Hydra lullaby

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Hydra lullaby

by Misscar

Summary

How far would you go to protect your child? Even if that child was created without your consent and survive 26 years without you.

Hydra is not just evil, it is opportunistic.

Essentially, a 'Hydra created a kid with Tony/Steve's DNA story' but with a twist.

This is part four of the series In a World Like This and a direct follow-up to Tony Stark Is Not a Relationship Expert.
But you should be able to read the story with just the help of the handy dandy what happened last time guide.

Notes

Canon compliancy: The story is about 90% cannon compliant for the MCU up to episode 22 of AOS (including Winter Soldier), then tracks close to the MCU up to episode 32 of AOS except certain events have been changed to prevent certain other actions from happening like a Civil War, the complete implosion of Fitzsimmons (but they will have some rough patches in this story), and a certain specialist’s death.

There will be other differences such as the timing of Iron Man 3, the identity of Melinda May’s ex-husband, and the identity of the people who contributed to Trip’s DNA. If ‘Skye’ can have a completely different mom in the MCU than in 616 for plot reasons, then I can give Trip different DNA contributors in my universe for my own plot reasons. Also in grand MCU tradition, I am giving Maria Stark a better or at least expanded back story. Seriously, I found only three lines on her in the Marvel wiki. That’s not right.

Spoiler warning: This story will contain spoilers for Agent Carter and future episodes of AOS and may contain Avengers 2 spoilers, but those will be mixed with other ideas from my imagination. There could also be accidental spoilers for Phase 3 in here because I’m trying to avoid Civil War, which ironically was my plan even before they announced the movie. Whether I’m successful, we will have to see. I’m willing to use anything that will help me better develop the characters in the story.

Relationships: Tony/Steve, May/Coulson, Tony & Pepper, Fitzsimmons (I’m leaning towards heterosexual life partners), Fitz/Mack (maybe more than platonic), Tony & Coulson, Steve/May (their relationship is mostly platonic now, but they slept together previously and Tony is trying really hard to arrange a birthday four-way), Trip & Skye (this relationship is complicated) and various background relationships past and present such as Howard & Peggy, Trip/Mack, Coulson/Hawkeye, Huntingbird, Hand/Isabel, and one-sided SkyeWard along with tons of other relationships.
A lot of these relationships will be straddling the fence between platonic and non-platonic.

Rated M for language, Tony being Tony, Hydra being evil, Ward having issues, sexual content, and violence.
There will also be discussions of extreme infertility issues including miscarriages and the death of a newborn.
Other warnings: This story is written by a dyslexic person using voice recognition software. Prone to crazy voice recognition errors and changing tenses without even realizing it. My beta tries her best, so proceed with compassion.

Disclaimer: Disney owns everything including ABC and Marvel. This is just a therapy exercise for entertainment purposes and reviews.

Proofread by Grayson Steele

Previously on In a World Like This:
Nick Fury being the chess grandmaster that he is realized that the Avengers Initiative would completely fall apart if Tony and Steve did not get over themselves and learn to work through their issues. To keep May from swallowing her gun (she didn’t know that Coulson was in TAHITI yet), Fury assigned her to keep those two idiots from killing each other and bringing the rest of the Avengers down with them, off the books of course.

She does such a good job that Tony and Steve ended up sleeping together, before Tony and Pepper officially decided to just be friends again. To complicate it even further, they end up sleeping together the week SHIELD falls apart.

Instead of relying on her mother’s contacts, May goes to Stark directly to find Maria Hill to get Phil the help that he needs and ends up telling Stark that Coulson is alive. A side benefit of this process is that May gets Steve and Tony back together. She is also manipulated by Tony into admitting that she is in love with Phil and eventually about the writing on the wall, the literal writing on the wall. Tony crashes the Playground and brings Steve along with a totally rebuilt Lola, a trunk full of spy gear, and much-needed funding.

While at the Playground certain secrets are uncovered including the fact that Tony slept with Fitz’s mom about nine months before he was born and the fact that Trip was conceived when his mother was kidnapped by Hydra, not that anybody knew it was Hydra at the time. The entire incident may have been used to place Alexander Pierce in charge of SHIELD. They are still not sure about that yet. During his visit to the Playground, Tony also convinces Coulson to give a relationship with May a chance as well as poaches Simmons for his new lab. And then Fitz wakes up.

If you would like to know more, check out the three stories that precede this. However, the information above should keep you from getting lost in this story.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue: The Road to Hell

January 1970

The smell of expensive alcohol permeates the space. That seems logical considering the several empty bottles that surround Howard. She should be thankful he’s in his office down here instead of his lab. She should also be thankful that he’s drinking alone and didn’t invite any of his special friends that everyone including Maria knew about. (Maria actually joined Howard most of the time. Peggy was in no place to judge considering she and her husband had a mutual ex-boyfriend, a dead mutual ex-boyfriend that they cared about so much that they are planning to name their unborn child after him.)

Peggy wondered if Jarvis or anyone else bothered to clean in here. Jarvis was the best person to deal with Howard when he was like this. Actually, he was the only one who was willing to which might explain the generous salary that Stark paid him. Right now though, Jarvis was at the Long Island house with Maria. She couldn’t be left alone since her baby girl, Natasha, did not survive being born two months prematurely. The situation was tragic.

Howard should be with her. They should be mourning their daughter together. Instead he’s not even in New York but in Arlington in his office buried under bottles, (but thankfully not women). She was hoping to find him buried in his work, that would’ve been preferable, not this. She hated Howard when he was drunk. He was a dreadful human being when intoxicated. With each miscarriage and failed search in the Arctic, a drunk Howard appeared and for increasing periods of time. All semblance of happiness drained out of him completely when alcohol entered his system.

The SHIELD Deputy Director’s mission was simple; nurse Howard out of his drunken stupor and drag him back to Long Island to deal with his life, in particular his wife. Peggy chose this particular mission because she felt uncomfortable being around Maria. The two women were supposed to give birth within days of each other. Now, however, Maria’s baby was buried in the Rose Garden of the Long Island estate while she was still heavily pregnant with her third child.

Life wasn’t fair. She is well acquainted with this reality. The latest insight to this truth is that no matter how much she wanted to be there for Maria, Jarvis was better suited to console right now and she was better suited to kick Howard’s arse back to Long Island.

Peggy was no stranger to survivor’s guilt, but this situation hit her hard. Of the two, Peggy should’ve been the one to lose her baby. She was a 50-year-old woman with a high stress career who somehow managed to get pregnant without actually trying. Between her and Gabe, they already have four children. Sure, they would have loved to have had a child together, but it seemed too late by the time they got married. Then their miracle happened.
In contrast, Maria was nearly a decade and a half younger and had been actively trying to get pregnant since she married Howard. Peggy knew they had visited every fertility specialist on the East Coast, a few of whom are now employed by SHIELD in the ‘genetic research’ department.

Sometimes Peggy thinks the whole purpose of that marriage was to produce an heir to the Stark Empire and for Maria to get more money for her various charitable endeavors. Not many people including Peggy understood why the notorious Playboy married a New York social worker and civil rights activist, at least not at first. She prudently bit her tongue because she was well aware that Howard had hidden depths and so did Maria. There was a type of love between the two, maybe not a conventional love, but it was there. Besides Peggy wasn’t sure if any other woman could deal with Howard on a regular basis. They were old friends and some days Peggy wanted to strangle the man.

In the span of their seven year marriage, the Starks had three miscarriages before the loss of Natasha. This time they concealed Maria’s pregnancy from the press. It wasn’t that hard to do when you’re the head of a secret spy organization. It was amazing what the lab could come up with to make a woman not look pregnant. Peggy had been making very good use of a particular coat around Maria in the last few days. She did not want to flaunt her pregnancy around her grieving friend.

Thankfully, Jarvis suggested that she procure Mr. Stark and she jumped at the chance to get out of there. Despite the camouflage offered by the special coat, they both knew she was still pregnant. Maria wasn’t as resilient as Peggy. The younger woman wasn’t able to deal with loss the way Peggy could. Peggy felt Maria’s anger and resentment every time they were together.

This is why she was the one to come down to DC to drag Howard back. Maria needed her husband and Peggy Carter-Jones would not let him run away this time especially when he was hiding inside a bottle.

She struggles with her temper as she approaches the unconscious man. How dare he be drinking himself into a stupor when Maria had been crying for days? However, her anger dissipates when she notices the blanket in his hands. The name Natasha delicately embroidered on the front with teddy bears surrounding it. The image is heartbreaking.

“What am I going to do with you Howard?” She mumbles out loud as she removes the half-empty glass from his fingers. If he doesn’t rouse at that movement, she would check his pulse to see if he had succumbed to alcohol poisoning. She’d heard there was a betting pool amongst the agents on when their leader would finally drink himself to death.

"Jarvis, I told you I wasn’t to be disturbed.” Peggy was sure that was the case considering the door was bolted. However, simple locks like that were no deterrent for his Deputy Director.
"Jarvis is still on Long Island. It’s Peggy." She said gently.

"Did you bring Marcy and Jamie?" Of course, Howard would ask about her daughters. Howard adored her kids. She wasn’t exactly happy about him teaching both girls how to shoot, however. Although, she decided a long time ago that the people in her life would need to know who she really was in order to protect themselves.

“Jamie and Marcy are still in school right now, in New York." And I wouldn’t let them anywhere near their Uncle Howard when he’s this drunk.

"Would you like a drink?" Howard asked only slightly slurring his words as he got up to go the bar which he somehow managed to do without tripping.

“Unless you have water, no.” She placed her hand subconsciously on her stomach, but Howard noticed. She caught the look of anguish in his eyes even though it only lasted for a second. She felt guilty again.

"Right, you can’t. Research says alcohol is not good for the baby.” He said as he poured himself a rather healthy portion of scotch.

"That’s the last thing you need right now Howard.” She walks over and takes the glass from him. “Alcohol doesn’t help with something like this. Talk to me. We’ve known each other for nearly 30 years.”

“Maybe it doesn’t help, but it makes everything else hurt less.” He responds by reclaiming the glass and proceeds to drain its’ entire contents in one swallow.

‘That’s one of your biggest problems Howard.’ She doesn’t say that out loud. She could. They’ve been friends that long, but she doesn’t. Not when he’s like this. She just lets him drink because he’s never going to tell her what’s really going on. Instead she walks over to the chair he just vacated and grabs the still open notebook now laying on top of Natasha’s blanket. She hopes there will be some clue as to what’s going on in his head in his journal.

"What are you working on Howard?" It seemed like a neutral question. It isn’t. It never is.

"I’m going to build a bigger, better baby.” For one wild moment, she wonders if he’s talking about
an actual baby. He uses the term baby to refer to a lot of his inventions including the bad ones. “He’s going to be my greatest creation. This one’s not -- cannot die on me.” A single tear rolls down her cheek despite her best efforts not to break down at that moment.

Through blurry eyes she looks over his notes only to realize he is actually trying to create a better baby - a real flesh and blood child. It should not surprise Peggy at all that he is approaching this the same way he does any other invention or failed project. It is heartbreaking though to see page after page of analysis as to why Maria went into labor early and why Natasha did not survive followed by even more detailed notes on how to keep it from happening again.

For the first time, she notices the books piled on the desk. None of them are about weapons engineering or cloaking technology which is something he’s been personally working on for the last year to perfect. Instead, Howard was surrounded by books and classified SHIELD research papers on genetics and reproduction. Was his notebook more than just a means for him to deal with his daughter’s death? Was he planning to take this beyond the hypothetical? It was Howard after all. The fact that there were budgetary numbers in these plans made that seem highly probable in her mind.

“Howard, I know you’re upset, but you can’t use SHIELD resources to create babies in a test tube or whatever you’re planning. A baby is not another thing for you to invent. You can’t treat this like another experiment.” She said in a gentle, but stern way.

"That’s where you’re wrong. And you only say that because you have four healthy children with one more on the way.” He spat out bitterly.

"Two of which are not even mine biologically, but I love Jamie and Desiree as if they were. You could adopt. Maria works with so many children who could use a good home." Despite being married to one of the richest individuals in the country, Maria kept working. She just had more resources now. The Maria Stark Foundation supplemented several group homes for displaced children in the New York area.

“The board wouldn’t like it. They want another ‘golden goose’ to follow me.” He actually made finger quotes when saying the word ‘golden goose’. Peggy wondered which one of his business partners would actually refer to a child as a ‘golden goose’. “Besides Maria wants a baby. I promised her a baby. I owe her that much for putting up with me. I’ve created so much death I need to create a life.” And there it was. The real reason why Howard drank so much - guilt.

“I’m surrounded by the most brilliant scientists in the world. We could do this. We could help people, help Maria. That’s what we are supposed to do. Will you help me?”
“Of course, Howard.” Because what else could she say.

"Gabe is outside.” She placed an arm around him. “You don’t need to stay here. We can go back to New York.” And hopefully you’ll be sober enough to deal with Maria by the time we get there and not give her false hope by mentioning making her a baby in your lab.

"Can I see Marcy?’’

"Not like this Howard. Things will be better once you’re sobered up.” She just wasn’t sure when that would actually happen.

"I doubt that."

She should know by this point in their relationship that when Howard Stark gets an idea in his head he doesn’t give up. It’s why he still searches the Arctic every summer for Steve’s plane; he’s convinced that Steve’s still alive. It only stands to reason that he would do everything in his power to get Maria the baby that she wants. She wonders exactly how much of his own money he allocated to SHIELD’s fertility research and how much government funding they got by passing it off as the next Super Soldier project.

But his plan worked. It only took 2 ½ years for Anthony Stark to come into the world via a surrogate and a process Howard referred to as in vitro fertilization. It became one of the duties of the new director of SHIELD, Margaret Carter-Jones, to cover it up. As far as the rest of the world knows, Anthony Stark was born to Howard and Maria Stark at 3:45 AM on May 29, 1972*. Maybe using SHIELD resources so that the couple could have a biological child was inappropriate, but the first time she saw Maria hold her son Peggy knew it was the right thing to do.

The details of Howard’s latest ‘project’ had the highest clearance within SHIELD. Only a select few would ever know how special Anthony really is.
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who left reviews, kudos, or added my story to your alerts. (Considering I will be posting chapters for this story as soon as I get them back from my fabulous beta, subscribing to the story may be a good idea.) Every little bit keeps me writing.

This chapter and the next were originally one chapter. I realized that a 12,000 word chapter would be difficult on all of us, so I split the chapter in half.

A quick note about pairings. I love both Fitzsimmons and Mack/Fitz, so I’m not entirely sure which way the story is going to go in that regard. I may keep it all platonic, I may choose sides, or may take a third option. If you read my story Take a Third Option you know I do write polyandry stories.

Late June 2014

Jemma hates the fact that she’s still not sleeping very well even though Fitz was now out of the coma if not back to his old self, not completely. Those first few nights she slept in his room, but now she doesn’t. She suspects that Fitz doesn’t want her there. His throwing the new stuffed monkey she’d bought him at her seems an obvious sign of that. She knows he blames her for being trapped in himself. She blames herself for the damage done to his brain. When he first woke up, he couldn’t talk at all and that was her fault.

Now after three weeks of working with the best specialist Dr. Stark (she still calls him that even to herself because she doesn’t feel comfortable calling him Tony) could find, Fitz was starting to regain his words. He was still at the hospital, albeit in the rehab center, but the fact he was there at all was her fault. His feelings for her doomed him and she is positive he regrets that now. She feels so horrible and confused inside. She doesn’t know how to even talk to him anymore. Everything hurts and she’s miserable.

Her nightmares about being at the bottom of the ocean have returned. She’s been dreaming about their being trapped in that container and not figuring out a way out. There were ones where Fitz didn’t even bother creating the distress signal because he knew no one would be monitoring. Even worse were the dreams about making it up to the surface with a dying Fitz in her arms and Fury not being there. Most nights she would wake up screaming and covered in a cold sweat.

She had these dreams at the Playground before Fitz woke up. They might have even been worse. But if she woke up screaming in the middle of the night at the Playground, she would find herself quickly wrapped in Skye’s embrace as she cried herself back to sleep. Here the rooms were soundproof and only JARVIS would be alerted to her nightmares and she had sworn the AI to
secrecy. She wasn’t certain if anyone other than JARVIS would actually care if they did know. And as remarkable as he is, the AI doesn’t truly count even if he does listen to her recount the dreams.

Skye wasn’t talking to her. Her friend was angry that she had abandoned the team in the middle of the night. She had emailed Skye a few times via secure channels, but has not received a single reply.

Trip was more understanding, but she felt too embarrassed to talk to him now. It was a good thing she hadn’t known that he was former Director Carter’s grandson otherwise she would have embarrassed herself even more. He probably snickered behind her back every time she gushed about the woman.

Why did she think he was interested in her? (Even when she was under the impression he was heterosexual.) Why would anybody be interested in her? Other than her two PhDs there wasn’t anything exceptional about her. She wasn’t anywhere near as attractive as Skye, May or Trip. She could see why Fitz would be interested in them or even the traitorous bastard, well, before they knew what he was capable of doing and that he only cared for himself and John Garrett.

Fitz liking her in a non-platonic way didn’t make sense. She doesn’t know how it happened. She certainly wasn’t expecting it. She still doesn’t know how she feels except that it wouldn’t be wise to risk their friendship for something that might not work. She’s been playing intermediary for Dr. Stark and Ms. Potts for the last three weeks. It’s become very obvious to her how difficult it is to get back a deep friendship after a romantic relationship has fallen apart.

But what does it matter now that their relationship was already in tatters? Fitz must surely hate her now because she hates herself. He can’t even look at her.

Agent May and Director Coulson contact her occasionally, but most of those calls were to inquire about Fitz’s health or related to her GH 325 research. This is her major project for Stark (and the main reason why she was still working in his private lab in DC). Their calls were necessarily infrequent because they did not want to give away the location of the Playground. Stark’s lawyers have successfully cleared most of the team members, but there was Hydra to consider. It would be foolish to think that they were all destroyed after the raid on Cybertek. Besides, she didn’t have the relationship with either of them to where she could talk about her distinct belief that Fitz hates her now or that she can’t sleep without finding herself in that medical pod in the Gulf of Mexico.

Even though it is barely after midnight, she decides to forego sleep for the moment at least and heads down to the kitchen. Cooking relaxes her and her boss really does have a lovely kitchen. It is much better than the one on the Bus or at the Playground and it always stocked with produce from the several farmers markets around. She makes a sandwich platter and a vegetable tray because she knows there will be dozens of people in and out of the mansion tomorrow. There always is but it seems even busier since they’re planning Captain Roger’s-- Steve’s birthday party. (He’s told her at
least 50 times to call him Steve, but she’s still getting used to calling her idol’s boyfriend by his first name.)

Steve initially objected to the party until Dr. Stark-- Tony pointed out that the event was to cement May and Coulson’s cover as the department heads of the new Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division. This is not to be confused with Stark Industries International Security Division which will still be in charge of the Avengers Initiative as soon as former Agent Natasha Romanoff could be around Stark without the urge to throw a knife at him. She wished she were exaggerating, but things are quite tense.

According to JARVIS, Ms. Romanoff blames Stark for the demise of his relationship with Ms. Potts despite the fact that Ms. Potts does not. It’s all very tenuous with Captain Rogers trying to make peace between the two which is quite difficult with the former agent staying off the grid due to Hydra.

With that task complete, Jemma is still restless and not at all hungry. She grabs one of the expensive beers from the refrigerator and sat down at her computer. Maybe if she went over Stark’s specs for the revised HENRY program she would eventually get tired. Before everything fell apart, Fitz was trying to create an AI with a hologram monkey interface; unfortunately most of his research was destroyed when old SHIELD was. Dr. Stark was trying to revive the program to give Fitz something to focus on besides his physical progress.

If looking over Stark’s notes did not help, she could always continue her party planning (why did she mention that she had told her parents she was a corporate party planner) or her research on GH 325. The equipment here was much better than the stuff at the Playground. She hopes she doesn’t fall asleep on her laptop again. And she really hopes she doesn’t wake up to the sight of her boss walking into the kitchen naked. Once was quite sufficient, thank you.

She wanted to tell Skye about that but she couldn’t because the hacker was still so angry with her. She actually composed an email about it before realizing she couldn’t send the message for various reasons.

Remarkably, she was asleep by the time her boss made his way fully clothed to the kitchen an hour later. Unfortunately, she had fallen asleep on her laptop again.

XXXXX

“You’re supposed to be sleeping Tony.” Pepper said as she mentally calculated the time difference between Tokyo and Arlington. She was currently in Japan convincing various partners that Stark Industries was in no way affiliated with any terrorist organization despite the fact that certain individuals i.e. Senator Christopher Ward was trying to paint Howard Stark as the founder of one.
The meetings were going as well as could be expected, which meant they were not going well at all.

"It’s only 2:34 AM. You know me and sleep schedules." Tony joked. Honestly, she shouldn’t be surprised at all by his calling her in the middle of the night his time.

"You don’t have one.” She sighed. This wasn’t supposed to be her problem anymore. She was neither Tony’s assistant nor girlfriend at the moment, which is the entire reason why she is sending Steve an “It’s 2:34 AM, do you know where your boyfriend is?’ text message. This was his problem now.

"I just…"

“Nightmares?” And yet she doesn’t hang up because she is still his friend and friends help each other deal with their nightmares at 2:34 in the morning. Actually, she’s just happy that he’s talking to her. She didn’t think they would still have these conversations not after things deteriorated so rapidly after the Thanksgiving incident. Is it wrong to think that breaking up was the best thing for their relationship? Their ability to communicate with one another has improved dramatically since they ended things in April.

“Something like that. I was dreaming about fighting with Ste…” And yet he stops at mention of Steve and she’s once again reminded that things are not like they were before they started sleeping together. But was that a consequence of being together in the first place or of not ending things before their core relationship was damaged? She doesn’t have an answer for that question.

"You know we agreed that it’s okay for you to mention your boyfriend. At least Steve is better than anybody I had to show out the next morning." Also after being together for almost 2 months Steve has lasted longer than most of Tony’s pre-Afghanistan ‘relationships’. Actually, it was longer than that if you counted the overlap time. Part of her feels like Tony and Steve had been dating for at least the last year, maybe even since the disastrous events of Christmas 2012.

"I’m trying to be polite." Tony joked and it was a bit unsettling.

"Tony, you’re never polite." If he was Pepper wouldn’t have the PR department on speed dial. She’s just hoping that he doesn’t call Senator Ward a prick on Twitter anytime soon. Why did the PR department think it was a good idea to let Tony have a Twitter account?

"I try for you."
"I don’t want you to be anything other than you." Pepper knew they were talking about something entirely different now.

"Yes, you did." There was a touch of bitterness in his voice.

‘I was wrong.’ She thought to herself.

"So you had a nightmare about fighting with Steve?" She asked instead.

"Not just arguing, but physically fighting like we were going to kill each other. We managed to tear the entire superhero community apart." Tony explained and she heard genuine fear in his voice.

"Yes, all six of you." She shakes her head. Although this was better than nightmares about wormholes and him being back in Afghanistan.

“There were a lot more of us in the dream. It just got worse and weirder from there. For example, there was this strange lullaby version of ‘Back in Black’ playing in the background and people with Hydra lanyards kept handing me children. Then my dad was having tea with a miniature version of Marcy and Stephanie. Also Antoine is there and suddenly an adult version of Stephanie is taking him to his first day of school which suddenly switches to me taking a little Leo to school except I have no idea what he looked like at four because I wasn’t there. Then we get attacked by Hydra agents and I don’t have the armor and Steve’s not there because Steve is still frozen. Fortunately, I managed to wake up just as Leo gets blown to pieces with the helicarrier that I inadvertently designed."

She doesn’t even know where to begin analyzing that dream. Although part of her wants to start with the fact that she was not in it. “Also I was dressed like Howard the entire time.” Correction, his very evident daddy issues were probably the most pressing. Pepper’s known for a very long time that Tony’s biggest fear was becoming Howard.

"Are you taking your medication? Better question, are you taking drugs other than your medication?" Because she can’t decide what’s harder to deal with a stoned out of his mind Tony or a Tony on the verge of another nervous breakdown. She doesn’t want either to happen when she’s in Japan.

"I don’t think I’ve done anything harder than marijuana since Afghanistan unless it was prescribed to me and even then the marijuana was for anxiety. Yes, I have been taking my medication and I
haven’t been chasing it down with scotch. By the way, I’m going to need a new therapist. I gave Suarez to Director Agent. I think they need her more.”

Her response is to sigh because she disagrees about the therapist thing. The end of their romantic relationship, the transition in his relationship with Steve, the fact that his technology was being co-opted by terrorists again, and Leo’s existence were all reasons why Tony needed professional help.

She wonders if Tony realizes that his entire dream is really about Leo otherwise known as the one paternity suit that might actually turn out to be true. Maria, her so-called friend, said that it was true, but Pepper wanted independent verification because she doesn’t trust Maria Hill at all right now. She’s not even sure if they are friends anymore. Not telling her about Phil is something she understands, it was for the man’s protection. Not telling her that Tony had a son is nearly unforgivable. She claimed it was a matter of national security which made no sense. Why was the fact that Tony fathered a child a state secret in the first place? What if Tony actually died without ever knowing that he had a child or vice versa? How cruel. It had been a near thing on both of their sides.

During her days as Tony’s assistant, she always thought something like this was going to happen. The SI legal team had a contingency plan for paternity suits because they happened so often. Pepper just wasn’t expecting the reality to be an almost 27-year-old recovering from brain damage caused by being dumped in the ocean by a Hydra agent.

“I can’t be held responsible for my subconscious.” Tony told her defensively bringing her back to the conversation at hand.

“I can hold you responsible when your subconscious is obviously worried about the outcome of a certain paternity test. Have you received the results of the DNA test from Dr. Triplett yet? Is Leo actually your son?” It’s been nearly 3 weeks. Even normal commercial tests would not have taken this long. Tony should have a non-SHIELD answer by now.

"She has the results, but she won’t tell me over the phone and I haven’t been by to see her." That makes absolute sense because Tony tends to avoid difficult things, so of course he’s going to delay seeing Dr. Triplett at all cost.

"Tony!" She is exasperated.

"I’ve been busy.” Pepper almost laughed at that excuse. She knew Tony. That was his favorite line for when he was avoiding something. The man locked himself in his workshop for a week after he slept with Steve that first time in order to avoid her. The question was what was he avoiding this
time? Was he afraid that Leo was his son? Considering the amount of money he was spending on flying in various experts in to work with the young scientist, she very much doubted that was the case.

“Tony you can’t keep putting this off. I was perfectly willing to come to DC if you needed moral support. The trip to Tokyo could’ve waited a couple of days.” Or she could’ve called Rhodey to deal with Tony and his possible teenage love child. The whole point of Tony moving to DC temporarily was so they could get some emotional distance from one another. Running to DC to help Tony deal with this wouldn’t be that.

“No, it really couldn’t. People are panicking right now and it’s not an excuse. I’ve been really busy and so has Stephanie.” She scoffs.

"Doing what?"

“Let’s see not calling Senator Ward a prick on Twitter, setting up Stark Industries’ Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division, and renovating the formally secret government offices under my house. I’m thinking of giving you your own floor.” Of course he’s giving Pepper her own floor. “I’m also going through Howard’s personal files which lived up to its potential of being unbelievably traumatizing and working on HENRY."

"What is a Henry?" Really she hopes it is not another flying car. Although SI was now working on the plans to rollout arc reactor cars in two years’ time so his endeavor was productive (thankfully they both agreed that there were too many bad drivers in the world for flying cars to be mass marketed).

"Assisted communication device for people who have suffered brain damage because of strokes or…” *Being dropped in an ocean by Hydra.* However, neither say that aloud.

“I should put a coffeemaker down here. I miss Dummy.” There’s classic Tony Stark avoidance again.

"What about your new assistant? I do remember bringing you a lot of coffee.” Because it was the only way to get you to do anything.

"I think she is still asleep, but by now she may have realized she was sleeping on top of her laptop in the kitchen again and decided to go back to her actual bed. Does she really believe JARVIS is not
“You have five PhDs.”

“And I never brought you coffee.” He joked.

“Tony, I have a meeting in half an hour. Why did you call?” Because they really need to get this conversation on point. Tony is not going to call her without reason, not now not when their relationship is so tenuous.

“I told you I was going through Howard’s diaries and just let me say I really hate the fact that my relationship with Howard was so bad that almost everything I know about him comes from old work papers.” She’s upset about that too, but she doesn’t mention it. “Really, I should know better than to look through Howard’s stuff after the great dress up closet incident when I was six. I always find out stuff I don’t want to know.” She can actually hear Tony shudder on the other end of the line. It was enough to make her wish this was a video call.

“Do I even want to know?”

“Let me just say there’s a reason why I’m not into dress-up play and leave it at that.”

“Seriously?”

“Honestly, the only time I ever really acted my age as a child was when Stephanie was there. We were playing hide and seek or something and we came across this big closet filled with different outfits including stuff I didn’t realize until adulthood were slutty nurse and slutty pirate costumes. So anyway, we decide to play dress-up and eventually got caught in the room by Stephanie’s mom and Jarvis.” Pepper wonders if Tony is referring to Peggy Carter-Jones specifically as Stephanie’s mom so he doesn’t have to think about the fact that she is his boyfriend's ex-girlfriend.

“Stephanie’s mom started yelling at Howard for letting us play in his ‘sexual aid closet' and it just gets worse from there. I really did not need to know that my father liked to put a 'theatrical element' in his sexual encounters ever, but especially not at six.” Tony shivered again and Pepper is almost tempted to start laughing.
“I could see how finding out that your parents enjoy dressing up in the bedroom could be traumatic.”

“I’m not sure mom was into that sort of stuff, but I’m sure their friends were. Did I ever tell you my parents had a really open marriage that both sides consented to? They both had girlfriends and sometimes they had the same girlfriend. Trista was really nice. I liked her. She made great cookies, better than Jarvis.” *This explains so much.*

“Anyway, I found out something even more traumatic than Howard’s secret kink closet. So it turns out Howard wasn’t upset because I was born with a dick. No, he was angry that I could never replace his precious little Natasha. It would’ve been nice to know why my parents got completely wasted together every January and why there is a gravestone in the Rose Garden at the old Long Island estate.”

"The headquarters for the Maria Stark Foundation?" She remembered making several trips there when she was his assistant. The organization did a lot of good work even before Tony’s Afghanistan awakening.

"Yes. I now know why the foundation gives so much money to prevent premature birth and SIDS. Actually, I now know why mom’s charity work focused on children. It would’ve been nice if my parents had told me any of this stuff while they were still alive." *Maybe they thought you were too young.* Tony was only 19 when both of his parents were murdered. He was just a baby - a baby who had unwittingly produced his own offspring four years earlier.

"Tony." She said his name softly this time. “I’ve had to deal with too many idiots over the last three days to deal with your rambling right now. Please be clearer.”

"Two years before I was born mom gave birth to a little girl named Natasha. She only lived for about three hours. They buried her in the Rose Garden which explains why Howard’s will contained specific instructions that I could never sell the Long Island house.”

“Oh.”

“My response was ‘Shit’. It definitely does explain why Mom was so overprotective of me. To this day, I still don’t know how dad talked her into boarding school. Then again that did happen right after one of my first almost kidnappings, so who knows. Maybe she wanted me away from all the SHIELD stuff.”
"How did you know this?" She asked in shock, not paying attention to any of Tony’s other ramblings. "How did you just find this out?" Because Pepper was sure that something like this would’ve ended up public eventually, if not originally then because of the SHIELD document dump. The public now knew more about the Palladium poisoning incident than she ever wanted them to, including the fact that Nick Fury defied orders to help keep Tony alive.

"I told you I was going through his journals. I was trying to see if there was anything helpful for a couple of projects I’m currently working on. Instead, I find out that SHIELD’s cloaking technology was first deployed on my mother’s maternity wear in an effort to keep everything out of the press. I mean I knew there were a few miscarriages before I was born. That stuff was public record and the press was extremely nasty about it. I guess they didn’t want this out there just in case it went bad again and it turns out their paranoia was well-founded. Should I be worried there’s more information on his early research into in vitro fertilization then how he felt about the death of his child? Howard just seemed so detached from everything."

‘You built dozens of prototype suits instead of talking to me about your nightmares. You built another suit instead of telling me you were unhappy and wanted to be with Steve.’ She bit her tongue waiting to see how he’d respond.

Finally after a few moments of silence she continues, "People deal with grief differently. You’re developing adaptive technology for Leo instead of…" Talking to Stephanie and dealing with this as a grown-up. However, she wasn’t sure how to word that in a way that would not result in Tony ending this phone call.

“Instead of finding out if Leo’s my son. You can say it.” Apparently Tony was self-aware enough to know that without her pointing it out. This is new.

“I was trying to be polite."

“Don’t be. We both know I shouldn’t be a father. I always felt like the damage done by the Palladium poisoning was the universe’s way of telling me that I shouldn’t procreate. We both know I would’ve ended up being just as bad as Howard.” Tony spat out bitterly.

“That’s not…”

“Don’t say otherwise. You were relieved when you got a negative sign on your home pregnancy test last Thanksgiving. I know you didn’t want to raise a kid with me.”
Near the end of their relationship she thought she was pregnant despite her meticulous use of contraceptives and she was panicking. She wasn’t sure how she could balance a child, the company, and Tony. Of course, Tony forgot to tell her that it was completely impossible as a side effect of the Palladium poisoning. When he caught her in the bathroom with a home pregnancy test, certain things were said that shouldn’t have been said. In all honesty, they both said some things they shouldn’t have.

“I didn’t want to raise a kid with anyone. I don’t want children. Also you had just accused me of sleeping with somebody else. How was I supposed to react?”

“I wasn’t that upset about it.”

No, he actually said that he completely understood with their schedules that she might need things that he couldn’t give her and would be perfectly happy to help her raise the child. That was when she came to the conclusion that he wasn’t upset because he was probably sleeping with Steve already at that point. She was off by six months, but she was still right. Although recent revelations regarding Tony’s upbringing certainly shed some light on his reaction. She wished she’d known that at the time.

“Tony, that was the problem. I thought that I was pregnant and you assumed I cheated on you, but you weren’t upset. You were actually happy at the prospect of being a father. I was terrified about raising a child and you were ready to embrace it even if you were sure it could not have been your child biologically. That’s the number one reason why I think you will make a good dad.” Even if the child in question happens to already be 27. “You care about people even when you shouldn’t.”

“I only would assume that you cheated on me if the test was positive.” She just sighed.

“You know that encounter was the entire reason I thought you were already sleeping with Steve. You didn’t even talk to me after that you just left for his apartment all the way in DC. It made me wonder if we really did have an open relationship because I was not nearly as angry as I should’ve been at the prospect of you sleeping with Steve. Actually, I wasn’t angry at all. It made sense and as soon as I realized that I should’ve ended things, but I didn’t want to.”

“Fuck!” Tony exclaimed. “I thought we were getting better at being friends again.”

“We are. We are sharing a lot more with each other than we ever did when we were dating. The thing is we are only going to be friends again if we talk about this stuff.”
“I know.” Tony sighed. “We will.”

“You need to talk to Dr. Triplett. You can wait until I get there. I’m supposed to be there in a week to visit with Phil and to put in an appearance at Captain America’s birthday party. I could come early.” She suggested.

“Hey, Steve just came down here with sandwiches. We can talk about it later, but it would be good to see you before the birthday party.” That’s when the phone line went dead.

“Tony, don’t hang up on me! You hung up on me.” She screamed. Sometimes she wondered why they were trying so hard to repair their relationship when half the time she just wanted to strangle him.

“Would you like me to try reconnecting you?” JARVIS asked her.

“It’s okay, JARVIS. Is Steve actually there?” She asked the AI.

“Yes, he is in the bunker with Mr. Stark. He also actually brought a plate of sandwiches made by Ms. Simmons. Captain Rogers sent you a text message to this effect.” Of course he did. Steve was really good about text messaging and emailing her about what was going on especially in light of the Leo’s situation. He didn’t tell her about Tony avoiding the paternity results, but maybe he didn’t know. He wasn’t as skilled at reading Tony as she was yet.

“His new assistant cooks?” She asked the AI slightly surprised given Tony’s earlier comment about coffee.

“Only when she is unable to sleep and she has not slept more than 3.1 hours at a time since arriving at the Arlington house 22 days ago. However, that amount has decreased by 45% since Master Leo threw a stuffed monkey at her 4.5 days ago.” Tony has already programmed the AI to recognize Leo as his kid. Seriously, what is she going to do with him?

“Captain Rogers and Mr. Stark believe that she is overly concerned about her friend, Master Leo. He is only now beginning to regain some minimal speech functions. The main reason why Mr. Stark decided to throw a large birthday party for Captain Rogers was to have Ms. Simmons work on a project not related to Master Leo in any way.”
That explains the extravaganza. Pepper hopes this event goes better than she expects, but any party that allows Tony to do fireworks will end badly.

“Leo must be improving if he could throw a stuffed animal at her.”

“Yes. He was moved to a rehabilitation center recently and will probably be moved into the Arlington house once construction is completed. Mr. Stark is planning to interview various specialists to work with Mister Fitz.” She shakes her head. She knew exactly what Tony is doing. He wasn’t afraid of having a kid, he was afraid of what will happen if it turns out not to be the case.

“That’s good. Please keep me updated on his progress would you?”

“Of course, Ms. Potts. I will also keep the use of pyrotechnics to a minimum at Captain Rogers’ birthday party. I think Arlington zoning laws will prohibit most of what he would like to do.” JARVIS knows her so well.

“Thank you, JARVIS.”

“Is there anything else I can assist you with?” The AI asked.

“Tomorrow or rather today at this point, would you make an appointment for Tony to meet with Dr. Triplett?”

“I will make the arrangements Ms. Potts. Do you want me to make the appointment for next week so you can accompany Mr. Stark?” A part of her wanted to be there, but it wasn’t really her place now.

“No. Just make sure Steve is able to be there.” As much as it hurt, it was time to completely let go of the girlfriend role.

“Of course Ms. Potts.”

To be continued.
Melinda May has never been a heavy sleeper due to her line of work. And even though they’ve only been sharing a bed sporadically over the last three weeks, she noticed the moment that Phil was not next to her. Phil was already dressed in boxer shorts and a shirt because despite their vigorous sexual activities earlier in the evening (which they actually managed to get through without being interrupted), it was impractical to sleep naked because they could be attacked at any moment by Hydra or any other group that wanted them dead.

Officially, this list no longer included the U.S. government. As of seven days ago, they were no longer being actively hunted by the American military because Tony’s lawyers managed to secure their cover as the new head of Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division. She wondered how long it would take people to realize that they were still SHIELD. Probably as long as it took the Small Island Development States to realize their acronym spelled SIDS. At least, it was a cover of sorts, a way to function in regular society and a means to stay ahead of Hydra. It was useful because despite the grandstanding on television about supposedly tearing Hydra up by the roots, they were still out there and regrouping.

May waited a few minutes before she followed Phil. She didn’t have to check his location to know that Phil would be in his office. She hoped that he would be talking to the recently re-established team in the Netherlands. Up until three days ago, he had been there trying to gauge if Agent Walters and her team were still loyal and would be willing to work under the front organization. They were.

Unfortunately, what she found was Phil standing at the wall with knife in hand and jazz playing in the background. She frowned to herself. She genuinely hoped that there would be longer between episodes or that they were done. And yet, here he was carving on the walls of his office. It was slightly better than using the supply closet, but it still had her worried.

She grabbed the camera, the new one that Stark gave her with an encrypted uplink to JARVIS. Maybe these new images would help them figure out what the drawing means. This was the procedure they had all agreed to after the last episode when it occurred 13 days ago.
"Why didn’t you wake me?" She finally asks once it seems like Phil has finished his latest rendering and is becoming aware of his surroundings.

"I didn’t want to wake you." What he really meant to say is *I didn’t want to worry you.* Didn’t he realize that his disappearing in the middle of the night worried her more?

"I woke up the moment you got out of bed. I don’t sleep well without you next to me." May admitted reluctantly as she placed an arm around him. She discovered last time that physical contact helped him come back to himself after he had one of his episodes.

“I haven’t been here much.” She understands. The job of putting SHIELD back together was not going to be a quick or easy task. He needed to see if the people he was bringing into the organization really were trustworthy and not Hydra loyalists or some other potential threat. Nobody can read people better than Coulson.

“You’re here more than you would’ve been without the Quinjet, yet another benefit of being under the Stark Industries banner.” Other bonuses included decent funding, Dr. Suarez, a fully staffed lab with state of the art equipment and complete access to Maria Hill’s secret files.

"I really do hate commercial. Although, I’ll be taking Lola tomorrow. Oceana, West Virginia is less than five hours away by normal car." Phil was going to the small West Virginia town in hopes of retrieving a former agent in hiding, a former agent who happened to be Victoria Hand’s widow, Isabella Hand.

"I should go with you." She doesn’t like Phil going alone, especially since he just had an episode.

"I need you here. Both of us can’t be gone at the same time."

"We have Hartley now. Why are you even going to West Virginia to convince Isabela Hand to join us? I’m not even sure she can work with Hartley anyway."

“Technically, we are already in West Virginia.” She forgot that they were in the state even though they were less than 60 miles outside of DC.
“You know what I mean.” She glared at him despite the fact that she was rubbing circles on his shoulders.

“We need a doctor, full-time, one that is familiar with some of the stranger things we deal with. The others that we have are going to have to go to the other bases once they are reestablished. They’re both professionals and agents as well. Just because they both dated Victoria Hand does not mean that they won’t be able to work with each other.”

“Yes, but Dr. Hand was married to Victoria when Ward made her a widow.” And May knew Hartley well enough to realize that was a possible point of contention.

“You were forced to work with Andrew, the guy you almost married, even after you married someone else.” Why did Phil have to mention either of those mistakes? The whole reason why they brought in Dr. Triplett was because she didn’t want to deal with her ex-fiancé.

“What about the fact that Ward is now here?” Ward was moved to the Playground once Simmons was gone because they were going to lose the other facility soon. May finds it more than a little annoying that the government seems to only be raiding actual SHIELD facilities and missing Hydra entirely.

The other reason why Ward was at the Playground now was his failed suicide attempts. He tried to slash his wrists with a button and then a piece of paper. He actually managed to lose a lot of blood before he was stabilized and because of that he is on a constant suicide watch. Ward was another reason why Phil wanted to bring an actual doctor here, full-time. Although, considering Ward killed her wife, there’s a good chance Dr. Hand would probably help his next suicide attempt along regardless of her Hippocratic Oath.

“I won’t mention that in my pitch.” Phil kissed her gently on the lips. She knew he was trying to win the argument that way, but she wouldn’t let him.

“I may kill Hunter before you return.” She doesn’t like the others that Hartley brought with her. She doesn’t trust either of them, but Hunter was getting on her nerves especially with his constant berating of Bobbi. May never talked this badly about her former lovers including the one who happened to be the Hydra operative they were currently keeping in their basement. She’s sure that Hartley’s people are in this for the money and now that they are under the Stark umbrella there was more money to be had.

“Bobbi vouched for him.”
"Bobbi was also sleeping with an agent who turned out to be Hydra as her post-divorce rebound. I don’t trust her judgment in men or agents.” Phil was kind enough to not remind her that she did the same thing, but her point was still valid.

"But it got her into Hydra and right now she is our only source of information unless we can get Ward talking.”

And unfortunately Ward wasn’t talking. When Phil was not flying around the world trying to recruit people to the new SHIELD, he was sitting on the other side of the invisible wall waiting for Ward to say something, anything that could be useful. However, after trying to slash his wrists with a piece of paper, Ward was barely communicating at all.

“Is Ward still only willing to talk to Skye?” The only thing Ward was still bothering to say was to repeat his request for a visit from Skye.

"Yes. Even going down there after our activities failed to produce any sort of reaction.” It was her idea to send Phil down to Ward’s cell post sex as part of their psychological torture. She even adjusted the ventilation system to make it very obvious what the two were doing minutes before and yet nothing. 

“You can’t give him what he wants.” She doesn’t want Skye anywhere near him right now. The young woman wasn’t ready for Ward’s head games yet. May was working on it, but Skye wasn’t ready for a situation like that nor did May ever want to put her in that position, at least not with Ward.

"We aren’t that desperate yet. We still have another option.” By the way Phil stiffened under her touch, she realized that putting Skye in that room was a last resort, but it was still an option. She wondered how desperate they would have to get to use it. Thankfully, they were not there yet. 

"Dr. Suarez?” May quickly supplied the name because that seemed like the most logical possibility. While it would be good for Skye and the others to speak with somebody about what happened, she is sure Phil has other plans for the doctor’s skills.

"Well, Ward did tried to kill himself, twice. It would only be appropriate to get him proper mental help." She knows him too well to think this was entirely a ploy. Phil was the one who saved Natasha after all.
"There’s no help for him." Ward was too far gone as far as she was concerned.

"We need information. We may have a Quinjet or two and no need for jet fuel, but we still need information. It’s the only way we’re going to be able to defeat Hydra for good.” She understands that.

She wants to say something about how they don’t need information about Hydra, they need to know why he is waking up in the middle of the night to carve on the wall, but she doesn’t say that. Instead, she walks away from Phil to start the cleanup.

The screen will cover the wall for now. She will repair it later after Phil leaves for his mission. Triplett is meeting with his mechanic ex in an effort to get him to come on board. Maybe she’ll have Triplett take Skye with him. Nobody would ask questions about May being in the director’s office with plaster except those two. Everyone else was too new to the organization to question the story about renovations and they really were re-tiling the bathrooms. The money from Stark was very helpful for things like this.

"Did you forward the images to Stark?” Phil finally asked once the room looked normal again.

“JARVIS is looking for matches, but he hasn’t found anything yet.” She knows that Stark feels his AI is infallible, but she’s not as certain. However, it’s only been three weeks. It may take more time to find something, anything, but with each new episode she gets a little bit more worried that they’re not going to find answers in time.

"And if we don’t find something …” She knows what Phil is going to say so she stops him by pressing her mouth to his. He can’t ask her to pull the trigger if his mouth is occupied with hers.

“We will find something. Stark or Dr. Triplett will find something. Maybe we should have Skye looking too.” Skye might think to look in places that Stark wouldn’t.

"No.” He replied a little too quickly. “Not right now. I didn’t even start doing this until I saw the…”

This didn’t start until he saw the writing. That was the trigger. She knows that without him even saying it. May is certain that Skye is the reason they’re going through so much effort to destroy the writing samples afterwards. He doesn’t want her to suffer the same consequences.
"She may not react the same way because..." *Because she may not even be human.*

"Because, she is a 0-8-4.” May said instead. "That’s a distinct possibility. If we don’t find something soon, we may have no choice but to bring her into this."

"I know.” Phil closes his eyes and pulls her closer to him. “I’m afraid we may never figure this out and I’m worried it will keep getting worse. I don’t want to end up like John. He was out of his fucking mind at the end. We need a plan.” She knows what he’s implying without him even saying the words.

"Not that plan. John was already crazy before the GH 325. He had to be to do the things he did. You are not John Garrett."

"We…” She pushes away from him. She’s not having this conversation.

“Right now, you have no right to ask me to pull the trigger. If you want me to make a decision about your life or death, I want a ring.” She says half joking. Even then she wouldn’t, perhaps especially not then. There is no way she could pull the trigger and she wasn’t going to let Triplett or the new guy, Hunter, do that either.

She had her own plan. She had a go bag with cash and a safe house in the Australian outback. JARVIS made the final purchase just hours ago. Now that she had Phil, she couldn’t lose him. The only thing left to do was to convince Steve to take over rebuilding this new SHIELD, if it came to that.

"Okay.” He pulls her back into his arms and kisses her. There is no more discussion about her being forced to take him out if things got worse. Actually, it was nearly impossible for him the say anything as their kisses lead to May riding him on top of his desk minutes later. An occasional expletive, blasphemous declaration, and her name were the only words uttered. Really, it was easier to avoid difficult discussions now that they were sleeping together. All she had to do was un_zip his pants and wrap her hands around him. Why didn’t she consider this method years ago?

XXXXX

Steve knew that Tony had another nightmare. Steve knew from personal experience that his boyfriend had a history of them. Tony had slept over at his apartment a lot even before their relationship became sexual (despite having a house that was less than a 15 minute cab ride away) and
more than once he had woken up in the middle of the night screaming and breathing hard.

However, the nightmares had increased exponentially in the last three weeks. There would be screaming and then Tony would try to sneak out of bed without waking Steve up. He never succeeded because Steve always heard him. Sometimes he would pretend to sleep through it. Other times he wouldn’t. On this particular night, Tony wakes up at 1:43 AM and Steve decides not to pretend to still be asleep.

"Remember to put your pants on this time. Jemma sleeps even less than you do and you should be fully dressed in the lab anyway."

Jemma has developed a habit of falling asleep in the kitchen after creating enough food to even keep his super metabolism satisfied. Steve really likes her pesto aïoli. He know she’s having nightmares too. You don’t get dropped into an ocean by Hydra and not have nightmares. She doesn’t say anything about it, but they keep finding her in the kitchen at weird times of the night.

"That’s why she’s the perfect assistant and it was one time. I am never going to be able to sneak out of bed with a partner that has super hearing, am I?" Tony jokes.

“Not a chance." Tony walks over to the bed and kisses him on the mouth. Steve tries to pull Tony back onto the bed, but the other man pulls away before he can succeed.

"Just let me pee and then you can get me back to sleep using the orgasm method. Blowjobs always make me sleepy.”

Steve reluctantly lets Tony go because he knows that Tony’s not coming back for a while. Tony may actually go to the bathroom, but chances are he’s going to sneak down to Howard’s ‘bunker’ to go through more of his journals trying to find any mention of the Guesthouse and the GH 325.

Since the project dates back to right after World War II, Tony thinks that Howard may have had something to do with it. They already know that he dealt with at least one alien artifact. There could be something in his personal files that may help. Steve is tempted to join Tony downstairs, but he knew his boyfriend needed some alone time. He always needed quiet time after a nightmare and Steve would give him an hour before joining him and then dragging him back to bed.

Of course, Steve hoped that Tony wasn’t down there reading the files at this time of night because it wasn’t very sleep inducing or relaxing especially post nightmare. He’d prefer it if Tony was
finalizing preparations for the room he was creating for Leo once the young man was able to leave the rehabilitation center. Considering the phone calls that JARVIS has been making on Tony’s behalf, it seems that his boyfriend was planning to bring the rehab center to him.

Unfortunately, JARVIS confirms that Tony is reading Howard’s journals again. He sighs to himself, but doesn’t go downstairs, at least not until he receives a text message from Pepper telling him to go get his wayward boyfriend.

Steve makes his way downstairs through the kitchen to find Jemma asleep at the kitchen table, again. Steve wonders how she can sleep like that, but is happy that she is actually sleeping. He was tempted to carry her to her room, but the last time he tried she woke up and was unable to fall back asleep - according to JARVIS. Instead, he makes a quick trip back to the bedroom and then carefully exchanges her laptop for an actual pillow and places a blanket over her.

He’s not surprised at all to find she was reading journal articles on traumatic brain injuries caused by hypoxia. Actually, he’s seen the same journal article on Tony’s tablet in the last two or three days. Really, he’s just happy she wasn’t working on his birthday party in the middle of the night until he realized that was what she had been doing before she started reading the journal articles. This can’t keep up much longer.

Jemma needed to talk to somebody and it was obvious that she saw him as her boss’ boyfriend rather than a friend. Maybe he should invite Sam over to talk with her. Much like May, his new friend really helped Steve deal with a lot of his issues (and unlike Natasha, Sam was supportive of his relationship with Tony). He hoped Sam could help her as well because there seemed to be more going on with Jemma than just her poor sleep patterns. Steve had noticed that even though Tony had drastically cut down on his alcohol consumption because it interfered with his medication, they’re still going through the same amount.

The last thing he does before leaving the kitchen and heading to the bunker is to grab the food he knows that she made before she fell asleep. He’s well aware that cooking is one of her better coping mechanisms. He doesn’t say anything about it to her because it is more productive than demolishing punching bags, not to mention that he gets to enjoy the results of her endeavors.

He pushes those thoughts from his mind because right now he needs to focus on Tony, who is in Leo’s room surrounded by several of Howard’s private journals. They appear to be from the late 60s and early 70s, except the one in Tony’s hand looks newer. He also seems to be talking on the phone with Pepper. He’s glad that they’re talking. It makes it a little easier knowing that sleeping with Tony before the couple officially called it quits had not completely destroyed their relationship. Although from what he was hearing, it obviously wasn’t back to what it was and possibly never would be.
As soon as Tony realizes Steve is there he ends the call. From what he’d overheard of the conversation, Steve is fairly certain that Tony was looking for a reason to end the call and Steve’s arrival just happened to give him one.

“Did JARVIS tell you where I was or did Pepper text message you?” Tony asked before pulling Steve down for a kiss.

“How do you know that Pepper sent me a text message?” Steve asked pulling away reluctantly.

“Seems like something she would do.” Tony shrugged as he cleared a space next to him for Steve to sit down. “I don’t know why she is so worried. It’s not like I’m building suits in the middle of the night.” Because JARVIS won’t let you, Steve thinks to himself. JARVIS would call him immediately of something like that started up again. Actually, it was one of the conditions they came up with if Tony was going to actively be wearing the suits once more. “I’m just going over some old papers until I feel like falling asleep again.”

“I thought I was supposed to help you get back to sleep.” To accentuate his point, Steve placed a hand on Tony’s crotch and started to rub it gently through the fabric. As predicted, Tony began to harden immediately at his touch.

“Well, that was the plan, but you were already asleep by the time I got back. However, I’m all for doing that now as soon as we move to another room and as soon as I’m done with this diary. I’m not having sex in Leo’s bed. That would just be weird.” Tony shivered a little bit and not in a good way. Steve knew Tony was lying because he never actually fell back asleep.

“JARVIS?” He asked the AI specifically just to prove a point.

“I have no record of Mr. Stark returning to your shared bedroom.” Steve was tempted to correct the AI. They were not sharing a room yet, not really. Steve just slept over a lot. Living together, really living together after barely being together for two months was too soon. Sharing a house with Tony right now was a necessity. The military wanted him under their control and Hydra just wanted him gone. He wasn’t sure if they wanted Tony gone or under their control to make things for them. Either way, they were safer together especially now that they had another scientist to protect from Hydra’s resource grab living with them.

“Tattletale.” Tony actually sticks out his tongue at the AI. “Why do I put up with you JARVIS?”
“Because I’m the only one who can deal with you sir.” JARVIS replied flippantly.

“You keep that up, I’m making Skye your only mommy.” Steve was not sure how the AI would feel about that. Even Steve could tell that the AI was developing a crush of sorts on the young programmer.

“Obviously, you need sleep. This will still be down here in the morning.” Steve pulled the diary Tony was reading from his hands.

“It’s already morning.” Tony quipped. This was classic Tony avoidance. Steve has known him long enough to recognize the signs.

“Do you want to talk about your nightmare?” They are also at the point in their relationship where Steve won’t let him get away with it anymore.

“Just go back to bed.” Steve decided to take that as a ‘No, I don’t want to talk about why I woke up in the first place’.

“I need to finish reading this diary, but when I’m done you can suck my dick until I cum so hard I won’t wake up for a week. I love it when you let me fuck your mouth. The fact that it’s almost impossible for me to choke you is a turn on.” Now this is a new Tony Stark distraction technique. Steve kept his expression neutral and continued to hold on to the journal.

“And the sooner you let me get back to my reading, the sooner I can fuck you.” And it won’t work.

“Did you find something about the Guesthouse?” Steve asked because he really wanted to know what Tony found more interesting than going upstairs to have sex right now. He knew it was possible that Tony had come across something like that. Anything related to the Guesthouse would certainly qualify.

It makes Steve’s skin crawl to know that SHIELD or rather Nick Fury (because this was not a SHIELD sponsored program, thank God) was actively coming up with a contingency plan if one of them died. He saw firsthand how upset May was when she thought Phil was gone for good, but nobody has a right to play God. Now Fury has put May in a position where if Phil keeps getting worse she may lose him again. Steve knows that despite how strong she is if that came to pass his loss would destroy her this time.
“I wish, but there were nothing in Howard’s diaries from the 40s and 50s about anything related to the Guesthouse. Stuff about a certain blue cube to go over later, but nothing about aliens. His diaries from the 60s and 70s contain a lot of stuff about genetic engineering and early IVF procedures. SHIELD had their own Super Soldier program in the early 70s ironically called LULLABY that thankfully never got very far. Although with a name like that, it makes sense that the program was more about him trying to produce an heir than working with alien genetics or to recreate you. Of course, maybe that’s what he was actually doing. He compared me to you a lot while I was growing up. My coming into the world the old-fashioned way must’ve been such a disappointment.” Tony said bitterly and Steve wrapped an arm around his boyfriend.

“I’m glad it didn’t work. I would hate to be around another me. I’m a complete bastard.” You are perfect the way you are. Tony kissed him at that.

“No argument there.” Tony smirked. “If only he put as much interest in to raising a kid as he did into having one, I would’ve had a decent childhood.” Howard, you’re an idiot. Steve thought to himself.

“Of course, the only reason why he tried so hard to conceive me was because mom wanted a child and Obadiah was being a real prick.” Steve hopes that doesn’t mean what he thinks it does.

This is just going to make Tony self-esteem issues worse. Until Steve met Tony, he didn’t know it was possible for someone to appear to be completely full of themselves and yet be completely consumed by self-loathing. Of course, Howard was probably the main contributor to this phenomenon.

“What did Howard do?” Steve asked with an annoyed side.

“Just being a really crappy absentee father. Although, maybe he was afraid he would lose me too. I don’t know because it’s not like the man ever talked to me. Let’s just say 1970 was a very interesting year for him and a really bad year for mom.” Tony wanted to stop there are, but Steve was patiently staring him down so he would continue.

“So, it turns out I have a dead little sister, ironically named Natasha, who is buried in the Rose Garden at the Long Island house. Stephanie’s mom had to drag Howard’s ass back to Long Island to deal with everything because he ran a way to DC and his good friend, the bottle.” Steve’s response was to pull the man closer to him. He is so thankful that Peggy was around to literally smack some sense into Howard when Steve couldn’t be there. She always was a firecracker.

“Do you want to talk about it?”
“Not at all, but I’m planning on taking you to the Rose Garden eventually to pay our respects or something. Right now, I just want to get through the rest of this diary and not even think about that part of it, but you don’t have to suffer with me.” Tony kissed his cheek.

“I don’t like being in your bed without you.” Which was very true. Steve didn’t like sleeping alone. He never had. “I can help you go through journals.” Because now he’s worried about what other family secrets could be in these diaries.

“You don’t believe the Guesthouse thing at all?” Tony asked and Steve just shakes his head no. “You’re not actually going to leave me until I tell you why I woke up.”

“Oh, why you are really down here at 3 AM going through your father’s diaries. I will take an explanation for either.”

“I really was trying to find any mention of the Guesthouse or blue aliens because Agent Scary will kill me if I don’t help her fix whatever’s going on with Director Agent. It seems more likely that anything related to that would probably be in the diaries from the 40s or 50s and I went through those a couple of days ago. There’s nothing like that in there unless it was on the pages that were conveniently torn out, which knowing Shydra, is highly probable.” Tony said grudgingly.

“But if that was the only reason why we needed to go through the diaries, I would just turn them over to Director Agent and Agent Scary. The truth is I’m trying to find out if Howard knew that I was already a teenage dad and tried to cover it up. There was a paternity suit scare right before the car accident… Sorry, assassination. It wasn’t actually a car accident was it… I need a drink for this conversation.” Tony sighed frustratingly.

“I’ll make you a hot chocolate when we go upstairs. I really do want to take you upstairs and tuck you in to bed.”

“I hope that’s a euphemism for blow job or hand job for that matter. Though, I doubt there’s going to be any alcohol in that hot chocolate.” That’s because your new assistant keeps drinking most of the good alcohol.

“So what happened?” Steve started moving his hand in circles on Tony’s back underneath the tattered Black Sabbath T-shirt he was wearing. Steve knew that Tony found skin to skin contact comforting.
"I was 19-year-old and fucking Tiberius Stone. You know the guy whose network treats me like I’m the antichrist and Pepper like her only discernible skill is spreading her legs, because I had no semblance of good taste at 19. Anyway, I was literally fucking Ty when Howard calls me in the middle of the encounter to yell at me for knocking up some innocent coed. I received that ominous phone call on December 15, 1991.” Steve knew the significance of that date or rather how close it was to another significant date in Tony’s life. He saw it in big red letters on the file Fury gave him when he came out of the ice. He wrapped his arms around Tony as tight as he dared and kissed the man’s neck.

“You don’t have to continue.” Steve whispers.

“Yes, I do. Obviously, you realize that mom and dad were murdered by Shydra just two days later. The next thing I hear about it, I’m told the kid is not mine and Obadiah took care of it. Now I’m wondering just how Obadiah took care of it and if the kid really was mine. I don’t know.” Tony explained. That’s when Steve realizes that the diary Tony’s reading is from 1991.

“So you’re wondering if it was Leo and whether Howard or Obadiah made it go away?” Steve’s question was confirmed with a positive shake of Tony’s head.

“Do you think I would’ve been a good dad?” Tony asked.

“You already built this room and you have yet to meet with Stephanie to confirm that Leo is your son. You’re also arranging for him to have the best care in the world to recover from what happened. You like to take care of people. I think you would be a very good dad.” Steve really believed that.

“I don’t know. I already think I was a really bad one. I didn’t think to question Obadiah. I was a complete prick to Howard. When he told me about the condom breaking, I reacted badly.”

“How badly?”

“I’m pretty sure I hung up on him after telling him to go fuck himself. It was the last time we spoke before…”

“The incident.” Steve finished for him.
"Yes. I still can’t believe those were my last words to him.” There’s a single tear rolling down Tony’s cheek.

“Then after I became an orphan, I liked the idea of having a kid. At least that meant I wouldn’t be alone. I was a mess, but…” Tony closed his eyes for a moment. “Then it wasn’t true or at least Obadiah said it wasn’t true and I was the last Stark in the world again.”

With those words, Steve realizes exactly why Tony was avoiding Stephanie. The woman called Steve days ago to asking him to literally drag Tony in to speak with her. Tony wanted kids. Specifically, he wanted Leo to be his kid, but he was terrified of finding out that this was not the case again.

“Are you avoiding Stephanie for the exact same reason why you didn’t call me after we slept together for the first time?” Or for the exact same reason that I went on a run that morning instead of waking you up so we could talk. “Because as long as you didn’t call me, I couldn’t reject you.” Because as long as I avoided talking to you, you could not reject me.

"I had to deal with Pepper first.” Tony replied, but that really didn’t answer Steve’s question.

"By hiding in your lab in the tower for a week,” he snickered.

"Pepper told you?” Tony shook his head.

"We talk or rather we text message a lot." Although usually most of those messages come about when Tony doesn’t show up for conference calls. Ms. Simmons is a wonderful assistant or rather a wonderful lab partner, but she’s not the best person to remind Tony that he has a conference call because she’s just as likely as he is to get caught up in the research. This means that Steve gets to do that, when he’s not tracking down Bucky sightings.

"Of course you do.” Tony sighed. “Maybe it was a contributing factor, but you were on a mission, then Shydra happened, then you were in a coma, and your personally appointed bodyguard decided you were too good for me and threatened me with death if I even tried to call you.”

Steve decided it was in his own best interest not to mention that Natasha gave him Sharon’s contact information, but completely neglected to mention that Tony came to see him in the hospital. If he had known that Tony had driven all the way to DC to make sure he was alright, at the very least Steve would’ve talked to him without waiting another week.
At some point in the future, the very near future, the Avengers were going to have to work together again. If there was any hope of that happening, Tony and Natasha need to be on speaking terms. He couldn’t just run missions with Sam and/or Tony, they would need the others eventually. (Or they were going to have to rebuild the team with new people.)

“You can’t keep putting it off. You need to talk to Stephanie.” He will not enable Tony to keep running away from his life. Not this time.

“I never get what I want.”

“You got me.”

“For the moment.” Steve only heard those mumbled words thanks to Super Soldier hearing. His response was to kiss Tony for all he was worth. If Tony doesn’t want to believe Steve’s words, maybe he would believe that.

Tony was panting by the time they broke apart. One of the bad things about dating a Super Soldier is sometimes Steve forgets that his partner needs to breathe a bit more often. Okay, sometimes that can be a good thing.

“I love you. I’m in this for the long haul even if that means you have an almost 27-year-old kid, but you have to call Stephanie. You can’t keep avoiding this even if you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared.” Tony told his boyfriend with as much bravado as he could muster.

“Then call Stephanie. I will fuck you if you do.” Obviously, Steve was resorting to bribery. Steve didn’t enjoy sex as much the other way around because he remembered bruising his partner due to super strength during his first time post transformation. However, Tony was slowly convincing Steve that he liked it hard and rough sometimes and he wasn’t scared of Steve, unless he wanted to read something into tonight’s dream. Honestly, he was more afraid of himself that he was of Steve.

“Tempting, but it’s almost 3 AM. Stephanie is mean when she doesn’t get enough sleep or at least she used to be.” Tony said as an excuse and is fully aware it’s a good excuse. As long as he doesn’t talk to Stephanie, he can still pretend for a little bit longer.
"Actually, I’m currently conversing with Dr. Triplett." JARVIS interrupted. Why did he bother to put the AI in the bunker?

"Why are you conversing with Stephanie? Is there something wrong with Leo?" Tony asked once he realized the only logical reason why Stephanie would be calling JARVIS at this time.

"Mr. Fitz vital signs are within normal parameters. Ms. Potts asked me to schedule your appointment with her immediately. However, I was unaware that her service would connect me with her even at this time of night." JARVIS explained.

"Would you put her through JARVIS?" Steve asked over Tony’s shoulder.

“I’m the boss and just because somebody responds when emailed at three in the morning does not mean…” Tony started to yell but was cut off by Stephanie’s voice filling the room.

"My kid is hiding from a ruthless terrorist organization and I have no clue as to where. Do you really think I’m going to be getting a lot of sleep right now?" Stephanie asked flippantly.

"No." What went unmentioned was she was also sleepless due to the fact that Tony’s lawyers were the only thing keeping certain morons in the government from going after her 94-year-old mother. People were scared and they were going after anybody and everybody because they couldn’t find the real enemy. However, both knew not to say anything about this in front of Steve.

"Correct. This means that I actually do respond to your AI making emergency appointments, especially because we really need to talk in person, but since you’re not going to make that happen, this will have to do."

"I could tell you where he is. Technically, he is now part of Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division." Tony would fly Stephanie there right now if it meant putting off this conversation just a little bit longer.

“SHIELD 2.0. At least the new name makes more sense than the old one. How long are you going to keep using the full name?" Stephanie asked facetiously.
“As soon as the acronym is no longer synonymous with terrorism. So I’m thinking at least until 2019.” Tony quipped.

“It could be longer. I did get fired just because my mom started the organization. Look, I’d rather Antoine be safe even though I do actually need to talk to him because you gave him the completely wrong idea about how he came into the world. You don’t see me telling Fitz stories about underage hookups in convertibles although scientific evidence is pointing to that not being the case.” The last part was mumbled under her breath, but JARVIS can pick up anything and instantly AutoCorrect the volume. Tony’s face fell. He was right; nothing good ever happens to him.

“So he’s not my kid?” Tony asked failing to keep the sadness out of his voice.

"Tony, he tried to take on Hydra with a suitcase of my dad’s old Howling Commandos gadgets and then managed to MacGyver his way out of a medical pod at the bottom of the ocean. Of course, he’s your child. The DNA test just proved the obvious.” Steve kissed Tony at that moment, but Tony was in too much shock to really kiss back.

"He is my child?” He asked again when Steve’s mouth pulled away. He couldn’t believe it.

"Yes." Tony let go of the breath he was holding. This was good. He wasn’t the last Stark anymore. He could make up for not protecting Leo when he needed it (starting from the beginning, because seriously if he had been around he definitely would not have given his son the name Leopold). Even if it was almost 27 years later than it should have been, he could still be a better dad than Howard was.

“Then why did you want to call me into your office?” Because if Leo really was his kid, why was she calling him in? What bad news did she have to give him?

"It’s too early in the morning for this conversation." Stephanie sighed.

"Good thing it is still night." Tony quipped.

“Fine, have it your way, Tony. The only reason why I let you avoid me for the last two weeks was because I was having your friend, Dr. Banner, go over the samples again to confirm my hypothesis. I’m a neurologist not a geneticist. I could have made a mistake. The only reason why I suspected that something was off because I’m as familiar with my own child’s DNA profile as anything else about Antoine. I was hoping I had misread the lab results, but Dr. Banner came to the same conclusion.”
What did Stephanie or rather her team find out that would result in her calling Bruce? Why didn’t Bruce say anything? More importantly, what was so special about her son’s DNA profile?

“What conclusion was that?” Tony asked keeping all signs of worry out of his voice.

“Do you actually remember having sex with Ms. Fitz in your dad’s car about 27 ½ years ago?” At first, it seemed like a strange question, but the truth of the matter is he really doesn’t remember that much about the encounter.

The second time he had sex was with Deborah from one of his computer engineering classes. He remembered everything including her lessons on how to get a girl off and the art of oral sex because despite it being his second time he was still a little clumsy and really didn’t know what he was doing. It was okay because she was the best sex tutor ever and was really patient with him (and never sold him out to the tabloids).

They had a good arrangement that semester. He tutored her in engineering class because while their teacher was brilliant, he had no idea how to teach and was an asshole to most of the female students. In return, she tutored him in the bedroom and helped him out with his social skills in general. He was a 15-year-old college junior, of course he had no social skills.

Tony was proud that she ended up getting the same grade he received in that class. She was now one of the best engineers at SI and Tony hadn’t had any say in her being hired. Besides she had a different last name at that point.

He tried to blame his clearer memories of his encounter with Deborah on the fact that they slept together a lot that semester (and still talk occasionally on various projects), but truthfully his first time in the car was blurry. Tony barely remembered anything about it all until he saw Lola again. Tony doesn’t remember taking anything else other than the wine she gave him. His drug phase didn’t start until later. So why doesn’t he remember what happened?

“I remember her kissing me then her proceeding to unzip my pants. Then the next thing I remember clearly is being found by Mr. George, one of dad’s bodyguards. Everything in between is vague.” It was nonexistent, but Tony was not ready to admit that.

"Isn’t he the guard who tried to kill in your lab two months ago?” Steve asked.

"Yes, but a lot of SI staff were Hydra though. I’m even sure that a few who passed the initial
polygraphs after the attack have defected to the beast." It was a huge problem and part of the reason why he was keeping Simmons isolated right now.

“Shit. I remember Maria calling my mom in tears because you’d been missing for hours and she had no idea where you were. If you put that together with Mr. Fitz’s strange DNA profile, then you get a very bad situation. The truth is I don’t think you actually had sex with Fitz’s mom.”

“Stephanie what’s going on?” What are you not telling me?

"I’m pretty sure Fitz’s conception was about as accidental as Antoine’s because they share certain very unique genetic markers. And considering I was forcibly artificially inseminated by Hydra agents somewhere in Appalachia, that’s not good at all." No, it really fucking wasn’t.

“JARVIS, wake-up Hill and tell her that I expect her in DC by 9 with bagels. She has some explaining to do.”

To be continued.

Chapter End Notes

Anyway remember to feed your writer. I take reviews, kudos, followers, and anything else.
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who read or reviewed the last chapter. I know I spoiled everyone with the quick updates (by my standards) the last few chapters, but that was mainly due to my writing the first three chapters simultaneously. I may keep writing two or three chapters at a time with this story just to facilitate quicker updates. The next chapter is mostly done. Remember, reviews make me choose to wake up at 5 AM to write for an hour rather than to sleep.

Continuity Notes: Everything that happened in Agent Carter is canon for the story because it does not contradict anything. However, this story will veer greatly from the MCU from episode 2.11 foreword. Some elements will be use some others will not. For example, Stephanie Triplett formally Carter-Jones is very different than Trip’s mother on the actual show. Here she’s significantly younger and she was born Carter-Jones, not the hinted at Dugan.

Warning: Descriptions of torture, unethical medical testing, and violence.

Jemma woke up at 3:32 AM to the sound of her boss cursing Maria Hill from the stairwell of the lab. Considering there is a part of Jemma that personally blames the woman for her experience in the Gulf of Mexico, she believes the woman completely deserves such condemnation. If Maria Hill had never betrayed their location to the U.S. military, she and Fitz would have been safely in Canada and would never have been ejected from the Bus in a medical pod by the traitor. If not for that, things would still be the same between her and Fitz. No last-minute declarations of love before perceived imminent death. Fitz would be the same and not in some rehab center and she wouldn’t feel this all-consuming guilt.

However, just because Jemma concurs with the sentiment does not mean she wants to hear his latest rant against the woman. She sees her laptop was now lying beside her. She was sure this was Steve’s doing because she recognized that navy blue blanket covering her from his room; the one he never uses. Even when Stark had an overnight trip to California last week, Captain Rogers slept in his boyfriend’s room.

Maybe he can’t fall asleep like her - being trapped in the ice for 70 years would cause issues for anyone. Perhaps being in Stark’s room is the only thing that keeps those nightmares away. She wished she had something like that, but she did not, therefore, she was still unable to sleep.

Jemma hastily fled the kitchen with her laptop, the blanket and pillow returning to her bedroom. She really had no desire to be drawn into whatever set Dr. Stark off. She needed to do something else to exhaust herself and she decided upon trying to contact Fitz’s mother again. Maybe if she did something productive for Fitz, she could sleep a little bit more tonight.
“JARVIS, could you please compose an email to Fitz’s mum?” She asked the AI after several minutes of struggling type out a coherent message that may or may not have been caused by sleep deprivation. She didn’t typically take this kind of short cut, but talking to Jarvis usually made her feel better plus he would make sure everything was spelled correctly.

“Of course, Ms. Simmons. What would you like the message to say?” The AI replied immediately.

"Please start with the subject line ‘The child you forgot you even have is now awake." She spat out bitterly.

"You used that subject line 17.3 days ago." JARVIS reminded her.

"You’re right.” Forgetfulness was unusual for her. She rarely forgot anything she’d written unless she was under a lot of stress. “Let’s use ‘When your son is nearly killed by terrorists, you should at least check up on him.’"

“That particular subject line contains information that you’re not allowed to give out.” JARVIS reminded her. “May I suggest, ‘Please contact your son or myself at your earliest convenience’?”

"No. Please use 'Do you even remember that you have a son?"’ Jemma would swear she heard the AI actually sigh. She wondered if Dr. Stark programed such behaviors into the AI. It seemed like something he would do.

"For the body of the message?” JARVIS asked after apparently finding nothing objectionable in that subject line.

"This is my 18th attempt to contact you. Your son was severely injured in a work-related accident six weeks ago. Half of that time he was in a coma. He could desperately use the support of his parents, but since his father disappeared before he was even born that leaves you. Yet, during the last six weeks we have not heard from you. Not one email or phone call in that time period let alone an actual visit. If you care about your son the tiniest microscopic bit, at least send a bloody card you cold, heartless bitch. Sincerely, Jemma Simmons a.k.a. the roommate who actually cares more about your son then you do." She included that last part because his mother is still under the impression that she is his roommate.
"Would you like the profanity removed before actually sending?" Why does she feel that this is a service that the AI performs for Dr. Stark on a regular basis?

"No," she responds sternly.

"Of course, Ms. Simmons. However, I do recommend removing the lines regarding Mr. Fitz’s absentee father. You are unaware of the circumstances regarding his father being absent from his life. His father may have wanted to be part of his life, if he’d been provided with an opportunity to do so." Sometimes she thinks Stark made his AI to human.

"If he cared, he would’ve been there. If Fitz’s mom actually cared, she would be here instead of…” She started to say but the AI cut her off.

"Mr. Fitz’s father may have been entirely unaware of his existence and would have been there every moment of his life, if he had known." The AI argued.

"When did I get to the point where my only friend is an artificial intelligence?" She said sitting in the middle of her bed with head in her hands.

"One of my primary functions is to serve as a confidant for Mr. Stark. However, due to Captain Rogers’ presence in his life, I no longer need to function in such a capacity.” The AI almost sounded as if he was upset about that.

“So, I’m your current project? I don’t need an electronic babysitter. I am quite capable of taking care of myself.” Jemma argued.

"I do not believe that to be the case considering you are dictating electronic correspondence to Mister Fitz’s mother at 3:52 AM after sleeping a combined two hours and 27 minutes. To function through the day, you consume 38% more caffeine than Mr. Stark himself. That is a remarkable feat.” She feels like telling the AI that she’s a SHIELD agent and therefore she was conditioned to function on very little sleep, but she doesn’t. She’s not an agent anymore, not really, even if she is monitoring Dr. Stark to make sure he doesn’t create anything that could accidentally end society.

"That’s not…” She stops speaking realizing that it is not productive to argue with a computer, albeit a highly intelligent one.
"Just send the letter." Jemma sighed.

"I apologize, but I’m unable to do that." Jarvis responded after a moment.

"Fine, take out the line and send the letter." Jemma acquiesced. She wouldn’t be surprised if Ms. Potts put in a filter that prevented angry rants from being mailed out. There’s a reason why PR makes her review Stark’s tweets before he can send them out. He would’ve called Senator Ward a cowardly prick (or some variation) six times in the last week without her reluctant intervention.

"32.3 minutes ago Captain Rogers per the advice of Dr. Triplett activated a protocol that prevents me from forwarding any correspondence to Mr. Fitz’s alleged mother. If you try to re-create this message on your computer to send manually, I will still block the transmission of the correspondence.” The AI told her before she could even move to grab her laptop.

Why can’t I email her now? It seems odd that this is happening especially after Dr. Stark’s earlier verbal outbursts. Did something happen? “Why are you referring to her as Fitz’s alleged mother?” Is the question she actually asked aloud.

"If she was actually his mother, would she not have been here? That is what you stated earlier.” The AI said turning her logic around on her.

"I hate it when you do that. Fine, but why am I not allowed to email her now? I’m even allowed to freely contact my father even though he works for a competitor.” She finds it deeply ironic that after years of her parents trying to get her to take a ‘respectable job befitting her academic credentials’ that they are upset by the fact she took a position at Stark Industries. It doesn’t surprise her though because her father’s company has been fighting with Stark Industries since before Captain Rogers’ disappearance in the 40’s. “The situation with Ms. Fitz is completely different and the moratorium on communication is for your own safety.”

Why would the AI say something like that now? She’s been trying to contact the woman since leaving the Playground and this is the first time she’s been stopped from doing so.

"Why can’t I attempt to contact Ms. Fitz anymore? Did something happen? Did Maria Hill find her?” A discussion with Maria Hill about Fitz’s mom could’ve triggered the earlier shouting she heard from Stark.

"I am not at liberty to discuss this topic any further. You will need to speak to Mr. Stark regarding
this matter.” She was prepared to do just that. “However, I recommend waiting until morning due to the fact that he and Captain Rogers are currently engaged in activities that you do not want to interrupt.”

“I don’t care.” They couldn’t be that far along. She heard mumbled curses of Maria Hill’s name just a few minutes earlier. She opens the door only to see her boss with pants around his ankles receiving fellatio from a national icon.

"Couldn’t they have at least waited until they got to the bedroom?” She said after quietly shutting the door to her room. She really hoped they didn’t notice her. Steve was otherwise engaged and Stark had his eyes closed and was loudly referring to him as a deity.

"I tried to warn you Ms. Simmons.”

"You could have specifically mentioned they were engaging in those activities right outside my door.” She exclaimed more than a little irritated as she climbs onto her bed.

"Would you like for me to play soothing music in an effort to induce sleep?” The AI asked probably realizing that she could still hear the couple. Soundproofing could only do so much when a person was being thrust against the wall outside of your room repeatedly during coitus.

“No ocean sounds.” She’d already had enough nightmares tonight.

"Of course, Ms. Simmons.”

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Steve has known Tony long enough to realize that he’s not going to get his boyfriend back to sleep anytime soon, but that doesn’t stop him from escorting Tony back upstairs (i.e. actually carrying him to the elevator). They make it to the lab before Tony starts cursing Maria Hill and Fury for keeping the truth from him. Tony’s frustration gets the better of him and he grabs the first thing that comes to hand and throws it across the lab. After watching it shatter against the wall, Steve manages to get Tony to continue into the kitchen - a kitchen that no longer contains a sleeping assistant.

Steve wonders if she woke up on her own or if Tony’s tirade caused that. The basement is purposely not soundproof in case Tony does something stupid in the lab. Tony screaming a few minutes earlier could’ve woken up anyone. Steve wondered how much she heard. Tony wanted to be certain of his paternity before they shared the information. Besides, it wasn’t exclusively their secret to tell.
“I could’ve died.” Tony says sitting down at the kitchen table as Steve heats up a pan of milk. He had promised Tony hot chocolate and hopes it will stop Tony from shaking. His hands have been twitching since the moment Stephanie suggested a Hydra connection to the existence of Tony’s son and knowing Hydra the way he does he could believe it. He readily believes they would use a child as a bargaining chip or at worst a weapon.

“I could’ve died at least four times without knowing that I actually have a child. It’s more than that if you count all the times that I almost OD during the worst of my drug phase. 1992 was a bad year.” That would’ve been a year after Howard and Maria died and all the responsibilities of Stark Industries started being thrown at him, in addition to Mr. Jarvis getting very sick that year. “Being high was the only way I could get through everything.” He could see Tony turning to the wrong things as a coping mechanism because he still did it sometimes. It was another reason he wished he’d gotten pulled out of the ice earlier.

“But you are still here. You survived long enough to meet your son,” long enough to meet me. “Not telling you wasn’t right, but...”

“You’re going to tell me they had their reasons because you’re noble and trusting like that.”

“No, I’m not.” He trusted the motivations of old SHIELD about as far as he could have tossed a baseball pre-serum and that was before he found out about the Hydra corruption. “Lying to you was bad, but being angry will not give you back the time you lost. It took me about 20 broken punching bags to realize that. I think that’s what you’re really furious about and I understand. You’re mad that you missed so much because you could have been a part of it. Everything went along without you. There’s a lot of resentment there.”

He feels a piece of that every time he sees Stephanie, his own living embodiment of everything lost. However, if things were different, he wouldn’t be with Tony now and he didn’t want that.

"Maybe I am feeling some of that, but I’m angrier at myself than I am at Spies Incorporated. I was a worse father then Howard simply due to ignorance." Steve stops stirring the milk to go over and hug Tony.

“You’re not.” He places a kiss on Tony’s neck.

"I didn’t question Obadiah. I need to finish going through that diary. I need to know if he…” That’s when Steve notices that Tony actually brought one of the diaries with him. Steve was certain he took
that out of his hands before he put Tony over his shoulder to carry him fireman style upstairs.

“What if Howard really did discover Leo? Hydra could’ve killed him for finding out about their secret Stark baby factory. If Stephanie is right and they really did steal my sperm, there could be dozens of little Stark super geniuses being trained to be Hydra assassins just like…” ‘Natasha.’ Steve thinks the name, but doesn’t say it out loud and neither does Tony. He knows bits and pieces about Natasha’s childhood as a child soldier. The thought of Hydra doing something like that with children made from Tony’s DNA made him sick. Instead of throwing up like he wants, he grabs the diary out of Tony’s hand.

"Tony, it’s late. There’s no point worrying about this stuff until we talk to Hill and Stephanie tomorrow. Let me finish the hot chocolate and then I’ll tuck you into bed."

"Blowjob?" Tony almost half smiled. But it didn’t quite reach his eyes. When even sex doesn’t make Tony smile, you know something’s wrong.

"Maybe, if you don’t pick up that diary when I turn around to add the chocolate to the milk."

"You’re horrible." Tony brings out a mock pout, but it’s a mask. Steve can see the pain in his eyes. It hurts his heart.

"I worry about you.” Steve said turning his attention back to the milk, just in time to keep it from boiling over.

"Maybe I am overreacting. Stephanie is not a geneticists or even a biologist. Maybe her theory is just her being paranoid. Actually, I’m not even 100% sure what her theory is because you had Jarvis cut the call after I ordered Maria down here."

“Because the conversation became too sensitive to continue over the phone despite your encryption capabilities. Anyway, I thought she minored in biology in undergrad.” Peggy mentioned something about that to him during one of their visits. She loved bragging about her kids although sometimes she thought Stephanie was still in college.

"Probably, I think she only had to take two more classes to get a minor since she was already premed. It’s a pretty common thing to do. It’s the reason why I have so many doctorates; a lot of my coursework overlapped.” Steve’s response is to just pour the chocolate chips into the hot milk and begin to stir.
"You know we have perfectly good hot chocolate mix. The good stuff. The Mexican stuff." Tony finally says as Steve pours the hot chocolate mixture into two mugs.

"I like doing things the old-fashioned way sometimes. It’s relaxing." Because I’m just as worried about this is you are, but one of us has to stay halfway rational.

“What I’d find really relaxing is if you’d let me add some bourbon or something else to this.” Steve is pretty sure Tony is at least half serious.

"Alcohol is not good for situations like this. Besides, it will interact with your medication.” All of which was true.

"And if it turns out that Hydra really did steal my sperm and is creating an army of snarky geniuses to rule the world, I’m going to need my crazy pills." Tony quipped.

"You’re not crazy."

"I’m bipolar with a nasty case of PTSD and substance abuse issues for flavor.” He kisses Tony at that moment. Steve could taste chocolate and cream on Tony’s lips.

"You’re still not crazy - just human like the rest of us.” Steve told Tony as he pulled away and Tony sipped his hot chocolate.

While Tony drank his hot chocolate, there were several more rants against Hill and Fury. Once Tony finished his drink, Steve dragged the man towards his room to give him that blowjob. They don’t actually make it that far. It’s not surprising. Before Jemma moved in, they had sex pretty much anywhere in the house. Now that they had a houseguest they were trying to limit things to the bedroom, Tony’s workshop, or their own bathroom. Steve’s need to comfort Tony only got them as far as the hall. He offered a silent prayer that Jemma had fallen back to sleep before losing himself in the act.

When they finally reach their room, Tony doesn’t fall asleep and neither does Steve. They lie in bed spooned together as Steve rubs circles across Tony’s back and shoulders. This keeps up until JARVIS notifies them that Stephanie has arrived with a bag of groceries and was currently talking with Tony’s new driver/personal mechanic in the driveway.
Her hands are bound to the metal table beneath her. She feels the cold steel against her bare skin. Her feet were also shackled. She would break Dr. Blue Eyes in half if he came after her with scalpel in hand if she wasn’t chained to the table. He ran the blade against her stomach. As usual his cuts were shallow, but she can feel the blood leaving her.

At least this won’t leave any scars. That was the whole point of this exercise to determine how fast she heals. She never screams nor does she cry. She doesn’t give them the satisfaction, but something’s different tonight. The scalpel starts to cut deeper and soon it feels as if something was being ripped out of her. She hears a baby, her baby, wail as Dr. Blue Eyes takes him away from her.

“Antoine,” Stephanie screams out just as she wakes up. Her whole body shaking as she looks at the clock. It was only 4:38 AM. She was barely asleep for 45 minutes before the nightmares came. Her kidnapping flashbacks had become less frequent over time, but they never really went away completely.

She isn’t surprised she had one tonight. Stephanie Triplett nee Carter-Jones doesn’t sleep well without taking an Ambien. Even those haven’t helped in the last 10 weeks since everything fell apart. To make matters worse, her husband’s job had him in another state for the time being allowing him to come to DC only every other weekend.

The other reason for her constant sleeplessness was her only child decided to follow in his grandparent’s footsteps and join the world of international espionage. She’s gotten used to sleepless nights wondering where her son was when he couldn’t contact her. It made complete sense that her subconscious would combine the two.

Her nightmares have increased exponentially ever since Stephanie watched her mother’s legacy fall apart on her iPad. She waited desperately for someone – anyone to tell her what the fuck was going on. Marcy called first to let her know that the CIA had Sharon in custody and they would be offering her a deal to join because she helped take Hydra down during the ‘Triskelion incident’, but neither Marcy, Jamie, nor Desiree knew anything about Antoine despite all their contacts, not even if he was alive. For two weeks she worried, but told herself that the constant FBI, CIA, and military interviews would not have happened if her son was dead.

At the end of the first week, she got desperate and called her husband’s old friend Virginia to get the contact information for former Director Hill, the woman that Stephanie would personally hold responsible if her son was dead. Stephanie may or may not have threatened the woman’s life if she did not hear from her son. Okay, her exact words were “If my son is dead, I will kill you. Then I will arrange for somebody to bring you back and I will kill you again. Don’t think I can’t pull it off because I know people.”
A week later Antoine showed up healthy and in need of her dad’s old Howling Commandos spy gear for reasons that she was better off not knowing. Over the years, she has wondered why her mom gave her the box instead of Marcy or why Marcy never protested her having these things. Maybe it was because Marcy had her biological father’s old SSR gadgets. Stephanie didn’t know.

Regardless of her own sentimental attachment to the suitcase of gadgets, she handed them over because Antoine was going to do whatever he was going to do with or without the stuff in that box and with it at least he would have a fighting chance. She didn’t tell Marcy or Jamie about Antoine making contact with her. A week later when he called her to let her know that he was safe, she knew she had made the right decision. Of course, at that point, she was at her new job on the other side of the country dealing with his colleague, who barely survived Hydra’s attempt to kill him.

How she found herself under Tony Stark’s protection and working for Stark Industries was a long dysfunctional story. She’s not entirely sure if she was fired because her mother founded SHIELD, her son worked for the now discredited organization, or if her employers were just disturbed by her being pulled out of the hospital multiple times to be interrogated by idiots, who couldn’t find real Hydra agents even if they were wearing their lapel pins.

It doesn’t matter because she found herself with no choice but to accept Tony’s job offer. Looking back, she feels horrible for pushing her friend away all those years ago just because the young woman who died helping her escape from that hell had his eyes.

At least she was closer to her mom, although that meant also being closer to certain siblings who still treat her like a pariah because they have no idea what happened 28 years ago. Nor was she planning to tell any of them anytime soon. Stephanie was thrilled to learn that she has to attend the official Captain America birthday party. She had been dreading having to show up to her brother’s annual Fourth of July spectacular now that she lived in the same metro area.

Besides, it was a decent job. There were a lot of good things about being the head of SI medical research programs and overseeing the company’s partnership with Georgetown. However, the more bizarre duties of this job include taking care of her son’s new boss who had been treated with ‘alien materials’ to bring him back from the dead. Stephanie was not shocked at all to learn Nick Fury would do something like that. It was things like this that made her want to ask for more money at the very least.

She was also taking care of an agent who had suffered severe brain damage courtesy of Hydra literally deep sixing him. It was something of a shock to discover that he’s actually Tony Stark’s long-lost son who may or may not have been created in a test tube by the very entity that put him under her care in the first place. On top of that, she’s still getting frequent visits from the FBI, although, now, most of their questions are about her mom. It was enough to make her really miss doing Alzheimer research in California.
The situation with Tony’s son is probably the reason why she had her first Nursery Group dream in almost a year. The whole situation reminded her too much of those months held captive in Appalachia. Stephanie was really thankful that Steve decided that the conversation was too classified to continue despite Tony’s encryption. The damage had been done though. It still resulted in her waking up screaming not even an hour later.

She gave up on getting any more sleep and decided to just head over to Tony’s house. As much as she never wanted to talk about her time in Appalachia, he still needed to know the truth or at least the stuff she never told SHIELD, because she never really completely trusted them and for good reason apparently. Even though Maria Hill wasn’t part of Hydra, Stephanie still did not trust the woman. Therefore, she wanted to have this conversation with Tony before Hill arrived.

She procrastinated by making a trip to a nearby grocery store for breakfast ingredients and a cheesy congratulatory ‘It’s a boy’ gift because she felt like she needed to get Tony an apology present. It’s very hard to shop for a billionaire, but Tony always appreciated a good snarky joke. She finally pulled up into the driveway of Stark’s house in Arlington a little before 7 AM. To her surprise, Stephanie saw a familiar face standing outside of Stark’s limo.

"Mack, what are you doing here?" She said as she hugged the man she had always wanted to be her son-in-law. What she really wanted to say was ‘Thank God, you’re not dead or Hydra’, but she held back those words. She would probably start crying if she said something like that.

Stephanie always thought it was a shame they decided they would be better off as friends. The end of that relationship led to Robin and Robin led to wedding rings being tossed into the Potomac (good thing she refused to let Antoine use her father’s wedding band). It also led to her elderly mom breaking the nose of one of her nurses twice. The fact that her mom was still that physically strong despite her advanced age and other medical conditions was causing Stephanie to receive all sorts of questions from people she didn’t want to talk to. They were the type that would throw her into a dark hole somewhere probably in the Caribbean. That growing fear was the other reason why she was here. Since Tony was doing everything in his power to protect her and her family, he deserved to know the truth.

"Former Director Hill managed to get me a job here as a bodyguard/mechanic/driver." Stephanie was sure there was more to the story than that. You don’t grow up with spies for parents without picking up something.

"Didn’t you flunk combat certification?” This is why she questioned his story. Stephanie distinctly remembered Antoine telling her that when he tried to explain why the two were breaking up post Academy. Supposedly, Mack being stuck at the base with Antoine being all over the globe made a relationship difficult.
"No, but only because Trip helped me. Really, I’m here for the cars and to avoid the interrogations.” That seems plausible. If her husband wasn’t friends with Virginia Potts, Stephanie felt like she would still be locked away in a windowless room. Marcy would try to protect her and so would Jamie, but they didn’t know what she really was.

"I’m sure they are really nice cars." Tony always loved cars.

"I’d appreciate them more if I wasn’t driving one to pick up my old boss, who my new boss completely hates, before 7 AM on my supposed day off." Mack complained.

"Hill?" She questioned.

"Yes. Luckily, this should be done by late morning and I will still be able to meet Trip for lunch." Her mouth opens at that. Trip hasn’t even called her in the last three weeks and he is making lunch dates with his ex-boyfriend.

"Your meeting with Antoine?" She could not keep the hurt out of her voice.

"Yes." Mack answered reluctantly. “I thought you knew.”

"We haven’t talked much recently given what’s going on."

‘I haven’t spoken to him at all since a very angry conversation three weeks ago because Tony told him that he was the product of her being raped by Hydra agents during kidnapping. Strangely, rape was one of the few torture tactics that they didn’t employ.’ Stephanie swallowed the words down. There was no reason for her to tell her son’s ex-boyfriend that.

"That makes sense. I’ll remind him to call you, but if you get done here in time, you could catch him when he visits your mom this morning. He told me he was going to go there first." She couldn’t believe Mack just told her exactly where she could find her son.

"You were always my favorite." Considering he went through agent training, Mack knew exactly what he was doing.
"Unfortunately, we work better as friends." He gave her a sad smile before sliding into the driver seat of the car.

"Some people do." She returned the smile before walking up the steps.

Given Steve’s appearance, it’s obvious that her conversation with Mack had allowed Steve just long enough to actually put on jeans and a T-shirt, although not enough to shower because the scent of sex still clung to him. Tony came in a few minutes later complete with bite marks that Stephanie does not want to think about at all.

"I forgive you for coming this early because you brought food although no bacon.” Tony said taking the box of donuts from her as he led her to his state-of-the-art kitchen.

"No cook bacon.” She pulled a packet out of the green reusable grocery bag. “The breakfast bar doesn’t open for another hour. I figured I could make breakfast while we talk. My French toast has only gotten better.”

"You should’ve waited an hour. I love their bacon and I’ve had your French toast before. Anything short of charred would be an improvement. You caused a fire and made Jarvis cry. I didn’t even think that was possible.” He said referring to her first attempt at cooking.

“I ruined his favorite pan, but I’ve gotten better. Mom made me take cooking lessons. Besides, if I waited an hour, I am not sure we would have time to talk before Hill arrives. I caught Mack as he was leaving to get her.”

"You know him?” Steve asked Stephanie as he helped her with the groceries. She brought a lot of stuff because her husband told her scary stories about Tony’s kitchen related via Virginia.

“He is Antoine’s ex-boyfriend from his Academy days. Nice boy. My preferred choice for future son-in-law, but now they’re just really good friends.”

"Does that mean he’s probably not a plant by Maria Hill?” Tony asked.

"Only in the sense that he’s probably here to keep you from creating a sentient car that will try to
“Possibly, it depends on how much cooking Jemma did last night.” Steve goes over to the fridge to check its contents.

“She doesn’t sleep much. You don’t happen to have the name of a therapist who specializes in PTSD?”

“Yes. I know you said that you were not raped, but…” Tony began, but is cut off by his boyfriend poking him in the ribs. That had to hurt.
“We should concentrate on breakfast now. We can talk about this when Hill gets here.” Steve suggested.

“I don’t want Maria Hill or anyone else to know about what happened at the Nursery facility.” That’s what she called the place where they held her. “I came here to tell you both what happened because you need to know and I trust you both to keep this between us.”

“So we can understand why you think Hydra kidnapped to me for my sperm and created Leo?”

“Yes, because my suspicions are not going to make sense unless you know everything.” She took a deep breath. “It was December 1985 and we were living in DC because mom was still Director.”

“And you were dating some guy that I absolutely hated.” Tony added.

“Yeah. Well, I ditched my security detail so I could let said guy deflower me because I was young and stupid. On the way to his house, I was picked up by…” She slammed the container of egg mixture on the counter causing some of it to spill all over the pristine granite countertop.

“Hydra.” Both men supplied simultaneously.

“Yes, but I didn’t know that at the time. They were there in a SHIELD van. I thought mom sent them to get me until I felt a syringe inserted in my neck.”

“They probably were SHIELD, but not sent by your mother.”

“Again, it’s not like I knew that at the time. It was not a pleasant experience. At first, I was experimented on. They took lots of blood and tissue samples before moving on to the type of stuff that mom would never let the SHIELD scientists do.”

She closed her eyes, her fingers unconsciously go to the scars on her wrists that should be there but aren’t. After everything that’s been on the Internet, she wondered if the same doctors who gave her lollipops as a kid were the ones who held her down as they measured how long it took her to recover from a knife wound to her thigh. Of course, she couldn’t tell Tony about that part of her ordeal. She never told anybody about that and never would.
“I must’ve passed all the tests because eventually they decided I would make a good incubator and that’s how I got Antoine.” The day she discovered she was pregnant was the day Stephanie decided that she wasn’t going to let either of them continue to be guinea pigs of the nursery group. She did anything she had to do to get out of there including snapping the neck of the scientist she thought of as Dr. Blue Eyes.

"You sit down. Let me take over. Besides you’re a guest, you shouldn’t be cooking.” The way Steve looked at her she knew she wasn’t going to be able to say no.

"Fine, at least until I’m done saying what I need to say.” Yet she didn’t speak once she took the seat next to Tony. This conversation was too fucking hard.

"Why were they running test on you? Why did they choose you?” Tony asked after a moment.

"They’re an evil, nebulous organization. It’s hard to understand their motivations sometimes.” She replied flippantly. Only that tactic doesn’t work on somebody who is more snarkier than her. It looks like she’s going to have to tell Tony everything.

"Do you remember the first time somebody tried to kidnap us?"

"I was five and you were seven. Two people tried to grab us when Jarvis was picking us up from school. Jarvis was able to get me away from the guy after hitting him with my book bag, but you were able to get away on your own."

"I kicked the guy so hard that I broke his leg and I was able to get away.” Years later, when she woke earlier than expected from the sedative and found herself at the Nursery, she attacked one of the guys guarding her. She may have killed him, but she’s not sure because they knocked her out again before she could do anything else. This was why they chained her up.

"You were seven!” Tony exclaimed bringing her back to the conversation.

"Some seven-year-olds have more training than other seven-year-olds.” She answered nonchalantly.

“I doubt Peggy ever tried to turn you into a child soldier.” Steve said from beside her.
“While mom got more cynical as time went by, she never got to that point. She was furious when Howard taught us how to shoot.” Stephanie explained. “I’m not quite normal.”

“I’ve known that for forever. You could do calculus at 10.”

“Yes, three years later than you. That’s not what I mean Tony.” Stephanie sighed. “It will be easier if I just showed you.” That’s when she walks over to the double refrigerator and lifts it without any effort whatsoever.

"I can see Steve doing that, but not you. Not unless you’re … You’re a LULLABY kid? Dad’s super-secret super soldier project. I mean it is weird for a woman to have a kid in her 50s and I could so see your mom adopting you to protect you from…”

“Considering I have no idea what a LULLABY kid is I’m going to answer no.”

“I don’t either. Howard didn’t define the acronym in his notes.”

“If Jamie’s traumatic childhood stories are to be believed, I’m pretty sure I was created the old-fashioned way. I inherited certain gifts from my parents.” Stephanie quipped.

"But both Peggy and Gabe were normal." Steve said looking at her with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Maybe when you knew them, but stuff happened. Did you know that some idiot managed to spill a teeny bit of the super soldier serum on mom before they used it on you?” He probably didn’t. Her mom never told that to anyone.

"It was only a little bit." He probably knew a lot of things about both her parents that she never would. They never really talked about the war.

"She had a cut on her hand and it got into her bloodstream. At the time nothing happened, but then on some secret mission a few years later she was exposed to a certain type of radiation and voila, my mom looked 30 until she was 85." Something happened that caused her to age almost 50 years overnight. Marcy, Antoine, or Sharon won’t tell her anything about it and it did not make the
"That was true. I never believed that she and dad were almost the same age. She looked closer in age to my mom." Tony added.

"And Gabe?" Steve asked.

“He had the world’s greatest immune system. He never got sick ever. When he got hurt, he would recover a lot faster than normal. He managed to survive things that would have killed a normal person. He didn’t die of old age, he was shot in the head.” His death may or may not have been a Hydra assassination, but she wouldn’t say that out loud. Marcy was looking into it. However, by the way Steve wasn’t looking at her, she had a feeling that he had already come to that conclusion.

“How did your dad get super healing? Was he exposed to something?” Of course, Tony would ask those questions. He is a constant scientist. Knowledge is always his priority.

“I don’t know.” Although, the most recent blood sample you gave me has the same unusual antibodies that Gabe’s blood contained. However, the stored sample that Bruce was working from does not. Stephanie wasn’t going to have that conversation right now because it implied something that she wasn’t completely ready to deal with.

“Anyway, when you combine the two together, you get me – the woman who looks almost the same age as her son and had to swear her doctor to secrecy when her broken leg healed completely in three weeks.”

“And you can apparently lift huge refrigerators without trying?” Tony asked one eyebrow raised.

“Yes. I brought my research.” She said holding up her iPad.

“I’m going to have to get you something better than this.” Tony said taking the tablet from her as he led her to the living room.

“I have two Stark Pads now thanks to you. However, I don’t want this on the system.”
“Why? My system is so much more secure.”

“It’s best to keep this information off the network. Currently that iPad contains information about the unique genetic markers from my son’s DNA which also matches your son’s DNA in addition to my own.” *I may trust you, but I don’t trust the others you work with not to do bad things with this data,* Stephanie thought to herself.

“What are these unique markers? What’s so special about Leo that you’re sure he was created in a lab?”

“Just like Antoine, Mr. Fitz was created using DNA from three contributors.” She blurted out giving up on explaining this gently.

“What?”

“You can’t be that surprised. I know you keep up with most scientific journals. Even VNN did an article back in February about three parent embryos. FDA trials are currently going on for the technique.”

“I don’t get my scientific news from VNN. I don’t even get my regular news from any network affiliated with Ty-Ty. Not that the garbage they spew can be considered news. They are usually too busy trashing Pepper to do anything resembling journalism.”

“I did warn you he was a prick the first time I met him. JARVIS, would you please pull up any public information about the FDA trials.”

“Put it in the living room Jarvis.” Steve told the AI. “You guys go in the living room. I will bring coffee out in a few minutes.”

“Please tell me it will be Irish coffee?” Steve shakes his head no and she follows Tony to the living room to look over the files.

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Simmons managed to fall asleep again for one hour and 49 minutes even after being exposed to Dr. Stark’s sex life. She forgot about the alarm that she set the morning before on her old fashioned wind-up. Jarvis cannot deactivate remotely otherwise the AI would’ve done so. He always allows her to oversleep (or rather sleep past her alarm) when she has a very restless night thus the reason
why she started setting a manual alarm.

Jemma is thankful for the connecting bathroom because she could get ready for the day without venturing into the hallway. She is reasonably certain that they would be done by now, but had no wish to see them again if that wasn’t the case. However, eventually she did have to leave the suite because work was calling her.

"If I walk in to the hallway now, will I see a repeat of last night?" She asked the AI as a precaution.

"Mr. Stark is currently working on a tablet in the living room as Captain Rogers and Dr. Triplett prepare breakfast. Both are also fully clothed."

"I would assume that to be the case since Dr. Triplett is present."

“Ms. Potts would argue otherwise.” JARVIS remarked and she walked out the door. Within seconds, she heard her boss yelling.

“Why didn’t you sit me down with this information when I started to avoid you two weeks ago? Also this is going on the private server with the good encryption and then I’m taking a repulsor to this iPad to make sure nobody can recover the information off of it.” Dr. Stark was screaming which was never ever a good sign. The last time he’d been this upset (excluding the Hill incident) was three days ago during a videoconference with R&D when she had pointed out several flaws with their latest robotic prototype.

“Because I needed verification from an outside source. I told you that last night. Considering that the FDA has only been considering approving the use of three parent embryos since February, I wanted to make sure I wasn’t crazy. As you can see, Dr. Banner came to the same conclusion.” She heard Trip’s mother explained.

Jemma realizes that she should not be listening to this conversation, but as a scientist she is curious.

“And this is how Hydra created your son?” And because whatever they’re talking about involves Trip she’s even more curious.

“Yes. I don’t even know who Antoine’s other two parents are. I noticed the same uniqueness in his sample.”
“But I am one of the three DNA contributors?”

“Yes. I’m not even sure if the woman who raised him is one of the other two. I need a blood sample from her and according to Hill nobody has heard from her since before SHIELD fell. I really find it to be bizarre she raised him with the same cover identity used to secure the sample in the first place.”

“Hydra has always been known for their hubris.” She heard Steve say.

“Which explains why they put their giant red octopus logo on everything.” Says the man who puts his name on his building Jemma thought to herself.

“So what you’re saying is you believe that Hydra created Leo from Tony’s DNA using a technique that is only now being considered for approval by the FDA?” There’s no way she heard that right. There’s just no way.

“I don’t know why you find this surprising considering that you were born before my mom and look almost the same age as my son thanks to SSR engineering.”

“Is it really creepy for me to be dating someone who is the same age as my child?” She heard Stark wonder out loud, however, she was too busy focusing on convincing herself that they were not talking about Fitz.

“Not when said child was probably created without your consent and your boyfriend is really about three years from being a centenarian.”

“I need a fucking drink.”

“It’s barely 7 AM.”

“If Hydra created a kid from your DNA when you were a teenager and then subsequently tried to kill him by dumping him in the ocean because he didn’t turn out to be some easily manipulated pawn, you would want to get drunk before 8 AM too… if such a thing were still possible for you.” They were talking about Fitz. There was no one else they could be talking about.
"You’re Fitz’s father?" She asked from the stairway startling the three downstairs.

“JARVIS, we talked about letting me know when Jemma is around after the naked snacking incident.” He told the AI before turning to her. “Now, I’m starting to realize how you ended up in the Pirate’s super spy organization.”

"Well, you might want to speak to JARVIS again, because he’s seriously mucking it up considering I walked in on you receiving fellat…”

"Don’t finish that sentence.” She was cut off by Dr. Triplett. “I really don’t want to know what my parents’ ex-boyfriend is doing with my childhood friend. It is just too weird.” Jemma is almost certain that the doctor used the plural possessive form of parents. However her mind was more consumed by other things to actually pay attention to that.

“You’re Fitz’s father?” She repeated the question again as she was doing the calculations in her mind. He couldn’t have been more than 15 when Fitz was born.

"Yes, but before I get your condemnation for being an absentee father, I didn’t know because his Hydra affiliated mommy never told me.” It’s now clear why she’s no longer allowed to contact Fitz’s mother. “Howard might have, but he was killed two days after finding out about a potential paternity situation that may or may not have been your friend, but I don’t know for sure. I had no idea he existed until The Playground.”

"His mom talked about you a lot. Fitz said she mentioned that the two of you had some classes together.” Simmons confessed.

"See, maybe it did happen the old-fashioned way." 

“Despite the fact you don’t actually remember having sex?” Stephanie deadpanned. “You did look over Bruce’s results? Babies like that do not come from inexperienced teenage fumbles in the back seat of a vintage convertible.”

“Good point.”
"I am Fitz’s medical power of attorney which means I get to make any decisions about him when he’s not able to do so. So I would really like to know what the fuck is going on?" She practically yelled because at this point she was very confused.

“So would I.” Dr. Stark said exasperedly. “ETA on Hill?"

"14 minutes, Mr. Stark." The AI replied.

“Would you like some breakfast? Steve made omelets. I’m sure you have barely been eating the last few days.” Before she realizes it, Trip’s mother is forcing her into the kitchen to have breakfast and she is still just as confused. She had no choice but to follow her. She took tiny bites of her omelet as she wondered how Fitz would react to his finding out his idol was his long-lost father.

The peace of breakfast was disrupted by the arrival of Maria Hill. “So how long did you and the Pirate know that I had a fucking kid?” She heard Stark scream the moment the front door opened.

“Also, where are my bagels?” She couldn’t help but rolled her eyes at that. She also couldn’t help but make her way to the door so she could see the exchange.

“In New York.” She said moving to one of the couches.

“I’m still waiting for an answer, because honestly, I have no trouble turning you over to Talbot’s replacement.”

“A SHIELD team, headed by Isabella Hartley, discovered his existence six years ago when investigating Obadiah after his death.” Once again her boss erupted in a litany of curse words.

“That would’ve been right around the time you showed up at Fitz’s door to convince him to join the Academy.” Jemma said out loud in interrupting the tirade. Only now did she realize how peculiar it was for the Deputy Director of SHIELD to personally recruit Fitz despite his engineering brilliance.

“What an interesting coincidence. Explain, before I fly you to Guantánamo myself.”

“We believe that Obadiah/Hydra was planning to use Fitz to take over the company in the event of
your death. At the time we weren’t aware of the latter’s involvement, but we felt it was best to convince Mr. Fitz to join the organization for his own protection.”

“Fuck!” Captain Rogers was the one to say it, but Jemma was sure everyone else was thinking it.

To be continued
Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. Sorry this chapter took longer to get up then I thought it would. The editing process took longer than usual because our real-life jobs are evil and take away too much time from doing fun things like writing.

For those of you reading this story on AO3, I reduce the relationship tags to those that have already come up and I will add new relationship tags as they become relevant. Some of the relationships I was planning may not happen because certain things going on with the show now make me want to strangle certain characters. Of course, under different circumstances these characters may not get that bad, but we shall see. If you want to discuss how new episodes of AOS or AoU will or will not effect the story, please send me a private message.

Continuity note. In this universe, there is at least a year between the events of the first and second Ironman movie. How Tony survived the Palladium poisoning for a longer period of time will be addressed eventually.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Really, Tony was going to kill Maria Hill and not just because she didn’t bring bagels this morning. Patches and his Number Two knew that he had a child for six fucking years and never said a damn thing. Tony was so furious he was shaking.

He wasn’t surprised that Obadiah would do something like this. The man was a bastard; a bitch in sheep’s clothing. Obadiah had lied to him and he had believed the man, like always. Tony never saw him for who he truly was until Obadiah was literally ripping out his heart.

Hill did not know when Obadiah found out about Leo’s existence, but Tony would put money on December 1991. Tony was now sure Howard discovered Leo existed then and maybe even knew Hydra’s plan involving Leo. That may have been how he discovered Hydra was part of SHIELD in the first place. There was no concrete evidence to back up either possibility. The only thing Tony knew for certain was his father was killed just days later by an assassin who may or may not have been a brainwashed and crazy version of Steve’s childhood friend. (For the sake of orgasms, he was trying not to focus that much on that part of the situation.)

Tony now held the original report. The thing only existed in hard copy. He was thankful for the Pirate’s paranoia because otherwise he would have discovered Leo existence during the SHIELD data dump. That would’ve been awful.
According to the report Agent Hartley, who was now a member of Team Coulson and technically SI, suspected that Obadiah kept the existence of another Stark heir a secret to make it easier to take over the company once Tony was gone i.e. murdered by the terrorists he’d hired. Tony would like to believe he did it solely because he was a bastard rather than because he was in bed with Hydra.

The fact that Alexander Pierce personally kept Patches from sending anybody to get his ass out of Afghanistan lends credence to the ‘in bed with Hydra’ theory. Maybe Obadiah just realized that Tony raising a child would mean it would be harder for him to manipulate Tony. He definitely would not have spent 1992 in a virtual cocaine coma ignoring anything going on at SI apart from his own R&D research, including Obadiah’s less ethical business decisions. Jarvis was already too sick to act as his proxy. According to certain notes (in what Tony recognizes as Natasha’s handwriting), this was possibly because Obadiah was slowly poisoning him to isolate Tony even more. The fucking bastard. (Tony and Natasha would be having a really long talk at Steve’s birthday party.)

If Tony had known about Leo, he probably would’ve given Obadiah the metaphorical keys to the kingdom willingly. He never wanted to be Howard, spending more time working than actually with his child and leaving said child to be raised by the help. It’s highly probable that he would’ve just given control of the company to Obadiah and taken a job in R&D which would’ve allowed him to create without catering to the board which he despised. (It wasn’t unreasonable to think he would have taken on Jarvis’ care and subsequently moved him somewhere where Obadiah couldn’t slowly murder his good father figure).

However, being less inebriated probably would have resulted in Tony designing the stuff he really wanted like AIs, cell phones, and tablets instead of the Jericho missile which probably would’ve led to an entirely different set of issues.

The one question Maria Hill did not answer was why she and the pirate kept their mouths shut for six years. She just kept saying it was a matter of national security. That was a bullshit answer considering they were already infiltrated by Hydra. He told her that before leaving for his lab. He couldn’t take anymore. He was going to punch her out if he didn’t leave the room.

Tony wished he’d brought the diary with him. That might be his only hope of figuring out when Obadiah knew the truth. Instead he was going to read through Agent Hartley/Natasha’s report one more time or at least that was the plan until Stephanie came down the stairs with coffee in hand.

"You are a goddess." He said taking the large cup of coffee from the woman.

"I assumed you needed the caffeine and you wouldn’t be coming up for a while."
"Not until Hill is off my property. I am tempted to drop her off at the Pentagon hot dog stand if I see her anytime soon.” They were only 2 miles away from the installation.

"She left 6.7 minutes ago after being berated by Ms. Simmons for her duplicity." Jarvis chimed in.

“Jarvis please tell me you have security footage of that?” He was sure that would be entertaining.

“Your may access it at any time.” Jarvis replied.

“You’re my favorite.”

“Ms. Simmons also verbally reprimanded her for leading the armed forces to Providence." Okay, now Simmons was his favorite. She was like the best assistant that he’s had since Pepper.

"Which resulted in Dr. Tripplet’s slapping her." The AI supplied and Tony raised an eyebrow.

"I didn’t do it full strength. She deserved it. She brought the military directly to my baby and her actions led to your baby getting dumped into the ocean. I really don’t like dealing with patients in comas when it could’ve been prevented."

"Which would be dangerous, especially…” Because they would want to treat him like a guinea pig just like the military wants to do to Steve. “..because he’s special like you?” Tony finally asked.

“I’m not entirely sure because I would never let him be tested, I didn’t want to risk him ending up on Alexander Pierce’s index, but it’s highly likely.” He could understand why she wouldn’t want her son on that index. It assumes that everybody who is slightly different is the serial killer waiting to happen, including Tony himself. But then again, the index was created by Hydra.

“Antoine acquires skills faster than normal. He also recovers at an accelerated rate which comes in handy when you have a job where you get shot a lot. In addition, Antoine did not get sick at all as a child, not even a simple cold. Then there’s the three parent DNA thing, I don’t know what else they gave him." Tony knows what she really wants to say is ‘I don’t know what else they did to his DNA.’ Tony was wondering the exact same thing. Leo was recovering faster than expected. Actually, at least two of the specialists he spoke to are surprise Leo woke up at all considering how long he was without oxygen. Could his special DNA be responsible?
“Therefore, you don’t want your son in the hands of the US military?”

“Not at all.” Tony wholeheartedly agreed with that sentiment. “The first rule of being a parent is keeping your child safe. Whether it be from monsters under the bed or the government.”

“Considering that Leo was created by Hydra and used as a pawn by Obadiah, I think I did a shitty job at that.” Tony lamented.

“Tony, you did not…” However, Tony would not let her finish.

"How am I going to explain this to Leo?” Tony sighed. “I’m going to have to eventually.”

"That you’re his father?"

"Any of it. My being his long-lost father is the least ridiculous part of this. How do you tell someone that you were created solely for evil purposes and as a means to control a multibillion dollar corporation? I managed to outdo Howard without actually trying.”

“I went with lying.” Stephanie said as she sat down on one of the couches in the workspace.

“That didn’t work out so well.” He’s well aware that her son hasn’t talked to her in weeks.

“I already told you that the first rule of parenting is protecting your child at all costs. I didn’t want Antoine to think that he was unwanted. That’s a lot for a kid to take. It was easy to lie and make up a story about being ditched by my deadbeat boyfriend after the condom broke and choosing to keep him anyway regardless of the fact that my own siblings were absolutely horrible to me about it. I was going to get pregnant no matter what since Hydra was dosing me with fertility drugs for months before. In the end, what matters is he knows that I chose him.” This resulted in Stephanie crying. Dummy 2.0 wandered over to Stephanie to give her a greasy rag to wipe her tears.

"I guess the fertility drug thing was in one of the secret Nick Fury files you read." Tony said, moving to the couch with a clean tissue.
"Yes, it was." She took the tissue. "I wouldn’t have done things differently despite the fact he’s not talking to me. I wanted him to know that I love him unconditionally, that how you came into the world has no bearing on who you are. I just hope Antoine will actually listen to me when I accidentally run into him when I go visit mom."

“You mean intentionally run into him?”

"It’s best if you have plausible deniability, Tony.” Stephanie tears were less now. “You should come with me.”

“For the heart-to-heart with your son, so I can learn how to do one?” Tony joked. “I’m appointing you my parenting coach.”

“I meant you should come see mom.” Why did she just suggest that?

“No, that would be awkward. What would I say? Sorry, Mrs. Carter-Jones that I have completely neglected to visit you for the last seven years. Oh by the way, I’m seeing your not actually dead ex-boyfriend.” ‘And I let Obadiah kill your BFF, because I was too stoned to realize what was going on.’

“At least you were nice enough not to say fucking.” Then the evil woman called Steve down and they both convinced him to go to Woodbine. Really he was just going there to see Leo.

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Melinda and Phil almost fell asleep on his desk post sex, but they’re both too old to actually do something like that. Too many injuries for it to be comfortable and concern that Skye might show up to his office if she couldn’t sleep which happens frequently, had them straightening the room before heading back down the hall.

Neither one tried to get more sleep when they made it back to his room. They both opted for a quick shower, separately. Phil got dressed for his trip and May for early morning training session with Skye.

For the moment, they have enough space to keep up with the pretense that May has her own bed somewhere in the complex, but eventually they won’t. They do not want the other agents to be aware that their new Director is sleeping with his second in command, even if Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division allows such fraternization.
It was looking like they wouldn’t have the luxury of space sooner rather than later. A part of Phil looks forward to that day. Slowly but surely agents are coming back. He doesn’t tell them about the Stark funding until they agree to work for this new SHIELD. They don’t need to know. It’s important to him that people are joining this new SHIELD for the right reasons. The new name has humanitarian and lifesaving in it for a reason. Saving lives and protecting people was the real mission of the new SHIELD. It was always supposed to be.

The exception was Hartley’s team because Phil was aware both were there for just the money, but they needed specialists or rather people who could function as specialists badly. Individuals with that skill set were the ones most likely to defect to Hydra or be killed because they did not defect to Hydra.

Isabella Hand probably only survived long enough to go into hiding in a small West Virginia town because she had skills Hydra needed. Now he needed to convince her to come to the new SHIELD.

Before Phil left that morning, May tried once again to convince him to take her with him. He says no again without even thinking. They can’t be together right now. If Hydra gets a hold of him, he needs to make sure that she will be okay, more importantly that there will be someone around to take care of this organization, to keep rebuilding.

He doesn’t kiss her goodbye because Hunter is right there. He wants to. But they need to stay professional right now and Hunter has a big mouth. Really, he doesn’t need to hear anything else about why his marriage ended with Bobby.

It took Phil less than an hour to get there in Lola. He considered taking one of the Quinjets, but where he’s going finding enough space to land one would be very difficult despite the features of the jet. The terrain is just too mountainous. Besides the car is much faster now thanks to Stark’s modifications. The cloaking capabilities came in handy as he landed in the parking lot of an empty church 2 miles from where Isabella Hand worked as a doctor at Community Health Care, one of two clinics in the tiny town.

He wished he had a home address but Dr. Hand refuse to give Triplett one. Or maybe if she did Triplett wasn’t quite ready to supply Phil with that information. Phil believes it’s most likely the former at this point.

Skye was able to get him a 9 AM appointment with the doctor, who was currently practicing under her maiden name of Cline. Or rather she was able to get Stephen Gray an appointment. That was the alias that was created for him to function as the head of Stark Industries new division. (Stark was going to use Steve James Rogers, but that was quickly vetoed by their respective partners.)
Skye wanted to come as well, but Phil needed to do this alone. When Agent Triplett first tried to get in contact with Victoria Hand’s widow, the first thing Phil did was a look to see if her name was on the list of possible loyal agents that came in the toolbox. Her name was there along with her dossier. She was 37 and came from a place called Coal Mountain that barely had a store anymore. Isabella joined the Army at 18 because it was the only way she would be able to go to college. However, she was hated by several of her colleagues and they arrange things so she would be discharged under the then existing DADT.

However, somebody gave her name to Nick Fury personally. He presented her with the option of joining SHIELD as an alternative. What was not in the file was that name was given to Fury by Jamie Jones, Agent Triplett’s high-ranking Army aunt or that Agent Cline served as a mentor to Agent Triplett, despite her being a biologist who also happen to have a medical degree. This was the real reason why Triplett was trying so hard to find out what Grant Ward did to her wife’s body.

Another thing not found in her file was her whereabouts from October 2011 until March 2012. From what he and Melinda could piece together, this was most likely the time Phil was working on Project TAHITI. This time period was when he had the least contact with Melinda and his memories were the patchiest.

This gap in his history along with Dr. Hand’s specialization made Phil wonder if she was part of Project TAHITI or the Guesthouse before reassignment to the Sandbox, so she could be a lot closer to her wife. Old SHIELD’s fraternization policies being what they were, would not allow her to serve under her wife at the Hub.

Maybe this was wishful thinking or him grasping at straws, but he had to check out this possibility for himself. Besides, they did need a real doctor at the Playground full time. Being a psychiatrist, Dr. Suarez did better with broken minds then broken legs. (Dr. Triplett was not an option considering her current FBI detail.)

The waiting room at the Community Health Care was sparse with few magazines (mostly about the downfall of SHIELD). Thankfully, Stark Tech phones work in places with no real reception. He had a few non-classified reports that he could read.

Eventually, he was taken into the back where they took his weight and blood pressure. The nurse asked Phil why he’s there and gave Phil several forms to fill out. He wishes he could put down ‘I’m waking up in the middle of the night to carve symbols that I first saw created by my ex-friend who completely lost what was left of his mind after exposure’. Instead he said that he spent a sleepless night due to a stomach virus that happened to come on suddenly while visiting his mother-in-law (because Stark thought it was funny to make him and May a married couple) and she was the one who suggested he come here. The fact that he barely slept last night probably makes the lie almost
believable.

The woman who walked into the room does not match the picture in her dossier. Her hair is now red and very short done in a pixie cut instead of being blonde and extremely long. She’s also wearing glasses and looks to be at least five months pregnant. However, Coulson is trained enough to see through the disguise. The scar on her cheek matches one that Isabella Hand received four years ago during a mission.

“What seems to be the problem Mister…” Her words stop abruptly as she drops her tablet and points a gun at him that she was obviously concealing under her medical coat. He should have known a former field agent who completely disguised her appearance was going to keep a weapon on her.

“Who the fuck are you?” She asked calmly with gun pointed at his head.

“I’m not Stephen Gray or rather I am technically. That’s my current public identity now that I work for Stark Industries.” Phil decides that honesty is the best way to defuse the situation. Yes, he could disarm her, but she was also pregnant and he really did not want to endanger her unborn child.

“However, I used to be a special agent with SHIELD and I worked with your wife. My name is Phil Coulson.” Her gun doesn’t go down. “I’m not aligned with Hydra.”

"Try again. Phil Coulson is dead. I called it myself.” Phil cursed himself for not remembering she served from April 2012 to June 2012 on the main helicarrier and most agents did not know about his resurrection and apparently Agent Hand was really good at keeping secrets, even from her wife. Just a week and a half ago he dealt with Agent Walters who was shocked to discover he was alive. It took an hour for him to convince her that he really was Phil Coulson and not a Hydra agent wearing a nano mask.

“I was, but I got better. Fury arranged for it to happen.” She keeps the gun trained on him still.

“We did a lot of crazy things at the old SHIELD but we never quite accomplished bringing back the dead.” The way she said that made Phil wonder if she didn’t have a part in Tahiti or maybe she did and they never had a successful patient. From the video file that was obvious. Phil was starting to think that maybe he should’ve brought Agent Triplett along so he could verify his identity. That’s when he got an idea.

"Jarvis, call Agent Triplett."
“Are we going to visit Fitz or your grandma first?” Skye asked excitedly as they pull into the rehab center’s parking. Trip thinks they are both here because it’s easier to secure one location and the staff can take care of Fitz just as well.

Skye was overly excited because this was the first time they been off-base in weeks. She was practically giddy when they were at Target. They had a trunk full of stuff, mostly junk food, along with a giant stuffed monkey for Fitz. The thing was almost as big as Skye.

“I want to see Grandma Peggy first. She’s better earlier in the day.” Trip explained.

“I don’t have to go with you, if it will be too much for her.”

“I want you to meet my grandma just remember that…” Some days she doesn’t even remember who I am.

“She probably won’t remember who I am the next time I visit.” Skye supplied.

“Pretty much,” Trip said just as his phone started to go off. Except it was not his regular phone, but his Stark encrypted mission phone. Why can’t he just have a day off where he can see his grandmother and overspend at Target like a normal person?

“Triplett here.”

“Agent Triplett, could you please tell Dr. Hand that I’m actually me and not a Hydra agent wearing a Phil Coulson mask.” He heard director Coulson, or someone who sounded a lot like him, asked.

“I’m not sure.” It sounded like the director and he knew that the man was going to visit Dr. Hand, but being a good specialist meant being paranoid, especially in the age of Hydra.

“She currently has a gun pointed at me.”
“I told you I should have come with you.” He did warn Coulson.

“And you need to visit your grandmother and your mom.” The fact that he knew he was visiting his grandmother made it more likely this was the real Coulson.

“Grandma, yes. Mother, not so much.” Because what does he say to a woman who has lied to him for 27 years?

“I know you’re upset that she lied to you about something personal but could you verify I’m actually Phil Coulson and no longer dead.”

“You can easily disarm someone.” Trip remarked casually. “Even I saw the security footage of what you can do with a bag of flour.”

“But she’s pregnant.”

“The fact that you wouldn’t disarm a pregnant lady proves that you are in fact the real Phil Coulson.” It was all the confirmation Trip needed.

“Wait, you’re pregnant? You didn’t tell me that. I thought we already agreed that I would be the donor.” Despite the secret agent lifestyle, Trip does want kids someday and being the sperm donor for Bella was his best option.

“Next time. Because we were using Tory’s egg, we decided to go with a blue-eyed blonde baby daddy.” There was a lot of sadness and bitterness in her voice. Of course there would be. She was carrying the baby of a dead woman, who she loved dearly. If Coulson lets him down into the basement again, he swears he’s going to knock out all of Ward’s teeth.

“So the baby looks like you.” He wasn’t offended by that decision. It made sense.

“Exactly. Although in this case it’s babies, we are having twins or rather I am because Tory. is not here to see it. I would’ve told you, but I’ve been busy for the last couple of weeks and technically we are both off the grid. But then your no longer dead boss showed and I needed to call you to confirm that it’s him.”
“Yes, he is my boss. I’m working for SI right now because Jonathan is friends with the CEO and he called in some favors.” The use of nepotism to keep him out of government custody was the story he was using with everyone. “I’m sure the boss is there to convince you to join our ranks.”

“And now she puts the gun away.” Coulson said slightly relieved.

"You could’ve warned me.” Isabella yelled at him.

“I couldn’t because we are both supposed to be off the grid. That means limited phone calls which is why I’m hanging up now before someone traces this call.” He said, ending the call.

"You do realize that’s impossible Mr. Triplett, due to Mr. Stark’s design.” The AI responded once he ended the call.

"I’m aware JARVIS."

"You were just trying to avoid a confrontation." Skye accused.

"Possibly." Skye still glared at him.

"Let’s get inside.” He said grabbing a box of his grandmother’s favorite cookies.

Trip was hoping for a good day when they walked inside the facility, instead he knew that was going to be a bad day because before even making it to his grandmother’s room they ran into Robin, looking just as hot as ever. The bastard!

“What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in jail right now for being a terrorist?” Who apparently was still just as ugly as ever on the inside.

Everyone in the room was now looking at him including Sharon’s friend Trista. Trip knew she was not just a physician assistant but a trained assassin and the head of his grandmother’s security team at the facility. She looked like she was ready to shoot Robin in the head. This is why he loved Trista.
"I was cleared by the CIA.” He had fun messing with the interviewer trying to get dirt on Marcy. He’d managed to successfully misdirect by telling the guy a story about his aunt using her badge to sneak back stage at a Backstreet Boys concert when he was a teenager. “I’m now working for Stark Industries in the new DC office. We are going into that building by the Harris Teeter on Glebe Road.” The building could easily be connected to the tunnel that went to the secret SHIELD offices beneath Stark’s Arlington house. Whatever offices they put in the building would be a front for the real work that would be happening at the bunker.

"Actually, we are here to visit our colleague Leo Fitzsimmons as soon as Antoine introduces me to his grandma.” Skye smiles at him in a way that told him that she was well aware he was 15 seconds from punching out his ex-fiancé.

"Only family and those on the approved list are allowed to visit Mrs. Carter Jones, especially now that there’s an FBI agent posted outside of her room.” Robin said smugly.

Of course there was. Trip just wasn’t sure if that was for her protection or if they really thought his 95-year-old dimension riddled grandmother was actually a threat. Seriously, who trained these agents?

"I’m sure his fiancée is considered family.” That’s when Skye grabbed his hand and Robin started to laugh.

“Antoine is gay.” Trip rolled his eyes. He told Robin numerous times about sleeping with women before. Granted most of those instances were mission related, but it did happen.

"I prefer the term pansexual, although I do have a slight preference towards males, who are self-absorbed assholes. That’s the only logical explanation I can come up with for almost marrying you.” Robin glares at him.

“I should send you a muffin basket for ending our engagement. I would’ve never met Skye, otherwise.” That statement was mostly true. If the wedding happened, he would have accepted the Captain America assignment and would’ve never been assigned to Garrett.

"Is he the idiot that dumped you because he couldn’t take that you have a career that required you to put others first for the sake of the greater good?” Skye squeezed his hand harder and Trip just nodded his head.
“I don’t think working for terrorists counts as working for the greater good.” Of course, the bastard was going to bring that up as much as possible.

"Again, we were both cleared."

“Nelson Mandela once said, ‘One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’. Just ignore him baby.” That’s when Skye pulled him in for a kiss. It was his training that kept any hint of shock off his face. At first it was a stage kiss, but eventually he felt her tongue in his mouth. When Skye finally pulled away, Robin was nowhere to be seen and Trip felt his stomach flipping.

“When did you get so good at undercover?” He whispered as they made their way to his grandmother’s room, trying not to think about the fact that that was the best kiss he’d had in years.

“When you live on the streets, you do a lot of things to get by. Besides it did get him to leave us alone.” Skye told him, but it made him wonder exactly what she had to do to get by.

"It definitely did.” He said just before walking into the room.

The good news was his grandma actually recognized him. The bad news was she thought Skye was someone named Jiaying she had rescued from Hydra near the end of the war. However, Skye went along with it when Grandma Peggy started asking her about how she was recovering from her Hydra captivity.

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“Thanks for playing along.” Trip said as they were leaving Grandma Peggy’s room.

“It’s okay. Besides I like hearing her stories about being a complete badass.” Skye smiled at him.

“So did the FBI agent listening at the door.” Trip remarked darkly.

“At least he doesn’t believe your grandmother was the head of a secret terrorist organization.” Skye smiled at him. “I’m going to go run to the car and get Fitz his monkey and the snacks that we brought him.”

“I’ll do it. Besides, you guys should spend some time alone. I’m not entirely sure Fitz likes me.”
When Trista came by earlier, she mentioned that Fitz threw a monkey at Simmons and he really didn’t want that to happen to him, especially considering how big of a monkey they are giving him.

“Because he thinks you’re interested in Simmons. Once he finds out you are gay and more likely to date him than her, he will adore you.” He wasn’t so sure about that.

“Pansexual. However, I just see Simmons as a friend.”

“So why didn’t you want to fuck when I offered? I’m really good at blowjobs.” Given her earlier use of tongue, he could believe it. However, he wasn’t going to sleep with somebody he needs to work with, just so she can get the taste of Ward out of her mouth. He has too much self-respect to be her personal vibrator.

“I will see you in a few minutes.” Despite all his training, this was the only response he could come up with before escaping to get the monkey. This was a conversation Trip was not ready to have with her, ever.

On the way back into the rehab center he sees his mom, Tony Stark, and Captain Rogers walking up to the rehab center. Thanks to the giant monkey Trip can be close enough to hear the conversation without being seen.

“If that jackass Robin makes a pass at Steve, please just ignore him.” His mother warned.

“Your son’s ex-fiancé?”

“Yes, unfortunately. Mack was so much better.” She was never going to forgive him for breaking up with Mack.

“You should prepare yourself for the fact that mom may think you’re still that four-year-old who tried to take her television apart. There is a 78% chance that she may confuse you with Howard.” His mom warned.

“I look nothing like dad.” The superhero scoffed.
“Not the later years when he was doing an excellent Roger Sterling impression, but you look a lot like him during his World War II Walt Disney expy phase.”

“Steve?”

“You have much better facial hair.” Trip snickered from behind the giant monkey.

“Antoine put the monkey down now.” And apparently his mom heard him.

“Shit!” He mumbled under breath.

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“Are you actually Phil Coulson or did Director Fury finally perfect cloning?” Isabella asked the man in front of her as she kept her hand on her gun. It would be foolish not to do so. She knew Hydra was after her. She was sure they were furious that she escaped the Sandbox, but that was their fault. They made the erroneous assumption that she was just another biologist without an ounce of field training. In reality, she was a level 7 agent who could probably pass the specialist exam if she wanted to. She didn’t feel guilty at all about shooting two of those goons in the head after she stole their weapons. She also didn’t feel guilty about using one of Victoria’s many lockboxes to get back to West Virginia.

“I don’t know about the cloning, but …” The man in front of her slowly unbuttoned his shirt to show the scars there. “I would hope that if Fury was going to give me a new body he would give me one without scars.” They were consistent with the damage she saw. There’s only one thing she ever heard that could possibly pull something off like this was the Guesthouse and what people referred to as their Lazarus project.

Until this moment, she thought the rumors were just wishful thinking. Isabel should know better. She had seen people frozen alive at the Sandbox. Anything was possible.

"So the Lazarus project at the Guesthouse was real?" She asked out loud not expecting an answer.

“That’s not what they called it, but you know about the Guesthouse?”

“There were rumors circulating around SHIELD about a project that could resurrect the dead. That’s
why it was called the Lazarus project. I know that it involved the Guesthouse, because of something Tory mentioned before I was almost reassigned there." Of course, Tory never gave her details.

“But you never did work there?”

"No," she was supposed to, but it never happened.

"Where were you from October 2011 until March 2012?"

"Here. My dad was dying, so I took six months off to be with him during his last days." And because she did such a great job, she impressed the management of Community Health Care and they were willing to hire her, despite the fact she once worked for SHIELD.

"Oh."

"I did a lot of questionable things during my time at SHIELD, but I would never play God like that. Bringing back the dead is a line I will not cross." Even if she wishes she could for the sake of her unborn children.

"What sort of questionable things did you do?" Of course the man in front of her would ask that question.

"I tested the powers of the people at the Sandbox. I felt some of the techniques…” She closed her eyes. “They said they were trying to stabilize the powers of the various gifted there, but I felt like they were making those power stronger, weaponizing them.”

“You never went to anybody with your concerns?” He asked.

“I never said anything. I knew something wasn’t quite right, but I stayed silent. I didn’t even tell Tory. Now she’s dead and I get to raise our babies alone.”

“How many weeks?”
“18. I didn’t even get to tell Tory. That it worked. She died not…” Despite herself, Isabella choked back a sob.

"I’m sorry." The man in front of Isabel doesn’t look at her.

"Sorry doesn’t change the reality of things.” She said trying to keep all the emotions out of her voice, but failing miserably.

"So why did you come here?" She asked once regaining her composure.

“"To get you to join the new Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division.""

"It is still SHIELD. The only difference is it is now part of a mega-corporation instead of a government entity. Maybe I don’t want to be part of an organization that turns sentient beings into lab rats. That allowed the ranks to be corrupted with apathy and indifference."

"We’re not that SHIELD. We’re trying to be what we were always meant to be - an organization that protects people." He sounded enthusiastic, as if he actually believed that.

“"At what cost? Autonomy, self-respect, freedom? We locked people up, took away their rights just because they are not like us. I don’t think I can go down that road again.”

“"We’re not that.""

“"If that’s what you need to tell yourself so you can sleep at night. Maybe you did learn from the sins of your predecessor, but I have two people right here that I need to protect. I don’t think I can do that as part of the new SHIELD.” They were the only part of Tory she had left.

"Can you really do that here? I found you. Hydra could too.” It is an ever present concern of hers. “"You’ll be a lot safer at one of our bases or even at Avenger Tower. I’m sure they could use an actual medical doctor."

"You found me because Trip told you where I was, the bastard. This is why I went with the
anonymous donor instead.” Coulson raised an eyebrow at her, but didn’t ask any questions. She doubted that the confidentiality agreement she signed to participate in the SHIELD program was still valid, but she didn’t want to talk about it. Okay, she didn’t want to think about why the organization she worked for was participating in research on three parent embryos. She wanted a baby bad enough to not question some of the more unusual aspects of the program. Now she was hiding in the one place she thought no one would come look for her because she swore up and down she would never come back.

“This practice has offices all over West Virginia and Kentucky, the very backwoods parts of both states. Next week, I’ll be somewhere else.” That was the plan. She was floating around from office to office. If she kept moving, maybe it would be harder to find her.

"We can protect you." He offered.

"I can protect myself." She gripped her gun just a little bit tighter.

"We have the person who killed Victoria in our custody." For just a second her eyes lit up at the prospect.

"Good. I hope he never sees the light of day again."

"I mean literally. Don’t you want to face him?" Yes.

"No, because if I see him I will…” put just as many bullets into him as he did to Tory. She starts again. “I have enough blood on my hands.”

“You were not part of Hydra.”

"We were all part of Hydra. We were all complicit. Hydra was built on apathy and fear."

“Our new organization won’t be like that." He repeated it again.

"I hope you’re right. I want to bring my kids into a world where there is an organization trying to protect them from the really strange things that go bump in the night, but right now I can’t be part of
"I understand." Coulson slowly gets up from the examining table and removes something from his pocket.

“This is an untraceable Stark phone. It’s not on the market, nor will it ever be.” He hands it over to her. “If you ever need us, just call.” She doesn’t hesitate to take the device and places it in her pocket.

"Now, sit back down. I may be one of the few doctors that can give you a full assessment."

"You didn’t work on Tahiti."

"No, but I did work on a lot of special projects, so I may be one of the few doctors you can find that won’t freak out. What side effects are you experiencing from your resurrection?"

"Why do you think I’m experiencing any side effects?"

“You wouldn’t be looking for Guesthouse scientists if there wasn’t a problem.” He responds by pulling another phone out of a different pocket. This time he brings up an image before handing it to her. It’s an image of circles and lines on green sheet rock.

"Have you ever seen this writing before?"

“No. How does this relate to your post resurrection symptoms?” She asked unable to see an obvious connection.

“Because I keep waking up in the middle of the night to carve them.”

Nick Fury, what the hell did you do?

To be continued
A/N: I personally do not hate Grant Ward, but I think my characters hate him with good reason. The question is will he ever give them a reason not to hate him. More importantly, will he ever give himself a reason to stop hating himself? Stay tuned.
How to Make a Fool Out of Yourself Without Actually Trying

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. Your encouragement is quite helpful. Sorry this chapter took longer to get out than I would’ve liked. I wrote this in the middle of moving. Packing and writing are not compatible at all.

As this is most likely the last chapter that will go out before AoU comes out (I’m trying to do better), I just want to mention I’m still up in the air as to how much from AoU and the Operation Hydra tie-in will be incorporated in this series (not to mention ‘real SHIELD’). As a writer, I have to ask myself the question would a Tony, who is working with Coulson’s team, has a kid, is dating Steve - who is being affected by Hydra on a more personal level, and has Dr. Simmons with some of her sunny optimism still intact as a colleague, make the same choices as the Tony in the movie. I’m not going to be able to answer that until I actually watch the movie, but my instinct is telling me no.

Then my job becomes deciding how those new circumstances effect the character’s reaction. This is just not with Tony, but all the characters. If you’re familiar with my You Don’t Have To Be My Boyfriend series or my story Alex Suarez, you are well aware of how much I love the butterfly effect. (Although I can now tell you 90% of what happened in Bahrain happened in this story.)

Skye knows what to expect when she enters Fitz’s room, even though she hasn’t seen him in person for nearly 7 weeks. Trip may be avoiding his mother, but Skye hasn’t and the woman arranged for her to have several videoconferences (very secure, JARVIS monitored videoconferences) with her friend. Of course, before allowing her to speak with Fitz, she was given the ‘what not to say around Fitz lecture’.

“You’re friend went through a lot.” Dr. Triplett told her in a tone that sounded more mother like then doctor like in that moment. “He almost died. He was in a coma for three weeks. Although, he’s making great strides every day, your friend Leo is still recovering. He is having trouble communicating, performing basic motor skills, and such. His brain is not working the same way it used to so he’s having to relearn everything.”

“Which means we may now be on the same level intellectually.” The doctor did not take that joke very kindly in fact she glared a little bit.

“I’m sure that Leo will be happy to see you, even if it is through videoconference, but keep in mind that he gets frustrated easily. Little things that we take for granted, like how to tie your shoes or even the word for shoe for that matter present a challenge. That’s frustrating for normal patients, but worse for someone who began to read at two. Personally, I blame the media’s tendency to magically heal
disabilities for giving people unrealistic expectations. Recovery takes time and hard work.” The doctor warned.

“But he will eventually be the same Fitz, right?” Because she doesn’t want to think of a world without her monkey loving friend.

“No.” The doctor said bluntly and Skye frowned.

“So he’s never going to get better?” Skye asked with concern.

“That’s not what you asked. You asked if he would be the same person that he was before nearly dying and the answer is no. You don’t come out of a near-death experience exactly the way you were before, even without suffering brain damage. Something like what he went through changes you on the inside.” Those last words were whispered.

“You would know.” Skye said, thinking of the files that they liberated from the Playground’s obsolete hard copy files regarding the women’s 1985 kidnapping (which basically consisted of a few dates and not much else). Trip may not be ready to actually talk to his mom about how he came into existence, but he was perfectly willing to have her break into various files for him. Of course, no answers were there just more speculation about what happened.

“I would know. I pushed a lot of people away after it happened. I was a much more optimistic person before.” The doctor explained.

“Rape would do that to a person.” Skye remarked darkly remembering her last foster home at 15 and their 19-year-old son who didn’t understand the meaning of the word no. That’s when Mary Sue Poots died for good and Skye decided that living on the streets was preferable.

“That’s not what…” Dr. Triplett just shakes her head on screen. “What I’m trying to say is don’t have unrealistic expectations. Appreciate your friend for who he is now and not who he used to be. Be patient. Be supportive. If he tells you to fuck off, let it go and make another videoconference call the next day.”

“So he’s already mastered the art of cursing.” Skye joked.

“For some reason curse words are the first words that come back.”
“So I should expect him to cuss me out a lot once you actually turned his videoconference over to him?”

“Probably, but don’t let him push you away. Keep pushing back. Show empathy, but no pity.” Skye nodded her head mentally vowing to do just that. “Jarvis, if you would…” That’s when the screen in front of Skye switched over to Fitz and his bland hospital room. She was very thankful to Stark technology for allowing her to get to see Fitz again. After everything it was reassuring to see him again, even if at that point Leo was unable to say anything beyond ‘hi’.

She told him the story of Cybertek, of Coulson blowing Garrett to pieces and nobody finding out about it until she managed to hack the Cybertek security footage after the fact. She’s pretty sure she almost got a smile out of Fitz when she told him about May crushing Ward’s larynx. Skye could tell that he wanted to ask her all sorts of questions, but was unable to do so. That broke Skye’s heart.

During their next videoconference, she tells him about Iron Man and Captain America crashing the Playground to play matchmaker to Coulson and May. She also tells Fitz about how obvious the couple is and how bad they are at sneaking around for spies. Seriously, she has caught them having sex in Coulson’s office three times. Even the new guy, Hunter, knows what’s going on, even if most of the other recruits are oblivious. She tries to anticipate his questions. She also remembers Stephanie’s admonishment to be patient, to try not to finish Fitz’s words for him and give him time which seems to work really well.

Their last videoconference was yesterday afternoon after the monkey incident. From what she could piece together from Fitz and from his bodyguard/PA Trista today, he threw a monkey at Simmons because every time he had trouble doing something like opening a candy wrapper or finding a word, Simmons would smile and say something along the lines of don’t worry, you’ll be back to normal in no time. Apparently Dr. Stephanie forgot to email her the 12 things not to say to a person with disabilities checklist. Skye would have tossed a monkey at her too.

Yet despite the videoconferences and her long talks with Dr. Triplett, she was still not prepared for Fitz’s angry outburst over a puzzle designed for small kids as she walks into his room for the first time.

“When you’re done throwing puzzle pieces at the wall, I would like to hug you.” She said cautiously crossing to him with a semi-fake smile.

“You’re… here?” Fitz had trouble with the small sentence, but this is still an improvement over their first conference call and according to Dr. Triplett three weeks ahead of schedule.
“Yes.” She said taking the seat next to Fitz on the bed. “Just in time for you to tell me how to put the puzzle back together. Computers, I’m good with. Puzzles, not so much.”

“You didn’t say… Tomorrow-- mean yesterday.”

“I wasn’t sure if we could get off base.” I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t have to accompany Coulson to Wyoming County to pick up Trip’s former mentor. Considering Colson’s emergency phone call, it probably would’ve been a good idea.

“Safe?” She smiled at his concern for her.

“As safe as it can be. I’m no longer a wanted criminal. Thank Stark for that.” Granted she spends a lot of her free time decrypting secret old SHIELD files for the man, but it was worth it.

“Hydra?” Of course he would ask about Hydra. They were still in a middle of a fight against Hydra. The military was still too busy with their witch-hunt for ex-SHIELD operatives to find the real Hydra operatives, as evidenced by the fact they gave a 95-year-old with Alzheimer’s an FBI detail.

“There’s like a dozen trained assassins here that are mostly on our side. We should be okay.” And even more FBI and CIA agents. This is how Hydra infiltrated in the first place.

“Most?” Fitz raises an eyebrow at her.

“Trip is still unsure about the FBI agent watching his grandmother, whose room is down the hall. She is amazing.” Fitz has an upset expression on his face and she’s pretty sure what his unasked question as. “But don’t worry, we are like 99% sure he’s not Hydra. We just think they’re incompetent, which is why they’re spending time monitoring a geriatric.” For a moment, Fitz’s face relaxes.

“Here too… why?” Leo questioned.

“She has Alzheimer’s, but that doesn’t stop her from still being a complete bad ass. Trip’s bastard fiancé works here and he was being an absolute dick after everything fell apart. He was saying all sorts of nasty things about Trip. Her response was to knock him out.” Okay, so maybe she shouldn’t have mentioned Trip’s former fiancé, but it wasn’t exactly like Trip was in the closet. He just wanted to keep his private life private.
“Don’t like.”

“I know you don’t like violence.” She said, thinking that was what Fitz was talking about.

“No, no, no, no.” Her friend repeated.

“You don’t like Trip?” That resulted in another puzzle piece being aimed at the wall.

“Hey, don’t throw stuff at me. I know you are having trouble finding words.

“I don’t like the bird.” Fitz clarified, but that really didn’t clear up anything.

“What bird?” Then she remembered what Trip’s ex-fiancé’s first name was. “Robin?” Fitz nods his head in agreement. That makes sense. The guy is a nurse here and just because he’s banned from getting within 50 feet of Margaret Carter-Jones doesn’t mean the same thing applies to Fitz.

“He’s an asshole. He must be an expert at giving head because I can’t see any reason why Trip would be interested in him. I was around him for less than 10 minutes and I wanted to punch him out. He’s just a pretty bastard.”

“You like him?” Fitz asked without a single stutter. That made her smile, even if the question made her uncomfortable.

“Trip?” She asked for clarification and Fitz nodded his head. “He not a psychopathic killer or secretly working with terrorists which makes him better than Ward and Miles, but he’s like 80% gay.” Plus, I’ve been flirting with him like crazy, i.e., straddling his lap, and he turned me down. So, let’s not talk about this at all. Skye let a small sigh escape. Fitz didn’t need to know about that.

“I have to show you my new driver’s license.” She said in an effort to redirect the conversation to safer ground. After several minutes digging around in her purse, she founded and passed the plastic card to Fitz.
"Skye Gray?" Fitz tries the smile.

“I refuse to change my first name again and Stark or one of his lawyers has a really twisted sense of humor. They made May and Coulson a married couple that took forever to get to the altar after they made me, which is how I got the ridiculous name Skye Gray. Skye Coulson would’ve been so much better. Actually, Skye Johnson would’ve been better. That’s May’s fake maiden name, which I still don’t understand because she doesn’t look like a Johnson. She really doesn’t look like a Kimberly. I think things would’ve been better if JARVIS randomly generated our new names. From now on I’m in charge of coming up with aliases.” Fitz begins to frown during the middle of her babbling.

“You don’t think I’m a Johnson?” That’s when Fitz points to whoever just walked into the room. Skye already knew somebody had walked into the room thanks to her studies at the Melinda May’s school of ass kicking and espionage. She’s actually pretty good at hearing footsteps. She turned around to see Simmons standing at the door, a shopping bag dangling from her hand.

“I brought gluten-free biscuits and a mozzarella and prosciutto ham sandwich for later.” Of course, Simmons would bring gluten-free biscuits.

“What are you doing here?” Skye asked the scientist that abandoned the team for her cushy job at Stark Industries. Okay, yes, she works for SI as well, but that’s a technicality.

"Captain Rogers is here to see Mrs. Carter-Jones and brought Dr. Stark with him.” Introducing your current boyfriend to your ex-girlfriend is awkward under any circumstances. Add in the fact that said ex-girlfriend probably watched your boyfriend grow up and you have a situation that may just be more awkward than the one Skye currently finds herself in. “I’m here to see Fitz and bring him something edible because the food here is terrible.” Fitz nodded his head at that. “I do try to come every day.”

“Yes. Must be nice not having to hide from Hydra and most branches of the US government. Hanging out with Avengers every day is a nice perk along with all of the other advantages of working for Stark.” Yes, she’s acting like she’s 12, but whatever.

"You are no longer under threat of being arrested because you also work for Stark Industries."

"No, I still worked for SHIELD. I didn’t leave in the middle of the night to…”

“Stop.” Fitz tried to interrupt, but it was futile.
"The S in SHIELD now stands for Stark Industries." Simmons shot back, which was true, but mostly because Coulson wanted to separate their organization from the ideology of its predecessor as much as possible.

"I’m surprised you would know that since you snuck out before any of that was decided."

"Don’t fight." Fitz interrupted again.

"We’re not fighting, Fitz. We are just discussing how your so-called friend abandoned us in the middle of the night for her job as Tony Stark’s personal assistant."

“This from the person who is on good terms with his AI. I did not abandon anyone. First of all, I’m still consulting. Second, I wasn’t allowed to leave the base until all the details regarding Stark Industries relationship with the new SHIELD and the creation of Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division were a resolved."

"There’s a big difference between being on base, on the Bus, or out in the field then working from Dr. Stark’s big house in Arlington." Skye crossed her arms against her chest.

"Only for my own safety. I would much prefer my own place after… Dr. Stark, sometimes goes to the kitchen naked during the middle of the night.” Okay under normal circumstances, she would snicker at that, but she is still mad at Simmons for leaving. She understands that Simmons is having a really hard time, but she could’ve talked to her and Trip about it instead of leaving without saying a word.

"I don’t see naked Avengers as a downside, especially if one happens to be Thor." She snickered.

"I have yet to meet the god of thunder. Actually, I’ve only met Dr. Banner via videoconference to discuss…"

"How to fix Fitz?" Skye asked angrily, cutting Simmons off abruptly.

"That is not…” Skye wouldn’t let her finish
"Fitz told me what happen yesterday. You want to fix him. Make things like they were before, but guess what things can never be like what they were before. We’re all different now."

"Yet, you’re expecting me to be exactly the same way I was before I was dumped into the ocean. And I’m not. I haven’t slept for more than two hours at a time in six weeks. I keep waking up in the ocean, and I can’t…" Simmons breaks down in tears. Skye realizes that maybe she pushed this too far. She expects to see Fitz glaring at her, but he’s not. Actually, he’s not in the room at all anymore. Great! They managed to scare Fitz away.

Is Tony surprised that the moment Stephanie pulls the bulletproof Audi into the rehab center, Simmons leaps out of the car barely stopping to grab her bag of snacks? No. Tony has listened to too many of her rants about her being the only one there for Fitz and needing as much time as possible to visit her friend. It did however annoy him that she said almost the exact same thing today when she found out they were going to the rehab center, despite his assistant being well aware that Leo Fitz soon to be Leo Fitz-Stark was his son and would now have at least one parent that cared about him since they still have no idea where Leo’s ‘mom’ is. Tony sighed as he realized he was going to have to talk to Coulson about that eventually.

Is he surprised that he received several warnings about not reacting when certain people made passes at Steve? Actually, yes, because at this point the warnings are superfluous. Steve radiates sex and innocence; a combination which makes you just want to pet his bicep or try to climb him like a tree and that was people didn’t know what super soldier serum could do to throat muscles. People making passes at his boyfriend was par for the course, especially because nobody knew the so-called All-American Boy Scout wouldn’t have been allowed to be a Boy Scout up until recently. They were waiting for a respectable amount of time to announce their relationship because Tony wanted to keep the Pepper humiliation down to a bare minimum.

The warnings about the woman who hugged him when Howard was being a dick and his mom was sick possibly not remembering who he is did not bother him. Okay, that was a lie. Yes, it did and not just because there’s a chance that he was going to be mistaken for Howard. He’s worried for Steve and Stephanie. Watching the legend deteriorate had to be hard on both of them, but especially Steve because in his mind it was something that happened overnight. Since the beginning of his relationship with Steve (and by that he means the beginning of their friendship), Tony has been aware of the situation. He’s done a lot of research on Alzheimer’s and maybe donated a few extra million to research. The only woman other than his mom who could ever put Howard in his place deserved nothing less.

The fact that Stephanie can identify her son just by the sound of him snickering, despite his being an entire row of cars away and hiding behind a giant stuffed monkey, does surprise him. Maybe, it’s a special parent skill that some people pick up. Maria could always find his hiding places in Howard’s
workshop. Of course, at that same time, he’s pretty sure that Howard couldn’t have picked him out of a lineup.

“Mack told you where I’d be?” Triplett said as he lowered the monkey. Apparently, this is exactly what happened. Now he knows why this guy is on his or rather Coulson’s elite superspy squad. They’re Colson’s team, he’s just writing the checks.

“No. Now that I’m in the same city, I do try to see mom more often. This time we decided to bring Tony.” For an encounter that may be only marginally less awkward than this one.

“I don’t believe that. Mack has a big mouth.” What followed were a few choice curse words in various languages that Tony easily picked up on because he can recognize when he’s being called an asshole or cultural equivalent in 19 languages. Stephanie just gave him the mom glare. He recognizes it from being on the receiving end many times when Mrs. Carter-Jones caught him and Stephanie doing something stupid like taking apart the television.

“I don’t want to have this conversation here.” Trip sighed eventually. “Go see Grandma and then we can talk later.”

“Not a chance. The second I let you out of my sight, you’ll be on the first plane to W...”

“I am not avoiding you.” Her son interrupted. “This is just the wrong place for this conversation.” Tony agreed with that assessment, especially if this conversation was going to include anything contained in the files that Stephanie showed him.

“Well, if you would have answered one of my phone calls in the last three weeks, maybe I wouldn’t resort to ambushing you outside of mom’s rehab facility.” Stephanie nearly screamed. Okay, this was starting to give him flashbacks to nearly every single argument he ever had with Howard - especially the last one. Maybe if he hadn’t dodged Howard for the two weeks before that call, Howard would not have been taken out by an assassin’s bullet and Leo would have grown up with Tony in his life from the start and he wouldn’t have been spending the last hour trying to figure out how to break the ‘Guess what, I’m your absentee dad’ news.

“Should we interrupt? I think we need to interrupt.” Tony whispered to Steve at a volume that only a super soldier could hear once the arguing started to become even more heated. Trip just called his ex a traitor and Stephanie was becoming defensive. Considering how wrapped up in their argument the two people in front of him were, they probably wouldn’t have heard him anyway.
“Leave Mack out of this. This is about us.”

“Did you ever think that if you would have told me the truth about what the fuck happened 28 years ago, I wouldn’t have avoided you for the last three weeks? Now you want to talk, but you want to talk on your terms. Maybe I need a little time to process things. This isn’t just about you."

“Don’t you take that tone with me, Antoine Roger Triplett!” Of course, her kid is named after Steve.

"If Stephanie is anything like her mom, I wouldn’t.” Steve whispered back."

"You of all people should understand the importance of classified information.” Stephanie justified.

"Being raped and forcibly impregnated by a once thought extinct terrorist organization definitely qualifies as classified.” Trip snarked. “Now I understand why the details were Level X, Nick Fury’s eyes only."

“I couldn’t tell you what happened. No one in the family but mom, dad, and Marcy, even knew that I was kidnapped. The others were told that I ran away with my boyfriend.

"I don’t think we have a choice." Tony mumbled to himself, before intervening. "Maybe you guys should go back to the car. It’s soundproof. Better than that, it’s NSA proof."

"What about SHIELD?" Trip asked finally acknowledging that someone else was around. 

"Now no, because you guys have my tech,” Steve rolled his eyes at Tony’s boast. “But before? Probably."

"I need to drop Fitz’s monkey off and Skye is going to worry about where I am." Trip started to make his way to the front door of the building again, but was stopped by Steve. 

“I will take care of that.” Tony grabs the giant monkey and then starts to get the hell out of there. At least this way he won’t be accosted by that one nurse that keeps trying to jump him every time he goes with Simmons to see Leo, which was often. If he was being honest though, Tony was looking for an excuse to not listen to that particularly uncomfortable conversation. He had enough experience
with parental screaming matches and didn’t need any more exposure.

Sadly, the giant stuffed monkey did not prevent the creepy nurse from hitting on him. Also, said nurse turned out to be Peggy Carter-Jones’s almost grandson in law.

"You just volunteered to bring in the monkey, so you can get out of seeing Peggy.” Steve whispered as soon as they made it past the nurse. The man’s mouth was still probably wide-open from the shock over seeing Steve grab his hand after he caught up from most likely locking mother and son in the Audi.

"No, I volunteered in order to get away from the awkward mother/son argument. Besides, don’t you think that I would want to actually see Leo first? He is my son."

"You’re—my -- fat--father?"

"Shit!"

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"You wanted to talk. So talk." Trip said as soon as the door to the car was slammed shut and locked by Captain America (with JARVIS given instructions not to let them out until they actually talked to each other). He hates interventions. He only went along with it because the Captain actually said “Peggy would be angry to see you two fighting like this.”

"I know you’re upset that I lied to you and I understand that you needed a few days to absorb things, but you need to hear my side of the story and not what Tony thinks happened." Considering his aunts and uncle were all in the dark, he would really love to know how Tony Stark knew what happened.

"No, I’m upset that my entire existence was a scheme to place Alexander Pierce in charge of SHIELD and you told me the same lie you told everyone else except for apparently my new big boss."

"You really think that?" His mom looked 30 seconds from crying.

"What am I supposed to think? They arranged for your rape and kidnapping and then they used said
pregnancy to force grandma’s resignation." He squeezed his hands into fists. He wanted to punch something, anything.

"I wasn’t raped. Tony doesn’t know what happened because I never told him what happened which pretty much destroyed our friendship. What Tony knows about the incident comes from a severely edited SHIELD report and the fact that he actually questioned the story they told everyone unlike your aunts and uncle. I think my perspective is slightly more accurate."

"You can’t give consent, if you’re chained to a wall." He read that fun little tidbit and the highly redacted Nursery Group file. May handed the file over to him two days ago after Skye made another attempt to find out what happened (i.e. trying to break into Coulson’s computer. Not that they could actually find said computer, even with JARVIS’s help).

“Somebody did some reading.”

“Everything is now on the Internet.” Trip retorted, even though it was a lie. He and Skye searched for days and couldn’t find the damn thing.

“Not this.” His mom sighed. “Let me start at the beginning."

"Okay." He finally acquiesced because he wanted to know the truth.

She begins to tell him the story about being 15 and ditching her security escort to go see her boyfriend and eventually getting picked up by other SHIELD agents. She originally assumed that Grandma sent them until she realized that they were not actually SHIELD or at least not working for her mother. She glossed over her captivity. She provided just enough detail for Trip to know that her torture went beyond being chained to the wall. Her lack of eye contact and her constant fidgeting as she told him about the extensive medical testing she went through told him that.

"It wasn’t all horrible. There was a person there named Nat that protected me, gave me food, healed my wounds after. Nat was the only person there who showed me an ounce of kindness." This doesn’t surprise him either, it was a good technique in situations like these. There were entire courses at the Academy dedicated to Stockholm syndrome.

"Your relationship became sexual?" Trip asked reluctantly because this would explain why his mom would adamantly deny being raped.
"Yes." She didn’t make eye contact.

"You can’t really give consent when you’re chained to a wall."

"More than I could when there was a gun to my head and a knife on my…” She was shaking so hard at that point that his mom could not continue. He places an arm around her.

It was at that moment that Trip realized that he was never told this story because maybe it was too difficult for his mom to talk about. During his SHIELD career, Triplett was taken prisoner one time, a couple of months after the wedding fiasco. He probably would’ve been dead if it wasn’t for Sharon telling their SO to go fuck himself and breaking half a dozen SHIELD regulations to get him out. He was only in that hell for 83 hours not for more than 100 days. If he doesn’t want to talk about his abduction, he can understand why she wouldn’t either, but he can’t understand why she kept a constant reminder of what happened.

"I assume that birth control was not one of the amenities provided."

"No. Actually, some the drugs they were giving me probably made me more fertile. When I found out I was pregnant, I knew I couldn’t stay there any longer. I would not let them have you too. Nat helped me get the hell out of there. I escaped, but Nat did not. After wandering in the woods of Appalachia barefoot for hours, a private team, not SHIELD, found me, but not Nat.” There was something his mother wasn’t saying right then. He knew it, but everything she did say seemed to be true.

“Why the secrecy?”

“Later on it was decided for both our sakes that I just pretend that I ran off with my deadbeat boyfriend, who Hydra had actually killed before they even kidnapped me. It wasn’t like at the time we knew it was Hydra.”

"Why did they kidnap you in the first place?" The real question he wanted to ask was why she kept him in the first place, but he’s too afraid to ask that question.

"Along with why I would go through such great lengths to keep you from them?" Just as always, his mother knew him a lot better than he would ever want to acknowledge.
“Yes. Actually, I sometimes wonder why you didn’t give me up for adoption.” Or have an abortion. “I know for a fact that, Aunt Catherine offered to raise me.” Great Aunt Catherine Triplett formally Dugan (yes, that Dugan) was a formidable woman who loved children, but was unable to have any herself. She was also more of a sister to his mom than her actual sisters. Maybe that had something to do with the fact that they belong to the exclusive club of biracial children of Howling Commandos. She was married to Jonathan’s uncle and was the one who introduced his mom to Jonathan in the first place. She was currently his favorite aunt.

"And under different circumstances, it might have been the best for you to grow up without a teenage mother. However, it was safer to stay together under the care of three spies in a fortress on Long Island.”

“So it was a practical thing?” Triplett asked concerned.

“It was practical because I loved you. I’ve loved you from the first moment I knew about your existence. I wouldn’t let anybody harm you. I killed to keep you away from my kidnappers. What are few lies to keep you out of Alexander Pierce’s hands?” There was no fucking way I was going to let you grow up in the Fridge.

“Why were you worried about Alexander Pierce?” There’s something more to what she’s saying.

"I should be on the index.” This confession doesn’t surprise him. His grandma didn’t even start aging until she was hit by some strange ray gun about six years ago and his mother still looked 25. “The only reason why I’m not, is because it didn’t exist until after your grandma was forced out. SHIELD became a more xenophobic place after that.” This doesn’t surprise him either. He once worked with a specialist name Calderon, who basically wanted to shoot anything and anyone that was slightly abnormal.

“I think that’s why they kidnapped me in the first place. Grandma would never let me be tested.”

“So they just took advantage of your subsequent pregnancy?”

“Hydra is nothing if not opportunistic.” That really doesn’t answer his question, but he doesn’t ask anything else. They just sit in silence until he sees Skye waiting for him in the distance. Thankfully, JARVIS decided that they talked enough and allowed him to exit the car.

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Tony curseled under his breath. This was not on his list of ways for Leo to find out. At the very least,
cookies and vast quantities of alcohol should be involved. It would also happened someplace slightly less public. Jane, the PR goddess, would probably kill him if anybody in this facility breaks out a cell phone and starts recording this awkward exchange. However, the only other people he sees in the hallway are Skye and Simmons, who just got there. Nobody’s moving or saying a word.

Simmons being the great assistant that she is ushers everybody back into Leo’s room. Not everybody, really. It’s just him, Leo and a pot of tea. Apparently every extremely awkward conversation needs ‘tea and biscuits’, even if they are gluten-free. (What Tony really needs is Steve and a couple of shots)

Tony is completely ready to tell Leo the entire truth until he gets asked the question “Why did you abandon mum?” complete with stuttering and four attempts at asking that question.

This question pisses Tony off because everyone always thinks the worst of him. If he found out the truth that fateful night in 1991, he may have had a bender in Vegas first, but he would have stepped up. But he’s also upset on Leo’s behalf because while Tony didn’t abandon him, the woman who raised him was at best working for Hydra his entire childhood. After hearing the Grant Ward story, Tony is not sure Leo can deal with another betrayal of that magnitude. Actually, this would be worse because it would be Leo’s mother that betrayed him this time.

Therefore Tony manipulated the truth. He cut parts of the story together and told a beautiful tale of a 14-year-old super genius with his first crush on a girl who was completely out of his league and he was too young and stupid to realize the importance of condoms. That part was definitely a complete lie. He’s not sure if his mom knew the entire truth of how Stephanie became a teenage mom, but they had a really uncomfortable sex education talk right before he took off for MIT, stressing the importance of prophylactics. (He was starting college at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic after all.) What was conveniently left out was any mention of Hydra involvement or the fact that his mother was Hydra, probably.

“Maybe she thought I was too young at the time and that’s why she never told me or maybe Howard paid her off. I don’t know, your grandfather was a bastard sometimes.” When in doubt, blame Howard. It was his mantra for life.

“Anyway, while you were here they went into your files in attempt to find your mom and came across the fact that I’m your father. According to Hill, that fact came to light when SHIELD transitioned to their DNA-based biometric system.” This lie was based on the version of the truth given to Pepper by Maria herself. “Apparently, Patches felt it was in his best interest not to tell me because the Pirate loves keeping his secrets.”

“Didn’t know?” Again, the question was not smooth and missing a word, but he understood.
“Not until Hill told me and that was three weeks ago.” That was sort of true.

“When I…” Leo started to ask, but couldn’t continue.

“Yes, I found out the day you woke up. You have excellent timing. And I didn’t say anything because…” I was waiting for the confirmation DNA test and then I was terrified of what the answer would be. “I know how intense everything is post terrorist kidnapping. I felt finding out you’re related to me while starting your recovery would be too much.” Fitz doesn’t say a word. He just stares at Tony in absolute, stunned silence.

“I mean, I’m a shitty father. I didn’t keep you safe from …” Obadiah, Hydra, and a million other things. “Why the fuck which you want me in your life? Honestly, I don’t expect you to want to have anything to do with me. Too little, too late but…” Tony stops speaking when Fitz squeezed his hand. Maybe this would be okay. Maybe.

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He discovers that Skye is waiting for him because she managed to get into a very intense fight with Simmons inadvertently causing Fitz to stumble upon the Tony Stark truth. They decide to get the hell out of Woodbridge and come back another time to spend time with Fitz. He sends a quick text message to Mack pretty much yelling at the man for telling his mom where he would be. Coulson would completely understand why he doesn’t want to extend an invitation to work at the new SHIELD to somebody who sold his location out to his mom.

He pretty much tells Skye about the whole thing as they retreat back to the Playground. Trip doesn’t have enough energy to visit Sharon. Besides, he’s not sure if he wants to step foot on CIA property just yet. He’s not sure if they would arrest him or recruit him.

“That some story.” Skye remarks as they pull on to 395.

“It’s definitely a story.” Triplett remarked coldly.

"Do you think she’s lying to you?"

"Yes. You don’t fall in love with your captor. You definitely don’t sleep with him voluntarily. At best, it was Stockholm syndrome. I just don’t know."
“So we keep looking for the truth.” Skye places her hand on his knee as a sign of support.

“You’re going to help me find the truth?”

“One of us at least deserves to have some answers.” Skye says with a hint of bitterness in her voice. He doesn’t question that. He also doesn’t question the fact that her hand never leaves his leg the entire trip back to the Playground.

To be continued
Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. Sorry for the delay, but I wanted to wait until AOU came out in the U.S. before I started writing this chapter. You are now benefiting from my post movie writers high further enhanced by ABC renewing Agent Carter and AOS. There was so much Tony/Steve in there that it was ridiculous.

MCU Continuity/spoiler note: Elements from AOU will be incorporated into the story. However, this particular story will end before Tony accidentally creates a certain murderous bot. Will we get to that point? I’m not telling. Elements from later episodes of AOS will also be incorporated, but this story will probably end before Gonzales and company show up, if they do at all in my universe. I don’t like xenaphobic people and the butterfly effect will send us down a different path. We are 100% free of Daredevil spoilers mostly because I haven’t had time to watch it yet. Real life is awful.

I will be gathering character background information from multiple sources including the second half of season two of AOS, AOU, and the new SHIELD comic that I’m going to weave into what I already had planned. Things that don’t work are being thrown out the window (probably Gonzales/’real Shield’ possibly literally).

The story should be safe to read if you haven’t seen/read these things because everything will be mixed together with stuff from my own imagination and some of the stuff was in the comic books before then. However, this chapter has tiny spoilers for Melinda (2.17) and AOU.

"Did you…” Fitz tried to ask Simmons when Dr. Stark –Tony (he’s supposed to call him, Tony) left his room, but Fitz struggles with the words. He probably would still struggle with the question even if his mind wasn’t mangled from being in the ocean. Finding out you have a father after 27 years would do that to anyone especially considering that said father turns out to be the genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist, superhero he has idolized since childhood.

His mum never talked about his father. As far as Fitz was concerned, he didn’t have one. Now that he does, he’s not 100% sure how to react. He reached out because he wanted Tony to stay around long enough for him to figure it out, and part of figuring that out is finding out…

Actually, he’s not sure what he’s trying to find out beyond how long everybody has actually known the truth. Was Dr. Stark-Tony even telling the truth or was this just a pleasant lie to get Fitz to forgive him. It would be nice to know if Simmons was part of this conspiracy.
“No, I didn’t know until this morning and I found out completely by accident.” That makes him feel better. Despite everything else, at least she didn’t lie to him.

"What about…” He tries to say Tony, but the name gets stuck in his mouth. Instead, he points to the Stark logo on his new Stark pad the man dropped off with the newly revised HENRY program on it. Actually, most of the remainder of his visit consisted of talking about the program, which put Fitz at ease. AIs were still something Fitz could understand, despite the fact he stumbled on the name HENRY.

"He didn’t know, not until recently. He didn’t stop yelling at former Deputy Director Hill this morning. He was furious at her and Director Fury for keeping your existence from him. He actually had to retreat to his workshop because he almost hit her.” Fitz was surprised to hear such a revelation, but he believed her.

Why did Director Fury do that? Why was Tony upset about discovering Fitz existed? Did he not want a kid? That doesn’t match what he said earlier, but very little makes sense right now.

“Why?” Is the only thing he’s able to get out.

“He’s livid that he didn’t know about you and maybe a little angry that he couldn’t protect you. It’s obvious that he’s upset. He wasn’t allowed to be part of your life. I think he wants to get to know you which explains why he asked me so many questions about our time at the Academy and you in general.” Simmons explained enthusiastically.

"He… Really?” Fitz asked still surprised, still somewhat skeptical.

"Yes. He made HENRY for you. Or rather he re-created HENRY for you. You know how difficult AIs can be. I’m going to have to teach you how to use the program. It should be simple. Nowhere near as complex as the JARVIS OS." There is a touch of condescension in her voice that even he could pick up. He doesn’t like that.

“Jemma,” Fitz tried to interrupt.

"And you have your own room in the Arlington house. I think the color scheme is too dark, but…”

“Jemma,” he tried to interrupt again.
"You’ll see what I mean when you’re relocated there.” Fitz gives her a strange look at that.

“Dr. Stark is arranging for a lot of the best doctors in the country to take care of you. You’ll be back to normal in no time.” He frowns at that or at least tries to. He’s never going to be normal again. It’s impossible. Why can’t she get that?

"Ms. Simmons, Mr. Stark and Dr. Triplett will be leaving soon. If you would like to spend more time with Mister Fitz, I can arrange for a cab to come pick you up when you are ready to leave. However, I would like to remind you that you have a 1 PM meeting with the caterers for Captain Rogers’ party."

“I thought the meeting was at 2 PM?”

“It was rescheduled.” The AI replied.

“Of course it was.” Simmons sighed.

"Leave?” What he actually wanted to say was maybe you should leave, but it came out as a question.

“I’ve really have no choice. I have a million things to do before Captain Rogers’ birthday party, especially if Dr. Triplett is right and you get to come home soon."

He frowns at her use of the word ‘home’. Did he have a home? He’s well aware that he hasn’t gotten so much as a phone call from his mum during his time here, but that place never felt like home. She was never there. SHIELD was his home, but it’s gone now. So was the Bus, but Ward took that away. Did they even have the Bus anymore? He wasn’t sure. Skye didn’t mention it.

He knew they were rebuilding the organization and that Simmons left for Stark Industries. Skye did mention that. But would they want him to be part of that? He wasn’t sure especially because Simmons wanted him normal again despite his brain damage. He knew it was impossible because that Leo Fitz didn’t exist anymore, but he didn’t have the words to tell her. That’s why he threw a monkey yesterday.

Part of him wonders if the father thing is a pleasant lie to give him a place to go now that he couldn’t
be part of SHIELD. They were just humoring him. But then again, Tony could just offer him a job or spot at one of the Stark funded rehabilitation centers, not a place in his house, if some of the earlier ramblings were to be believed.

"I'll come by tomorrow for lunch. I'll bring… something not a sandwich. Maybe I should talk to Dr. Triplett about what foods may help with your recovery."

Simmons hugs him and it feels different than before, stiff, almost. He wonders if she really will come tomorrow. He’s not sure if he even wants her here. Fitz has been awake for over three weeks and she’s yet to mention his last words to her. It’s as if by mutual agreement they’re not talking about it, but in his case it’s because he physically can’t.

He’s actually glad she left, relieved even. He can be left alone with his thoughts even if words are only half formed in his mind. He has a father. What does that mean?

"Hopefully Ms. Simmons will not return to your room once she realizes that Dr. Triplett, Mr. Stark and Captain Rogers are still visiting with Mrs. Carter-Jones and that I was the one who rescheduled her meeting with the caterers.” Fitz looks strangely at the screen in front of him. He knows JARVIS is there in his room. The AI is the one who arranges for his various videoconferences with everyone at the Playground which mostly consists of Skye, but the program rarely talks to him.

"Why?" Fitz was confused by the AI’s actions.

"Mr. Stark updated my programming to make your well-being my number one priority. This includes monitoring your vital signs. I observed that your conversation with Ms. Simmons was causing your heart rate to increase by 32% indicating that you found the situation stressful. I felt it was best for her to leave. Therefore, I adjusted her schedule accordingly." The AI replied effortlessly.

"I…" Fitz starts to say but nothing really comes out. The engineer that he looked up to for most of his childhood decided to make Fitz his AI’s number one priority. This put Fitz more at ease with the situation then words ever could.

"Mr. Stark is not the same man he was before Afghanistan. Actually, in many regards, he emerged from the experience as a better person. It is possible that the same may become true for you as well. No one should push you into returning to what you once were or make you feel inadequate because such a thing is not possible.” Fitz response was to nod his head.
“Tristan will be bringing the rest of your lunch in shortly. In the meantime, I can explain to you how to use the Stark pad with the special HENRY OS. It is currently designed to function as an advanced adaptive communication device. Mr. Stark wishes for you to be the beta tester.” The AI said before he started explaining how to use the program. Fitz was thrilled at being asked to do something to help. Maybe someone did care about who he was now and realized he could still be useful.

Tristan said something similar when she ate lunch with him. Of course, he didn’t completely believe her until Tony Stark showed up the next morning in his rehab room with goodies because everybody needs bacon maple donuts. Fitz felt it was best not to push him away.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Phil didn’t say anything until they reached his office. “Dr. Hand is willing to be called in for an emergency and to do research on my own personal medical problem from afar, but she doesn’t want to come to the Playground. She thinks it’s best if she keeps moving and I’m inclined to agree with her.” Phil sat at his desk and May perched herself on the edge of it.

“Why?” Why did she not want to come here especially if she can help with his carving alien symbols into the wall? Why do you think she can help with that? Did she work on TAHITI? Is that why you went to her? Is that why you wouldn’t let me or anyone else go with you? Only Melinda could ask one question that could be interpreted in a dozen ways.

“Because she’s four months pregnant with twins and doesn’t want to raise them on a secret military base. She believes that this is no place for small children.”

“She’s right. This isn’t the place for someone who is pregnant. It’s dangerous.”

Melinda subconsciously puts her hand on her stomach thinking about the mission that she never wants to think about ever again. And yet she can’t stop thinking about months of in vitro fertilization treatments that supposedly were not working and being called in as the specialists when they found a powered person in their backyard and Phil needed her. She doesn’t want to think about losing the girl, the baby, and the husband in a matter of hours. Or how it felt like the universe paid her back for killing that little girl by taking her child away because someone like her doesn’t deserve a child.

Of course, the incident blew her cover as the mild-mannered wife of the DCM, even if that’s who she was when she wasn’t investigating the possible smuggling of a suspected 0-8-4 by embassy personnel and dirty SHIELD agents. She wouldn’t have even considered starting fertility treatment if
she wasn’t on a ‘honeymoon’ assignment. It doesn’t matter anyway.

"It is, but so is Hydra. At least we are underground here. Maybe we need to do more. I could try arranging a safe house. Not the retreat but something else, off the grid, completely off the books.” His words brought her back to the present, away from her broken memories. Only two people knew what really happened and Phil wasn’t one of those two.

"What are you thinking?” She asked curious.

“I’m sure Stark could pull off something like the Virginia farmhouse.” She instantly knew who Phil was talking about.

“Linda and the kids?” Phil nods his head in agreement.

“Fury did a really good job at keeping that off the books. It’s not even in the Toolbox.” She surprised about that.

”Nor did it end up in the data dump.” May mumbles under breath. Phil gives her a strange look.

"I asked Skye to be on the lookout for any of that information, but she never came across anything related to the farmhouse.” She owed Burton that much.

“That’s good. I wouldn’t want anything to happen to Cooper and Lila.” She agreed which was why she asked Skye to get rid any evidence of the house in SHIELD’s files, but there wasn’t any.

“Other than Clint, I think only four people know about the safe house and two of them are us.”

“And Fury and Natasha are the other two.” She doubts that Stark knows because he’s convinced he’s the first Avenger with a kid. Given Fitz’s age, that’s technically true by good 15 years. She only knew about Barton’s home because she was invited to stay there post incident. Phil may have been his handler, but May was his SO. When she needed somewhere to recover, he offered. Then again, maybe she was there to witness the end of Clint’s relationship with the mother of his two children. She’s not certain. Although, Melinda thought she must’ve been masochistic to be around a newborn just days after miscarrying.
"I only know about it because of the meet the kids and ex-girlfriend lunch.” She didn’t know about that.

"You guys were serious?” It would’ve had to have been if Phil even knew about the children.

"I thought we were but…” Phil shakes his head. “Some people work better as friends and I have you. I like where we are right now.” He kissed her lips gently. “I don’t want to talk about my ex-boyfriend. I want to spend some time with my current girlfriend and not Agent May.” He tries to kiss her again, but she pulls back.

“I’m always Agent May.”

“Sometimes you’re Melinda.” She’s always Melinda around him.

“Sometimes you like to distract me. I know you don’t want to talk about this, but you’re going to have to start letting people know you’re back from the dead, starting with your ex-boyfriend. Unlike Audrey, he’s seen enough at SHIELD not to be completely shocked by the possibility of you coming back from the dead. Clint is going to find out eventually. He’s too good of a spy not to and I think it’ll be better if it comes from you. Half of the Avengers already know and not the half that are professional liars.”

Although Melinda actually thought Steve and by extension Stark (because Steve will keep his boyfriend in line) could keep the secret, she has more faith in Agent Burton’s skills as a spy.

“Because you told Stark and Rogers and Tony told Banner.” Phil seemed slightly upset.

“Because Dr. Banner is going over your blood work. SHIELD is gone and I thought Nick Fury was dead. Stark was my best option.” She doesn’t regret that decision at all. Especially now, because they have decent funding and she’s not dealing with Phil’s problem on her own.

“You never actually thought Nick was dead.”

“I wonder if Barton believes the same thing about you. You have to tell him along with Romanoff, preferably at the same time. We’ll all be dead if she’s the last one to know.”
"I will tell him eventually, once we are not dealing with Hydra." That just sounds like an excuse to her, even if they were starting to look for the more dangerous things that Hydra ‘liberated’ when the organization fell, like the weapon that was used to murder Phil in the first place. They still have no idea what happened to that.

"He’s going to be at Steve’s birthday party. The one you have to attend as your cover identity. I think it would be better for everyone if this happens before then." She would like to cut down on the probability that she may have to physically restrained Burton from shooting Phil with an exploding arrow when he finds out.

"Steve said he wasn’t coming." Of course he would check up on that.

“But Natasha is and he may decide to tag along with her. Regardless, when she sees you, she will tell him.” They both knew that the two had a close enough relationship where if you told one, the other would know.

“Because they tell each other everything.” Phil agreed.

“We’ll schedule something soon. Maybe lunch before the party?” Phil suggested reluctantly.

"Or tomorrow." Melinda countered. They need to get this over with.

"I need to go to London." She looks at him in puzzlement. This is the first time she heard about a London trip.

"More recruiting?" That would make sense. Although it doesn’t make her worry any less.

"Yes. Billy will be flying." That definitely does not make her feel better.

"You should let me teach you how to fly." Or let me go with you but that part goes unsaid.

"I can fly, just not a Quinjet." She glares.

"You can take off in an emergency. Maybe." She’d made sure that much.
"It still counts." She shakes her head as she leans over to undo his tie.

"No, it doesn’t. You’re telling Barton you’re not dead when you get back. I’ll talk to Steve to set up a lunch or something, not public.” She leans over and kisses him in a way that essentially guarantees that he will do anything she asks.

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It is 2:34 AM on what is now technically the first day of July and of course Tony wakes up in a cold sweat from another nightmare. If he thought recurring dreams of wormholes were bad, seeing your son’s body on a cold metal slab in the morgue was 1000 times worse. However, it places second to seeing Howard, Jarvis, his mom, and Steve covered in blood and blaming him for not doing enough to save everyone. It is enough to wake anybody up screaming in the middle of the night. His subconscious is evil and completely fucked up.

Luckily, he wasn’t actually screaming this time as he finally woke up which was good since Steve was sleeping soundly next to him. Just the presence of Steve next to him helped his breathing return to normal. Okay, the fact that Steve did not have a giant hole in his chest helped immensely. He really thought falling asleep post sex would lead to better dreams then falling asleep reading the Howard diaries (especially now that he was sure there was nothing in there about alien writing or the 1991 paternity suit). Obviously, he was wrong.

‘Fitz is in his bedroom, not the morgue. Steve is alive and still unconscious after fucking him into the mattress earlier in the evening. No blood. No death. It’s okay. Everything’s okay.’ Tony repeated this mantra in his head until he no longer felt like throwing up.

Tony gets up and gets dressed for the lab because he knows if he does what he wants to do in the bedroom he will wake up Steve and he doesn’t want to do that. If he’s being honest with himself it’s because he doesn’t want Steve to ask him about his nightmare. He doesn’t want to talk about it at all.

He walks to the lab. Thankfully, Simmons isn’t sleeping on his kitchen table, again. She had a telephone session with Dr. Suarez the day before at Stephanie’s request because his assistant has issues and Dr. Suarez is the only one qualified to deal with the psyche of a SHIELD agent who they are 100% certain isn’t Hydra or Steve’s former FWB’s ex-fiancé.

As soon as he enters the lab, the first thing he has JARVIS do is pull up the video feed to Fitz’s rehabilitation room. The place is filled with all the ‘toys’ and other goodies Tony brought him to keep the boredom away.
Seeing the rise and fall of his son’s chest on screen eases Tony’s breathing even more. He watches wordlessly for a few moments as his heartbeat continues its deceleration to normal. Tony is halfway tempted to send the suit up to Woodbine to watch him. He’s worried. It would definitely ease his mind, but he only has two suits right now and that’s only because the bots in the New York workshop finished the second one yesterday. Maybe he should speed up the work on his remote suits system because if his kid ends up in the icy waters of the Gulf of Mexico again, he wants there to be a suit there to get him out before the hypoxia sets in. Tony won’t let anything bad happen again.

"Status check?" He asked the AI. Maybe if he knew everybody was safe he could fall back asleep.

"Captain Rogers is still asleep or at least pretending to do so. His heart rate and breathing patterns indicate that he is conscious.” Tony rolls his eyes. Of course, Steve was faking. Although that did present Tony with another option, if this doesn’t work.

“Ms. Potts is currently en route to Manhattan. She wishes me to inform you that she plans to sleep one night in her own bed before coming down to Arlington for the two of you to have a chat. She plans to arrive sometime on July 3rd." Jarvis replied curtly.

“Of course she does.” Personally, Tony is still shocked that she’s willing to even come down for Steve’s birthday party, despite it being a corporate function of sorts. She does have better things to do like deflecting the board’s questions about why he is spending so much time in DC or where the money from the old SHIELD patents is going. Realistically, she’s coming because he hasn’t exactly been returning her calls for the last four days.

“She also wishes for me to inform you to contact Jane Barnett in the PR department. Apparently, there are media reports speculating about the nature of your relationship with Dr. Simmons.” Of course they think that Simmons is the replacement Pepper in a non-professional sense. Evidently, he fucks all his assistants, the female ones anyway. Ironically, excluding Pepper, it was mostly the other way around.

“I’m practically licking ice cream off Steve’s fingers in public at lunch this afternoon and they think I’m fucking one of my science babies? She’s the same age as my kid.” Who is barely younger than Steve, but JARVIS is astute enough not to mention that. However, considering the way Simmons and Leo look at each other, he is not getting anywhere near that relationship. He wouldn’t under any circumstances. He is too old for anybody born after 1984.

“How is the science baby handling the latest rumor?"

“She is asleep in her room and has been for the last hundred and 22 minutes.” It would seem that
therapy does work. Not that Tony will admit that out loud because otherwise he will be having sessions with Dr. Suarez. “She is unaware of any accusations because I am deleting anything related to that from her media feed. The speculation about the nature of your relationship has yet to move beyond various gossip sites owned by Tiberius Stone.” Of course, Ty was involved. The vulture was a heartless bastard.

“That’s good. Keep doing that for both her and Steve. How’s Bruce Bear?”

“Dr. Banner is currently located in his lab at the tower.” Jarvis continued.

"Of course he’s not sleeping. Is the backstabbing liar who kept my son away from me also at the tower along with her BFF?”

"Ms. Romanoff is currently at an undisclosed location with Mr. Burton.” Of course, they’re together. And of course, Jarvis doesn’t know where, they are spies after all, even if they have no agency to call their own at the moment.

"Are they still coming to Steve’s party?” Tony asked.

Clint he wanted there because the guy could party with the best of them. Natasha not so much. She hated him for cheating on Pepper and he hated her for not telling him about Leo.

“Agent Romanoff will be there, I’m uncertain about Agent Barton.”

"And what about Director Agent and Agent Scary?"

"According to his itinerary, Director Coulson is in London and Agent May is in charge of the Playground.”

"We have to rename that base." Tony mumbled under breath.

"Where is he really?” Tony was the only one he knew all the itineraries were fake because Coulson did not trust his AI to keep his actual location out of the hands of Hydra. “Actually do I even want to know?”
"Because this trip is related to what you refer to as the ‘Oh Fuck Protocol’ I can only provide you with that information in the event the Director is in immediate danger." Jarvis replied calmly. The ‘Oh Fuck Protocol’ is some secret project that Coulson is working on in the event that things get ‘Battle of New York’ bad again. Tony doesn’t know much about it, not even what the project’s real name is, but he’s willing to help fund anything that can protect them from that situation.

"It didn’t work so well last time.” Tony muttered under breath. Tony flashes back to his dream which also included Director Agent standing in front of him with Loki’s scepter sticking out of his chest.

"Did Tristan agree to be Leo’s bodyguard/nurse?" Tony asked because he was thinking it might be better to move Leo in sooner rather than later. Tony is certain this house is a lot safer from Hydra then a rehabilitation center with a few former assassins planted on the staff.

"She is willing to do so, if you find an adequate replacement to watch over Mrs. Carter-Jones.” That shouldn’t be so hard considering she already had an FBI detail with agents that actually respected her.

"I'm looking into it. Donuts?"

"Mr. McKenzie will bring a dozen with him when he picks you up for your morning visit with Leo."

"Leave up the stream of Leo’s room and see if you can convince Stephanie to let Leo out a little early.”

“I will try.”

“Also, a little mood music, if you please.” He was expecting Black Sabbath, but got jazz. Steve was obviously messing with his music collection again.

"Different music." He suggested and JARVIS started playing something that Steve obviously listened to as an actual teenager.

"I give up. Kill the music.” Tony sighed. “Just pull up the schematics for the automatic armor system.”
"As you wish, Sir."

XXXXX

“You found nothing?” Trip asked when Skye showed up to his room the first morning in July.

“Not a thing. I still haven’t even found the computer in the Director’s office. Okay, JARVIS has yet to find it. I’m not going in that room again because… Why do they keep having sex in his office when they have two perfectly good bedrooms?” Trip saw Skye shiver. He bet she was trying to repress the memory of five days ago when the two caught May straddling the Director in his office chair with the majority of their clothes scattered about the room including her underwear. Trip knew he was.

"I have no idea. I don’t want to think of the sexual aspects of my boss’s life." Seriously, they had been going up there to tell Coulson about Fitz’s newly confirmed paternity, not see that. Those two definitely needed to start locking the door.

"It’s like thinking about your parents having sex. It’s just disturbing. Speaking of parents and things you don’t want to deal with, are you going to try talking to your mother again?” Skye asked. He just knew she was going to bring that up, especially because the computer searches turned out so futile.

"She will just lie again." Trip is starting to think that it’s a genetic trait and his family.

"Coulson? He helped last time." Skye suggested.

"That was actually May and what mom told me had more details than what was actually in those reports.” Trip knew enough to recognize what an altered report looked like and those were fake reports. Too many details were left out. Maybe his grandmother wanted to spare his mom the humiliation of going through the investigation process or maybe Grandma Peggy was just trying to keep mom off the index. (Maybe it was Hydra trying to keep the big dark secret intact) He wasn’t sure and he knew there was no way to ever know for certain anymore, not with his grandmother the way she is right now.

“In that case anything Coulson has may not even be useful.” Skye threw her hands up. “Is there anyone else in your family who may have known what happened?” ‘Yes, but she currently has Alzheimer’s.’ Trip thought bitterly.

“Aunt Marcy was the only one who knew the truth about the kidnapping, let alone anything else.
Everyone else thinks that I am the product of a teenage love story that went horribly wrong.”

“So we talk to your Aunt Marcy.” Skye suggested as she literally bounced up and down on his bed. Sometimes she was like a five-year-old.

“That is entirely… This is not a conversation you have over the phone, not even on an encrypted hard line. There’s just too much…” Of a likelihood that he might start hurting some of them for how they treated his mom. He was unbelievably unhappy.

The only reason why he didn’t say that was because his Stark phone beeped. He quickly looks to see that it was a text message from Sharon. She was one of the three people in his family that had this number. She was being forced to go to a very family Fourth of July in three days and wants him to come as a buffer. That’s not going to happen mostly because he might start yelling at all of them for believing the running off with her boyfriend story and treating his mom so badly because of it.

Normally the two of them avoid this particular family gathering like the plague. Actually, they usually beg for assignments out of the country during the holiday just so they don’t have to be there. Unfortunately, that’s no longer an option for her anyway. Trip can lie and still say that he’s in hiding. Before he has a chance to offers his condolences, Skye reaches for his cell phone actually trying to take it from him. In trying to keep control of the phone Skye is now practically, straddling him on the bed.

“What are you doing?” Trip blinks at her as she finally successfully snatches the device from him.

“Trying to tell your cousin that you’ll be joining her for a very dysfunctional Carter-Jones Fourth of July.” She says, not bothering to get off his lap because he can’t grab the phone from her in this position, at least not without flipping her over and he doesn’t want to do that.

“Why are you doing that?”

“Your aunt sounds cool and I want to meet your cousin.” Skye shrugged as she continued typing. “Actually, I want to hear embarrassing stories from her.
“Unfortunately, they are the only not evil family members.” He sighed.

“They can’t all be that horrible.”

“Well, great Aunt Catherine is not evil, but she’s safely in California. She is my favorite. Also my aunts Jamie and Desiree are tolerable. Only my uncle and his wife have no redeeming qualities whatsoever. Actually, mostly, it is his wife. She is extremely homophobic and is convinced I just need to meet a girl to settle down with and that is one of the nicer thing she said to me.”

“Is she aware you are pansexual and still sleep with women occasionally?” Skye asked.

“I don’t think that word is in her vocabulary. Besides, I feel it’s best to not feed into her delusions. The hell and damnation talks are already bad enough on their own.” Trip said bitterly.

“So since you hate your family so much would you be okay with me going with you as your transgender girlfriend. It would completely freak your crazy aunt out and give you time to talk to the non-evil ones.” That suggestion actually sounded appealing.

“I don’t hate my family.” Trip said almost defensively.

“This will help me with my undercover skills,” she started giving him the puppy dog eyes. She also pressed down hard on a certain part of his anatomy. Could Skye just get off his lap? This was going to be embarrassing.

“I don’t think you need help with those.” But I might before this is done.

“You want answers and your aunt Marcy will be there, perfect solution.”

“Only if she can’t figure out a way out of it. She despises her sister-in-law.” Trip groaned. Thankfully at that moment Skye decides to move off him on her own.

“I guess we can stay here with everyone else who won’t be at a very Steve Rogers’ birthday party
and be forced to listen to Hunter continuously complain about his ex-wife.” That may just be as bad as a Carter-Jones Fourth of July celebration.

“Which I don’t get. I was left at the altar and I don’t even say that much about Robin.”

“Because he’s not worth it.” She’s right about that. Trip had more important things to concern himself with like Hydra and if they are responsible for his existence in the first place.

“Okay, Sharon says that Marcy will be there. She already knows we’re coming so you cannot back out of it.” Skye smiles at him and continues, “Just to be on the safe side she’s bringing back up.” He hopes back up is Tristan. They’re going to need a weapons expert, especially one with medical knowledge.

“Fine, but we are coming up with a better cover story.” He acquiesced. “And we’re bringing ICERs.”

“I knew you would see things my way.” What on earth is he agreeing to?

XXXXXX

"How is Stark handling everything?” May asked once Steve popped up on screen. It was a loaded question. He shouldn’t be surprised after the last five days. They had only exchanged a couple of emails, so of course the first time they’re able to actually talk to one another, she would ask that question.

"Badly.” To the point that he has turned over the search for Bucky exclusively to Sam because Steve knew he couldn’t leave Tony right now. Although, it probably says something good about their relationship that Tony was his number one priority now.

Of course, May took what he said the wrong way because she was frowning and if you can actually get her to frown you were in trouble. “Not that way. He’s ecstatic about Leo. He sees him every morning and managed to convince Stephanie to let Leo move into the house early. He’s looking into getting him a service dog, just because Skye told JARVIS he wants one instead of a monkey.” It took all of Steve’s powers of persuasion to keep Tony from throwing money at the organization in order to get Leo’s name at the top of the list, even though the organization could use the money anyway.

“But he’s panicking on the inside and he’s not talking about it. He hasn’t even spoken to Pepper about it. He just sent her an email that said ‘Congratulate me, it’s a boy’ and has been ignoring all of
her calls, emails, and text messages since.” This is why Steve has been getting a lot of those phone calls.

"Of course he is." May sighed.

"He woke up in the middle of the night again last night thrashing about. If it wasn’t for the serum, I would have a black eye right now.” Tony punched him twice before he actually woke up to Steve restraining him. When he tried to ask Tony about the nightmare, he refused to talk about it and then made an excuse to go to his lab. Neither mentioned it this morning.

"Going over the diaries?” May asked. He told her about that in a very encrypted email, he figured she needed to know about some of the more SHIELD related things that he uncovered.

"No, he is done with that, after pulling two all-nighters. He found nothing useful, but he’s going to hand the diaries over to you and Coulson at the party, just in case he missed something. According to JARVIS, he was working on the suit and watching Leo as he slept via the camera Tony set up.” Steve is not sure either coping mechanism was healthy.

"I thought you banned him from working on the suit between the hours of midnight and 6 AM?”

“Physically, yes, but I can’t keep him out of the schematics. It’s impossible.” Steve gave up on that a long time ago.

"I think it will be better with Leo in the house. At least then he won’t be going down to his lab to monitor the camera he placed in Fitz’s room."

"That’s supposed to be happening today?” She asked.

“Yes. Tony left about an hour ago, but they’re still not back yet." Steve is a little worried about that.

"It takes a while to check someone out of the hospital." May said trying to be reassuring.

"Probably.” But Steve wasn’t convinced.
"I want to do lunch before your party, just the four of us. Actually, you should invite Natasha and Clint." The subject change was extremely abrupt, but that shouldn’t surprise him. She did ask multiple times if Natasha was coming to his party.

"I thought you were currently not on speaking terms with Natasha." He knew she was still bitter about Natasha not attending Phil’s funeral, despite the man’s death being less than permanent.

"I have her number in my cell phone. This is not the type of conversation you have over the phone.” Steve knew that conversation would most likely revolve around the fact that Phil’s death was not permanent.

“So Phil is ready to tell everyone?"

“No, he’s not. He wants to wait until the fight with Hydra is over. I’m not giving him a choice.”

"The fight with Hydra is never going to be over.” He knew that all too well by now. “There’s no point in waiting because you may wait too long."

"And not all of us get second chances." There was something in the way she said those words that worried him.

"You’re worried? Steve asked as he hears Tony’s car pull into the driveway. He looked up to see that Leo was in the car with him. He was relieved on Tony’s behalf.

"There hasn’t been a writing episode for six days. At least I think it’s been six days. He’s in London right now recruiting.” He can still pick up on that hint of worry in her voice.

“But you are worried?"

“I’m not sure if I should be worried and I don’t like not knowing something. I think Phil is afraid that everything is going to get worse and I’m going to have to put a bullet in his head. At least, that’s what he wants me to do if things escalate. What’s worse is I think he does believe it’s going to come to that and wants to spare everyone from going through the mourning process again. What he doesn’t realize though is that even a few more minutes are worth it.”
"He actually asked you to kill him if it gets that bad?" Steve asked worriedly.

"I won’t do it, not after B… I can’t. I have a plan." Yet she doesn’t tell him what that plan is.

"You won’t." Steve says, just as he hears another car approaching. He assumes that it’s Simmons, until he sees the red hair. Also Tony’s “Why the fuck did you not tell me I had a kid” could be heard in the living room even with the soundproofing. It was obvious he was yelling at Natasha along with her guest who he couldn’t quite make out because the trees were in the way.

"Natasha came early and Tony’s not happy. I have to go, but I’ll talk to her about lunch tomorrow and see if she can get Clint to come.”

“Why the fuck did you cheat on Pepper?” Steve heard Natasha retort.

“Tony may not be with us.” He didn’t even bother to hang up before he rushed outside the keep things from getting worse. It was going to be a really long birthday and it was only July 2nd.

To be continued.

Chapter End Notes

Would anybody like to guess who Natasha brought with her?

Also what do you think Clint’s reaction in this story will be to discovering the Coulson truth? I’d like to hear your thoughts.
It Was All Going to Blow Up Eventually, Why Not Today

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. There’s some fun to be had in this chapter. I’m warning you in advance that this chapter is ridiculously long because there was just no place to divide it up.

I’m also sorry for the long wait. The chapter was attacked by email gremlins (or Hydra) during the editing process and it was lost for about a week and a half. Actually, I’m currently in the middle of a two-week vacation, but I’m posting this right now to make sure you guys got it as soon as possible.

Please keep in mind that this story is only about 90% cannon compliant. There’s going to be some major divergence from canon in this chapter.

Tony was having a good day for a Wednesday anyway. Senator Ward had given up his anti-SHIELD crusade and started focusing on the real terrorists and Leo was coming home today. Of course, the former happened because Tony told the good Senator in no uncertain terms that he was not above letting everybody know what the senator’s baby brother did to Leo. Nothing would derail his 2016 political hopes faster than having everyone discover that he was related to a sociopath ‘domestic’ terrorist.

Okay, maybe it wasn’t a perfect day. Pepper has called him eight times in the last 12 hours. Tony is pretty sure he’s going to have to talk to her about how he’s allegedly dating his twentysomething assistant. Even though he knows that she knows better than to believe anything like that.

His attempt to keep Steve and Simmons from finding out the ridiculous gossip of the week did not go quite as planned because Steve still gets a hard copy of the Washington Post and copies of Express are everywhere, including the lobby that Stephanie was forcing them to sit in as they waited for Leo to be released. Why did he forget that hard copies of the paper still exist and that people will actually read a paper when it’s free and they’re bored from having to wait for a ridiculous amount of time?

Steve thought it was absurd and was thankful that the papers had no idea who Simmons really was beyond being Tony’s assistant. He’s pretty sure Simmons was more than a little upset they were accusing her of sleeping with her best friend’s father. Although, he’s not entirely certain how she’s taking it because the conversation was interrupted by a transatlantic phone call. His twentysomething assistant was currently sitting next to him as she argued with her parents about said rumors because apparently Ty’s British papers love slandering him more than the American ones.
“I am not shagging Tony Stark.” She yelled into the phone as she sat beside him, making Tony wish not for the first time that he’d successfully snuck out to pick up Leo by himself.

Tony’s sucked at reading emotions, but even he could pick up the obvious uneasiness between Simmons and Leo. It reminded him of the same uneasiness that showed up whenever he had to interact with Pepper right now (which is why he wasn’t picking up her phone calls) combined with how everybody treated him post-Afghanistan incident. It was a strange combination.

He thought that by getting Leo when Simmons was at her final meeting with the Captain America birthday planning committee he could avoid any awkwardness except she was already waiting for him in her little blue ‘hybrid’. (She refused to accept any of the ‘flashier’ cars available for her use, still unaware that the blue hybrid was actually a prototype that ran on arc reactor technology). This is what happens when he tries to outsmart someone who is almost as smart as he is and happens to control his schedule.

“So do you really believe the only way I could only secure a position at one of the top tech companies in the world is on my back?” If her father is truly this stupid, her being that brilliant is a small miracle.

“You do remember I have two doctorates which I earned by myself before I was even old enough to drink in this country? Wait, of course you do, because you remind me of how much they cost you every time you call.” There’s definitely some serious tension between father and daughter.

Great, he was having another childhood déjà vu moment. Tony remembers a version of this particular argument all too well because it was Howard’s favorite. He loved to remind Tony that he would be nowhere without Howard’s money or connections. That Howard had raised himself up from his lower East side beginnings relying on no one but himself and Tony would never know what that was like, because he always had everything handed to him on a silver platter. He never defended himself, because somewhere in his mind he had actually believed that Howard might be right.

He knew better now and there was no way Tony was just going to sit here and listen to someone else receive the same treatment, especially someone he actually liked. Since he had no idea when Trista would actually bring Leo out, it was time to intervene.

“Hand me your phone.” He said finally getting Jemma’s attention.

“Dr. Stark, I am speaking with my parents right now.” He could tell she purposely used the title doctor for the sake of annoying her father. This was why she was his best assistant since Pepper.
“That’s why I want the phone. Actually, never mind. JARVIS, transfer the call to my phone.” JARVIS already took care of it before Jemma could object.

“This is Dr. Stark, Dr. Simmons’ new boss and contrary to anything said by any media outlet owned by Tiberius Stone, just her boss. I think we met last year at a green energy conference.” He doesn’t even know why the oil conglomerate bothered to show up at the conference. Good publicity, who knows.

“I don’t remember that.” His tone was clipped.

“I’m not surprised. You were too busy with your barely of age “assistant” to pay attention to any of the speakers.” He was about to make some comment about the man spending more time with that young woman at the pool then actually at the conference, but he already heard an angry female voice in the background, probably the wife of the moment. It was time to go in for the kill.

“Maybe that’s the real reason why you actually believe any of the ridiculous lies about your daughter. Considering MI6 has been at your house multiple times in the last 11 weeks, I’m sure you’re aware your daughter was never actually a corporate party planner. Dr. Simmons is working for me, because she is the best biochemist in the world, who does not have severe anger management issues. I can understand where you may be inclined to believe the tabloids considering that Roxxon gets hit with at least six major sexual harassment suits every quarter. But at Stark Industries, our CEO, Virginia Potts does not tolerate such behavior.”

Just as the man started to say some very not nice things about how Pepper allegedly received that job, Tony hung up.

“JARVIS divert calls from that number to Hill for the rest of the day. She can deal with daddy dearest.” Otherwise Tony may do something bad like use the idiot to test out the new suit. Tony expects the woman to completely eviscerate the man anyway.

“I can’t believe you just did that.” Jemma sighed.

“He annoyed me. I had that argument with Howard more times than I care to think about or remember. I always wished I could do something like that to him, but I never could. Now I can. You’re welcome.” Simmons sighed again at his words.

“Did you actually have to imply he was sleeping with his assistant? My mother was also on the line.”
So that was the angry woman in the background.

“Again, you’re welcome because JARVIS actually has pictures of his ‘inappropriate’ behavior with the assistant that I will never show you because it will give you nightmares. JARVIS, let Mrs. Simmons know that the divorce attorney is on me.”

“You really didn’t have to do that. I love my parents.” Tony just gives her a ‘you have got to be kidding me’ look. “Although, I may love my mother just a little bit more. I just don’t think I’ll ever be good enough for them.” Tony is pretty sure she’s just referring to her father, but he doesn’t correct her.

“Some people can never be pleased.” Like Howard. “It took me a while to learn that I just have to be good enough for myself.”

“How’s that going for you?” She leaned back in the old to hard waiting room chair. Tony made a mental note to donate more money for better decor. Stephanie’s mom deserve to be at a place that at least looked comfortable.

“Badly, I have very unrealistic expectations. Speaking of unrealistic expectations, did you read the package that Stephanie sent you?”

Said package was Stephanie’s personal survival guide on how to deal with an ill family member. Seeing her interact with her own mom made Tony certain that she actually knew what she was talking about. The package was sent to Simmons at Trista’s insistence, because apparently the young woman was better at putting her foot in her mouth then Tony was, and that was saying something. Tony had a full PR team to deal with that sort of thing because it happened so often.

Why Trista thought that Tony would be the best person to have this conversation with her Tony will never know, but it was a condition of Trista coming to work for him. This completely explains why he waited to the last moment and had Stephanie do most of the dirty work.

“Nurse Trista is overreacting. I don’t think it’s unrealistic for me to expect Fitz to get better and I don’t see anything wrong with encouraging him to do so.” Because encouragement can sound like pity if you use the wrong words. After reading Howard’s diaries, Tony is certain that 90% of his Howard related issues were related solely to bad communication on Howard’s part.

“That’s Physician’s Assistant Trista.” Tony corrected with a smirk. “It’s unrealistic to expect him to
be exactly the same as he was before the incident. You’re not. I’m definitely not the person I was
before New York or Afghanistan.” Okay, maybe this is the reason why he was selected to have this
conversation with her. “I don’t think you’d’ve like that person very much. Actually, that person
probably would’ve done everything your father and the tabloids accused me of.”

“I doubt that. Plus, I have more self-respect than to be another notch on your bed post.” She said
sternly, and he completely believed that.

“I’ve only added two notches in six years and I don’t think either actually counts as a notch because
I’m involved in a long-term perceived as monogamous relationship. Pepper didn’t see it that way
but…”

“I can do this myself.” Fitz’s words interrupt his possible Pepper tirade just in time. True to her word,
Trista was wheeling Fitz down the hall of the rehab center with Dr. Stephanie by her side.

“Yep, you’re related.” Stephanie mumbled under breath.

“Get back in that chair.”

“Does he really need to be in the wheelchair?” He asked picking up on Leo’s pleading look.

“Center policy.” Trista replied putting a hand gently on Fitz shouldered to get him to sit back in the
chair. Simmons did not look happy at the physical contact. He is now 99% sure that Simmons
reluctance to take Trista’s advice when dealing with her friend because she felt threatened by the
physician assistant/bodyguard/former SHIELD assassin.

“Yes, but as of five minutes ago, you don’t work there anymore.” Tony replied flippantly. “I even
did that thing you asked me to do.” Three minutes before you actually got here, but it still counts.

“I’m not sure if it actually helped. I don’t work for you either. I work for Fitz and I only care about
what’s best for him.” She said this, looking directly at Simmons. “And what’s best for him is to sit
back and relax and not wear himself out with an unnecessary display of bravado.”

“I like you.” Simmons glared at him for that comment.
“You’re not my type. You have a dick.” Simmons suddenly started smiling again. When did his life become a teenage soap opera?

“Don’t worry, so does his current significant other.” Stephanie remarked. “I’m sure you saw how all over each other they were yesterday when they went to see mom.”

That was a total exaggeration. At worst, he may have grabbed Steve’s hand once because he’s always going to find Mrs. Carter-Jones intimidating.

“Seriously? Captain Rogers?” Trista gets even more bonus points for not referring to Steve by his superhero façade. “That explains the nondisclosure agreement.” Trista remarked.

Before he can explain the real reason for the nondisclosure agreement, Mack pulled the black SUV up to the front of the building. They went with that car because Stephanie felt it would be easier for Fitz to get into it by himself because of course the 27-year-old was too stubborn to let anyone help him. If Pepper were there, she would be laughing at the irony of it.

Apparently, Mack and Trista knew each other long before his house became a home for wayward not evil, former SHIELD agents. There was actual hugging and possibly happy tears at finding out at least another one of their friends was not Hydra. Eventually, they were all in the car heading back to the Arlington house. Well, not everybody because Simmons did have to drive her own car back and Stephanie went with her arguing that his SUV could only sit four comfortably. The real reason is she probably wanted to have another talk was Simmons.

“Right now, everybody working directly with me at the Arlington house is signing a nondisclosure agreement due to the fact that most of us are targets of a long assumed dead terrorist organization.” That probably created my son in the first place.

“I have never cared if people know about my sexual preferences. I have enough sex tapes out there and I have more important things to do than be bothered by it.”

“That’s pretty much an open secret. I assumed you were trying to protect your boyfriend who came from an era where most of us in this car would’ve been arrested or killed for our bedroom practices.” Okay, he definitely likes this woman. She was observant if nothing else.

“That’s not it, at least not completely, because Steve hates bullies and would love nothing more than to duke it out with the talking heads on Fox news or one of Tiberius’s networks.”
“My mom loves that channel.” Mack ground from the front of the car.

“I’m very used to the media saying whatever they want about me. By the way, I’m not sleeping with your best friend.” He said turning to Leo. “She’s a very beautiful and intelligent young woman, but I’m in love with Steve and you and Simmons need to have a seriously long conversation.” About whatever the hell you guys are not talking about sooner rather than later. Otherwise things are going to implode like me and Pepper and you two don’t want to end up like me and Pepper.

“Knew you weren’t.” Leo only struggled a little bit to get the words out which made Tony smile.

“But there are some things more important than protecting my already questionable reputation. The nondisclosure agreement is to make sure you do not tell every tabloid in existence about Leo.”

“You don’t want people to know that Fitz is your son?” Trista was giving Tony a very angry look and Fitz’s sad look just broke Tony’s heart.

“That’s not what I’m saying. This is why there’s an entire PR Department dedicated to pulling my foot out of my mouth. I have no trouble shouting it from the rooftops if it wasn’t for…” Tony stopped wondering how much he should say. Hill cleared both Trista and Mack, but Maria also cleared the bastard responsible for putting his son in a coma in the first place. He doesn’t trust her judgment. Then there’s how much Leo wanted the two to know.

“Hydra?” Fitz says it as a question.

“Yes. Hydra. And that’s in addition to what you want. I’ll only say what you want me to say and that includes what I will say to those two. Can I tell them what happened?” Thankfully Leo gave his consent. And Tony tried to explain what happened without mentioning the backstabbing traitor or the fact that Coulson was alive. Of course, Leo spouted the part about the backstabbing teammate himself.

“I knew the boating accident story was a cover.” Trista Mumbled under breath. Fitz just shrugged.

“It wasn’t your fault. We were all fooled and had to deal with friends who betrayed us.” Mack said with a hint of sadness in his voice. ‘My old driver turned out to be Hydra. He shot at me and the guy used to give me candy as a kid.’ The words were on the tip of his tongue, but he was cut off by Trista.
“Was Tim Hydra?”

“Tim died on the *Iliad* during the fall.” He whispered and Tony’s really glad that Steve wasn’t there for this particular conversation. Tony was sure he held himself at least partially responsible for every true SHIELD agent, who died. “And I was busy vacationing with Bobby and her rebound that turned out to be Hydra. I’m here and she is not.” And apparently Steve wasn’t the only one who held himself responsible for what happened.

“What happened?” Leo actually asked this question.

“Today is not the day for that story.” Mack told everyone and even Tony knew better than to push.

“I’m going to be the first one to admit I have no idea what I’m doing. I have no idea how to be a father. Grandpa Howard was not exactly the best role model, unless I do the exact opposite of everything he does.” Which may actually be a good idea. Although, considering how his parents were actually gone for nearly 8 years by the time he was Leo’s age, he wasn’t sure how much good it would do. It strikes Tony at that moment that he never had a chance to have an adult relationship with his parents courtesy of the organization that made sure he didn’t have a relationship with Leo during his childhood.

“Actually, according to Pepper, I have no idea how to be a normal human being, but I know about dying and surviving and everything that comes afterwards. I also learned a lot after the Malibu incident and I don’t want to endanger people close to me.” Leo actually squeezed his hand.

“Wasn’t your…fault.”

It was. It’s always his fault.

“The three of us are SHIELD agents or we used to be, which means that the military and Hydra all want us dead, and it has nothing to do with you. Hill warned me that your ego was big, but I didn’t think it was this big.” Mack remarked.

“I’m not that bad. Leo, you already have a target on your back being one of SHIELD’s top scientists and don’t make that face at me because the information is still in there it just takes a little longer to get out. You already made the HENRY OS 30% more efficient.” The kid was definitely the best beta tester he’s ever seen. “But let’s be honest, it is going to be worse if they find out you’re the son of
Every person that Tony had pissed off would go after Leo because he was Tony’s weak spot. It was at that moment that Tony wondered if maybe Patches had done the right thing by keeping Leo’s existence from him.

“More like if they find out he’s the son of Iron Man.” He heard Mack say from upfront.

“They’re the same.” Leo mumbled next to him.

“An enemy is an enemy, but that’s why I now have two extra bodyguards in addition to the army of one boyfriend. Like you said earlier, both of you are former SHIELD agents.” Trista was actually a specialist before the battle of New York made her consider a serious career change. Tony is certain her placement at Woodbine was Patches’ related meddling.

“I’m just a simple mechanic, who just happens to know how to give a Quinjet a tune-up.” The guy was being modest and Tony only liked modesty from Steve, because it was cute.

“I’ve seen your resume. Your real resume.” His talk with Stephanie and his late-night insomnia led to Tony finding out about the man’s second stay at the Academy. This time it was for field agent training with Stephanie’s son.

“You were the chief engineer of the Iliad when SHIELD fell.” Even if he wasn’t there when everything went down because somebody in Hydra wanted him to be as far away from the fallout as possible.

“But you completed your field agent training. You are also being personally trained by someone referred to as Mockingbird, who can apparently give Burton a run for his money.” And was apparently on the Avengers Initiative short list along with Steve’s former FWB.

“Who turned out to be Hydra.” Mack practically growled. Now Tony was glad she only made the shortlist.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m sure Hill put you on my staff for a reason and I think that it’s to keep my family safe.” Tony noticed half a smile from Fitz. “At least I hope it is. Of course, she could have put you in my house as a spy, but I’ve already dealt with that once.”
“I really do want to work on your car collection.” The guy side and Tony knew he was right in trusting this person.

“Everybody wants to work on my car collection.” Tony said before going into a detailed description of what cars were at the Arlington property. Fitz asked a few questions along with Mack, apparently both like classic cars. This put his mind at ease. Somehow they managed to beat Simmons, but that’s probably because his assistant somehow manages to get lost even with JARVIS giving her turn by turn directions or she may have stopped to get food. Either was possible and odds have combination of the two probably involved.

“You are going to love your room.” Tony said opening the door for Leo. “You’re in the bunker section, but that’s mostly because there’s an elevator from the lab that you can actually get to from the garage. There are less stairs that way.” Leo frowned and Tony took that to mean he wasn’t happy. Maybe he felt like Tony was ashamed of him and that’s why he wasn’t in the main part of the house, when it really was more of a safety thing.

“Although, if you rather be on the second floor of the actual house I can make some phone calls. I’m sure it wouldn’t be that hard to get an elevator installed. Steve and I are also going to stay in the room next to….”

“Please start breathing soon. I really don’t want to have to give you mouth-to-mouth on the first day.” Trista interrupted.

“I’m not sure Steve would like that. Anyway Trista, you’re going to have the room next to…” Before he could say Mack, another car pulled up the driveway and it was not Simmons way too small blue hybrid.

He could see the red hair from there and instantly knew who it was. If you’re trying to keep a low profile, that would not be his first choice of hair color. Then again his legal team was making sure it wasn’t necessary for her to disappear again despite her role in keeping the real truth from him. Steve would take away blowjob privileges, if he even tried.

But as Director Agent and many others will attest, Tony has a tendency to speak first and not even bother to think about it later. So naturally the first words out of his mouth were “Why the fuck did you not tell me I had a kid?”

Leo flinches and Trista is shaking her head. And Natasha retaliates with the not breaking up with
Pepper before jumping Steve thing which under other circumstances Tony would be completely okay with being called out on. He did fuck up there. However, Leo is giving him a disappointed look which he doesn’t like at all.

"I’m fully aware I screwed up there, but what you did was not even in the same league. You kept my child away from me. Besides, the only one who gets to call me on that is Pepper because my stupidity directly affects her."

“And even if you were picking up my phone calls, I wouldn’t call you out on it.” Pepper said getting out of the car. Pepper arriving an entire day early was not good. Maybe he should have at least glanced at the messages she left with JARVIS.

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Pepper knew that putting Tony and Natasha in a room (or apparently driveway) together right now was going to be volatile, but she’d been unable to turn down a ride from the woman when she turned up at the airstrip an hour ago. During that hour, in addition to unsuccessfully figuring out why Natasha picked her up, she futilely tried to convince her friend that there was no point in being angry with Tony. Pepper herself has let it go.

“As I told you several times on the ride here, I’m not mad. I wouldn’t be attending Steve’s birthday party Friday, if I was.” Her new assistant was at least competent enough to find a way for her to get out of the birthday party for her ex-boyfriend’s new boyfriend, if she really wanted to not be there.

“Anger is a waste of my time and energy.”

“Because you’re used to cleaning up his messes.” Natasha remarked.

‘That Steve’s job now.’ She thought to herself, just as the man in question walked down the stairs prepared to break up the fight that she hopefully just defused.

"We made mistakes,” ‘All three of us’ Pepper added mentally. “But our relationship is our business, not the media’s or yours, despite our friendship.” Just to emphasize her point she actually hugged Tony much to the shock of the spy in question.

“Good to see you’re still alive.” She was worried about his silence after verifying Leo’s paternity. Steve assured him that Tony was mostly intact, but she worried. She was always going to worry. No change of relationship status was ever really going to change that.
“I really should’ve returned your phone calls.” Tony said pulling away.

“Yes, you should have. You can’t ignore the world because you’re not ready to deal with it.” She whispered low enough that hopefully no one besides Tony and Steve heard her.

“You’re here early.” Steve said coming to stand behind Tony. She picked up on the tension in his posture. He looked like a soldier preparing for battle. Considering the volatile nature of Natasha and Tony, it was entirely probable.

"I have some work stuff to do and I didn’t want to take Tony away from your birthday." And really, the situation couldn’t wait that long. One day back in the U.S. and her Board of Directors had already managed to make her miserable.

“I may have neglected a few dozen phone calls, but I’ve been busy. The good senator is now completely terrified of the entire world finding out…” Tony trailed off, looking directly at Leo. She understood that Tony blackmailed the man with the possibility of the entire world finding out his younger brother put the heir of Stark Industries in a coma as part of terrorist activities.

"I’ll let you get away with it this week, considering…” You just found out you have a child and you haven’t done anything requiring more than one member of the PR team to deal with it. "Everything that’s been going on lately. Besides, I wanted to meet Leo." He definitely had some resemblance to Tony, unfortunately that resemblance is mostly to the Tony that came back from Afghanistan and woke her up every night screaming post New York.

"Fitz." He extended his hand.

"He doesn’t like his first name." The young woman standing protectively next to him explained.

“That’s because it’s Leopold and if I was around that would’ve never happened, but thanks to certain people in this driveway I didn’t have a say.”

“Let it go Tony.” She hears Steve whisper.

"It’s nice to meet you." Pepper smiles.
"I’m going to show Fitz to his room before he gets tired, so you two can finish your pissing contest in peace." She sees the physician assistant put an arm around him.

“I can do that. I should do that.” Tony offered.

"I’ve got it. It’s what you’re paying me for, besides if Nick’s favorite secret assassin shows up at your door unannounced with your ex-girlfriend, there’s probably a good reason."

"Fury’s dead.” Natasha repeats and Peppers not even sure of that anymore. Mostly because she thought Phil Coulson was dead two months ago and hopefully tomorrow Pepper was having lunch with him.

“That isn’t always permanent.” She said nothing beyond that remembering Tony’s warning that very few people can know about Phil still being alive for the man’s own safety.

“Natasha, let’s just go into the house." Steve grabs his friend by the wrist.

“Before the neighbors hear extremely classified material.” This was mumbled by a man that Pepper did not recognize. He was probably Tony’s new bodyguard/driver. That also meant that the man was former SHIELD.

"Not a problem. I bought out the neighbors last week." Tony smirked effortlessly.

"Of course you did." Both Pepper and Steve said simultaneously.

"Pepper, do you want the house on the left or the right?"

He bought her a house. Why not. He already tried to give her the penthouse twice since the breakup (and if she doesn’t find a new condo soon, she may say yes if he offers a third time). Pepper wondered if this was another one of his apology presents. Actually, she is certain that it is. She’s just not entirely sure what he’s apologizing for this time. With luck, it’s not something entirely new that she isn’t even aware of yet.

"You bought two houses without telling me?” Pepper is surprised that Steve says this before she
“Steve, you’re the one who’s always worried about civilians getting hurt because of what we’re planning. And Pepper said she didn’t want a room in the bunker. I thought the best solution to both problems was buying out some of the neighbors. Besides, I always hated the Allen’s next-door.”

“At least this is better than the Popeye’s incident.” Pepper sighed exasperatedly reminding herself yet again that this kind of behavior was Steve’s problem now. “Do I even want to know what you’re planning to do here?”

"It’s best that you have plausible deniability when dealing with the board." Like that would help.

"Do I want to know what the Popeye’s incident was?" Steve asked after a moment.

"I may have won a fried chicken franchise during a poker game and saved a lot of jobs." Steve shakes his head at Tony’s explanation.

“Romanoff, as I’m sure you will be staying over until the birthday party, you can stay in Bruce’s usual room. Maybe you can successfully convince him to share when he gets here.” Pepper saw Natasha’s glare before Tony pulled her through the shrubbery to the house next door so they could have a look around.

“So do you want this one or the other one?” Tony asked as they walked around the property. It really was a nice house, but she needs to be at least two blocks away from Tony.

“I rather talk to you about yesterday’s board meeting.”

“I rather talk about the Popeye’s poker incident.”

"Tony!" She said exasperatedly.

"Okay, why is the board mad this week? I even managed to get Christopher Ward on the green energy bandwagon." Because you’re blackmailing him.
"Other than the fact you’re allegedly dating the daughter of a major competitor.” Pepper said instead.

"Dating would be a nice word for what they’re accusing me of. You know I’m not sleeping with her. She’s Leo’s age.” ‘So Steve,’ but unlike Tony she had enough tact not to say that.

“And I know that Steve is almost Leo’s age.” Leave it to Tony to say it for her, she thought as she sighed. “However, technically, we are celebrating his 96th birthday in two days, so I’m pretty sure he’s the cradle robber in this relationship. I still can’t believe you’re coming for the party.” Neither could Natasha, who mentioned that several times on the ride here.

"You said we would stay friends and friends help each other out when paternity tests come back positive.” She needed to know how he was reacting.

"Yes, but we are also friends who just got out of a messy breakup.”

"It wasn’t that messy and we still have a business relationship to maintain and like it or not, you having a son affects that.” Because now when Tony does something stupid someone else other than her will get the majority of his stock. Actually, she was sure that would’ve been the case regardless.

"I slept with Steve,” because of that.

"I forgive you and that’s the only thing that matters.” She told him, because he needed to hear that. "Besides, we have bigger problems.”

"One of the members on the board knows about Leo?” Tony can be very perceptive when he chooses to be.

"Possibly. Or they may know about you dating Steve. I’m not entirely sure.”

“But you’re thinking it’s the latter, because the former is not going to be that big of a problem except for…”
"At this point, I don’t care if people find out you’re with Steve. It’s been a couple of months.”
Truthfully, she’d rather people know that she was dumped for Captain America instead of the flavor of the month. “It’s sooner than I would like, but it’s preferable to the board becoming aware of Leo--Fitz before were ready for them to know.” Before Tony has time to completely rewrite his will.

"Who?" Tony’s eyes were hard.

"Baker." Also known as the one member of the board that has been actively trying to replace her as CEO since her appointment. “His mother happens to also be at Woodbine and apparently he saw you there last week.”

“I doubt he was actually there. Also, it doesn’t surprise me at all that his mom is in a nursing home three states over.”

"His sister lives in the DC Metro."

"And is probably the one who actually takes care of his ailing mother." Tony scoffed and he was probably right. The only person Baker cared about was his current mistress and even that was stretching it.

“What did he say to you?”

"Nothing very specific. He just mentioned visiting his mom and commented offhandedly about seeing both you and Steve there at the facility visiting a supposed SI staff member who oddly didn’t exist before his accident. He also mentioned that he’s sure that others on the board would like to learn why you were there.”

Tony sighed. “Wasn’t Baker one of Obadiah’s golfing buddies?”

“Possibly. I don’t really remember. That was seven years ago and I’ve only recently been forced to take up the game. It’s a ridiculous CEO requirement. Why do you ask?”

“Nothing,” Tony said dismissively in a way that told her that it was something.
“Just tell Baker and the others that I was there as part of our Alzheimer research or maybe I feel like doing some volunteer work. Visiting the sick and elderly at a rehab center should count as that. Maybe I was just there to see Stephanie’s mom. I have known the woman since I was a baby.”

"If the press was following you there, they might actually buy that.” Because they only cared about what would make the stock go up.

"Maybe I want to do something good for the sake of doing something good."

“You’ve met our Board of Directors.” Many of the same people that locked you out after Afghanistan. “You know they’re going to point out your propensity to fly around in a red and gold metal suit rescuing kittens.”

"That was one time." Tony said as he started walking back to the house. She had no choice but to follow behind him.

"It still happened."

"Then you can point out that I haven’t been an active member of the kitten rescuing squad for the last 18 months and how I spend my private time is none of their damn business, especially when I’m doing DC damage control." He was doing a surprisingly good job at it mostly because Simmons was keeping him from cursing out Sen. Ward on Twitter.

"But that’s going to change soon. I saw the latest suit in the lab last night. The bots are already working on another one.” She really hoped Tony wasn’t sliding back into that dark place where he was waking up in the middle of the night to make suits, but she was afraid to ask Steve.

"Hydra has the staff that killed Director Agent and who knows what else they manage to liberate from SHIELD.” He whispered as they started to make their way up the stairs to the house. “Maybe it would be a good idea to find it before they decide to use it to lead another alien army to Earth or who knows what else. To do that we need to get our superhero boy band back together."

“And insulting Natasha was a good first step?”

“Maybe not.” Tony said as he put his palm up against the key panel for the house. Of course, Tony upgraded the place to biometric scans, considering there’s a secret base in his basement. “But we
could always have Steve’s special friend take her place.”

“Or you could let her and her team take care of all of it. You are financing the top secret organization.” He was probably planning to move them into that secret base, which would completely explain why he bought out the neighbors. However, she stayed silent as she followed Tony into the house.

“Not an option. Even with the rapid cash infusion and other resources they are still only at 3% of what the organization was before…” Tony stopped mid-sentence because they were greeted by the sight of Natasha pinning Tony’s new assistant to the ground at knife point.

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This morning Natasha had been at Clint’s farm braiding Lila’s hair and enjoying Laura’s homemade biscuits, practically on vacation. This afternoon, she was standing in another one of Stark’s houses back to work.

Although, as she really looked around, Natasha could tell that this was actually Steve and Tony’s house. There is definitely more of Steve in this place than there ever was in his SHIELD provided apartment. She really didn’t want to have to think about this, at least not until Steve’s birthday party in two days. However, thanks to a certain package that she received in Clint’s barn with explicit instructions to pick up Pepper from the airport on her way to deliver the package to Stark and Rogers, she was here earlier than she wanted to be.

"I don’t know why you’re with him." Natasha said as she sat down on one of Stark’s postmodern couches after putting her things in the guestroom.

“I don’t know why you kept the existence of his son from Tony.” Steve was giving her his disappointed look. Anger she could deal with, she expected it. This was worse.

“I was ordered not to.” It was true, but that excuse seems hollow now.

“Some orders shouldn’t be followed. Were you going to let him die not knowing?” She thought about that question a lot during her time undercover at SI and she never did come up with her answer. Thankfully, she never needed to come to a definitive decision.

“He wasn’t ready for the news.” Maybe she didn’t want to have to deal with Stark rejecting his own flesh and blood. Although, considering the way Stark looked at his child, she knew that was never going to happen.
"That was not your call to make. Tony deserved to know. He’s not who you think he is. He’s not even who he pretends to be. I’ve never met someone who cares about people as much as he does. And I’m pretty sure he fell in love with Fitz the moment he met him, maybe even the moment he knew about him. Underneath the bravado there is a good person who has a heart and you broke it."

“Stark is not perfect. He’s narcissistic and self-involved.” She said defensively, knowing it wasn’t true, not really.

“Observe me when I’m dying and see how well I behave.” Steve had a point, she knew he did.

“He cheated on his girlfriend of nearly 3 years.” Steve sighed exasperatedly as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

“It takes two to actually cheat. I was well aware of what I was doing when I fucked him.” Her spy training was the only reason why her mouth didn’t open in shock at the use of the word ‘fuck’ considering he will chastise other agents for cursing during a mission. “As Pepper said outside, this is between the three of us. You may be one of my best friends in this time, but it’s none of your business who I sleep with.”

"And what happens when he does it again, but this time to you?” Steve actually rolled his eyes at her.

"He won’t."

"You don’t know that. It could already be happening." Not that she actually believed anything published by Tiberius Stone. She’s almost disappointed they have yet to find anything connecting him to Hydra.

“You’re right. I don’t know what might happen in the future, but I know a lot more about what’s going on now than you do. And you should know better than to believe what you see in papers about Tony. Yes, I know about it because I do actually read the Washington Post in the morning.”

"I’m not going to be able to convince you otherwise, am I?” If this goes badly, their team will be down one of their biggest hitters and she just knew it was going to, which was why she had been trying to prevent this relationship from happening in the first place.
“Not at all.” Steve said, sitting beside her. “Why are you really here?”

“\textquote{I was contacted by a friend this morning.}” Actually, she was contacted by one of the Koenigs. Thankfully, it was Ilse Koenig, and not one of her brothers. However, before she would say anything else she needed to make sure the AI, was not listening. Thankfully, she still has a certain gadget in her pocket.

"What did you do?" Steve asked as the music playing in the background and any other function controlled by JARVIS suddenly stopped.

“I made it so JARVIS couldn’t hear this conversation. More importantly blocked others from using the AI to listen in on this conversation.” She said before taking a manila envelope out of her red bag.

"This is for you." She placed the envelope in his hands. Ilse always did have a thing for hard copy.

“If this is a list of all the people Tony slept with before we were together, don’t bother. Because if so, I should mention that my list wouldn’t be that short.” She couldn’t help but laugh at that.

"You’ve slept with one person in the two years you have been out of the ice. I couldn’t even get you to go on a date. Just open the envelope. It came from Nikki.” She used that particular nickname on purpose, not sure who could be listening despite the precaution she took against it.

“Six,” Steve says from out of nowhere as he reluctantly starts to open the envelope.

“Six what?” She asks for clarification.

“I’ve had sex with six people in the last two years, four more than Tony. Actually, Tony and Melinda were the only two I slept with more than once and had any type of relationship with outside of breakfast.” She knew that Agent May was assigned to watch over Steve when she was busy with the Clint situation, but she had no idea they had that type of relationship.

“I’m not even sure I actually remember the names of the other four and I’m supposed to have an elastic memory now. I’m not some blushing virgin and I haven’t been since 1936 when I figured out an easy way for a skinny asthmatic to pay for art school.” She refused to believe that he was
implying that he actually turned to prostitution to get by. There’s just no way.

“Just read the file Steve.” She sighed, not wanting this particular conversation to continue.

“And what will I find in there?”

“The truth about Leo Fitz’s mother.”

“Was she Hydra?” Steve asked finally taking it.

“Possibly. Or she was just connected to somebody who was connected to the organization, we don’t know for sure.” And it wasn’t like she was currently available for questioning.

“Her real namewas Catherine Mitchell. She was hired directly by Obadiah Stane for the sole purpose of producing another heir to the Stark Empire, specifically one that would be more pliable. We suspect he was Hydra, but there’s no concrete evidence to back that up.” Considering at least one Hydra plant was part of the team going through Stane’s possessions, it was entirely possible that anything proving that connection was removed from the estate during the search. Thankfully, she was the one who found this.

"So when Fitz became old enough to take over Stark industries, he arranged for Afghanistan to happen?"

“We believe that to be the case considering the incident happened to him just a few months before Mr. Fitz’s 21st birthday."

"Jesus."

"After Stane’s death, my team discovered Catherine and her son. In exchange for protection for her and her son, she agreed to give us everything she could on any of the illegal dealings at Stark Industries.” There was more to it than that, but Steve didn’t need to know any of the other details like Stane poisoning former SHIELD operative Edward Jarvis.

"Why wasn’t this in the information that Hill gave us earlier?” There was a hint of anger in his voice.
"Because, Nikki kept this need to know only. I was just one of two additional people knew the truth about Catherine for security reasons, but it didn’t matter." She grabs the papers from Steve’s hands and pulls out several images at the back of the pile. She quickly passed them back over to Steve.

"Hell." He said as he looked at images of the mutilated body of Catherine Mitchell.

"That was what Agent Ilsa Koenig found at the safe house Mitchell was staying at. I’m positive Hydra was responsible."

"How can you be sure that’s her? There’s nothing left but pieces." Steve was shaky. Natasha hadn’t seen a body this hacked up in a long time.

"DNA analysis." Natasha said just as she heard someone make their way up the stairs. She quickly placed the pictures back in the folder and deactivated her JARVIS blocking device.

“I’m sorry we’re late, but we stopped to get dinner.” She turned around to see two women carrying boxes of fried chicken. Natasha instantly recognized the young woman from Tony’s latest tabloid exploits. She was the assistant that Stark was allegedly sleeping with. However, she didn’t recognize the slightly older woman with her. The lab coat made her believe that the woman was one of the specialists that Stark brought in to take care of his son.

“That’s probably a good idea since I’m sure nobody wants to cook.” Steve said as he grabbed the boxes from both women and started to make his way to the kitchen. “Natasha, I want you to meet Dr. Simmons, Tony’s new assistant and Dr. Triplett. She’s Fitz’s main doctor.”

"Also known as his ex-girlfriend’s youngest daughter. I’m the head of Stark Industries research program at Georgetown." She quickly shook the woman’s hand before moving on to the assistant.

"It’s an honor to meet you, Agent Romanoff." Her voice was nervous.

“I’m not an agent anymore.” Natasha extended her hand to shake.

“Neither am I, but it’s hard to forget sometimes.” So this woman was former SHIELD. That explains why the tabloids could not find anything on her. She was a ghost. “I’ve heard so much about you at
the Academy and from my former SO, Dir--Agent Coulson.” Her use of Coulson’s name caused alarms to go off in Natasha’s mind because the woman really should not be a ghost. Less than three months ago, she dumped all of SHIELD’s personnel records onto the Internet. People should know everything about her. Unless someone removed all traces of her existence from the Internet. Did Stark do this to protect her or was it someone else for less altruistic purposes?

"When did you work with Coulson?" She asked in an effort to try to find out which possibility was more likely.

“From February to April 2012 as part of a mobile command unit.” Natasha kept her expression carefully neutral. The young doctor was definitely lying. Natasha knew for a fact that Phil had been in the Arctic for most of April 2012 and Simmons was starting to perspire ever so slightly. The average person wouldn’t notice it, but she did.

She wouldn’t be surprised if Hydra tried the honey trap approach with Tony. She already heard from Pepper that SI had been deeply infiltrated by Hydra.

“Unless you were part of the team of doctors that revived Steve, I doubt that.” She said reaching for the knife in her pocket.

“Well, I was consulted on the best way to revive Captain Rogers, but I wasn’t allowed to leave the Hub.”

“A few minutes ago you said you were part of a mobile command unit, not stationed at the Hub.” Natasha kicked out and swept the young woman’s leg from under her. She straddled Simmons, her knife at Tony’s assistant’s throat. “Who are you?”

“Natasha, put the knife down.” Steve commanded, but he didn’t actually tried to disarm her.

“Not until I know who she is. Two minutes of talking to you and I can already see the holes in your cover story.”

“Melinda was right, this secret is dangerous.” She heard Steve mumbled under breath.

“She actually is an agent.” Dr. Triplett said from behind. “She worked with my son and trust me, he was not Hydra. Dad would roll over in his grave if he was.”
“I take a 20 minute walk with Pepper and you already have my assistant at knife point.” She heard Tony say as he approached her. “Contrary to the tabloids, I’m not cheating on Steve and if I was you should be pointing the knife at me.”

“Trust me, I would but right now I’m trying to keep this person from pulling a knife of her own or God knows what else.”

“I accidentally mentioned working with Agent Coulson.” Jemma managed faintly staying perfectly still beneath the assassin’s blade.

“Which is impossible.” Natasha stated firmly.

“You might as well tell her the truth at this point because I really don’t feel like interviewing assistants again. We have to work on your lying. You are never going to be able to handle the board at this rate.” She heard Tony sigh.

"I was ordered not to."

“That’s the other thing we need to work on. You work for me not Director Agent and definitely not Patches.” Who the hell were Director Agent and Patches? “Again, I really don’t want to have to interview for a new assistant or deal with the paperwork that comes from Black Widow killing you.”

"I worked with then Agent Coulson from August 2013 until SHIELD was dissolved in April 2014 as part of a Mobile Command Team that operated out of SHIELD 616.” At that point, the knife was pulled out of Natasha’s hands by Steve and she does nothing to get it back.

"That’s not possible.” She said, disbelieving, even though the young woman in front of her was no longer showing any signs of dishonesty.

“She’s telling you the truth.” Steve confirmed.

“I really didn’t believe it either, until I crashed their secret base a few weeks ago.” Stark said, backing up his boyfriend.
“I found out when Colonel Talbot sent me security footage of Phil and Maria beating up his team.” Pepper added. “But I didn’t actually believe what I saw until Tony confirmed it.”

“The man is currently the new head of Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division. Director Agent is supposed to be at Steve’s birthday party Friday.”

“So Fury lied?” She couldn’t dispute this many people. His doing something like that wouldn’t be out of character, especially if it was for the supposed greater good.

“No, Phil really died. He just didn’t stay that way.” Stark started to explain. “Have you ever heard of something called Project TAHITI?”

To be continued.
"Maybe you are the real Coulson that Stark says you are." Natasha remarked as he sat down in front of her at the small Virginia diner that they often frequented post mission, pre-New York.

Even after a two hour conversation with Bruce (because ironically enough, Bruce was the only one who could calm her down right now), where he shared every piece of DNA evidence that he had regarding the man in front of her, she was still skeptical. Justifiably considering she had to listen to Clint’s drunken description of Phil’s mutilated body one too many times post-incident. Despite everything she has seen and heard during her time as a SHIELD agent and even before in her previous ‘job’, she wasn't quite ready to believe somebody could come back from the dead. (If he really was back from the dead she would hope she would’ve found out about it before now and from someone other than Stark, like the man himself.)

Before arriving Natasha successfully convinced herself that she's going to be meeting with a Coulson clone that just happened to have a good portion of the man's memories. She wasn't sure if she was going to put Clint through this pain if the being in front of her is not the real Philip J. Coulson. Clint had moved on and was in a really good place right now. She wasn’t certain how he would handle “the one that got away” suddenly being not dead, especially since he blames himself for that death.

"You did actually get here without additional instructions." This supports her theory that this Coulson looking creature has some of his original memories, but not all. Stark said he would not remember anything related to his resurrection process. Natasha personally felt that was a little too convenient.

"You really have no idea how many times I’ve had to prove that I am not a Hydra agent wearing a nano mask. At least you haven’t pulled a gun on me, yet." That had been her original theory until she was given access to the files on a highly encrypted Stark pad currently on her person.

"I was thinking clone myself.” Natasha remarked taking a drink of water. That would explain the similar genetic markers. She had yet to allow herself to read beyond that point because she wants to hear from the man in front of her. A lot of it she could not even read until he gave her access anyway.

"If I really was a clone, I would hope that Nick would have fixed this." He reached over his left hand and she sees the scar from the knife she planted there the first time they met. She runs her fingers
across it, knowing that it's real.

"I can also show you the scars from where Loki stabbed me, but there small children around."

"Maybe later." Maybe never.

She’s not sure she is ready for absolute proof that this man really is Coulson. She’s not sure if she’s ready to make the decision on whether he should really speak to Clint.

Last time she made that type of call she believed that she was protecting Leopold Fitz from a father that would reject him, especially considering the circumstances of his conception. Last night’s dinner with father and son proved how wrong she had read that situation. What’s to say she won’t do it again?

"What is the story behind that scar?" Natasha asked instead.

"The real story or the version of the truth that we tell everyone?" The fact that he's aware that there are two versions of the story makes her more inclined to believe that this is the real Phil Coulson.

"The real story." Because the real story did not exist anywhere except in the minds of her, Clint, and Phil. Not even Fury or Hill knew everything. The report was falsified and therefore the truth never made it to the internet when she put the rest of SHIELD’s dirty little secrets out there. She's not sure if she would be walking around free if the truth, the complete truth, was out there.

"You were assigned to kill Laura and Cooper. Maybe your handlers thought that if you destroyed his family, you would destroy Clint. I’m not entirely sure, but I managed to convince you that murdering a one-year-old in cold blood was something that you did not want to do. You stabbed my hand with a knife first, but eventually you realize that I was right, and that no matter what they trained you to be, you couldn’t cross that line. Then I managed to talk you into working for SHIELD." That was what happened.

The official version of the story was her handlers sent to the takeout Clint. That was true, sort of. They wanted to her to destroy him to the point that he wouldn’t be a threat. Now she wonders if they wanted to make him so disillusioned with SHIELD that he would join the other side.

"You said I didn’t have to be a monster. That I could choose who I wanted to be and I could be the shield that protects humanity." The words burned in her mouth. The taint of discovering that she was working for the same side the entire time still hurt.

"That you could be the shield that protects the world or you could spend the rest of your natural life at the Fridge. You chose protecting people. It doesn't matter if the organization you thought you were working for turned out to be infiltrated by Hydra because what you do is more important than what the organization does. I always knew that you could do good and you have proven that repeatedly." With those words, she starts to believe that this truly is Phil Coulson because you can't teach a clone that type of optimism. It's just not possible.

At the same time, there was something missing from his story, a very important detail that just happens to support Stark’s version of the truth, that the TAHITI protocol was used to wipe out any knowledge of a TAHITI protocol and the ‘Lazarus Project’ was more than just some strange rumor told to freshman at the science academy.

"Nothing else?" She prompts. Phil shakes his head no.

"Do you remember actually giving me a third option?"
"Is there something else I should remember?" How about offering to wipe my memories so I would remember nothing about the red room whatsoever, including the genital mutilation and sterilization? Despite the reconstructive surgery, every time she plays with Lila the memory still haunts her.

"Stark and Steve mentioned that the doctors removed some of your memories. Anything related to how they brought you back. I thought you're missing memories were because Fury did not have a complete set of memories to give to your clone." She started to explain.

"What do you believe now?"

"That Fury successfully played God and brought you back and he really screwed with your memories." Natasha sighed. She had already lost her faith in too many people during the last few months; she wasn't ready to stop believing in Fury. Maybe he had a good reason for doing what he did and not telling anyone about it, but right now she had no idea what that was, unless he suspected something was wrong with SHIELD a lot earlier than he ever let on.

"What don't I remember?" He looked lost in that moment. It was the look in his eyes that finally convinced her, but she did not have time to respond because Lee, her favorite waitress, showed up at that moment to take their orders.

"What can I get for you two?" She said absently at first before looking up from her pad, only to drop it when she noticed who her other customer was. "Phil is that you? Clint told me that you died during the Battle of New York. You were a first responder."

Shit! She forgot Lee knew a little too much sometimes. Instead of going to Phil's funeral they came here because Clint just couldn't handle it and she couldn't leave him alone. His mind was an absolute mess between the mental rape by Loki and the murder of his ex-boyfriend by that same asshole. They toasted Phil's sacrifice with his favorite milkshake laced with vast quantities of alcohol and may or may not have had sex in the bathroom.

She really couldn't remember entirely because the milkshakes did have a very high alcohol content and they were all having a lot of comfort sex at that time. Clint's need for it was the initial reason why he ended up getting back with Laura. This was fine with her because all her relationships were open by her own design and Cooper and Lila like having their parents back together.

However, she does remember Lee pouring them into a cab and Clint going by two days later to explain the whole reason why they were completely wasted at the diner. Lee gave him free chocolate cake for a month.

"Tales of my death have been greatly exaggerated." Lee just gave Phil this strange look. "I did die for about 40 seconds and was in intensive care for quite a while."

"Unfortunately, most of us did not know that at the time. Let's just say there was a lot of miscommunication on the part of a former mutual acquaintance and leave it at that." Natasha added hoping that would be enough to keep Lee from asking anymore questions.

"How could that happen and why did you wait so long to let them know that you were okay?" She was thinking the exact same thing.

"Do you have any idea how heartbroken Clint was when he believed you died. The kids were worse. They cried all the time, those first few weeks. They really miss their Uncle Phil." Coulson dropped his gaze to the table at that point. Good. He needs to know how much this secret hurt people that he supposedly cared about.
"Because everything was so chaotic in New York at the time and the extent of my injuries, they sent me to Bethesda."

"That included memory loss.” Natasha added. That was partially true.

"Only my boss knew about it. When I woke up, I was convinced that it would be better to let people believe that I never made it out of New York. However, my new girlfriend convinced me otherwise.” Natasha wondered if there was actually a new girlfriend or if it was just another part of the cover story. It was so hard to get to the truth of the matter when you’re dealing with a fellow professional liar.

"Did this boss happen to be a crazy, manipulative former boyfriend?” Lee asked. Natasha vaguely remembered Clint helping Lee move away from a boyfriend that liked to leave bruises on her.

"Paranoid and manipulative, but still a friend. I am trying to forgive him. I understand why he did it because they weren't sure I was going to even survive for the first six months. It was really touch and go and I’m still dealing with some complications.” That’s why Bruce was let in on the secret before her. Not that he would tell her what those complications are. Just because he’s not an actual medical doctor doesn’t mean Bruce takes doctor-patient confidentiality any less seriously.

“Do you still have the blueberry French toast?” Phil said changing the subject.

"Of course. Actually we named it after you in honor of your supposed death. Just be glad I don't feel like printing new menus. I'll add the extra fresh blueberries the way you like it. And what can I get for you Tisha?” Phil gives her a strange look well aware that she doesn't like that nickname and only Lila was allowed to call her that because Natasha was too long for the small child. Yet another thing that confirmed he really was her Phil.

"We come here a lot.” Lila was going through a phase where she only wanted to eat the grilled cheese from here.

"I will just have my usual.” Natasha said after a moment, looking forward to her fresh raspberry pancakes.

"Evidently often enough that you now have a usual.” Phil remarked.

"Lately it's been every other day because Lila is going through a picky phase.” She may be keeping the kids out of the house so Clint and Laura could actually work on creating baby number three. She doesn't understand why they're trying to have a third child after recently discovering their employer was infiltrated by a major terrorist organization, but it's their choice.

"I'm sure they enjoy having their Aunt Tisha around so much.” Lee smiled at them brightly. Well, she smiled at her. She was glaring at Phil.

"They really do and I'm glad to be here. It's one of the few perks of being unemployed." She was enjoying being part of a normal family, even if she really doesn’t belong there. People like her don't get to enjoy families like this.

"It is always best to look on the bright side in these situations. Any prospects?"

“A few.” Natasha replied noncommittally. She wasn’t sure how much Lee actually knew about her ‘unemployment situation’, but this place is less than three hours away from DC. She was sure that the woman had seen her on C-SPAN a few times. The less she said the better.
“I’m trying to get her to work for my new company. She’s brilliant at everything she does.” She wondered how much of his praise was in an attempt to keep her from slapping him the moment there out of here. How could he have lied to her for two years?

“Except I’m not sure I could work with your financier without strangling him.” Especially because he started dating my friend before he technically broke up with my other friend, even if she’s fine with everything.

"Good point especially with" Phil abruptly stopped speaking when he noticed her angry expression. ‘I kept Stark's 26-year-old son from him for the last six years. I was also completely unable to keep said son's mother safe even though that was my responsibility. And now they’re busy trying to figure out how to tell him about what happened without letting him know that just like me, he was created to be nothing more than a tool.’ She thought bitterly.

"Could we get these orders to go?” Phil said instead of anything Natasha was thinking. “Although, please bring more coffee now.”

"Sure, no trouble. I'll get more coffee." Lee left, still glaring at Phil.

“That was a bad idea. The minute we are out that door I'm going to slap you.”

“And I will let you. I could say that I was just following orders, but just following orders is a stupid excuse and there really isn’t any reason good enough to explain why I waited so long.”

"Why didn't you tell us sooner? Steve said something about...." Just as she was about to mention him being kidnapped she was interrupted by some teenager making snide comments about the CEO of Quinn Worldwide a few booths away.

“It’s a long story and I'll tell you that later after I take care of something and we are no longer in public.” Phil said before getting up to walk over to the teenager who was speaking much too loudly. She followed behind him.

“Skye, you really need to work on your surveillance skills.”

"I told her that, sir." The man next to her said. She recognized him as Sharon’s cousin, Antoine, who, like her, was a former SHIELD specialist. These must be members of the new Shield.

“If this is the new team that you and Stark are putting together, I’m concerned.” She wasn’t even remotely joking.

"Skye is much better at tracking people with computers.” He remarked darkly. “What are you doing here?”

"Your girlfriend didn't want you coming here alone especially to meet somebody who broke Simmons arm yesterday. And when May asks you to do something, you don’t say no.” He’s with May. It may make some of this less awful for Clint.

“It was a sprain not a break.” Granted she may have pushed Simmons a little too hard into the ground.

"She is still in a sling and that was your fault…” The young agent in front of her said icily.

“You're not even speaking to Simmons and yet you are… I don't know what to do with you girl.” Antoine shook his head.
At that point, Natasha stopped paying attention to the conversation because her phone beeped. Not her regular cell, but the one that only Clint had access to. His text message simply read 22. That wasn’t good. Code 22 meant that she needed to get to the farmhouse now.

"I assume that since these two came to save you from me that they are better at combat than surveillance."

“Usually, yes.”

"Good, you're coming with me. I have weapons in the truck.” Natasha said before leaving a large sum of cash on the table for Lee.

This really wasn't how she wanted to tell Clint that his ex-boyfriend wasn't dead, but maybe if Phil helped save his family he wouldn't put an arrow in Phil’s ass without asking questions first. One could hope anyway.

Xxxxxx

Once again, Melinda may found herself waking up after being knocked out by what she could only assume was Fitz and Simmons’ special formula. However, this time it was to the smell of hay and the sight of Clint Barton standing over her tied up body. She figured it would come to this, but she was hoping that she would have time to prepare him for Phil’s arrival before he knocked her out. Instead, she didn’t even make it to the front porch.

"Knock out arrows? Stark gave you that?” May asked still groggy. Considering he shot her without asking any questions made her glad she decided to warn him first.

"Yes, although he said that somebody your size should be knocked out for 90 minutes, not 10 minutes. Back up should be here any minute.” She wondered who backup was - probably Natasha. That meant Phil would be with her because he would come ready to defend the kids. She had very little time to prepare him to see his very much alive ex-boyfriend. If Phil had just listened to her, they could have had this discussion over a nice lunch with Dr. Suarez there to prevent bloodshed.

"I’m not Hydra.” She told him.

"I didn't think my last partner was either until he tried to shoot me in the back. I'm not taking any chances especially because you haven't called in two years, if you really are, Melinda May.”

“I did call the house when SHIELD fell apart, but I spoke to Laura. I also sent the kids gifts for Christmas.” But she couldn’t speak with him because May knew the moment she did she would tell him the truth. Clint was the one person she felt the most uncomfortable with lying to. She was pretty sure he was the one person who took Phil’s death as hard as she did.

"Which is part of the reason why I went with the non-lethal arrows. Lila would never forgive me for killing the person who gave her the vintage princess tea set.” That was not what she sent. He was deliberately lying to see if she was who she said she was

"That was from Phil three years ago. Last year I got her a Hero’s of New York play set.” Clint relaxed the bow in his hands just a little. He's no longer ready to shoot her at any moment.

"So maybe you are the real Melinda May, but how do I know you’re not Hydra?

“The fact that I was walking up to your front door completely unarmed should tell you that I don’t intend to hurt you or the children. I came to warn…”
“You don’t need a weapon.” Clint cuts in abruptly. “You are a weapon.” May is almost tempted to sigh. Really, she doesn’t have time for this.

"I can understand your skepticism considering my ex turned out to be Hydra, but just call Steve. He can verify my allegiances.”

Not for the first time she wondered if she should’ve brought Steve with her, but he was currently figuring out how to help his boyfriend tell Fitz that the woman who raised him was murdered by Hydra. Also, she sure she would’ve gotten the same response if she had brought anyone who was unaware of this place with her.

"I always knew that a guy who would dump his wife a mere two hours after she had an emergency hysterectomy following a miscarriage had to be a special kind of evil. Your ex-husband being part of a terrorist organization goes along with that. Pierce was originally DOS, so it makes sense that he had others there.” Clint said bitterly.

"Not Phillips, at least as far as I know. I haven’t seen him since the papers were signed. I made the mistake of sleeping with a teammate, Grant Ward, who turned out to be Hydra. Although that mistake only counts as a relationship if you consider somebody that you only slept with because they were readily available a relationship. I’ve upgraded since then.” To your ex-boyfriend.

"Where we used to work that was a pretty normal occurrence which probably should’ve told us early on that something wasn't quite right.” Clint stops speaking as the sound of tires in the driveway becomes audible. She moves to see what’s going on, only to find another arrow in her shoulder. She loses consciousness before she even has time to react to the pain.

She wakes up a few minutes later to Natasha of all people treating her practically healed wound. She was also yelling at somebody on the phone about appropriate reaction to knock out arrows.

"A normal person about 90 minutes, but it will only last a fraction of that on Agent Scary. So I would do whatever you had to do very quickly, if I were you.” She heard Stark remarked.

“Do you know why?”

“Not yet. I haven’t had time to investigate. I’ve been too busy trying to figure out why Director Agent is not dead and how to keep him that way.”

"Where is Barton?” May asked out loud, to let them all know that she was conscious again.

"Yelling at your boyfriend.” She heard Starks say over the line. “Since she’s up, I need to get back to moving Steve's birthday party at the very last minute to somewhere else since you convinced Pepper that having it here was a bad idea, even though I've had lots of parties at my private residence before.”

“Yes, but this house is technically a secret military installation. Considering what happened to your son’s mother less than 72 hours ago, if you really care about Leo, you will make sure that no one will find him.” She replied and ended the call.

"You're going to be playing the child card a lot now.”

“I discovered that Tony Stark cares about something other than his suits or himself. Of course I'm going to use that." Natasha responded flippantly.

"So why exactly did you showing up to the farm cause Clint to issue a code 22. The rest of your team has yet to find anyone else here.” So Phil did figure out that she sent Skye and Trip to watch
over him.

"I walked up to the front door without calling in 26 months." She responded dryly.

"Because if you called, you would feel even worse about not telling him that Phil was alive." That guess was a little too close to the truth.

“If that was the case, it would’ve only been for the last 20 months. Fury waited six months to tell me. At that point, I was ordered not to tell anybody anything else and he put me in charge of keeping Phil safe. Keeping Phil’s resurrection need to know only was unfortunately part of that. I know you’re very familiar with following Fury’s orders. You’re the reason why Agent Fitz was kept from his father for the last six years.” Natasha glared at her.

“I didn’t agree with the order, but it was for Phil’s protection. A member of our team was almost killed for the sake of discovering the truth behind Phil’s revival. I wanted Clint to know the truth. I’ve been trying to get Phil to speak with him for the last few weeks. Actually, I avoided Clint because I knew the moment I saw or talked to him I would completely ignore Fury’s orders.”

"I wish you would have."

"So do I." She said as Natasha goes back to bandaging her. Xxxxxx Since the moment Phil received his orders to keep his continued existence of secret, he wondered what it would be like to let everyone know that he was still here, especially Clint. Sometimes he thought they would be happy and sometimes he thought they would be furious with him. Usually he imagined some combination of the two, but in some of these daydreams no one cared at all. Despite fears, he wanted this secret to no longer be one.

After his kidnapping and attempted murder of Skye happened, Phil realized just how dangerous knowing about his resurrection could be. He didn't want to be responsible for Cooper and Lila not having a father. He lost his own when he was nine and knew all too well what that was like. He didn't want those two to go through that. Phil was now well aware how far Hydra and others would go for the truth; Skye nearly dying was proof of that. This convinced him the people he loved were better off thinking he was gone.

But things changed. SHIELD fell and he started carving symbols into the wall, just like Garrett. May brought in Stark and Rogers and Stark brought in Banner to figure out the mystery of the writing along with Dr. Triplett. Even then, he’s still thought he could keep this secret from Clint and Natasha until he had the answers, keep them safe a little bit longer. Then Simmons got hurt yesterday because of his secret. She could've been killed and the blood would have been on his hands. It was time to come clean.

Although, now that he found May tied up and unconscious, he realized that he probably should’ve gone with Dr. Suarez’s suggestion of a group therapy session with no weapons present. The only reason why Clint had not shot him with one of his knockout arrows was due to Natasha’s multiple assertions that he was not a clone.

"You’re not dead." Clint said for the fourth time still reeling from the shock. “How are you not dead?”

“Your boss had a contingency plan to resurrect an Avenger and AC ended up being the guinea pig.” Skye answered as she made her way to May.

“That’s not how I wanted to explain what happened, but Fury was involved.” Phil sighs.
“Considering your girlfriend was unconscious and had been shot with an arrow twice, I thought it best to start with the actual truth instead of going with the dead for 40 seconds explanation.” Skye groused at him. He doesn’t even try to deny that he is with May. Although, he does wonder how she figured it out. They were being careful.

“Finally,” he hears Clint mumbled under breath.

"Seriously, what did you do to my SO?" Skye glares at Clint.

"Who are you?" Clint still bewildered with his weapon pointed at Skye.

“This is Agent Skye of Stark’s brand-new Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division. Phil is the new director." Natasha explained before he could.

"Skye is a codename right?" That's when Skye pulls out an ICER or at least he hopes that’s what it is.

"Skye stop pointing that at him and go help Agent Triplett secure the perimeter." Of course Skye doesn’t leave, but she does put down her weapon.

"Sorry, I thought my house was being attacked by Hydra and I knocked her out again so it would be easier to deal with the assault." Clint explained to Natasha, ignoring everyone else.

"I told her she should've brought one of us with her, but Hunter was her only option and you know she hates Hunter.” Skye explained and Phil can feel a headache coming on. He had explicitly told Melinda not to come with him to this meeting. He felt that this was something he needed to do on his own, but she was already waiting for him at Clint’s house.

"Would somebody please explain what is going on?" Clint’s demanded. "You are supposed to be dead. I saw your body. Hill and Fury had to drag me away from the morgue.” Maybe that’s the real reason why he was told not to tell Clint, despite him being a SHIELD agent. He wouldn’t believe the only clinically dead story. He knew better.

"Miracle drug made from alien DNA. It was used on me too, but I was only almost dead."

“Agent Skye,” he said waiting for her to look at him. “Go help Agent Triplett.” He ordered again and this time she actually listened to him.

"Nick did something questionable." Natasha said as she handed Clint a Stark pad. “Everything Stark and Banner have on what happened is in there or at least everything they’re willing to give out. It will decrypt once Phil agrees to give you access.”

"I can't deal with this." Clint tossed the Stark pad back at Natasha before fleeing from the barn. Phil followed him out the door only stopping to grab the Stark pad. Eventually, he caught up with Clint in his kitchen.

“This wasn’t how I wanted you to find out.” Phil finally said after a moment.

"Then how did you want to tell me?" The man asked angrily.

"I don't know. Originally I was told I couldn't tell you or anyone below a level seven that I was alive." Phil stammered.

"Lucky for you I was made a level seven after you died or at least I thought you died. It was part of the package to keep me from becoming a farmer full-time." His words are bitter.
"Fury never told me that."

"It doesn't matter now. Fury’s dead and there's no more SHIELD which means no more clearances. No, wait, you’re the one in charge of the replacement organization. So why am I hearing about this now?"

"I..." Because we were being chased down by Hydra for weeks. Because anybody who knows what happened to me will instantly become a target. Because I think I’m going crazy and May might have to kill me before I become a threat. Because I was too much of a coward to tell you. However none of that came out. He just stood there searching for the right words that wouldn’t come.

"It doesn't matter. We were together for two years. I introduced you to my children and... I mourned you. I thought it was my fault. If I hadn't let that fucking bastard get inside my head then... You need to leave." His words were pure ice.

"Can we just talk?" Phil pleaded.

"We could have talked two years ago, but not now. Just take your team and Natasha and leave.”

"It wasn't your fault. I knew what I was walking into when I went up against Loki by myself. It was my choice and I would do the same thing again even knowing the outcome. The only difference is I would've made sure that you knew the truth from the beginning, but at least you can know it now.”

Phil said as he unlocked the Stark pad. He placed it on the counter and left without another word.

XXXXXXX

"I assume that you're calling because it safe to come back." Laura said as she picked up his phone call.

When Ilsa Koenig showed up at his farm yesterday, he decided it was best to send Laura and the kids to her sister’s for a few days. When Fury’s special operatives appeared it usually meant something bad was about to happen and he was right. Just not the way he was expecting. There was no way he could have predicted this.

Phil and everyone else left the farm almost 3 hours ago, but he didn’t want his family to come back until he read everything on that stupid Stark pad and then promptly took an exploding arrow to it. What the hell was Fury thinking putting Phil through that? The notes about Phil begging to die made him throw up twice.

"Yes." He told her warily.

"What happened?" She knew him way too well. It’s what happens when you’re in somebody’s life for a decade and a half in various forms.

"May decided to come for a visit and I overreacted. I was a little worried by the fact she hadn't bothered to talk to me in two years.” Probably because she didn’t want to have to lie to me.

“Actually, she called the day everything fell apart or rather the night. She told us to go somewhere safe."

"Of course she did." Clint sighed as his wife of six months verified May’s version of events.

"Something else is going on though." He’s not surprised that she sees right through him. Considering they’re both communicating on Stark’s encrypted phones, he decided to tell her everything.
"My ex-boyfriend, who I believed I got killed during the Battle of New York, didn’t die after all and he showed up at my door this morning. Also, he’s now with the woman I wanted him to be with when we broke up. So that’s a good thing." He ended things with Phil because he knew May and Phil needed each other and then the asshole started dating Audrey instead because they were both stubborn idiots. At least one thing was better now.

“I’ll see if my sister can watch the kids for a few days. I will be there with the biggest bottle of brandy I can find in two hours." This is why he loves her.

"Tequila or vodka. This calls for something a lot stronger.” Much, much stronger.

To be continued.
Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. Your reviews keep me in the creative happy writing zone.

Sorry for the lag between updates. I did not want to start working on this chapter until I had a chance to see Ant-Man and unfortunately it took me three weeks to see it because things are that insane right now. Very sick family members and brand-new bosses are cutting into my creative time. I'm trying to get as much writing done on the weekends as possible, but other things keep on getting in the way like laundry and other grown-up responsibilities.

When I finally did start writing, the last section of this chapter started giving me problems. After completely rewriting it twice, I decided to move it to the next chapter so I’d have more time to perfect it. The good news is that since that chapter is mostly done an update will be posted sooner next time.

MCU Continuity notes:
1. Skye/Daisy will continue to go by the name Skye No Last Name in this story until the time is right for her to go by another name. She may never go by the name Daisy Johnson in this story. (Because Daisy is the real name of my late grandmother, I probably will be using the first name eventually for her sake.) Skye could end up with a completely different last name. If she happens to get married at some point in the series she may choose to go by her spouse’s last name. There’s actually another character in the story that will be dealing with a name issue as you will see in this chapter.

2. Ant-Man spoilers: The flashback sequences happened in this universe with slight alterations. In my continuity, Hydra already forced Peggy out of SHIELD in 1987 so unfortunately she wasn’t around in 1989 for a certain confrontation. However, Howard Stark was present and was really happy that Hank punched that asshole out for reasons that will come out in this story.

3. Voice recognition software is evil and it screws up most names. (It likes to put hot guy instead of Hawkeye a lot.) The names of Clint’s family in canon are Laura, Cooper, and Lila. However, the software may put anything similar and we may not pick it out.

4. I cannot remember if I gave May’s ex-husband and the story a first name. I did a little digging, but I couldn’t find anything. Therefore, I decided to make it the same first name as her canon ex-husband, solely for the joke possibilities.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hi, it's Phil again. I know you're furious with me for not telling you about being not dead.”

'No shit.' Clint thought to himself as Phil's voicemail played. Laura was forcing him to listen because apparently she was that type of wife.
"You have every right to be angry. Pepper actually slapped me this morning." He always liked Pepper.

“But there's other stuff going on that we need to talk about and…” Thankfully, Laura had the good sense to press the stop button there.

"Don't even think about shooting the phone." Laura glared at him.

"I wasn't thinking about it. I would just turn off my hearing aid if it became too much. You're the one forcing me to listen to all the messages anyway," he complained.

"You have your bow in your hand."

"Maybe I was thinking about shooting him." He quipped. This resulted in Laura calling him a moron in ASL probably in case he did deactivate his hearing aids.

"I think that would require you to actually answer one of his phone calls. That was his twelfth message on every single line that he knows about. He actually called the landline."

“Which is just stupid if you are still being chased by the NSA and God knows who else.” Clint replied angrily.

“I thought you said that the landline was untraceable?”

“He said it was.” They both knew that ‘he’ was Nick Fury. But unlike Laura, Clint knew that Fury was still alive. If he ran into the man anytime soon, he would put an arrow in his ass.

“I really don’t trust him right now. He said we worked for the good guys and well, we now know that wasn’t true. Then he decided to...Bring Coulson back from the dead by doing things that made him beg for death.

“Do highly morally questionable things too classified for you to ever tell me about.” Laura supplied
"Be thankful I can't tell you. You really don't want to know." He sighed.

"You need to talk to Phil."

“A normal wife would never encourage her husband to have a deep, meaningful conversation with his ex-boyfriend.”

“I’m not normal.” Laura shrugged.

“That’s a good thing. He waited two years. He can now wait a couple of weeks for me to work things out." Yes, he was acting like Lila right now, but whatever.

“Tantrums have no place in your line of work. Technically, he's the boss of the organization you now work for and he probably has a mission for you. You cannot avoid him forever.” He gives her a very strange look. How did she even know that?

“It was in one of his many voicemails to you.” Laura said answering his unasked question.

"The organization I worked for no longer exists. Actually, I don't think it really ever did in the first place. Phil is the head of Stark’s new secret organization. That’s completely different." He crossed his hands over his chest.

"That you are probably already working for since you are an Avenger. And even though SHIELD completely blew apart, you're still going to be an Avenger. You would be miserable if you weren't helping people." She said this sounding supportive which was a change from six years ago when they pretty much fell apart because he kept putting the mission first. But they were older now and Laura got why he needed to keep doing what he was doing.

Clint was dragged out of his thoughts by the voice of Stark filling the room. Apparently, Laura decided it was a good idea to play more of the voicemails he didn't want to actually listen to. Maybe he should shut off his hearing aid. Although knowing Laura, she would probably just translate everything into ASL.
“I know that you read the secret Stark pad that Natasha gave you because you blew it up.” It was just creepy that he knew that.

“JARVIS uploaded footage just before the arrow made impact. I’m glad to know that the exploding arrows work just fine.” Clint made a mental note to get every piece of Stark tech out of the house. He wouldn’t be surprised at all if the billionaire was spying on all of them.

“You don’t have to come to Steve’s birthday party tonight, but we’re having an Avengers meeting tomorrow that I think you should be there for. Some things have come out recently that we need to take care of.” The message ended there, which left Clint wondering what was uncovered that required an Avenger level response. Although without a full-fledged SHIELD the threshold was probably lower than alien invasion, but he was still worried.

“We both know you’re going,” Laura said smugly. “There’s no way you’re skipping it even if you’re not on speaking terms with several of the people who are going to be there. It’s who you are.”

“You knew that coming into this relationship.”

“The second time anyway. Time takes away foolishness and you learn to accept people for who they are not who you try to make them. I know that you’re never going to tell me everything and there are some things I just shouldn’t know. I accept that you’re going to have a relationship with Natasha that I’m never going to fully understand.”

“Honestly, I think you understand my relationship with Natasha better than I do most days. I never expected you to be okay with the physical component continuing or being an active participant for that matter.” He was still trying to figure that one out.

“I had a girlfriend for a couple of months after we broke up.” Laura shrugged nonchalantly before continuing. “I also assume that you’re always going to want to be an Avenger. Saving people is just part of who you are. I also expect that you’re going to have a very complicated relationship with your ex-boyfriend.”

“Who we really thought was dead at the time we said our vows.”

“Does that change things?” She asked looking directly at him. After spending half the night drinking with him as he lamented over Phil, of course she's going to think that.
"I broke up with him because he was in love with May and I was tired of May dating complete assholes. I still want to shoot her ex-husband and the shrink fiancé that called everything off at the altar, which led to her falling for the soon to be ambassador.” He found out yesterday that somebody decided to put the man’s name forward to be the US ambassador to war-torn Sokovia. He was betting Hydra involvement.

“Also, did I tell you her last boyfriend pre-Phil turned out to be Hydra.”

"Sometime around shot number seven last night. How can you not have a hangover right now?"

"I'm a professional." He joked before continuing. “I don't regret fixing things between us. But, I'm not sure we would be where we are now if Phil Coulson didn't die. Losing him made me realize that I didn't want to lose anyone else and that we needed to fix things between us, one way or the other.” Everything that happened in New York made him want to make a lot of changes in his life.

"And now he's not dead which means you get a second chance to fix whatever’s going on between both of you." Laura said wisely.

"I'm not leaving you and the kids for Phil." Clint told her emphatically. The thought did not even cross his mind, not once.

"But you may have the occasional sleepover with him and May. Which is fine if there’s video.” Laura told him in complete seriousness. His mouth actually opened in shock.

"You can't tell me that you did not consider this as an option. Natasha has her own drawer in our bedroom."

"Natasha is different because she doesn't do ‘romantic entanglements’. Also, she currently has a crush on Bruce. Yes, I realize those statements are contradictory, but Natasha doesn't realize that yet. She still believes love is for children."

"Does he even realize that she's interested?” Laura asked very concerned.

"I have no idea. Probably not. Bruce didn’t even see what was going on between Steve and Tony. Considering that Tony is Bruce’s best friend, it was quite a feat.”
"Does Natasha realize that she's only interested in Bruce because it's easier for her to become emotionally invested in someone who is completely unattainable or emotionally unavailable?"

“This is what I get for marrying a school guidance counselor.” He grumbles to himself. "Emotions make her uncomfortable. It’s a side effect of being raised to pretend you don’t have them. I doubt that Natasha is that self-aware."

"Which is why she showed up at our house yesterday with your not dead ex-boyfriend."

"I don't have any idea whatsoever why she did that. That wasn't like her unless...” There was a mission related reason why he was being made aware of Phil’s resurrection now. Clint read enough on those files to know that a lot of people want to discover the secret of how Phil came back, most of them Hydra. Even in his anger he's willing to concede that this was a dangerous secret to know. It is only logical to conclude that he's finding out about this now for a reason, but what is that reason? The possible answers worried him.

His thoughts were interrupted by his phone ringing. His burn phone that is. Only Natasha had that number. This made him even more concerned.

"Are you going to pick that up?"

"Not really." But he pulls the phone out of his pocket anyway. Before he could actually answer the thing, it stopped ringing only for the phone that Tony gave him to start.

"This is ridiculous." Laura threw up her hands in frustration before taking his cell phone away from him before he even had time to stop her.

"Hi Natasha. I'm sorry your best friend is being a complete moron. I'm working on it, but you know how stubborn he is."

"I am well aware of that even though I'm not Natasha but you're not Clint, so I guess were even.” As soon as he realized that it was Stark on the other side of the line he grabbed the phone from Laura. Really she should know better than to answer his work phone, (even when he’s being stupid).
"Why did you call?" He barked into the phone, annoyed.

"Hello to you too, Katniss. Who was that wonderful woman who picked up? Do you actually have a girlfriend? That probably made yesterday even more awkward." Actually, my wife is more OK with my ex-boyfriend being back from the dead than I am.

"Yes, I have a new girlfriend and I would like to get back to what I was doing before you interrupted." No, he did not want to continue talking to his wife about his really complicated relationship with his ex-boyfriend or is slightly less complicated, but more unique relationship with his best friend (that he has sex with some times when she feels like it.)

"You can bring her to Steve's birthday party tonight. What size does she wear so I can have a dress ready? We're going to be on the yacht in the Potomac because your BFF made me change venues last minute and that was our only option even with my money." Now he’s really worried. Why would Natasha have Stark do that?

"Thanks for the offer, but I really don't want to spend time with somebody who waited weeks to tell me about Phil." But I may come to DC tomorrow to figure out what the hell is going on.

“First, Natasha is not going to be there. She’s doing something for Director Agent. Also, as much as I hate to defend Natasha right now, she only knew for a day because the rest of us who only found out a few weeks earlier decided that it would be Phil's job to tell everyone. It's not like Natasha kept this secret from you for six years.” That was an awfully specific time frame.

"Tony!" He heard Steve chide in the background.

"She kept the existence of Leo from me for six years. Yes, she apologized about it halfheartedly this morning, but..."

"Who is Leo?" Laura asked the question before he could because she was still listening to this crazy phone call.

"He’s my 26-year-old son, who I didn’t know existed until six weeks ago. Your friend kept him a secret from me for the last six years. It doesn't matter because..."

"Don't say anything else." Because he knew her so well, he just knew Natasha had to have a very
good reason to keep the existence of Stark’s child a secret, even from Stark, for six years. Whatever that reason was it meant that this was not a conversation that should be occurring over a phone line.

"This line is not secure enough for this conversation." Dammit, this meant he was going to have to go to DC tonight and deal with everyone because he really does want to know about the 26-year-old son.

"JARVIS secured it."

"And I don't trust your AI right now. Where will the boat be leaving from?"

"Old town because Steve absolutely adores the Torpedo Factory and we're going through the gallery first so Steve can do something he actually likes on his birthday."

"Why does Steve want to tour a Torpedo Factory?" Clint asked confused which has been his baseline for most of this conversation.

"Since it's now an art gallery. Meet us at the house first for drinks or rather, you can do drinks and I will do appetizers since I'm not allowed to drink anymore. Bring the girlfriend. JARVIS will email directions." The line was dead before Clint could even respond.

"I assume I'm coming with you?" Laura asked.

"You don't have to." I prefer that you don't. It's easier to keep this family life a secret if they don't meet you.

"I owe Phil Coulson a slap in the face." Laura was dead serious.

"As long as I get to watch." He shrugged. It was difficult to argue with Laura at all when she got like this.

They were ready to leave half an hour later after Clint decided to take Stark up on his offer to choose a dress for Laura. It would probably cost more than his SUV. He was an expert at packing and it really didn’t take that long to get a bag together. Of course, when he placed the luggage into the SUV he found Howard Stark’s 1986 and 1990 diaries in his trunk. Apparently, even when in hiding Fury like to play games.
Why the hell was this in his trunk?

Xxxxx

“I would still like you to be at my birthday party regardless of what Tony said to you.” Steve told her as he handed her the blonde wig from Starks’ extensive espionage collection. At least, she hopes that’s the purpose of the room filled with costumes in the secret base part of the Arlington house. She doesn’t want to consider the other possibility.

“Me not being there has nothing to do with your boyfriend being mad at me. Coulson secret files have nothing except that Marcy Carter-Jones participated in the investigation of her younger sisters kidnapping, even though she shouldn’t have, by using her biological father’s last name. She must know things that didn’t make it into the files like the name of the SHIELD agent in charge. Stephanie Carter-Jones kidnapping and subsequent insemination are the only connection we have to what happen with Stark's kid and possibly his mother's murder. I need to look into it.”

She received an entire briefing regarding the connection between the two incidents that morning with Director Coulson (and she will keep referring to him as Director Coulson until she’s no longer furious with him). Basically both young men were engineered in a similar fashion, most likely by Hydra for reasons completely unknown.

It was just fortuitous that Sharon needed a +1 for a family barbecue where the high-level CIA operative would be. It was even more fortuitous that woman’s niece and nephew already wanted to question her about what happened.

During the briefing, it came out Agent Triplett wanted to know more about the auspicious circumstances that brought him into the world, even though he was ignorant to exactly how auspicious those circumstances were. Natasha wanted to know what Marcy Carter-Jones kept out of the official record to protect her sister. Was she already suspicious of dirty agents in the organization nearly a quarter century ago? Did she suspect that her own nephew was another attempt at creating the perfect soldier?

That’s what Natasha believes this entire thing to be, which makes her extremely uncomfortable. Mitchell had a choice in all of this even if she switch sides in the end to protect a son that she fell in love with. She knowingly seduced a 14-year-old boy so they could get his genetic material to build their future army of weapons experts. Natasha was actually terrified that there could be an entire school filled with Stark children, just like where she came from, cultivated to be nothing but depraved killing machines.
She could see Hydra doing this. Actually, a part of her wonders if they controlled the Red Room when she was there.

Stephanie Carter-Jones was forcibly impregnated against her will. As somebody who had her reproductive choices taken away from her without her true consent, she disliked this immensely.

“You don’t have to do this tonight.”

“Yes, I do. We already have one dead body on our hands. I’m sure you see keeping your boyfriend’s son safe as our key priority.” She told him and started to unzip her top so she could put on the sundress she chose for the mission which included a secret panel to hide a weapon.

“You’re right.” Steve told her as he turned around to give her some privacy to change.

“Besides your new best friend, Agent May, will be there and today’s not even your real birthday.” A few weeks ago, Steve told her that Zola only knew about the birth date he put on his enlistment papers. The same thing happened with her. The computer only knew the birth date that was in her official SHIELD file that happened to be off by a few years on purpose. No one alive knew her true birthdate, not even her.

"Does Stark even know that?"

"He was already excitedly making plans and I didn’t have the heart to tell him that my birthday is really the eighth and I just lied on my enlistment papers. At least this way I can have the celebration I want to have with him later."

"Please never tell me the details of that." Natasha mumbled under her breath, but he still heard her.

"You’re the one who wanted me to date."

"Sharon or if you prefer her cousin, Agent Triplett seem like a nice guy. You served with his grandfather."

"I had sex with his grandfather and thought that I was in love with his grandmother." There was still
"And now?"

“I’m in love with Tony despite his imperfections. I love him even when I need to lock him out of his lab because he’s too wrapped up in a project. I love him when he wakes up screaming in the night and can only fall asleep again with me wrapped around him. Nothing’s going to change that.” She didn’t think it was that serious, but they were living together, so she should’ve known better. “What I feel for Tony has nothing to do with who I knew in the war. It’s all about Tony.”

"And if it all falls apart?" And it will because real love doesn't exist in this world and everything falls apart eventually.

"We will all be professionals like this morning. Besides not everything falls apart." Steve almost sounded defensive.

"Your boyfriend stuck his tongue out at me. That was anything but professional." She pulled the dress over her head.

"Tony works through his anger in unusual ways, especially when he is not allowed to drink." That last part was mumbled so low that she only heard it due to her special training. Besides, I was speaking about you and Director Coulson."

"The mission comes first." She told him before changing the subject. "You can turn around now. Do I look like Sharon’s preppy med school girlfriend?"

"Why are you going as her girlfriend?" Steve asked confused.

“Taylor Carter-Jones’ wife is a homophobic bitch who always makes nasty comments about Agent Triplett and his mother. She was single handedly responsible for your Peggy ending up in a home. This is their revenge." It will probably provide a big enough distraction to allow her or Agent Triplett to get Marcy Carter John's alone. Preferably her because, due to his mother’s insistence, Agent Triplett is unaware of being genetically modified.

"Nice to know that your uncomfortableness with Tony has nothing to do with the fact he’s my boyfriend." Did he really think that? Natasha had to remind herself that he was from a time when
"My uncomfortableness with Tony is solely related to Tony. Let’s say that I believe that open relationship thing. There’s still the fact that you’re sleeping with a coworker. This is not a good thing. If things go badly the two of you will be at each other’s throats. We can’t afford to be at each other’s throats with Hydra around right now." Natasha reluctantly admitted the truth.

"I know that but apparently you can work with an ex. So why can’t I? Actually, I already am. May was at the briefing this morning.” She glared at him.

“Yes, I know that you were sleeping with Burton before he apparently got a new girlfriend. No, May did not tell me. Obviously, it’s possible to compartmentalize. We can do the same thing if the worst happens, but I doubt it will." Because you're too in love right now to see logic.

"How do know about Laura?" She asked cautiously.

"I didn’t know her name. Some woman answered Clint’s phone assuming that it was you calling." That call probably took place after her last attempt to get Clint to come with her to the Carter-Jones barbecue. She was sure that Agent Triplett’s family would find Clint more believable as his boyfriend then Agent Skye as his girlfriend. He never did pick up her phone call and the burn phone doesn’t have voicemail.

"Of course, Laura did." Natasha sighed.

"And Tony put two and two together. Tony invited her to come to the party."

"Of course he did." Natasha mumbled to herself before making excuses to leave. Actually, she suggested that Steve go check on Stark. The scientist was upstairs running tests on Director Coulson with Bruce.

When Steve took the bait, she left to check on her team. She never worked with Agent Triplett directly before, but she heard a lot of good things about him from his cousin. She knew he was a competent agent, but she was worried about Agent Skye. Yes, she was May’s protégé, but Agent Skye only received her badge two days before she and Steve raided the Lemurian Star.

Agent Skye was also upset with her for hurting Dr. Simmons accidentally. However, she was willing
to work with Natasha because ‘at least you didn’t sell us out to Hydra like my former SO’. Natasha was willing to work with Agent Skye because their other option was former mercenary Lance Hunter (because Clint will not answer her phone calls). Even Coulson didn’t trust the guy enough yet to read him into the situation. Also Sharon specifically said not to bring Agent May.

She finds both in the gigantic suite that Stark made for his son that probably housed 20 bunk beds before his renovations. He knew the two were there to cheer up their friend preventively because Stark was going to tell him about his mother’s death tomorrow.

It surprised her to find the two posing for pictures with Agent Fitz with Agent McKenzie taking said pictures. Dr. Simmons was also there arguing with Trista. This doesn’t surprise her at all because they were arguing at breakfast this morning as well. This time they were arguing about last names.

“Just because Dr. Stark is his biological father does not mean that Leo should change his last name.” The young doctor argued emphatically.

“Fitz can have any name he wants.” Natasha could easily tell that these two did not like each other.

“Maybe you two should stop talking about this issue as if Fitz is not in the room. It’s his call, not yours.” Agent McKenzie told both women, causing everybody in the room to turn around, therefore seeing her standing in the door.

"You’re supposed to be getting ready for the mission." She said looking at her subordinates dubiously.

"We are.” Skye replied annoyed. “In addition to having my entire employment history at Stark Industries memorized, I know everything possible about his Aunt Marcy from her time at the SHIELD Science Academy to her Backstreet Boys fetish to her extreme hatred for her former boss Mitchell Carson.” Note to self: have JARVIS dig through the SHIELD files for any information regarding Mitchell Carson.

“I’ve even been briefed by Trista and Mack who have spent way too much time with Trip’s family about personal habits and food preferences. They don’t believe any of his aunts will believe that he has a girlfriend except for the homophobic aunt but they underestimate my creativity. I have a plan.” Agent Triplett actually winces at her words.

“Does this plan involve taking vast quantities of pictures with Mr. Fitz?” Natasha asked with one
“Fitz is going to be our mutual pretend boyfriend. Since Trista will not let us bring him to the barbecue we need lots of pictures to pull this off.” Of course, Trista doesn’t want him to leave this highly secured base because Hydra murdered his mother days ago and he has no idea what danger he’s really in.

"You’re encouraging this?" Natasha looked directly at the two former senior agents in the room. Really they should know better. If one picture of Fitz ends up on Twitter, she will hurt them all.

"Only because I said I would not go with them. Mrs. Carter-Jones reminds me too much of my own mother for my personal comfort." McKenzie shrugged.

"Also, it would give my mom too much hope. She is still mad about the breakup. You’re her favorite, mostly because you told her exactly where I would be and forced us to speak to one another when we weren’t ready.” Apparently there was some history there.

"I’m not sorry because obviously it was necessary."

"This was actually my idea after I shut down their proposal to bring Fitz along because you’re not ready to deal with those crazies.” Trista interrupted before the previous conversation became too personal.

“Trip’s baby cousins are hedonistic monsters and they will knock you over without even thinking. I don’t even want to deal with them even though I was invited. If I was actually going, Skye could pretend to be my girlfriend, but I just can’t deal with Trip’s aunt. I’m sorry, I just can’t. The main reason I took this job is so I would never have to speak with her again.”

“That’s understandable.” Triplett shrugged before Trista walked over to her.

“Besides, they’re having fun. This is good for him. Fitz feels like part of the team again and the bitch deserves an aneurysm.” Trista whisper the last part in perfect Russian as she handed Natasha a Stark pad containing lots of images of the engineer actually smiling, wearing different outfits. The images were inserted into various backgrounds making them look very real.

She wondered if the AI himself suggested this so Stark could have more pictures of his kid. That wouldn’t surprise her. Considering how much time he spends around Fitz, it’s entirely possible. Actually she’s surprise the billionaire is not down here, but his tests on the director probably take
At this point she gave up and decided to order JARVIS to make sure no images of Fitz or Triplett find their way onto the Internet.

“I told both of them it was a ridiculous idea. Nobody’s going to believe it.” ‘Probably because you don’t like the idea of anybody else touching your best friend’. Natasha thought to herself.

“You don’t think I can be with… You don’t.” Fitz stuttered as he pointed to Agent Triplett. Natasha easily figured out with the man was saying.

"I’m not saying that. You’re a very good-looking… Not that I… We’re friends. Just friends.” Fitz’s frown deepened and everyone else looked like they wanted to get out of the room immediately.

"Friends can notice that sort of thing. I’m just… Do you want to end up like Dr. Stark and Ms. Potts?” Natasha personally believes this is a bad example to use. Pepper actually seems to be more okay with Steve and Stark then she was with Clint and Laura, and she was his maid of honor/best person.

“They tried.”

“And they failed miserably and now they can barely be in the same room with each other.” She doesn’t look at Stark’s kid.

“Same now--with us.” Stark’s son mumbled under his breath. Apparently he gets his self-awareness from his mother. Natasha was sure she was the only one who heard that.

“I don’t count the three having breakfast together this morning as failing miserably. Actually, I think they’re planning on having a three...” Fitz glares at Skye. “I realize I’m not allowed to talk about your dad in that way anymore and now I really feel horrible writing all those NC-17 RPF fics about him before, especially the one that you betaed.” Note to self, have JARVIS find these stories.

“If you weren’t my boss’s son, I would date you, even though Stark seems like the type of dad that would pull a weapon on your dates regardless of the fact that you’re 26.” McKenzie’s words made Fitz smile and Simmons dropped her Stark pad.
It was at that moment that JARVIS told Dr. Simmons that Bruce and Stark needed her assistance. Natasha doubted that was true at all, but she used the occasion to get them moving, but not before Agent Skye promised to bring her friend cake and to do a sleepover when they returned.

It took too long in her opinion to choose a car. Skye wanted to take one of Stark’s Porsches, but Natasha insisted that they borrow Dr. Simmons hybrid. It was the least conspicuous. With a cheese tray and a bottle of wine in the back, they were finally on their way to the Carter-Jones’ Fourth of July barbecue. Thankfully, it was happening just up the street at some condo community room on 4 Mile Run; it was a very short trip.

“Your family is going to hate me.” Skye said as they approached the neighborhood where this thing was taking place. “There never going to believe I’m your girlfriend, even if it is part of a polyamorous relationship. They wouldn’t believe that I was your girlfriend, even if you were 100% straight. You can do a lot better than some formally homeless hacker who unknowingly had ties to two terrorist groups.”

“Breathing would be really good right now.” Natasha sees Triplett reach his arm back to squeeze Agent Skye’s hand. “You have nothing to worry about. My mom likes you and she normally arranges for Marcy to do background checks on most of my boyfriends, complete with a DNA analysis if she can pull it off. I'm pretty sure Mack was the only one who completely passed.”

Natasha was certain that Agent Triplet was being completely serious. It makes sense to do something like this if your child could be the target of certain terrorist groups.

“If you have my mom’s approval, everyone else will like you.”

“Your mom won’t be there to sway their opinions. Do I even want to know why Stephanie does background checks on all your perspective boyfriends?” Skye asked.

“I have no idea. Besides, I thought the whole point of you coming here as my girlfriend was for you to get my evil aunt, to hate you.” Natasha tuned out their conversation at this point to concentrate on finding a parking space in the overcrowded lot. Thankfully, she found one after only two attempts.

“Good, Aunt Marcy didn’t take an out of country mission just to get out of this.” Agent Triplett said from beside her. Natasha already knew she would be here because Sharon was picking her up personally.
“And it looks like she brought a date.” Agent Skye pointed to the man in question. “I thought you said that she was single?

“Marcy doesn’t believe in love, especially after she caught her now former fiancé screwing his teenage intern the week before the wedding. It almost makes me feel better about the Robin fiasco.” It was at that moment Natasha realized that the man with her was Andrew J. Phillips, Melinda May’s ex-husband. Now she knows why she was ordered not to bring May. Clint is going to be so mad he ignored her call earlier.

To be continued

Chapter End Notes

I finally created a Twitter account under my pen name because I needed a Twitter account (because @level7accesspod has the best AOS giveaways), but I did not want to get it under my real name. I have issues with social media. Anyway, you can find me @Miscar2015.
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. Your reviews keep me in the happy writing zone. Also, the first promos for AOS: Season Three along with the Mockingbird one-shot really contributed to the creative juices. The latter in particular gave me some ideas for this story.

This chapter was written well before the season premiere, but you’d be surprised how long the postproduction on one of my chapters takes. Voice recognition software creates lots of fun typos. The process was made even slower than normal because my mom, who’s in her 70s, fell at home and had to have surgery last week. She is currently in a rehab center, but hopefully she’ll be able to go home soon. No matter how much I love writing and getting your feedback, I have other priorities right now.

I may use some of Season Three storyline for inspiration (I loved the season premiere), but we are in a different multi-verse now. Think of this as Earth – 199998.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Trip desperately wanted to back out of going to his Uncle Taylor’s very dysfunctional Fourth of July barbecue primarily because he wasn’t sure he could get through it without getting arrested. He definitely doesn’t want to put Jen from legal through that right now. He can deal with Sharon being mad at him, but what he can’t deal with is Uncle Taylor’s part of the family. He rather spend quality time in Vault D with Ward.

Unfortunately, Director Coulson made his attendance mandatory. Black Widow needed to pass some information to his aunt or vice versa. The Director wasn’t clear on the objectives of the mission, only the fact that neither Trip nor Skye could make the drop. Their main purpose was to distract the family so the exchange could take place and provide back up in the unlikely event that the Avenger would need it.

Skye being introduced as the girlfriend he shares with his recently hospitalized boyfriend has adequately distracted the whole family. Uncle Taylor’s wife was so scandalized that she has not had time to interrogate Sharon’s surprise girlfriend ‘Nina Richards’. (The rest of the family except for Uncle Tyler believed that he was playing a very elaborate prank and were enjoying the show.)

She was so busy condemning everything about his life, she did not go anywhere near ‘Nina’. Trip considered this a huge stroke of luck because the woman loved C-SPAN and was probably the one most likely to recognize ‘Nina’ from her recent congressional appearances.
Nor did she grill Marcy about her equally surprising date. Andrew Phillips was working with Aunt Marcy at the State Department. Trip doubted the man knew it was a cover since he apparently hated the intelligence community in general and specifically his ex-wife, who just happened to be former SHIELD. Trip wondered what Phillips would do if he discovered his current girlfriend was not only CIA, but the daughter of the woman who started the organization that he hated so much. His aunt had worse taste in men than he did.

Somewhere around snide comment number 12 about his ex-wife, ‘Nina’ ‘accidentally’ pushed Phillips in the pool. No one but Phillips bought her apology for being clumsy, especially Trip. He wasn’t sure if Natasha did it because she knew his ex-wife and did not enjoy his bitter comments or so she could get Marcy alone. Either way it worked because the evil aunt took Phillips to their condo to put on something dry. Personally, he hoped neither came back.

He wanted to tell Marcy that she’s dating an asshole, but he doesn’t because Natasha was now monopolizing his aunt’s attention and the mission needed to come first. It also meant he wouldn’t get a chance to ask her about her investigation of his mother’s kidnapping. (Or why she allowed their siblings to treat his mom like crap for so long.)

Instead he was jointly interrogated by Aunts Jamie and Desiree. Sometimes he’s convinced that Desiree is actually a military interrogator, but he has no proof.

"So when did you guys meet?" Desiree asked, with beer in hand. She’s not drinking. She’s using it as a prop to put people at ease.

"About three months ago at work." Skye answer nonchalantly nursing her beer. He already warned her that she needed to stay as sober as possible for this operation. Only in his family can a barbecue become an operation. This is what happens when Peggy Carter is your matriarch.

“Did you work at the agency?” Jamie asked nonchalantly. Agency was the family code for SHIELD. And really, nobody wanted to talk about the agency right now, except for Marcy’s idiotic date.

“No.” Skye answered using the agreed-upon lie. His family knew that he worked for the agency, but they didn’t need to know about Skye’s involvement.

“Thankfully, Trip was already working at Stark Industries before everything blew up."
Trip only wished that was true. Aunt Jamie already knew what those few weeks were like post SHIELD implosion, but Aunt Desiree did not. Trip saw no point in worrying her with the truth and Jamie went along with his lie.

"I already realize that something wasn’t quite right and I asked Jonathan to put in a good word for me. I ended up taking a position as a beta tester for the defense/law enforcement division about a month before things fell apart." He lied with ease and only Aunt Jamie gave him a sad smile.

“Stark doesn’t make weapons anymore.” Aunt Desiree pointed out thoughtfully or maybe she was trying to catch him in a lie.

“But they make excellent body armor and tablets that can take a bomb blast.” His Aunt Jamie added before he could.

“We are also working on small robotics for search and rescue. Our boyfriend Fitz is the chief engineer on that project. I write the code that makes his creations come to life because our fearless leader is now too busy saving the world to do it himself.” There was some truth in that. Stark wants Skye to help him look at some abandoned SHIELD defense project involving artificial intelligence and world security. Skye is also working on a program to make the crazy little droids more self-sufficient.

“Antoine was brought in to test our designs. It was love at first sight and I believe in taking a third option.” It was at that moment his evil aunt rejoined them and promptly fell right over the ice chest because she was too scandalized to pay attention. Sharon snapped a picture.

“The prototype has a ridiculous name, but it really gets the job done.” Trip added.

“He has a Snow White fetish.” Skye shrugged. “Tony, Fitz’s dad, said that they should be ready for mass market next year,” Both Aunt Jamie and Desiree were looking at Skye strangely. Actually, Aunt Marcy was now abandoning Natasha to come over. That’s when he realized that Skye screwed up. They weren’t supposed to tell anybody about the familial relationship between Tony and Fitz. Shit!

“So is there another Tony at Stark Industries that makes major decisions? Marcy asked with drink in hand that he knew was doctored apple juice.
“Or did our baby Anthony knock up some poor girl years ago and never told us?” Desiree asked as Aunt Marcy started to choke on her fake cocktail. Fuck!

“The tabloids would love that, but it’s nothing that sordid.” Yes, it is and there are dead bodies involved. “His dad is Antonio Fitz, the new chief of R&D. I don’t even think a press release has gone out about it yet.” Skye lied effortlessly and Trip hoped they believed her. “Fitz and his dad are both brilliant, scarily so. Always coming up with great ideas.”

“You mentioned the accident earlier. Hypoxia…” Desiree started, but Skye silenced her with the glare.

“Even with the brain damage, Fitz is still brilliant. He’s just different now. So what if he has trouble saying my name, he’s still my Fitz. How could a few minutes in the ocean do so much damage?” Skye voice began to crack and tears swelled up in her eyes. Trip know she’s not acting. "I hate thinking about the accident. He should be here with us and..." Skye finishes off her beer in one drink.

"He's getting better." Trip reassured as he placed an arm around her. “He will be home before you know it.” ‘Fitz will be at the Playground back with us soon.’ He can’t say that out loud so instead, he kissed her forehead.

“I know, it's just frustrating. What if he never comes home?” Skye buried her head in his chest and he rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head. He has no idea how to answer her. Now that Fitz knew his real father maybe he would leave SHIELD altogether regardless of his physical health. After everything that happened, maybe Fitz would want to get out of the saving the world thing completely.

“Is he still in rehab?” Jamie asked innocently. Her tone convinced Trip that she knew what really happened to Fitz, at least a more accurate version than falling into the Bay of Baltimore. (This would also explain why she smirked at him when he introduced Skye. He’s fairly certain she was doing this to screw with the evil aunt.)

It made sense. She was the one who released Ward into their custody because she felt that Coulson had a better chance of getting actionable intelligence. (Unfortunately, Ward will only talk to Skye and that’s not happening. Trip would probably put a bullet in him first (nonfatal of course, maybe).

“The doctor released him from the rehab center a couple of days ago. He was at the same place as your mom, but has moved in with his dad temporarily. The guy is very well off and pretty much brought the rehab center to him.” And because Hydra killed Fitz’s mother, he needed to be in a more
secure location anyway.

“His dad hired Trista, which is why she’s not here.” Trip smiled.

“Please, we all know she’s not here because of...” Desiree pointed to his least favorite aunt now yelling at Uncle Tyler as smoke billowed from the grill. Apparently, she blamed him for her tripping earlier because he didn’t put the coolers in the perfect spot.

“Even though she adores mom, I’m sure she was happy to leave so she wouldn’t have to put up with her. Mrs. Taylor Carter, who refused to take the Jones part of the last name, doesn’t even bother to see mom, but she has no trouble making the lives of Peggy’s caretakers a living hell.”

“Trista may have mentioned that as being one of the perks.” Trip stated casually as he looked over to see his baby cousins making their way to the food table consisting of potato salad, the cheese tray, Aunt Desiree’s signature fried chicken, and baked beans that no one will touch because they obviously came straight from a can. They were probably hungry and it wasn’t like their parents were actually paying attention.

Trip was positive at this point that the food on the table would be the only food at this barbecue. Uncle Tyler insisted on doing the grilling despite his inability to pay attention, which is why the grill was currently on fire.

“I don’t blame her for taking another job. None of us would be here if we could have got out of it.” Desiree was already moving toward the fire extinguisher as she spoke.

“Can’t we go one year without some kind of fire breaking out?” Marcy mumbled under breath. “I’m surprised he got permission for us to use the clubhouse again after last year’s fireworks fiasco. The fire department had to be called in.” That little anecdote made Trip very happy he had been in Azerbaijan last year.

“I’ll order pizza.” Jamie said grabbing her cell phone from her purse.

“Trip, can you get Marg...” Jamie stopped speaking when she noticed that baby Margaret was about 10 seconds from falling headfirst off the table, bringing most of the food with her. Trip quickly ran to catch the toddler, but ‘Nina’ beat him to her. However, the table was a goner. Trip hoped that Sharon managed to get a shot of Mr. Phillips, Uncle Taylor and the evil aunt being covered with baked beans and potatoes salad.
Because they were both enjoying the sight a little too much, they were both unable to keep his five-year-old cousin Jack from pushing the cooler that had offended his mom earlier into the pool. It was the cooler that contained all the good beer. Considering the hazy brown spot now in the pool, not all the glass bottles survived. Sharon managed to get to Jack before he started throwing fireworks at the grill, barely.

"Somebody should tell your aunt to actually manage her own children instead of trying to manage your life when you're an adult." Skye mumbled under her breath as she grabbed Margaret from 'Nina'. For some reason, his three-year-old cousin actually liked Skye and would listen to her. That in itself was a small miracle.

“I can do a beverage run, because we’re going to need more alcohol to get through the rest of this evening.” Marcy suggested and the others agreed.

“And maybe some potato chips and fried chicken.” Desiree looked at her platter of chicken now on the ground. A few pieces had actually made it into the pool. She looked like she was about to cry. “They just finish remodeling the Safeway on Braddock. You can go there.”

“Good idea. Trip you’re with me.” Aunt Marcy grabbed his arm and did not give him a choice. ‘Nina’ offered to go with them, but Marcy said they could handle it on their own. Trip did not want to raise her suspicions by insisting that ‘Nina’ come along.

"Are you sure you don't want to bring your boyfriend with you?" Trip asked as he took the driver seat of Simmons’ little blue hybrid.

"You can’t stay with your girlfriend all the time.” Marcy took the passenger seat and slammed the door. “Besides, he's not my boyfriend.”

“I’m pretty sure I saw you kissing him earlier,” Trip remarked darkly as he started the car.

“You’re no stranger to making out with people because it’s part of the mission. You had to kiss Sharon once.”

“We agreed to never mention Budapest again. Ever.” He said before asking JARVIS to provide him with directions to the nearby Safeway. Thankfully, JARVIS had the good sense to use a different
voice nickname FRIDAY. JARVIS/FRIDAY told him Skye already placed an order for food and that it should be ready for pick up by the time they reached the store. He loved JARVIS.

“The guy is my target and the entire reason I’m still on detail at State. He is suspected Hydra, but I'm pretty sure I'm only watching him because he literally fucked over the daughter of one of the former higher-ups. At least that was the case before he suddenly became nominated for an ambassadorship to a country suspected of being a Hydra safe haven. Regardless, I'm sure the bosses are going to get a kick out of Black Widow ‘accidentally’ throwing the bastard in the pool.” Marcy even made finger quotes around accidentally. Trip cursed inwardly.

"You didn't think I wouldn’t figure it out, especially when she saved Margaret so easily less than an hour later. I've been in this business longer than you've been alive even if I started at the science Academy, studying under Dr. Wilma Calvin” Trip doesn't answer.

"So why exactly did you bring Black Widow to our family barbecue?"

"You’re going to have to ask Sharon about her girlfriend.” Trip told her, keeping his eyes on the road.

"Your cover is already blown so you might as well be honest with me. I figured it out long before she saved Margaret. Her constantly making out with Sharon in front of my horrible sister-in-law made it obvious. Seriously, what the hell was Taylor thinking? Just because you get someone pregnant does not mean you need to marry them.” She complained.

“You managed to turn a family barbecue into an operation and I want to know why.” Marcy, demanded.

Shit.

“I think you have been in the business too long.”

“Maybe or maybe not. Actually, I was suspicious the moment you showed up here with a girlfriend because we both know ‘girlfriends’ are usually a mission only thing with you, but whatever you have seems to be real unlike Sharon and ‘Nina’.” And this was why they should've just arranged a meeting somewhere else. His aunt was too perceptive for everyone’s good. He doesn’t want to think about the Skye situation too closely.
“The fake boyfriend thing was a little much though. At least I hope he’s fake.” Marcy mumbled under her breath. “Has your mother run her usual DNA scan yet? I assume Skye is SHIELD, because she came with you and your mom did not ask me to do a background check. Although considering what happened to the agency, maybe I should anyway. Is Skye even her real name?” No, but she doesn’t even know her ‘real’ name.

“Mom hasn’t done any of that yet because this is actually a mission.” Trip decided to confess. “Skye is just better at espionage than most people would think.”

“Or you have become such a professional liar that you excel at lying to yourself. You and Skye look too cozy for this to all be just part of the mission.”

“When you survive your agency being taken over by terrorists and being hunted down like dogs by other agencies, relationships get deep, but that doesn’t mean that those relationships are sexual.” He argued.

“Whatever you say, Ant.” If she’s using his nickname that means she doesn’t believe him at all. “How much of what you told Desiree and Jamie was true? Are you really working for Stark or are you still rebuilding SHIELD?”

“Both, actually. Although SHIELD now stands for Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division.”

"Of course, Tony would put his name on it. He got that from Howard.” She smirked sadly.

“When we get back, you need to find a reason to disappear with Nina somewhere. She needs to talk to you.” Trip told his aunt in an effort to get this mission back on track.

"About what?"

"I don’t know. The director didn’t give me details, only that Skye and I were to be here as backup. I would’ve found an excuse not to come to this party otherwise.” Trip suspected that the mission was somewhat related to the death of Fitz’s mother, but he kept that suspicion to himself. “Skye was the one who decided to come as part of a triad to provide a distraction to allow you and Widow time to talk.”
“I think you’re lying about Skye, but it’s good to know you’re not actually sleeping with an engineer who happens to be Tony Stark’s secret son.” Shit!

"How do you even know that?"

"Fury brought me in just before mom's legacy went to ashes. I arranged passage to a new safe house for Catherine Mitchell." That explained why Natasha needed to make contact.

"Not safe enough. Her body was found five days ago. We are investigating."

“Fucking hell.” Marcy mumbled under breath. "How secure is this car?"

"Stark says it's NSA proof. JARVIS, activate privacy mode." Trip replied as he pulled into the underground garage for the Safeway.

“Of course, Sir.”

“You are not the product of your mom running off with her boyfriend for three months or the result of a teenage hook up gone wrong. It was the same with Fi..."

"You're a couple of months too late to tell me that. I'm well aware I am the result of Hydra trying to get grandma out of SHIELD by whatever means necessary."

“Mom was never forced out because of the pregnancy. That was just an excuse. Mom and Howard broke every rule possible to find Stephanie and later those who took her. Howard, even went so far as to place me on the team investigating under a fake identity.”

“Not that fake. I knew it was you as soon as I saw your original last name among the agents investigating.” Trip quipped.

“Listen, Pierce had been looking for a way to get rid of mom for years. Howard could only do so much. Even back then I thought Pierce was screwing with the investigation, so she would step out of line.”
“When the reality was they were trying to keep her from discovering the truth.” Trip suggested.

“Apparently. Pierce finally got what he wanted when SHIELD lost a very valuable asset in Jane van Dyne. The bastard used the opportunity to force mom’s "retirement" and further marginalize Howard. The Council was already upset that she refused to turn you and Stephanie over to be indexed. Jane was the straw that push them over the edge.”

"The fashion label?" Trip asked because he was too scared to ask about why Pierce wanted him to be indexed.

“There really was a Jane van Dyne once upon a time. Do you really think that Tony Stark is the first eccentric inventor to work for SHIELD? Her husband was a SHIELD consultant and she kept him from strangling Howard on a regular basis, in addition to being a badass specialist. The fashion designer thing was a cover.”

“What does this have to do with Agent Fitz?" Trip really didn’t want to talk more about Hydra forcing his grandmother out.

“As I tried to tell you before you went on your mission of self-flagellation, both you and Fitz came into this world the same way.”

“His mom was kidnapped and ended up sleeping with one of her captors?” Trip quipped.

"OK, not exactly the same way since Tony was the one kidnapped for his genetic material and originally Catherine Mitchell was a willing participant in the retrieving of the genetic material and artificial insemination. I guess after what happened with Stephanie, they decided it was better to just take the sperm and run." Trip just stared at her for a minute in pure confusion.

"Mom said my father is some guy named Nat who was there with her. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if that was a complete lie considering the reports never mention a guy named Nat being there." When would his mom start telling him the truth?

"There wouldn’t have been because Nat was actually a woman named Natasha and according to Stephanie she was the only reason why your mom was able to escape." OK, he wasn't expecting that. His mother had never said that Nat was the one who got her pregnant, just that they had a relationship while she was in captivity. The first thing they teach you at the Academy is to lie by
telling the truth. Apparently, his mom learned this lesson well.

“Stephanie came up with the lie about the boyfriend because it was best that not everybody know about the kidnapping, but she also did not want you to feel unloved.” Considering that’s exactly how he felt when he found out he was conceived during his mom’s kidnapping, she may have had a point.

“But you’re not a little kid anymore. You’re an adult with a security clearance that’s probably higher than mine since Pierce purposely made sure I would not advance at CIA after I left SHIELD.” That explained so much about his aunt’s career trajectory.

“Yes, you were created in a lab, but Stephanie and mom loved you so much that they stood up to Pierce and the World Security Council to prevent you from becoming just another experiment at the Raft.” He’d never seen anything like that happen, but he’d heard rumors. Considering Hydra was actually in charge, he could believe it happening.

"Is it possible the relationship actually happened?" Because there was just something in the way his mom spoke of this person that made him feel like there was a bit of truth to all of this.

"You’d have to ask Stephanie that, but I can tell you that your mom was artificially inseminated with DNA from three contributors. We have no idea what samples they used beside hers. A similar technique was used during the conception of Mr. Fitz. The only thing I know for sure is that Tony’s not your father."

"How do you know this? Why did you even test for that?"

“First of all, I ran your original DNA analysis after you were born. I think Howard was secretly hoping that two teenagers did what teenagers do rather than believe Stephanie was forcibly impregnated during her captivity. After what I discovered, Howard was really glad that didn’t happen.” Maybe Trip would have asked what she meant by that if she hadn’t made the next statement, “As for what I know about Agent Fitz, your now deceased former boss read me in shortly before his death. He also left me a little present.” At this, Marcy took off the locket she was wearing and handed it to Trip.

“This has everything I have, except the original DNA analysis. That was lost, but Stephanie can re-create that. With today’s technology, Stephanie may be able to prove something I never could.” He was just about to ask how they can do that without the samples in question, but JARVIS interrupted him first.
“Skye has asked me to inform you that if you do not return to the barbecue within 30 minutes, she will show your Uncle Taylor his wife’s Ashley Madison profile.”

“Somehow I’m not even surprised she has a profile, but there are some things you don’t want to find out like that.” Marcy mumbled to herself as she opened the car door. Trip nodded in agreement as he tucked the locket into his front pocket and followed behind her.

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1986

Howard hated any conversation with Obadiah that lasted more than an hour. Once upon a time, they had a good business relationship. Now he wished his Board of Directors trusted him enough not to have Obadiah as CFO. He understood the necessity. Between needing to spend more time at SHIELD to prevent Pierce from completely taking over and his desire to diversify Stark Industries, he didn’t have time to busy himself with the financial aspects of his company.

Of course, the diversification is where the contention came from. Obadiah refused to see that in the long run diversification and hopefully the eventual phasing out of weapons would be best for Stark Industries. Unfortunately, the man had Howard by the balls since he accidentally discovered that Katie was Maria’s mistress, not his. The public and the board could deal with him fucking around, but not his wife and especially not with another woman.

“You really think cellular telephones will be the next big thing? No one’s going to want to carry around something the size of a brick.” Obadiah asked skeptically chewing on his cigar with large drink in hand.

“They will if our people can get it down to the size of a pack of cards and you know we could if you would stop nickel and diming my R&D department. We have to adapt. War will not last forever.”

“War is why you are still in business. It’s responsible for 90% of our profit margin. War is the only constant. Why change what works.” His CFO said taking another drink.

‘Not if SHIELD can help it.’
“In that case, we can sell the cellular phones to DOD. They’re always looking for better ways to communicate with their troops. There’s money to be had there.” For a second Obadiah smiled, but it was a fake smile. The one reserved for the board.

They were interrupted by Marcy Carter-Jones screaming at his assistant, before he could say anything else. He could hear the woman he considered a daughter through the door without the intercom.

"I don't give a fuck who is in his office right now. I need to see Mr. Stark immediately." Howard had a feeling that she just found out about her reassignment.

Pressing the intercom button on his desk, he said, "Let her in Madison. You know Marcy’s always welcome."

“Obadiah, can you give us a minute?” The man left but only after glaring at Marcy in a way that made Howard’s skin crawl.

“How is he still here?” Marcy asked as soon as the door was closed.

“The board likes him.” And he threatened to out Maria and her girlfriend to the press if I don’t do what he wants. Howard knew what would happen if the stock prices if there was a scandal and Peggy won’t let him use aggressive means to shut the guy up. He really would love to know how Obadiah found out. Other than Jarvis and Peggy, only Tony and possibly Madison knew about her.

"Drink?" He pointed to the bar.

"I try not to drink alcohol before noon." Marcy said icily. She obviously knew about the Pym reassignment.

"Maria has the same rule.” Especially after he spectacularly fell off the wagon last December. “This is actually club soda with some apple juice in for coloring.” He’d been sober for four months. He wondered if he could make it a year this time.

“Why are you sending me to the other side of the country when you know nobody else at SHIELD is doing anything regarding what happened to Stephanie? Pierce is acting like mom is wasting precious resources trying to find the erstwhile boyfriend who knocked up her little girl.” Marcy sat
down hard on his desk.

‘Because Pierce wants your sister and future niece or nephew under glass, so he can study them. He doesn’t give a damn about who kidnapped her.’

“I won’t even be here when my niece or nephew is born. Why are you doing this?”

“Because four days ago, three individuals impersonating SHIELD personnel tried to abduct Agent Pym’s daughter from school. Thankfully, there was a colony of ants nearby and Hope is a very resourceful six-year-old.” He frowned darkly. “I need you to keep an eye on things.”

“Are you sure they were fake agents like the ones who took Stephanie? What would they want with a six-year-old?” The Pym particles. “This could be someone else. Carson hates him and would send agents after his daughter if he thought it would garner his cooperation.” Marcy had a point there.

“Also I thought that you hated Pym too. Why do you care?” Because no one should have to bury a child. It was the worst feeling in the world.

“I don’t know if they were part of the Nursery group, but I know they were not sent by me, your mother, or the Pyms. The ‘Agent’ did not know her password.” After what happened to Stephanie, they decided to use this method with the younger children of the higher-ups in the organization (excluding Pierce, of course). The children knew not to leave with anyone who did not use their password. Carson would be unaware of this because neither he nor Peggy trusted him.

“You’re right, Carson could be a possibility. I will ask Agent Fury to look into it.” The level 6 agent was one of the few at SHIELD besides Marcy, Jarvis, and Peggy that he completely trusted.

“Which is why I should stay exactly where I am, so I can keep an eye on him. You could send Nick to San Francisco.” Marcy argued.

“Due to your science background, you will be more inconspicuous at Pym Industries.”

“What about my work on Stephanie’s case?”
“You’ll have more freedom working under Pym.” No cronies of Pierce to sabotage the investigation. That was the other reason why Howard was moving her to a well-equipped lab on the other side of the country.

“And I’ll fly you back personally on one of my jets when Stephanie goes into labor.” Because you need to collect a sample from the infant to complete your investigation.

“Fine, you win.” Marcy said before leaving. She exited so quickly that she almost ran into Obadiah, who apparently decided to chat up Madison, instead of going back to his office.

XXXXX

October 1986

As promised, Howard made sure that Marcy was there to see her sister give birth, even if it happened earlier than it should have. She was the only one of her siblings there. The others had turned against Stephanie. They were angry at her for everything that she put her mom and dad through during the months that they thought she was hiding with her boyfriend. They were ignorant of the truth and it was decided that it was best to keep it that way for their own safety.

Tony tried to reach out because unlike her siblings he refused to believe the lies. Unfortunately, he was too busy with his first year of undergrad to keep trying after Stephanie’s many rejections. Stephanie was pushing everyone away.

Peggy would slap him harder than when she found he’d lied to her about having Steve’s blood, if she knew that he and Marcy were drawing blood from her two day old grandson. Determining the baby’s paternity was their best shot at finding the people who kidnapped Stephanie. (Howard tried not to think about how easy it was to get the nurse to look the other way.)

“I can’t believe you asked me to do this to my own nephew.” Marcy said as she tried to calm the baby down after taking the necessary sample.

“You know Peggy was going to say no. Better us than your former boss who only cares about studying your nephew because Stephanie managed to kill 20 people single-handedly while escaping with barely a bruise. He’s only interested in creating the next super soldier, not finding who kidnapped Stephanie in the first place.” Howard told her angrily.
“You’re the one who created an organization where most of your scientists are more interested in treating human beings like lab rats than actually protecting them.” Marcy said bitterly.

“That’s not the SHIELD I created.” He wanted to create a place that would uphold Steve’s legacy. The more Pierce took over, the more Howard realized that he had failed miserably at that.

“Maybe if you paid closer attention to what was going on at SHIELD or tried sobriety sooner, it wouldn’t be like this now.” He knew she was right.

“Just run the tests.” I have your mom to say things like that to me.

“Explain to me why I am doing this? You have an entire R&D division that could be doing this. You could be doing it yourself.” Marcy lamented.

“Right now, you’re the only person I trust.” He told her, honestly.

“Probably because you still want me to make sure Tony is not the father, even though baby Antoine is only slightly lighter than his Aunt Desiree.”

I have realized that, but I really want you to run Tony’s DNA against the ‘biological samples’ we salvaged from the nursery labs. Howard thought to himself.

“You are aware that Maria is actually Puerto Rican not Italian and her older sister is the same shade as your sister. Stephanie also did name him Antoine, which is French for Anthony.” Howard told her instead. All technically true.

“You could just ask Tony if he experimented with Stephanie like a normal parent. Oh wait, I forgot, you’re not a normal parent. Instead of just explaining to Tony that you have a really high risk job and he needs to be careful, you shipped him off to boarding school and convinced him in the process that you hated him. You know the timing isn’t right for that anyway.” Howard knows that, but he also knows that Stephanie was artificially inseminated.

“Run the tests Marcy.”

“Fine.” She said putting Antoine back in his bassinet. “But I’m only doing this for the baby. I’ll run Antoine’s sample against the other blood samples I found on the scene once I’m back in San
When Marcy returned to the west coast, the last thing he expected was for her to call him two weeks later after midnight his time asking for a sample of his blood, as well as Maria’s and Peggy’s.

Nor was he expecting her to ask the question, “Do you have any other children besides Tony and Natasha?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Did the tests showed that Antoine is Tony’s child?” That would mean that the Nursery Group had to have gotten their hands on a sample of Tony’s genetic material. Considering he had agents on Tony at all times, he’s not sure how that could’ve happened.

“He may be a relative, but not the father.” Her statement confused him.

“Is that why you need the other samples?”

“That crazy program your team created to make this easier on me accidentally compared Tony’s sample to that of one of the samples from the crime scene and Stephanie’s DNA.” This was what he wanted it to do because he couldn’t even tell Marcy about his suspicions. “To my shock, there were partial matches on both to Tony, but not to each other. I could only come up with one explanation for that.” Now he knows why she asked for a sample of Peggy’s blood.

“There must be something wrong with the equipment.” Howard suggested, although he hated admitting that anything he created could be faulty.

“I have never slept with your mother. She’s probably my best friend outside of Maria. I respect her too much to make her another notch in my bed post.” I respected Steve too much to do that.

“I’m not sure I believe you.”

“Come to New York to visit your sister and run the tests here again. Obviously, there’s something wrong with the equipment. You were still at home when Tony was born. You’re well aware your mom wasn’t pregnant back then.”
“I know Maria didn’t carry Tony. I just assumed that you got Maria’s girlfriend at the time pregnant, thus engaging in the Babylonian tradition of surrogacy.” Apparently, Marcy also knew about his open marriage.

“After Natasha died, Maria’s gynecologist said that she couldn’t have any more children. Maria wanted another child so badly that we decided to utilize in vitro and a surrogate, who was most definitely not your mother. They used Maria’s eggs.” At least that’s what Wilma and Dr. List told him. They were the heads of project LULLABY.

“But in vitro was not available until… I forgot who I’m talking to. You managed to genetically modify my mom’s first love in the 40’s. A test tube baby in 1971 is not that hard to believe.” Marcy sighed.

“I’ll be there tomorrow.” With that, she ended the call abruptly. Howard was unable to go back to sleep.

Xxxxx

The Present

Clint closed the duplicate diary reluctantly after he realized that the next entry took place months later. He really would like to know what Agent M found out about the nursery incident. Actually, he would like to know who SCJ actually was along with her sister Agent M.

Former Director Stark may have made the cardinal sin of writing this stuff down, but at least he wrote it in a way that maybe only Tony would understand and he wasn’t entirely sure if he wanted to show this to Stark just yet. (The note on top told him he was supposed to give it to Steve, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to.)

Although, if he wanted to figure out how this all related to Tony’s secret child he probably was going to have to hand over the book to the billionaire. The only thing he found relevant was that Howard thought that Alexander Pierce was a prick even back then.

Maybe the kid related stuff would be in the later part of the diary. He wished he had time to look right now, but they were arriving at Stark’s Arlington house. By Tony Stark standards, it looked a little small. Of course, Natasha informed him that in grand DC Metro tradition 95% of the structure was underground.
“Are you ready for this?” Laura asked as they pulled into the driveway. It would figure that he would look up to catch May and Coulson kissing in one of the windows. He blamed his sniper skills for picking up on that.

“As ready as one can be.” In other words, not at all, but he knew that he needed to pass off the duplicate diary, even if he doesn’t completely understand its’ importance. He can be a grown-up agent and deal with his resurrected ex-boyfriend who’s probably now his boss. “However, if you want to flash your wedding ring in front of Phil, I would be okay with it.”

“You can flash your wedding ring. I’m not doing your dirty work for you,” Laura replied, “except for the slap.” Less than five minutes after they walked in the door, she made good on her promise.

To be continued.

Chapter End Notes

A/N - Sorry, the Carter-Jones family drama just got too much and I was unable to include anything from Steve’s party, but it will be in the next chapter.
Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. Also, thank you to everybody who sent well wishes about my mother. She is doing better and is now home after spending about half of October at a rehabilitation center. I was able to visit with her for a few days at the beginning of November, which is why this chapter is even later than originally planned. I hope to get another chapter out before the winter hiatus.

Warning: Technically, I’ve lived in the DC Metro for about a decade, but I’ve never gone into the Capitol for the Fourth of July festivities and have only been in town twice on the day. It is essentially a tradition with the locals to get the hell out of town for the holiday. So I’m going off vague memories from the couple of times I’ve been there.

Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts honestly thought she was done putting out Tony Stark-shaped fires when she decided that they were better off as friends. Of course, if that was the truth, Pepper would have broken off all contact with Tony whatsoever and looked for a new Fortune 500 company to run.

Instead, she stayed up half the night with him and his boyfriend in an effort to figure out the best way to tell his recently discovered son that his mother was dead (because she may or may not have been working with Hydra). Pepper didn’t know why he was obsessing so much over this, at least the first part. However, Tony manages to break the news to Fitz it will be an improvement on how Tony found out about the death of his own parents.

Jarvis had been away visiting friends so Obadiah was the one who broke the news by bringing Tony to identify his parents’ bodies after parading him through a sea of reporters. Everyone should have known then that Obadiah was a coldhearted, opportunistic prick.

She also had breakfast this morning with Tony, Steve, and the one assistant Tony has had who might actually make it past six months. Maybe they should have considered getting Tony an assistant who could work on his level earlier and function more as a colleague than a traditional administrative assistant. She liked Dr. Simmons except she kept asking very personal questions about her relationship with Tony.

Pepper has yet to figure out for herself how to easily become friends again with someone after ending a romantic relationship and therefore was unwilling to provide advice. So far she finds it awkward, but not impossible. They have to put SI first regardless.
Maybe they’re able to still work together because they still care about one another. It’s just that she doesn’t want this suburban life with Tony involving houses with space for swing sets, children, and superhero activities. She wants her penthouse apartment, corporate job, and maybe a partner who she doesn’t have to worry about blowing himself up on a regular basis. Even the last part was negotiable. To put it bluntly, Pepper didn’t want to be in a relationship where either partner was sacrificing their own happiness just to stay together. Steve was a negligible part of this.

Right after the ‘what are we going to do about the board’ breakfast, Tony’s brand-new head of Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division arrived. Even though she has spoken with Phil a few times since discovering that he was among the living, she didn’t quite believe it was real until she actually hugged him. This may also be why she subsequently slapped him moments later.

Phil was her friend before he was Tony’s anything. He was the one who went out of his way to check up on her after her employer told the entire world that he was the guy in the red and gold suit. Yet, he’d let her believe that he was dead for years.

She knows that there’s more to the story of how he was brought back than what she was told. The fact that he has spent most of the morning in the lab with Bruce and Tony running tests made that apparent. The attempt at secrecy was infuriating. She had a right to know. According to Natasha, the fact that he did not prevent her blow showed that Phil felt similarly.

Because of Tony’s preoccupation with Phil, she ended up taking his 10 AM at DOD to convince certain admirals not to worry about Stark tech designs in the hands of SHIELD, but rather focus on the actual Hydra threat. Tony owed her for taking this meeting by herself. She had to take two extra-strength Tylenol before leaving the building.

Pepper spent her afternoon coming up with the press plan to distract the board and the general public from discovering the existence of Leo Fitz-Stark. A plan that needed to be implemented immediately due to questionable text messages sent to her by Baker regarding Fitz’s mother. Pepper found out about that situation the night before in too much gory detail.

They decided to use a diversion and nobody does a diversion better than Tony Stark. The goal was that people, the press/the board will spend so much time speculating about Tony’s love life that they will not have time to find out about his secret love child or the secret organization that he was rebuilding in his basement.

Steve graciously volunteered as long as they did not do a formal announcement via a press release. So far the plan was to have the press catch Tony and Steve out together throughout the DC Metro
and let things evolve as they would. At first, Tony did not want to do this. Tony was worried about what Fox News and Tiberius’s networks would say about a gay Captain America. However, Steve said he spent enough time in the closet during the 40s to last a lifetime and didn’t care what Fox News or any other media outlet said about him. Actual confirmation would come sometime in September or October, which will allow the head of PR to come up with a situation where Steve would feel comfortable making a public statement most likely a benefit for LGTBQAI youth.

By 4 o’clock, Pepper assumed that she was done with her Tony duties for the day - other than to make an obligatory appearance at Steve’s birthday party to prove to the board that the status of her relationship with Tony has no bearing on her ability to run this company. All she wanted was a relaxing bath before she had to get dressed.

Pepper was not looking forward to this evening because she would be forced to spend the majority of her time with various members of the board, without a date to rescue her. Pepper despised being forced to interact with most of them in a social setting that didn’t require golf clubs. The fact that she will be trapped on a yacht with these people for at least three hours makes the situation even worse. It’s very hard to make small talk with people who are actively trying to oust you from your job simply because you have the wrong chromosome. Spending quality time with her ex and his new boyfriend was vastly preferable. (Hell, another alien invasion would be preferable so long as Tony doesn’t almost die again.)

Just as JARVIS managed to get the bathwater the perfect temperature, Phil knocked at her door sporting a very large black eye. She could not deal with the board questioning why their new division head arrived at this party severely bruised. It would be worse if they ever discovered that she was the one responsible for said bruising.

“Do you have any concealer? May is the wrong complexion and Simmons doesn’t wear makeup. Lab incident.” Pepper wonders if this is an excuse just to speak with her. Phil seems like the type of person who would keep anything he would need for a mission on his person including concealer.

“I thought a good spy always carried make up.” She said rolling her eyes.

“Budget cuts. It’s just another unfortunate side effect of your agency imploding.” Phil shrugged. “Also, maybe I just thought we could talk for a few minutes and Simmons is technically looking over my latest lab results. I’ve learned not to interrupt her when she’s doing science things.”

“Same with Tony. Yet another reason why she will be the first assistant to make it past the six-month mark since I’ve been promoted.” Pepper said as she allowed him into her room. They really did need to talk in person anyway.
“In all fairness, at least two of those individuals were SHIELD plants.” Phil shrugged.

“One of which turned out to be Hydra.” Pepper said as she made her way to her makeup bag to find the concealer. “I can’t believe I hit you that hard.”

“You didn’t. Natasha and Clint have been training Laura for years.”

“Laura?” Pepper asked confused, now with bottle of concealer in hand.

“Barton’s… girlfriend, I think.” Phil grabbed the concealer in a fresh sponge out of her hand. “Although, I’m almost certain I felt a wedding ring connect with my eye.” That part was mumbled under breath as he walked to the mirror.

“Clint has a girlfriend? I thought he was dating Natasha?” Again, she was confused.

“It’s complicated and I’m not entirely sure. They were on a break at the time of my…”

“Supposed death.” She supplied for him.

“I did die.” Phil stopped dabbing concealer on his face.

“For 40 seconds on the operating table.” She said reciting the story that Maria told her after her unpleasant conversation with Talbot.

“It was longer than that.” He doesn’t look at her.

“How long?”

“I can’t tell you. You wouldn’t believe me if I did.”

"I had Extremis injected into my system. I can take the truth.” Pepper tells him forcefully."
"I can’t even take the truth. I wish I didn’t know. It’s better not knowing."

“But they did something to you?”

“I can’t answer that.” His words are calm.

“I will take that as a yes.” She held up a hand to stop him from objecting. “Whatever it is you can’t say and that’s fine. I’m just glad that it worked.” Phil doesn’t look at her. She’s seen this behavior before and not just during the great birthday meltdown of 2010. Her mind instantly went back to the summer between freshman and sophomore year of high school and her parents trying to hide the fact that her mother’s cancer was no longer in remission.

“It’s not working anymore?” As soon as she said the words out loud, she finally understood why Phil went to Tony first. “There’s something wrong. That’s why Tony and Bruce were running so many tests.”

"I can’t answer that."

Pepper sighed. She was so tired of all the secrets between one another.

“I’m going to take that as another yes. It’s just better to tell the truth.” Pepper sighed in annoyance. “Everyone believes that Tony and I fell apart because he slept with Steve.”

"I would call that a contributing factor." Phil quipped and Pepper laughed.

“Not really. I’m the one who bought most of Tony’s vintage Captain America collectible collection, including the eight pagers. I think I picked up on his crush before Tony did. Steve was always going to be a free pass, but our ability to communicate at that point was so dysfunctional that I couldn’t even tell him that.”

“Stark actually has a collection of Captain America Tijuana bibles? Really? I didn’t even think they made those because I could never find any.” Because Tony probably owns all of them.
“Yes. Tony and I could talk about that sort of thing before we were a couple, but in the last year we stopped telling each other what we felt and what we wanted from each other. So, if you can’t tell me, please tell me that Melinda knows at least.”

“She’s the one who told Stark the truth.”

“That’s good.” It really was because whatever she wasn’t being told was big. “It is ironic. He’s telling me more stuff now than when we were actually together.” Like the truth about Fitz’s mother. The entire ‘drugged and had his genetic material stolen by Obadiah/Hydra’ truth.

"Maybe that happened because before there was so much going on that he couldn’t tell you.”

‘Like designing the engines for what became Project Insight.’ Pepper thought bitterly.

“That’s why it didn’t last with Audrey. She couldn’t know anything about who I really was beyond the fact that I worked for a government agency.”

"Including that you were back from the dead?” Pepper asked.

“Including that.”

"Now you have a second chance with May. If you really want things to work this time around, don’t lie to her.”

“I’m a spy and so is she. We always lie. It’s what we do.” Phil handed the concealer back to her.

“But hopefully not to yourself.” Thankfully, at that point JARVIS reminded her that her water was getting cold and Phil left without prompting (and promptly ran into the woman responsible for Colson’s make up emergency in the first place).

Her relaxing bath was the only reason why she could get through drinks that afternoon. The situation was tense and awkward. She drank. Tony made snide comments about not drinking. Clint kept apologizing profusely for knocking Coulson’s girlfriend out the day before while simultaneously lamenting the fact that she had kept Phil’s resurrection a secret. Meanwhile his girlfriend, Laura, kept
trying to get him to calm down. This seems strange considering she punched Phil earlier.

Things got even worse when Tony left early to take Steve to some art gallery near the docks, i.e. a large fight broke out because of Phil waited so long to reveal his resurrection. She stayed to the shadows with Bruce, who thankfully had enough decorum not to ask why she was there or why she was even still on speaking terms with Tony. He probably knew more of the details of why things fell apart then everyone else. He didn’t ask which was refreshing.

She wished the people on Tony’s yacht were like that. It felt like everybody was judging her decision not to be the bitter, angry ex-girlfriend. She was asked 17 times in the most ‘polite’ way possible why she was attending a party thrown by her ex-boyfriend for a ‘dear friend’. She was certain it would be 100 times worse if they knew Tony was currently playing house with that ‘dear friend’.

Pepper spent the evening avoiding Caldwell, Cooper, and Baker, a.k.a. the board members that openly wanted her head on a platter. She couldn’t consume the amount of liquor she’d like and stay coherent enough to have a casual conversation with any of them. She knew full well that they were all hoping to use the demise of her sexual relationship with Tony to oust her as CEO. It was easier to dodge them when Bruce was with her. Most were too afraid to even approach her with him around, especially to ask inappropriate questions about the Tony Stark break up. Eventually, he was dragged away by Stephanie to meet some former colleagues from Doctors without Borders.

Thankfully, she found Kathleen Worthington, the only member of the board Pepper could actually tolerate for extended periods of time. It seemed that most of the board hated them equally. Kathleen maybe more so thanks to her recent marriage to environmental crusader, Terry Alexander.

Kathleen or Katie as her friends call her was a shrewd businesswoman who started out as Maria Stark’s personal assistant and worked her way up through the ranks of the Maria Stark Foundation and Stark Industries. Upon Maria’s death, Katie inherited Maria’s seat on the board of directors as well as the directorship of the Maria Stark foundation. Now that she was semi-retired, she was more hands-off with the foundation, but took her role on the board of directors very seriously.

"I’m surprised to see you here.” Katie remarked when she found Pepper at the bar. Much to her personal chagrin, she had the bartender pour her a glass of the doctored grape juice that Tony was drinking. There were too many members of the board who hated her presences for her to drink anything more tonight.

“Not only is this a CEO requirement, I actually like Steve.” It was pretty much impossible to be mad about Tony falling in love with him when she knew it was always a possibility.
“Contrary to what your colleagues may wish, I am never going to hate Tony enough that I can’t be in a room with him. Actually, we are friends.” Perhaps ‘becoming friends again’ would be more accurate phrasing. However, she doesn’t feel the need to clarify.

“Of course you don’t hate Stark. You probably still love him. You just couldn’t deal with him dying all the time.” The board member’s words were a little too close to the truth.

“Breakups just happen sometimes. We wanted different things and decided to end things before it got bitter.” Barely before and only because she never expected Tony to not sleep with other people. Okay, she never expected Tony not to sleep with Steve.

"You wanted to be a CEO and he wanted to be a superhero?"

'I wanted to be CEO and he wanted to raise a ton of adopted babies with his blonde boy toy with arms like a tree, probably to make up for Howard’s shitty parenting.’ Pepper thought barely managing to contain the words.

"But that doesn’t mean that I don’t care. And there is something about being in the nation’s capital for the Fourth of July." She smiled as she took a drink of her grape juice.

"That mostly appeals to tourists. Anybody who is actually from here usually tries to avoid the Mall at all costs."

"Which is why the river is overflowing with boats right now." She gestured her glass to the window.

"Keep an eye on Baker." Katie told her out of nowhere.

"I always keep an eye on Baker." Especially now that she remembered Baker’s long-standing friendship with Obadiah as well as Obadiah’s involvement in Leo’s existence.

"He’s been sniffing around me. Trying to dig up old dirt on Tony." That doesn’t surprise Pepper at all.

"Such as?" She just takes another sip of her juice.
“If I knew about Tony having any youthful indiscretions that may or may not had resulted in a Stark heir.” Pepper doesn’t react. However, she does wish her drink was significantly more alcoholic.

"Did he?” Pepper asked casually wanting to know if Marie or even Howard confided in her about the possible paternity incident that happened right before their deaths.

"I’m sure you would know the answer to that before I would."

"You were friends with Maria, though."

"We were friends the same way Tony is friends with Steve, the exact same way.” That’s when Pepper remembered Tony telling her about his parents’ open marriage and his mom’s many girlfriends.

"Oh."

“Don’t worry. This won’t be turning up on TMZ anytime soon. I know a lot of Stark family secrets. Actually, I was one of those Stark family secrets. I’m planning to take all of them to my grave. I promised Maria I would keep an eye on Tony and I always keep my promises.”

“You’ve always been the one board member that I trust not to throw Tony under the metaphorical bus for the sake of raising stock prices.” She was the one who had actively tried to prevent the lockout from happening. She wasn’t that successful because many felt she was only doing so to piss off Obadiah. Their hatred for one another was legendary.

“I always will be that person. You know it’s a different time now. I came here with my wife on my arm. You don’t need to be Tony’s Howard.” She wanted to make a snide comment about bisexuals existing outside of porn, but who knew who was close enough to be listening.

“I was never a beard.” Pepper whispered, just as Ms. Simmons made her way to her.

"I hate to interrupt Ms. Potts, but we have a situation."
“Miss Wellington, this is Tony’s new assistant Dr. Simmons.”

“I prefer Ms. Simmons except when my father questions my life choices, despite the fact I already have two PhD’s.” Tony is trying to convince her to work on the third in either engineering or robotics. “Dr. Simmons seems overly pretentious.”

“I can see why Tony chose her. The only ones who call him Dr. Stark are the other board members. You can call me Katie by the way.”

“Please tell me that Tony is sticking to the sparkling apple cider.” She hoped that Tony sticking to the unfermented stuff. Okay, she just hoped that nobody walked in on Steve or Tony giving the other a blowjob.

"Coke Zero actually. He’s telling everybody that he is the designated Avenger and needs to stay sober in case anybody falls off the boat or the ship gets invaded by aliens.” Considering what happened to Fitz, she’s not even entirely sure Tony was joking. Tony’s getting obsessive again. She knows for a fact that the first prototypes of the Iron Legion are circling the yacht.

"That may be worse.” A highly caffeinated Tony with minimal sleep can be very bad.

"Mr. Baker is here." That was not a situation.

"This was expected since he’s on the board of directors and his sister lives in the area.” And he’s here to fuck with all of their minds.

"She’s the Chief of Staff for some senator.” Ms. Simmons added. “But Jarvis didn’t specify who." That worried her because the AI usually provides detailed information. He was obviously withholding the specifics from her for reasons only known to the AI.

“Sen. Christopher Ward of Massachusetts, I believe. The guy is a total asshole. Everybody but his wife knows that he is fu…” Tony’s assistant grabs a flute of champagne off the bar and drinks half a glass before saying anything else.

That’s when Pepper remembered that Senator Ward’s brother dumped Tony’s assistant in the ocean.
"Hydra is the terrorist organization that infiltrated Shield. Not everybody there actually prescribed to that philosophy. I’m sure you know all about being a good person working for a corrupt company." Apparently, Steve has been studying.

"Scott Lane was nothing more than a disgruntled employee, his allegations were completely unfounded." Everhart responded defensively.

"According to what was dumped on the Internet, most of the Shield members who joined Hydra where disgruntled employees, but instead of exposing the corruption in their organization they contributed to it."

At that point, she decided it was time to rescue Steve. She would send in Simmons, but she has yet to catch up to her.

"Steve, there you are. I need to introduce you to Kathleen Worthington from the board. She’s an old friend of Howard’s and wants to hear stories about the younger days."

"You really expect me to believe you’re not with Ms. Potts?"

"She’s just introducing me to some key people."

“You also owe me a dance.”

"Won’t your girlfriend be angry?"

"Boyfriend and I doubt he would care." Steve told the woman as he grabbed Pepper’s hand. Everhart started to choke profusely on her drink just as Simmons arrived.

“We will be arriving at National Harbor in 15 minutes.” Ms. Simmons said, looking slightly nauseous. She must not be a boat person, but she seemed fine inside a few minutes ago.

“Good, you can escort this Everhart off the boat when we arrive.”
"You can’t kick me out. I’m the guest of…" That’s when Simmons threw up on Everhart’s shoes. She wasn’t even upset because Simmons had just provided them with a legitimate reason to get Everhart off the ship.

“I think you’re going to want to have a nice hot shower at the Gaylord before going home.” Pepper suggested. “We’ll pay for your room and replacement shoes.” Preferably something more appropriate for a journalist than a hooker.

Because Tony had installed JARVIS on his boat, the AI called Dr. Triplett, Bruce and Sam over to deal with the situation. She would let them deal with the sick assistant too. This allowed her to deal with the crisis that Steve just created.

"Do you realize what you just did?” She said dragging him toward the private rooms where JARVIS said that Tony and Phil were.

"Exactly what we discussed, slowly unraveling the story about new significant other. She’ll focus on trying to find Captain America’s supposed boyfriend instead of looking into the allegations of Tony secret love child." Or she may think that Simmons is pregnant due to her throwing up on her, but either scenario was less dangerous than the public and subsequently Hydra finding out about Fitz.

"I don’t think that’s what Ms. Barnett had in mind.” She said rubbing her temple. She hoped there was a giant bottle of Tylenol in whatever room Tony was currently occupying. Really, she shouldn’t have to deal with this stuff anymore.

XXXXX

Tony has had to deal with a lot of unexpected revelations in the last few weeks, including but not limited to the fact that his parents really were murdered, that Obadiah poisoned Jarvis to make Tony more susceptible and that he’d had a little sister who died two years before he was born. Really, discovering that he has a 26-year-old son doesn’t even rate compared to those revelations. Now, the fact that his first sexual encounter didn’t actually happen and he was in fact knocked out for his genetic material did rate high, but Leo’s existence didn’t faze him at all.

Discovering that Leo was his son was a good surprise; everything else that went along with it not so much. Should Tony keep hiding his son’s mother’s Hydra connected past? She did turn herself into shield in to protect Leo.

On the other hand, discovering that his head of R&D was actually old SHIELD and he hoped not Hydra was not one of those good surprises. Deborah saved him from a very uncomfortable
encounter with Baker only for Director Agent to discreetly lead the two away to one of the lower bedrooms solely for the purpose of informing him that Deborah’s real name was Donna and that she had been in his class at spy school.

‘Deborah’ was one of the pirate’s special people. Considering that at least one of the pirate’s special people turned out to be Hydra, Coulson was concerned. This is why he and Agent Scary had the woman down on the ground with a weapon to her head as Director Agent asked questions.

“Phil, you know me. I’m not Hydra.” Deborah pleaded.

“I knew Garrett too and he had me kidnapped and tortured.” Director Agent said nonchalantly.

“Yes, but Garrett was an opportunistic self-centered asshole.”

“Point.” Agent shrugged, but kept his weapon trained on her.

“I’ve been retired from the world of espionage since ‘89. You were at my going away party.” She said gesturing to Agent Scary.

“May?”

“That part is true. You were leaving to finish your Masters, allegedly.” May explained.

“Which I did, along with a doctorate eventually. It was easy since I audited most of the material during my MIT assignment.” The director signaled for his pit bull to stand down.

"So you were actually a field agent and daddy just had you babysitting me while in college.” Was I just a mission to you?’

"I was placed at MIT after your kidnapping, not that you remember actually being kidnapped. Howard didn’t want what happened to Stephanie to happen to you.” Deborah/Donna answered. 10 weeks ago Tony wouldn’t have believed her at all, but after reading the diaries he could see Howard
behaving in this way.

"Memory replacement?" Director agent asked.

“I don’t think so. The lab believed that whatever they drugged Tony with wiped everything out and Howard decided it was better not to inform Tony that what he thought was a hook up was probably some sort of medical examination." Or shorter version of what they put Stephanie through.

"Of course he did. Thanks to that little ‘examination’, I now have a 26-year-old." Tony replied dryly.

"We were unaware of that at the time." Tony wasn’t so sure of that.

"So was screwing me part of your mission?" He starting to wonder if that’s a normal SHIELD thing. Considering that Agent Scary and Steve hooked up during her time watching him, but it was Steve. Really, who could resist.

"No. My job was to keep you safe from The Nursery Group and whoever else was after you. Considering your father was the head of a super secret spy organization and the greatest weapons designer in existence up to that point, you had a lot of people who wanted you dead or to use you as a bargaining chip. I was to get close to you, but if your father knew how close he would’ve killed me and no one would have ever found my body." He had the feeling that Deborah was being entirely serious.

“Quite possibly. Sleeping with an underage targeted of a protection detail is against several regulations. It wasn’t supposed to happen back then and it’s definitely not going to happen now.” Director Agent explained.

"I’m not Shield anymore and I haven’t been for nearly 25 years. I don’t work for you." Deborah said defiantly.

“But you do work for me." Tony interjected.

"Always. It wasn’t just a mission, not after I realize you were never this rich idiot with no day job. You were sweet and funny, even when being a complete asshole to most of the professors."
"Because they treated me like a kid." Tony answered defensively.

"You were a kid, but you weren’t at the same time and I kind of just wanted give you some sort of normality and make you feel just a little less lonely."

"By being my sexual tutor?" Tony asked incredulously. Dr. Suarez was going to have so much fun with this.

"It did make you less susceptible to the honey trap technique." Obviously he’d already fallen for it at least once at that point.

“I think it made you marginally safer. I kept you from getting kidnapped or drugged nine times during the time you were at MIT.” At that moment, a hazy memory from nearly a quarter of a century ago came back into his mind.

"That party my second year, where I woke up on your couch after not remembering anything, was that one of these incidents?"

"Attempted abduction number three." Tony frowned at her answer.

"So did you end up joining Stark Industries to keep an eye on me? I could see shield faking your retirement party for the greater good." Especially the Hydra part of Shield.

“As part of my mission, I had to take almost all the classes you were. Sometime during mechanical engineering 302, I realized that I liked engineering a lot more than espionage, but I didn’t want to spend the rest of my SHIELD career in the labs. I stayed there to keep an eye on you, but once that was over, I decided to do what I really wanted. I left Shield and started to work on my Masters.” Deborah explained.

"And then your doctorate and somehow you randomly ended up at Stark Industries all under your Deborah identity?” Tony asked skeptically. There were just too many coincidences.

“I often wondered if Nick Fury pulled some strings since SI came to me for the R&D position after you switched gears.” Because he was dying at the time and needed to get someone competent in charge of his baby.
“It’s possible.” Director Agent gave Agent Scary a look that resulted in her letting go of Deborah completely.

“So happy to know you no longer think I’m Hydra. I want nothing to do with that world ever again. Although that will be difficult considering Obadiah left SI very dirty. I’m positive at least one Hydra plant made contact with me.”

“When?” Colson asked, followed by his own “Who?”

“Derek, my unfortunate number two. You know that Obadiah crony that Baker wouldn’t let me get rid of? It happened right after Shield fell. He knew that I was a former conquest and tried to convince me to get back at you for disregarding me.” Deborah scoffed.

“I reported the incident to Hill, but then my husband got sideswiped and I didn’t care what happened. This is actually the first public event I’ve been to since the funeral and I managed to get tackled.” Agent Scary and Director Agent were giving each other their ‘talking without actually talking’ looks. JARVIS was also letting him know that Derek was currently in FBI custody for leaking SI proprietary information to suspected terrorist organizations.

“See, it’s taken care of and you really didn’t have to be here.

“All the department heads were supposed to be here to meet Mr. Gray. Seriously, why did you choose that last name? Have you read 50 Shades of Gray?

“What?”

“He prefers his porn in Tijuana Bible format.” The Director snarked. Seriously, who told him about that collection? The only reason why Steve is not making him sell it is because he doesn’t want anyone else to own his early ‘I need to pay the rent by whatever means necessary’ work and he doesn’t want to be a hypocrite by forcing Tony to get rid of the other stuff.

“I’m sure superhero porn from the 40s was better written.” Deborah quipped. “It was good to be out of the house despite the rug burns.”
“You can never be too careful.” Director Agent grabs her arm. “I’ll walk you back upstairs.”

“And get me a drink.”

“Of course.” Deborah allows herself to be led back to the main party.

“You’re okay with your boyfriend doing that?” He asked Agent Scary.

“He’s trying to get more information about the death of her husband. If she did actually uncover Hydra operative, they may have tried to get back at her.”

“By killing off a family member?” He shouldn’t be surprised. They were already dealing with one dead body.

“You know that there were several former SI employees at Cybertek, many of which were only there because Hydra kidnapped family members. I wouldn’t put murdering her husband past them.”

“Nor the making it look like a car accident again.” He said, remembering the lie Obadiah told him so many years ago. He wondered if the man was in bed with Hydra then. Tony is almost certain that he was.

“How’s Director Agent? Has he drawn on any walls since this afternoon?” Yes, he was blatantly changing the subject.

“Not yet. I think there will be an episode tonight. The encounter with Clint this afternoon has him unsettled.

“Getting slapped by your ex-boyfriend’s new girlfriend will do that.” Tony said just as Pepper and Steve walked into his room. He would love to kiss his boyfriend in front of the man’s ex-girlfriend except that his own ex-girlfriend was now standing beside him and Tony does have some common decency.

”Christine Everhart is here. Baker invited her.” Pepper ground out.
“She’s worse than an STD. I’m not surprised. Head games have always been his specialty.”

“He may also be Hydra.” May added this from beside him.

“And unfortunately not the type that you can just throw your shield at.” Tony sighed.

“I’ll take care of it.” Agent Scary says in a way that worries Tony, just a little.

“Worse than that, Everhart just asked Steve about your secret love child.”

"Fuck." He does not want to deal with this right now. Leo wasn’t ready to deal with the vultures or anything else involved with having the last name Stark. He wasn’t even sure if he wanted the last name Stark yet. Tony thinks that the name Fitz Stark is cool, but he’s not the one changing his name.

"And Steve distracted her by telling her that he’s gay."

“You did what?” Not good. Not good at all. He barely wanted to go with Jane’s distraction to keep them from finding out about Fitz, but Tony figured that by October, Congress would be less likely to grill Captain America in prime time about his personal habits (and he and Skye would have successfully tracked down all copies of the Captain America sex tapes/government invasions of privacy).

"I didn’t tell her I was gay. I told her I had a boyfriend, although I didn’t say who. The plan was to slowly let the world know about our relationship. I think the first step in that is letting them know I’m open to that type of relationship in the first place." That was such a Steve answer.

“She’s going to start digging. You know that we can’t afford that right now.” Tony subconsciously grabbed Steve’s hand. He didn’t even realize he had done so until he noticed Pepper trying not to look.

“I don’t have anything to hide.” Tony tried not to scoff at Steve’s words. The surveillance sex tapes, the 15 different Tijuana Bibles that Steve did in the early 40s that are currently hidden in Tony’s Connecticut house, and the fact that Steve slept with men for money during the late 30s kind of indicate otherwise. That’s not even including the fact that Steve had a sexual relationship with a
black teammate during the extremely racist and homophobic World War II, who ended up marrying the woman that Steve was in love with at the time. That’s the stuff that reality shows are made of.

“She’s going to start looking for ex-boyfriends.” May said with a glare. She neglected to mention that they would also start looking into her existence. They can’t deal with her face being plastered everywhere.

“Who are dead.” Tony could detect the bitterness in Steve’s voice. Tony squeezed his hand just a little bit tighter.

“Not the two random men that you hooked up with during June and July 2012.” Agent May said pointedly.

“I’m calling Barnett. Tony, you explain to your boyfriend what he just did because somehow you’re the adult in this relationship.” Pepper just left the room. It was never good when Pepper got to that point.

“Order I’m sorry basket number 7 and add an extra pair of shoes.” Tony ordered his AI before the door was even completely shut.

“Of course, sir.” JARVIS replied curtly.

“I don’t even remember who I had a one night stand with two years ago. I doubt they would either.”

“I do because I had to file a report on it. Thankfully, it wasn’t part of the leak, but that means nothing. I’m sure the two guys in question will remember you. Also, not everybody at your old apartment were shield plants. Somebody may have seen something.” Like you two screwing in the laundry room.

“Do you think that they’ll find you?”

“I was there under a false identity. At worst, they may find my ex-husband. He’s recently been nominated to become an ambassador. However, if they turn up at my father’s condo in Arizona, I would be worried.” May reassured Steve and Tony was already arranging for said condo in Arizona to be equipped with the beta version of his new JARVIS security system.
“I’m going to go find Phil.” With that excuse, May was gone and Tony was finally able to kiss his boyfriend. He’d wanted to do that for the last few hours, which was the main reason he was keeping his distance. If he was within 10 feet of Steve, he would jump him. So of course, he managed to push the super soldier on the bed. Tony’s quite proud of that fact.

“Seriously, you have any idea what you just did?” Tony asked once he broke for air.

"I distracted her enough to keep her from continuing her investigation into Leo’s existence. It will buy us enough time to figure out how to keep him safe from Hydra.” As well as figure out how dirty his Board of Directors are. He thought he’d cleaned house after Afghanistan. Right now Tony is pretty sure the only one not dirty at this point is his mom’s ex-girlfriend.

"You’re too fucking noble. I want champagne." Tony said, looking longingly at the private bar in the master bedroom before remembering that it only contained orange juice and Coke Zero.

"You don’t need champagne. Champagne will interact with your medication.”

“I know I can’t have a drink, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want one. Why did I decide to stop drinking?"

"Because you don’t want to end up like your father.” Steve said bluntly.

“Right.” Tony lies down on the bed. “Do I have to go back up there? I think I might punch out Baker if I do.”

“Yes, but I’ll come with you.” Tony leans over and kisses Steve again. 20 minutes later after giving Steve birthday blowjob number two, they did leave the room just in time to see Everhart escorted from the boat in one of the guest bathrobes.

In hindsight, Tony probably should have had Simmons stay home. He didn’t think a boat ride on the Potomac would trigger a flashback and result in his assistant throwing up on a cable news rising star. At least it got the woman off his boat before he had to see her, even if Sam was very mad at him. Like he needed Steve’s new friend mad at him.
A/N - Definition of Tijuana Bible from Wikipedia: Tijuana bibles (also known as eight-pagers, Tillie-and-Mac books, Jiggs-and-Maggie books, jo-jo books, bluesies, graybacks, and two-by-fours) were palm-sized pornographic comic books produced in the United States from the 1920s to the early 1960s. Their popularity peaked during the Great Depression era.

For some reason I kept dictating this as Tahiti Bible. It is a magical place.
Chapter 12: Things You Will Never Say (If You Think the Other Person is Actually Awake)

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. I’m sorry this one took longer to post than I intended. I was really hoping to get another chapter out or at least partially written before the hiatus. However, life had other plans. On November 25, my uncle died due to complications of cancer. On December 1, I lost my brother-in-law to his fight with lung cancer (never smoked). Actually, he passed the night the episode Closure aired in the U. S.; now, I have that day oddly connected to what happened to Rosalind.

I spent the first half of December helping my sister take care of things which included trying to get my nieces through finals week. Let’s be honest, taking finals the week after your father died is good for no one. Needless to say, I’m ridiculously behind on everything and the only writing I really got to do during this time was proofreading my niece’s paper comparing Jazzercise and Zumba. The joys of being a fitness major.

We have so much ground to cover in the story that I am going to try to pick up the pace in the next few chapters otherwise it’s going to turn into a repeat of my story Adaptation Mode Style which I’m currently rewriting because the pacing was so bad the only way I can finish is to rewrite it. I would like to avoid that this time around.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jemma Simmons was not drunk. The glass that she downed in front of one of the board members was only her third glass of the evening (since she arrived on the ship anyway). The reason why she threw up on the intrusive reporter was a combination of the river motion and a flashback to her encounter in the Gulf of Mexico. The fact that she lost consciousness soon afterwards was strictly a result of stress and recent sleep deprivation. Again, she did not drink that much.

'Although a bottle of water would be lovely right now.' She thought to herself as she woke up in one of the yachts bedrooms. It was small so she doubted it was her boss's personal room. The fact that she heard his muffled moans from next-door confirmed that. Seriously, could they not go the entire party without being intimate? Obviously, not. The fact that she could identify the sounds pointed to the fact that they behaved this way too often.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" She recognized the voice as belonging to Agent Barton's girlfriend.

The way that she pressed the washcloth to her face made Jemma think this woman had to have children. It reminded her a lot of how her mum had cared for her when she was a child or at least
before her mum started keeping a bottle of sherry in the breadbox to keep her company when her husband was on official travel. Thanks to Dr. Stark she now knew exactly what her father did when he traveled.

"I'm fine."

'No, you're not.' A voice inside her head told her. The woman stroking her cheek just gave her a sad smile.

"You just lost consciousness after throwing up on WHiH reporter. You are not fine." She knew that voice belonged to Steve’s friend, Sam. He had been around the house enough recently for her to recognize his voice.

"I just need some ginger ale and saltines to settle my stomach." Both of the people in front of her shared a look that she couldn’t read.

"Water may be better. You don’t want to get dehydrated." Dr. Triplett said as she walked into the room. “So how’s my patient doing?”

"I’m fine. Now, if you excuse me, I need to get Ms. Everhart off the ship when we dock in…” She paused to look at her watch just in time to hear a muffled ‘I love your fucking mouth.’ through the all too thin walls of the ship.

“We should be at National Harbor in 10 minutes.” Dr. Triplett replied. “Dr. Banner is taking care of her because he is the one least likely to hit her.” That is never a good sign. (The irony of that statement was not lost on her.)

“Although, he could probably use more help, especially to make sure she doesn’t hear those two. They are like teenagers.” Jemma agreed with that sentiment entirely.

“I’ll go help, because I haven’t been friends with Steve long enough to listen to that.” Sam said leaving the room. She would too if she could.

“I’m fine.” Jemma said starting to get up. “I didn’t drink that much.” Both women gave her a look that told her they didn’t believe her at all.
"I’m just seasick or rather river sick." She said as a cold bottle of water was placed in her hand.

"Considering you lived on a plane for nearly 9 months, I doubt you are really this susceptible to motion sickness."

‘That was before I was dropped into an ocean.’ She thought to herself.

“Although I should probably give you a look over to make sure it’s not something else, like food or some other type of poisoning.” ‘Such as alcohol poisoning,’ was thankfully left unsaid.

“I hope not, considering everything I went through with the caterers. Although, I think I only ate an appetizer or two.” She said just before Dr. Triplett asked Laura to give them some privacy.

Said medical examination lasted for 15 minutes and ended with Stephanie asking JARVIS to put the times and locations of every single AA meeting in the DC Metro on her Stark pad. Jemma personally felt it would be more useful to place that information directly on Dr. Stark’s device, but she should probably find him a meeting to attend if he really wanted to give sobriety a try. She wondered if there was a chapter or a similar program with less of a religious affiliation.

Once Dr. Triplett was done, she ordered Simmons to go home, take some acetaminophen, drink several bottles of water, and avoid the Cabernet. That’s when the argument started between Dr. Triplett and Sam over who would drive her home.

"You can go back on the boat to prevent the others from getting arrested or making drunken fools of themselves.” For some reason Jemma felt the last part of that statement was directed squarely at her.

“I can drive her back to Stark house. It’s not out of the way.”

“I live less than 2 miles from there and I would really like to talk to my son to learn what happened at the Carter-Jones Fourth of July. It must be bad if my brother just called to ask if he and the kids can stay with me for a while. Besides, Steve actually listens to you.” Stephanie suggested. That’s when JARVIS showed her a tweet from News Channel 8 regarding a domestic disturbance off of Four Mile Run.
“Maybe you should call your brother back instead.”

“Probably. Fine, you win.” Stephanie said as she went over to talk to her recently emerged boss and his boyfriend. Jemma really hoped everybody was focused on the reporter being escorted off the ship so they would not notice that Dr. Stark was now wearing Captain America’s tie.

"You don’t have to drive me home. I can call a cab." She said as they sat in the car that was strategically placed in the Gaylord garage in case Stark wanted to make a quick getaway.

"I don’t want to deal with Steve, if you end up in Anacostia." Sam said as he placed the key in the ignition.

"I sincerely doubt that would happen." She scoffed as he pulled out of the parking space.

"I know a lot of cab drivers in the Metro. If you throw up in the back of their cab, they will drop you off in the wrong neighborhood."

"Good point."

"Besides, I’ve always wanted to drive a Ferrari and I figure you may want to talk to somebody who is not a computer." She stared at the console for a moment wondering if JARVIS had said anything to anyone.

"There’s nothing to talk about.” She said before asking JARVIS to play opera mix number 1. Instead, Jarvis decided to play something that was more Bluegrass with the vocal sounds of Justin Timberlake.

\[I\text{ see you but you're gone}\]
\[\text{Telephone a doctor: I'm not okay}\]
\[\text{The bottom of the bottle}\]
\[\text{To fill this empty heart up}\]
\[\text{A thousand proof}\]
\[\text{Don't change the truth}\]
“Aren’t you a cheeky little bugger.” She mumbled under breath as she switched off the radio.

“Obviously, the AI believes there is a problem.” Sam said as they drove through the development towards the freeway.

“I apologize, that was Mr. Starks, ‘I screwed up with Steve’ mix number 3 from last April.” Sam chuckled.

“Stark is a lot more self-aware than I thought he would be.” Sam mumbled. “I guess April was a really bad month for everyone, including you.”

“Just because I don’t want to talk about how things have gone downhill since then, does not mean I’m not self-aware. So what if during the last three months I’ve dealt with my best friend nearly dying and discovering that the agency I worked for several years was actually a front for a terrorist organization. I accepted it and I’ve moved on.”

“Outside of Steve and Natasha, I was one of the first to discover the truth. I still haven’t accepted it and I didn’t work there. It’s okay to be angry.”

“It is more productive for me to adapt to my new circumstances than for me to be angry.” Yes, you’ve adapted the same way mum adapted to father’s trips. “I’m part of Stark Industries now.”

"Steve mentioned that your father was unhappy with that." That comment made her wonder what else Steve told his friend. She was trying to rack her brain for what the man did. She knew that he worked for Veteran Affairs, but she wasn’t sure what he did exactly.

“My father being unhappy with me is irrelevant. Actually, I don’t think the man has been happy with me since my scoliosis surgery nearly 2 decades ago. There’s no point in talking about my father.” Or throwing up on intrusive reporters, she thought to herself. “It’s over with.” Part of her wonders if she said so much because of the champagne from earlier.

“If you prefer, we could talk about how you throwing up on that reporter was probably the result of you having a flashback to getting kidnapped. I’ve seen stuff like that before."
"That’s not what…” She paused realizing that the man beside her was glaring at her as if he could hear everything she was thinking even though he should be focused on getting them across the Woodrow Wilson Bridge intact.

She was thankful that the bridge was down because she wasn’t sure if she could spend any more time with this intrusive person. Being driven by Trip’s mother would have been preferable, even if she was still slightly embarrassed by her crush on the woman’s son and mother for that matter.

“What exactly do you do at the Department of Veteran Affairs?” She asked wondering if he was a psychologist. Only JARVIS knew how much Dr. Stark needed one around. However, she personally did not feel like being psychoanalyzed by anyone else. She’s already upset about her mandatory sessions with Dr. Suarez.

"I work at the VA as a counselor/social worker. I help people transition back into society.” Sam explained.

“That’s an interesting career choice. Why did you decide to do that?” Maybe if they made small talk about his job, he would stop asking questions about her life.

“I was in the Air Force for almost a decade. When I got out, it took a while to adjust to civilian life. The beds were too soft and every little thing sounded like a gun being fired at 3 AM. My girlfriend broke up with me because she couldn’t take my sneaking out of bed to do rounds in the middle of the night. After that, I started going to counseling and I discovered what I needed to do. I love helping my fellow veterans find their purpose..” He smiled at her.

“That’s an admirable thing.” She said, staring at the passing scenery as he continued to drive.

“I can help you to if you want it. I’m sure going from a spy to Tony Stark’s partner in scientific crime can be a lot for anybody under perfectly normal circumstances. Worse if a traumatic incident was involved.” Like being dumped into the ocean by a so-called friend.

"I don’t know if being the personal assistant/laboratory partner to an Avenger truly counts as civilian life.”

She doesn’t want to talk about the ocean. She doesn’t understand why it keeps coming up. Then she remembered exactly who her boss’s boyfriend is. He’s the paragon of helping people. He had to
have set this up.

“Did Steve ask you to help me?”

“I’ve seen what happened to you today happen to other people. Maybe I think you’re too bright to
go down that path.”

“I am perfectly fine.” Liar.

“If you say that to yourself enough, maybe you’ll start to believe it.” He said sadly. "You don’t have
to talk to me, but you need to talk to somebody."

‘I do. I talk to JARVIS all the time.’ She thought to herself. However, she doesn’t dare say that out
loud due to the fact that she doesn’t want to be escorted to the nearest psychiatric hospital.
Thankfully, Sam said nothing else until they got to Arlington Ridge and he almost pulled into the
wrong driveway. The houses look nothing alike, but it’s dark.

JARVIS wanted to do a full body scan, but she put the AI off. Maybe that’s why she doesn’t go
back to her own room, but instead started wandering the property. Before even realizing it, she
pressed her palm against the biometric reader of the elevator in Dr. Stark’s lab that went straight to
the secret base.

Of course she found herself wandering into Leo’s room. He’s asleep, peacefully so for once. He
looked so small in the full-size bed. Then again, they’ve been living in SHIELD dorm rooms and
standard issue bunks for the last six years. Yet from personal experience she knew it was possible for
the two of them to fit on the small bunkbeds.

She didn’t even realize that she crawled in beside Fitz, until she felt the warmth of his body envelop
her. As the tears began to fall, she told him everything that she’s been afraid to say out loud while he
was awake. Fitz continued to sleep unaware of her confession. Only JARVIS would hear her words
and see her tears.

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Laura was a very light sleeper. That happened when you’re in a relationship with the superspy for
more than a decade, even when the majority of that time their relationship was just co-parenting. Of
course, she woke up the moment her husband showed up to their guest room at Stark’s base with
Natasha. This surprised her considering that earlier in the day he had been avoiding her phone calls.
Maybe there was an Avenger related reason for this meeting or maybe they were both ready to kiss
and makeup, literally.

Clint disappeared from the party with Melinda while she was helping with Mr. Stark’s inebriated assistant. This resulted in her getting a ride back from Ms. Potts, who apparently left early for what she referred to as ‘damage control’. Laura was already looking forward to the tabloid articles tomorrow.

She pretended to sleep so she had a better chance to figure out why she ended up coming to Stark Base by herself. So far their conversation focused on the mission Natasha had been on for the last few days. Clint was aggravated about not being the one to put May’s ex-husband into a pool and Natasha was upset that due to his not taking her phone calls she had to run her mission with a ‘baby agent’, who received her badge ‘three days before the agency blew apart’. Laura agreed with Natasha.

The fact that they’re speaking in English not Russian convinced her that they thought she was still asleep. Natasha and Clint talked shop while she was supposed to be asleep frequently. If she wasn’t actually a lowly high school guidance counselor, but rather a spy for a rival agency, they would have been screwed many times over. It stunned her to realize how much they must actually trust her. She loved Clint and Natasha too much to ever consider betraying either of them.

Currently they were discussing how Natasha barely escaped being picked up by the Alexandria police. They were called in when a fight broke out between husband and wife after the baby agent ‘accidentally’ let Agent Triplett’s uncle see his wife’s Ashley Madison profile and her dirty emails to the Ambassador designate of Sokovia. Clint was slightly disappointed May’s ex-husband only left with a black eye.

Natasha was also extremely annoyed that for her efforts she only had a necklace shaped hard drive that Agent Triplett refused to hand over to anybody but the Director and a cryptic suggestion from Agent Carter-Jones to redo the original DNA analysis.

“I’m sure Stark already did that. Stark may be preoccupied with his boy toy, but did you check with Bruce?” Laura heard Clint asked Natasha.

“I tried to. However, he was equally preoccupied having tea with Pepper. He said that unless we were being invaded again, it could wait until morning.” Even Laura could pick up on a hint of annoyance in the woman’s voice despite her best efforts to keep her usual neutral tone.

“Apparently, listening to Pepper complain about having to escort Christine Everhart off the premises after Steve let it slip that he has a boyfriend is more crucial than finding out who killed the mother of
Stark’s son. And unfortunately Stark is so paranoid that even JARVIS does not have access to the DNA analysis.”

“This is why Steve needs to go to spy school.” Laura’s husband joked. “I’m surprised that they weren’t drinking anything harder.”

“I’m sure it was laced with something harder, possibly whiskey.” Natasha replied snidely. “I will ask Stark’s assistant to take care of it in the morning. I’d rather deal with her anyway.”

‘If she’s sober.’ Laura thought to herself.

“I would ask her now if she wasn’t curled up around Stark’s son, according to JARVIS.”

“I didn’t even know you could do jealous.”

“I’m not jealous. I’m annoyed that I’m not going to be able to look into a possible lead until morning.” Natasha countered.

“If you really wanted to you could access that information. I don’t know why you’re worried. You are aware that people can be friends and not actually sleep together? Pepper probably just needed someone to vent to about her business partner/ex-boyfriend and his idiot boyfriend and their inability to keep Stark’s 26-year-old indiscretion from ending up on the 6 o’clock…” Clint’s words were cut off by what sounds like kissing noises. Now Laura wished she could be watching this. She enjoyed watching them together.

“Okay. Normal people can be friends and not have sex. You and I are not normal. Pepper just broke up with Stark less than three months ago. It takes time to get over something like that.”

“Stark is already shacking up with Steve.” Natasha retorted.

“Actually, that kind of started before, the emotional part of it anyway. At least, that’s what May said and she was there.”

"She was sleeping with Steve." Natasha commented snidely.
“In her defense, May had no idea that Phil was alive at the time.” By his tone of voice, Laura could tell he doesn’t completely believe that.

“When exactly did you have time to speak with May?”

“When you were at a dysfunctional spy family barbecue, we had time to talk.” There’s a brief pause before Clint continued. Most likely because Natasha stared him down.

“After I asked Pepper if she and Bruce could give Laura a ride home, May pulled me aside and asked me to look into the death of the husband of one of Stark’s division heads in addition to coming up with a safe house.” Clint began to explain. “The division head, Deborah, was actually old shield from the 80s and her husband ended up in the morgue, three days after she identified a Hydra mole in her division."

“Shit.”

“Because she asked so nicely, my plans to retire to a life of Virginia farm work are completely shot. However, I now have a new renter for my former bachelor pad.” By bachelor pad, he meant the other house on the property where he lived before they got married. They were always amicable exes, but Clint wanted his own living space and therefore built a second cabin on the property.

"You were never going to actually retire." Natasha said in a tone of voice that told everybody that she knew Clint better than he knew himself.

“I considered it more than once, especially in the last few weeks, before Stark’s baby mama was in the morgue. I don’t want that to be Laura or the kids."

“You’ve always been afraid of that possibility. I think that’s why you allowed things to fall apart the first time around."

“Relationships are not controlled by force of will. Maybe we just needed to grow up or maybe I just needed to realize there’s no such thing as the perfect safe house. It’s easier to sleep if I can walk to Lila’s room when I do wake up in the middle of the night from one of those nightmares.”
“I wish I could sleep like her.” Natasha yawned audibly.

"When was the last time you slept for more than an hour?” Clint asked.

"Whatever day Lila woke me up by jumping on my bed because she heard strange sounds in the barn. If I had known it was one of Nick’s contacts with a mission, I would shot first and asked questions later." Natasha admitted grudgingly.

"That was like four days ago. You should sleep." Clint suggested.

“Probably, but in my own room.” Laura could feel Natasha getting off the bed.

“You know you can stay. Seriously, why else did Stark put king size beds in what is supposed to be a secret base?”

“Because he needed to make sure all of the beds could fit his ego.” Natasha joked. “You didn’t return my phone calls, so there’s no way I’m sleeping with you tonight.” Laura heard the door shut just seconds after that. She is not surprised that she left. Natasha never stayed, not even after sex. Laura didn’t want to examine why that fact made her sad.

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"You’re awake.” Clint said to his wife once he certain that Natasha is out of listening distance.

"You already knew that?” Laura smiled at him.

"Yes, and so did Natasha.” He lied down next to her certain that’s true. She would have mentioned that Nick was alive if she was 100% certain Laura wasn’t listening.

“You’re more honest when you think I’m sleeping.”

“That’s true. Speaking of being honest, my ex-boyfriend, who can’t even bother to tell me that he’s no longer dead, wants me to do him a favor by turning the old log cabin into a safe house.” A safe house that he wants to use for the pregnant widow of Victoria Hand and Stark’s R&D chief.
“Well, it’s not like you’re using it any more. Although, when did you talk to Phil without throwing a punch at him?” He didn’t actually throw a punch at Phil this afternoon. He may have thought about it a few times, but mostly stuck to words after being admonished multiple times by Laura to be a grown-up and actually talk to the man.

“That was you and I didn’t speak to the director directly. The order came from May.” Who had cornered him into a vehicle against his will, so he could help her relocate Stark’s employee and her daughter to another SI property (complete with the new JARVIS security system and Bobbi’s ex-husband and his partner, Idaho, standing guard) until they had a better solution. While they were waiting for Deborah to pack her things from her hotel room, May made the suggestion about the cabin. They may have talked a little bit about Phil, but Clint wasn’t quite ready to forgive, despite Laura now trying to convince him otherwise.

“You can’t avoid him forever. Again, he’s your boss and I saw those dusty diary pages that you probably have to give to him.”

That was so unfair. The Director actually avoided him this time.

“You said I could have a couple of weeks to be angry. Besides, I’m not doing anything that would jeopardize national security including my willingness to babysit former SHIELD operatives.” Yes, he was going to babysit the old agents. It allowed him to stay closer to his kids and kept him a good three hours away from his ex-boyfriend/boss. All good things in his mind.

“That was before I heard Phil talking to Pep…” Laura stopped speaking abruptly. “I know you’re mad, but I think he had a really good reason for not telling you.” Most likely national security reasons, but Clint was a big boy with his brand-new Tony Stark special which included a fingerprint safety lying next to his bed.

“There’s no good reason.” Clint said annoyed.

“What if he didn’t think that he was going to make …” Laura was interrupted by Natasha walking back into the room. Of course, she wouldn’t bother to knock. She never did.

“You came back.” He smiled at her. He wanted her to stay even if she had a really good reason to be mad at him. He’s extra pissed that he didn’t go with her to retrieve the locket.

“Come with me.” Natasha grabbed his hand and didn’t even give him a chance to say no.
Luckily, he’d been too busy talking with Laura to take his pants off. He wasn’t sure where they were going, except they were following the sound of jazz music. They stopped when they got to a large open door. He knew this was part of the base not yet renovated. He could smell drywall dust in the air. He could also pick up the sound of a blade cutting into the stuff.

He looked in to see Phil carving on the wall while May took pictures and Stark looked on with a scared sense of duty. He’s positive May knew he was there, but she doesn’t say a word. There’s something going on here, but he has no idea what. Natasha finally dragged him away just as Phil came out of his trance. They both decided that Natasha was going to keep an eye on Phil by whatever means necessary.

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Fitz had such an exhausting day that he really should be sleeping right now, but he could not. It was good being with his friends again. Even better, was actually being part of the mission again, even if he thought they were humoring him. No one would believe that he was actually dating Skye or Trip, and definitely not both at the same time (except for Agent Triplett’s homophobic aunt apparently).

He barely had any boyfriends at the Academy and never any girlfriends. The only reason why you had any ‘boyfriends’ was because it was usually just sex because he kept ending up attracted to arses (and terrorists) who were perfectly fine using him for their own means. A prime example of that is what happened after Nevada before everything went to hell.

He wished the oxygen deprivation would have taken away the memory of that night of mutual hand jobs. It didn’t even mean anything when it happened except to forget about Asgardian mind control. Ward wanted Skye and he was hopelessly in love with Simmons who would never see it. It had been just two friends helping each other out. Or maybe it was another means to ingratiate him to the Hydra Bastard.

Now what happened truly meant nothing since the bastard threw him into the ocean. If only that stint in the ocean would take everything away, but that was too much to ask for. He didn’t remember it at first, but the more time he spent around his friends, the ones who did not throw him into the ocean, literally, the more things were starting to come back, much to Fitz’s regret.

The current situation with Jemma was just another reminder of what a hopeless case he was when it came to all non-platonic relationships. Apparently, the prospect of a romantic relationship wasn’t worth risking their friendship, even if their friendship was already turning to rubbish and he wasn’t sure why.

Fitz cared about her too much to not respect that decision. He didn’t want to lose their friendship in the process either, but it seems like things were headed that direction and he was helpless to stop it.
She was avoiding him as if he was that stupid Chitauri virus except when she wanted to tell him how much she wanted things to go back to the way they were.

He was spending his days learning to tie his shoes again with the best physical therapist in the country while his newly discovered father tried to keep him out of the hands of the CIA, FBI, NSA, Hydra, and who knows who else. Nothing was going to be the same ever again.

He tried not to think about her while he was watching movies with Mack and Trista when everybody else was going to his potential future step-father’s birthday party. He didn’t feel left out because even Tony himself didn’t want to be there. During the multiple phone calls he had made through the night, Tony had threatened to shoot almost every member of the board at least once. Also, Mack was nice and didn’t try to take the can of soda away from Fitz when it took him five minutes to open the bloody thing by himself.

He tried not to think about her when Skye and Trip came back without the good fried chicken and an obviously store-bought cake. They told him about nearly getting arrested and Trip’s aunt almost fainting when she found that they were allegedly together despite the fact that she was screwing around with a future ambassador.

They ran away so they purposely did not have to deal with the fallout. Fitz would bet his Stark pad they were lying about Trip’s soon to be former aunt’s reaction in an effort to make him feel better, but it didn’t work. It just made him more resigned to focusing on the more important things like his recovery, figuring out his relationship with his father, and how to build his post Shield life. He doesn’t have the energy for anything else.

Of course, that thought made him think about Simmons’ argument with Trista that afternoon about what his name should be. Despite the brain damage, he still had enough brain cells left to know that Leopold Fitz was a dangerous name to have and he always hated the name Leopold anyway. Too many short jokes as a child. Again, he was on the wanted list of everybody from Hydra to the NSA.

Leo Fitz-Stark or even L. Fitz Stark would be better. It would be a fresh identity with very few connections to his actual past. Taking the name Stark meant completely accepting Tony as his dad and he was unsure if he was ready to take that step especially without talking to his mom. Unfortunately, she wasn’t exactly accepting his phone calls right now. He believed Simmons sensed his uncertainty which was why she was arguing so adamantly for him to keep his current name.

He pushed that far out of his mind as he lied alone in bed with his eyes closed. Everyone left his room 30 minutes ago at the first sign of his yawning. Actually, Trista kicked everybody out. However, he was nowhere near asleep when he heard his door crack open. His first thought was it
was going to be Tony even though his father said that he wouldn’t be back until at least 2 AM and it wasn’t quite midnight yet. Tony liked to check in on him in the middle of the night.

The click of heels tells him it’s not Tony, but rather Simmons. He had seen her dressed for the party earlier. She looked quite elegant in her cocktail gown, hair done up in a way that she had only worn once before at the pre-graduation ball at the Academy.

Fitz was almost sure that she didn’t realize he was still awake by the way she lied down next to him and wrapped an arm around him. He felt certain she would run out of the room screaming if she was aware.

"I made a complete fool of myself tonight. God, I hope there’s not an article about me being pregnant with your future half sibling tomorrow. That would just be awful and ridiculous.” She whispered as she moved a little bit closer.

Her confidence was obviously bolstered by the fact that he didn’t turn around and look at her. He knew that she wouldn’t say anything else if he let on that he was actually awake and he would really like to know why there could be an article about her sleeping with his father in the papers tomorrow. Well, another article about her sleeping with his father. Trip’s awful ex-boyfriend made sure he saw that particular issue of Express.

"I threw up on a reporter. You know that dreadful woman who hates your father. I think he slept with her and didn’t call the next day.” I don’t want to hear about my father’s sexploits. “Although, in his defense, it wasn’t his fault. There was a kidnapping involved that time.”

She doesn’t say Afghanistan, but he knew that she was talking about that incident.

“It was for the best. She knew about you or at least that Dr. Stark has a secret love child that was staying at the Woodbine rehabilitation center.” She explained with a hint of worry in her voice. He understood, considering the Hydra threat.

“Technically, you are still there. A security guard is under a nano mask impersonating you to keep Hydra from looking for you.” He wondered why they were going through so much trouble. “And makes sense considering what they did to your mum.”

What happened to his mum? What was she talking about? As far as he was concerned, she disappeared off the face of the planet because she most likely couldn’t be bothered with him. It
happened a lot during his childhood and he was left with various boyfriends who would use their fists more than necessary. Yet, Simmons made it sound like something more sinister happened.

“When your father tells you tomorrow, I hope he doesn’t show you the pictures. I hate my father now, but I never want to see him like that.”

‘Like what?’ He asked in his mind, but he didn’t think he could get the words out, even if he was willing to risk letting her know that he’s awake.

"They’re worried about me. They think I’m a lush and that I don’t sleep nearly enough. I know Steve purposely had his counselor friend drive me home. I don’t need a therapist. I’m fine."

'No you're not. Neither of us are.' Fitz thought to himself.

"Sam, the military to civilian life transition expert, thinks I should talk to somebody about the incident. The only people in this place that could understand what it was like are probably you and your father. He hates even mention of the ‘A’ word and I can’t talk to you because this is all my fault.”

It’s not, it’s his for not seeing past muscles and pretty eyes and realizing that Grant Ward was manipulating him. He was just another victim of the honey trap approach. The bastard was obsessed with Skye anyway, at least that’s what he overheard. People have been saying a lot of interesting stuff around him when they think that he’s half-asleep. But then that’s been the story of his spy career. Everyone under estimated his abilities.

" I’m the one who so desperately wanted an adventure. I’m the one who wanted us in the field and look where it got us. You’re learning how to button a shirt again and I can’t even look at a body of water without getting sick.” She tightened her arms around him.

"I didn’t believe you when you practically told me that you were in love with me. I just assumed your feelings for me were a reaction to Ward screwing us over. I was well aware of your crush on him.”

How the hell did she pick up on that? Did she know about what happened after the mind control thingy?
“Then I found your diary.” Thankfully they were too busy searching for the ‘Clairvoyant’ at the time for him to write down about snogging the jerk when slightly drunk. Why did that memory have to come back?

“I was cleaning your bunk so I could bring you things to make your room homier. It turned out that you actually did care about me before we were dumped in the ocean and I was completely oblivious to it.” Simmons laughed bitterly.

‘Very oblivious.’ He thought to himself. He’d been infatuated with her since their second day of classes when she corrected one of his calculations. He didn’t know how to handle it because she was the first woman he was ever sexually attracted to (Skye was the next) which explained why they spent most of their first few weeks at the Academy arguing with each other.

“This is a bad time to start anything. It would be a bad time even if we were only dealing with our agency imploding.” He agreed with her.

“I’m not even sure who I am anymore. I’m not even sure who you are. Leopold Fitz was never real.” Yes, I am.

“He was just the cover identity for Tony Stark Junior, not that you knew. Now that doesn’t change who you are completely, but falling into the ocean did. Not because you’re having trouble with your words, but because I know for a fact that the people who went into that ocean did not come out.” What did that even mean?

“The inquisitive girl who wanted to explore and be there in the thick of the action is not here anymore. All that’s left is a guilty shell of a person who needs at least a glass of Cabernet so she doesn’t flashback to holding your breathless body in her arms afraid that help was never going to come.” Fitz feels tear pricking his eyes at her words.

“I dream about the ocean every night. I escape with you in my arms, but Fury never arrives to rescue us.” She must be drunk since Fury is dead, Fitz thought. “Because he really did die in DC instead of just faking his death so he could hunt down Hydra more easily.” Or maybe he’s still missing some details about that day.

“Some nights I dream that you hate me or worse that you stopped loving me because you blame me. I would understand if you did, because I blame myself.” I don’t blame you. The words are on his lips, but he can’t say them. He hated his brain and the fact that it doesn’t communicate with his mouth very well anymore.
“I didn’t think that you loved me, not like that. It wasn’t like I ever saw you with any girls at the Academy.” You are the only one I was interested in back then. “Now, it doesn’t matter, it can’t matter and everything is just confusing. I wish we could just go back to last year before everything fell apart.” A part of him wished he could go back to that point too, but he wouldn’t have Tony or even Skye and they mean a lot to him.

“I wonder if we are cursed or maybe friends aren’t meant to become lovers. Your father and Ms. Potts are an obvious case.” As pointed out in her comments from earlier. “I don’t know if they’ll ever get back to what they were. Whatever they were, they can’t be that now. Whatever we were, we can’t be that now either.”

She was right earlier when she said that whoever went down into that ocean did not come back up. They were different people now and they had to figure out what that meant before anything else. He had to figure out who Leo Fitz Stark is.

“What are we now?” He didn’t have an answer to that question.

“I love you, but I’m not sure how I love you. I don’t know what type of love and I don’t think I can figure that out right now. I have to figure out who I am, without SHIELD and you need to figure out how to deal with your disability, your billionaire father, and the fact that Hydra butchered your mother to pieces for reasons only known to them. Romance is the last thing either of us should be thinking about.”

He feels Simmons kiss his shoulder, but all he could think was ‘What the bloody hell are you talking about?’

Xxx

It was different seeing it in person. Tony had watched the compulsive carving by Director Agent via satellite feed, but it was eerie watching the most controlled person he’d ever known give in to this compulsion when just feet away. Agent Scary stood there taking pictures as crazy carving music mix number 3 played in the background. Apparently, Jarvis came up with the perfect soundtrack to lose your mind to; there was lots of jazz involved.

For a moment, Tony thought he heard footsteps which didn’t surprise him. The base was currently filled with spies and Avengers. When he turned around, there was no one there. He thought about asking JARVIS, but he didn’t want to break the spell of whatever’s happening. Besides, if there had been a threat his AI would tell him.
It was over now. Director Agent was half asleep on a chair as May and Steve folded the tarp that caught all the drywall dust. He debated with himself whether he should let the contractors deal with this in the morning or take care of it himself before the workers wreck the room as part of the next phase of renovations to the base.

In the end, Tony decided to have Dummy 2.0 take a sandblaster to the thing so no one else would see the alien writing on the wall. At least he’d do that after JARVIS completed his scans. He hoped that the AI would find something or at least get a certain Asgardian to take his calls. Where that hell was the big guy? They could really use an alien language expert right now.

As Steve carried Phil to his room, Tony wondered how Agent Scary dealt with all of this by herself. She needed help or at least somebody else to know the secret, but Steve moving onto their base wasn’t an option right now.

Tony locked the room to make sure nobody came across the writing accidentally. Phil didn’t want Agent Skye to see the carvings on the wall yet. With the alien miracle drug being in her system too, he worried that she may begin to do the same thing.

He found himself moving to Leo’s room. He was half-asleep and dead on his feet, but he still wanted to check up on his kid. Stephanie said that it is a built-in parent instinct. Evidently, it must have skipped Howard, since his dad never did anything like that (unless you count having spies babysit/fuck him, literally, in college).

Considering how tense things were recently, he wasn’t expecting to see his assistant in his son’s bed. Although, this was his kid, he was talking about. There must be something in their DNA that led to this type of situation. At least they are both fully clothed which was never the case when he was involved. Before he could make a snide comment about that, Leo’s eyes opened and he made the international shushing sound.

Fine. He won’t say anything. Instead, he typed exactly what he was thinking on his Stark pad and passed it to his son. Besides, this might be easier because the Stark pad has excellent word prediction software.

*Why exactly is my assistant sleeping in your bed? Although, I guess I should be happy she is fully clothed, even if ball gowns are itchy.*

*JS wanted to talk. Fell asleep.* Fitz typed back.
Tony didn’t believe him, but let it go.

You’re an adult. You can do whatever and whoever you want. Tony typed before passing the pad back. Leo rolled his eyes at him as he read the message.

Does JS have trouble sleeping? Leo asked.

Yes. Tony decided not to elaborate. There was no need for Leo to realize how much trouble Simmons had sleeping without him.

Is there a reason why my mum hasn’t called?

Tony was not expecting that. Why did he have to ask that question? Tony had a feeling that his assistant must’ve said something during their conversation. There is no way he was going to type out the answer to that question on the Stark pad any more than was he going to wake up his insomniac assistant. However, his silence was apparently too much of an answer for his genius son.

She is dead? Leo typed. Shit.

Do you like pancakes? He realized it was a stupid thing to ask. He had no idea why he typed that except he had virtually no interpersonal skills to speak of and was completely out of his depths right now.

That means yes. Hydra did something to her? Leo was now sitting upright. Somehow he’d extricated himself from Simmons. Surprisingly, she stayed asleep. Tony wondered exactly how much alcohol she drank last night or if she had taken a sleeping pill. Then again, he couldn’t remember how many times he had found her sleeping on top of her laptop.

Tony nodded his head because he has no fucking clue what to say. Even in the darkness, he saw one tear slide down Fitz’s face. He understood this reaction. Despite his complicated relationship with Howard, Tony had cried. He had been alone in the bathroom at the morgue and wanted nothing more than for Jarvis or even Peggy to hug him, but no one was there. In that moment, Tony did exactly what he had wanted somebody to do for him. He wrapped his arms around Fitz as tightly as he could.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered in his son’s ear, unable to say anything else as his child promptly cried
into his T-shirt.

Chapter End Notes

The song used in this chapter is Drink You Away by Justin Timberlake. Even though it was only released as a single in November, it’s been around since September 2013. I’m sure I’m going to end up writing a Tony centered song fic to that post Civil War. It just feels like a Tony Stark break up song.
Natasha took the offered Stark pad from Agent Koenig as he explained how to activate the security measures in place to keep the prisoner in vault D from attacking her during this interrogation. She was thankful that the agent was mostly professional and did not spend the entire conversation gushing over her. Maybe he had gotten that out of his system when she arrived to the base three days ago.

She wanted an excuse to keep an eye on Coulson after she and Clint caught him carving on the walls. Stark provided her with one in the form of interrogating Hydra operative and Playground resident, Grant Ward.

Ward was the one responsible for Leo Fitz-Stark’s diminished state, as the young man had now requested to be called. Ward was the one who betrayed Coulson’s team. However, more importantly he was an invaluable source of Hydra Intel.

Did he know how Hydra was able to keep in the shadows for so long? Did he know anything about the Nursery Group or the murder of Fitz’s mother? Unfortunately, the Hydra agent wasn’t speaking.

Coulson had Dr. Suarez working with the prisoner for two reasons. The main reason was he was suicidal, and a dead informant informs on nothing. The second reason was to try to uncover any intel by monitoring the sessions. Ethically, it was questionable, but they were at war.
While most of the team had been away from the base for Steve’s birthday, the prisoner used a piece of paper given to him as part of art therapy to slash his wrists. Natasha could almost hear Coulson reprimanding the therapist. This prisoner could use almost anything as a weapon.

Apparently, this was Ward’s second suicide attempt and Stark really did not want the person who almost killed his child to die by his own hand before supplying some answers. At this point, Stark wanted to fly his armor to the Playground and threaten the man at repulser point until he talked.

Natasha knew that type of persuasion didn’t work on people like Grant Ward because she used to be Grant Ward. They were weapons in human form with little autonomy. Death was preferable under enemy confinement. Make no mistake, they were his enemy. It’s probably why he kept trying to kill himself, despite the fact his suicide pill was taken away. That doesn’t matter much when you are trained to use anything and everything as a weapon.

Natasha wondered if he was trained from a young age like her to be the ultimate weapon or if he was at one time a good SHIELD agent who turned dark. An agent who became so disenfranchised with the system that he turned sides. She felt it was more likely the former given rumors she heard about him from before and the note she found in his file.

He was the only person who could hold a candle to her when it came to espionage. There was an obvious reason for developing that particular skill set and that was the need to be everything and everyone for the mission.

She made the screen transparent as she walked down the steps to greet the prisoner. She waited three days to give him time to recover from his latest suicide attempt before trying to interrogate. The fact that he was up this morning at 5 AM doing his regular exercise routine made Natasha think he was ready for her. Despite that, she could still see the white bandages around his wrist. She surprised he was allowed that. They just gave him means for his next attempt. He could easily suffocate himself with that much material.

“So they brought out the big guns. It’s nice to meet you in person, Agent Romanoff. Your reputation precedes you.” Of course he recognized who she was despite the new hair color, glasses, and suit to make her look like another therapist.

“I’m flattered that Coulson thinks so much of me.” The man said attempting to sound as cocky as possible.
But it was a front. She could tell from his eyes that he was slowly breaking down. Maybe the solitary was getting to him. Spending so much time with only your thoughts could make you reevaluate your life choices. That’s what happened with her, but he’s not her, not completely. Right now she just wanted as much information about Hydra as possible.

Steve wanted Hydra blood and this was the only target they had at the moment. Not only for what they did to him and his best friend, but for killing Howard and almost murdering Tony’s son. The US military was supposedly trying to track down Hydra. The only thing they were really doing was finding legitimate SHIELD agents, whose only crime was complacency and clueless regarding their agency’s corruption.

She couldn’t fault any of them that because she herself was just as guilty. She didn’t see the truth until it was too late, but she saw it now. They won the battle when they brought down the helicarriers into the Potomac, not the war. The pieces of Hydra were still out there and as they should’ve learned from its parasitic growth inside of SHIELD there only needs to be one for regrowth to happen.

“Not Coulson.” His eyes became dark at the name. "The father of one of the people you almost killed when you dumped them into the Gulf of Mexico.” Her words were deliberately vague, providing him with an opportunity to incriminate himself.

“Of course it wasn’t Coulson, because he knows that I will only provide information to Skye.” There was no way she was sending the baby agent in here yet, not until Skye was fully trained to May’s and her own high standards. Not unless something happens that would be on the level of New York and maybe not even then.

“She's not available. If your helpfulness wasn’t based on some ulterior motive, you would be volunteering information without that particular demand. Instead I'm here to get as much out of you as possible including why you dumped my client’s child in the oce...” Natasha was cut off by him before she could even finish her sentence.

“I wasn’t trying to kill Fitz and Simmons. I was trying not to kill them. I really thought the pod would float.” He sounded sincere, but she had a feeling that was more because of his expert skills at lying then any true sincerity.

“If the impact did not kill them first,” Natasha rebutted.

“They survived.”
“Barely. It doesn’t matter because one of them has a very powerful father who is unhappy with you.” Stark would like to aim at Jericho missile at you. “He has personally engaged my services.” She smiled at him before taking a seat in the one chair in the room. She saw Coulson sit there for over an hour yesterday trying to get the man to talk but nothing.

“If you were sent by Simmons’ father, I’m surprised I’m not dead already. Although, I didn’t think the oil executive was still that powerful.”

Interesting, he knows what Simmons father did for a living. She knew that was purposely omitted from the scientist’s SHIELD files. He must know by some other means which caused Natasha to make a mental note to look into the oil company’s finances. Actually, the fact that he assumed the executive would order an immediate hit on him had her just as concerned.

“Actually, I’m sure he managed to make too many people angry especially after that nasty oil spill a couple years ago. I’m surprised that he even knew that his daughter was a SHIELD agent.” He didn’t know until MI 6 showed up at his door and ever since then he’s been increasingly belligerent. That would explain why Stark had no qualms feeding the press information about the man’s affair with his assistant.

"Not Agent Simmons." Natasha replied curtly, which caused the man in front of her to smirk.

"Nice try. I really thought you were better at this sort of thing. Fitz doesn’t have a father.” It appeared Ward actually believed that. “I guess some people are just lucky enough to not have to deal with a father whose political ambitions and love for a psychopath resulted in him never asking why his kids were covered in bruises.”

She knew he had a history of child abuse. It was in his file corroborated by an anecdote from Howard’s journal from 1989. The note was about the fallout from Maria calling Massachusetts child services on Senator Ward Senior when she noticed too many bruises on his children at a charity event. Actually, that anecdote was the only evidence supporting his claims, but it made her wonder how early his induction began.

“Maybe you’re not as good as you think you are. Maybe Fitz was so good at subterfuge that he even fooled you.” Ward raised an eyebrow at her words snorted in disbelief. Obviously, he didn’t know anything about it.

"Fitz may be a better liar then Simmons, but I don’t think he was ever that good. As close as we
were, I am sure he would have slipped up eventually. We were very close.”

At his emphasis on the word 'close', she made a mental note to ask Fitz-Stark if he engaged in a sexual relationship with the man who almost killed him. It wouldn’t surprise her. It was a common technique to extract information, unfortunately. It was one of the main reasons behind the Red Room’s ‘graduation ceremony’.

“They say the best spy is one you don’t expect. I assume that you are unaware that the only part of his field assessment that he did pass was the espionage portion, with extremely high marks actually.”

The statement was mostly true. The man actually had the best marks coming out of the science Academy in that regard since Marcy Carter-Jones graduated in the early 80s. Although, Fitz -Stark also passed the weapons portion. His hand to hand was just so bad that it couldn't be overlooked despite his high marks in the other two areas.

"Regardless of how well you think you know your former teammate, who you stabbed in the back, Leopold Fitz is the son of the merchant of death himself. Dr. Stark is very displeased with you. Actually, he wants to use you as target practice.” She smiles at him as she turns the screen around to show him video images of Stark using his latest armor in action. Ward doesn’t react. Not even a twitch.

"But you won’t let him do that. You’re the good guys. Coulson won’t let him do that because you need me alive. Dead men give no Intel."

“You’re not as valuable as you think you are.” She gives him her most menacing glare. “I may be an Avenger now, but I’m not a good person. Your blood on my hands won’t make a bit of difference to me because they’re already stained crimson and they were long before your parents were covering up your Pyro tendencies. Considering all the bad things that you done including killing Victoria Hand and leaving her twins motherless, it may be easier for me to sleep afterwards”. For just a second Ward tensed at her words.

“But you want Hydra gone. I’m the only key that you have right now. That gives me power and I’m not speaking to anyone, but Skye."

“Again, you’re not as important as you think you are. You were just another tool in the toolbox. There are other pieces of intel out there, many more valuable than you. Besides, I wouldn’t even let you talk to Skye even if she was still with us.” Her choice of phrasing was deliberate and the look on his face told her that it worked. It's the most reaction he'd had so far.
"Where is she? Is she okay?" To Natasha surprise, he was genuinely worried. Perfect. That means Skye can be used to manipulate him even if they don’t let her come down here at all.

Natasha purposely does not tell him that Skye is on a private plane to Scotland to help her friend spread the ashes of the woman that Natasha didn’t protect. Instead, she stayed silent as she made the clear screen between them opaque and walked out of the room. She would try again tomorrow.

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Jemma was unaware of how truly large the Arlington Stark House facilities were until she was there alone. Well, not truly alone. Sam had moved in to be her bodyguard while Tony and Steve were away on business.

Business may not exactly be the right word for it. They’re going with Fitz to scatter his mother’s ashes after attending the ‘funeral’ of Tony’s head of R&D. She wasn’t really dead. It’s just that her house exploded due to a gas leak about five hours after she would’ve arrived.

The Director decided to take advantage of this opportunity. This meant Ms. Potts’ assistant planned a fake funeral while being unaware that it was a fake and Jemma temporarily took over running the R&D department.

It would be so much easier if she was allowed to relocate to either the New York or LA research facility. Both possibilities were deemed too dangerous, especially in light of the fact she was covering for someone who had her house blown up possibly (probably) by Hydra after her husband was killed. Instead, she was forced to use JARVIS to conference with everyone as she stayed locked inside the Arlington Stark House for her own safety with Sam camped out on the couch.

Well, not the actual couch. He was occupying Romanoff’s former bedroom, but he was still there an awful lot. Shocking, really, considering she knew for a fact that he had a real job.

This was the main reason why she wasn’t with Leo as he went home, well, other than not being invited. He asked Skye to come along with Trista and his new best friend, Mack, the bodyguard. He asked them, but not her, not the person who has known him for more than six years.

She hadn’t spoken to him since the night she fell asleep in his bed and woke up to him crying in his father’s arms. Witnessing that exchange was the entire reason why she was finally comfortable calling her boss by his first name.
She tried to offer Fitz comfort after that. She even made him his favorite sandwich, but he was avoiding her. Maybe he was glad that she was too busy to come with him. She thought Fitz would realize that if he wanted her there she would be no matter what. One of the projects occupying her time included discovering his origins and trying to connect it in any way to his mother’s murder. At least this way she could help him even if he would not accept her help with anything else, not that he knew the truth.

Of course she discovered that the silence of the lab was unnerving while she was by herself. She was used to working with Fitz and more recently his father. Even Dr. Banner would have been preferable to the silence. She ordered JARVIS to play Opera mix number four, but it did nothing to make the room less quiet. The only thing that did that was Trip video calling her.

“Do you have the results?” Trip asked as soon as Jarvis put him up on screen. Naturally, he was only calling her for the results of the DNA analysis he’d asked her to do it before leaving on July 6. She couldn’t help but roll her eyes. This was the third time he has called in as many days. Neither the Director nor Agent Romanoff was that persistent.

“My answer has not changed in the last 19 hours.” Simmons said slightly annoyed. “I promise to call as soon as I have anything solid.” She had a few theories, but she needed to run more tests. “Besides, I was under the impression you weren’t supposed to make any phone calls.”

Trip was on a mission to assist with the relocation of Deborah and her daughter with Agent Hunter after her death was successfully faked. Due to the sensitivity of the situation, there was supposed to be a communications blackout, but that hasn’t stopped the agent from contacting her repeatedly to find out if she had found any answers in his DNA.

“We just moved your predecessor and her teenage daughter into their new house in the middle of the night a few hours ago complete with new identities. We are just taking the long way back to the base with a detour to a taco stand in the middle of nowhere Virginia. Besides, I needed a break from Hunter. He’s screaming at his soon to be ex-wife at said taco stand because the universe is full of coincidences and I can only deal with so much. It's too early in the morning for that.” She heard enough rumors about Agent Hunter to make her glad that she was at Stark house.

“You couldn’t call Skye?” She asked.

“I have no idea what time it is where she is.” Neither did Simmons, not really. Skye left with Fitz, but she may not still be with him and his security team now that Tony finally made his way to London. She had a mission from the Director and Romanoff that Simmons was not privy to. That’s what happens when you’re no longer actually part of SHIELD, only a consultant.
“Really, I just want to know if you found what my aunt said we would find.” Simmons rolled her eyes again at that.

“I ran both yours and Fitz’s sample against the DNA database from the old SHIELD and there were no matches.” That wasn’t entirely true, but she wanted to ease into the fact that Leo was related to his Aunt Marcy and Trip was a partial match to a sample that had no information associated with it whatsoever.

“It would be entirely easier if I knew what I was looking for.” Her frustration was obvious. She just wanted to find something, anything, to explain what was going on.

“We could always try to schedule coffee with my aunt, but it may be a little difficult since she was just reassigned to the Advance Threat Containment task force.” Trip said sarcastically.

Because of the agency’s corruption/demise, or rather old SHIELD’s demise, there was a vacuum in the intelligence community in regards to the type of threats that old SHIELD formally dealt with, so it made sense that the CIA, NASA, DOD, and other agencies created a joint task force to fill that void. It also made sense that as a former shield agent with more experience with the abnormal, Agent Carter-Jones would be appointed to the task force. However, now they can’t access the cryptic agent to ask more questions. Not that she provided any substantial answers in the first place.

“Director Price is watching and she can’t make contact right now, especially with what happened last week.” They also would hate to make her new supervisor aware of the rehabilitation of SHIELD as a private enterprise at a time when former agents were still being hunted like witches in 17th-century Salem.

“I understand that. Contacting her again would not be necessary if we could access the ‘necklace’ drive that you brought.” She lamented.

No one could access the device, not the Director, Skye, or even JARVIS. Or rather, they could access the device, but they could not decipher the code that the information was written in. Tony considered that a personal affront and was likely focusing most of his energy on that from wherever he was. Simmons wondered if that was the main reason why Skye went along with them. It couldn’t just be because Leo trusted her more right now.

"I don’t even think she could access it.” Trip confessed. “I think Fury knew that something was going to go down and gave it to her for safekeeping which means he’s probably the only one who can access it.” It seemed highly probable, given the paranoia of their former boss which was bloody ridiculous. His replacement should be able to access the files with ease. They needed that
information. She just knew it, but they had no access.

“Forget about the necklace drive. What else have you discovered so far from the DNA samples?” Trip asked.

“I confirmed the hypothesis that that both you and Leo were created using a procedure to create an embryo from three DNA sources.” She said before going on to explain in more detail about what was found including the fact that there was evidence that additional genetic engineering was involved. At least this explains why Fitz never had so much as a cold at the Academy. This also explains why Leo is recovering faster than Dr. Triplett projected.

"Well, at least Aunt Marcy wasn’t lying about that.” Trip exclaimed after she was finished, “nice to know that not everyone in my family lies.”

"I think they just want you and Leo to feel normal which is why they lied about it. Your mom obviously loves you.” She knew that Tony loved Fitz too. There were no doubts in her mind after watching Tony comfort her friend when he found out his mother had been killed.

The same can be said of Dr. Triplett. Before leaving, Jarvis forced Trip to see footage of his mom and stepfather accosting Ms. Potts to get any information on him whatsoever during the black days after the fall of shield. She was desperate for anything about her son.

“So much that she lied.” Trip scoffed. “Is that really love?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t a horrible lie.” It wasn’t like saying you were on a business trip when you were actually shagging various trollops throughout the majority of Europe and Asia.

“Lies now have degrees of awfulness?”

"My mom just moved into a new flat last week after learning that I’m going to have a new half-sister in six months’ time because when my father was working late he was really shagging his assistant.” She blurted out.

Her mum didn’t need Tony’s comments to be aware of her husband’s philandering. Jemma was certain in the back of her mind, her mum had known it for a while but she couldn't keep up the pretense any longer when confirmation came in the form of her husband being the father of his
assistant’s soon to be born child. The offer of a job at any Stark facility worldwide and a flat, to go along with it made it easier for her to leave.

“She’s been covering it up for years. Trying to keep up a happy front for my siblings.” Maybe the fact that Jemma’s youngest sibling would be heading off to university in the fall contributed to her mum finally leaving as well. If there were no children at home, there would no longer be a need to pretend.

“In that case, I think I would’ve preferred the truth. But I understand why she did it. It’s the same with your mom. I think she convinced herself that knowing the truth would hurt you. She didn’t want you to feel like something less just because of how you came into the world.”

“So you’re never planning to tell Leo that his biological mother was actually an agent of Hydra who essentially drugged and raped a 14-year-old for his genetic material?”

She’s been thinking about that herself for a while. Yes, Leo now knew that his mother was dead at the hands of Hydra, but not the details. He still thinks that he’s the product of two teenagers doing dumb things in the back of a convertible, not some sort of conspiracy to take over SHIELD or Stark Industries. She wasn’t sure if that was Hydra’s purpose in Leo’s case. Yes that’s obvious what they were planning to do with Director Carter-Jones, but was it the same with Howard Stark?

Considering the things that she’s read about him in the history books, it seemed highly unlikely that Howard could have been blackmailed by shame. The man had a sex tape on actual film before the internet was a glimmer in a defense contractor’s mind. A copy ended up on YouTube a few years ago before being promptly yanked down by SHIELD.

She decided that it was best to keep all her hypothesis to herself until she had a better understanding of why it happened. Personally, she didn’t care because she was happy they did whatever they did because the thought of a world without Leo was completely terrifying.

xxxxxx

“I think it’s best not to say anything to Leo until we know what actually happened.” Simmons said defensively. Trip just sighed. He didn’t feel like dealing with another lecture from her about why he should deal with his mommy issues. There’s too much for him to process and at this point he wished he had never looked into things in the first place.

He would deal with it eventually, but not until he had a better idea of what was going on.
“Which will probably never happen because anyone who actually did know is dead.” With the exception of his grandmother, who has Alzheimer’s. “All we have is the evidence. What does the evidence tell you?” He asked again because he needed to know the truth and the evidence rarely lies.

“I must warn you that genetics is not my specialty…” He rolled his eyes because she’s hedging. She really was a bad liar.

“But Dr. Banner confirmed my hypothesis that one contributor to both your and Fitz’s DNA are related.” He should be surprised, but he’s not. The process used to create him and Agent Fitz must’ve been expensive. It made sense that they recycled some of the same genetic ‘materials’.

But wait, that doesn’t work because Fitz is so light skin, ridiculously light-skinned considering Maria was his grandmother. Although the woman died when he was just a little kid, Trip remembered her being just slightly lighter than his own mother. Actually, he’s surprised that Stark is as light skinned as he is considering his Puerto Rican mother.

“You believe that I am related to Fitz through my mom?” It was the only logical option.

“That was my original hypothesis. It was proven correct when the computer partially matched Fitz to your Aunt Marcy.” Well, his hunch about her lying when she said neither of their samples matched anyone in the old SHIELD database was true.

"That explains why Marcy was so happy when I told her that I wasn’t actually sleeping with Fitz. He’s not my half-brother?”

Oh God, did he actually kiss his half sibling the other day to get pictures to freak out his soon to be former aunt? Just the thought was a little disturbing. He thought stuff like that only happened in the Star Wars universe.

"No, at worst you are genetic cousins.” Like that made it so much better. Yes, he had made out with his cousin before, but it was a mission thing and he really never ever wanted to think about it again.

“I could be wrong. Remember, genetics is not my specialty.” Obviously she was picking up on the look of horror on his face. "You only kissed him on the cheek during your photo shoot.” That’s because the more risqué pictures were taken without you in the room because I was certain you would hurt me if I laid a finger on your Fitz. “You did much worse with Skye.”
“I’m not related to Skye. At least, I don’t think I’m related to Skye? I’m not, right?”

“No, you’re not. She was one of the thousands of samples that you were compared against because she’s in the SHIELD database.”

“Thank God.”

“I would ask you if you were attracted to Skye, but I’m well aware she’s not your type.” And Trip will not correct that assumption for the sake of avoiding the ‘It’s not your gender, it is you that I’m not attracted to’ conversation. There’s only so much uncomfortableness one can handle in a single phone call.

During his road trip with Hunter, the R&D director formally known as Deborah and her daughter, Trip came to the conclusion that yes, he does like Skye, and yes, he would like to make out with her again, but his life was just too fucked up at the moment to deal with this. He decided to just concentrate on the big stuff like Hydra. Although it was good to know he did not accidentally kiss another cousin.

“Because your mother and your aunt have different fathers, the relation must come from former Director Carter-Jones. I wish we had a sample of your grandmother’s brothers to compare. That seems to be the most likely possibility.” Trip wasn’t so sure himself.

Uncle Michael died before having any known children. Although, it’s possible that he may have got somebody pregnant when he was on the front lines and did not live long enough to know about it.

Sharon’s grandfather was another possibility, but there was something niggling him in the back of his mind. Tony Stark was very light skin with straight hair. He didn’t exactly look like Maria Stark. He did look a lot like Uncle Taylor, but with more facial hair.

Oh Fuck!

Grandma really? But this shouldn’t surprise him. There were pictures of his Aunt Desiree with Maria taken in March of 1972 with her, looking anything but pregnant. He knew that his grandmother at one point was very close to the Starks. Again, he’d seen pictures of Maria and Howard with his aunts and uncles. Actually, there’s a picture of Maria Stark at his third birthday party and he remembered Howard coming to his grandmother’s house several times when he was a little kid. The last time was only a week before he died. He remembered because they just put the Christmas tree up
and Mr. Stark brought presents that nobody opened due to his death.

"Did you compare Stark’s DNA to mine?" The words were out of Trip's mouth before he even realized it.

"Of course not. I did not find any reason to believe that…

"You should. If you are 100% sure I am related to Fitz you should see if I’m related to his known family members."

“Normally, I would do that, but I find it highly unlikely that you are…” Trip cut her off midsentence.

“And I think you’re going to need a sample from my grandmother to run against Fitz and Stark.” He practically said in a whisper. He couldn’t even believe he was thinking it, let alone saying it out loud.

"Why would I need a sample from former director…” Simmons goes silent as she apparently gets what he’s insinuating. “That would be statistically impossible. Director Carter would’ve been in her mid-50s and was still in a very public position. Her pregnancy would not have gone unnoticed.”

“People barely realized she was pregnant with Stephanie. The science team came up with a special camouflaged coat or something. In addition, I have photographic evidence of Maria Stark not being pregnant two months before Tony Stark was born wearing no such technology. Also Grandma Peggy didn’t go through menopause until my mom was a teenager and please don't ask me why I know that.” On good days his grandmother was very chatty and because she always assumed that he was his grandfather, some days she over shared.

“The dates may be wrong in the picture. You’re actually accusing your grandmother of having an affair?” Not at all because he couldn’t see that happening with how much his grandparents loved each other. Could they have had some sort of arrangement to help Maria have a child? Possibly.

That’s when Trip remembered one weird afternoon when he was 13, where he arrived home early to find his mother crying into his grandmother’s lap. She came all the way out from New York for his mom's first ultrasound of his new brother or sister. Except that afternoon they discovered there was no longer a baby. His mom was devastated.

That day Trip overheard his grandmother tell his mom all about the trouble her friend Maria had
getting pregnant, even giving birth to a stillborn child just a few weeks before Stephanie herself was born. Eventually they found a surrogate that helped her have a beautiful boy. It's only now that he realizes who Maria actually was.

"I don’t know what I’m accusing her of except at this point I’m pretty sure that Tony Stark is my uncle. There are lots of ways to have a kid without sex being involved." Like jacking off into a cup at the List Group Center for Fertility of Arlington. He almost did that for Isabel before she decided to go with donor sperm.

“If he wasn’t born in 1972, I would think in vitro fertilization, but that technique was not successful until 1977."

"And three parent embryos are just undergoing FDA approval right now, but my fellow three parent embryo cousin will be 27 next month." There was a touch of annoyance in his voice.

"You have a valid point. It’s entirely possible that the technique was perfected earlier and we know that much like his son, Howard Stark was a science visionary. Although, why Stark Industries would be working on fertility technology?” Because the bylaws of Stark Industries at the time required a biological heir.

“Maria Stark had a stillbirth a couple of weeks before my mom was born. She also had several miscarriages before that.” He said instead. There are probably other reasons as well, but he doesn’t feel comfortable sharing at the moment.

“I guess, when you’re a billionaire and run a top secret organization, you can invest a lot in solving your fertility issues.” He could see her frustration on the screen.

"JARVIS where are the diaries of Howard Stark?” He heard her ask just as he saw Hunter walking back to the car from his meeting with his ex-wife carrying a bag of tacos. Also, Trip was almost certain there were bite marks on his neck that were not there when he walked into his meeting with his ex.

"Currently in the possession of Director Coulson. They were turned over last Saturday.” Simmons then used various colorful British curse words. “However, a copy has been placed on the server and you have access to anything related to Project LULLABY."

“You should look into that.” Maybe whatever Project Lullaby was became the nursery group. It's
possible with Hydra's infiltration. "Look, I have to go. Hunter is back and Coulson doesn’t want him
to know too much of what’s going on with this."

"It’s okay. I think I have an idea where I need to search." Simmons said, ending the call.

"Why do you have tacos at 10 in the morning?" Trip asked as Hunter sat next to him. From the scent
alone, he was 99% sure Hunter had sex with his ex-wife, who may or may not have defected to
Hydra. His disheveled appearance confirmed it.

"They’re breakfast tacos, although I would’ve preferred doughnuts. It would’ve been a lot less
conspicuous right now, but that wasn’t an option. Besides, these are for the Director, sort of." Hunter
explained cryptically.

“Are we going back to the Playground?” He asked concerned. Again, he didn’t think the Director
trusted the new guy enough to give him direct orders.

"No, we are transmitting him whatever is on the taco wrapper through Mr. Super Siri.” Jarvis is so
going to get him for saying that later. “Afterwards, we need to go back to watch the newly minted
science teacher, Kimberly, and her daughter, Erica, to make sure that there’s not another gas leak.
Director’s orders." Hunter said just after double checking to see that the Jarvis security measures
were in place to make the vehicle NSA proof.

Of course, the tacos were wrapped in nano paper and this was a dead drop. It made perfect sense,
considering who Hunter’s ex-wife was, especially in light of the marks covering the guy’s neck. He
didn’t believe his ex-boyfriend's assertions that Bobbi went to the dark side. Obviously, she was
undercover and Hunter was around to make drops easier.

The possibility that ranting about his ex-wife was part of his cover was the only thing that kept Trip
from strangling the guy right now, the only thing. Bobbi’s time undercover had been very fruitful
since she just provided them with the names of several new heads of Hydra, including Wolfgang von
Strucker.

He’s not surprised at all that the former division head of SHIELD’s science programs was now in
charge. His father-in-law, a Dr. List, was apparently his number two. Bobbi was extremely thorough
and also included information about his wife, Natalie von Strucker. She allegedly runs a string of
fertility clinics throughout the U.S., including the center that Isabella used in Arlington to get
pregnant.
It could be a Hydra front, but no concrete proof yet other than the fact the place received a lot of subsidies from shield pre-collapse. It was also the clinic of choice for the SHIELD agent who wanted a kid, but couldn’t the old-fashioned way. It was something to look into.

Since it was a long drive back, he decided to have JARVIS find any information on Natalie he can. Apparently, professionally, she still goes by her maiden name of List. She also filed for divorce from von Strucker two days after shield fell apart. Considering he was still tight with her father, this might have been a means to distance her from him and to keep her from getting arrested.

The AI produced a picture of her with her stepson, Alexander, from the fertility center’s website. He couldn’t put it out of his mind that she looked almost like a younger version of Maria Stark. She was even born a few weeks before his mom, which would’ve lined up with when the Stark's lost their child. All of this just has to be coincidence or a side effect of growing up in the spy industry. It couldn't mean anything, could it?

Of course, if Trip had asked JARVIS to research her father, he would’ve found out that the doctor was Maria Stark's personal OB/GYN from 1967 to 1971 and the one who delivered the allegedly stillborn Natasha Stark. Trip never asked, so JARVIS never told him.

To be continued

Chapter End Notes

I would love to hear your theories about Natalie von Strucker formally List.
Chapter 15: Of Confessions and Arrangements

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. Your reviews keep me writing. In celebration of AOS being renewed for a fourth season and the brand-new episodes of this season, you get a new chapter in under two months. Actually, I was so hyped up I accidentally wrote two chapters at the same time. Therefore, I’m 99% sure I’ll have another chapter done before Captain America: Civil War makes me an emotional mess. (I just need your encouragement to make me sit down and write out one last scene.)

Why must my babies fight? Couples therapy could completely prevent this. I’m pretty sure that Dr. Suarez is a much better therapist than Andrew and she’s less likely to be homicidal. (Despite this, I am a complete masochist because I already have tickets to watch Civil War in IMAX at 9 AM on May 6. I think this is the first time I will watch a movie in IMAX, so it should be fun and heartbreaking.)

Continuity note: This story is cannon compliant for Agent Carter season two because nothing contradicts what I have planned. Actually, what happened to Anna Jarvis works well with my narrative and will be used.

Also, I have no idea if MIT was on a quarter system in the 80s, but in this story they were and have a similar schedule to my alma mater Ohio University, home of the Thanksgiving to New Year’s winter break. It just works better for my story. (Okay, I forgot that Fitz’s cannon birthday is August 19 when I started working my timeline and this is the only way it will work without making him a super preemie, although he was still born a few weeks early.)

"Why did you call me up here?” Natasha asked the moment May brought her into his office. “I was supposed to be interrogating the prisoner in vault D again.”

“So you can tell him more things that he shouldn’t know?” Phil snarked. He was still not happy about that despite their conversation immediately following yesterday’s incident.

"I am aware you are unhappy with me disclosing Fitz-Stark’s true paternity to the prisoner…”

“Extremely unhappy,” Phil was 30 seconds from pulling her out yesterday, but Natasha thankfully ended her interrogation before he needed to.
“I had my reasons. We needed to know if he knew anything about the Lullaby program. You know he wasn’t going to answer the question directly, so I had to take a different approach. We now know that he doesn’t.” Natasha said defending herself.

"Or he was just simply unaware that Fitz was part of this program. We don’t know how many children Hydra genetically engineered. We don’t even know the purpose of said program. It’s possible he doesn’t know anything because of Hydra’s highly compartmentalized nature, but he may know something about some other aspect that could lead us to what we need to know.” Phil said poignantly especially in light of the intel he received in the last hour.

He wonders if the List Group Center for Fertility may just be the latest legal incarnation of the Nursery Group. The new head of Hydra supposedly soon to be former wife’s running a fertility clinic couldn’t just be coincidence. Coulson knew many agents went there. Hell, even he has a genetic sample on file.

Part of him that wanted to have kids someday and he knew that with this job that might not happen for a long time, if at all. Anything could happen and it was good to have an insurance policy out there.

It was another thing to investigate. He will send Skye a message later asking her to look at their financials. However, they had more pressing situations to deal with right now.

"Which is why I’m going down there again today. Now that he has spent the entire evening wondering about what Fitz lied about and if Skye is actually still with us, he may be more willing to have a conversation.” Natasha smirked at him and Phil rubbed his temples.

“That’s going to have to wait. I just received intel from Agent 19.” He said only using Agent Morris’ code number due to her highly sensitive mission of infiltrating Hydra. A mission that has finally paid dividends since they now know where Hydra was about to strike. “I need you to help Agent May extract Isabel Hand from her current location."

In addition to the information about von Strucker and family, Bobbi informed him that Hydra was systematically going through any known old SHIELD safe house and taking agents out. This list included the ones that were supposedly only known to Fury and the agent who arranged for purchase. Unfortunately, according to Bobbi said agent was Hydra. Now they needed to evacuate as many houses as they could. (There was a little part of him that worried that the farmhouse could be compromised even though its name was not on Bobbi’s list.)

“Her safe house in Kentucky has been compromised and we need to get her out now.”
Unfortunately, Isabella Hand was in more danger than most and would need help.

Also, according to Bobbi, Isabel Hand was at the top of the list of agents that Hydra wanted alive. Why Bobbi didn’t know because her access was limited due to just being in the labs and her ‘boyfriend’ Bob a.k.a. incompetent head of Hydra security only let so much slip during their time together.

They were going to have to put Karen in place very soon. Once Agent 33 was no longer needed at Woodbine to keep an eye on former Director Carter, Bobbi could arrange an accident for Bob of Hydra. It really was their only hope of getting more useful intel because obviously Ward wasn’t talking and there’s no way in hell he’s sending Skye down there.

"I thought Hand-Cline was in West Virginia." May commented interrupting his train of thought.

"She asked for a transfer after I found her. She felt it was best to keep moving." And she landed right on Hydra’s radar.

“Shouldn’t Ward be the priority?” Natasha asked.

“Considering Ward killed her wife and forced her to go into hiding alone and pregnant, not really.” And she may be his only shot to stop his carving on the walls. Dr. Triplett was brilliant, but her battery of tests last week had come up with nothing. Isabel Hand was his only hope.

“Point. Although, why can’t you take Hartley or Hunter?” She turned to May. ‘Because May might strangle him and it’s easiest for him to make contact with Bobbi.’

"Hunter is on a mission with Agent Triplett.” They were watching the farmhouse property because maybe Phil has been doing this job too long. “And I preferred not to ask Hartley to help assist with picking up her ex-girlfriend’s widow. She’s also tracking various ex-SHIELD agents selling secrets that didn’t make it onto the internet.” Secrets that you dumped out there.

“You really are short staffed.” Natasha said as she grabbed her Stark phone to send a quick message to someone.

“Which is why I really appreciate that you’re here. I know Stark wants you here to extract as much information from the prisoner as possible, but the person in vault D will be here when you get back.”
He wasn’t so sure about the doctor.

“Unless his next suicide attempt a successful.” Natasha responded just as her phone chimed.

“Yes, but…”

“Hawkeye said he’s willing to help if May will give him a ride." He's not surprised at all that she reached out to Clint. However, Phil is not certain that he should leave considering the farm could also be a target. "He doesn't have much else to do right now considering the kids are at camp and Laura is helping their new tenant decorate." That meant that the kids were safe and Hunter and Triplett would be watching Laura. Clint’s not being there would be a good thing as the Avenger was on the Hydra target list, but the others are not. However, he’s still not certain if this is best.

"It’s fine. I’d prefer that you’re not here alone.” May decided for him. “Not with Skye and Agent Triplett gone anyway.”

"I can take care of myself." He hadn’t had a carving incident since DC. Of course, that meant that he was due for one any day and who knew how long the extraction of Agent Hand would take. Melinda might have a point.

"Not when you’re carving strange writing into the wall.” And apparently Natasha knew about that because of course Phil heard her mumbled words from the other side of his office.

"How do you know that? Did Stark tell you?” Because Stark was really good at opening his mouth at the exact wrong time. His life would be so much easier right now, if the guy had just stuck to the damn cards. Of course, it also would’ve been easier for Hydra if Iron man had never been made public. So there’s that.

"I saw you last Friday."

"Oh," was his only response. That was mostly because May did not look surprised at all. Considering he was so out of it when he started carving, Natasha could have very well been standing next to him the entire time and he would’ve been unaware.

"This is a side effect of what they did to you.” He just looked at Natasha for a moment when he realizes that she didn’t say that as a question.
“Unlike some others, I read the file Stark gave me about what they did to you. Although, now I realize it was very incomplete. There were no mentions of hypergraphia anywhere.”

“Because I didn’t want that information written down anywhere.” He admitted reluctantly as he saw May grab her jacket.

“As much as I want to be here for this conversation, I need to pick up your doctor.” May leaned over and kissed Phil before walking out the door.

“Which explains why Dr. Hand was more important than interrogating the prisoner in vault D.” Phil sighed. Of course she would realize that. Natasha was always extremely perceptive. “I assume that despite how smart he is Stark has no idea how to fix this.”

“He’s trying. Stark went to London with Skye to track down Thor.” Since they were going to be nearby anyway to scatter the ashes of Fitz's mother Stark decided to check out Thor's last known whereabouts.

"I know that Steve and by extension Stark are trying to get us all back together again, but what does that have to do with you?” Instead of responding, he just presses the cube to play Skye’s last video message.

"Hey AC, greetings from London. Despite being forced to abandon our hotel for a three bedroom townhouse/safe house due to the paparazzi knowing that he is now in town, things are okay. I’m just thankful they didn’t show up until we arrived in London. It would’ve been bad if they crashed the memorial service last night.” Very bad considering they were scattering the ashes of someone murdered by Hydra. Thankfully, Stark can fly under the radar for a little bit. Unfortunately, it was just for a little bit.

“Of course the incident at the University may have been why the press now know were here. I’m sure somebody tweeted a picture of Tony Stark being slapped by a professor in the hallway.” At that moment, Jarvis pulled up said tweet on another screen not connected to the toolbox. He paused the message long enough for Natasha to read.

Thankfully, nothing related to Skye being there was on the net, but the Stark related stuff that did had Natasha scowling. Phil had done that as well the first time he watched the message just 15 minutes earlier. He also reached for his emergency bottle of acetaminophen.
"Were you aware that they had a history?" Natasha asked as she looked at the tweets.

"Not until I watched the rest of this file the first time. I would’ve sent Skye alone otherwise.” Phil responded before starting the message again.

“So our meeting today with Professor Foster went badly.” Skye started playing with the sleeve of her sweater on screen.

"First, her assistant is still pissed off about the iPod despite still thinking that you are no longer among us, and I feel really crappy about not being able to tell her that you’re not.” Natasha glares at him at that comment. “Although, she’s mostly mad about that because now she will never get that iPod back.” Phil rolls his eyes at that.

"Second, she hasn’t seen the one with arms like a tree since March. March 11 to be exact, a.k.a. the day of a desert adventure with you know who. I’m sure his disappearance could be connected to what happened that day.” Phil also agreed that could be a possibility considering the video footage that he saw, but they had no way to know for sure.

"Also finally there was an incident at a scientific symposium in Budapest in 2007, where the big boss was pretty much a prick…” At that moment, Skye stops speaking and the camera pans over to Stark who had a very noticeable black eye. Steve was currently handing him an ice pack.

“I’m pretty sure I’d didn’t actually sleep with her.” The captain just glared at Stark for a moment.

"You know I’m awful at first impressions. I probably questioned the validity of her thesis in front of everyone. Or maybe she did not get a Stark Industries grant and blames me personally. It could’ve been a lot of things, but I’m not sure since I was drinking vodka by the case at that time. Although, I do remember some blonde guy with a stomach you could eat off of.” Stark pauses for a moment before his mouth parts open.

“I think I remember what I did because we both have things for blondes. In my defense, he didn’t tell me that he had a girlfriend and if I remember correctly, he only slept with me to get a research position. So, I actually did her a favor because he was a prick.”

“I don’t think she’ll see it that way.” Skye called from off-camera.
“Jarvis please send apology gift baskets number four and six along with the new Stark MP6 player for the angry assistant. Also, see if we have any funding available for trans-dimensional research.”

“Of course sir,”

“I really suck at first impressions.” Phil agreed with that completely.

“You get better.” Steve leaned over and kissed Stark on the mouth causing Natasha to look away.

"This is why I don’t want him with Steve." Natasha said just as Phil paused the video file again.

"You know he’s not that person anymore." Phil said defending Stark.

“The one who tries to buy forgiveness? He still that person. I’ve seen the room that he made for his long lost son.” Phil sighed at Natasha’s words.

“That is not what I mean.”

“Maybe he’s not sleeping his way through the continental United States anymore, but one should never start a new relationship when you are dealing with major life changes like children or terminal illness.”

"He is not dying anymore." He said defending Stark again.

"Are you?" He really just walked into her trap. "What’s going on? Why are you carving on the walls? Why did you send Stark and the baby agent to London to get Thor?"

“I’m not sure which question to answer first.” Phil said as he sat down at his desk. He suddenly felt very weary.

"Just start at the beginning." Natasha responded.
"Originally, I thought I just had a close call with Loki. That I was only clinically dead for eight seconds and the surgeons brought me back. Eventually, I learned it was longer than that and I was made to forget the process."

"I know. They put you through the Tahiti protocol. They also gave you some experimental drug called GH 325." There was a hint of anger in her voice.

"That wonder drug they gave me was derived from the tissue of a blue alien stuck in a tank. Unfortunately, my body is not reacting very well to having alien DNA inside it and now I’m scribbling what Stark refers to as alien math on the walls."

"And that explains why Stark is trying to find Thor." Phil nods his head. "Is that the only symptom?"

“No.” That’s when he tells her everything that’s been going on for the last few months including his biggest fears about going crazy like John Garrett. He even tells her about asking May to put a bullet in him if he goes too far. So far his lover has yet to agree and Phil doesn’t blame her.

"May will never agree to that." Natasha tells him after Phil finishes his story.

Inside she was cursing Fury for putting Phil through the TAHITI protocol’s knowing full well the consequences. The only sign of her distress is the fact that Natasha is holding his hand as tight as possible. She’s almost scared that she will break it. She scared for him. She knows all too well what it’s like to feel like you have no autonomy whatsoever, to feel like you’re a bomb that can go off at any moment. At the same time, she can’t believe that he actually asked May to pull the trigger if he really does go too far.

“You can’t ask her to do something like that. Maybe no one told you, but May was a mess when you died. Maria said she had to keep her from punching Alexander Pierce at your funeral." Natasha sincerely wishes that she had done that now, considering what the bastard did.

“I know, but I don’t want to hurt other people.” His voice sounded of desperation. “I don’t want to become Garrett.” ’That’s why you won’t become him.’ Natasha thinks to herself.

"I’ll do it." She said out loud instead. Her words are low, as if Natasha doesn’t even realize she’s saying it. "If it gets to the point that you’re too dangerous, I will take you out myself." She’s not entirely sure if she could make that call, but he saved her from herself. She owes him for that.
"You don’t have to." Yes I do. I have to save you this time.

"You can’t expect the woman who is completely in love with you to kill you. It would be too cruel.” She doesn’t mention Clint, even though it would be just as bad for him. Maybe worse because he blames himself for Phil’s death in the first place.

“I know that, but up until May and subsequently Stark brought everyone else in I didn’t exactly have anyone else I trusted to pull the trigger.” Phil acknowledged reluctantly.

"Now you do." Natasha said sadly.

"That’s why you didn’t tell us the truth now that Fury’s orders are no longer valid. You are afraid you’re going to die again." He stares at the shirtless Captain America mug (an inappropriate birthday present from Stark) on his desk a little too long.

"Possibly." He eventually responds.

"You’re wrong." Natasha told him staring directly in his eyes, trying to convey every ounce of pain in her. "It’s better to have whatever time there is, even knowing full well that I’m going to have to pull the trigger myself."

“And you’re willing to pull the trigger?” If necessary, if only to save you from a fate far worse.

"My ledger is filled with red. One assisted suicide will make very little difference." She says as nonchalantly as possible before she’s pulled into a hug. Hugs are strange for her still. Clint’s kids hug her all the time, but it’s different when it’s adults.

"Thank you." He tells her seriously and she doesn’t understand how he can be so gracious about her agreeing to kill him. She needs to get out of here.

“I’m going to interrogate the prisoner now.” She tells him in an effort to get out of there before her façade cracks.
“Not yet. Since you found May another partner, I need you to help me look over what Agent 19 sent.” She smirks to herself as the Stark pad was handed over to her.

“So is the real reason that Hunter is here is to make the drops with the ex-wife easier or are you really that desperate for agents?” Coulson glares.

“Is there a possibility that the farmhouse could’ve been purchased by the Hydra traitor in question?” He asked bluntly. She’s not at all surprised that he’s worried about Clint.

“No. It’s like the retreat. Fury handled it himself.” Phil exhaled in relief. Although as a precaution, as soon as she’s out of Phil’s office, she sends Laura a code 16 text message. That meant Laura would decide this would be the perfect time to visit her sister; the one that lives in Iowa. She doesn’t like to take risk when it comes to Laura or the kids.

Once that’s done, she goes through the intel from Bobbi. To her relief, there is no evidence that Hydra knows about the farmhouse. Bobbi doesn’t know about it despite working with Clint for a year, so they don’t even have to worry about her giving up that information, if she becomes compromised.

Unfortunately, some newly purchased Avenger properties including one in London that may or may not be the location that Fitz-Stark was moved to are there. She called Steve to confirm her suspicions, but he didn’t pick up. If he was screwing Stark right now, she was going to be pissed. Steve doesn’t answer, but Stark’s AI promised to get through to him by any means necessary. She should notify Phil of what she found, but he has too much on his plate. She can deal with this herself.

It is also why she doesn’t tell Coulson that she recognizes one of the names on the head of Hydra list. Instead, she calls Agent 13 to look into it. When she has something, she will tell Coulson or at least that’s what she tells herself.

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November 20, 1986

I’m no stranger to making hard decisions nor am I a stranger to bad decisions. Deciding that it was better for Agent 13 and her children to think that Daniel abandoned them instead of remembering his murder was at the top of that list.

I find myself in this position again. The body in the Rose Garden is not my Natasha or at least she was not a child of myself and Maria. That distinction belongs to the one Stephanie refers to as Nat, the young girl who helped Stephanie escape the Nursery group.
They took Natasha. I know they did. I’m sure of it.

Do I tell Maria that our baby is still alive or do I keep this to myself? It’s safer that I do. I don’t know why they took Natasha. I don’t know why they took Stephanie. What if they take Tony too? My biggest fear is that Tony will suffer for the things that I’ve done. Sometimes I think I should’ve just handed Tony over to Ana and Jarvis to raise. I wouldn’t have to worry about my enemies stealing my children that way. Apparently, they’ve already succeeded once and I was too fucking busy trying to save the rest of the world to stop it.

Note to self: have Jarvis burn these pages.

Xxxxxxxxxxx

“Apparently somebody forgot to do that.” Clint mumbled to himself as the sound of Stark’s super secret Avengers assemble hotline started beeping. Why did something always happen just when he was getting to the good stuff. This particular entry happened to be dated only two days before Stark was kidnapped for his genetic material. Clint wondered if that event or some other distraction is the reason these pages still exist.

He has yet to return the diary pages. He promised himself that he would hand them over to Coulson as soon as he had time to really study the information. Unfortunately, today was the first day he had time to actually read them since the kids and Laura were out of the house.

Unfortunately, Natasha needed a favor. A favor that resulted in him being picked up by an invisible Quinjet from his cornfield. Thank god he owns all the land for at least 3 miles around his property. He really doesn’t want his next-door neighbor to start questioning why he looks like their son’s favorite Avenger action figure.

“Why am I going with you to the middle of nowhere Kentucky to find a doctor?” Clint asked as he stepped inside of the jet less than a half an hour after receiving Natasha’s original message. He didn’t even try to take over flying because Melinda did not turn the stick over to anybody. It’s probably the entire reason that Coulson couldn’t do more than the emergency basics in a Quinjet.

"We received a tip from Agent 19 that they will be attacking a safe house near the Kentucky - West Virginia border. That safe house is currently occupied by a more than five months pregnant Dr. Isabella Hand, who is currently going by her maiden name of Cline." Melinda said distinctly as he was handed a Stark pad with all pertinent mission details.

The name was not only familiar to him because Coulson originally wanted her to take up occupancy
of his cabin, but because Dr. Hand was the one who looked him over after the Asgardian mind control fuck up. The scientist had told Coulson that she was better off hiding by herself. Apparently, she was dead wrong considering they’re now going to extract her before Hydra can kill her.

"And of course Coulson always wants to do the right thing except when it comes to telling me that he’s not dead." Clint mumbled under breath.

May responded with a glare. He shouldn’t be surprised. It’s probably not a smart thing to talk bad about her boyfriend.

"Did you read the package that Agent Romanoff gave you regarding Phil’s resurrection?" Melinda asked keeping her eyes on the sky.

“I didn’t read beyond the description of the surgeon slicing open his brain and him begging for death. At that point, I took an exploding arrow to the Stark pad in question." He admitted honestly.

"Good. I don’t think Stark should have placed all the information in one place and thankfully what you used probably made said information irretrievable."

“Since I don’t have time to read through all this, give me the Cliff notes version because obviously this is related.” He asked gesturing with the Stark pad currently in his hand.

"Agent Hand was to be assigned to project TAHITI before it was shut down.” He vaguely remembered that Tahiti was the name of the project designed to revive an Avenger. “Although she never worked there, she’s done a lot of work on alien biology."

“Because of that research, she’s a target for Hydra?” Clint asked.

"Yes. It is her knowledge in that area which makes her very valuable to us. This is why Coulson wants to keep her safe."

“In addition to her being too pregnant to fight the forces of Hydra herself.”

“Of course.”
“Although, why would an alien biology expert be useful?”

"I know you know about the hypergraphia?" How is this related?

"You saw me?" He asked out loud instead.

"Yes, but I was too busy dealing with the situation at hand to discuss it at that moment." May explained.

"Which would be?"

"You can’t bring somebody back from the dead without consequences, especially when you use alien DNA to do it."

Fuck. That explains why they are recovering someone who has studied alien biology, even if that study probably mostly involved going over Thor’s blood samples from his indexing and studying the aftereffects of Asgardian mind control. That part probably wasn’t that useful considering Clint was an awful patient who ran away from her (only to find his dead boyfriend’s body).

"The carving on the wall is one of the consequences?" He asked, trying not to be worried. He’s mad at Phil. He’s married to someone else, but there’s always going to be this little piece of him that’s in love with the man, which is probably why he so hurt and angry in the first place.

"Yes.” Her face tightens as if she’s deliberately trying to keep emotions in check. “Others who received the treatment during the trials went completely insane. That’s why Phil originally pulled the plug on the program.” What was left unsaid was Nick Fury was more pragmatic and wanted his good eye back, no matter what the consequences would be.

"Is that happening to Phil?" He asked. It would explain a lot. Would you tell people that you were back if you were convince you were losing your mind? Clint wasn’t sure if he would take that risk himself.

"Not yet."
"But eventually?"

"I’m hoping Dr. Hand can prevent that." She said returning her attention to the controls as the cabin went silent for the remainder of their trip.

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Due to the mountain terrain, they couldn’t find anywhere closer to land the Quinjet then a church parking lot a mile away. Of course, that may have been the point of the safe houses location. Thankfully, the redesigned Avenger/new SHIELD Quinjet’s have space for motor vehicles, in this case a pair of very cool motorcycles that Clint was certain had been specially designed for Stark’s boyfriend dearest. It was obvious that the back area where his weapons were secured was originally designed for a shield.

They arrived just in time to see a group of Hydra agents dressed in old SHIELD regalia storming the house. He knows that they are Hydra because if they were part of the new ragtag bunch of misfits the Avengers or new SHIELD emblem would be visible somewhere on their uniform. Stark takes branding just a little bit too far.

Clint really didn’t have time to think about this. Instead, his bow was in hand before even stopping the bike.

"Just like Budapest." He mumbled to May, who already had a gun out.

"Never mention Budapest again." May replied as she shot one of the Hydra agents. Clint responded by shooting his companion with an exploding arrow.

He goes through half of his new toys from Stark, but he provides May with blanket cover for her to get to the decidedly pregnant Isabella Hand. He really hopes she doesn’t go into premature labor on the way back to the Quinjet.

To be continued.
Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. Some of you were happy to realize that Natasha Stark is still alive. So yes, in this dimension Tony and Natasha S exist simultaneously and that will play into our story a lot as things progress.

Just a quick note, this chapter is happening nearly simultaneously to the last chapter.

Continuity note: I am borrowing information about Mack’s family from AOS episode 3.14, and Skye/Daisy’s past love-life from 3.13. I have not seeing Civil War yet (because I wasn’t paying close enough attention to Twitter to snag one of those early tickets :-( ) so anything in here is purely coincidental and the plan is for us not to get to that point anyway.

Agent code number guide
Agent 10: Phil Coulson
Agent 13: Peggy Carter (1940s through 1970s), Marcy Ana Carter-Jones/Sousa (1980s), Sharon Carter (2007 through the present)
Agent 19: Bobbi Morris
Agent 33: Kara Lynn Palamas

I promise that once things become clearer, I will post a Stark family tree with who’s related to who else.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

April 1, 1970
I’m surprised that Agent 13 is allowing me so much access to her scientists for Project Lullaby. I know she’s not doing this for me. This is about Maria and Ana as well. She always looks sad and guilty whenever Maria holds Stephanie. 13 always had the same look whenever Ana held her namesake. I don’t quite understand why 13 feels guilty in either instance. She wasn’t responsible for what Frost did, just like she wasn’t responsible for Stephanie surviving when Natasha did not.

13 doesn’t see it that way because she has always been too good for the likes of me.

That’s probably why she’s letting the scientists study her still functioning ovaries. A woman who can get pregnant in her 50s, despite precautions can provide a lot of answers.

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Jemma puts the Stark pad down after reading that. She wonders how Tony could have missed the importance of this. Maybe he just stopped reading the accounts of his mother and father’s dark days after the death of his sister.

She wouldn’t want to read that. It probably didn’t help that most of the accounts were drunk ramblings until the end of March 1970 after Stephanie’s birth. That was when Howard started funneling all his pain into Project Lullaby a.k.a. an early attempt at developing in vitro fertilization under the guise of calling at it a super soldier program.

Then again, Tony probably did not know Agent 13 was Director Carter’s codename until the end of the 70s (when her oldest daughter took over the designate) and therefore did not realize what this
really meant. From what she read, Director Carter would not allow resources to be poured into actually re-creating the super soldier serum. It seems more likely she used the Lullaby Project subterfuge to prevent being forced to do just that. Jemma knew that the US government had spent billions trying to re-create the super soldier serum. There had to be pressure on SHIELD to do the same.

Jemma knew so much about Director Carter-Jones because she was slightly enamored with the founder of SHIELD during her Academy days. She was the one that Jemma wanted to be when she became a full-fledged agent, even if her scientific focus made her more likely to be in the lab than in the field. So, of course, she read every bit of information she could on the woman, even parts that were slightly classified. (Unfortunately everything related to her personal life was heavily redacted, especially her first husband who disappeared in the early 60s and the identity of her youngest grandchild.)

It does not surprise Jemma that the director participated in the study to increase the likelihood of her friend becoming pregnant. It wouldn’t be outside the realm of possibility is that they collected various samples to study, including the ova used to create Tony Stark. She was certain that subsequent pages would provide her with evidence to support this hypothesis, but she now knows she must procure a DNA sample from a 90 something Alzheimer patient, who had an FBI detail.

At least Trip will be happy to know that there’s a logical explanation for the possibility of Tony Stark being his uncle, other than his grandmother having an affair. Of course she couldn’t contact Trip now because he was following the communications blackout as of two hours ago, when he hung up on her. Now that she needed to talk to him about the best way to procure a sample, he was not picking up his phone. Why is it that when she’s ready to talk to a guy he ignores her? (Yes, she just tried to call Leo again. And no, he did not pick up either.)

She didn’t have any more time to think about this because the one guy she wishes would actually ignore her was now down in the lab with her. She quickly closes her Stark pad so he doesn’t see the diary entries that she’s reading. She doesn’t think Tony or Fitz would appreciate her sharing their family secrets with someone who does not have a need to know.

“Are you here to drag me out to lunch?” She doesn’t think it’s that late, but it’s entirely possible.

"I should, but Trippett’s cousin is here. She said that she was going to give you a ride to visit Leo while she visits her grandmother. Why are you still visiting Leo at Woodbine considering he is actually in London right now?” Because we are actually going to acquire a DNA sample from Sharon’s great aunt to prove that she is my boss’s biological mother. She can only assume that Trippett was checking his messages and decided to assist by having his cousin help her. It was for the best because she didn’t feel comfortable sneaking into the director’s room.

“Tony is somewhat paranoid and therefore there’s a security officer posing as Leo now. If I don’t visit occasionally, it would raise suspicions.” She explained as she made her way to the stairs. She actually wasn’t planning to visit fake Leo, but this wasn’t opportunity not to be passed up.

"That makes sense in a Tony Stark sort of way. Although, I could’ve driven you there." Sam offered.

"It’s okay. Sharon volunteered." Jemma lied and she hoped it was convincing. It was somewhat true since Sharon was here of her own volition without Jemma asking her. “Besides, shouldn’t you be at work?” Instead of watching me as if I’m still in primary school.

“It turns out that if you work for veteran’s affairs and put a couple of helicarrier’s into the Potomac after liberating a military prototype, you get put on unpaid administrative leave during the
investigation.” He explained as they started to ascend the stairs. “It’s fine because apparently the Avengers have an opening for a full time counselor.”

“I could see the necessity of it.” Sam shakes his head at her words.

“Also Tony needs a live in house sitter and rent in the Metro is ridiculous.” She is certain he actually means to say babysitter for her.

“You’re moving in here?” She asked as she walked into the kitchen.

"Next-door actually. Since I’m going to be helping Steve with his missing person case and barely using my apartment, I decided to say yes to the job offer and free housing.”

“I wish I could get a free house.” Sharon said from the kitchen table as she casually sipped a cup of Starbucks. “I didn’t realize DC rent was so expensive,” the “because SHIELD paid for her housing before” was left unsaid.

“I’m staying with my aunt right now until I can afford something.”

“You could always suck up to Stark. He now owns every house on this block.” Sam joked.

“I think he’s mad at me for Natasha trying to set me up with Steve to keep them from sleeping together.” Sharon replied. Apparently, the former SHIELD agent was highly perceptive.

“Not your fault she tried to make you a replacement goldfish.” Sam snarked. “Dating your ex’s great-niece is just weird,” Sharon nodded her head in agreement.

Jemma was certain that dating your ex-girlfriend’s son would probably be weirder, but did it count? Neither party knew that he was anyone other than Maria Stark’s child. Anyway, he still was Maria Stark’s child regardless of DNA. If her suspicions were true, this was nothing more than a procedural mishap that resulted in the wrong egg being fertilized.

“Especially if you’re only doing that to prove to yourself you’re not in love with your very male friend.” Sam added after a momentary pause.

“I think the real problem is everybody expected him to want to date me because of who my aunt is and not because of who I am,” Valid point. “Or even worse because I’m female. Apparently, it’s the end of the world if Captain America is not heterosexual.” Sam snickers at her words.

“We’ve only met a few times, but you seem very interesting on your own.” ‘Please flirt on your own time.’ She thought to herself as their interactions made her slightly nauseous.

“We should leave now. I’m sure your great aunt is better earlier in the day.” Jemma interrupted.

“Of course. Trip told me that he left the present for Aunt Peggy in the lab.” Before she could ask what present she realized she forgot to grab the necessary equipment to collect a DNA sample.

“I forgot about that. Let me go down and get it.” She quickly went downstairs to pick up her field kit. She still had one because she would probably be filling a similar role with the Avengers as she did with team Coulson before. Now that there was no SHIELD to do their dirty work, they would have to do their own forensics which meant that she probably had ultimate job security.

Just to keep up, her cover she walked by the present closet. Yes, Tony Stark had a present closet because he was that eccentric and apparently he screwed up so regularly that he needed to keep presents on hand. In addition to various emergency gift baskets, there was a nice blanket that the
The blanket easily obscured her bag. Sam was none the wiser of her real plans as she left with the younger Agent Carter.

"By the way, I'm not interested in Sam." Agent Carter said as they made their way to the garage because for some reason they decided to take her car. However, she threw her keys at Sharon because she could barely make her way to Harries Teeter down the street for groceries without getting lost.

"That's none of my concern." She told Agent Carter as she turned on the ignition. "Sam is just my appointed babysitter because despite having multiple PhDs apparently no one believes I can take care of myself."

"Sam sees himself as more of the Avengers' new babysitter. “After having to watch Captain Rogers for several months, I wish him luck. The CIA is less stressful." Sharon said once she activated the anti-listening equipment in her car. That explains why they took the hybrid. Jemma wonders how long they spoke to each other before Sam retrieved her from the lab.

“After several weeks of wrangling Dr. Stark, I agree. Did your cousin ask you to get me?” She asked as she put on her seatbelt.

“Yes. For some reason, he thinks Tony Stark is my cousin. I would volunteer to disprove that crazy theory any day of the week.” Jemma felt it most prudent not to mention her great aunt's participation in fertility research that most likely lead to accidental fertilization of the wrong egg.

“Although, I probably would be going over there regardless. Natasha contacted me as I pulled into the driveway to do her a favor, which entails us trying to accidentally on purpose run into Natalie and convince her to tell me all about her upcoming divorce.”

“Who is Natalie?” Sharon never answered her question. Instead, she’s given a data package by Jarvis regarding the head of the premier fertility clinic in Arlington. Apparently, this is the Natalie the agent was referring to.

To her surprise, she recognizes this person from the halls of Woodbine. Her paraplegic mother was at the facility and Jemma had run into her a few times at the coffee machine while she was visiting Fitz when he was still actually at Woodbine. She vaguely remembered thinking that the woman could be her boss’ sister or cousin because they had the same brown eyes.

Jemma asked Agent Carter why Dr. List was a person of interest, but the agent just kept driving. Jemma took that as a sign to try to call Leo again. Of course, he doesn’t answer her.

She pushes it out of her mind as they get the necessary sample (although that she tries to call Fitz again when she’s done). It was easy because Director Carter was having a good day and was happy to help their investigation. Well, Director Carter was having a relatively good day considering she forgot that they took a swab of her cheek just minutes later. Even though Jemma barely knew Sharon, she wanted to hug her because she looks so broken dealing with her aunt.

Eventually, it was Dr. List that did hug her when they met up with her at the vending machines. Thankfully, her son wasn't with her. She knew of Alexander List because the teenager kept hitting on her every time they ran into one another.

"It's getting worse?" The doctor asked with concern in her words.

"Well, it's not like she's going to get better. I know that, but it's hard to see her like this." Sharon said as she pulled out of the hug. "This shouldn't still make me cry."
"It does because that woman practically raised you. Love is always more important than blood." Those words are wise. No matter what her lab test told her, Maria Stark was still Tony's mother because she was there.

"I know. Sorry to cry on you especially with everything you’re going through. Trista told me about the divorce."

"I'm OK. Divorce is divorce. I just thought that Wolf was sleeping around not doing whatever the FBI is accusing him of doing. "Anyone who refers to their husband as "wolf" should probably realize that they're not necessarily married to a very good person. Although, Simmons would really like to know what the FBI is accusing him of.

"I don’t want to talk about it. Actually, I can’t talk about it. Despite that, I’m perfectly OK being your shoulder to cry on now that Tristan got the hell out of here." Natalie tells her.

"She likes her new private home healthcare job largely because she doesn't have to be around the evil aunt that will soon be out of the family since divorce due to infidelity is going around." Agent Carter tells her friend.

"I'm not surprised. I never like the woman. I'm also not surprised about Tristan taking a new job either. I just wish she told me she was in the market for a new job. The clinic needs confident nurses too." She said just before looking down at her phone.

"I would love to stay here and continue gossiping, but I have a 2 o'clock with the lawyers and then a 3 o'clock with a patient."

"We should do lunch soon. Maybe Monday?" Sharon suggested.

"1 PM works for me and bring your friend since I need to apologize for my son constantly hitting on her."

"I take no offense." She said speaking for the first time.

With that the doctor left, and they made their way to fake Leo’s room. When they walked in the door, they found the security officer was unconscious with his nano mask deactivated. Also in the room was Trip’s former fiancé, Robin, who was crumpled in the corner. Although unlike fake Fitz, he didn’t have a pulse. Because of her CIA connection, Agent Carter elected to take care of the situation while Simmons went to look for Agent 33, but could not find her.

It was at that moment that Jarvis informed them that he was unable to contact the group in London. She couldn't help but be concerned. It’s when things like this happen that her complicated feelings for Leo become less murky.

xxxxxx
60 minutes earlier

“I can’t believe you made me drop off my apology present in person.” Tony said rubbing his bruised cheek that he just received to go along with the black eye from earlier. Steve’s do-gooder tendencies were going to get him killed or at least severely battered.

Earlier that day, Skye and he attempt to discover the secret to the blue alien in the guest house by making contact with the alien expert herself, Dr. Jane Foster. Tony thought at best she could get them in contact with her boyfriend or at worse she might see something they weren't. Instead, he ended up with a black eye because the doctor held a grudge for something he did when he was a drunk moron pre-enlightenment.
Steve being the guy that he was decided that they were going to try again to make contact with Dr. Foster that night, not even giving her time to cool down with a nice cookie bouquet. Against his better judgment, he agreed. This meant leaving Leo in the custody of the baby agent so that he could grovel to the sciences that he had apparently offended.

Just as he expected, it went badly, like slapped in the face badly. Still, it was an improvement on this morning because she did take the apology basket. Unfortunately, when he mentioned the T word, he got smacked upside the head. Tony had a feeling that the one with arms like trees seriously fucked up. Like slept with somebody else before the breakup fuck up.

Unlike Tony, the God did not have somebody as magnanimously perfect as Pepper. Really he still doesn’t understand why his ‘trying to become BFFs again’ has yet to smack him herself. (She did laugh her ass off when the pictures of him being punched made it to Twitter earlier that day.)

Now he just wanted to drive to their safe house before they got made by the paparazzi.

“I also can’t believe you thought this would go better this time. We should’ve just focused on Darcy.” Steve allowed him to send her a cookie bouquet via courier and he already received a nice thank you email and they made arrangements for breakfast for the next morning to talk about the MIA god of thunder.

“Ms. Lewis isn’t the expert. I promised May that I would help her with Phil. I keep my promises. I’m not going to let her down. So if we have to come back tomorrow with a shoe bouquet we will.” Tony starts to rub his temple.

“Sometimes I think your stubbornness is sexy and makes me want to push you up against the nearest wall to fuck your brains out. Other times it makes me want to punch you in the fucking teeth. I’ve been physically assaulted twice in under six hours. I really don’t want to get kicked in the balls next time. Let’s try a different strategy.” Tony sighed as he started the rental car.

“But we need to figure out how to undo the side effects of whatever the hell Nick Fury did. We need Dr. Foster’s help.” Steve said using his perfectly righteous, Captain America voice.

“Look, Steve, I made the same promise to Phil. That’s why I came back here with you against my better judgment, but she’s already slammed the door in my face twice. Let’s just meet with her assistant for breakfast tomorrow and see if she can soften up her boss.”

“Fine.” Steve sighed. “We’ll try it your way. I’m just worried about May and what will happen if we don’t figure this out before she loses Phil again. You didn’t see how bad she was when he was dead. I think she would have swallowed a whole bottle of pills if it wasn’t for the mission. Actually, I think she almost did anyway.

“What? When did this happen?” Steve explains some of the things he observed during his time as May Phillips’s next-door neighbor/fuck buddy including the time he found a large bottle of pills hastily stuff between her couch cushions when he showed up to her apartment to ‘spar’ unannounced.

Tony’s response is hugging his boyfriend.

“We’ll try Darcy tomorrow and maybe she can help.”

“I’m just tired of losing people and being helpless. Of being seconds too late and going back on promises.”

“Are we still talking about May?” Tony asked wondering if they accidentally ventured into Bucky
territory. They had been avoiding Bucky related conversations due to everything else going on, but it was something that they needed to talk about.

“Well, if we weren’t so busy fighting amongst ourselves Coulson would not have taken Loki on by himself. Then there would not have been the need for Fury to play God with alien DNA.”

“So now you need to make sure you fix things because you have successfully convinced yourself that you are solely responsible for what happened last time?” Tony asked.

“May is my friend.” That you slept with for several months after you made her a Bucky replacement.

“I know that. And Phil is my friend. I hate seeing him the way he was the other night.” I still think there’s this part of you that wants to help May save Phil because you couldn’t save Bucky. “And because you are a stubborn asshole who keeps trying even if it destroys you.” Tony said instead.

Okay, he knows he probably just put himself on the couch for the next month for saying that out loud, but it was better than what he actually wanted to say.

"He can still be saved, now at least. I know you’re not completely okay with it because…”

"He killed my parents." Tony supplies.

"But that wasn’t Bucky. He was…”

"Brainwashed. I know that. I also know that you blame yourself for not keeping him from ending up in Hydra’s clutches.” Despite the fact the numbers say that such a thing was impossible.

“And then he wouldn’t have killed your parents.” Steve added.

“I think that they would have died anyway. Some things are just inevitable. Hydra needed Howard dead to keep up the masquerade. Someone else just would’ve been the one to pull the trigger, like the body guard who tried to kill me a couple of months ago. Maybe some things can’t be prevented.”

“Only if you don’t try.”

“You really are that virtuous. And even though we have other things to worry about, I know you want to save Bucky. But what does that mean at this point? At best, I’m thinking an extra luxurious bed in vault D with an army of therapists on call to undo decades of whatever Hydra did. Maybe at some point he be well enough for you to have a Star Trek pizza date without the glass between you, but that day might be a long way off.”

Tony plans for vault D to be vacant very soon. He knows that Leo is going to want to go back with his friends to fight the good fight and Stark doesn’t want the Bastard who almost killed his son in the same state, let alone same building. The Bastard’s asshole Senator of a brother wants him back to make an example of him for political brownie points, but Tony doesn’t feel like playing that game and was still searching for better option.

“From a tactical perspective, we can’t let Hydra use him as a weapon. He needs to be somewhere safe away from them and I can live with vault D if the army of psychologists are around to help Bucky get better.” Oh my, Steve just compromised. It’s enough to make you think miracles are possible.

“I’m paying for Sam, and a team of private investigators, a.k.a. not evil former SHIELD agents, to help find your missing person. Not for my own personal vengeance, but for you. I just want to make sure you know that whoever he was back then, that is not who we are going to find now. Things
change you, especially with the shit they put him through."

“I know that but…” Steve can’t finish that sentence and Tony just rubs circles on his back.

“I know you love him like you came from the same mother, but I love you too and I just want you to know what you’re getting yourself into. Maybe my forced incarceration with terrorists in Afghanistan was nothing compared to what Bucky went through, but the guy that was dragged into that cave was not the one who escaped. You wouldn’t even want to share a room with that guy. I mean he was the type of guy who stole the boyfriend of a brilliant astrophysicist while being too drunk or stoned to actually realize what he was doing. He was a prick."

"You’re not that guy anymore. You’re the person who came with me to make amends because his friend needed him to do so." Steve placed a gentle kiss on his lips.

Jarvis chose that moment to interrupt their would be make out session.

"Agent Romanoff is trying to contact you. Apparently it’s a code 16." Avenger short hand for ‘Get your ass in gear’.

"Put her through." Tony said pulling away from his boyfriend’s mouth reluctantly.

"She’s no longer on the line. When she was unable to contact the captain, she asked me to deliver her message for her.” That you decided to wait until after our really awkward conversation wrapped up to deliver.

“I know my phone is in the car, but why couldn’t she get a hold of Steve since he promised he would have his?” Tony glared at his boyfriend.

"It seems Captain Roger’s phone was destroyed due to your earlier activities.” By earlier activities, Jarvis meant sex at the house that was used to manipulate him into doing the in person apology. He vaguely remembers a crunching sound at some point.

"I'm embedding a com in you. This is like the seventh phone you have destroyed."

"That was your fault." Steve said playfully.

"I’m not the one built like a tank. Message Jarvis."

"You need to leave townhouse C because the location is compromised. Hydra is aware of it." A townhouse that they were only staying at because Eberhardt was waiting for them in the lobby of the hotel they were supposed to be staying at. Considering she was friends with Baker, Tony would not be at all surprised that she was in Hydra’s pocket. So apparently they just walked into a trap. Dammit.

“Wonderful. Jarvis, can you please alert Trista and Muscles to the situation.” He knew that the bodyguards were having dinner at a pub nearby so that Leo and his friend could have some time by themselves because apparently scattering your mother’s ashes is difficult.

“They are already en route.” Which was a very good thing considering the townhouse was already under fire when they got there and Jarvis could not contact the kids. Now Tony was dealing with his first panic attack since April as Steve got his shield out of the back seat. This was not a good day. X

45 minutes earlier
"You’re mopey.” Fitz said to her as they sat down to their dinner of take away from Fitz’s favorite pub from when he was here at University. Apparently when your dad is a billionaire, anyone will
deliver. Which is a good thing because security obsessed Trista will not let them leave the townhouse right now.

His bodyguards are supposed to be down the street at a bar, but Skye is certain the retired specialist is watching them with binoculars. Skye is also half convinced that there’s a brand-new Ironman drone hovering in the backyard because daddy Stark is overprotective. Fitz didn’t seem that upset about it because Trista promised to bring him ice cream when she gets back.

"I’m not mopey. I’m slightly disappointed that we couldn’t find Thor.” She told her friend. She hopes Tony’s second attempt will work better, but she doubts it. She personally agreed with Tony that they should’ve waited another day before trying again, but Captain America is apparently being Captain America and obviously used sex to get him to agree to it. These walls are way too thin.

“You want to jump… Him?” She is now completely regretting letting Fitz proofread her NC-17 Avengers stories, especially that one where she self-inserted and pretty much climbed the thunder god like a tree. She may have a lightning kink. Actually she’s regretting all of that now that she has spent an unfortunate amount of time listening to the real thing earlier.

"Of course not.” It would be so much easier if she could tell Fitz why they were really trying to find the god. But she couldn’t tell him the truth because Fitz had no idea that she now had alien DNA in her body. Therefore he had no idea Skye was desperate to figure out what’s inside of her and that they needed the Asgardian for that answer.

“I just really want to help your dad and Coulson get the Avengers up and running again to deal with Hydra.” Again, not a lie because they were still trying to put SHIELD back together again.

"Because they killed my mom.” She would celebrate the fact that he didn’t stutter once, if the words weren’t so serious. “Because of me.” Of course he’s blaming himself, just like she blames herself for an entire village being dead because of her allegedly monstrous parents. Skye has no idea what she could possibly say to make him not think it’s his fault because whatever she says he won’t believe her.

"The fries or chips or whatever you guys call them actually are really good. And they’re still hot which is weird but I guess when you’re the son of the billionaire you get really good take away." Fitz glares at her. “I’m really bad with emotional moments.”

"Makes two of us." Fitz said as his phone started to vibrate again.

"Is that your dad?” Skye asked annoyed. “I know he worries, but you’re a big boy SHIELD agent and he needs to stop being so paranoid. Okay, he needs to spend more time making out with his boyfriend." Fitz glares at her again.

“I forgot we’re not supposed to talk about that.” She said as Fitz canceled the call. She looked over just in time to see that it was one from Simmons.

"You’re still not talking to Simmons?” Skye asked.

"Neither--are you." He shot back to quickly.

"Because she abandoned us in the middle of the night to take a job with your dad.” Fitz continues glaring at her. “Which may have been for the best because she was a complete mess while you were in the coma. She cried a lot. Actually, she’s still not coping well considering what …” Skye stopped herself. Nobody told Fitz about Simmons passing out at the Stark party because he was too busy dealing with other things like Hydra murdering his mother.
"Got pissed and threw up on reporter." But apparently Fitz knew anyway.

“Okay, you know that she’s still not handling things well at all which is why Tony arranged for Sam, the licensed counselor, to babysit her while we are dealing with things.” Skye is the first one to agree that Simmons could really use some personal time with a therapist.

“But she still should’ve told us that she was going. She didn’t have to leave like that.” Skye had been driven to the social worker’s office in the middle of the night too many times and just left there without prior warning to be okay with that. Yes, she now knows it was a protocol to keep her safe, but you can’t make the angry and lonely 12-year-old within her not be somewhat bitter about it.

"Why are you mad?"

"I’m not even sure anymore.” Fitz looks at her. “I don’t like being abandoned. You guys are the closest thing I’ve ever had to a family which is really sad because it hasn’t even been a year yet. I just don’t want to lose my family and her leaving like that just…” Skye paused to wipe her face with her sleeve. Really, it was just allergies. She wasn’t crying.

“Did you tell her?” Fitz asked.

“We already established I’m not very good at interpersonal communications. Besides, this is not about me. This is about you. What did she do that has you avoiding her?” ‘What did she do that had you inviting me on this, instead of her?’ Because if you have to scatter your mother’s ashes, your best friend should be the one with you instead of someone like Skye. She didn’t know what to say and could offer no more than a hug or squeeze of the hand last night.

"She said she loved me." Fitz said in a near whisper, as he dropped the fry he was holding.

“You didn’t know?” He shook his head. “I told you she wasn’t well when you were in the coma. It was kind of obvious. She slept with your blanket.” Fitz’s eyes widened at that.

"She doesn’t know how… how she loves me." He clarified.

"That was pretty obvious too." Fitz looks up at her. “Of course, she’s going to be confused. You almost died on her. That’s going to make things complicated.” Skye tells him.

"Do you know what.." Fitz started but couldn’t finish. But she could tell he was asking if she knew about what happened in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Simmons wouldn’t talk about it. Even Coulson couldn’t get her to talk about it." Skye focuses on her food.

"Oh."

"But I think I know what happened. You and Simmons figured out some way out of there because you are both brilliant, but it would only work for one of you. And because you were so in love with her, you decided it would be her.” Fitz nods his head, letting her know that she was mostly right, so far.

“Of course, you decided to tell her that you were in love with her just before your suicide by nobility. Because hey, if you are going to die there is nothing left to lose. How close am I?” Skye asked.

"Close."

"Except you didn’t die because she wouldn’t let you. Now you’re both here coping with all this stuff
and everything’s different and you really don’t know how to deal.”

"Yes."

"And then you add everything else going on like your mom dying and finding out you’re the son of the billionaire Avenger and you’re going to have other things to focus on than trying to figure out how you feel about one another." Fitz nods his head.

“I wish I could tell you what to do, but I’m just as clueless as you are. Actually, I’m even more clueless. My track record is horrible. The best relationship I ever had was with a Russian hacker named Ivan and that lasted only long enough for me to learn there’s not really a Russian equivalent to fuck.” Fitz smiles at that.

“It just went downhill from there. Miles was an awful poser who got people killed and he who shall not be named was a backstabbing, manipulative bastard who almost got you killed which is worse because you’re my friend. Also the guy I’m currently attracted to is probably 95% gay and I already humiliated myself by propositioning him earlier when I was desperate to get the taste of betrayal out of my mouth. Do not take dating advice from me at all.”

Probably the entire reason why she’s attracted to Trip is nothing will happen. Why does she keep going after bastards?

"Mack?" She just wants to hug Fitz when he says that. Why is it that Fitz assumes that everyone he’s attracted to is interested in someone else, even when that guy turns out to be more interested in Fitz then her? Although maybe he just said that because he knows that Mack plays for Fitz’s team.

"No." She answered emphatically.

"Why? He’s nice." Fitz smiled.

“He is, especially to you. I saw him hug you yesterday after the service. Actually, I saw you sleeping on his lap when I came back from Operation Find an Asgardian. You looked really comfortable.” Skye has pictures. She would email them to Trip, but it might be in bad taste to email him pictures of his ex-boyfriend, cuddling up with his perspective new boyfriend. It would be really in bad taste to show them to Simmons.

"He’s a friend." Fitz says too quickly.

"So is Simmons. I’m sure he would be open to being more than a friend."

"Too com--complicated." Fitz stuttered.

"I know things with Simmons are way too complicated, but that’s totally why you should go for Mr. McKenzie. He’s a mechanic, so I’m sure he will be willing to help make sure everything under your hood is still working.” Fitz responds by throwing a balled up napkin at her.

“Your hand and eye coordination is improving considering how easily you hit me. You should definitely give him a try. Your father should not be having more sex than us. It’s wrong.” Tony and Rogers had plane sex during the flight to London this morning and headphones only do so much.

"Too complicated." Fitz said again.

"No strings attached is not that complicated." That’s when Fitz became annoyed with her and turned his attention to his phone. Skye responded by turning her attention to some nice pieces of fish and a bottle of vinegar. When she was on her second piece of fish, Fitz computerized helper monkey began
to speak whatever Fitz wrote down.

It’s complicated because I did someone really dumb before everything fell apart. Also, Mack’s boyfriend of two years was killed on the Iliad by Hydra agents before it was sunk by the Captain. Mack was vacationing in Portugal with Bobbi and her boyfriend. Now he feels guilty and blames himself for his boyfriend’s murder.

Skye is just going to assume that ‘someone’ was a Henry typo unless the Asgardian skank violated him. Then she had another reason to find Thor because she was going to Asgard to personally hurt her, even if she had to hijack one of Tony’s suits to have the power to do any actual damage.

"Both of who defected to the evil tentacle organization.” Fitz nods his head. “Okay, definitely too complicated for no strings attached, but maybe you can try for something a little more.” Skye suggested. Fitz passed his phone back to her with another message.

He also said I reminded him of his little brother Ruben. He’s also only four years younger than my dad.

‘Because your dad was 14 when he did something stupid.’ However, Skye was smart enough not to say this out loud.

“Okay, maybe Mack is out, but what about Trista. She likes you.” Fitz was already typing something out at her words.

I’m not ready to fuck around with anyone right now. Also, Trista has a crush on Trip’s cousin, Sharon.

"Seriously?” Fitz nods his head. “That explains why she wanted to avoid Trip’s aunt so much.” Trista also didn’t want to pretend to be her crushes fake girlfriend. That was a weird experience. “It’s like Hydra purposely avoided anyone who was a member of GLASS?” Fitz looks like he’s about to say something, but he doesn’t.

“Which completely makes sense for a Nazi organization. He who shall not be named definitely freaked out at the prospect of hitting on a guy.”

“May be another reason.” Fitz said not looking at her.

“I don’t know. Trip told me that he joined SHIELD because he didn’t have to be in the closet unlike with the military which still had ‘Don’t ask don’t tell’ in place at the time. Isabel said something similar. People who saw SHIELD as a safe haven were probably less likely to go to the Hydra side even if they were welcomed with open arms.” Skye remarked.

"You like Trip?” Fitz blurted out.

“You’re just figuring that out…” Skye started to say just as Mack and Trista walked into the room with weapons in hand. This was not good.

“Grab anything you absolutely need. We are getting the hell out of here.” Mack told them as Trista secured the perimeter.

“What’s going on?” Skye asked as she made her way to her laptop bag.

“Coulson’s Hydra contact let him know that Hydra was going to start making raids on various SHIELD safe houses. Apparently Stark’s London flat was on the list.” Mack explained.
“Because it was a safe house of Howard’s?” Skye asked.

“I don’t know. Let’s get moving.” Skye doesn’t even have time to argue. She just starts preparing to leave the house (i.e. go upstairs and pick up the weapons left behind). Less than 10 minutes later, somebody threw a smoke bomb into the room and she saw firsthand proof that Trista had the same level of combat skills as May.

She would enjoy it more if she wasn’t trying to avoid getting shot. Also, Skye had to focus on getting Fitz to the car with Mack. It was at moments like this, she was very thankful she attends the Melinda May school of ass kicking. She shot three stupid Hydra agents in SHIELD clothing as they made their way to the street. The getaway car was on fire and there were more agents coming after them. Skye was really glad she grabbed some ICERs.

Thankfully at that moment, Steve jumped out of a nondescript SUV down the street with his shield in hand (which totally explains why she didn’t find it in his bedroom when she went looking for it). Skye decided to get Fitz to that SUV as Captain America and Mack made sure that they wouldn’t get hit.

“You’re okay?” Tony asked as soon as they opened the door.

“I’m o--okay, Dad.” Fitz said as Skye and Mack literally pushed him into the car. At that, Tony was out of the car and tossing the keys to Mack.

“Get the kids out of here.” Within seconds, Tony was stepping into new armor.

“Do you just realize that you called Tony ‘Dad’?” Skye asked seconds before a bullet took out their back windshield. Thankfully, the debris didn’t hit anybody because they were on the floor of the vehicle.

“Later let’s get out of here now.” Mack said just as he accelerated.
To be continued.

Chapter End Notes

Since I haven’t use the acronym in forever, GLASS stands for gay and lesbian agents serving SHIELD. They include the whole LGTBPI community, but they didn’t want to change the acronym. You know SHIELD. They just love their acronyms.
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. I’m sorry for the long wait between updates. I should’ve warned everyone that I wasn’t planning to start on the next chapter until I watched Captain America: Civil War.

There was so much that I had to watch it a second time to unpack everything before I could begin working on this. I may have started crying during the climax the first time I watched. Then I started writing a fix-it story to help resolve everything (If you’re in serious need of a fix-it story check out I Hope You Have Unlimited Text Messaging). Because the Agents of SHIELD season finale was in two days and since I had the next day off from work, I decided to wait. (Yes, postproduction on chapters does take this long. Best of all, I got to meet Brett Dalton and Elizabeth Henstridge at Awesome Con during this time). And then you know how the chapters just get away from me. (So much so that I ended up moving a third of it to the next chapter in order to get something up sooner.)

Finally, during the proofreading process, the email gremlins/cyber Hydra attacked and the chapter was lost for an entire week. Really, I’m so sorry; email gremlins are awful.

I was always planning for this story to avoid Civil War or at least avoid Civil War between Tony and Steve and I actually accomplish that in a way I didn’t see coming. It was such a simple thing. There probably won’t be any blatant Civil War spoilers in here, but there will be some lampshading even in this chapter.

Spoilers/continuity note: We are so AU that Civil War doesn’t happen in this universe, not even the flashbacks that take place before 2014, at least not in the same way anyway except for the fact the accident was not an accident and the Winter Soldier/Hydra was responsible.

Also we have a completely different version of Maria Stark in this story (down to the DNA pattern), which was always the plan. How different you’re just going to have to keep reading to see, but she turned out more different than I thought she would.

Although I have cousins with blonde hair and blue eyes on the Puerto Rican side of the family, the Maria Stark in this story had dark hair and light skin as drawn in the comics. Also in this story, she is of African, indigenous Puerto Rican, and Italian ancestry. Normally, I don’t revealed the racial makeup of my characters unless it’s a plot point (just assume all my original characters are extremely biracial unless stated otherwise) and it’s a plot point for this story.

December 17, 1991

Tony Stark hasn’t said a word since Obadiah drove him back to the mansion from the morgue five hours earlier. He couldn’t after seeing the obvious signs of his mother’s broken neck. In his head, he was calculating how fast the car had to be going to cause those injuries. The numbers weren’t
matching up to the injuries that he saw, but maybe his math was wrong for once. Or maybe he just couldn’t deal with… any of this shit.

Tony needed a fucking drink. Another one, actually. He already went through the bottle he liberated from the guest stash. Ironically, Howard’s office was clean. (Maybe he drank it all before getting behind the wheel of that car.) Of course, getting more alcohol would mean leaving his room and he wasn’t ready to do that. He wasn’t ready to face the emptiness of the house again filled with the ghost of his parents. The sight of the Christmas tree and presents that he never wants to open made him nauseous and it wasn’t just the alcohol.

Maria wanted him to come home and Tony purposely arrived after he was sure they had already left for the Christmas gala or whatever they were supposed to be attending. Tony wasn’t ready to deal with Howard yelling at him again for accidently getting someone pregnant. He wasn’t ready for his mom to look at him with shame for fucking up. This was especially true with Jarvis out of state participating in a very Carter-Jones Christmas and Katie could only do so much.

Yes, he knew about his mother’s girlfriend and he adored Katie. She was the good step mom that begged for him to come home early so he could spend Christmas with her and his parents. He called her first. She offered to join him at the morgue, but he couldn’t bear the thought of her being exposed to Obadiah.

Now, he regretted avoiding his parents. Now, he would give anything to hear Howard screaming at him as Maria told him not to be so harsh and Katie plied him with homemade cookies. Now he’s alone, the last Stark.

Or maybe not. He had a son, maybe. Another piece of him in the world. That was a sobering thought.

Tony looked at the empty bottle dubiously, belatedly realizing he was pulling a Howard. Tony was broken out of his thoughts by a knock at the door. It was probably Esmeralda trying to get him to eat something most likely on Katie’s orders. The fact that he could smell pizza pointed to that.

"I’m not hungry." Tony said not even looking at the door. It wasn’t a lie because the smell of food was making him nauseous. Maybe he should not have drank an entire bottle on an empty stomach.

“Tough.” The voice did not belong to Esmeralda or even his mom’s girlfriend (or widow would probably be the more emotionally accurate term), but his friend, Jim. “Esmeralda is pretty sure you haven’t eaten anything since Obadiah dragged you out of here way too early this morning. She ordered pizza from your favorite place and you know how much she hates letting you eat anything
They met just two years ago after Deborah transferred, but Tony felt like Jim was his platonic soulmate from the moment they first met. Tony was glad that Jim was here because the guy was his only friend after the fight with Ty a couple of days ago. Seriously, why did he fuck him?

He wasn’t expecting Jim to be here because the roads were now awful according to the news. Regardless, he was glad for it when he opened the door and was immediately pulled into a hug.

“I’m happy to see you, but how did you get here?” Tony asked. “I thought the roads would be closed by now.”

"Your Aunt Peggy has connections and I was closer. Besides, there’s nowhere else I would be when you need me." He said moving out of the hug.

Tony wanted to say thank you, instead he promptly threw up on Jim’s shoes and then he passed out. The fact that he woke up in his bed wearing his oversize MIT T-shirt with Jim sleeping in the chair next to him pretty much pointed to the type of friendship they had.

xxxxxx

The next few days were a blur. Obadiah ushered him from event to event making the funeral more spectacle for the shareholders than actual remembrance of the loss. He didn’t fight it. He couldn’t. Tony didn’t have the energy to fight the man and Jim didn’t force him to be an active participant. Jarvis didn’t arrive until almost all the public arrangements were finalized. Otherwise, he would have made sure half of this stuff didn’t happen.

The burial was private. Mostly, because Jarvis took over just in time. No board and no Obadiah (he probably would’ve gotten arrested for knocking out Baker if the man was there). Jarvis stood beside him because he is more like family than almost anyone else. Katie was there as well, because she’s family too. She was allowed to cry here among the people who knew how much she loved Maria. Tony doesn’t. He can’t, because he keeps playing his final conversation with Howard over and over again.

Marcy Ana, Stephanie’s big sister, was there along with her mother. This didn’t surprise Tony because Marcy had been working with his dad for the last few years. Although, he was surprised that Peggy’s there because of the falling out she and Howard had after Stephanie’s kidnapping. Things like death make you realize how silly some arguments really are. Although, apparently that wasn’t enough to make Stephanie come, which made him feel sad in an entirely different way.
Marcy was there for Howard. His dad and Marcy were close, very close. She was the daughter that Howard really wanted. (He found the “Natasha’s blanket” in the attic yesterday when Jim and he took the Christmas decorations up there because he couldn’t keep looking at them).

Although the creepy old men who made up the SI board didn’t see it that way. Half of the board thought they were screwing around. There were some nasty comments which resulted in half the board being removed (except for Baker because he was probably blackmailing dad). This was the reason why Katie would be becoming a member of the board soon.

He was glad they weren’t there. The service was for only people who really cared and loved Maria or Howard. The fact that there were only six people there said things that Tony didn’t want to look at too closely. He would like to blame it on the snow, but he knew better.

Tony was literally numb as Howard and Maria’s bodies were laid into the ground next to each other for the rest of eternity. He wanted to watch every single shovel of dirt fall upon the ornate ivory casket that Jim chose (because Tony was too out of it to actually do any of that). Instead, Jim dragged him towards the limo to go back to the house (after Katie made him promise to come by to build their annual gingerbread dream house together).

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Marcy told him as he opened the door to the limo. Tony was really tired of hearing those words, at least she was sincere. Jim had to keep him from punching Baker in the teeth yesterday at the public memorial service.

“I should be saying that to you. Howard actually liked you. You he treated like a daughter and me like the gum on his shoe.” Tony said bitterly.

“Tony.” Jim hissed.

“Howard’s dead. There’s no point in sugarcoating things now. He was a fucking alcoholic whose stupidity is the reason why I don’t have a mom anymore.” Tony said bitterly. For the first time in days there actually was an angry tear running down his cheek.

“The toxicology isn’t back yet. Howard may have just had a bad day in the snow.” Marcy suggested.

“Do you really believe that?” Marcy doesn’t look at him. She probably already knows it was a drunk driving accident and can’t bear to acknowledge the truth.
“Regardless, it doesn’t change the fact that they’re both dead.” The words are heavy in his mouth. He feels like he’s going to be sick again. This day could not be over fast enough.

“No, it doesn’t.” Marcy said as she pulled an envelope out of her purse. “Howard, asked me to give you this letter, if something happened to him.” She extends the envelope to him and Tony can’t bring himself to move his hand. He just can’t take it from her.

“I know you think that Howard hated you, but he didn’t. He was just a damaged man and maybe he couldn’t show what he felt, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t feel it for you. Howard really did love you.” Marcy’s words made him feel even worse.

“I still don’t believe you.” Tony doesn’t move to take the letter. Jim does it for him.

“I’ll let you get back to the estate to mourn in peace. Mom drove here, so I’ll ride back with her.” Marcy said before leaning over to hug him.

“It was good seeing you again, Tony. I just wish it was under better circumstances.” Marcy said pulling away.

"Like your sister deciding to speak to me again? Where is Stephanie?" Yes, he had Rhodye there, but he could use his childhood friend as well, even if he hadn’t spoken to her since the kidnapping. Yes, he knew about the kidnapping. And he still doesn’t think that’s an acceptable excuse for not being here.

“Betty Ford.” That is.

"Oh.” Tony wasn’t entirely sure how to respond to that. “I’m not surprised. Kidnapping is hard especially when you end up with a child afterwards.” Because you were raped by those that kidnapped you.

"Especially when most people don’t know that you were kidnapped.” Marcy added. “Thankfully, Stephanie realized she couldn’t keep pretending any longer and decided to get help. No one outside of me and mom know. Baby Antoine just thinks that his mom is studying abroad for a couple of months.”

“That’s good. No one deserves to be raised by another Howard.” Tony closed his eyes remembering.
He was lucky Howard was only a yelling drunk.

“I’m hoping it works.” Marcy gave Tony a sad smile. “You’ll take care of him.” She asked turning to Jim.

“Of course,” with that Marcy left and Jim was pushing him into the limo.

“Do you want to read the letter?” Jim asked as the car started the long drive back to the mansion.

“No. What I really want is my mom back.”

"I’m sorry, Tony."

“I know. Unlike most of the people from yesterday, at least you are sincere.”

“Marcy was sincere.” Jim grabbed his hand.

“That’s because she was Howard’s favorite. Do you think I’m going to end up like him?”

“You’re not your father.” Jim reassured.

“But I could end up a father like him. The last time we talked it was to let me know that I fucked up and most likely got some random girl pregnant during my first year at MIT before you got there and saved me from myself. Great.” Jim doesn’t even look surprised that that revelation. Probably because he walked in on Tony a lot during the year they shared a dorm room due to his dad trying to teach him responsibility.

“My final memory of Howard is him yelling at me for screwing up.”

“Did he really yell at you?” Jim asked.
“He was using his ‘I’m so disappointed in you because Captain America would never do this’ voice.”

“Considering they put condoms in soldiers’ rations during World War II, I doubt that he was the paragon of virtue that most people claimed him to be. Especially if he hung out with Howard.”

“And now you’re giving me weird thoughts about my first crush and my dad.” Tony shivered slightly.

“I think that you’ll be a good dad.” Jim tells him sincerely.

“And you’ll help me not screw up if the test turns out positive?”

“I promise.”

xxxxxx

The Present (July 2014)

Being Tony Stark’s best friend is not always the easiest job in the world. There are lots of drunken 3 am phone calls involving arranging for bail money behind Pepper’s (and long before that Jarvis’ and Obadiah’s) back along with the occasional Senate hearing or paternity test. Actually, Jim would rather be behind enemy lines sometimes. Especially when he finds out by watching breaking news reports that Tony almost got himself killed, again.

The major difference was 10 years ago the almost death involved vast quantities of alcohol and almost falling off the roof of a hotel after some ridiculous public sex incident. Now almost dying involves tag team fighting with the new boyfriend and a group of terrorists who are after his kid (because one of the paternity tests finally came up positive which wasn’t surprising considering the dumb stuff Tony did in college alone).

After knowing each other for more than 25 years, Jim would have thought that he’d be used to it by now, but he wasn’t. And he hopes that he never will be.

It does not help things when Tony doesn’t pick up the phone for nearly 2 days after the London incident and his only reassurance is JARVIS telling him that his master is still breathing despite taking heavy fire from fake SHIELD. He doesn’t call Pepper because Pepper is trying to distance herself from Tony a little. He understands. He wouldn’t want to hang around his former significant
other and her new significant other. It’s why he’s running point on Tony’s panicked parenting phone calls. Tony was determined to hold him to his promise after the funeral nearly 23 years ago.

After two days of no calls, his only option was to resort to angry text messages.

War machine: It’s been two days. You better pick up the damn phone and call me. After some of the things you put me through, I don’t necessarily believe JARVIS.

War machine: I have tried your boyfriend, but he’s also not picking up my calls.

War machine: Usually you don’t go this long without calling unless you’ve been kidnapped. Tony what’s going on?

War machine: I will bribe JARVIS to tell me your location and I will fly there myself, if I don’t hear back from you in the next 24 hours.

War machine: If you’re just drunk and in your lab avoiding everybody like you did last April, I will hurt you.

War machine: If you’re dead, I will figure out how they brought back Coulson just to use it on you solely so I can kill you myself.

Iron Man: Don’t mention what happened to Coulson in any type of non-encrypted communication.

War machine: That’s what gets your attention?

Iron Man: Because I have to scorch that type of information from the electronic earth, and that’s a little hard to do with just the cell phone. Thankfully, JARVIS is a genius.

War machine: So you’re really not at home?

Iron Man: Yes. No need to drag me out of the DC workshop, even if you could. Only Steve and Leo have override access to the lab.
War machine: I would be hurt if Pepper was also not on the list. Also Pepper Junior is absent.

Iron Man: Don’t call Dr. Simmons that. There’s like a 50-50 chance she’s going to be my daughter-in-law someday, as soon as those two idiots can work through their issues. I’m thinking 2017, maybe.

Iron Man: They ignore each other. Then they can’t be away from each other then they ignore each other again. They’re supposed to be 26-year-olds with multiple PhD’s and their acting like fucking teenagers. Let’s not even talk about the fact that Leo has a crush on my driver too, who is only six years younger than me. Teenagers, all of them.

War machine: It’s obvious that PhD’s do not prevent you from behaving stupidly since you have five and still do dumb things.

War machine: Also, your boyfriend was born in July of 1918, less than a year after your father and is biologically only two years older than your son. You are not allowed to comment on the age inappropriateness of anyone else’s relationship unless one party is under the age of consent.

Iron Man: Funny.

Iron Man: The access thing is not a big deal. Simmons is always in the lab, and therefore has the same access as me, so the override is not necessary. Pepper asked not to be on the list. It’s part of our effort to redefine the boundaries of our new relationship.

Iron Man: In your case, you haven’t been by since I upgraded the system to put you in the new system. Which is weird since you technically live there.

Iron Man: By the way, I’m moving you next door to your own house. Simmons took your old bedroom.

War machine: I’m sorry I haven’t been by recently. Your boyfriend exposed a major terrorist organization. It’s been busy which is why I haven’t been by since the baby announcement. But if you need me, I will be there.
Iron Man: We're okay. The London branch of Shydra is currently in MI6 custody. Although, the city of London is really mad about the property damage.

Iron Man: Which they shouldn’t be because it was damage to my property only, no civilian casualties. Really, it’s nothing that Damage Control can’t fix. God, I think I’m their best customer.

War machine: That’s good. Are you okay?

Iron Man: Leo escaped without a scratch. Steve’s bruises are already healed and the bots have already finished repairs on the armor. We’re staying at Phil’s house for a couple of days until Agent Carter Jr. checks out a couple of things.

War machine: Emotionally?

Iron Man: Someone tried to murder my kid. It’s the second time in less than three months. They actually did kill Antoine, Stephanie’s son’s former fiancé Robin a.k.a the nurse I really didn’t like at Woodbine because he kept trying to fuck Steve. The CIA’s special unit is looking into that one. The guy was a dick, but he didn’t deserve that.

War machine: It’s still bad because Antoine used to love him and it still hurts.

Iron Man: Exactly. Stephanie is really sad about it because she was BFFs with his mom, still was after the engagement was called off. They’re probably on their way to the wake right now.

War machine: Where are you?

Iron Man: Getting ready to meet with a reporter

War machine: Damage control?

Iron Man: As much damage control as you can do when there’s someone with their own show out to get you
War machine: You’re not meeting with Everhart? You were contemplating getting a restraining order against her after she crashed Steve’s birthday party.

Iron Man: Well, her showing up in London resulted in us fleeing the hotel which is why we ended up getting ambushed by Shydra.

War machine: You think she set you up?

Iron Man: I did until Skye uncovered a few things. Now we have a bigger problem to deal with and unfortunately I drew the short straw.

War machine: Tony what are you planning? Who is Skye?

Iron Man: Leo’s BFF, the one he’s not in love with. Scary hacker who I think JARVIS is in love with.

War machine: Okay, now I know you’re planning something

“Mr. Stark is no longer able to respond due to the arrival of his appointment.”

"I hate it when you read my text messages." Jim groaned.

"I monitor all correspondence going to Mr. Stark. In the event that…"

"Someone could be threatening his life." Jim finished for the AI.

"Precisely, Colonel Rhodes. Captain Rogers is with him so Sir should be relatively safe."

“Captain Rogers is also a stubborn hothead who despite the all American look will say the wrong thing at the wrong time. They’re not planning to come out together on national TV just to keep the press away from finding out about Leo?” JARVIS doesn’t answer. That’s never a good sign.
"Do I need to come back now?" He asked.

"Not at this time, but the situation could change." That was JARVIS for ‘Please make travel plans now’. Actually, knowing the AI, one of Tony’s private planes was probably already en route.

“What time will Stark-force 1 touchdown?”

“1000 hrs. Local time.” Now he knew how much time he had to talk command into letting him spend some time stateside.

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"I’m sorry, I’m back a day later than I said I would be. I was already there and the network decided I should cover the London incident. Thanks for agreeing to stay an extra day.” A disheveled Christina Everhart said from her front door with multiple suitcases in hand.

Christine was annoyed because she was only supposed to be in London long enough to meet with her contact. Instead, the network made her stay to cover the Avengers’ latest screw up. Although, the fact that she had cell phone video of Tony Stark himself, pushing a young man who matched Leo Fitz’s description out of the way of danger was a plus for her even if it didn’t quite fit the narrative given to her by Baker and Stone.

Christine pushed all that out of her mind because all she wanted to do was take a bath and maybe play Barbies with Alana before bedtime. Alana’s bedtime because Christine was about to collapse. She was so exhausted that she didn’t even bother to see if the babysitter she was talking to was actually there.

"I wouldn’t say thank you to your nanny seeing that she abandoned your kid.” The voice of Tony Stark caused her to drop both of her suitcases. “The moment Steve and I showed up at your door, she ran. Apparently your five-year-old was driving her crazy due to fingerpainting on your pristine white carpets. We arrived just when she managed to get purple handprints on her backside.” Tony smirked at her.

That’s when she noticed that her carpet resembled a Jackson Pollock painting. She was definitely going to have to call the service for a new sitter and then she’s going to have to deal with getting the carpet replaced. There goes the security deposit.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t call Alexandria PD right now?” Her cell phone was already in
her hand just ready to dial.

“Because I’ll pay for Damage Control to take care of the carpet.” A restored carpet might be worth listening to whatever the billionaire had to say. She might even get a story out of it. “Also, Steve is mesmerizing her right now with his shield, so there’s a good chance that your daughter might take a nap and I have a feeling that you can’t deal with an energetic five-year-old right now.”

“Alana is my niece and she won’t be five for another month.” Christine responded annoyed.

“But you’re raising her?”

Because you’re incompetence got her mom killed. “Yes,” she answered instead.

“You sister was an officer in Jersey City, but when the aliens invaded Manhattan she was called in to help and she never made it back home.”

"Thanks to you." She said bitterly, not being able to bite her tongue any longer.

"I think you’re going to have to blame it on the aliens that invaded because I’m the one who kept a nuclear missile from blowing up Manhattan. Your cute little niece would not have escaped the fallout." The jackass explained.

"We didn’t have to worry about aliens falling from the sky before you decided to fly around in a big red suit playing hero." Before him there were no aliens falling down to earth causing chaos. No super villains trying to take over. No terrorist organizations that had her on their target list. She was one of the names on the Hydra kill list and thankfully no other news organization reported that fact. Maybe they were ashamed that she was one of only five journalists (and only on air talent) on American cable that the terrorist organization saw as a threat.

"So we are back to this being my fault again?” He looked at her annoyed. “I don’t think that’s fair to your sister. If you keep blaming me, you take away the fact that she died a hero."

"It’s impossible to take that away.” She spat back angrily. “Olivia was more of a hero than you ever were. You never were one. Being a hero is not about atoning for your own sins. It’s definitely not about walking back into the life of a kid you abandoned 23 years ago.” She was shaking at this point.
"So you actually know about Leo?" He asked too innocently.

"So you’re not denying the fact that Leopold Fitz is your illegitimate son?" His response was to pull up an image on his phone of Leopold Fitz and himself sleeping on the couch together.

"There’s no point. Five minutes looking at his CV and you'll know that he is my kid." Stark actually smirks. "The only thing I’m going to argue with you is that I didn’t abandoned him 23 years ago because I didn’t even know I had a son until 2 months ago."

"Bullshit." She knows better than to believe him despite the fact that her evidence was contradicting itself. "You can distract everyone else with your charms, but not me."

"Not anymore anyway." He smirked at her again. She is repressing the urge to smack him, because she really can't afford to lose the security deposit on this house.

"You weren’t that good."

"Probably not." She's slightly surprised by his words, at least until he speaks again. "It’s better if you at least like the person you’re having sex with. But were not here to talk about something that happened 6 years ago, because were both better than that."

"I am at least. You, I’m not so sure. According to an anonymous source, you were informed of the existence of Leopold Fitz on December 10, 1991, where you promptly freaked out and told your dad to take care of the problem." The head of the network provided her with this information himself once he was informed of her plans to expose the illegitimate Stark child to the world.

"Ty, Ty. I shouldn’t be surprised since he signs your paychecks."

"I’m unable to divulge my source," but you obviously know who it is.

"Definitely Tiberius then. He always was an obnoxious little prick.” Christine agreed with that sentiment entirely especially because he kept trying to sleep with her despite her many attempts to tell him that was never ever going to happen.
"I didn’t freak out. I hung up on Howard because he went into such a long tirade about why I am a complete failure.”

"That makes you sound so much better." She rolled her eyes at him.

“The next morning after I calmed down, I called the lawyers to begin the process to confirm the paternity claim.”

“Then when the claim turned out to be positive, you had Obadiah Stane throw money at it to go away. I have bank records by the way. That was the real reason why I was in London. Running into you at the hotel was pure coincidence.”

"Or, alternatively, Obadiah told me that the paternity test turned out negative, so I would stay focused on making all his wonderful weapons instead of proving to the world that I was going to be a better father than Howard ever was." There was a level of anger in his words that she wasn't expecting. It almost made her believe him, almost.

"I only have your word on that."

"Rhodey was there with me when Obadiah broke the bad news. I promptly went on a bender because not only did I lose my parents, but I thought I lost the last bit of family I was ever going to have."

"That doesn't paint you in a very favorable light either." Christine responded.

"Mostly because I didn't verify what Obadiah was telling me. I was too much of a mess because my parents were just murdered. Not that I knew that at the time. I know you don’t believe me, but I wanted Leo even back then. I am never going to forgive myself for not realizing what a bastard Obadiah was."

“I believe the Obadiah being a bastard part of your story, if nothing else. However, my version sells more papers or rather, it results in more views for our YouTube page.”

"I don’t know. Obadiah secretly grooming my child to take over once I was out of the way seems
much more scandalous than a deadbeat dad. Those are a dime a dozen. You’re dealing with one right now.” She should’ve known he had something on her. He wouldn't be here on her turf if that wasn’t the case.

"What do you know?"

"Before your sister Olivia became a cop in New Jersey, she was a member of the Capitol police force. Because he wasn't exactly the most favorable member of the party, Senator Christopher Ward ended up spending a lot of time with Officer Olivia. Unfortunately, awful taste in men is genetic in your family and I'm guessing the condom broke."

Fuck, fuck, fuck! No wonder he was being such a smug prick. He managed to uncover her one real weakness.

"You acknowledge that you're not exactly the best choice in hook up partners?" She wanted to avoid all talk of her niece's biological father. Maybe if she ignores it, this will all go away.

"Back then, yes. The big difference is unlike the good Senator I have been sterile for years. Leo is my miracle baby.” The billionaire smiled fondly at that, which surprised her. “Also, by comparison, I came from a stable family. Howard may have forgot when my birthday was, but he never hit me. Really, you should be happy the guy wants nothing to do with his daughter. It’s for the best.”

She realized that when she discovered two dozen reports to Massachusetts child services that were never dealt with. It made her terrified of how much power the Ward family really had. All of her suspicions were confirmed when Christopher's brother, Tim (formally Thomas), found her and confirmed that her worst fears were just the tip of the iceberg of the family's depravity. The one who was supposed to be a government agent was the worst of them all apparently.

"How do you even know that?" If that ever goes public, she won’t even be able to get a job writing a traffic blog. Senator Ward made that quite clear. He didn't want anybody to hurt his White House chances. Impregnating a member of the Capitol police force (while still married to your political trophy wife) would do that.

"You don’t protect your computer files very well or at all. The DNA test confirming that your niece is Senator Ward’s love child should be under at least 3 layers of encryption." Unfortunately, it was only under two. She kept it because she was hoping that one day she would be able to expose Senator Ward for the monster that he was.
"You broke into my computer?" She shouldn't be surprised at all.

"My son’s friend did. She was convinced that you led us into a trap 2 days ago and was pissed. So she spent the whole flight back from London finding out anything she could about you. Discovering your niece is the niece of the guy who put my son and her best friend in a coma was a bit of a surprise, but something I can work with." What the hell is he talking about?

"That explains so much. I’m glad your bitterness isn’t really about me. You’re better than that."

"According to my sources your son was hospitalized after a yachting accident." She said purposely ignoring the earlier comments. "Although that seems like a cover for something else considering other sources put him at SHIELD Academy 5 years ago. That leads me to believe that any real information about him would require me to decrypt secret SHIELD files."

Which she's been working on since the data dump. She needed to know if Alana's uncle who worked for SHIELD was dirty and if he would be a threat to Alana, especially considering what Tim told her. Instead, she came across information about the possibility of Howard Stark actually being murdered and the existence of his grandson. She ran with the Howard Stark story, but after Baker contacted her with supporting information, she decided to sit on the Leo Fitz really being a Stark story until she had more.

"In addition to the existence of Alana, Senator Ward probably doesn’t want the world at large to know that his younger brother escaped juvenile detention to become a distinguished member of Hydra who tossed my kid out into the middle of the Gulf of Mexico about three months ago, putting him in a coma for three weeks. I really don’t like the Ward family right now." The murderous rage in Tony Stark eyes made her believe him. You can’t fake that.

Dammit. He was a dirty agent. She shouldn't be surprised considering Tim told her about the guy nearly drowning him as a child.

“Could Alana be a target for Hydra?” Could that be why she was on their hit list? Could Christopher be Hydra too? He was dirty. She knew that, but could he be terrorist dirty? He was very quick to distance himself from political ally Senator Stern, maybe a little too quick.

"Don't worry, her uncle is in custody." She exhaled in relief or at least she did until she realizes he doesn’t address the general Hydra threat.
"I'm more concerned with the distinguished gentleman from Massachusetts. He could be another bad apple for all we know, and he's having you do his dirty work for him. Getting people riled up about SHIELD and powered people so they don't see what he's really doing. I'm sure exposing me as a deadbeat dad is just another distraction, but you don't have to be used like this." She's smart enough to know that he is offering her something right now.

“If I don’t play his game, I lose everything.” If she exposes him, she’ll lose Alana. He may not take responsibility, but he would make damn well make sure she couldn’t get within 100 feet of her niece.

“Not if you have somebody stronger than him at your back.” He was offering her protection?

“You’re willing to be that person?” Christine asked. “The enemy of your enemy is your friend. Is that what this is?”

"You’re angry at me and I get that. You don’t trust me and I get that too. I get it more now that I know you’re upset about the fallout from New York and the fact that you think I’m doing the exact same thing your niece's sperm donor did to her.” Maybe he wasn’t a complete idiot.

“But what I really want to do is just keep my son out of Hydra’s clutches. I know you want to do the same thing for your niece. We need each other to do that.” There’s no arrogance in his words just genuine fear. It’s unnerving.

“Let me guess, what you need from me as to not tell the world that you have a 26-year-old son? Isn’t that convenient.”

"Personally, I want to shout that from the rooftops. Did you uncover his list of patents?” Stark was actually beaming. “He’s every parent’s dream child. And when it’s safe to do so, I will. I’ll let you have the exclusive, but Hydra is out there and they’ve already tried to kill him twice since April. London was attempt number two.” It doesn’t surprise her. Despite the SHIELD logo, it was obvious that Hydra was responsible.

"All I have to do is sit on the story until you’re ready for the truth to come out?"

"I need your help to uncover the truth. Obadiah worked with a lot of bad people. The same bad people that your niece’s uncle worked for. A few minutes ago you mentioned that you found the financial records of Obadiah paying Ms. Fitz to stay quiet. BTW, Ms. Fitz was found murdered about two weeks ago, most likely by Hydra, but we don’t have enough evidence to prove that conclusively. I need everything you have to prove this."
She’d been a journalist long enough to know that it’s easier to get the real story when you have the cooperation of the subject. There was something important here, but she was still hesitant.

"And what do I get in the meantime? My bosses know that I’m working on a story involving exposing you for who you really are." Tiberius would know something was up if she stopped giving him updates.

"You could let the world know about Senator Ward’s illegitimate love child." He said seriously.

“As much as I want to, I can’t. Alana would end up with those people and I would probably be dead within an hour of reporting it.” She was staying quiet on Alana’s father until he was not a threat anymore.

“Valid point. Keep that revelation until the Ward family political dynasty is destroyed. But in the meantime, you can appease evil Mr. Stone by scoring the first post-breakup interview with Pepper Potts and Tony Stark together.” It would be the interview get of the year.

"She agreed to this?" Christina asked dubiously.

"We are still friends by some miracle and Pepper knows that protecting the people I love is the most important thing. Even though it’s only been a couple months, my son is at the top of that list, but I think you get that.” Tony said, pointing to Alana’s door.

She heard Alana laughing. It was her favorite sound and she didn’t hear it nearly enough.

“If I help you find out the truth, you’ll make sure nothing happens to Alana?"

“Even if I have to camp outside in the suit.” Before she could actually agree, Alana burst through at that moment with Captain America himself behind her. In seconds, Alana is squeezing her for dear life. All Christina can think about is that the babysitter left her child with complete strangers and the fact that her child’s uncle is a domestic terrorist. This is on top of the fact that Alana’s biological father was a manipulative bastard. She’s terrified.

But then Alana told her about how Mister Steve helped clean up and colored with her and she began
to calm down. They did stay here with Alana when she was abandoned by the babysitter. That’s better than what most people would’ve done.

After she calmed down a bit more, she realizes that Tony Stark was staring at Steve Rogers as if he was the most important being in the universe. He was the boyfriend. That made 1 million other little things make sense. More importantly, he gave her something to use against Stark in case this all fell apart. But right now she needed to make this deal. She can barely keep Alana safe from her father. Hydra wasn’t a possibility at all. It’s amazing the alliances you will make for the sake of your children.

To be continued…
“Watching the prisoner?” Clint asked as he found Natasha in Agent K2’s Office (Due to the fact it was hard to tell the brothers Koenig apart, he just number them). He wasn’t surprised to find her watching the camera feed to vault D. The prisoner was currently doing push-ups.

“Other than the fact he can wake up at 5 AM without an alarm clock every single day, most likely due to conditioning, I’ve learned nothing new in the last three days.”

Clint could tell that she was frustrated. Stark wouldn’t even let her mention the W word in front of his kid, let alone ask him about his interactions with the captive. Or maybe she was frustrated because the prisoner was giving her red room flashbacks. He wasn’t entirely sure because Natasha wasn’t exactly a sharer. That was evident by the fact she snuck out of his bunk last night without a word afterwards as usual.

“I thought you were watching Dr. Cline-Hand this morning?” Natasha asked, not even looking away from the screen.

Due to the excitement of almost getting kidnapped by Hydra, the doctor would most likely be on bedrest for the remainder of her pregnancy. Also due to nearly being kidnapped by Hydra, that bedrest would continue here at the Playground, like it had since they arrived three days ago. However, Dr. Cline-Hand was a flight risk and since Laura was the same way when she was pregnant with Lila, he had monitoring duty. (Okay, they were secretly worried that Dr. Cline-Hand would sneak down to vault D to kill the prisoner or go into labor trying.)

“Dr. Triplett kicked me out because she wanted to check on the patient one more time before going to the funeral.” The funeral of another Hydra victim.

“Besides, I needed to talk to you about the Howard Stark diary pages that were left in the trunk of
my car by Fury’s special friend.” He decided it was finally time to confront her about the diaries.

“I found those in Obadiah's things.” Natasha confessed. Clint’s not even that surprised.

“Did you read them before turning them over to Nick?”

“Only the last few pages. It's how we found Fitz and his mother. They helped corroborate other things we found at the compound.” She didn’t elaborate more on what they found. Although, he heard from Stark himself that he found evidence of Obadiah poisoning the original Jarvis. There was no way that guy wasn’t Hydra.

“Did you read the entries from ‘89 when Stark Senior discovered that his dead daughter wasn't buried in this rose garden and his suspicions that she was kidnapped by Maria's OB/GYN? Or how about the pages regarding the fact that he had the body exhumed from the rose garden after Natasha Stark’s DNA or at least the DNA of a child of Maria and Howard Stark was found at the scene of Stephanie’s kidnapping?” That led to several Russian curse words being said in succession.

“I wasn’t allowed to read more.” Natasha muttered finally returning to English. Of course he had understood her before because he was fluent in Russian, just like she is fluent in ASL and BSL.

“Fury?” He asked.

“Of course.” Clint is not surprised by Natasha’s response. It’s what Fury does. And even though he is mad at Coulson for following orders that he shouldn’t have, Clint was still willing to work with the new SHIELD, because Coulson won’t do half the cloak and dagger stuff that Fury did.

“He probably knew. According to SHIELD legend, he was in Howard Stark's inner circle. And now that things are unraveling…”

“He thinks that we should know now.” Clint finishes the thought for her. “The question now is do we tell Stark that he may have a sister out there somewhere?”

“Not until we know more.” Natasha responds. “I didn't even want to tell him about Hydra killing his parents, but I was overruled when Christina Everhart started reporting on the possibility.”
“Because there's no way Steve was going to lie to his boyfriend like that.” If he kept a big secret like that from Laura, he would be sleeping on the couch for a year at least.

“They weren't together yet, but Steve had spent enough time with Tony to know that it was better for him to find out that his parents were murdered in a controlled way than by some other means.” Natasha explained.

“Like a super villain trying to mess with his head?” Clint joked. Thankfully for Stark, it was an ambitious ex who discovered the deep dark secret because she was trying to find out if her niece’s uncle was Hydra. Turned out he is and said individual was currently doing lunges in the middle of his cell on the screen in front of him. (It was also why Agent Skye was currently making a fake background for the agent they’re planning to put in place as a nanny.)

“Exactly.”

“Although, I think this is also one of those things that Stark will react badly to once he finds out the truth.” Clint warned.

“But Stark will react worse if we tell him now and it turns out that his older sister is really dead. It would be crueler to dangle a chance that he has a sister who may be alive somewhere only for us to take it away from him.” Natasha explained.

“Valid point.”

“Until we have more information, this needs to stay between us.”

“So how do we go about finding out if Natasha Stark is still out there somewhere?”

“What was the name of Maria Stark's OB? We can start by investigating him.” Natasha asked.

“Edwin List.” He was immediately treated to another litany of various Russian curse words.

“She was kidnapped by Hydra.” Natasha said one she returned to English again.
“You're sure?” Clint asked. “You're not trying to make them out as the boogie man for everything.”

"Coulson’s Hydra plant sent back a list of Hydra higher-ups and List was the number two to number one Wolfgang von Strucker. Although he may have that position because Strucker is or rather was married to his daughter Natalie List von Strucker.” Natasha explained.

“The same Natalie List that was present when Agent Triplett’s ex-fiancé turned up dead?” Clint asked.

“The very same, but I have my doubts about her actually being the former wife of von Strucker. According to conversations with Carter and Simmons, she is taking things very well for her marriage falling apart. Too well, really. This is why the Director asked Carter to keep her scheduled lunch with List tomorrow. Stark’s assistant is supposed to tag along.” And Clint already has a feeling that Natasha will be going in her place, mostly because Stark’s assistant doesn’t lie very well for somebody who’s been part of the spy organization for six years.

“You want to help Carter find out if List was responsible for the murder of Nurse Robin?” Clint asked.

“I'm more concerned with the fact that Natalie List is the same or rather would have been the same age as Natasha Stark.” Natasha handed him a tablet with an image of Natalie List. She definitely did look like a sibling of Stark’s.

“JARVIS, can you do a facial comparison between Natalie List and Maria Stark.” He asked the AI.

“I already did. And there is a 78% match.” That wasn’t conclusive. Sometimes total strangers looked exactly alike, but it was enough to raise red flags.

“Are we telling Sharon?” Because he felt like they needed her help if they were going to get a DNA sample from Natasha List.

“We could just knock out Simmons and have me go wearing a nano mask?” Natasha suggested.
“Stark likes his assistant and if we’re going to keep this a secret from him, I’d rather not antagonize him more than we have to.” Clint just knew this is going to bite them all on the ass.

“We’ll tell Sharon and that’s it.” He exhaled relieved that Natasha agreed with him.

“Good.”

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“Should I congratulate you on the fact you’re related to a billionaire?” Jemma asked Agent Carter as they stood together in front of the screens inside the lab of the Playground. After the incidents three days earlier, it was decided it was best for everyone to relocate to the Playground, temporarily.

Leo was back which made her happy. The thought of him almost dying again made her sick to her stomach, however. She was glad that he was able to get away from fake shield. She’d only seen him long enough to hug him when he arrived after the London incident. (If you don’t count the fact that she snuck into his room last night and fell asleep beside him only to be woken up before he knew that she was even there because Agent Carter decided to drag her to the lab at an ungodly hour.)

The reason why she had so little time to figure out her Fitz related feelings was because she was processing forensic evidence from all incidents during the last two days, in effort to find out what killed Trip’s ex-fiancé. (Although it provided her with a reason to avoid Skye every time she tried to talk to her.) Robin had a severe allergy to shellfish and someone managed to put that in syringe form. Of course, that would mean the killer would have to know Robin very well and pointing that out led to Sharon defending Natalie and reminding everyone not to blame her for the things her family did.

Personally, Jemma felt that Sharon was so edgy because they were waiting for the results of the DNA analysis between Agent Carter Jones and her boss. Now that they had the results, the expression upon Sharon’s face told Jemma that she sincerely wished that she had not dragged her out of bed at 4 AM to complete the test.

"I don’t think congratulations are appropriate." The agent frowned at the screen in front of her as she started cursing in French. Jemma happened to be fluent in French and could easily tell that agent was not pleased.

"Tony is very different than his public persona. He’s a good person, even if he forgets to eat unless I put a sandwich in front of him."
"I know that. I had to watch him flirt with my aunt's ex-boyfriend for a year. I know he’s not the person he is in public. I would even find the evil aunt that’s getting kicked out of the family preferable to fake Tony Stark." Finding out that his uncle was getting a divorce was the only thing that made Trip smile in the last three days. He essentially blamed himself for his former boyfriend getting murdered.

"And yet you just don’t like him."

"He cheated on his girlfriend." Sharon said simply thinking that that explained her animosity perfectly. And maybe if she didn’t know the whole story, Jemma would accept that statement.

In a recent conversation with Ms. Potts, Pepper told Jemma the full story of why things ended up the way they did. Pepper also flat-out told her that even though things ended up the way they did, she was glad that she tried for something more. Pepper would’ve regretted not trying and their friendship was strong enough to bounce back eventually. Jemma was more confident that it would considering Pepper called her within minutes of the London incident making the news to check up on Tony.

"Actually, they had an open relationship so…” Jemma stopped speaking when the door to the lab open letting Dr. Triplett in.

“I’m just letting you know that I’m heading out to Robin’s funeral.” Jemma looked at the clock at Dr. Triplett’s interruption. It was already 8 AM.

“We’re heading out early, so I can force my son to eat something, hopefully. I hate when he gets like this.” Dr. Triplett has been on base for the last three days. She was not just providing medical care to the injured, but being there for her son who was not taking the death of his former fiancé well. The fact that Trip was getting along with his mother again to the point where he was literally crying on her shoulder was about the only positive thing that had come from this.

Agent Triplett really was a mess. He blamed himself for his ex-boyfriend’s murder. He was convinced that his association with SHIELD was the reason why Robin was targeted. (He’s completely ignoring the fact that Hydra went after fake Fitz.) Trip had not eaten more than a couple of pieces of toast and a protein bar in the last three days and that had only happened because his mother and Skye forced him to do so.

Jemma knew Trip spent his time in the lab watching over her. Technically, he was on grief leave and told not to be part of the investigation because he is emotionally compromised, but he really wasn’t
listening. Jemma actually believed the only reason why he wasn’t here was due to his getting dressed for Robin’s funeral.

"I’m still not coming with you. I know you’re friends with Robin’s mom, but…” Sharon stopped abruptly as Dr. Triplett began to glare at her.

“A part of you is happy that he’s dead.” Dr. Triplett finished for her niece (or was it cousin? Familial relationships in the Carter Jones family confused her).

"Not that.” Sharon replied almost defensively. “I promised Director Coulson that I would help him figure out who attacked Woodbine.” A.k.a. prove that Natalie List was not involved and had no idea that her soon-to-be ex-husband is Hydra. “Coulson is going to need all the help he can get with Antoine out for a few days.” Sharon explained.

"I wasn’t going to ask.” Dr. Triplett replied. “Besides, someone should sit with Mom. The first time she woke up here Mom thought she had been kidnapped by Hydra agents at least until Steve calmed her down.” Due to the Woodbine incident, Agent Carter-Jones had been moved to the Playground facility until they could find another nursing home to place her in. She was having some trouble adjusting to her new room.

Should they break the news to her that she had another child? Did she already know? If they told her now, would she even remember? Of course before that happened, they would have to tell Tony the truth and how do you tell somebody that the person they thought was their Mom was not. Jemma had no idea where to begin.

Jemma had an acquaintance in primary school who ran away when she found out she was adopted. Jemma wondered if Tony would react any better. She really didn’t want to be the one to tell him.

“I just wanted to let Dr. Simmons know so she can keep an eye on Agent Cline-Hand.” Dr. Triplett explained.

“I thought she was on bed rest right now? Is there anything else I need to be concerned with? Is she having contractions again?” Jemma asked.

“No contractions,” Dr. Triplett reassured. “I just wanted you to make sure that she actually stays on bed rest. Doctors make the worst patients.”
“Especially at a facility that needs more medical staff or at least people with actual MDs.” Jemma nodded her head at Sharon’s comment. She was glad that they had Dr. Triplett there because Jemma really wasn’t that type of doctor. “If someone shows up seriously hurt, there’s no way we were going to be able to keep her in that bed.” Jemma agreed with this comment from Sharon as well.

“Medical did take the most damage with over 40% turning out to be Hydra and those that weren’t were promptly murdered by Hydra loyalists.” Jemma explained. Poor Dr. Weaver. The Academy was a bloodbath, Jemma remembered.

“I think Tony almost has Dr. Cho ready to join up, but in the meantime I’m planning to do a few interviews to find some new doctors willing to work with Stark Industries’ new initiative. My top choice is the newly graduated Dr. Lincoln Campbell, originally from Cincinnati. Or he would be if JARVIS could figure out why he took a year off before he went back to one of the best med schools in Chicago.”

"You took a year off." Sharon pointed out to her aunt.

"For rehab. I was in Betty Ford for a while. And if that’s the case with Dr. Campbell, I won’t hold it against him.” Dr. Triplett commented. “That would be hypocritical.”

“You ended up going to rehab to deal with your kidnapping.” And the fact that you were forcibly impregnated with an experimental/enhanced embryo, but we are not to say that out loud because we are all aware that you really do love your son, Jemma thought to herself. “That’s different.” Sharon told Dr. Triplett.

“Most alcoholics have a reason for drinking. I ended up in rehab because instead of working through my issues and talking to the people who love me after what happened, I pushed everyone away and found solace in a bottle which helped no one.” Dr. Triplett said this looking directly at Jemma.

“I only had a few drinks the night of Steve’s birthday party. It was the sight of the water that made me regurgitate my dinner.” Jemma said defensively.

“All the more reason to deal with what happened in the Gulf of Mexico. My biggest regret was pushing Tony away. We were like siblings growing up.” Both she and Sharon tried not to look at each other at that moment while Stephanie kept speaking.

“I regret that we lost 27 years because I wasn’t ready to talk about it. I don’t want you to be that
person.” Jemma felt like she was saying, ‘Fix things between you and Fitz before it’s too late.’

“It’s kind of hard to when you’re still trying to deal with the trauma of everything that happened.” Simmons mumbled under breath that Stephanie still heard her, because apparently she has enhanced hearing.

“I know. You could try writing him a letter.” She said pointing to the computer screen behind her. “I wrote several to Tony that I never actually had the courage to send. Maybe you will…” Stephanie stopped speaking as she started to read what was on the computer screen. That’s when Jemma realized that she never locked the screen after Stephanie came in.

Shite!

“Why is my mother’s DNA profile on the screen?” This was not a conversation she wanted to have right now.

"You recognize your mother’s profile?" She said in surprise.

"Yes. Like the back of my hand. Why are you studying it?" She asked quite angrily.

“Calm down, Stephanie. I’m the one who procured Aunt Peggy’s blood. It’s part of the investigation. It’s actually the reason why we were at Woodbine and discovered Robin’s body.”

“Explain.” Dr. Triplett demanded.

“You’re aware that Tony asked me to go over your notes and analyze your son and Leo’s genetic markers to see if we can figure out anything that will help us apprehend those responsible for the murder of Leo’s mother, including finding any familial matches.” She started to explain.

"But what does this have to do with my mom?"

"Antoine and Leo Fitz Stark appear to have a common relative, and that common relative is Aunt Peggy." Sharon answered for her when Jemma was unable to figure out a way to word the truth delicately.
"I think I would’ve remembered mom being pregnant when I was little.” Stephanie said as she sat down on one of the work stools in the space. “Although, I don’t remember Maria being pregnant but..."

"Because Maria Stark was told that she couldn’t get pregnant again after suffering a stillbirth in 1970. She didn’t give birth to Tony.” Sharon explained.

“Who did?” Stephanie asked confused.

“A gestational carrier only referred to as Katie is mentioned in the diaries.” Simmons began to explain. “Tony is the first successful attempt of in vitro fertilization. However, as is often the case with new technology problems do occur, such as accidentally fertilizing the wrong ova.”

It was at that moment that the lab was invaded by two spies resulting in Sharon being rescued from the lab by agents Romanoff and Barton so they could discuss some mission related thing. Thus leaving Jemma to explain everything to the extremely confused Dr. Triplett. This was not fair at all.

Xxxxx

Sharon Carter was getting really tired of being everybody’s secret keeper. She was only one of about five people that knew Bobbi didn’t in fact join Hydra, but was actually infiltrating the organization on Coulson’s orders.

Only she and Coulson knew that Agent 33 used the assault on Woodbine as an opportunity to ingratiate herself into Hydra. Because of her good work only Robin was dead and Agent 33 was now in a prime position to take over as head of Hydra security (now that Bob of Hydra found himself in CIA custody). Of course Sharon had no idea that it was happening that day, otherwise she wouldn’t have brought Simmons to Woodbine.

She doesn’t feel guilty at all for providing Kara with Robin’s food allergies. Her aunt was right; she was happy that Robin was dead. Now that he was gone, only she knew the real reason Robin called off the wedding was because she caught him fucking someone else the night before the ceremony. Her only regret in not telling Trip the truth was he was now mourning someone who didn’t deserve it.

Thanks to Agent Simmons’ forgetting to lock her computer screen this morning, she was now one of only three people living that knew for sure that Tony Stark was a relative of hers. Realistically, that
number must be four because given Marcy’s cryptic suggestion to Antoine. How long had she
known? Why didn’t she tell anybody?

Before interrogating Marcy, however, they had to tell the latest family member that he was in fact a
Carter. Maybe she can talk Stephanie into being the one to break the news after she gets back.
Sharon is extremely grateful that she’s not having that conversation with her aunt right now. She
really doesn’t want to think about the Tony Stark situation. She wonders if he’ll stop being
irrationally jealous when he finds out they are related. Probably not.

(As a rule, thanks to the Robin fiasco, she doesn’t sleep with people who knowingly sleep with other
people’s partners. That alone keeps her from genuinely being interested in her aunt’s ex-boyfriend
who is now sleeping with her son, but has no idea. Her family was a damn soap opera.)

Now she had another secret to keep after being brought into Agent Barton and Romanoff’s inner
circle. Thanks to secret diary pages found at Obadiah Stan’s house, the pair was suspicious of the
paternity of Natalie, namely her being Tony Stark’s sister. (Half-sister actually, but she can’t tell them
that yet). Of course there only telling her this because Romanoff would like to take Simmons place
tomorrow, unaware that she just rescheduled the lunch for the day after tomorrow at Natalie’s
insistence. The reason why is they want to prove that Natalie List was Natasha Stark.

“I know I technically don’t work here, but shouldn’t we bring the director in on this?” Actually, she
did but that was another one of her secrets.

“Not yet.” Natasha answered too quickly. “I prefer not to bring anybody else in until we have
confirmation.”

“Besides, the Director already knows that you’re meeting with List tomorrow as part of the
investigation into the death of your cousin’s former fiancé.”

She was only really looking into it because she needed to prove that Natalie wasn’t part of Hydra,
even if her husband and possibly her father were. The thought that she may have been kidnapped as
a baby and indoctrinated into the Hydra philosophy was slightly nauseating. Sharon knew that
Natalie was a good person, she was sure of it.

"I’m only offering to go with you to help the investigation because Agent Simmons is not ready for
combat. That’s all we need to tell Coulson. He’ll agree to it.” Sharon looked at Natasha skeptically.
“Why tell me about your suspicions regarding Natalie?” Sharon asked.

"Because she’s a friend of yours and you already knew she had been adopted." Clint said in response.

"Fine. In that case, you should know that the lunch isn’t tomorrow but the day after and Trista is coming with us as well." Because last night Trista asked Coulson if she could go undercover as a nurse at Natalie’s fertility clinic because she wants to find out who killed Fitz’s mom by any means necessary, but they don’t need to know about that. It’s just another on the list of secrets that Sharon keeps.

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Stephanie Triplett wasn’t surprised by Dr. Simmons words. Not really. Growing up she honestly felt closer to Tony than her known biological siblings. She always felt that was because they were much closer in age, but maybe deep down she felt that blood connection. That may be the only reason why she didn’t faint as Dr. Simmons explained their theory on how her mother ended up having a fourth biological child.

Although her body did go ice cold as Simmons explained that at least one of the doctors who worked on the project had known ties to Hydra. She couldn’t help but think that Tony’s conception was the birth of the Nursery Group. It made perfect sense that Hydra took something good and corrupted it for their purposes.

She made Dr. Simmons promise to not tell anyone else what they found out. She wanted to break the news as gently as possible (after having JARVIS run the blood work again while she was at the funeral). Stephanie decided she would be the one to tell Tony, if JARVIS confirmed the results. Then they could tell everyone else, but not until Tony knew the truth.

She also took this opportunity to convince Dr. Simmons to write a letter to Stephanie’s recently discovered nephew about everything that had happened. She didn’t want the two to end up like her and Tony, separated from one another for almost 3 decades because of something so silly. Then Stephanie promptly called her sister Marcy to cuss her out.

Stephanie was certain that she knew. Why else would Marcy have warned Antoine not to sleep with Leo? The fact that her family phone was disconnected pretty much cemented this in Stephanie’s mind. She left JARVIS to deliver a message to her sister that basically asked, “When did you find out the truth about Tony?”
Half way to DC, she received a text from an unknown number. She knew it most likely belong to a burn phone belonging to Marcy. The message read, “I’ve known since October 1986. I did the original test.”

The only appropriate way to reply to something like that, “Fuck you, Marcy.”

How could her sister keep a secret like that for almost the entire time that her son had been alive? Stephanie was furious. She had a right to know. How dare Marcy keep this secret from her? Then she felt like a hypocrite for feeling that way because this is almost exactly what she had done with Antoine. They say what goes around comes around.

Thankfully for everyone, she was calm by the time she actually arrived at the funeral. Of course, it could have been that she was so preoccupied with figuring out how to tell Tony that not only was he her brother, but Maria Stark, the woman who punched out a socialite for being awful to Tony, was not his biological mother. (She’s not even going to touch the fact that Tony is now sleeping with his biological mother’s ex-boyfriend. This wasn’t Freudian. It was pure Oedipus complex.)

She didn’t know where to start that conversation. Tony loved Maria, adored her. Discovering that she was not actually his mom would be devastating. It would almost be like learning of her death all over again. Honestly, it was easier for her to call Robin’s mom, Gloria, and tell her that her son was murdered.

Then she thought about why she had been the one who called Gloria. It was easier to take news this bad from a friend, then a random stranger. Despite the relationship of their children going down in flames, Gloria and she had stayed friends. It probably helped that even Gloria thought her son was an asshole for breaking up with Antoine the way that he did. The woman spent most of the service crying on Stephanie’s shoulder. (Gloria invited her and Antoine to sit in the family pews.)

The same principle had to be applied here. Tony would need a friend to break the news gently. Since things were really, really complicated with Pepper and she ditched Tony 28 years ago because she couldn’t deal with her own kidnapping, that only left one real option. This is why she stayed in the car when her son, Trista and Skye stopped off for post funeral pancakes. (A funeral like Robin’s most definitely required pancakes at 2 PM on a weekday.) It was time to bring in reinforcements which meant calling up Colonel Rhodes. Thankfully, JARVIS connected her to the colonel quickly.

“It is never a good thing when you call Stephanie. Please tell me that Tony didn’t cause a political or PR disaster with his decision to accost a reporter yesterday.” The colonel said in lieu of greeting.
“I think everything went well,” considering Skye spent most of the morning working on creating a cover identity for Agent Hunter, who will be functioning as Christine Everhart's new nanny to keep an eye on her and her niece, rather than pulling images of him from the internet.

“I only spoke with Tony for five minutes this morning, but my medical skills were not necessary. So I think that’s a good sign.” Knowing that Tony is her brother was causing all sorts of weird emotions in her and Stephanie just really wanted to hug him right now.

"Do I want to know?"

“Not really,” she sighed. “I know and I wish I didn’t have the details, but that’s not why I’m calling.”

"You found something out while you were running tests for Tony and you want me there to break the news?" Apparently, the colonel was really perceptive.

"Tony told you about that?"

"He tells me a lot of things when he feels like it. It’s not cancer, is it?” Jim asked worriedly. “Walking around with an arc reactor in your chest for several years had to have some long lasting side effects."

"No, surprisingly his health is fine.” She had done a panel since that’s how they’d lost Ana. “Although that now makes sense, considering what I found out or rather what Dr. Simmons found out."

In addition to finding out that Tony was her half-brother, Simmons also found the same antibody that she and her siblings all carried. She had found them too, but ignored it (because looking at it too closely made her uncomfortable). She just assumed that the antibodies found themselves in Tony’s blood, the same way they found themselves in her father’s blood. That was one hypothesis that Stephanie had never wanted to test.

Although now she knows because she ran her test with an old sample of Tony’s blood because only Tony Stark would have blood on hand for a paternity test. The fresh sample that Simmons used had higher amounts of the antibody than the blood taken from Tony four months before he started sleeping with Steve. That meant she had conclusive proof that the antibody really did come from Steve.
She also had a good idea on how it got in Tony system in such high quantities (probably oral sex) which lead to all sorts of weird questions that she never really wants to know the answer to (and a lab project for Dr. Simmons). It also explained why the Palladium poisoning took a year to show up instead of six months and why ICEer guns only knocked Tony out for a few minutes instead of an hour.

“What did the doctor find?” Jim asked breaking her out of her dazed state.

“This line is not encrypted enough for me to tell you.” It really wasn’t, but this wasn’t something you say on the phone.

“But whatever this is, it’s something that Tony’s going to need a friend for and even though Pepper is closer…”

“They still need some distance.” Although, thanks to the deal with Everhart, Pepper will be arriving in two days for the interview of the century involving the former power couple. Stephanie thinks that Tony may no longer be hiding in his lab by that point maybe. It’s hard to tell with Tony.

“This is the second time you’ve done this.” Stephanie knew that he was referring to her desperate phone call on December 17, 1991. She wanted to go to Howard and Maria’s funeral, but she also knew she was too much of a mess to actually go in. She didn’t feel right being there because so much time had passed, but she couldn’t let Tony go through that alone, so she called Jim and manipulated Marcy into pulling strings to get him there. All from rehab.

“You knew he needed a friend when Howard and Maria died and he wasn’t going to call. I couldn’t go because in addition to spending almost 5 years ignoring him at that point, I was at rehab.” Stephanie sighed

“You lied to my superior officer to get me emergency family leave nearly 23 years ago, so I could be at Howard and Maria’s funeral.”

“Tony is your family and he was dealing with a major death in the family.” It wasn’t really a lie.

“And whatever you found is on the same level of his parents dying?”

“Yes.”
“Leo’s not sick?” Jim asked.

"He’s fine, but restless. I found him sneaking into the lab this morning.” Unfortunately, he saw her talking to Simmons and he promptly ran away. Hopefully he left before finding out that one of his grandparents is not dead.

“He is not happy about my sons’ ex-fiancé getting murdered when Hydra went looking for him at Woodbine.” He feels extra guilty about that which may be why he so withdrawn.

"That wasn’t his fault."

"The Stark guilt complex is genetic." Stephanie snickered.

“Not to mention very dangerous at times. I was already concerned after Tony disappeared for a couple of days and I was working on getting enough time off to go check on Tony in person. I just have one more thing to do and then I’ll be on my way. Stark force one is already waiting for me."

“You’re a good friend.” Better than I ever was, and I’m his sister. “There’s just one more thing."

“Which is?"

"I know Marcy gave Tony a letter after Howard and Maria were murdered." Because Marcy told her about it in an effort to get her to come with her to the funeral. Thinking about it now, she wouldn’t put it past Marcy or Howard to have told Tony the truth via that letter.

"He wouldn’t take it from her. I did." Jim explained.

"I'm not surprised. Did you keep it?" She asked.

"I never opened it, but I saved it in case Tony would ever want to read it. Of course, 23 years later and it has yet to happen."
"Can you bring it?" Stephanie asked.

"Why?" Jim asked.

"I think Howard knew that his time was limited and there may be something in that letter that would help with the current investigation." Stephanie explained.

"It’s locked in a safe at the DC house. You’ll need my fingerprints to open it. I should be there by 10 p.m. your time."

“I’ll pick you up from the airport myself. Then we can break the news to Tony. He’s going to need both of us for this.” Tonight she would tell Rhodey and tomorrow they would tell Tony, preferably in the room where he couldn’t break anything.

"It’s that bad?" The colonel asked.

“I think it’s good.” It would be nice to have a brother who didn’t just speak to her when he needed something like housing during the middle of his most likely to be messy divorce. She loved Tyler, but she was happy that she had to stay at the Playground the last couple of days. “Although, Tony may think that it’s bad and that’s why I think you should be here.”

“I’ll call you when I land.” Jim said as he ended the call just seconds before Skye knocked on her window.

“Are you coming in? They just brought out your post funeral pancakes with extra sprinkles. I hope you don’t mind that Trista ordered for you.” Skye said with half a smile.

“It’s okay. Did Antoine order anything at all?” Stephanie asked as she got out of the car.

"I made him get an omelet. I’m not sure he’ll eat anything. I think he feels too guilty to eat.” Probably because Robin’s Aunt Esther punched Trip in the stomach after point-blank blaming him for what happened. Thanks to shield’s implosion all of Robin’s family knows about where Antoine used to work. Stephanie knows that her son feels guilty because he allowed Aunt Esther to punch him instead of blocking it. Her mother taught him how to do that before he was in kindergarten.
“Other than possibly telling one of his co-workers that turned out to be Hydra that his ex-boyfriend was extremely allergic to shellfish, there’s no other way he could be culpable in this.” At least they killed Robin in a way that made it easy to lie to Robin’s parents. They don’t know about the assault on Woodbine or the missing agent. (Aunt Esther is just an evil paranoid person who hadn’t even been on speaking terms with her nephew since he came out. She was just a loud outburst waiting to happen.)

Mack thinks that Agent 33 a.k.a. Agent Kara Lynn Palamas joined Hydra, where Trista and Sharon think that Palamas joined Hydra to infiltrate the organization and Stephanie is personally worried that the poor girl is in a ditch somewhere or worse. Only Coulson knows for sure and he’s not telling.

“We don’t know that it’s Hydra.” Stephanie just looks at her for a moment.

“Really, we don’t. We just think that it was Hydra. I think that’s a big difference.” Skye explained.

“Maybe, but it doesn’t change the fact that someone that my son still loved was murdered.”

“How could he still love Robin after that?” Skye asked concerned.

“Because love doesn’t go away. Not really. You may realize somebody’s not good for you and you need to stay away, but the love doesn’t go away. You wish that it would, but it doesn’t so you just deal with it.” Stephanie explained.

“I just wish I could do more than just being here for the funeral and the wake yesterday. I don’t think I’m the best funeral friend. I hope I don’t get any more experience. Two funerals in a week is enough for anyone.”

“I think just being here is enough right now. Despite the other things you could be doing right now, important things.” Stephanie explained

“I was able to set up the identity of Lance Morris babysitter extraordinaire on the way here. Hunter is going to be really mad. I gave him his ex-wife’s last name, but Hunter is not a good name for a nanny.” Skye smirked.

“Honestly, Hunter is like the last person who should be posing as a nanny. Seriously, why don’t they
ask Trista to do it? Leo is doing good with physical therapy and there will be other people around once he’s back at Stark house.”

“That’s the Director’s call and Trista’s because she really is not an agent anymore. Although that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m surprised you’re not on a flight to Rhiebeck right now. Last night JARVIS identified paintings from the community center website that contain the same hieroglyphs as John Garrett’s scribblings.”

The same carving that your boss is doing, but you don’t know that because I’m not allowed to tell you. In addition to trying to keep Dr. Cline-Hand from going into premature labor, Dr. Cline was also sticking around to help Stephanie figure out how to prevent the writing on the wall.

“How do you even know about that?” Skye asked.

“JARVIS likes me, and I’ve been read into the alien writing situation due to my skills as a neurologist.”

‘The whole reason why I was brought in on this in the first place was to deal with the side effects of the alien DNA in both of your systems.’ Stephanie thought to herself. Although the sudden carving on the wall, even threw Stephanie for a loop. She didn’t know what to think. The paintings were the first place they have seen the writing outside of Phil and the deceased John Garrett samples. This was a lead that needed to be followed up on and yet Skye was still here.

“I don’t think 24 hours is going to make too much of a difference, especially because the artwork was already pulled from the site. I’ll fly out tomorrow. I just hate leaving Trip so soon. It’s been a rough couple of months.” Because shield collapsed, his boss turned out to be Hydra, and Antoine discovered the truth about his paternity. Any one of those things alone would be hard on anyone. Robin’s murder was just the cherry on top of the misery sundae.

“You could take him with you.” And while Antoine is safely in upstate New York, she and Jim will gently tell Tony that he is her brother.

“I will think about it. Let’s go before your pancakes get cold.”

Halfway through her pancakes, Skye was looking for a bed-and-breakfast near Rhiebeck because she insisted that Antoine get away from everything for a few days. Stephanie smiled into her pancakes. Maybe things would be okay eventually.
To be continued.

Chapter End Notes

Just to let everyone know, only Sharon and Agent 33 were aware of the plan to sacrifice Robin to keep Hydra casualties low. No one else, including Coulson, were aware that they were planning this.
Chapter 18: 101 Reasons to Hate Undercover Work

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who read or reviewed the last chapter. Your reviews keep me writing. Yea, another update before the new episodes of Agents of SHIELD starts. I’m even working on the next chapter today. Remember, your reviews help me write faster.

Some things in this chapter have been adapted from AOS episode 2.7. Also, there is a Guardians of the Galaxy reference in here. It’s all connected and I’m utilizing everything that works.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I hate flying commercial.” An annoyed May said as she placed her duffel bag in the trunk of their rental car. It had taken them almost an hour from when they got off the plane to get to this point.

If it was too dangerous to use one of the Stark Quinjets they’d been gifted, she still could’ve borrowed one of his private jets to fly down here. The man has four and she knew for a fact at least one of them was not in use at the moment. But instead they flew commercial to see why a painting that contained the design that Phil was compelled to carve showed up on a community center website in upstate New York, of all places. More importantly, they need to find the artist and determine if this was somehow connected to Project Tahiti.

To do that, they were going undercover with Skye and Trip playing the part of a recently married couple thinking about settling in the area. May was posing as Skye’s mother there to help them with the decision. Skyler Carter, the computer programmer, and Roger Carter, self-defense teacher, would be stopping at Rhinebeck community center tonight to apply for jobs there. As a consequence of the mission, they had to act the part. The Carters would definitely not have access to private jets.

“The flight wasn’t that bad. We spent more time going through TSA than we did in the air.” Trip said, placing his bag behind hers. He didn’t smile. His eyes were still dead.

“I don’t know. There was that screaming toddler behind us, but they did give me this nice goodie bag.” Skye held up a Ziploc bag filled with candy.

“That’s why I hate flying commercial.” May took the bag of candy from her and threw it away before taking the driver seat of the car.
“I was going to eat that. There were tiny Snickers in there.” Skye lamented as she crawled into the backseat.

“Never take candy from strangers.” Melinda said as she placed the key in the ignition. She already use the app Stark created to scan the vehicle for explosives. Considering what happened last week, caution was necessary.

“I doubt that they were Hydra.” Skye rolled her eyes. “They had an eight-month-old who was adorable when he wasn’t screaming his head off.”

“The current head of Hydra has a 20-year-old. That means Hydra agents could be parents too. Don’t let your guard down.” May warned.

“I’ll get you a chocolate bar when we stop for gas.” Trip suggested from the passenger seat.

“There were Nerds in there too,” Skye pouted from the back.

“Then we will get you Nerds.” Trip replied.

“You have to get a chocolate bar too. Actually, your mom wants me to make you eat something nutritious. Supposedly, you can’t live on candy and protein bars alone.” Skye told her friend.

“Why do I have a feeling that you’re probably reporting my intake back to my doctor mom? I’m 90% sure that this mission was set up to be a mini vacation because I refuse to take grief leave.” Trip statement was somewhat true because under other circumstances only May and Skye would be here.

However, Phil wanted him to take time off, despite being short staffed. Agent Triplett seemed like the type of person that was better off keeping busy which was evident by his activity in South America immediately after his wedding was called off. In the end, he came with them because the newlywed cover would work better than the mother/daughter starting over cover.

“This is not a vacation. We need to investigate the writing that JARVIS found on the website for the local community center.” May reminded her team.
“Which is apparently important enough for you to be here.” Agent Triplett stated from beside her with the closest approximation of put out that the specialist would ever do. If any other set of agents were involved, she would almost think that she was ruining a romantic weekend by her presence.

“Yes it is. May was always coming with me, but I talked Coulson into letting you come too.” Skye explained. “This is important because the only other person who was making those weird writings was your dead ex-boss. I personally would like to talk to this person before I start making the weird carvings on the wall too.” Skye’s concern was audible in her words.

May would have been worried about that too, if it weren’t for the fact that Phil started carving within 24 hours of seeing Garrett’s markings. Skye was exposed weeks ago and had not shown any of the same symptoms. Melinda and Phil believe it has something to do with her 084 status. Actually, Phil mentioned he was beginning to wonder if she’s part alien.

It’s definitely a possibility considering there are Asgardians living among them. May would not be surprised if Professor Randolph or another ex-pat Asgardian managed to get a human pregnant. Also, there was an alien abduction in 1988, just a few months before Skye was found in China that the agency covered up. However, it occurred in North America not China.

“Although, I thought that because we are so shorthanded Coulson would just send Trip with me instead of you. I mean, he’s sending Hunter of all people to pose as a nanny. You would be better at that than him.” Skye said, pointing to her.

“You were attacked by a team of Hydra agents less than a week ago in London. You need back up. Also, I’m not good with kids.” May argued, trying not to think about Bahrain.

She definitely did not want to be around Alana Everhart. She would be almost the same age as the girl that May killed and she couldn’t do that. Phil knew she couldn’t do that mission, especially now that her boyfriend knew all the details.

“Valid point. Can I turn on the radio?” Skye asked.

“No.” May said as she made her way out of the rental car parking lot.

“I’ll just use the music app on my Stark Pad as I prepare for my job interview. Do you think they will actually believe I’m on the team that developed the latest version of the Jarvis OS?” Skye asked.
“Of course. Because you actually did.” Trip said stroking her leg. Maybe her initial instincts were right. Phil owed her a six-hour orgasm for this.

Xxxxxx

“I'm sorry for getting here almost 15 hours later than I said I would and thanks for picking me up anyway. You didn't have to. I could've taken a cab to the Arlington house since Tony's driver is not available, especially since we were able to land at Reagan instead of Dulles.” Jim said as Stephanie navigated the driving maze that are the roads around Reagan National. The reason why the jet was able to land at the private terminal at Reagan was a War Machine situation that delayed his departure.

“You know that Tony would be highly offended if you ever took a cab to any of his houses.” Stephanie told the Colonel.

“True. Where is Tony right now?” Jim asked.

“Alexandria. Work stuff.” He was delivering Agent Nanny to Christine Everhart. However, Jim didn’t need to know that.

"I assume that the boyfriend is with him to keep Tony from doing stupid stuff?" Jim asked.

“No, but Mack is. He’s an ex-SHIELD mechanic, who also just happens to be a field agent. Technically, he is Tony’s new driver, but he’s a little bit more than that.” Stephanie explained leaving out the fact that Steve was currently at the Playground probably going through a full sexual history with Dr. Simmons.

Apparently, Simmons’ new mission to keep her from dealing with her feelings for Fitz is to investigate the sexually-transmitted super antibody that she came across when analyzing the various blood samples that contained it. It says volumes when Stephanie rather tell Tony that she is his sister, then find out more weird things about her parents’ sex lives (Stephanie could acknowledge this was the main reason why she had never looked into this). At least Tony actually was created in a lab.

“We are going to meet them both for dinner tonight. I’m only taking you to the house long enough to pick up the letter. Then, I’m taking you to an undisclosed location because I know Tony wants you to meet Leo first. Also, he will hurt me if I show you your new house without him.”
“You know he will probably force me to meet with his team of decorators to redo the place.” The Colonel groaned.

“Of course.” Stephanie snarked.

“I assume that because Hydra wants his kid this dinner will be happening at that undisclosed location?” Jim asked.

“Yes. Although trust me, it will still be four stars.” They would be taking a detour to the grocery store on Glebe to grab the order that JARVIS placed before picking up the letter and then making their way to the Playground.

“Will I be blindfolded anytime soon?” He asked.

“I probably should. I’m sure Tony doesn’t exactly want the military to know about his latest project in the hills of Appalachia, but I’m not because your loyalties have always lain with Tony first.” She told the Colonel directly.

“Don’t tell the Air Force that.” Jim joked before becoming serious. “I’m sure that Tony’s already cleared most of the former SHIELD agents working for Stark Industries International Education, and Lifesaving Division. Thankfully, the Admiral in charge is actually going after Hydra assets instead of listening to whatever Malik, one of the president’s advisers, is saying.”

It doesn’t surprise Stephanie that Jim doesn’t like Gideon Malik. The guy was one of the world security members that ordered the nuke to Manhattan, thereby nearly killing his best friend. Stephanie doesn’t like him either, because Malik was the youngest member of World Security Council that forced her mom out when Director Carter wouldn’t hand Stephanie and Antoine over for testing.

“Because Talbot pissed off Tony so often, he had him arrested. It’s enough to make you really happy that Ross is retired.” Stephanie told him.

“Probably because he would listen to Malik since they like to golf together. Ross’ heart attack happened while playing with the guy.” Stephanie started to rub her temple at Jim’s words.

“So why am I here?” Stephanie took a deep breath at Jim’ question. It was time.
“Grab the folder underneath your seat.” Stephanie told him.

“Hard copy. Ominous.” He said, now with purple folder in hand.

“Nano paper with DNA encryption and self-destruct capabilities. This is actually safer than an encrypted Stark pad.” At least, that’s what Simmons reassured her as she printed out Tony’s DNA profile. She wanted to get this over with towards the beginning of their drive. That way, by the time they made it to West Virginia, the Colonel would be calm.

“And this is why the military has no idea how to handle half of the stuff they have found while cleaning up old SHIELD facilities. Yesterday, three people got petrified when trying to catalog a supposedly innocuous phallic metal statue. That was why I had to make a detour first before coming here. The armor could make contact without being affected.” Jim groaned.

“You might want to talk to Phil about that before leaving. Mom was really paranoid and a lot of shield files were not digitized. There are a lot of things where we’re going that may help.” Stephanie suggested, but by this point she wasn’t sure that Jim is still listening. He was too engrossed with the contents of the folder.

“This is a DNA test? Did you find out that Leo is not his kid? Tony would be so devastated. He was a complete mess after Obadiah handed him a cigar to celebrate the fact that ‘he dodged a bullet’. He cried as soon as we were away from the bastard.” James told her they’d discussed it. She’s not even that surprise Tony reacted like that.

“Fucking asshole.” Stephanie mumbled under breath.

“Agreed.”

“No. I ran that DNA test five times, Bruce ran it three times, and Leo’s friend, Simmons, ran it twice herself. Leopold Fitz is definitely Tony Stark son.” She said reassuring Jim.

“That’s good. I think Tony is completely in love already.”

“However, Leo Fitz is not the grandson of Maria Stark.” There, she said it out loud and the world
did not come to an end.

Xxxxx

“What?” Jim couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Maria is not Tony’s biological mom.” Stephanie clarified. “Dr. Simmons ran the initial test and I ran it again yesterday after calling you.”

“Maybe you better start at the beginning of your story.” Jim suggested, still very confused.

That’s when she explained the diaries and the questionable history of Stark family fertility problems. Some of which he knew because Tony told him earlier.

“You probably only met Howard a few times, but the man always hated problems without solutions.” Jim nodded his head.

“And what was the solution? Adoption?” He asked.

“Creating in vitro fertilization and employing a gestational carrier.” Stephanie explained.

“Makes sense. I would claim that is a very Stark trait to do, but I’m not sure Tony is a biological Stark anymore since they apparently did not use Maria’s eggs. Therefore I’m not sure if they use Howard sperm.” Jim is not sure how Tony would react to not being related to Howard.

“Tony is still a Stark, but he is also a Carter because they accidentally used my mom’s egg instead. Tony is my half-brother.” That’s going to make things really complicated. The fact that Maria wasn’t Tony’s biological mom was going to make things tragically complicated. The fact that Tony’s real biological mom dated his boyfriend was going to raise this to Jerry Springer proportions.

“And you want me to break the news?” Jim asked almost positive this is why she asked for him to come.
“I’ll be there to provide scientific support because knowing Tony, he is going to want to see all the files and watch me as I rerun all the blood work. But I think the initial announcement should come from you. He needs a friend right now.” He knew that Stephanie was right.

"I’m expecting filet mignon and lobster for this."

“JARVIS already ordered enough of that to feed an army of super soldiers. I’ll even throw in some twice baked potatoes. We’re going to pick up the groceries first before we go to Phil’s house.” That explains why she didn’t make the turn to Tony’s house.

“And a few bottles of wine.” He really wanted a drink right now.

“I’d prefer it if we don’t. Tony’s been sober since late May and I have been making my way through the 12 steps since November 1991 and my last relapse was in May of 2012. With news like this, it’s probably best not to have a bottle of wine on the table.” Stephanie explained.

“Point taken. Anyone would have slipped up when the Earth was being invaded by aliens.”

“It wasn’t the aliens that did it. It was my son getting dumped by his asshole fiancé after the alien invasion.”

“Understandable. And since I’ve been trying to convince Tony to stop drinking for years, I will support his sobriety.” Jim truly meant that. Although, he may be stopping for a drink on his own later.

“Thank you.” Stephanie said with a relieve smile. "If it makes you feel better, Tony is already my favorite brother. Actually, he’s my favorite sibling right now.”

“Is this because your other brother’s a prick?”

“Pretty much. Also, Marcy knew about this since Antoine was a baby and never told me.” Stephanie said with anger dripping from every word.

“I think after we pick up the food we are definitely going to need to pick up the letter.” He just had
this feeling that the truth may have been on those pages the entire time. Maybe if Howard had already written the words down, he wouldn’t need to come up with a way to tell Tony that Maria wasn’t his mom. Jim had no idea how the break that news, even if Stephanie was convinced that he was more qualified than her to reveal the truth.

Xxxx

When they pulled into the parking lot of the community center, Trip seriously wondered why he was part of this mission. May and Skye did not need him at all. Maybe he should’ve taken a few days off to deal with his fiancée’s murder. The truth of the matter is though, no matter how much vacation time he took or how many sessions he was forced to take with Dr. Suarez it wasn’t going to change the truth. This was his fault.

He is positive he mentioned Robin’s shellfish allergy to multiple SHIELD colleagues, especially when he was spending way too much time with menu planning.

Statistically speaking, if he told 10 colleagues about Robin’s shellfish allergy at least three of them were Hydra. Maybe more, maybe less. Medical and psych had some of the highest numbers. 60% of the level VII’s and above turned out to be Hydra because Pierce was stacking the deck. He even solicited menu advice from Isabella in email form, so anybody could have listened in on that conversation.

But he couldn’t think about that now. The mission came first and honestly, he was glad that this mission had nothing to do with Hydra. All they had to do was track down the person who kept painting strange alien hieroglyphs and step one was infiltrating the community center. Hence, the reason they were here.

Skye was already in the building, but Trip was taking his time and apparently Agent May noticed that.

“I know that you’re blaming yourself for what happened to your former fiancé, but right now you need to focus on the mission at hand. While Skye is having her interview, we need to find the art studio and see if we can find any other paintings containing the same design.”

“When the murder weapon just happened to be derived from something I said to the wrong coworker, it really is my fault.” Trip responded.
“They could’ve found that by hacking in to his medical records.” May said echoing his earlier thoughts.

“But why would he be a target outside of me?” May actually rolled her eyes at his words.

“He was a nurse at a facility that housed over 50 retired SHIELD, FBI, and CIA agents including the former director of SHIELD herself, your grandmother. Woodbine is essentially a RED nursing home. For that very reason, SHIELD always kept at least two agents on staff until just recently.”

And now the CIA would be taking over that duty considering what happened. At least that’s what Aunt Marcy told him. Apparently, neither Sharon nor mother are talking to her which means it probably has something to do with the lab results that they won’t tell him about. Considering they won’t tell him what the results were, it probably means that Leo Fitz-Stark is his cousin. This gives him another reason why he’s happy to be in upstate New York right now.

“I know that. I promise to focus on figuring this out. Although, since Director Coulson isn’t doing that, I don’t know why we’re worried about Skye. He’s had the drug in his system a lot longer.” He got the full Tahiti story and preparation for this mission. He already knew a lot of it, but now he had all the dirty details. As he looked at Agent May, he realized that there was one detail missing from those files.

“Is the Director now doing those carvings too?” Trip asked.

“Yes, along with exhibiting other symptoms. It’s why we called your mom in.”

“Because she’s a neurologist?” He asked.

“Yes.” May responded. That made sense.

“But she hasn’t found any answers yet?” He asked.

“No.”

“Has Skye been displaying symptoms?” Trip asked, worried.
“Not that I’ve seen, but you tell me? Skye did specifically say that she would have no troubles sharing a bed with you at the hotel since you’ve been doing it for the last three nights at the Playground.” Why did Skye tell her SO that when they checked into the hotel before coming here? 

“Nothing weird or strange. Definitely no waking up to strange hieroglyphs written on the bed sheets with a Sharpie. And she’s just been sleeping over, nothing else.” Trip explained. “It helps to not be alone at night.”

“Your personal life is your personal business.” May said quickly.

“Until personal business becomes SHIELD business because my ex-fiancé was murdered.” Trip mumbled under breath.

“You can’t do anything for Robin right now. Just focus on helping Skye for now.” Trip nodded his head, before getting out of the vehicle.

Xxxxx

“You expect me to leave my five-year-old child with that guy?” Christina Everhart said pointing at Agent Hunter who was currently dressed in a God Save the Queen T-shirt and jeans that look like they would fall apart at any moment. Tony is pretty sure that Simmons arranged for a suit, but the agent refused to wear. Apparently Lance Morris babysitter extraordinaire didn’t do suits.

“I agree that he’s not exactly dressed for the role of bodyguard/nanny, but he is ex-military and he even watched my own son for a few days.” Tony tried to reassure the reporter. He had no idea why he was doing so, except that he actually liked little Alana. It wasn’t her fault who her parent was and even Christine was a step up from Howard.

“Your child is not five.” Christine shot back. Good point.

“My child has been almost murdered by Hydra twice in the last three months. That’s not counting when they wanted to shoot him in the kneecap so they could make him their science slave. If he can protect my son from that, I think he can keep your niece safe from the same threats.” Although, he wasn’t that sure about snack time. Maybe they could work on getting a second person to be an actual au pair.
“Point.” Christine sighed reluctantly.

“I’m still in the room.” Hunter snarked. "I’ve been told it’s rude to talk about someone as if they weren’t actually in the bloody room.”

“Have you actually taken care of a small child before?” Christine asked the agent skeptically. “I’m not sure because you have yet to learn not to use curse words in front of her.”

“Yes. Because my as-- dad left when I was 10. I had to help take care of my younger brother and sister. They were just six and eight at the time. Then my Mum died when I was 19 and I ended up going into the military to support us. Both my siblings have graduated University and have become upstanding members of society.” If she were to call the phone numbers listed on the resume, it would go straight to his assistant, who was starting to be able to lie a little (mostly to herself about her feelings for his son). Not that Agent Hunter was lying. It was more that he couldn’t make contact with his siblings due to his previous career choices.

“So you understand what it’s like to step into the role of parent completely unexpectedly?” Christine asked.

“Yes, but at least you’re the right age for this. When you’re only two years older, they tend not to listen to you.” Just then Agent Hunter caught a stuffed animal that was being tossed at him by little Alana.

“It doesn’t help much even when you’re almost 40 years older. Alana, we don’t throw things at visitors.” She responded by throwing a ball at Tony that Hunter caught before it actually hit him.

“At least he has better reflexes than the last nanny.” Christine responded to Tony’s words with another glare.

“I didn’t think that you were a day over 30.” He said handing the stuff animal back to the five-year-old in question.

“Flattery won’t get you very far.” Tony wanted to make a snide comment about that, but chose not to, mostly because Alana was there. See, he was maturing.
“Why did you leave the military?” Everhart questioned.

“My wife and I were planning to start a family and it was decided that I would be the stay-at-home parent. However, things didn’t work out because apparently it takes two people for a marriage to work out. It also helps if one is not habitual liar.” Hunter’s rants about his ex-wife, made Tony really glad that things were not bitter between him and Pepper.

“Infertility or infidelity?” Christine asked.

“She always cared about her job more than me and then she left me for some arsehole named Bob. You can’t bring kids into a situation like that.” Tony closed his eyes at the curse word.

“If Steve was here, he would be yelling ‘Language.’ right now.” Tony lamented.

“I don’t know why, because I’ve heard him curse like the Army man he is.” Hunter snarked.

“Because you shouldn’t say those words in front of five-year-olds.” Tony replied.

“She needs to learn somewhere.” Hunter responded with a shrug. Tony was resisting the urge to put his head in his hands.

“Can I speak with you alone for a moment?” That’s when Tony found himself being dragged into a bedroom by Everhart.

“Sorry, I don’t do this sort of thing anymore. I have a boyfriend.” Tony joked.

“And I’m sure-Steve-doesn’t share.” Christine snarked back.

“How did you know that?” Tony asked.

“It was pretty obvious when you looked at him two days ago as if the sun revolves around him.” Christine responded. “It makes me feel so much better that your player ways were a direct result of you being a closet case.”
“I’m pansexual. Yes, we exist.” Tony responded.

“Parent to parent, can I really trust that person with my child?” She asked.

“You are right now.” Tony replied flippantly.

“I’m just in the other room right now.” Christine glared at him again. “What if I have to go on assignment? Since I refuse to suck off -- I mean suck up to Tiberius, I usually end up broadcasting the news from the other side of the world.”

“I’m pretty sure you were right the first time.” Tony suddenly grinned evilly. “The next time he harasses you, tell Ty Ty that Tony Stark is willing to say who he was in bed with when he found out about his son for the very first time. Chances are it won’t happen again.” Considering Everhart’s smile, she obviously realized what he was insinuating.

“I realize that Mr. Morris is not the type of guy who will get a five star review on DC good nannies dot com but I’m pretty sure he’s not likely to leave her with complete strangers. That’s a marked improvement over your last nanny.” And now Everhart was glaring at him. “He’s also an excellent shot and knows several different forms of unarmed combat. That will come in handy due to Hydra uncle.”

“Who you have in custody. If he’s in custody, why do I need an ex-military person as my nanny?” Everhart asked.

“In addition to your daughter’s biological father being a slimy coward, who would probably do just about anything to keep his presidential ambitions alive, your daughter’s uncle worked for the type of people who would have no trouble killing your daughter because her uncle managed to get himself caught. That’s not even considering the threat of escape.” Tony warned.

“Why haven’t you killed him yet? Then we wouldn’t have to worry about that anymore. I know you want to.” Everhart almost taunted.

“Because he has valuable intel, but he’s not ready to speak. And if he’s dead, we’ll never know.” Tony’s perfectly fine with her suggestion, but is being overruled. Plus, he would like to know more about those responsible for the existence of Leo in the first place.
“I could get him to talk.” Tony rolled his eyes at her claim.

“This is not a tell-all interview with that guy who drove his boss’s car into the pool after exposing him. That guy’s white collar.” Tony told her.

"Grant Ward dumped my son into the Gulf of Mexico. Of course, this is after he strangled a fellow agent to keep his secret intact and shot dead a woman who was just starting a family with her wife. Said wife is now in hiding due to being really pregnant and on the run from Hydra. They tried to kill her while we were in London. In other words, you need Nanny Morris here.”

“Fine, I’ll give him a week.” She acquiesced.

"Thank you. He’ll be in the apartment next door and Pepper will be here the day after tomorrow. I assume the tell-all is still on for Friday.

“Yes. How did you get them to move? I’ve been trying for months. They were awful." She lamented.

“Jarvis informed them about a four bedroom house on Arlington Ridge renting for only $1700 a month. I would move you there, but I’d don’t think we can take living on the same block.” Tony said leaving her bedroom only to find Agent Hunter/Nanny Morris and Alana playing with stuff animals on the recently restored living room carpet. This may go better than expected.

Of course, Tony loses that feeling completely 35 minutes later when he shows up to the Arlington house to pick up fresh clothes (because Steve says using a personal shopper to buy new things is wasteful), only to overhear a conversation he wished he never heard.

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It only took 10 minutes of Trip wandering around without May watching over him for him to find the art studio. There was only one woman there, standing in front of a giant canvas painting circles and lines. He instantly recognized the pattern from the images in the files.”

He just stood back and watched as he took pictures of it with his ‘sunglasses’. 
“I had no idea that I had an audience.” The voice was familiar, but he didn’t realize why until the woman turned around.

She just happened to look exactly like Isabel’s roommate, Rebecca Stevens, from the Academy. A roommate who while on a mission in late 2010 died. Considering he works for a dead man, Trip really shouldn’t find the situation shocking. If whatever they gave Skye could bring her back from the brink, then he shouldn’t be that surprised to see Becky here alive and well.

“My wife, Skyler, says that I should wear a bell. I really like the design that you’re using in this.” Trip says trying to find out more about this person. Maybe he was wishing for too much. Maybe this is just a case of Becky having a doppleganger in the world.

“I don’t know where it comes from. I just know that I have to get it out on the paper. It’s a compulsion. I used to only have to do it every once in a while, but now it seems like a constant thing.” Or maybe she was a Tahiti patient.

“Do I know you?” Maybe Becky asked.

*You were friends with my friend, Isabel. You and she tried to convince me not to marry Robin the week before you were killed in action, supposedly.*

"Maybe in another life, but not this one.” Trip responded instead.

“Maybe we were fated to meet up again.” Becky smiled at him.

“Maybe we were. I’m Roger Carter.” He said extending his hand to shake. Becky quickly wiped her hands off so she could grab his hand.

“Hi, I’m Janice Robbins, originally of Iowa, but somehow I found myself here three years ago. I don’t even really remember why I chose to come here, but I really like it.”

*Because someone decided you were going to be here and they didn’t really create a very good back story via your new memories.* He is positive that her memories were wiped. Trip knew that SHIELD had that technology. His boss had it used on him by Nick Fury himself.
“So are you interested in signing up for my art class?” Becky/Janice asked.

“I just like to look at paintings not necessarily paint them myself, but my wife is interviewing for the computer science teacher position here. She is getting tired of the life of a corporate programmer and I’m thinking about starting my own dojo. I’m also looking to get away from Manhattan.” Trip told her.

“Well, I really like it here. Maybe I can show you and your wife around town.” Janice offered.

“I think I would like that.” Trip said handing her his Stark phone to put her phone number in. In reality, JARVIS would be running Janice’s fingerprints to see if she was really Becky.

An hour later, he would discover that his suspicions were true. Rebecca Stevens really was back from the dead.

xxxxxx

Jim thought that he would have at least until he reached the undisclosed location to figure out how to tell Tony that Maria was not his mom. That wasn’t nearly enough time to come up with a strategy to deliver the news. He was happy that they were taking their time making their way to the Playground, even if one of those detours meant retrieving the funeral letter.

Jim considered calling in Pepper for reinforcements, but changed his mind when Stephanie told him that she would be flying into DC and two days for the post breakup interview with Christina Everhart (Jim really wanted to hear that story).

He also thought about getting Tony’s boyfriend involved, but decided against it since Tony would be angry that so many people already knew before he did. In addition, Jim was worried about how Steve would react, at least until Stephanie set him straight.

“If Steve calls it off because he can’t handle the fact that Margaret Carter Jones is Tony’s biological mom, then my mom, dad, and brother all had God awful taste in men.” Stephanie said as they walked into his bedroom or rather former bedroom. It was obvious that Stark’s assistant now lived there. She had a mini bar’s worth of bottles in the trashcan. Stephanie looked very concerned about that.

“That in itself just adds another level of ridiculousness to this.” He said placing his finger on the biometric reader of the safe hidden in the wall of the bedroom.
“Would it make you feel better to know that my mom only kissed Steve? Really, sometimes I think he was only into my mom because it was the 1940s and that’s what you did.” Stephanie said just as the safe opened, revealing the 23-year-old letter. Jim thought about opening the letter, but felt it was best to convince Tony to do it instead.

“I think it would make Tony feel better.” Jim said as he placed the letter in his pocket before he went to the closet to grab some of his civilian clothes only to find they were no longer there.

“I think it’s going to be a shock to the system, but I think Steve is in love with Tony enough to work through it. Besides, the whole thing was a medical fuck up. Somebody fertilized the wrong egg when they were trying to do in vitro for the first time.” Stephanie said trying to reassure him.

“I’m going to trust your judgment on that since I wasn’t around to see how their relationship changed.” Jim hoped she was right. “JARVIS, where are my things?”

“Everything has been moved to your new house.” The AI responded.

“Of course they are.” Jim sighed.

“I should inform you that Mister Stark is in the driveway.”

It looks like his time to figure out a way to do this was up. Tony was excited to see him or at least on the surface Tony seemed to be excited, but Jim felt like something was off. The fact that he was getting the Tony Stark fake smile worried him. Jim told himself he was getting that smile because Tony just spent the last hour with Christina Everhart.

Jim pushed his uneasiness out of his mind as Tony dragged him to his new house. It helped that Tony was excitedly talking about renovation possibilities. Apparently, he was getting his own armor room and a built-in pool. Of course, he was alone with Tony at that point because Stephanie wanted to get to Phil’s house before all the food spoiled. This was a ridiculous excuse because there is a built-in fridge in the car that Stephanie was using because Tony just had to design a car with a fridge in the trunk just to see if he could.

Jim would call her a coward, but after trying unsuccessfully to broach of the subject of Tony’s true maternity three times Jim decided to wait until after meeting his godson to tell Tony the truth. He did give Tony the letter and successfully convinced him that he needed to look at any piece of
documentation that Howard left behind. That had to count for something.

Of course, Jim was completely unaware that Tony overheard his conversation with Stephanie before JARVIS announced his presence because of his paranoia Tony wanted to know who was in his house before stepping inside.

To be continued

Chapter End Notes

So Tony knows, but nobody but JARVIS knows that he knows. That’s going to be fun. I want to hear your speculation on how Tony will react.

A/N: For those of you not familiar with prices in the DC Metro, US $1700 is dirt cheap for a four bedroom house in Arlington Ridge. An apartment complex just down the street from where Tony’s house is has one-bedroom apartments that go for the same price.
Chapter 20: I Have a Lot of Regrets, but You Are Not One of Them

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. You’re all lovely.

For those of you who really wanted some relationship goodness, this chapter and possibly the next will make you very happy. Although, I won’t say which relationship will get their fluffy moment. You might find it surprising considering everything going on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dear Tony:

If you’re reading this then my enemies have finally gotten to me. And if I was half as good as I thought I was, then you probably had no idea I had so many enemies. I’m sure whoever successfully killed me will try to make it look like a drunk driving accident when in reality I’ve been sober since about a week after your kidnapping in ’86. The only reason why everybody still thinks I’m constantly drunk is because it’s easier to fool people when they underestimate you. I have too many secrets. Too many for the pages of this letter.

Don’t trust Obadiah. The only reason why he still in position at SI is because he is threatening to expose Maria and Katie to the press. You’re well aware the board is homophobic, considering some of the things they’ve said to you. The sooner you can get rid of Obadiah and most of his cronies and replace him with Katie or your mom, the better you will be. That way you won’t have to deal with a board that will keep you in the closet.

I have no problem with you being gay. One of the people I admire most was gay or I guess more accurately bisexual. That being said dump Tiberius Stone. He is using you. You can do better. Find a nice guy who will love you for everything you are; someone who can be a good stepdad to your son when the test comes out positive. I know it will.

What you think happened during your first time wasn’t what happened. I made sure you don’t remember what happened. It’s for the best because you shouldn’t remember being kidnapped. There were repercussions, however and one of those repercussions is little Leopold.

Have Marcy run the lab work on your possible child herself. She’s the only one I trust other than her mother. Peggy will keep you safe, as if you were her own child. Actually, you are. There are too
many people at SI who have their own motivations and would love to get their hands on another Stark heir.

I am sorry I couldn’t be the father that you needed. Thank God you had Maria, Katie, Jarvis, Ana and Peggy, before she got pissed at me. You would’ve been completely ruined with just me in your life. I’m sure you’ll do better than me. Hopefully, you’ll figure out all your mistakes before the grandchildren show up. It’s the Stark legacy to be slightly better than our fathers. Don’t think that I didn’t love you because I did. I pushed you away to keep you safe and it looks like I pushed you away too far. I’m sorry. Please do better than I have.

I know my hours left are short. I feel it, which is why I’m redoing this letter. I’m not sure if I’ll be around for us to reconcile. I don’t even think I’m going to hold Leo. Know that I forgive you for what you said the other day. I understand you were just scared. That’s okay. I was absolutely terrified the first time they put you in my arms.

I’ve done a lot of things I shouldn’t have, because I was scared, mostly of losing you. I sent you to boarding school because of Ana’s death and your first almost kidnapping. I’m sorry about that now. I’m sorry for so many things. I have a lot of regrets, but you are not one of them.

Chocolate Buttercup 425681.

Xxxxxx

Tony placed the letter on the floor beside him. If he wasn’t so numb, he probably would be crying, but he’s in too much of a stupor to do that. At least he now knew with 100% certainty that Howard knew about Leo before he was killed. More importantly, Howard was convinced that he wouldn’t live long enough to get the results of the DNA analysis. (Tony doesn’t want to think about the fact he was right about this.) The letter had to be written just hours after the disastrous ‘you have a kid’ phone call. It even addressed the fact that his first sexual encounter didn’t happen.

The letter even confirmed the conversation he overheard between Rhodey and Stephanie a.k.a. his sister in a roundabout way.

Peggy will keep you safe, as if you were her own child. Actually, you are.

Tony would have taken those words for hyperbole if he didn’t hear Stephanie actually referred to him as her half-brother four hours ago. He wanted to pretend he didn’t overhear that conversation, but he couldn’t because the truth was glaring at him from his highly encrypted Stark pad. Or rather, he was staring at the DNA analysis that his very competent assistant had done, wishing it said
Considering the obscene number of paternity suits that he has had to deal with, Tony knows how to read a DNA analysis. Maria Stark was not his mother. Certain diary pages confirm that she didn’t even carry him. She couldn’t. Katie had and Tony just knew that the Katie from the diary was his sort of step mom. Maria and Katie met when she was working on a special project for Howard. Apparently, Tony was the special project. His mom and Katie knew each other for a good 15 years before they became lovers. It all made sense. As soon as he didn’t feel like throwing up, he’s going to need to talk with her.

Tony had read those pages before, but he didn’t put it together. Howard referred to Tony as his ‘greatest creation’ and now Tony knew why. He was the first test tube child. Now he feels extra awful about having said everything special about Steve came from a bottle. Now everything about Tony came from a SHEILD lab. He was a designer baby made to the specifications of Howard Stark and yet he still couldn’t live up to expectations.

Maybe if that was all there was to this, Tony wouldn’t be so disoriented. Gestational carriers and donor eggs were almost a normal thing especially for couples like himself and Steve (if they were still a couple after Steve finds out that he is fucking his ex-girlfriend’s biological kid). He’d gone 42 years as seeing himself as Maria Stark’s son and now he wasn’t anymore, at least not genetically. And that was confusing things. Who is Tony Stark? He wasn’t sure anymore and it wasn’t just the DNA test results that brought this on. Too many things had changed in the last couple of months.

Now he was also the son of Peggy Carter Jones (and maybe Katie too, because of course Tony has three mommies.) He was always jealous that Stephanie had two parents who absolutely adored her and who were usually around for story time. He could’ve had that too, but it was lost to him now. Too much time has gone by and Alzheimer’s was fucking awful.

What does it mean to have Peggy Carter as his mom? Tony wasn’t sure. He was not an only child anymore and that was good. He adored Stephanie. Although some of his other siblings left much to be desired, except for maybe Jamie. He kind of wanted to punch out Marcy. She had known for 27 fucking years and she didn’t say a damn word.

Fuck you, Marcy. She knew about Leo too and did nothing to help. Tony wasn’t sure he could ever forgive that level of betrayal, even for family.

At least Stephanie was trying to tell him. She brought in Rhodey. That was a good call. Too bad Tony likes to find out who’s in his house, when the alarm accidentally got tripped because Stephanie used the wrong code. At least he found out by hearing them discuss how best to tell him about Maria not being his biological mother in a way that wouldn’t freak him out.
That still didn’t mean he was ready deal with either of them. The moment he arrived at the Playground, Tony left Rhodey behind to find a safe place to gather his thoughts and go over all Simmons’ research. (Did they really think JARVIS was going to keep this from him indefinitely?) The Peggy Carter truth was discovered when his brilliant assistant noticed that Agent Triplet and Leo had a similar ancestor. Said similar ancestor just happened to be the sleeping woman in front of him.

It made complete sense to Tony that he was hiding in Peggy Carter-Jones bedroom at the Playground. It was only partially because no one would think to find him here. Maria’s grave was too far away whereas his biological mom was right here. (Not to mention Katie was at a board meeting with Pepper in New York trying to cover up the fact that Tony was keeping a low profile because of Hydra and the fact that he had just become a father to an almost 27-year-old.)

Agent Carter Junior didn’t even blink when he asked to spend some time alone with ‘Aunt Peggy’ (and he was already paying the nursing staff here a small fortune to be discreet). Tony probably shouldn’t call Sharon that anymore considering she is his cousin. Although, Tony really didn’t know how to behave with extended family because he never had to deal with extended family before. Maria wasn’t on speaking terms with most of her family and Howard’s family only showed up when they wanted money. It’s kind of what happens when you pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.

Maybe Sharon knows the truth. She did go with Dr. Simmons to procure the necessary DNA sample last week. Now Tony felt like he was the very last person to know. It was too much to absorb.

Three months ago, Tony thought he was one person: Pepper’s boyfriend, a retired superhero, Howard and Maria Stark’s son, the super consultant for Shield and someone who wanted a kid, but couldn’t actually have one. Now who was he? He was a father, who missed out on his child’s entire life and a son, who wasn’t there when his biological mom was slowly falling apart in a nursing home. He was a man who accidentally created weapons for the terrorist organization that killed his father and mother, and very nearly his own son, as well. He was also a part-time superhero trying to reestablish his (mother and) father’s legacy. Everything was so overwhelming that it was starting to drive him crazy.

Tony was sitting in the corner of Peggy’s room when he got a text message from Steve. Another one of those changes, one of the good ones or at least that’s what he thought before all of this went down. Tony was almost afraid to look at Steve’s message. There was this little voice inside of him that was telling him that Steve discovered the Peggy Carter truth and was planning to break up with him via text message. Yet he still looked.

Stevie bear: Hey, Stephanie wants everybody to sit down for dinner in 10 minutes. Where are you? I looked in the lab and in Leo’s room, but you weren’t there.
Tony exhaled in relief as he read the message. Steve didn’t know yet. He could pretend everything was still okay for a little bit longer, but he also knew that he needed somebody to talk about the letter with and he wasn’t ready to face Rhodey yet. (And he wasn’t bringing Pepper into this until she got here for the interview, if at all. He needed to be a big boy and deal with his own shit without going to his ex-girlfriend the moment he got an emotional boo-boo.)

Me: I just feel like being alone right now.

Stevie bear: Why?

Me: We retrieved a letter that Howard wrote to me before he died. After I read it, I just wanted to be away from people for a while.

Me: Let Stephanie know that even though I know she bought ingredients to make Jarvis’ legendary chocolate caramel cheesecake, I’m not in the mood.

He wanted to bring Obadiah back from the dead, just so he could blow the man up again. Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option. He was also pissed off at Howard for not telling him that he was a lab experiment. (And yes, his anger at that fact was making him question his decision not to let Leo know about the true circumstances of his conception, Hydra was out there though, so the fewer people who knew the truth, the better.)

Stevie bear: Tony, are you okay?

Not at all. Hell, he wasn’t even sure who he was at the moment.

Me: I’m fine.

Stevie bear: You are not fine. If you were fine, you wouldn’t be hiding somewhere on the base. You are on the base, right? You’re not at the bar above?

Me: Yes, I’m on the base and surprisingly still sober. And you’re right, I’m not okay.

Stevie bear: What was in that letter?
Sometimes Steve was too smart for his own good.

Me: I think it’s better if I just let you read it. Let me take a picture of it and send it to you.

Stevie bear: Is that safe?

Me: Don’t worry, our connection is NSA proof. No one else is going to see this.

Me: Image attached

After sending the letter, Tony waited anxiously for Steve’s reply. It felt like it took forever, but it was really only 10 minutes later.

Stevie bear: Now I know you’re really not okay. He really did know about Leo back then?

Me: Among other things that he never told me.

‘Like the fact Maria is not my biological mom,’ Tony thought to himself, but didn’t dare type that.

Stevie bear: Why the hell did Howard put that in a letter? If he knew that Hydra was after him, he should’ve just left.

Me: I wonder the same thing. Actually, Katie mentioned dad was planning for us to go to the Stark family beach house that happened to be on a private island in the middle of the Pacific. We never made it.

Stevie bear: I’m so sorry, Baby.

Me: It’s okay. Honestly, I’m more pissed off about the Obadiah revelations.
Stevie bear: So am I. I just want to smack Howard upside the head. How dare he confirm all your worst fears about Obadiah in a letter that you didn’t even find until today.

Stevie bear: Was this something that they uncovered during the renovations?

Tony wish that were the case. Then he wouldn’t feel so nauseous. The truth of the matter was the only thing that kept this information from him for nearly 23 years, was his own stupid pride.

Me: I didn’t just find the letter. Stephanie’s sister, Marcy, gave it to me after the funeral, but I was so mad at Howard that I never even bothered to open it.

Stevie bear: Oh God, Tony.

Me: As you can see, I fucked up. I had a warning about Obadiah and I never opened it, because I let my anger at Howard get the best of me. Do you know how many people were killed by Stark weapons that were sold illegally when I allowed Obadiah to do whatever the fuck he wanted to do with my company?

Stevie bear: No.

Me: Neither do I, but I know that it’s a lot. Yancy’s family was among them. Maybe we could have even figured out the Hydra thing earlier if we knew Howard was positive whatever happened to him was a hit. I fucked up so badly.

Stevie bear: You did not fuck up. With information that important, Howard shouldn’t have just left it in a letter that you may not have wanted to read or that could have been destroyed by Hydra or anyone else before you even saw it. He should’ve told you. This is on Howard, not you.

Me: It doesn’t change the fact of things. In addition to all the blood on my hands, if I had known not to trust Obadiah, I probably would’ve been able to raise Leo and Jarvis might still be alive or at least he would’ve died of natural causes. But that didn’t happen.

Stevie bear: Don’t do this to yourself Tony. Baby, you have to stop blaming yourself for everything, especially things that were outside your control.
Me: I can’t help it. In this case it was something that I could’ve controlled, but I didn’t. There are so many things I wish I could do differently.

Stevie bear: That’s not an option unless you’re planning on figuring out time travel.

Me: I probably could, but it would be too dangerous.

Stevie bear: I’m glad you realize that. I know this was a lot for you to take in, but maybe you should still come to dinner. You have to eat.

Me: I think I would throw up anything I consumed right now. I haven’t been this sick since I tried to eat a Whopper after my extended stay at the Afghanistan Hilton.

Stevie bear: I think I’m missing a reference here. Are you referring to your kidnapping or a bad business trip in Kabul?

Me: The kidnapping. Did your history of Vietnam packet contain anything about the Hanoi Hilton?

Stevie bear: No. I probably need to Google that. But being confused is a normal state for me. What does chocolate Buttercup mean?

Me: I think it’s some sort of password. Maybe if I whisper that into the locket that Agent Triplett brought back on your fake birthday, it will reveal all the other weird Stark family secrets. I don’t know what other weird stuff I could find out at this point.

Stevie bear: That you’re actually adopted?

Tony almost typed something along the lines of ‘actually, I am the first test tube baby and oops, they used your ex-girlfriend’s egg because it wasn’t like they had good protocols for that sort of stuff back then’.

Tony may be a prick but there are some things you don’t send in a text message. Instead, he cut off his phone because he wasn’t ready to tell Steve the truth yet. He wasn’t ready to tell anybody the truth because then it would be all too real.
Tony was sure that Steve was joking or maybe he just suggested the most absurd thing possible, not realizing that he suggested something that was sort of true. In 2014, embryo adoption actually is a thing.

Is that what this is? Was Maria his adoptive mother? Except she had no idea that he was adopted or at least he thinks that she has no idea. Maybe they were always planning to use a donor egg. Did Maria think that he was her flesh and blood despite Katie being her gestational carrier? Would Maria love him less if she knew the truth? Would she have loved to him at all? Unfortunately, Maria was not around to ask.

He should talk to Katie, but he’s afraid (and he might hurt Marcy if he saw her anytime soon). Though honestly, she’s the only one who could tell him if Maria always knew. They were just speculating that this was accidental. There were cases all the time about fertility banks accidentally fertilizing eggs with the wrong sperm. Arlington Fertility Center was sued just last year for something similar. Maybe this was planned from the beginning? He had too many questions and no source for answers.

“I would love it if you could tell me if they were always planning on you being my biological mom.” Tony said out loud to the woman sleeping in front of him after getting lost in his head for too long. Tony actually thinks she’s sedated because the last time she woke up she assumed that she was being held captive by Leviathan. (Note to self: lookup Leviathan).

“Although considering Howard had me tested to see if I was Antoine’s father, I should probably assume that’s a hard no for you at least. I wonder if that’s when they realized the actual family relationship.” Probably. “If it’s okay with you, I’m going to stick to referring to you as Aunt Peggy.” It was easier to keep things as they were, but he was claiming Stephanie because those ingrates don’t deserve her.

“Was Stevie bear this perceptive with you or is this a new thing?” Tony was going with this being a new thing because it took the guy months to realize Tony was sexually attracted to him despite the girlfriend.

“So did you know that you had another son or did Howard and subsequently your own daughter keep the truth from you?” There was no answer and Tony wasn’t expecting one. Even if Peggy was conscious and lucid, she probably wouldn’t be able to answer. Even if she was told, she may not remember and Tony’s not going to tell her.

“I kind of wish Marcy had said something before things got to this point.” At least that way I would have another person to talk to. “You could give me tips on how to deal with Steve when he’s being a
stubborn asshole. It could be a mother/son bonding activity. I mean, that should be one of the advantages of dating the same person as your parent.

“Which, thanks to Howard being Howard, I actually have slept with somebody who slept with one of my parents before. Her name was Mercedes. She was actually purposely targeting me so she could claim that she slept with both Howard and me. I was dumb, 22, and probably stoned at the time, so I fell for her lines.” He also didn’t know until after the fact that she was one of Howard’s girlfriends. And by after the fact, Tony meant when the woman sold the story to some tabloid, which had been her plan all along. Tony was so thankful that incident happened before the invention of camera cell phones.

“By the way, thank you for never actually sleeping with Steve. That helps things out right now. So, what’s the probability of Steve dumping me when he finds out that he is unwittingly fucking the biological son of the one that got away?” Tony asked a sleeping Peggy.

“Extremely low, the limit of 0%.” Tony turned around to see Steve standing in the doorway with cell phone in hand.

“Normally, I would comment on how sexy I find it that you know what the limit of zero is, but instead I would love to know how long you’ve been standing there?” Did he know? “How did you even find me?”

“Sharon told me where you were after she smacked me in the shoulder when she heard me dictating my last message to you.” Of course, Steve was dictating because Steve’s hands were too big to use a smart phone keyboard. Also Sharon obviously knew and apparently the ‘Nobody messes with my family, but me’ thing has already kicked in. “As for how long I was standing here, long enough to understand why Sharon smacked me. Sorry, I stuck my foot in my mouth by sort of guessing the truth.” Steve was actually apologizing. Tony wasn’t expecting that.

“If you heard that much, you’re probably just as confused as I am right now.” Tony responded with a sigh.

“I’ve always found Peggy to be a good sounding board. Maybe talking things out with her will make you less confused.” Steve said walking over to Tony.

“Nope, I’m still confused. I have three mommies and Howard knew that Obadiah was an asshole all along. He probably figured out the Hydra thing before…”
“The Winter Soldier murdered him and Maria.” Steve finished for him as he took the seat next to Tony. “Remember, I found out just a couple of months ago that the Winter Soldier is my supposedly dead friend, who actually got kidnapped because I wasn’t fast enough. So, I think I understand having everything you thought you knew about the world turned upside down in a few minutes.”

“I think waking up in 2012 is probably the equivalent of this mind fuck, especially considering they tried to trick you into thinking some 70 odd years hadn’t passed by. So if you would be kind enough to wait at least a month before …” Tony’s ramblings were cut off by Steve’s lips descending upon his.

“I’m not breaking up with you because you discovered that Peggy is your biological mom. You’re still my Tony.” He said and wouldn’t let Tony pull away. “How did you discover that Peggy is your biological mom?”

Apparently Simmons figured it out while trying to find any biological matches for Leo and Trip. Stephanie brought Rhodey here to tell me in the gentlest way possible. And I ruined them try to figure out how to tell me because I love checking my security footage a little too much.” Tony explained as he leaned into Steve.

“I thought after the ‘we accidentally create a sex tape because shield was spying on us’ incident, you deactivated most of the cameras in the house?” Steve asked.

“And I reactivated them because of Hydra trying to kidnap Leo, again. I don’t regret doing that even though there are some things you don’t want to find out via VTC.” Learning they accidentally use the wrong egg during the experimental in vitro procedure used to create you is one of those things. Steve responds by putting an arm around him and pulling Tony to his chest. “But still it’s probably better than if I hacked the files and found the report. You want to see the DNA test? I’m still half tempted to run it again myself. Stephanie already did it twice.”

“That’s okay, I trust Stephanie.” He threaded his fingers through Tony’s hair, massaging his scalp gently.

“I’m a selfish bastard, so I’m going to take this hug, but how many times did you keep reassuring me that you would not leave me for Trip or Sharon because it would be so creepy to sleep with your ex’s family? And as somebody who has slept with one of their dad’s former conquests, it is creepy and I could totally see why you would dump me.” Steve is now giving Tony his I’m very confused right now look.

“Don’t give me a weird look, I was 22 and it was right after Howard died. I didn’t know by the way
until the thing was all over the tabloids. Apparently, she targeted me just for the story.” Tony explained.

“It’s not the familial relationship, not really. My real problem is everybody just assumed that Sharon would be perfect for me because she’s Peggy’s niece and just like her, but I’m not looking for a Peggy Carter substitute because there isn’t one.” Steve explained.

“Aunt Peggy was definitely one-of-a-kind. I love the fact that she had no trouble putting Howard in his place. She was kind of awesome.” Tony smiled fondly.

“But at some point while I was feeling sorry for myself, I met May and she made me realize that I couldn’t keep holding on to the past. Part of letting go of the past meant getting to really get to know this guy, who I thought was a complete asshole, because he wasn’t who I expected him to be.” Steve explained with a smirk.

“I’m still an asshole.” Tony mumbled as Steve pulled him closer.

“But an asshole with a big heart, who cares about everything and tries to do good things. An asshole who challenges me and makes me do better. An asshole who is willing to help me bring in my best friend, even though he murdered his parents, so we can help rehabilitate him. And even though he had a girlfriend at the time, I still fell head over feet in love with him.” Tony kissed him.

“I enjoyed the flattery. I think we still both owe Pepper like another 20 apology gift baskets and a foot massage.”

“Let me finish.”

“Continue.”

“As it turns out, you’re Peggy’s son, but it doesn’t matter to me because I’m completely in love with that condescending asshole, who drives me up the wall. If I never saw you as a Howard replacement, then I’m definitely not going to see you as a Peggy Carter substitute. You’re your own person. You always have been. It took me a little while to get used to you, but I’m glad that I did.” Steve told him firmly.

“Thank you for saying that.” Tony said, smirking. Maybe everything would be okay after all.
“Do you want to break up with me because of it? Is this weird for you? You know I only kissed Peggy?” Steve asked, still trying to process everything. And yet he wasn’t as surprised as he should’ve been. Maybe it was because unlike Tony, he didn’t gloss over the journal pages where Howard dealt with losing his daughter and his attempt to fix that via Project Lullaby. He already half wondered if Tony was a Project Lullaby child, but wouldn’t dare raise the possibility with Tony. Now he felt like even more than ass for his earlier text message.

Steve was worried that Tony wouldn’t be able to process this very well or at all. He should be just thankful that Tony was talking out loud to Peggy instead of drinking himself into a stupor. He could only deal with one active high functioning alcoholic at a time and Tony’s assistant appeared to be the one at the moment.

Steve understood what it was like to think your parents were one thing and then only to find out everything you thought you knew was a complete lie. He always thought his dad had died in the Great War. Then when he came out of the ice, Steve read his own biography and found out the man died in the 30s most likely of alcohol poisoning after walking out on his family. This is why Steve believed that your parents were the ones who raised you. As far as Steve was concerned, he didn’t have a father. The situation was different between Tony and Leo because Tony never walked away.

All the same, that revelation changed how he saw himself and his past. The same would be true of Tony. It was highly probable that Tony may no longer want to be with him anymore due to his recent revelations about his genetic parentage. Maybe he couldn’t see Steve the same way. Tony was ridiculously happy when Steve reassured him that he never had sex with Howard. Maybe he felt the same way again.

“It’s no weirder than the fact that you’re simultaneously almost the same age as my father and my son. But I’m kind of in love with you and Peggy is still Aunt Peggy to me. It’s just I’m calling dibs on Stephanie and possibly Jackie. This doesn’t have to change anything.” Steve isn’t sure if Tony is saying that for his own benefit or Steve’. He’s not sure Tony actually believes that.

“The only reason why I was happy about you never doing anything with Howard thing is I don’t want to be a substitute for anyone. I’m glad because now I know that’s not the case here.”

“You’re definitely your own person. Didn’t you tell me before that you felt like Jarvis was more your father then Howard? In a way, this is the same situation.” Tony nodded his head in agreement.
“Except with more sisters.” Tony joked.

Peggy’s children were now Tony’s biological siblings. That was going to take some time to adjust to. Steve was not as surprised as he might have been, because Peggy was the type of person who would have no trouble giving an egg or two to help a friend out. Unlike Tony, he doesn’t think this was an accident, but a deliberate act of friendship that Steve can respect.

“And a brother.” Steve added once he broke out of his own thoughts.

“I’m not sure I’m counting Tyler.” Steve understands. He had heard a lot of things from Agent Triplett about him over the last few weeks and very little of it was good.

“I don’t even think Stephanie wants to count Tyler, it’s probably the entire reason why she’s moved into the base. She can’t deal with her familial houseguests.” Steve laughed as he helped Tony up from the chair. As much as he wanted to spend more time with Peggy, he knew he needed to get his boyfriend out of here. Otherwise, he would keep obsessing over this.

“Do you feel like at least putting in an appearance at dinner?” Steve asked. “You know Leo likes spending meal times with you.” Steve already knew that using Leo was a good way to get his boyfriend to do a lot of things.

“I’m not ready to deal with my big sister yet or even face Leo. I wasn’t ready to really tell anyone that I knew, but you just had to catch me mid soliloquy.” He couldn’t tell if Tony was mad about that or not. Steve wondered if Tony was actually planning to tell him. Was Tony that afraid of his reaction? Steve wasn’t sure. Now he really wished he’d gone with another reason to explain why he was not going to leave Tony for the younger relative of one of his former significant others.

He should’ve just gone with ‘they’re not you’ and been done with it.

“I don’t know if I’m even going to tell Leo that not all his grandparents are dead like we originally assumed, especially considering the circumstance. I should probably tell him about the kidnapping and the letter, but….”

“But it’s just too much?”

“Right now, yes. I’m going to have to tell Pepper, but I just don’t want everyone to look at me
“You don’t have to figure out everything tonight. Would it make you feel better to know that Stephanie threatened to use her super strength on me if I hurt you, right before telling me to find you for dinner?”

“A little. Maybe having a big sister won’t be so horrible.” Tony joked.

“I’ll text message Trista and have her bring Leo and a slice of cheesecake by in a little bit.” Tony smiled at the offer.

“That would be good. Also, I kind of want to talk to mom’s ex-girlfriend Katie before I tell anybody else what’s going on. I think she knows more about this whole thing.” Steve agreed. If Maria knew about this, it was highly possible that she confessed the truth to her girlfriend.

“I met her at my birthday party. She wants us to have lunch or dinner sometime soon with her and her wife.” Steve explained as they started walking out towards the rest of the base.

“Of course she does. She likes to meet all my serious significant others which up until this point only consisted of Pepper.” Tony said with a frown. Steve was concerned with what possible interrogation he could be dealing with.

“I’ll check with JARVIS to see what time is available, so we can go together. You and me, we are a team now.” Steve kissed his temple.

“Okay.” Tony said with an exhausted shrug of his shoulders. Given the stress of the afternoon, it was no wonder why Tony fell asleep 45 minutes later with a slice of uneaten cheesecake on one side and Leo on the other. This is what happens when you eat on your bed.

Steve was worried, but he wasn’t leaving. Not at all. Tony was still Tony even if his perception of himself was continuously evolving. Steve planned to be there to help Tony adjust no matter what. One of Howard’s final wishes was for Tony to have a good boyfriend, who would love Tony for everything he is and Steve was planning to be exactly that.
To be continued.

Chapter End Notes

I thought about cutting to other things going on, but I just felt like this needed to be a Tony and Steve chapter.
Chapter 20: Follow the Data

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. I am so sorry that it’s been 3 months since I last updated this story. It’s been so long that May/Coulson might kind of sort of be almost canon right now in a ‘be careful what you wish for’ sort of way. My regular beta for this story, GraysonSteele and I have been working on my entry for KS Advent 2016 and it sort of ended up ballooning to 34,000 words. Sorry. However, it’s done and hopefully I can return to monthly and even semimonthly updates for this story.

A good portion of the next chapter is already written and I’m hoping to finalize it today. Your reviews can give me the energy to do that.

For those of you who enjoy Star Trek adventures from the Kelvin timeline, check out my story How to Survive (Until) Your Wedding.

Leo Fitz-Stark (he was still getting used to that last name) would have to admit that he doesn’t sleep well. Since waking up from his coma, the only night he’d fallen asleep easily was two nights ago when he’d crashed on his newly discovered father. Even that was short lived because while his father’s super strong boyfriend carried him back to his room stealthily Jemma’s almost nightly visit woke him.

No that isn’t right. His sleep issues started in Vegas after the mind control incident. If he hadn’t had that sleepless night post Vegas, then maybe he wouldn’t dream of a lover who tries to kill him post-coitus on black and red sheets with the Hydra symbol everywhere.

It didn’t surprise him that Grant Ward haunted his dreams or Hydra in general now since they killed his mother and grandparents (He learned about Hydra’s role in his grandparents’ murder, thanks to that bloody Everhart woman who enjoyed airing his father’s dirty laundry far too much). Grant Ward was his own personal personification of Hydra. He’d trusted Grant, even looked up to him. Fitz wanted to be him. All it got him in the end was quality time in the Gulf of Mexico and at least another month of Occupational Therapy before he would be allowed back into the lab unsupervised.

He wondered what Dr. Suarez would think of these dreams. Probably nothing good.

Fitz was almost glad that Jemma didn’t sneak in to his room last night due to him having a movie night with Trista. She told him she was taking another job (infiltrating Hydra, but he’s not supposed to know that), and someone else would be taking over his rehabilitation. It was nice for a change not
having to pretend to be asleep as Jemma rambled on next to him. He would eventually have to let her know that he’d been awake during these encounters, especially considering that was how he found out about his mother’s death in the first place.

He was reluctant to do so because this was the only time Simmons talked to him like she did pre-accident. He needed something to be normal in his life now that everything was different. So he let her continue, despite the fact that Fitz discovered that he’d made out with his cousin because apparently Peggy Carter Jones is his fraternal grandmother. That particular truth was discovered recently and completely by accident while analyzing Leo’s DNA profile. (Fitz would like to know why they’re running additional DNA tests on him, but he’s too afraid to ask.)

His go to activity for sleepless nights is writing in the therapy diary given to him by Dr. Suarez. Not that he’s planning on ever letting her see what he writes. There are too many entries about being uncertain about everything that’s happening right now. It is actually a digital diary. His motor skills are still absolute shite and the word prediction software on the tablet he’s using helps.

Dear diary:

I can’t sleep, again. I dreamt about him yet again. About that night. Except, unlike what actually happened, he tried to choke me afterwards. I should’ve known he was using me. Guys like that don’t go for guys like me, at least not before I became the heir to the Stark Empire. Women like that don’t go for guys like me either, not unless they want something.

I should’ve known he was just using me by the time he went down on me. The whole reason why I went along with it was because I didn’t think someone like Simmons would ever want something beyond a platonic relationship with me. Now, I know I was wrong. It’s too late of course. Everything’s ruined because I thought I could trust him.

I wish they had never told me he was here. I think the nightmares would be less if I thought he was far away and I would never have to see him again. I don’t like being in the same building with him. I hate Hydra. I want to go home. I just wish I knew where that was.

He’d like to think the answer to that question is wherever his friends are or wherever Tony is, but he’s still very uncertain. Either way, he’s not putting it in writing.

It would be easier if Skye was here. If she snuck into his room, he wouldn’t accidentally discovered bad things. He missed her, but he knew she had to work. Thankfully, Skye did give him an email to contact her, just in case. The only problem is that she was undercover. He had to utilize that cover in his email to her.
How’s New York? Do you think it will make a good place for a yoga studio? How is Roger doing? Losing someone you love is hard even if that love was one-sided. You’re a much better fit. I hope you’re safe up there. Are you going to be staying there for a while or are you coming back to Virginia? I miss you guys.

Trista just got a new job as a nurse at some fertility clinic in Arlington, so she won’t be here as much and I won’t have anyone to talk to. Things are still really complicated with Simmons, so that’s not a possibility. I don’t know what to say to her, even if I could get the words out without stuttering.

Write to me when you get a chance.

“Would you like for me to put on a movie or TV show for you?” JARVIS asked once he sent off the email.

“Something hopeful and not a love story.” He tells the AI, wanting to avoid all those things right now.

“Of course, Sir.” JARVIS started playing a marathon of TOS Star Trek episodes, obviously aware of his preference for sci-fi. He’s not going to say anything about JARVIS starting with Amok Time. He actually watches three episodes before deciding that it was late enough for him to get breakfast on his own.

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Dear Skye:

I know you’re mad at me for leaving in the middle of the night.

I’m sorry I left. Okay, I’m not sorry that I actually left the Playground, but I’m sorry that I left you. You’re one of my closest friends. I was just so lost after everything and Dr. Stark… Tony actually understands what it’s like to survive the near death experience caused by somebody you cared about stabbing you in the back. I’m still furious with Grant Ward. Why didn’t I see past that stupid smile? Yes, because he saved me from the sea once, but then he put me back there.
He almost cost me Leo and I am never going to…

Dear Skye:

I’m sorry. I didn’t have that many friends growing up. Leo was actually my first friend and I don’t know how to deal with things, anything really. The guilt and the fear of losing him was something I couldn’t handle. I still can’t handle it. I’m actually terrified to talk to him.

I don’t know how to move forward. Running away did nothing but push you further away from me and now I have to deal with this all on my own. I don’t know how to do that. Maybe I have been drinking too much. Trip’s mom seems to think so.

Did I mention that my parents are getting divorced?

Dear Skye:

Dr. Triplett suggested that I write to you to work things out because if I let things stay as they are I might regret it. Although I don’t know why I’m taking advice from her since she’s been avoiding her brother for the last two days in an effort to not tell him that she is his brother. Which is ridiculous because he already knows due to his tendency to eavesdrop on private conversations via JARVIS.

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“Bloody hell I can’t actually send that.” Jemma said out loud as she shut her laptop giving up on Dr. Triplett’s exercise once and for all. That was attempt number eight and only one of the three that she did not delete entirely. She’d been up since 4 AM trying to figure out what to write to Skye and her various rough drafts had proven that she was no better at putting her thoughts into writing then she was at articulating them verbally.

Her attempts to write to Leo were even worse. She could barely get past the salutation. Actually, she couldn’t even decide on which to use.

Did she even have a right to refer to him as Leo anymore? Is he still going by Fitz even though he changed his name to Leo Fitz-Stark. (And she’s not surprised he ditched Leopold altogether.) She’s too afraid to ask.

She couldn’t even speak to him during daytime. She was afraid to. She had no trouble crawling into his bed in the middle of the night and confessing everything when she was sure he was asleep. But
she couldn’t even get past the salutation on an email that she’s actually trying to send him.

If she had actually slept in Leo’s room last night, she probably would’ve managed more than two hours, but she didn’t want to make it a habit. Okay, actually she did not slip into his room last night because Trista and Mack were in there having a movie night and she didn’t want to intrude. Especially because Trista didn’t like her and she’s half convinced that Leo wanted to move on to Mack. After everything that had happened, Jemma was not going to begrudge Leo finding happiness with someone else. (Yes, she would actually be upset about it, but she would keep those thoughts to herself. She just wanted him to not be sad.)

At 5:32 AM she gave up trying to sleep and decided to get ready for her 7:30 AM with Director Coulson. Jemma actually had enough time for a bagel and to visit the lab to review yesterday’s findings one more time before handing them over to the Director. During the few days that she’s been at the Playground, she found the lab very peaceful, despite the influx of people at the facility.

Or it had been peaceful until Agent Romanoff arrived. Jemma is still intimidated by the woman due to being knocked unconscious by her just a few weeks ago.

“What can I help you with Agent Romanoff?” Jemma asked, looking up from the screen in front of her. She was looking over her recent analysis of what Dr. Stark refers to as ‘Super Soldier Antibodies’.

Actually, Tony calls it ‘Super Soldier STD’, but that seems unseemly. Somehow the antibody is in Ward’s bloodstream despite Agent May’s assertions that she only engaged in sexual activities with a barrier prophylactic. Obviously, either something broke or Agent May misremembered. Jemma would have to ask, unfortunately. She wonders if the antibody being present in his bloodstream is why his multiple suicide attempts have been ineffective. Oh well, she’d go back to looking at that after she handled Agent Romanoff.

“I wanted to see if you completed your DNA analysis of Natalie von Strucker.” At least somebody was convinced that Natalie List- von Strucker was just an alias and it’s possible that she’s really someone else. Apparently, Jemma was the only one trusted with doing such an analysis. She’s starting to really dislike that trust. She’s finding out too much about her friends.

“I believe the system is still analyzing the sample and comparing it to others on the network, but JARVIS would know more.” Jemma said much to the annoyance of the agent in front of her. Obviously she wanted that information immediately.

“I’m still comparing her against the main SHIELD DNA database along with several other law
enforcement databases. I ran into a complication, but I should have the results soon.” JARVIS responded. “I will alert you as soon as the analysis is completed, Agent Romanoff.”

“See all settled. Now, if you will excuse me, I have an early meeting with the Director that I need to get ready for.” Jemma said as in an effort push the agent out of her lab. She had a line graph to complete.

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“How’s New York?” Phil asked as soon as his girlfriend popped up on screen in his office. It was early morning at the Playground, the perfect time to have a private conversation.

May had been gone for less than three days and yet he missed her terribly. Somehow it was worse with her being the one gone and him staying behind. Due to Hydra, this was the first time May had checked in since leaving. They were trying to keep communications to a minimum despite the fact they were now using Stark’s new equipment.

“We found a Tahiti patient.” He wasn’t expecting for her to tell him that. Actually, he wasn’t sure what he was expecting for the three to find when he sent them to check out the artwork that had the same pattern as his carvings. He wished he could say that he’d just felt like sending Agent Triplett on a nice mini vacation on S.I’s dime so the man could deal with his former fiancé’s death somewhat constructively.

Coulson still felt guilty about Agent 33 not being able to save Robin without sacrificing her cover. Despite the high cost, now they had another agent in Hydra, one who would be able to see things that Agent 19 would not due to her going in as just a biologist and girlfriend of the departed head of Hydra security.

When Phil received May’s picture of Janice Robbins and her artwork, he knew that whatever was happening in New York was more than the easy mission that he wanted for Agent Triplett. He knew that he had seen her somewhere before, he just didn’t remember when or where.

"Do you recognize her?" May asked breaking him out of his thoughts.

“Sort of. She seems familiar, like I’ve met her before around the office, but I don’t remember where.” The memory was there hazy in the back of his mind, but he couldn’t access it. It was as if the information was deleted from his mind and only the echoes remain. Considering what he went through, that’s entirely possible.
“Do you remember an agent named Rebecca Stevenson?” May asked. “She worked at the Hub. She was a friend of Isabel Cline-Hand, her roommate at the Academy.”

Before the fall, SHIELD was a large agency. It was bigger than the State Department and the CIA with thousands of agents all over the world, none of which knew anybody besides those in their immediate department. Maybe that’s why they couldn’t see the fox in the hen house. You really didn’t know anyone outside your department or Academy class unless something horrible befell that agent as in this case. That’s why the name was more familiar than the image that accompanied it.

“She died on a mission in December 2010. Her name was on the wall at the Academy.” He remembered seeing it there when Skye went to pay her respects to the agent that found her.

“And yet somehow she is alive and mostly well living under a different name and a different state.”

“Are you sure both of these women are the same person?” Coulson asked just as another image of Agent Stevens popped up on his screen. They looked very similar, but looks can be deceiving.

“Yes. Trip recognized her from before and the fingerprint program that Stark came up with identified her as Rebecca Stevens.” May explained.

"Which means one thing, she was an early Tahiti patient." Phil closed his eyes and tried to concentrate for a moment. He sees flashes of white, a metal table and hospital gowns, but not faces.

"I don’t remember her." But he really wanted to.

“I didn’t think you would. I know Fury took any memory you had related to Tahiti or the Guesthouse.” Too many memories, really. Apparently he admitted that he was in love with Melinda to Pepper during the lost time. How many more important memories were gone? How much was taken from him? He felt like his previous verbal chastising of Nick Fury was insufficient.

“Is Janice Robbins displaying any of the other symptoms?” The image shown earlier already told him that she was displaying the symptoms of hypergraphia. It’s just that she chose a better medium than drywall and exacting knife.
“Not that we are aware of at the moment, although her artwork at the center is alarming enough.” That’s when several images pop up on his screen. It is the same pattern, but it felt like a different pieces of the same puzzle. What is he missing?

“The entire studio is filled with those images. It’s all she paints.”

May’s words worried him. Could he get to that point? That was his biggest fear.

“I want Trip and Skye to get closer to her, to keep an eye on her.” Phil ordered.

“They’re having drinks with her tonight while I put cameras in her apartment.” He’s not even surprised. This is why he loves Melinda. She’s always on the same page as him.

“Good. I think this mission is going to last more than the two or three days originally intended.”

"Do you want me to stay here as well?” May asked and he definitely wanted to say no, but there were other things that need to be considered first.

“Has Skye displayed any symptoms?” If anything was going to trigger Skye, it would have to be the vast amount of artwork. He started the night he saw Garrett’s carvings for the first time.

“No, but even if she did Agent Triplett knows what to watch for.” May explained.

“He knows? You told him, even though I told you not to tell anyone else?” May was giving him her best death glare. Apparently he had used the ‘I’m your director’ tone of voice. May doesn’t care for that tone.

“I didn’t tell him. He’s a specialist; he picks up on things. And the fact that his neurologist mother is working with us made it quite obvious what was going on.” Phil sighed. He shouldn’t be surprised. Agent Triplett was smart. Maybe another reason why he sent the agent up to New York was so he wouldn’t figure out that his ex-boyfriend was killed during a mission to plant someone in Hydra.

“Does Skye know?” Phil asked.
“No, but she’s suspicious. She knows that Janice Robbins was most likely part of Project Tahiti. I’m surprised she hasn’t asked if you have taken up any new hobbies.” Skye was smart. Also, Stark’s AI loved her. It would be only a matter of time before she knew everything.

“Read Triplett into the situation completely. Let him know he’s allowed to tell Skye if she starts to piece things together on her own, but I need you back.” Because he can only take so many days of Natasha on carving watch. She slept in his room last night, on the floor, just so he couldn’t sneak out to the carving room without her.

“You sound very weary which worries me since I’ve only been gone a few days. Have there been any problems?” He know she’s really asking if he’s had an episode.

“It hasn’t been awful, just busy and chaotic. Hartley is still on assignment. Stark and Dr. Triplett are avoiding each other and thereby keeping Dr. Triplett away from the base which wouldn’t be horrible if Dr. Cline-Hand would stay on bed rest. Hunter is babysitting Grant Ward’s niece who also happens to be the niece of Christine Everhart. Stark is scheduled to be on her show tonight.” Against Phil’s better judgment.

“And you’re afraid that he’s going to announce that he started a private spy agency under his house in Arlington.” May knew him so well.

“Technically, we are still at the Playground. The facilities in Arlington won’t be done until December at the earliest.” He joked.

“Phil.” Apparently his girlfriend was not in the mood for such jokes.

“It’s not like he can stick to the cards any better now than he could six years ago. Something’s going to slip. I’m just hoping it’s that he’s sleeping with Captain America.” His childhood self can’t believe that is the least damaging thing Stark could say. “I need someone else here when everything hits the fan.”

“You need more people.” He was well aware of that. Natasha was helping him find more agents because things were too chaotic right now for him to resume his face-to-face recruitment mission. She was only doing that because he wanted to get SHIELD reformed as much as he could before… Natasha had to take him out for good. Rebecca or Janice or whatever her name is constant painting has him afraid that day may come sooner rather than later.
“I did get more people and now Agent West is going undercover at the clinic owned by Wolfgang von Strucker’s wife.”

“Ex-wife.” May corrected.

“I’m not so sure. I suppose it’s possible for a head of Hydra to love something other than himself and power. Maybe he wants to keep his wife and son safe, so he cut all ties. Trista will figure it out. Regardless, she’s someone we need to watch.” Phil explained.

“You always try to see the best in people. I guess this means lunch yesterday was successful.”

“Very successful.” He would fill May and on Trista’s specific mission parameters in person. He didn’t want to say much more, even on an encrypted frequency.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. Anything else I need to know?” May asked.

“No.” Nothing, that I can tell you now anyway.

“Have there been any carving?” Of course she asked directly this time after evading the previous question.

“No.” That was the truth. He had felt a slight compulsion, but he could hold himself back which is better than before. He may make it until tomorrow before needing to visit the wall. That was a great improvement. At that moment, he heard steps coming down the hallway. That’s when he remembered Simmons wanted to meet with him to discuss her findings related to the super soldier antibody (they need another name). She was five minutes early which didn’t surprise him.

“I have a meeting with Simmons at 7:30 this morning and she’s already here.”

“She’s early.” May remarked. “What is she there to discuss?”

_Nothing I can tell you about over this video call._ Phil thought to himself.
“I’ll tell you when you get home.” *Love you.*

“Don’t do anything stupid before I get there.” *Love you too.*

“I’ll try not to.” Phil said just as he allowed Simmons into his office.

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“Was that Agent May on the screen when I arrived?” Jemma asked. She thought she glimpsed the woman when she walked into her boss’ office early, but she wanted to present her findings immediately. “I received some interesting results this morning and I need to clarify the exact nature of her…” Jemma paused, trying to figure out a delicate way to discuss her boss’ current girlfriend’s sexual encounters with the Hydra traitor before they knew of his true allegiances. She quickly realized there was no delicate way.

“Ward has trace amounts of the super soldier antibody in his system. I need to confirm that what she said was accurate regarding the nature of their sexual contact before I look into alternative ways that those antibodies could have made their way into Ward’s bloodstream.” Jemma explained.

What she was studying definitely needed a better name. Maybe she should go with SSA. She knew Fitz could come up with a much better acronym, but she couldn’t talk to him about what she was working on because he wasn’t in the lab with her anymore. Also, since her research involved learning about his father’s sex life in explicit and uncomfortable detail, it was probably best he wasn’t involved. Learning about her father’s affairs was traumatic enough for Jemma. The situation would have to be significantly worse for Fitz due to the fact that sex tapes actually exist of his father’s antics.

“Stark would be very upset if May strangled you when she got back, so you are not asking her more questions about the specific sexual activities that she engaged in with Grant Ward.” That answer suited her because she didn’t want to ask.

“Understood, Sir. Unfortunately, if the history she gave me initially is accurate, then I have to look at alternate theories regarding how the antibodies got in his system. And frankly, all of them leave me extremely concerned.”

“Why are you concerned?” The director asked.
“If Agent May was not the source and we know for a fact he did not engage in protected or unprotected sex with anyone else exposed or patient zero himself, then it means that another source was involved. SHIELD took blood, tissue and semen samples from Captain Rogers when he was rescued from the Arctic.” She told him pointedly.

“Which means Hydra could have blood, tissue and semen samples from Captain America.” Coulson closed his eyes and frustration. “You’re worried that Ward could be some sort of guinea pig?” It was the one possibility that she’d been considering which made the most sense.

“Yes. Someone else at SHIELD and therefore Hydra must have been aware of Peggy Carter’s own exposure to the super soldier serum. They did kidnap Stephanie Carter Jones for a reason. Also, the US government and other entities have been trying to re-create super soldier serum for decades. The government exhausted samples of Captain Rogers's blood trying to replicate the properties of the serum during the mid-1940s. They simply did not have the technology to understand how the serum worked. Who’s to say they won’t try again.” Jemma said pointedly.

“It would be very easy to try again with fresh samples. I could talk to Colonel Rhodes, but I doubt the US government confiscated genetic samples.” Coulson shut his eyes for a moment, most likely adding another thing to the mental list of things they had to track down.

“I doubt there were any samples to confiscate.” Hydra would have taken great care with those.
“Thankfully, in the past no one considered the possibility that the properties of the serum could be transferable via semen or passed on to offspring.”

*Nor were they thinking of anyone actually consuming semen containing super soldier serum.* Jemma kept that thought to herself. She had no desire to discuss the oral sexual habits of her current boss, especially because said boss happened to be her best friend’s father.

“And now we have evidence in the form of May, Stark, and Dr. Triplett about the transferable nature of the super soldier serum. All three would now qualify for the index with their enhanced healing and strength capabilities, if we still had such a thing.” Coulson stated. “And Ward had these same antibodies in his system. I am positive May is not the source because she never trusted him enough to engage in any unprotected activity that could lead to transference.”

“It’s in your system as well.” He didn’t look surprised at her revelation. “At higher levels actually.” Much higher than she expected, actually.

“Because we trust each other enough not to use condoms and we are both going to pretend I didn’t tell you that.” She is almost certain that that she saw the director blushing. She did overhear one or
two jokes about Tony arranging a birthday orgy for his boyfriend with Director Coulson and May as the guests of honor. She didn’t have confirmation of that actually occurring, but Coulson’s levels would be consistent with direct exposure from patient zero.

“We are trying to keep our personal relationship, private.” *You’re doing a bloody awful job of that,* Simmons thought to herself.

“I have no desire for more details. I already know more about Captain Rogers post transformation sexual history than I ever wanted to know.” She pulled up a holographic Venn diagram, tracing everyone’s exposure. It was one of the things she worked on after kicking Agent Romanoff out of her lab.

“Wait how did Fitz get exposed?” Coulson asked, making Simmons realize that she forgot to take him off the graph.

Tony didn’t want anyone else to know that Peggy Carter is his mother. She wasn’t even supposed to tell Stephanie that he knew because he overheard her discussing the situation with Colonel Rhodes. (She was allowed to tell Colonel Rhodes, but hadn’t done so because Tony doesn’t pay her enough.) *Now it’s going to be obvious that Fitz had the antibody in his system from his father, who happen to have the antibody in his system long before he started sleeping with patient zero.* Jemma fought to keep her panic from showing.

“Did Fitz have sex with Ward?” Okay, she wasn’t expecting Coulson to suggest that.

“No. No. No. Not at all not possible. No.” She stated emphatically. Because Leo had a higher percentage of antibodies in his system than Ward, but she’s not going to point that out until she had to.

“A good scientist doesn’t dismiss anything automatically out a hand. It would make sense. It would explain why Fitz refused to see what Ward really was until it was almost too late.” She felt the same way before she read the diaries. Fitz realized he was in love with her before the ocean, even before they knew the Ward truth.

“That’s not what I’m doing. I’m fully willing to acknowledge that Leo had a slight hero worship type of crush on Ward before we knew who he really was, but Ward was supposedly in love with Skye. Except, we know he wasn’t in love with Skye.” *He was manipulating all of us,* a dark voice said in her head. He never cared about any of us at all.
“I think his cold, dark heart is incapable of such emotions.” Jemma said out loud instead.

“And Ward slept with May to keep her distracted. If Ward could manipulate May, a seasoned specialist, then it is entirely possible he could have targeted Fitz, especially because of who he is.” Coulson countered.

She didn’t even consider that possibility. She was sure Hydra would love to get their hands on their creation again. A sexual relationship would be a good way to manipulate him.

“He has yet to indicate that he knows anything about Fitz’s true paternity, but he was always a very good liar.” Quite excellent really.

“Leo was exposed because one of his grandparents also had this in his or her system.” She confessed because she couldn’t take anymore speculation on Fitz’s sexual habits, although she did include a little bit of misdirection.

_Leo did not have sex with Ward_, she told herself again. Meanwhile, a niggling voice in her head argued otherwise. Leo was fascinated with him from their first encounter. Leo wouldn’t shut up about him after their mission together in Russia. Then there was the constant flirting and the fact that she was convinced that Leo was actually in love with Ward before she knew about his feelings for her. You can love more than one person at the same time. Could something have happened between the two men and Leo just didn’t feel comfortable telling her? And what did it say about her that she was more upset about him not telling her about sleeping with Ward than it actually happening?

It’s not entirely impossible. There was hardly anything in Leo’s diary after Skye almost died. Nothing about Vegas or anything that followed. There were only a few words about killing someone for the first time after the fall of SHIELD, his fear of losing her during the chaos, and about how much he loved her. But at the same time, there was so much missing from those pages.

If Ward knew who Leo really was, then it’s highly probable that Ward targeted him specifically. She is certain that Hydra would love to get a specimen sample to start working on a new Stark heir to indoctrinate because there’s no way they’re going to get Leo to the dark side. What better way to get a sample then by arranging for a sexual encounter and stealing the condom afterwards? That’s essentially how Leo came into being in the first place. Except, Stark was knocked out specifically for his sperm.

“I’m not surprised.” Coulson’s words brought her back to the present. “Maria Stark did not exist on paper until six months before the wedding and there are rumors that she was supposed to be on the index.” Thankfully, he doesn’t expect the truth.
“Also, Howard Stark worked on Project Rebirth, he could’ve had the same accidental exposure as Peggy Carter. Although, if it were Stark Senior, we’re going to have to test half of California and most of Manhattan for the antibody. It wasn’t like they used condoms like we do now back then.”

“Maternal side.” She acknowledged reluctantly. “Regardless, it’s just a trace amount in Ward system, which would be the same amount in the system of anyone Stark-- Tony had a single encounter with minus a physical barrier. Not enough to do anything except for a slight immune boost, theoretically. I’m only concerned because it’s Ward. Although, we should probably screen Ms. Potts while she’s in town because of the type of relationship they had.”

“That may be best. Although I would not elaborate on the details.”

“I do not plan to. I’m only saying this much so you will stop pushing this ridiculous theory about Leo sleeping with Ward.” Liar. “Now if you excuse me I’m going to go through any files related to what SHIELD and hopefully not Hydra scientists did to Captain Rogers after he was rescued.” Maybe there would be some obvious Hydra agents among those involved.

“I also suggest talking to Captain Rogers about that time. He may remember something not in the files. A lot of my memories from that time are hazy.” Probably because you were working on the Tahiti project. But she does not say that out loud.

“Of course sir,” she said as she gathered her things to leave.

“You know, an encounter between Fitz and Ward, it’s not ridiculous. Even if it makes us uncomfortable, sometimes the easiest solution is the right one. I much prefer this explanation then Hydra experimenting with Captain America’s genetic materials and using Grant Ward as their guinea pig.” And she did too deep down, because in her mind she was imagining Hydra making an army of baby Fitzs with sperm stolen by Ward. The only one who would be making baby Fitzs was her.

Okay, that came out wrong.

“Maybe you’re right, but I am not going to ask Leo if he slept with Ward.” She said with a sigh, coming out of denial slightly. “We can barely talk to each other right now and asking a question like that would just make it worse. I don’t want to mention Ward in his presence ever again, not after what he did to us. If what you’re proposing did happened, that just makes everything worse.” Especially if her worst-case scenario for why came true.
“It doesn’t have to be you.” Coulson offered. “In a perfect world, it wouldn’t be because you are too close to everyone involved. Unfortunately, due to the sensitive nature of the situation, you’re the only one that Captain Rogers trusts outside of Dr. Triplett to figure this out and Stephanie is busy.” She was interviewing others for the position of base doctor so she can avoid telling her brother that he’s her brother. Although they really did need another physician.

“I understand. Reading in one of the lab techs in on the situation is too risky. I'll find another way to get the answer.” One that doesn’t involve asking entirely too personal questions of someone who she cares about deeply. Hopefully she can find the answers in her samples.

“I’m sure you will think of something. Come talk to me once you go over Captain Rogers’ files.” Simmons knows that she’s being dismissed and honestly she’s glad to be out of there.

“It would be so much easier if Ward would actually tell us what we wanted to know.” She mumbled under breath and yet Coulson still heard her. She wonders if he’s already developing improved senses.

“That’s something I’ll talk with Natasha about. She’s the only one I want going anywhere near Vault D. We are too close to the situation. At least that’s what Dr. Suarez believes and she may be right. At this point, I’m considering returning him to military custody. He doesn’t want to tell us anything and Dr. Suarez believes it would be healthier emotionally for us all if he wasn’t here. We can’t move on with him here.” She didn’t bother to respond, just left his office before another uncomfortable conversation could occur.

As she started going through the Captain Rogers’ files, she decided that Dr. Suarez may be right. If she found out Ward did sleep with Leo for nefarious purposes, she would strangle him with her bare hands.

Xxxx

Sometimes JARVIS was dismayed by the fact that many people saw him as merely a more advanced Siri, but he did not let this bother him. Mr. Stark along with his son and partner considered him a person, maybe that was what was important. (Skye and Dr. Simmons were also included on this list.) His most crucial purpose was to protect his family and people underestimating him allowed him to do this. He is slightly disappointed that Agent Romanoff was one of those who underestimated him. He was not surprised when the agent snuck into the lab after Dr. Simmons left, just disappointed that she broke into his system to obtain the Natalie List Von Strucker file and upload the information to a USB device shaped like a watch.
“If you try to delete the information, I will alert Mister Stark and send him the information immediately.” JARVIS threatened. This resulted in the agent cursing under her breath in Russian. Apparently, he was a piece of shit box of circuits that she would like to burn.

“I have already made copies of the pertinent information and have uploaded them to multiple off-site servers.” The agent responded to JARVIS’ words with more Russian cursing. JARVIS wonders how seriously he should take her threat to dismantle him with a hacksaw.

“Considering how he reacted to discovering that Maria Stark was not his biological mom, I don’t think it best that he find out he has a half-sister out there who happens to be the soon-to-be ex-wife of the head of Hydra.” The agent argued.

What’s left unsaid is Natalie List is most likely the allegedly deceased Natasha Stark. The fact that JARVIS found a code in the SHIELD DNA database that would block Natalie’s sample from matching to her biological brother, father, or nephew should such a search take place made that highly probable. He was sure that whoever created that the coding assumed no one would ever discover that it existed. But they underestimated JARVIS and in turn, Tony Stark. His creator did not get his five doctorates on money and good looks alone. Now that he has compared her sample to that of Maria Stark, he knows for certain Natalie List is Natasha Stark.

“I assume that you are aware of Mr. Stark’s true maternity?” JARVIS asked deciding not to address the Natasha Stark situation.

“I was with Steve when he overheard Stark’s soliloquy and he decided it was best for me to not be there.” JARVIS was unaware of that because he did not have access to the cameras in that section the building, at least not until yesterday afternoon. Now he did because his primary function is to protect the Stark family. Peggy Carter Jones is now part of that family. “Steve felt it was too private for me to be there.”

“It was.” JARVIS replied.

“I will tell Stark eventually about Natalie, once we know who she really is. But do you really want him to find out by accident again? It’s better to just let me take the information off the server for now.”

“Natalie List is the biological daughter of Howard and Maria Stark.” JARVIS answered simply.
“Is she really Natasha Stark or was she a creation of the Lullaby Program? We know the lead scientist on the program was Hydra. Could he have stolen their DNA for purposes unknown?”

“Given her age and the results of the DNA analysis, there is a 99.8% probability that Natalie List and Natasha Stark are the same person.” JARVIS replied nonplussed.

“But that still leaves the question of who Natalie List is now. Is she just the unaware second wife of Wolfgang von Strucker or is she an active Hydra agent? If she is an active Hydra agent, was it her choice or has she been brainwashed since the beginning? Does it even matter considering she was kidnapped from her parents moments after birth?”

“You identify with her because you believe that you share a similar circumstance?”

“I feel that it’s better to have all the answers before your boss storms off and blows something up. If she’s not active Hydra, it changes how we approach the situation. We need to go in with as much background as possible?” Part of JARVIS believes that she’s stalling while another part believes that getting more information is most prudent before notifying his boss.

“How do you expect to get these answers?” JARVIS asked.

“Agent West.”

“What about the captive?” He asked not wanting to say the individual’s name.

“Not all Hydra agents know each other. So far, it seems that he was not aware of Fitz-Stark’s true paternity. He’s also being extremely uncooperative. I’m almost tempted to let Stark go down there and help with the interrogation. If anyone could get him to speak, it would be an angry father holding a gauntlet.”

Considering what JARVIS read in Leo’s therapy journal this morning, he was also tempted to allow such a thing to happen. However, his boss does not need any more blood on his hands. It is situations like these when JARVIS regrets that he is programmed not to kill.

"In exchange for keeping the Natalie situation from my boss for the next month, I want you to
increase your efforts to interrogate the prisoner. Extract as much information as you can so he can be removed from the premises."

"I’m planning to do that anyway."

"Good. You have one month to find out who Natalie List really is before I inform Mister Stark."

This would not be the first time JARVIS kept a secret to protect his boss because protecting his family was always his main priority.

To be continued.
Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. See, a timelier update. Although, it wouldn’t be that hard to beat three months.

Also a reminder: what happened in Bahrain was slightly different in this universe. The showdown in the warehouse did happen, but May was already in the country working deep cover as the wife of a high-ranking Foreign Service officer because things fell apart with Andrew earlier (in this universe he found out about Russia) and she ended up married to someone else.

Also, Fitz’s paternity is obviously different in this universe. Fitz’s father on the actual show is his stepfather in this universe. He’s still a bastard although he left even earlier.

Also, I know some people felt that JARVIS went too far last time. He did. However, he also knows that Tony is not in the best place right now. We’re not even dealing with gray and off-white morality here, but orange and blue.

“You owe me shoes for agreeing to do this interview.” Pepper demanded halfway joking.

“Jimmy Choo or Manolo Blahnik?” Tony asked still surprised she had agreed to do this at all. This reaffirmed his belief that Pepper was too good for him, especially after what he put her through.

“Louis Vuitton.” Pepper said seriously. Considering he actually owns a $10,000 pair by that designer himself maybe Pepper was not as okay with this as he assumed.

“It’s not going to be that bad. Jane pre-approved the questions. The worst thing Everhart is going to ask me is if I’m dating a former prostitute.” Tony joked, sort of. That question was on there probably because Everhart thought he could say no.

“I don’t find that reassuring.” Pepper sighed.
“It’s fine. Stevie bear gave me permission to answer that question honestly.” Pepper checked the minibar at that point, only to find it was devoid of alcohol. Between recent familial revelations and his assistant’s tendency to drink her problems away, Tony decided on a minibar that mostly contains chocolate and brownies (unfortunately not the good brownies). Stevie bear has a sweet tooth.

“What is the honest answer to that question?” Pepper was giving him her death glare. “It has to be something other than no, if you needed Steve’s permission to answer honestly.”

"It was the Great Depression and he was an orphan trying to make his way. Cuddle Bunny has a history of liaisons with rich assholes, but it's fine. None of which were my dad by the way, thank god.” Because Steve making out with his biological mom was Tony’s limit on Oedipus subtexts.

Pepper reached forward and helped herself to the contents of the chocolate minibar.

“I can't believe I'm saying this, but don't answer that honestly.” Pepper consumed a piece of dark chocolate.

“I am OK with using an exclusive about how I am handling the end of our romantic relationship to keep people from discovering the truth about Leo before it’s safe. I just wish you’d chosen someone else. Christine Everhart hates you, which is the reason why you owe me $10,000 shoes for this.” With that, Pepper ate her second piece of chocolate. It’s going to be a very long day.

“I wish I could choose somebody else.” Tony said grabbing a brownie for himself. “But I'm willing to let her attempt to humiliate me on live television because Leo’s safety matters more.” He’s sure that Stephanie would say that’s the primary characteristic of parenthood, if he wasn’t avoiding her.

"I know. I'm just worried that this may blow up spectacularly."

Honestly, so was he.

"It's not the worst thing I've done, not even this year.” How we broke up still has the top spot.

“She's not going to take things too far because she needs me to keep her niece/pseudo-daughter safe. Love for your children makes for strange bedfellows sometimes.” Tony revealed trying to reassure
her. “Everhart did provide you with enough hard evidence to remove Baker from the board?”

“Mountains of it. It’s why we are having lunch with Katie at her house before the interview. Well, more than lunch, it’s more of an afternoon strategizing session. We also have a 2 o’clock with the lawyers.” He shouldn’t be surprised since Katie considers DC home because of her wife.

Tony was halfway tempted to text Steve to see if he set this up, especially because of the private location. His boyfriend had been trying really hard to get Tony to confront his Peggy Carter issues head-on, but he’s not ready yet (which was why he snuck out of the base this morning at 4 AM). Steve would still be unaware if he hadn’t overheard the wrong conversation. Tony was not ready for this. It’s why he had JARVIS reschedule Stephanie’s job interviews for this week and why he disappeared at 4 AM. It’s also why they’re slowly making their way back to the Arlington house. At least the underground base area would be safe for Leo.

"Sorry, I can’t make it. I already have plans with Rhodey." Tony lied. Rhodey is another person he’s been avoiding. He told Simmons that she could tell Rhodey that he knew, but she said that he doesn’t pay her enough. Considering that she’s avoiding his son, who is her best friend, it was silly of him to think that she would take on his major emotional confrontations.

"No, you don’t. You’ve been avoiding him for two days." It was also silly of him to think that Pepper wouldn’t know that.

"I have not. We spent all day yesterday together watching movies." And not talking about the Peggy Carter truth.

"With your son and your boyfriend there to act as buffers." Dammit, Pepper knew him too well.

"I really don’t feel like having lunch with anybody from the board." That was his go to excuse in situations like this.

"Tough, you owe me." He really did.

"That is what the shoes are for." Tony responded.

"You dumped me for Captain America." Pepper shot back, but she wasn’t really malicious about it.
"It’s more like I was too stupid to ask you for a polyamorous relationship. Steve is much more adventurous than I ever thought, as evidenced by his post transformation sexual history. We are never going to be able to locate the two chorus girls or that French prostitute." Thankfully somebody put their condom rations to good use.

"I would’ve said no. Also, what are you talking about?"

So, it turns out the properties that make Steve super are sexually transmitted and although I didn’t sleep with you after I slept with Steve, they were already in my system because Maria is not my mom. Also, we now know why I managed to survive the Palladium poisoning for about six more months than my models initially indicated. By the way, I'm going to have to take you to the Playground for a super soldier STD test today. You probably have some antibodies in your system because it's not like we used condoms after we were sure the Palladium was out of my system.

“Obviously, after what happened, it is a hard no. But I think there may have been a magical window before I screwed up.” He said as a way to distract her from her earlier question. When talking about infidelity was the preferable subject, you know things are bad.

"You fell in love with someone else. That’s not a screw up. It just happened." Pepper said sadly.

"Not telling you, that’s where I screwed up." Not just about Steve, but a lot of things.

"You usually don’t tell your girlfriend that you’re having feelings for someone else."

"Marie is not my biological mom." Okay, he did not mean to blurt that out, but he needed to talk to somebody about it other than Steve, and he’s afraid to talk to Rhodey right now.

"Okay, I wasn’t expecting for you to tell me that." That’s when Pepper grabbed another truffle. He has never seen her eat this much chocolate before, in one sitting.

"I wasn’t expecting to find it out 2 ½ days ago either." He leaned back into the seat of the limo as he took a drink of water, wishing it was something harder.

"The diaries?" She asked.
"Yes, actually." All the dirty details about Project Lullaby were there. If Tony had paid closer attention to the post miscarriage ramblings, he would have seen the situation for what it was, but it was just too painful to read that stuff. Now he realizes how much his parents really wanted him and it changed things.

“But I didn’t realize what I read until I overheard the wrong conversation between my best friend and my… Stephanie.” He almost said sister, but he wasn’t ready to reveal the truth to anyone else, not until he talked with Katie and he didn’t want that to be today or ever really.

"Is that why you’re avoiding Rhodey?" Yes.

"Stephanie discovered the truth while she was trying to find Leo’s mother, his real mother, because the woman who raised him was not her.” Well, not entirely, but Pepper didn’t need to know that. “Instead, she found out I can’t possibly be Maria Stark’s child. It was in black and white in the diaries that mom couldn’t have any more children after the miscarriage. I just kind of took for granted that I was their miracle baby.” Which was true in the same way that Steve is a miracle. Really, Tony should know that only miracles were science related.

"Adoption?"

"Surrogacy." Tony clarified.

"Babylonian tradition?" Tony snorted at the question. Considering his parents share girlfriends, maybe that was the plan before Howard decided on a designer baby.

"First instance of in vitro fertilization," With genetic modification possibly. It's a little hard to tell things to all the ‘Steve juice’ in his system. Tony never thought his oral fixation would give him actual superpowers and yet here they are. Simmons is looking forward to testing him.

"I shouldn’t be surprised. Do you know who your biological mother is?" Pepper asked grasping his hand in support.

"Yes, the Howard diaries only refer to her as Katie, but…"
"I’ll cancel lunch." Pepper already had her phone out.

"No, there’s no point. We need to discuss Baker. I want him off my board." And in vault E, but Tony knows he can’t have everything.

"I can talk to her on the phone when you’re having ridiculously loud sex with your boyfriend tonight."

"I’m not that much of a bastard. That’s why I bought you the house next to mine." Tony joked.

“How are you feeling about this?” Like none of it’s real.

“A lot of things. At first, I was angry. Then, I was some mixture of scared, terrified, and nauseous. Now, I am slightly less scared because Steve knows the truth and didn’t dump my ass.” Tony was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Dating your ex-girlfriend’s biological son had to be weird. Steve kept telling him that he cared about him too much to let something like that get in the way of their relationship. Tony sincerely hoped he’s not lying.

“Why were you worried about Steve breaking up with you because Marie is not your biological mom?” Pepper asked. He might as well go all in with this because he really never wants to have this discussion, again. He will, of course, but he would like to limit the number of times he does.

“So Stephanie’s my sister.”

“Donor egg?” Pepper asked.

“Or lab fuck up. We’re not sure, but maybe Kate might know.” Was she supposed to be his mom?

“And you’re not ready to ask that question?” Pepper rubbed her temple with her hand.

“Is anybody really?”

"I need a fucking drink." Instead, she grabbed what appeared to be acetaminophen out of her purse.
"So do I, but I haven’t taken one yet."

“I’m proud that you haven’t.” She squeezed his hand in support before politely canceling lunch and handling the whole thing in a conference call. Apparently, his presence was required next week for the ousting of Baker. That meant a much too fancy dinner in Manhattan the night before the board meeting where the ousting was to take place. Pepper got him a week’s reprieve. He was getting her a whole basket full of $10,000 shoes.

Xxx

Taking part in a long-term undercover assignment was a strange experience for Skye. She’d done short assignments since joining SHIELD, but nothing this long. They might be here for weeks with her living and working as Skyler Carter. It was strange having to be another person all the time or at least whenever they were outside of the walls of the hotel room that she was sharing with Trip. (She tried hard not to think about how easy this was for Ward to do.)

The weird part was acting like a newlywed couple. Or maybe the weird part was the fact that acting like a newly married couple didn’t seem weird at all; it was almost natural. The relationship was the easiest part of the charade for her. The kissing and handholding felt really good actually. The constant lying and trying to keep her cover straight was harder. She almost screwed up this afternoon during the art class their target taught by calling Trip by his real name instead of his cover name.

May warned her before this all began that it was easy to lose yourself in long-term undercover assignments which was essentially why May hated them. Apparently, it was what led to May’s first marriage and why she absolutely despises undercover assignments now. It’s also probably the reason why May wasn’t married anymore, not that she knew much more than that.

Skye wondered if May knew that she actually liked kissing Trip. At least twice in the last two days Skye looked for excuses to kiss him in public.

May was leaving tomorrow and that scared her because with her SO there Skye couldn’t completely lose herself in Skyler Carter. However, it was so easy to be the Carters when it was just her and Trip. It was easy to forget that her fake date was really an attempt to learn more about Rebecca/Janice than what she could find from the obviously fake background that SHIELD created for her. Seriously, Skye had done a better one for Leo in a half an hour.

‘You’re not going on a date.’ She reminded herself as she chose the appropriate undergarments for such an evening. ‘You’re keeping Janice out her house so that May can wire it making it easier to keep an eye on the former Tahiti patient.’ The berating didn’t work because she held a black bra and
scrap of fabric panty set in her hands. She’s not going to ask why Sharon had put that in her bag when she helped Skye pack.

“Trip is your partner. He’s also not interested in you in that way because he’s really, really gay. He is mourning his bastard ex-boyfriend, who was just murdered by Hydra.” That got her to pick up the cotton days of the week pair that Simmons picked up for her after her daring escape from Ward and the Bus when all she really had was literally the clothes on her back. Skye really didn’t want to think about Simmons at all. It was too messy.

Because she had at least a half an hour before they had to leave, she decided to check the special email box that she created for Fitz to talk to her during this assignment. Coulson knew nothing about it. Fitz needed someone to talk to because things were still messy.

She wasn’t expecting to see three letters from Simmons in her inbox, especially three letters that were essentially apologies. She had only given that address to Fitz. She knew he needed someone to talk to about everything and there was a letter waiting from him written to Skyler. There was a decent chance Simmons was absolutely wasted when writing her letters, but at least Simmons was talking to her.

She emailed Fitz back because she actually had an idea what to say to him. Simmons not so much.

*Hi Fitz.*

*I’m happy to hear from you. I’m actually happy to hear from anybody besides your sort of ex-girlfriend. Did you give her my new email address? She drunk emailed me last night. At least, I think she was drunk. Everybody heard about what happened at the party for your dad’s boyfriend.*

*I’m not sure if we are relocating here permanently, but I don’t think I’m going to be back home for a while. At least that’s what I got from listening in on mom’s phone call with dad this morning. Although, if you need me, I can come back sooner. I’m sure dad would okay it. Your dad is his boss and paying for most of the bills. If it’s for you, I think your dad would do anything. It must be nice having a father like that.*

*Trip is doing well here. He’s even made a new friend. Or rather an old friend who thinks that she’s a new friend because she doesn’t remember her visit to Tahiti.*

*Actually, finding her is the reason why we’re going to be here a little while. We’re having dinner*
tonight. We also found an apartment in her complex, but were only going to go three month lease for now. I don’t know if I can take three months here, but dad believes I can.

How are things with your dad? Is the parental bonding still going okay or is he being extremely overprotective? I have imagined what it would be like to find my biological parents and I always thought it would be messy, but I still wanted to find them.

But hey, you got a billionaire superhero for a dad and you know who for your stepdad because we all know where their relationship is going. Also, at least he didn’t consciously massacre an entire village. That’s better than what I know.

I know you’re sad about Trista leaving, but she has to do important things and you’re doing well. I don’t think you need her like you did earlier. You’re doing much better than I would have done in the same situation.

Write me back when you get a chance. With mom going back home, I need someone else to talk to.

PS: Should I write to your ex? She’s says she’s sorry for leaving the way she did, but I don’t even know where to begin with her. Are you talking to each other again?

Xxx

"Are you ready to go?" She heard Trip ask from the hallway. He must’ve arrived while she was writing.

"I think so. Does this outfit say hot night at the club?" She got up and twirled around for him. She was wearing mostly leather. She was glad they had wardrobe help again. Getting the fake geek outfits for the cybertek invasion was hard.

"Yes, although I wish I said dinner and drinks. I hate going to clubs on assignment. Or at all."

"Mack doesn’t seem like a club guy either. So I doubt he’d dragged you to any when you were dating."
"Robin did." Trip answered.

“Which explains the dislike.” Skye mumbled, just as May walked into the room through the connecting door. She was already dressed to break into a house.

“Well I see somebody is ready for breaking and entering.” Skye quipped.

“Just be sure to keep her out for at least two hours.” May told them both.

“You are aware that I grew up in a house of spies. We’ll be fine.” Trip reassured the agent as he put a hand on Skye’s back. Skye was not sure.

xxxxxxx

“I don’t want you to go.” Fitz said as he watched Trista, now Agent West, pack up her room at the Playground. It wasn’t that difficult, because she had only been staying there for the last week. However, she did have a bag full of new gadgets and high tech communications devices to take to her new apartment.

“And I don’t want you to get killed by Hydra. So I’m doing what I can to make sure that doesn’t happen. I can protect you better by keeping an eye on Natalie List, than just as your bodyguard. Stark can get another bodyguard. In fact, I think he is already in the process of making you one.” That was true. He and Tony have been working on perfecting the Iron Legion. His dad wants to look at the old Ultron security project for ideas, but Fitz thinks they’re better off looking at the Life Model Decoy research instead, especially because two of the technicians who worked on the program were still on base.

“But he can’t get someone else in Hydra.” Maybe someday they could, if his research is successful.

“You don’t know -- that she’s Hydra.” Fitz argued or at least he tried to. It would be so much easier to argue his point if he wasn’t stuttering so much. He wished the speech therapy would work faster, but it was hard to have more than two sessions a week when everything had to be so secretive for his protection.

“Sharon sees things your way, but I don’t. Natalie was married to the head of Hydra for 10 years. You don’t sleep besides somebody every night and not know who they really are.”
“I didn’t.” Fitz mumbled out. He’s surprised brain let that slip.

“Grant Ward doesn’t count.” How did she know that?

“We didn’t—want-we-bugger.” Fitz gave up on trying to defend himself. She knew too much.

“I’m sure some of that was involved.” Trista joked darkly.

“Once before—I didn’t know who he was.” Trista smirked at him. “Not that—oral things. I don’t want to—talk.” He wanted to hide under a pillow except the bedding was already bagged up to be washed.

“You need to talk to somebody about what happened. It doesn’t have to be me but someone, even your therapist.” Trista placed an arm around him.

“How did you know?” Fitz asked.

“I’ve been watching the interrogation of the prisoner in Vault D in case I see something that Agent Romanoff does not.” Fitz adores her for not saying the man’s name. “He thinks we are lying about Tony being your dad because you were very close and that was something you never told him. Romanoff asked me to check because you’ve been avoiding her.” No kidding. She knew that Tony was his father before Fitz even made it to the Academy. He lost years of knowing his real dad because of her.

"Fuck!" Fitz mumbled.

"I’m sure some of that happened as well.” Trista quipped.

Mostly figuratively. Fitz replied mentally because he wasn’t sure he could say it out loud without stuttering. He was too angry to really get anything out.

"On the bright side, chances are he didn’t know about Obadiah and Hydra’s attempts to hide you and eventually use you against Tony."
“Or he’s lying.” Fitz manages to get out.

“Apparently he’s really good at that and that is part of the reason why the situation is not the same. You were a just a mark to him. He was actively trying to keep the truth from you. I’m not sure if Wolfgang von Strucker did the same. Besides, there’s a big difference between six months with a colleague and 10 years with someone you live with. You have to be good to keep up the charade for that long and I’m not sure if von Strucker was that good.” Fitz felt like there was something he wasn’t being told.

“Pierce was,” Fitz suggested.

“No, he wasn’t. He just killed a lot of people to cover it up, possibly including your grandparents. They even found the body of his maid in the Anacostia River a couple of weeks ago,” Trista explained. “Actually, that wasn’t the first time that a member of his staff was found in the river, but it was Anacostia so it was easy for Pierce to cover it up.”

“I don’t want you to --to get hurt.” I don’t want to find your body in the river.

“I’ve been an agent for a very long time.” Trista tried to reassure him. It did not help at all.

“You also haven’t been an agent for…” He holds up three fingers.

“It’s 2 actually and that’s only on a technicality. I’ve been Peggy Carter’s personal guard for the last two years. I think that still counts.” Fitz nodded his head in agreement.

“Sharon is going to be close by posing as my live in girlfriend. It will be fine.” That doesn’t make him feel any better, especially now that he knows Sharon is his cousin. “Mostly fine. I’m not looking forward to pretending to date my BFF who doesn’t know I wish it was more than an act.” Fitz is glad he only ever had to play Skye’s boyfriend.

“Be safe.” Don’t get killed.

“I will be.” That’s when he hugs her. “And I’ll figure out a way for Sharon to get non-mission related letters to you.”
When she told Director Coulson that she would find a way to verify if Leo was responsible for Ward’s exposure to the super soldier antibodies, she didn’t think that it would be by overhearing a conversation between Trista and Leo. Yet here she was learning what she needed by accident due to the pair talking with the door cracked. You would really think two SHIELD agents would know better.

Simmons had spent the day running numerous tests on Captain Rogers. It was a highly effective method to avoid Fitz despite the fact he spent some time in the lab with his occupational therapist. They stopped for the day so the first Avenger could watch his boyfriend’s interview and actually eat something. Unfortunately, that meant it was time for her to actually do what she had been tasked to do. She ended up making Fitz a deli platter and brownies because as she learned during their Academy days, food bribery worked best on him (it also allowed her to avoid actually talking to Leo for a little longer). When the food was ready and artfully arranged on the tray, she went to get Leo (because it couldn’t be put off any longer and Sam literally pushed her toward Leo’s room).

Not wanting to accidentally walk in on Leo making out with Trista (or Mack), she decided to listen to their conversation before barging into the room. The good news was Trista was not interested in Leo as anything other than a friend. She readily acknowledged that he needed more friends. Real friends, the type that would go into Hydra to protect you. It was an option she’d considered before Stark Industries felt like a better plan.

The second thing she learned was Ward was not a friend. Surprisingly, not just in a ‘stabbed them in the back and abandoned them in the Gulf of Mexico’ way, but rather the ‘Ward performed fellatio on Fitz and that’s why he has super soldier antibodies in his bloodstream’ way.

Bloody hell!

Coulson was right and she was really not happy he was right. She wanted to convince JARVIS to let her borrow one of Tony’s suits so she could have the pleasure of choking Ward with her armored covered hands. If she told Tony about this, he would let her do whatever she wanted with the armor. Regrettably, she won’t tell him because Leo is her friend and Tony doesn’t need to know this.

Actually, what she really wants to do is vomit because Ward using Fitz like that just makes her sick. She was also close to having a mild panic attack regarding the possibility that Hydra might have more Stark semen in their possession. But she couldn’t do either because Trista and Fitz walked out at that moment and she had to pretend she didn’t know. It was time to put Natasha’s lying lessons to the test.
“What are you doing out here?” Trista asked.

“Dr. Stark is going to be on TV in a few minutes. Steve decided that we are watching in the living room. Clint made popcorn and I made your favorite sandwich with just a hint of pesto aioli.” He smiled at that. She missed seeing him smile.

“Are they taking bets on if Stark will announce that he’s starting a private spy agency in his basement?” Trista asked.

“Possibly. My Russian is rusty.” She responded.

“Leo, you should go supervise. I have a couple of things I need to pick up from wardrobe. I’m getting camera glasses and lock pick hairpins.” Considering the look that Leo was giving her, Simmons was almost felt like that was an excuse to leave the two alone so they could talk.

She wasn’t sure if she was grateful or not. It was fine when she snuck into his room to confess everything she wished she could tell him during daylight hours, but was afraid to. It was easy because he was sleeping. Right now the silence was awkward and of course the room happened to be on the other side of the base, which meant a really long walk. She was also sure that they took the wrong turn somewhere. They passed the same room three times in the last five minutes.

She hated that they’re not talking to each other. She hated that he didn’t tell her about Ward. She was not going to judge him for that. He wasn’t the first person to make a bad judgment call and sleep with the bastard. Also, it wasn’t like he was the only one who accidentally slept with a Hydra member. Apparently, Agent Hunter was married to one. There was also the information, she found out about her first recently, which she never told Fitz about. Of course that was because they were just starting to become friends at the time, but he deserved better. Maybe it was time to start getting honest again.

"I know we are not telling each other things like we used to because there’s so much going on. You have a new dad and apparently my father has been screwing trollops at clean energy conferences for as long as your father has been attending clean energy conferences.” She tells him, because maybe it’s best to start this with sharing something he doesn’t know.

"Divorce?"

"Yes, but that’s not what I wanted to talk about. I am bloody awful at this.” He grabs her hand. She
can do this. They can get back to something.

"Yes." Or maybe not.

"You’re supposed to say, ‘No, you’re not’.” She shakes her head.

“Trouble with words."

"Did I ever tell you why Weaver had to keep me from getting expelled during my first semester at the Academy?” She knows she never did, but maybe he found out some other way. They were spies after all.

"You blew up a lab." Of course, that part made its way around campus. Thankfully, that wasn’t the scandalous part.

"After I kicked my lab partner in the genitalia. Of course this is before they decided I would only work with you, despite being worried about you overtaking my GPA at the time." Being lab partners was what forced them to get over their initial rivalry and realize that they were two sides of the same coin.

"Why?"

“I was young and stupid, with multiple doctorates and no real experience with boys. I didn’t even have any friends. Not yet because I think you still kind of hated me.”

“Never hate you.” That was good.

“Anyway, Jordan was good looking and paid attention to me. Obviously, I was curious and ultimately decided he was the perfect partner for my first sexual encounter. Shortly afterward I found out I had chlamydia. It turned out he was sleeping with a girl in every single one of his classes just so he could pass. Unfortunately, I had lab right after I found out which is why deliberately destroyed our work before I could think better of it. Needless to say, I miscalculated.” By miscalculated she meant that she wasn’t expecting it to blow up until she was safely out of the room. Thankfully, she only broke an arm.
"You created a new..." Fitz made an exploding motion with his hands.

"I think accidentally creating a new explosive compound was the only reason why I wasn’t expelled. Also, according to the most recent intelligence reports, Jordan was also Hydra, so at least I now know why he was allowed to stay after he got out of the burn unit.” At that moment, Fitz looks at her and he knows that she knows. But neither one is going to say anything.

"I know we are not as close as we were because there are so many new things between us right now, but if someone did that to you, I would have no trouble blowing them up for you.” She almost wondered if she could blow Ward up before anybody found out. No, she needed to know if Ward turned over any of Fitz’s genetic material to Hydra.

“I know,” was Fitz's only response.

"Come on, let’s see what your father accidentally says on television. I have $50 on him saying how much he loves you.” Fitz smiled at that. Maybe things would be okay, eventually.

"Okay."

Xxxx

“Why did Tony dump you?” Pepper’s not even surprised when Christine goes for the jugular within the first 30 seconds. They did agree that Everhart could ask why they broke up, but that wording was not approved.

“It was mutual.” Tony responded before she could. At least that’s the public line. “Although, if there were any actual dumping Pepper would have been the one initiating it.” Because you fell in love with someone else. “How could I ever be good enough for her?” You really do have self-esteem issues. “Pepper pot is a goddess among women.”

She smiled at him as she tried to come up with something to say other than, ‘We became too busy for each other’ or ‘We stopped talking to one another’. ‘Tony fell in love with someone else’ wasn’t something she wanted to disclose. ‘He loved helping people more than me’ made her sound selfish even if it was accurate. She definitely wasn’t sharing that he wanted to be a dad and I never want to be a mom. ‘We are better off as friends because as soon as we started having sex with each other we stopped talking to one another as friends and I like my friend Tony more than my boyfriend Tony’ is more information then she wants release of the public.
“Some relationships work better being purely platonic and I think that’s the case with us.” Pepper put forward finally deciding on the wording. The fact that it was true was a plus.

Today, Tony definitely needed his friend Pepper. They didn’t go drinking after Tony's revelation, not alcohol anyway. There may have been a stop for milkshakes which allowed Pepper to successfully delay Tony’s meeting with his birth mother by a week. The dinner was now set to take place the day before the next board meeting and Steve would be there because Tony needed all the emotional support possible.

“I believe we are better off being friends and business partners.” They already had their strategy to oust and replace Baker, thanks to some very interesting lines in Howard’s will that nobody thought to challenge. And why would anybody when they thought the object of the bequeathal was lost in Antarctica.

“Rumor has it that he left you for a member of the Avengers?” Everhart asked almost smirking. The next question was supposed to be about upcoming Stark industry projects. Instead, this interview had to go right into the gutter.

Tony told her that Christine knew about Steve. However, PR team made it clear that Steve Roger’s name was to stay entirely out of this. Of course, the PR department apparently forgot to close a loophole, but Tony was ready.

“They think I’m sleeping with Black Widow again which is stupid.” Tony rolled his eyes as he took a sip of his water. Pepper does as well just to keep from laughing. “Men and women can be friends without sleeping with one another. I mean, why does everyone assume that if a woman is on a superhero team, she must be screwing someone else on the team. That’s just ridiculously misogynistic, especially because I’m bisexual. Maybe Bruce bear is the love of my life.” It’s a small miracle Pepper doesn’t start choking.

“That was a joke by the way. I’m so sorry Grayson that your Science Bro fanfiction storylines are not going to come true. Although congratulations on guessing the truth before the great Hydra data dump.”

“You’re still browsing ‘Freakingcool’ for Avengers fanfiction aren't you?” Pepper asked.

“Only during really dull board meetings.” Tony joked before starting to list all of his favorite fanfiction writers and kindly telling them that their ship is not happening (except for the IronCap people). Everhart looks annoyed realizing that her interview has already been hijacked. Pepper is certain that it’s on the tip of her tongue to make some snide comment about Tony being paired with
so many different Avengers because he is slutty member of the team, but she doesn’t. Pepper is almost relieved that Everhart doesn’t go there because she would hate to get arrested for punching a reporter on international television.

“So far, you have specifically stated that you’re not sleeping with every Avenger except Captain America. Which leads me to another rumor that you left Ms. Potts for a man. Is there any truth to that?” Really, Pepper should just be happy that she didn’t ask if the two things were connected.

“Look, romantic relationships fall apart for a lot of reasons. It probably didn’t help that I am an overbearing manchild with extreme daddy issues. But really, let’s stop with the narrative of me leaving Pepper because that’s not what happened.” That’s exactly what did happen or at least some variation of it, but we are never ever going to acknowledge that publicly.

"So you’re not seeing someone new?” Everhart asked more directly.

“Actually, I am. Pepper and I haven’t been together since April and it’s almost August. I think etiquette rules allow me to be dating someone else.” He said turning to Pepper.

“You’ve never followed rules etiquette or otherwise. Why start now.” She took another drink of her water. Half of her wished it was vodka.

“See, Pepper is cool with me dating already and her opinion is the only one that matters.” Tony remarked.

“I’m sure the opinion of your new girlfriend also matters. Is she okay with you still being close friends with your ex-girlfriend?” Everhart asked. Once again, Pepper was really angry with Tony’s decision to have an interview with the devil herself despite the necessity of it.

“He actually encourages it. He wants us to be one big happy family.” The fact that she spent a lot of this afternoon texting Steve after the maternity confession is a testament to that. Also, she may have threatened to cut off Steve’s balls if he left Tony, just because Peggy Carter is his biological mom.

“So the rumors about you leaving Ms. Potts for a man are true?” Everhart asked with a ‘got you’ look on her face.

“You’re running a ‘Tony Stark just came out as gay’ tickler under this interview aren’t you?” Tony
asked. She looked over to see her new assistant, Kevin, nodding his head. “Which is stupid because I just told you in this interview three minutes ago that I’m bisexual. I’ve been the first openly LGTB CEO of a tech firm since January 1992.” That was when Tiberius Stone threw Tony under a bus the month after his parents were murdered without outing himself, bastard. “Sorry to steal your thunder, Tim.”

“Who is Tim? Is he your boyfriend?” Is Everhart really playing dumb right now or is she actively trying to get an ‘I am dating Captain America’ soundbite?

“Just a colleague. You’ll understand that reference eventually. Most of us in the tech field already do.” Pepper knows which CEO she will be getting a phone call from later.

“Really this shouldn’t be a shock to anybody who has ever googled Tony Stark sex tape. It is definitely not a shock to your boss. Hey, Tiberius, did you ever get rid of that Mickey Mouse tattoo on your ass?”

“I would personally love to know the answer to that question, but your feed was cut off right around when you said 'sex tape.'” Everhart said taking her earpiece out.

"Of course, Tiberius would cut my feed before I could return the favor of what he did to me. I told you I should’ve said that towards the beginning of the interview.” Pepper was starting to realize that what happened was more planned out than she thought it was. Tony owed her a $10,000 handbag filled with $10,000 shoes for this.

"Unfortunately, we are getting reports of a small bomb going off at Georgetown Medical Center. There are rumors of SHIELD involvement. For once, the network has decided to choose real news over sensationalism." Everhart almost looked shocked that they were doing so.

“Not really. You’re going to report that it was SHIELD attacking the hospital not Hydra.” Tony corrected.

"My boss doesn’t see it that way.” Everhart explained with a frown. Pepper is surprised to see that.

"Your bosses are morons.” Tony removed his own microphone as he spoke.

"I will not confirm that statement due to the fact I’m still wearing a microphone.” Everhart said just
as Tony’s cell started to ring which resulted in him getting a very dubious look from the reporter in front of them.

"It’s not like it went off during the interview.” He replied pulling the phone from his jacket pocket.

“It’s Stephanie.” Tony said as he ended the call without answering.

"You’re going to have to talk to her some time.” Pepper glared at him.

“We’ll talk in the limo.”

"Who is Stephanie?” Everhart asked.

"Dr. Stephanie Triplett nee Carter-Jones is our new head of medical research, who is working on a program at Georgetown. It was one of the things we were going to discuss if you did not automatically ask a question about Tony sleeping with other people.” Pepper responded having already disconnected her own microphone. When you’ve done as many interviews as she had, it wasn’t that difficult.

“I assume were done here.” Pepper said already leaving the set.

“It’s been fun.” Tony was already putting back on his ‘Don’t fuck with me’ shades. “Tell Alana that I love the card and I hope she’s having fun with Nanny Morris.” Tony said as his phone began to ring and was once again silenced. It was probably Stephanie again.

“He let her color on the refrigerator last night.” Pepper couldn’t help but smirk at Everhart.

“Better than the carpets. I’ll see you in three months when I bring the boyfriend by.” With that they were both out the door.

"I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy for Hydra intervention before.” Tony tells her as Kevin gets them out of the building as fast as possible. They were well out of Everhart listening distance by that point.
"I told you it was going to be awful and you’re going to have to do this again with Steve in three months." Pepper lamented as they walked outside the doors of the studio to see the town car waiting.

"Unless it’s safe enough for people to know about you know what and considering Hydra just bombed a hospital less than a 15 minute drive away, I don’t think that’s going to happen." Tony said just as his phone rang again. It was the Stephanie ring tone.

"If she’s calling you back for the third time within five minutes, it’s probably important."

"She’s just doing job interviews for the new doctor for Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division at… Shit! She decided to do the interviews at Georgetown instead of in the Arlington offices.” That’s when Pepper answered the phone for Tony and put it on speaker. They were also just sliding into the car at that point.

"Stephanie, please tell me if whatever is going down requires Avenger level intervention?" Tony said, not even letting Stephanie speak.

“IT makes perfect sense that the person labelled as the ‘Good Brother’ on Dr. Triplett’s phone is an Avenger." The speaker was a male voice that she didn’t recognize.

"Who are you?” And apparently neither does Tony.

"Dr. Campbell. I was her last interview of the day. The one who helped her escape when we were ambushed by SHIELD." That’s not good.

"They were not really SHIELD. They were likely Hydra in SHIELD clothing. Where is Stephanie? Why are you calling me on her phone?"

"She told me to call you before she lost consciousness."

To be continued
Chapter 22: I Wish I Were in Montana

Back in February when Dr. Lincoln Campbell decided to apply to Georgetown University Medical Center for a position paid by Stark Industries, he thought it would be a good place to start fresh. It was a bonus that they were offering to pay off all his college loans. With his family situation being what it was, it was a necessity for any job he accepted.

Even his AA sponsor felt that starting over away from triggers would be a good thing. Lincoln really did want to leave the bad memories of Chicago far behind, which is why every hospital that he applied to was at least four hours away. Of course his now ex-girlfriend Alisha didn’t want him to apply to this particular job because of Stark Industries’ ties to SHIELD and the Avengers Initiative. Despite her doubts, he put the application in any way believing Stark Industries was just funding the position.

Months went by and Lincoln never heard anything back regarding that particular application. Due to the massive amount of college loans that would be due any moment, he accepted a position in Cincinnati. But Monday, seven weeks after he’d relocated, he did finally heard back from the HR department at Stark Industries. The Cincinnati job was so awful that he was tempted to walk into the one of the bars were near his apartment, so he decided to take the interview. He was getting an all-expenses-paid trip to DC out of it, at the very least.

It really was a nice trip with first class airfare and accommodations at the Pentagon City Ritz-Carlton. Those perks alone made him happy he agreed to the interview and even more interested in this job.

The interview seemed to go well. Dr. Triplett, at least on the surface, appeared a lot nicer than his boss in Cincinnati. She did less screaming and seemed to know what she was talking about, even if she looked almost his age. Her CV said that she was born in 1970, but that almost felt like a misprint. However, considering she’s one of the top neuroscientists in the country 1970 seemed almost too young.

During his hour-long interview, Lincoln was pleasantly surprised to find out the position at
Georgetown would be less research oriented than the original position description. Dr. Triplett told him this was the case because she only came on board at the end of April and decided to use the applicants for the medical research position he applied for originally to fill another position that needed to be filled sooner. That was fine with him because the responsibilities for the new position seemed more interesting.

Of course, his enthusiasm quickly evaporated when he was asked about his year of absence from medical school which hadn’t even occurred when the preceding question was if he was comfortable treating patients with superpowers. His bad answers on this question are the reason why he ended up in Cincinnati. Every time he answered honestly or as honest as he could, he would get an email within a couple of days letting him know that another candidate was chosen. Cincinnati was the only place that did not ask that question.

“I get that it’s hard to answer that question. I understand. I had to defer my residency for a year. Thankfully, once everything was resolved, I was able to come back and start over where I left off.” Doctor Triplett explained.

“Family issues?” Lincoln asked.

“Betty Ford.” He wasn’t expecting that. In addition to reading through her CV, he also did a thorough Google search. That wasn’t there, not even a hint. Then again, there was very little about her private life at all. “That was the best place back then and I had a rich godfather who did not want me to end up like him.” The doctor explained.

“Oh,” was the only thing Lincoln could say to that.

“Now, I’m in charge of this program. So you really don’t have to be ashamed because we all have a past, but the past does not dictate the future. The future is a blank slate.” Dr. Triplett said wisely, which is the only reason why he answered the way he did next.

“I did a year-long rehabilitation program in China for alcoholism.” This was mostly true, he thinks. He’s not exactly sure if Afterlife is in China, but probably.

“I didn’t have the best family. I was also in a toxic relationship with my then girlfriend and somehow she was stupid enough to get in the car with me when I was completely wasted and angry. We hit a tree and that was my wake-up call.” There’s no point of mentioning the near dying and only being saved by a miracle that he could not explain to the person in front of him. There’s no way that she would understand.
“Rock bottom for me was my godfather, Howard, telling me point blank that I needed help so I wouldn’t end up an absentee drunk parent like him. If you knew how bad Howard was to his son when he was drinking, you would understand why the comparison would make me decide to spend four months at Betty Ford.”

“I have that type of family. I get it.” Lincoln said before the interview continued.

Dr. Triplett’s positive attitude at the end of the interview made Lincoln wonder if he should look at apartments in the DC Metro before his flight left tomorrow afternoon. Of course, those plans went on hold when a small bomb went off in the parking garage as Dr. Triplett walked him back to his car.

The garage was now filled with construction dust and smoke alarms blared in the background. Thankfully, they were clear of the blast zone. Although Lincoln wished they were in an aboveground parking lot instead of a below one.

During the chaos, a group of five people with SHIELD fatigues attacked them. He wasn’t surprised considering all the stories he’d heard. SHIELD went after people with powers and now that everyone knew that they’re really a branch of Hydra, of course they would be picking him up the moment he stepped foot in DC. This was where the agency was exposed after all, less than four months ago.

How did they know he was an Inhuman? Did he screw up? Then it came to him. Two weeks ago during an emergency, the defibrillator he was using malfunctioned and he did what he had to do to save a life, the only way he could. Did somebody say something or see something? Did they now know that he was special? Was this a trap? He was asked about his opinions about treating patients with powers earlier.

Of course, when the five individuals in SHIELD fatigues completely ignored him and went straight for Dr. Triplett, he was really confused. Lincoln quickly figured out why Dr. Triplett was the target when she threw a guy twice her size into a Mercedes.

Obviously, Lincoln had something in common with Dr. Triplett, other than their history of alcoholism. She was special, possibly an Inhuman like him because a normal woman the doctor’s size would have difficulty throwing a 300 pound man across the room. Or at the very least she wouldn’t do it as if she were tossing a stuffed animal.

He should probably run away. That would be the sensible thing to do except Dr. Triplett had been
nice to him. She genuinely cared about people, including a child that she got better for. That was something his mother never did for him. So Lincoln didn’t run instead he shocked SHIELD agent number two to the ground as Stephanie knocked out agent three. They took care of agents four and five, together. Although that was after agent five shot Stephanie twice.

He wanted to take her out to the medics waiting outside at this point. The bomb had to cause some damage unless it was just a distraction and it probably was. However, he realized that wasn’t an option when the next group of SHIELD agent started to attack. That was when Dr. Triplett took a device out of her work purse that unlocked and started the BMW that they were standing beside.

“This is not your car.” Lincoln said as he got into the driver seat as quickly as possible. Considering he was being attacked, he was still going to get in regardless.

"I’m sure Tony will pay them back for proving that his universal car hacking program works. Just drive.” He did - right through a group of SHIELD agents. He didn’t stop until he found himself in a nearly abandoned parking lot on the other side of the Potomac. It looked like they weren’t being followed at that point. They probably got really lost in Georgetown; he would’ve too if Dr. Triplett’s phone hadn’t given him turn by turn directions.

"There’s a first aid kit in my purse." Dr. Triplett told him. It was the first thing she had said in the last 15 minutes. Her voice was very labored, which was probably why she stayed quiet despite the fact he got lost twice.

"I’d doubt that there will be anything in there that can handle this. We need to keep you from bleeding out.” Her white doctor’s jacket was mostly crimson at this point.

"In my family, that’s the major purpose of a personal first-aid kit.” He looked in the large tote bag like purse and underneath the first layer, there was a compact first-aid kit that did have the basics to close up the wound. This was not something a normal person would have. Add to it that there was a legit -looking passport with a different name, several hundred dollars and a similar amount in euros, an antique looking flip phone, and 10 untraceable Visa debit cards in there as well made him pretty sure Dr. Triplett was not a normal person.

"I should take you to a hospital." He said again. All he wants is to go back to Cincinnati right now. What the hell did he get involved in?

"Not with Hydra chasing us. They already bombed one hospital today, there’s no need for a second one.”
"That was SHIELD." Lincoln argued.

"My mom worked for SHIELD for nearly 40 years; she helped found SHIELD.” That explained why she has what is essentially a go bag on her person. “That wasn’t SHIELD, that’s what was created after she left because she refused to put me on the Index.” Lincoln knew what the Index was. It was something he was told to avoid. The fact that her mother resigned rather than put her own child on the list was more than what his parents would have done. His mom hated him because he got the gene and she didn’t.

"Those people with eagles on their chests were not SHIELD. That was fucking Hydra. And I’ve been to the Hydra Hilton before and there’s no way in hell I’m going back." He wanted to tell himself that she might be hallucinating or going into shock, but he knew better.

"You need a blood transfusion.” He said, arguing with her again. “I think there’s more blood on you then in you at this point.” She should be dead at this point - a normal person probably would have been.

"No, I really don’t. Remember you’re applying to a program that is trying to make bloodless surgery the norm. We just need to get my volume up once you’ve stopped the bleeding and I am sure my hiding place has IV fluids.”

"I think I would feel somewhat better if you were somewhere with an operating theater and hemoglobin." He remarked.

"I’m not exactly compatible with normal blood anyway. My body will start to heal itself very quickly. No surgery required. I won’t even need stitches by morning. Just stop the bleeding. Well stop the bleeding more than the towel in the backseat can." As soon as she pulled the towel away, the wound started to bleed again.

"Because you’re special?" He asked as he used the scissors in the kit to cut away her blouse. It was the best option not to aggravate her wounds.

“Yes.” She answered with a scream because he accidentally touched the affected area. Thank God they were in DC where people don’t pay attention. There was a lot of screaming as he tended to her wounds, which is to be expected when you do something like this without even general anesthesia. There was a pill in the kit that Stephanie took that would take at least 10 minutes to kick in and they didn’t have that much time.
“That hurts.” She explained as he cleaned and closed the first one.

“One more to go.” Lincoln told her as he moved to the second bullet wound. This one wasn’t as clean as last time.

“You’re also special? I saw you electrocute evil bad guy number two without a Taser. Fuck!” She exclaimed as he removed the bullet.

“You’re delirious from the pain and blood loss. Although, now I can at least dress your wounds.” He said trying to clean the wounds with a mini bottle of peroxide from the cars own first-aid kit and the giant roll of paper towels from the back. He’s happy that they stole a car with stuff that he can actually use.

“Plus, the little purple pill I just took. But that doesn’t mean that I just imagined what I saw. I mean my body is already trying to help close bullet wounds without stitches.” She said pointing to her arm. Apparently she was hit the third time, but that bullet just grazed her and it was already healed to the point where it did not need his attention.

“So was it alien interference or experiment gone wrong?” She asked.

*Both, if Afterlife legend is to be believed*, but Lincoln decided not to tell her that.

"I don’t know," he lied. "So how did you end up with powers that made SHIELD … I mean Hydra want you so badly?"

“I told you my mom started SHIELD. Because of her occupation, she was accidentally exposed to an experimental super soldier serum and then was exposed to mass levels of radiation, a few years later. Now, all her kids have the ability to recover from a broken arm in a week. Also, my almost 60-year-old brother looks 30. And I almost look the same age as my kid.” That explained the picture on her desk that he saw earlier. He originally thought that was her brother.

"Can they all throw a 300 pound man into a Mercedes?" He said as he decided that gauze and lots of medical tape would be better than him trying to do stitches on someone with accelerated healing abilities. They needed to spend as little time here as possible anyway.

"That’s just me. We all have different dads.” She said it like that explained everything, which it
would, if her father was Inhuman. He’d heard of a few cases of powers being triggered by other catalysts. “Well, Marcy and Tyler have the same dad, but Tony and I do not. Wow, I think the drugs from my bag are awesome.”

“And I think you’re going to pass out any moment.” He said, throwing her a T-shirt that he found in the back of the car. He was thankful for that even if the shirt said, ‘Proud parent of a TC Williams High honor student’.

“Probably.” The doctor said with a yawn as she pulled off phone out of her bag. “Call the number labeled the Good Brother. He’s going to tell you where to go. Just listen.”

He was going to ask her who exactly was the ‘Good Brother’, but the Doctor was out cold. Thankfully, she was breathing with a good pulse.

Looking at the cell phone in his hands, Lincoln considered calling 911 and giving them directions to find Dr. Triplett and having Gordon get him the hell out of there. It’s the best option because they’re going to be after you too, he rationalized. But when you take an oath to be a doctor, you promise to do no harm, so he dialed the number that she told him to.

The last person he expected to hear was Tony Stark answer, but this day had been extremely bizarre from the beginning. How much more shocking was it that he was actually interviewed for a job by the secret sister of said owner of the company that he wanted to work for? After he explained what happened, the GPS in the car was taken over by an AI name JARVIS. An hour and 45 minutes later, Lincoln thought about calling Gordon again because the safe place the directions led him to was a bar just across the West Virginia state line. This cannot be right.

"I’m a little concerned that your brother thinks a bar is a safe place for you to hide out.” He said out loud regardless of the fact that Dr. Triplett is still unconscious or rather sleeping. Reaching for her wrist, he finds her pulse is strong.

"My sobriety is well known. The last place the legions of Hydra would look for me probably would be a bar.” The doctor responded groggily. Lincoln was surprised she was alert at all. “Besides, they have awesome cheese fries here. The tempura green beans aren’t bad either." How fast had she metabolized the pill she took earlier? Also, if she metabolized the drugs that fast, how much alcohol was she drinking during the bad old days?

"I’m not at the hanging out at bars for the food stage of my recovery yet.” He quipped. “Also, considering you just woke up from losing consciousness due to blood loss, I don’t think you’re up for the cheese fries."
"You’re right, the bacon wrapped filet mignon would probably be better. Or maybe the sliders? Red meat would be really good right now. I need to build my iron back up." Lincoln just looked at her as if she was completely crazy.

"When I escaped from being held hostage for six months in the middle of Appalachia as a teenager, the first thing I had them do once I was safe was to stop for a Whopper." He can believe that. Both parts actually. His ex was right. He should’ve never applied for this job.

"You promptly threw it up, didn’t you?" Lincoln asked.

“Yes. Granted, I was pregnant at the time." The doctor explained.

"There’s a story there."

"And I’ll tell it to you if you don’t ask to be sent off somewhere far away from this craziness as soon as we get somewhere safe. We won’t be here long." With that the doctor got out of the car.

He followed her into the bar, or rather he helped her walk into the bar because enhanced healing or not, it’s hard to move after being shot multiple times. He wanted to sit at the table closest to the door of the practically empty bar/restaurant, but Dr. Triplett insisted that they sit in one of the booths towards the back. Maybe it was so people wouldn’t see the fact that there was a few blood splotches on her pants.

"Obviously, the job interviews went badly," their waitress said as she handed over menus to the pair. She obviously knew the doctor.

"It had its moments. However, Dr. Campbell here seems promising. I brought him to meet the boss. He’ll also just take the food menu." That was probably for the best because a drink would be good right now.

“Do you have any recommendations?” He asked. They probably had to keep up appearances until the doctor’s brother arrived.

"With the day you’re obviously having, you need to get the triple bacon cheeseburger.” The waitress
"That’s fine for both of us Gretchen. Do you want the fries or the onion rings?” She inquired turning to Lincoln acting like she wasn’t just shot a couple of hours ago.

‘I don’t care. Just pick something,’ was nearly uttered, but instead he just shrugged.

“One of each, then. And I’d love an Apple pie milkshake or possibly two.”

“Sure, anything else?” Gretchen asked.

"Add some tempura green beans and the mozzarella sticks. Also, can I get it downstairs?” The doctor asked.

“I’m sure the director will allow it just this once.”

Director? What is their waitress talking about? He doubted this place had a basement.

"You might want to buckle up, Sugar pie.” Gretchen said before departing. That’s when he noticed Dr. Triplett buckling a seatbelt. Why does a bar booth have seatbelts? Are they afraid the drunks will fall over without a belt? It became very apparent to Lincoln why the booth had seatbelts when it started decending. What the fuck was going on? Then he remembered that Dr. Triplett’s mom was a spy for 40 years.

"Where are we going?" He asked.

"The current headquarters of Stark Industries Humanitarian, International Education, and Lifesaving Division. No job interview is complete without meeting your boss’s boss." Dr. Triplett explained.

"You know if you take out that ‘I’ for Industries that still spells SHIELD?” He can’t believe he’s being led to what is probably a SHIELD safe house or what’s left of one considering everything that’s happened since April.
“Yes, but we are now privately funded and don’t believe in putting people on a registry. Honestly, Tony just wanted to be able to honor his star-spangled boy toy.” Lincoln thinks that may have been a joke. There’s no way Iron Man is dating Captain America?

“Is this still part of a job interview because I’m really confused?” And have been since the bomb went off a couple of hours ago.

"So, I may not have been entirely honest with what position you were really being interviewed for. With SHIELD officially gone, there still needs to be a shield for people like me." By the look that she was giving him he knew that Dr. Triplett really meant ‘us’. "This is shield." Dr. Triplett said just as the booth elevator touchdown. They were met by a very pregnant woman in a lab coat who was ordering various lackeys to get Doctor Triplett on a gurney.

"Isabel, you’re supposed to be on bed rest." Dr. Triplett said as she was laid down on the gurney.

"Well, you should’ve thought of that before you got shot. Let’s get her into the infirmary now.” Isabella yelled and the others followed her instructions including Lincoln, who walked behind them. “Right now, I’m the only medical doctor we have to treat you because you can’t treat yourself. What the hell happened out there? Who are you? I assume you are with her?” She said turning to Lincoln.

"Lucky for you, my new friend over here is an actual medical doctor, if he sticks around."

"I am for now." He said before explaining what happened as succinctly as possible. He needed to know what this place was especially if he was going to live with an I told you so from his ex-girlfriend for the rest of eternity.

Xxxx

“Stephanie’s here and has been rushed into one of the exam rooms.” Steve related to Tony over a secure line. He exhaled in relief. He wanted to be at the Playground when Stephanie arrived. However, he had an errand to run.

“Is she okay?” Tony asked.

“She was shot twice and lost a lot of blood, but…”
“Stephanie is a super soldier enforced tank.” Tony added.

“Apparently. I had no idea, the serum was transferable.”

“I’m sure no one would think to check back then. It’s okay. Your lack of condom use is apparently the only reason I survived the Palladium poisoning long enough to create a workaround.” Tony joked, even if there appeared to be some truth to it.

“You know I never had sex with Peggy.”

“No, but you did have sex with my sister’s dad,” which is weird, but not a deal breaker. “He transferred the serum properties to his wives and kids. Said second wife just happened to be my biological mom.” Also they now know why Jackie and Desiree’s mom survived stage IV cancer for two years longer than her doctor thought she would during the cancer dark ages of the early 1960s. “If the Army or any other government entity ever found out about this, they’d try to turn you into a stud to make a whole army of super soldiers.” Something like that could still have been happening considering Hydra’s return to the world.

“Agent Carter-Jones car has entered the security gate of the complex.” JARVIS interrupts.

“It looks like the evil sister has shown up. I’ll talk to you later.”

“I still think you should have asked Agent West or even Ms. Potts come get her. You’re still mad at her and this could go badly with you being by yourself.” Steve said worriedly.

“You can at least call her Virginia. Ms. Potts was her mother and that woman was absolutely terrifying.” Pepper’s mom never really liked him at all. She died a few months before the Afghanistan incident. He didn’t even want to think of what would’ve happened if she had been alive while they were dating or during the break up fiasco. He would probably be dead now.

“Bye-bye Muffin,” Tony said, ending the call. Moments later Marcy was opening her front door with gun in hand. Really he should expect nothing less from his family.

“You know I thought that I would be sneaking into your house soon.” She said putting the weapon
away and shutting the door. “So, I assume you finally broke the encryption on the necklace hard drive?”

“No, I haven’t actually tried for a few days. Other things have come up like your nephew nearly getting kidnapped by Hydra a couple weeks ago and your sister almost getting kidnapped by Hydra, again, about...” Tony pauses to check his watch. “About 2 ½ hours ago.”

"Georgetown?" Marcy asked taking the seat next to him.

“You’re just as smart as when we were kids. Were you there?” Tony asked.

"Sharon is. I have to keep up my cover at DOS due to the fact we think a few ambassadors or even higher in the organization are in bed with Hydra." That part doesn’t surprise him. The President is absolutely awful at picking political appointees. His first VP did try to kill him. “I wouldn’t mind letting Sharon take point, if she was still talking to me. I didn’t even know Stephanie was involved.”

“Well, finding out you lost your dream guy to your cousin that you didn’t even know you had because your aunt didn’t tell you, can cause some animosity to build up." Tony quipped.

"She has issues with guys who sleep with other people’s boyfriends or girlfriends for that matter." Marcy responded. "Why are you here?"

"To take you to Stephanie."

"And?"

"And maybe yell at you a little." Tony remarked.

“I gave you the letter. It’s not my fault you never read it. It’s not my fault you believed Obadiah.” Tony has been thinking similar thoughts over the last few days, but he wasn’t going to tell her that.

“You could have tried a little harder.” Tony told her on the verge of yelling. “You’ve known me since childhood. You know what a stubborn asshole I am. I could’ve used you, at least, calling once a week to ask if I read the letter.”
“Because I do know you is the reason why I assumed you had read it and didn’t want to have anything to do with us,” Marcy said, pretending to look hurt. The key word was pretending.

"Bullshit." Tony however was genuinely screaming. “I love my son. I love my sister, Stephanie, anyway. You, I kind of want to smack upside the head because I’ve lost so much time because of the choices you made. You knew about Leo, but didn’t say anything. You knew that Peggy was my mom and didn’t tell me. You knew that you were my family and you let me drown in the toxic mess that was Obadiah for no reason whatsoever.”

“It was safer for everyone involved that the truth stayed a secret.” Marcy said in her own defense. Tony wanted to laugh and scream simultaneously.

"For who?” Tony asked bitterly. “Because I was unaware that I was working with a snake, I almost died in a cave in Afghanistan unaware that I have a son because Obadiah had him hidden away with his Hydra mommy as his own personal insurance policy.”

“For Leo.”

"I don’t think being raised by Hydra did him any favors. His stepfather was a real piece of work." Leo hadn’t said much about his stepfather, but his personnel file and things he heard from Simmons were enough to make Tony want to use the lethal weapons on him. Tony was pretty sure Leo did not break his arm falling off his bike when he was six. Nor did he get a black eye running into a door when he was seven.

"I know how bad things were. That’s why had the guy taken care of when Leo was young.” Leo was eight years old when the guy ‘disappeared’, right after Leo spent a week in the hospital for ‘a run in with a bully at school’. Tony is now 100% sure that was a euphemism for abusive father that likes to beat the shit out of you. And ‘taken care of’ was obviously a euphemism for killing the guy. “And that was before I knew about the Hydra affiliation. I just thought he was a drunken bastard that liked to hit little kids.”

"Thinking your dad abandoned you didn’t make things better.” 90% of the time, Tony was convinced that Leo believed that he would disappear at any moment because of what happened before.

“I have to argue against that. I feel like Taylor is better off thinking that Daniel left us, then remembering a guy with a metal arm murdered him in front of us like I do.” So Peggy’s first husband
was murdered and not a coward. Again, he’s not surprised.

“And this completely explains where your family gets the idea that lying to protect people is perfectly okay,” Tony said sarcastically.

"Obadiah murdered Jarvis because he tried to convince you to diversify and stop designing weapons. After that incident, I decided it was best to keep everything as close hold as possible."

“I already knew about that. It was in the SHIELD data dump right along with the existence of mission report December 16, 1991. Still not an excuse to keep the truth to yourself.” Tony told her.

“Tony, this is more than just you and your son. It’s even more than mom. Hydra needed Stark Industries to keep making weapons to keep the world unstable. How far would they have gone to keep you as their puppet?”

“Well, they had Steve’s brainwashed best friend murder my parents. Thank God, I haven’t come across the rumored video file of that yet. So I’d say pretty far. But here’s the thing Marcy, up until about four months ago, you and pretty much the rest of the intelligence community had no idea that Hydra was more than an historical footnote. So again, I call bullshit.”

“I knew Obadiah was a bastard.”

“Do you want a cookie?” Tony told her sarcastically.

“You would’ve been next.” Marcy replied.

"I was next or did you forget the quality time I spent at the Afghanistan Hilton?” Tony asked angrily.

“I remember. I was out there looking for you.” Tony didn’t know that.

“That’s great, it’s still doesn’t change a thing.” It makes him a little less angry, but he’s not going to tell her that.
“Knowing could’ve put Leo in even more danger.” Tony scoffed at Marcy’s words.

“Or it would have made it easier for me to keep him safe. Stop giving me excuses because that’s all that they are. I don’t want to hear your excuses or your explanations for lying for so long because there’s nothing you can say that will fix things. Nothing. You lied. The end.”

"So does that mean your son knows his true origins, or are you feeding him pretty lies like Stephanie has done for 28 years?" Marcy shot back.

"Well between attempted kidnapping by Hydra and attempted murder by Hydra along with the actual Hydra murder of the woman who raised him, I felt it was best to wait a little while." Liar.

"Well, telling you right after your parents died in a car accident wasn’t exactly the best time to tell you that you really did have a kid. Obadiah was a fucking bastard and it probably wasn’t an accident?" Marcy scoffed sarcastically.

“The difference between us is you’re thinking about what’s easier for you and I’m thinking about what’s easier for Leo." Tony said justifying his choice.

"Really? Don’t assume how much a person can take. They may end up surprising you.” Tony rolled his eyes at her words.

"You just told me that your brother still thinks your dad just abandoned you. I would really love to know how you got rid of that traumatic memory for him. Actually, your whole family thinks that pretty lie is the truth. Aunt Peggy really sold it."

“You have no idea what really happened back then.”

“Probably not. Then again, your three other siblings also still believe that Stephanie ran away with her boyfriend 28 years ago instead of the truth."

“Again, I call bullshit.”
“Where’s my sister?” Marcy asked avoiding his earlier statement. “That has to be while you’re here, unless you really do want to have this out now.”

"I think we’ve been doing a good job already.” That’s when Marcy glared at him.

"Well, she’s not in Hydra custody again."

“I gathered that from what you said earlier. Where is she?” Marcy asked concerned.

"I can’t tell you.” Marcy glared at him. “But, I can take you there."

"Black bag protocol?” Marcy asked just as the door opened and an ICER rifle went off. Thankfully, Agent Mack, a.k.a. his bodyguard was shooting for Marcy.

"Nice shot."

"After listening to that for the last 10 minutes, I kind of wish I had a shotgun or maybe an ax,” the agent said from behind him. "I never really liked Trip’s Aunt Marcy."

"Which explains the desire for a deadlier weapon." Tony quipped as they managed to make their way to the car carrying his unconscious sibling.

It has to say something about DC that not one of Marcy’s neighbors came to see what was happening. The ICER shot had to make some noise. Maybe they were all out. It was for the best. PR Jane would kill him if pictures of him carrying an unconscious woman went up on Twitter.

“Is Marcy actually your sister?” Agent McKenzie asked once they were in the car. Tony cursed himself for saying way too much during his ‘private conversation’ with Marcy. Maybe for a moment he forgot that Agent McKenzie was on comms. His teamwork skills were still questionable.

"Yes, which means you’re trying to get with your ex-boyfriend’s cousin, who you happen to be closer in age to his father than him." Tony is not an idiot. He can see the triangle forming. He likes
Agent McKenzie. However, despite the fact it makes him a total hypocrite, Tony does not want his son dating someone just four years younger than he himself is.

“First, I’m not trying to get with anybody right now, considering my boyfriend was murdered during Hydra’s hostile takeover.” That explains why he’s so willing to fight the good fight. “Even if I were, the age difference should not count against me because your boyfriend is only six months younger than your father and you were 14 when Fitz was conceived. Also, apparently that conception was more than just drunk sex in the back of Lola with the condom busting.” Kidnapping from the back of Lola, but Tony is not going to tell him that.

“Technically, I think I was 15 when he was born.” Tony deflected. He was really good at that sort of thing.

"You know I was listening the entire time." Agent McKenzie said with an annoyed glare.

"I know."

"I haven’t known Turbo that long, but I know he doesn’t like being lied to." But apparently you know my son long enough to give him cute little nicknames.

"Because the last guy that lied to him, dumped him into the Gulf of Mexico." And Tony really, really wants to use the lethal weapons from the suit on him, but can’t because they needed as much Hydra intel as possible.

"Exactly." The agent said as the car became quiet again. That’s when Tony decided it was the perfect time to text Steve for an update about Stephanie.

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Stephanie hated kidnappings. She’d gone through so many of them that she’s lost count. Or maybe it’s just that only one incident really mattered. Regardless, she absolutely hated the experience. Now that she knew that Hydra was behind her stay with the nursery group, she had no desire to be back in their care.

Of course, if it wasn’t for Dr. Campbell she would be. He even made sure she didn’t bleed out in the car. Thank God she was a Carter-Jones and figured out how to put together a decent first aid/gunshot
wound survival kit. It became a staple of her “work bag” since Hydra came out of the shadows. It got her patched well enough to reach the Playground.

Stephanie opened her eyes to see that she was really in one of the Playground medical rooms. She really should talk to Tony about painting this place something other than old SSR colors. Speaking of Tony, he was sitting in the chair next to her bed.

“So, I think Steve made me eat your bacon cheeseburger. Sorry, he gets worried when I don’t eat, but Nurse Simmons might allow you to have a Jell-O cup.” She heard Tony say from beside her. He looked exhausted, then again, it was nearly 3 AM.

“I don’t think I actually ordered a bacon cheeseburger. That’s just the code to get down here. Do we actually have a nurse named Simmons or have you already given your assistant a ridiculous nickname?” Stephanie said groggily.

“Ridiculous nickname. Well, obviously, the anesthesia has worn off.” Tony quipped.

“I’m pretty sure I’m not going to be allowed to eat for a few more hours. Also, even if I could I never want to eat Jell-O again. That is what they gave me to eat after I got out of Hydra hell last time.

“You really have to stop getting kidnapped by fake SHIELD agents.” Tony said seriously.

“Technically, I did not actually get kidnapped this time.”

“Because apparently having superpowers is a prerequisite for any Avenger physician and Dr. Lincoln saved your ass.”

“He told you?”

“It’s DC. There are two cameras on every corner. I need to make you a suit.” Fuck! She really didn’t want that all over YouTube. “Don’t worry, Sharon took care of the file and one of the quadruplets is taking care of the employee orientation. No one else knows about his extra qualifications.” She exhaled. That gave her one less thing to worry about.
“This is why Sharon’s my favorite cousin/pseudo-niece.”

“Probably because she is nowhere near as much of a brat as your regular niece. BTW, Sharon moved Tyler and the children into a CIA safe house because we don’t have a lot of secure SHIELD facilities to spare.” Tony explained. She was happy about that. It was too dangerous right now for the kids.

“It’s a family house. We have a few.” Part of her wonders if she should’ve gone to the one in Montana until Desiree’s ex-husband manages to actually weed out Hydra once and for all.

“I shouldn’t be that surprised with our family.” Tony sighed, but she quickly noticed Tony’s use of the inclusive ‘our’. That confirmed what she’s suspected since Sharon told her that Tony was hiding in her mom’s room.

“So you know that you are part Carter?” She asked cautiously.

“I found out a couple of days ago. You tipped off JARVIS when you put your code in incorrectly. I watched your entire conversation with Rhodey in my house from my tablet.” She shouldn’t be surprised.

“You will definitely fit in to a family of spies.” More than Tyler did. At least Stephanie did the occasional medical contract for SHIELD pre-implosion. She also gave birth to a specialist. That should count for something.

“Possibly. I currently have Marcy in Vault E. FYI, I did arrange for Mack to sneak up and shoot her with an ICER.” That made her snicker, even though it shouldn’t have.

“Why are you laughing?” Tony asked.

“The fact that Mack finally took a shot at Marcy. He never really liked her that much. She was absolutely awful to Mack when he was dating Antoine.”

“I got that impression. What happened there?”
“She felt Mack was just using Antoine as a rebound after his marriage imploded because his daughter died of SIDS.” ‘I think my sister is bi phobic, but I’m not going to say that out loud.’

“Now I feel like even more of a jackass for what I said earlier. At least I agreed to let him put Marcy in the trunk.” Stephanie is not even surprised that his words.

“I don’t think you are. Seriously, you couldn’t bring her to the Playground conscious?”

“Coulson ordered it. She’s just here for a conversation.” Stephanie responds with the glare.

“I’m sure he did. Why is Marcy in Vault E?” Stephanie asked as she felt a headache coming on. She should be on enough drugs that that should not be a problem. And yet here she was. This was part of the reason why she was glaring at her brother at the moment.

“Okay interrogation may be a more accurate term to use. Coulson’s down there.” Tony clarified. Stephanie’s glare intensified because she just knew he wasn’t telling her everything.

“And Natasha.” Tony acknowledged and she sighed.

“I know that you didn’t grow up with siblings, so you probably are unaware that it’s not okay to hire a former Russian assassin to interrogate them when you’re mad. It’s tempting, but not okay.” Stephanie joked, mostly.

“We kind of need to know how much she knows. She may have worked with Patches back in the day.” Not surprising.

“They always said that Marcy was mom’s clone.” Stephanie mumbled after herself.

“I don’t like being lied to. I really don’t like things being kept from me. And after you managed to get shot twice today, the time for playing games is over.”

“I was planning to tell you. From the moment I knew, I realized you had to know.” Stephanie explains.
“I guessed as much. That’s why you brought Rhodey in to break the news gently.”

“Which worked out so well.” Stephanie said sarcastically.

“It’s the effort that counts. Besides, that’s not what I’m talking about.” Tony tells her.

“What are you talking about then?” Stephanie was confused at this point and it wasn’t just because of the drugs.

“We have a Hydra problem.” Tony said bluntly. “Hydra tried to kidnap you again. Before that Hydra tried to take out the Leo decoy at Woodbine.

“They didn’t go after mom.” And Stephanie was still surprised about that.

“Probably because they didn’t flip any of the three burly FBI agents guarding her.” Tony replied coldly. “Before that we had the London attempted kidnapping of Leo and the incident in the Gulf of Mexico. Also, apparently when SHIELD fell, they tried to recruit my son by threatening to shoot him in the kneecaps. He survived it by killing someone for the first time. It’s a little dangerous for the Carter bloodline right now.”

“I know; it’s why I’m glad Antoine is undercover.” And far away from all of this.

“It’s also why they need to know why Hydra wants them.” She wasn’t expecting Tony to say that.

“We have no idea why Hydra wants them unless the guest in Vault D has decided to talk.”

“Mister Vault D is still silent, but Miss Vault E is very talkative. Our children are genetically engineered products of the Nursery Group. Marcy’s latest theory is that the Nursery Group was trying to create the next super soldier by using the genetic material of identified gifted.”

Stephanie’s mind was whirling. Thanks to the Hydra infiltration of SHIELD, it was highly probable that someone in the nursery group knew all about her mom being exposed to the super soldier serum.
That’s probably why she was kidnapped the first time. They may even know about Tony being
Peggy’s biological son, and therefore inheriting some traits from her. List was on the project to create
Tony, and intel now shows that he is Dragon and father-in-law to the head of Hydra. Swapping the
egg might have been done on purpose as a beta test to prove their theory.

“They are part of us. Just because the mixing occurred in a petri dish instead of a backseat or a hotel
room does not change that. This is not something that needs to be public knowledge.” The words
seemed hollower now than they did before. Maybe it’s different now because she’d seen this from
the other side.

“That’s ridiculous excuse. Marcy didn’t tell us about being siblings because it was safer.”

“For her.”

“Exactly. It’s safer for us if they don’t know the truth. It’s not safer for them. Hydra is out there.”
Tony argued and she knew he was right.

“I’m too drugged on painkillers to say yes or no.” I don’t want my son to think I don’t love him
because of how he came into the world.

“It’s okay. We have some time. It’s not like anyone else here will tell them.”

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30 Minutes Earlier

Leo was still completely awake when Simmons came into his room. Considering it was 2:30 AM, he
was surprised she was there at all. This was the latest that she’s ever shown up. Usually she would
come to his room before midnight.

Of course most nights Simmons wasn’t dealing with his aunt who was just shot trying to avoid being
kidnapped by Hydra. He hoped that she’s okay. He likes Agent Triplett, well, he likes Agent Triplett
now that he knows the man is his cousin and not interested in Simmons at all. No one else needs to
lose a mum.

“Dr. Triplett is okay.” Leo exhales in relief. He wonders if Simmons noticed it. “Your aunt is
definitely a fighter. I wonder if it’s a trait she got from your grandmother.” Obviously she didn’t realize that he wasn’t really asleep. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have said that. Apparently he’s not supposed to know that Stephanie Triplett is his aunt.

“Dr. Campbell is nice as well as a good doctor, although I’m not sure he wants to stay here. I think we overwhelmed him.” Honestly, this place would be overwhelming for anyone. At least Trista and Mack were SHIELD agents before. It was easy for them to fall into old patterns.

“Actually, I think it was being almost apprehended by a terrorist organization that overwhelmed him. I hate Hydra so much.” The feeling was mutual.

“They destroy everything good. They’re unconscionable bastards. You are the only good thing those wankers ever gave the world. That’s mostly because your mum fell in love with you when she wasn’t supposed to.”

*What is she talking about?* Leo thinks to himself. Her words confused him, but they confused him most nights.

“I’m worried about Ward. It’s why I can’t sleep.” She tells him after a moment. “I need to talk to you about it, but I’m too embarrassed to ask if you use condoms when you fucked him.” He felt his cheeks become scarlet. “That would be the easiest way to get material to make more baby Starks. They couldn’t get you to flip, so they might as well start over with new specimens. I’m trying to decide if Ward’s technique was less evil than kidnapping and forced specimen removal. My findings are inconclusive.”

“What the bloody hell are you talking about?” He did not intend to say it out loud, but he did with minimal stuttering surprisingly enough. Why would Hydra want his genetic material? Who was kidnapped before?

“You’re not asleep?” Fitz shakes his head at Simmons’s question.

“You just heard everything that I said?” He nodded his head.

“Shite!”

To be continued
Chapter 23: The Complicated Interpersonal Relationships of Spies

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. I know it’s been a little while. I wanted to finish the last part of Season 4 of AoS, before I started working on this chapter. Alastair Fitz is a gift for this story.

Of course, I thought I would get something up before Spider-Man: Homecoming, but it didn’t happen (I’m only a week late). Other projects and life kind of got in the way. I’m going to be moving soon, so there might be another break, but I’m going to try really hard to draft one more chapter before I go on a three-week break. This weekend is dedicated to writing the next chapter. I just finished my Star Trek story and I’m not going to start another one until I move so that should give me more time.

Skye was having a good evening or rather morning at this point, if the clock in the car was any indication. The mission went well (the target does not know that she’s a target yet anyway) and she got to kiss Trip six times. One technically may have counted as a make out session as it consisted of multiple kisses, but she’s just going to count as one big kiss. Okay, the mission went well after they managed to convince their target that they weren’t interested in a threesome.

“My husband is a Kinsey four, but I’m a zero, so if we are going to do a three-way, it’s going to have to be boy, boy girl. You’re cute, but I just don’t think it’s going to work.”

Janice pouted and then spent the rest of the night trying to find the Carter’s a third. There was a lot of giggling and alcohol involved, but thankfully they still had a decent supply of alcohol nullifying pills, so Skye wouldn’t be suffering a hangover in the morning. Also, they were sober enough to drive home, which was good. Or rather, Trip was because he didn’t trust her driving. Apparently everybody knows about that SVU she crashed to get Coulson back.

“You’re not a Kinsey zero. You’re obviously at least a one. You would’ve totally said yes, if it was Simmons.” Trip said after they dropped off an extremely tipsy (read as totally wasted) Janice. Seriously, it took them 20 minutes to walk her back to her apartment. She’s a very affectionate drunk.

“No, mostly because I’m not talking to her. Maybe Black Widow. She was a little too into making out with your cousin.” Skye said only half joking.
“As soon as you’re able to talk to her without stuttering right?” Trip joked.

"Come on, I was going to say no, no matter what. Do you think we gave May enough time to wire her house?” Skye said as she checked her watch. It was actually almost 3 AM. She guesses time flies when you’re keeping a target preoccupied.

“Well, May would’ve had more time if we had taken Janice up on her offer and went back to our hotel room.” Tripp remarked.

“I’m sure May didn’t need the extra time.”

“I was joking before, but you know sometimes this job requires doing stuff like that. There was actually a class about it at the Academy.” One that Skye will never take because there is no longer an Academy.

“Which should’ve been the first sign that the agency was overrun with Hydra.” Trip frowns at her words. “I didn’t mean it like that. Have you ever had sex with a target before?”

"Yes. It’s why I told you I’m straight for missions.”

"I thought you meant like what we’re doing. You definitely kiss like a man who is into women.” Obviously the alcohol neutralizing pills didn’t work that well because Skye hoped she would not have said that completely sober.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment. With a good spy, you can never tell if they’re pretending.” Which is why the whole Ward thing happened. However, Skye knows better than to say that out loud.

"So, do you wish I hadn’t said no?” Right now Skye is wishing she had gone along because she could have been with Trip and just blamed it on the mission. That would definitely get the war taste out of her mouth permanently.

“The times I did go that far usually involved really dangerous situations with no extraction plan. If you can avoid it, it’s best not to go that far. It’s part of the reason I usually stick to guys in my actual life.” Trip told her.
“Don’t worry. Janice apparently wasn’t offended by it. She wants to do brunch next Sunday or rather the Sunday after next. She wants to show us some of her work.” Skye explained.

"You should probably type up everything you guys spoke about before we get back to the hotel."

“JARVIS baby, can you make a note. I’m too tired to actually do work stuff.” Skye said to the AI that she knew was listening.

“Of course Agent Skye.”

“You know, now that we’re not a real agency anymore, I thought there’d be less paperwork.” She remarked.

"Actually, we work for a private security company, so there’s more paperwork. I think we might be government contractors.” Trip joked he turned back to driving. They arrived back at the hotel 15 minutes later (even with JARVIS they got lost twice) to an annoyed, possibly angry or maybe even pissed off May. It is ridiculously hard to tell with her.

"So did the mission not go well?" Skye asked as she sat down on one of the beds. Her feet hurt.

“I was successful on my end. You can now see everything that’s going on in that apartment.” She passed Skye a Stark pad that was showing the video feed to Janice’s apartment. She was passed out on the couch.

"Then why do you look upset for you. I can't always tell because of the Zen thing you do." Skye remarked.

"Hydra attacked the hospital in DC dressed as SHIELD agents." That’s when May turned on the television in the room. The scrolling headline read ‘12 dead at DC hospital’.

"Fitz’s dad is never going to be able to use the acronym again.” Skye remarked.
The talking heads made Skye thankful that the club did not have TVs. It also made her want to throw something at the television in the room.

“Why weren’t we alerted at the club to what was going on?” Trip asked.

“I had JARVIS purposely keep all mentions of what happened from you. You needed to focus on Janice. Besides, SI’s PR along with Maria are working on countering the incident.” Skye wondered what that actually meant.

“Well, somebody obviously won’t be sleeping tonight.” Trip remarked.

"There’s something else." Skye was guessing, but May seemed twitchy.

"The target of the attack was Doctor Triplett. Thankfully your cousin Sharon has been able to keep that out of the news.”

Oh shit! That was not good. Skye really liked Trip’s mom. She was the kind of mom that Skye always wanted to have. Granted, she did some things that she probably shouldn’t have, but you could tell that she really loves her son.

“What happened?” Trip asked. He was worried. Instinctively, Skye grabbed his hand and he didn’t pull away.

“They bombed the building as a distraction to ambush her while she was walking one of her candidates for the new med position to his rental car. At least, that’s what the candidate told us. Most of the casualties are those that tried to kill her." May responded.

"Is she okay?" Skye could hear the worry and panic in his voice.

"Yes. She was able to fight them off with the help of the other person and they were able to escape.”

“Is she at the Playground?” Skye asked because Trip was visibly surprised. He was trying to act like a big strong specialist, but she could just tell he was not okay.
"Yes. She is safe now." May reassured.

“Should Trip go back? Can he go back?”

“Even before the implosion, SHIELD wasn’t heartless. Agent Triplett, if you want I can stay with Skye to finish the mission and you can go back.” May offered.

“You’re obviously not telling me something.” Trip said, finding his voice again. “I doubt the Director would be offering to have me come back especially since I was sent on this mission to get over my dead boyfriend.”

‘Actually deceased former fiancé, but obviously semantics don’t matter right now.’ Skye thought to herself, but didn’t say it out loud. That would be inappropriate.

"She was shot three times and had to have emergency surgery.” May finally confessed.

“What is her condition?” Trip asked.

“Surprisingly good for somebody who was shot three times.” May explained. “Coulson says that they’ll have to take her stitches out in the morning. Also, to keep her knocked out, they had to use roughly the same amount of anesthesia as they use on Steve. This means that she woke up 30 minutes ago. Stark is with her.”

"That’s not surprising." Skye was aware that Trip’s mom was different, like she could be a card-carrying member of the Avengers different. That’s probably why Hydra tried to kidnap her earlier.

"If I stay, can I still talk to her?” Trip asked and that told Skye that he really was shook up. He’d been avoiding his mom since the funeral. It was really just a tiny reprieve in what’s happened the last couple of months.

"I think once will be okay." Skye would work with JARVIS to make sure it happened more than once. Actually, she was going to have a really long conversation with the AI as soon as May was back in her room.
"Then the mission comes first. I’d rather stay.” Trip explained.

"Okay, I’ll tell Coulson your decision. Although, if you change your mind. Let me know." With that, May was gone and Skye wasn’t sure what to say next. She decided to begin with JARVIS; that was easier.

Xx

Hydra had tried to kidnap his mother. It really shouldn’t surprise him, considering Hydra tried to kidnap his cousin earlier this month. They also tried to kidnap Isabel, successfully ran off with 33 and killed Robin. And maybe that fact was why he was so worried. Being a SHIELD agent, he always knew that his family could be targeted. Actually growing up a Carter, he knew that was possible. This was the reason his grandmother taught him how to shoot when he was 10. It led to an argument between Grandma and Aunt Marcy that he still didn’t get.

After Hydra came out of the shadows and he found out the truth of his parentage (because even if his mother’s story was true Stockholm syndrome doesn’t exactly make it better), Trip has become more aware of the possibility that something could happen. They did kill his cousin’s mother after all.

And here they were, Hydra tried to kidnap his mother again. This time she was not a scared teenager. They could’ve killed his mom and Trip didn’t want that to happen when they were in such a bad place. It just made him realize that holding a grudge is stupid especially with a career like his.

He was a professional liar. He lied to protect people all the time. Why did her doing it bother him so much? He wasn’t sure, but he really didn’t have time to think about that right now. He needed to check in with Sharon. May gave the family code, possibly without realizing it. That meant he needed to check the family phone.

“Okay, why are you using a flip phone when we have JARVIS to fill all our needs? He just confirmed that your mom is resting. Apparently, your uncle is at the Playground calming down Fitz that doesn’t make sense,”

“JARVIS is referring to Tony as my uncle. He did grow up around my mom; however, I’ve only met him recently.” It felt weird to realize that he’d only met his uncle recently and he already liked him better than Tyler. Uncle Tyler was a real prick.

“I guess that makes sense, although, it doesn’t explain the flip phone.”
“It’s a family phone.” Because Carter-Jones have family phones. This was his new one because Sharon was still pissed at him for going completely dark (throwing it in an incinerator at the Hub before leaving) after the collapse of SHIELD. “I want to talk to Sharon.” He needs to talk to Sharon.

“JARVIS already confirmed that your mom is in good health. Why do you need the family phone?” Skye asked.

“But JARVIS cannot tell us stuff that he doesn’t know.” Trip tells her.

“JARVIS knows everything.”

Trip looks down at his phone and sees that he has text messages from ‘Cousin Shannon’. He’s thankful that Sharon did send him a message, even if it was ridiculously coded.

Cousin Shannon: So I hate to tell you this in a text message, but according to your wife’s mother you’re working right now and they’re really strict about cell phone use. When you get a chance, call me. Your mom was in a fender bender with some idiot guy in a black and red Beemer. Actually, it was that same bastard who hit her right before you were born. What are the odds? She’s okay. She is even recuperating at your wife’s father’s house.

Cousin Shannon: Seriously, how late are you going to be working? Your wife’s mom would not give me details. Is this going to be an overnight thing like what happened in Budapest? I really hate Budapest and my evening in Georgetown is reaching Budapest levels.

Cousin Shannon: Okay, so I may not have given you all the details before, but your mom wasn’t totally fine. She had to have surgery. It’s no big. She’s out and your uncle is watching over her. The good one. And the fact that Uncle Antonio is the good uncle compared to Tyrone just says so many weird things about our family. Especially after what he did to Charlotte. I really wanted Charlotte as an aunt. I want to be her when I grow up.

Cousin Shannon: And contrary to what you think, I’m not upset about Antonio dating Stefan. It’s weird, but isn’t everything in this family weird? He just should’ve broken up with Charlotte first.

Cousin Sharon: BTW - Tyrone is going to be spending some time at the ranch to recover from the divorce. It was silly of him not to take a break, especially with the kids being on summer vacation.
Cousin Sharon: Aunt Margarita however is spending quality time in the basement of the Shepherdstown property because we are still pissed at her for hiding grandma’s secret love child. She should’ve said something earlier.

“Apparently, my mom really is okay and Marcy is now in vault E or at least I think that’s what the very cryptic text message says.” And apparently Sharon moved Uncle Tyler to the family safe house in Montana. It is not a good thing when family members are moved to safe houses. Then again, considering the Hydra thing, he was surprised it did not happen sooner. “I think that’s what she said anyway. I don’t remember the family code as well as I use to.” He tells Skye.

Also, no one told him that Tony’s codename would be Antonio, but it makes sense. Charlotte must be Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts. Also, apparently Sharon almost likes Tony which means that Tyler was probably a prick about being relocated. Okay he was definitely being a prick because of her comments about Stark sleeping with Rogers.

“Why is your aunt in vault E?” Skye asked.

“I have no idea.” Unless she’s actually in vault D, strangling Ward with her bare hands. Trip would be all for that.

“You don’t think she actually set up your mom.” Skye asked worriedly.

“I doubt it. They’ve been having problems, but Aunt Marcy is the good sibling.” Sometimes, but apparently she knew about Tony being related and said nothing.

“I thought that was your aunt Jackie?” Skye asked.

“I put most of my aunts in that category, at least recently. It’s my uncle – I mean, Uncle Tyler, who has serious issues.” And oddly enough Trip was happy that his uncle was several thousand miles away, tucked away in Montana.

“You only have one uncle, so there’s no need to clarify.” I thought that too, until recently.

"You know you can leave.” She tells him after a moment. “I can tell Janice that we had some big
fight because I caught you making out with that guy who kept staring at your ass all evening. You should be with your mom."

"Which guy?" He asked jokingly, mostly because he really didn’t want to talk about this. "The one wearing the overpriced Gucci T-shirt or the one who tried to buy me a drink."

“Both. She’ll take pity on me and then your cover will stay intact. May and I can figure out about the writing and you can be with your mom like you need to be.” Skye was actually babbling by this point. This worried him a little. Okay, it worries him a lot, but considering what he’s been hit with in the last few minutes, he really didn’t need another object of worry.

“She’ll just think I’m trying to find a third. You’re the one who told her you would be up for a guy, guy girl three-way.” He said jokingly or at least attempting to be joking. It’s specialist survival tactic 322.

“That wasn’t funny. So, tell me what’s really going on because I can tell you’re upset and considering that I can never read you, it worries me. Also, the bad jokes worry me.”

Dammit. He thought he was keeping his emotions in check. He was a specialist. He was good at that sort of thing. You only saw his emotions when he want it you to see something.

“I’m stressed.” He told her.

“Hydra tried to kidnap your mom again. You’re allowed to be upset.” Skye walked over to Trip’s bed and laid beside him. “But they didn’t get her this time. She’s at the Playground surrounded by multiple Avengers.” She put her arm around him and he was grateful.

“Working where we work and having the family that I have, you expect for stuff like this to happen, but it doesn’t get easier.”

“That’s not everything is it?” Skye asked worriedly.

“Hydra has had a greater influence in my life than I would ever want to acknowledge. I exist because my mom got kidnapped by Hydra. My ex-fiancé got murdered because of Hydra. My partner got murdered because I didn’t notice that my boss was Hydra. I’m just sick of it.” He was exhausted. He was supposed to be here recovering from what happened to Robin and then this.
“We all kind of missed that one. At least you figured it out before having a make out session with him.” Skye joked.

“Not helping.” Trip said as he laid his head on the pillow.

“You have a right to hate Hydra. I hate Hydra. I finally had a place where I belonged and they killed it.” Skye confessed.

“You still have a place where you belong.” He grabbed her hand.

“So do you. You exist because your mother loves you, and not because of Hydra’s intervention.”
She placed an arm around him. “I don’t know my parents. The only thing I know about them is they tore up a village and that apparently they’re monsters. I don’t even know how I ended up in SHIELD custody, not really. Your mother loves you so much that she would do anything to protect you. That’s what matters - not how you got here, but the people who cared for you along the way. I wish I had a mom that loves me like your mom loves you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You shouldn’t be. I’m supposed to be cheering you up. I suck at this. I think I should just go stay with May before I say anything else stupid and make things worse for you.”

"Stay. I hate being alone when I’m worried like this." Because I get too caught up in my thoughts otherwise. It was the main reason he was glad he wasn’t at the base right now.

"Okay, just let me change into something not made of dead animals."

“It did look good on you.”

“Perfect for undercover, not for sleeping. Well, not that type of sleeping.”

“What type of sleeping were you planning on?”
“The type you should be getting. Just don’t worry about your mom right now. It will all work itself out in the end.”

As Skye disappeared into the bathroom a few minutes later, Trip hoped that she was right.

Lies. His entire life, everything Leo Fitz Stark thought was true, was built on lies. It really shouldn’t surprise him considering he thought Alastair Fitz was his father until the man disappeared when he was nine and his mom told him the truth. Or maybe it wasn’t the truth. Maybe, it was just her version of it. He didn’t even know his mom’s real name until her dead body showed up; taken out by Hydra because of him.

Except that’s not true. Not really. According to Simmons, at least, his mother may have even been Hydra or in league with Obadiah. This was the man who not only tried to murder his father, but kept Leo’s actual existence from Tony. That was unforgivable in Leo’s view.

Howard found him and tried to introduce him to Tony, but Obadiah kept that from happening. Leo vaguely remembered this, although he didn’t realize it was Howard Stark until recently. He blamed that on the fact all his textbooks had a picture of Howard as a young man and Leo had been very little at the time.

The meeting took place when they were hiding out in London for a few months. Alastair had broken his arm and his mom had enough. The house in London where they stayed happened to be owned by an old friend of his mum. A kindly old man who bought him toy cars to build and a chemistry set that he was supposedly way too young to play with, but did anyway. Now, Leo knew that man was Howard Stark, his grandfather.

Then the gentleman went back to America where he was killed. (No, murdered by Hydra) And his mom went back to Alastair once he found them in London. Leo always wondered why she did that. Now he wondered if she had a choice. Were they both victims of Hydra? He didn’t know.

Although, if Alastair was Hydra, and Fitz could easily believe he was, then why did he just leave them? Fitz had no answers and nobody who knew the truth was still around. He had no desire to see Alastair again. He was mad at Tony for lying to him, but Tony was still more of a father to him than
Tony was sitting in his room right now. He was on the bed beside him - Simmons was long gone - explaining everything that she had not gotten to before Tony's arrival.

"I know you're mad at me." Tony said after he explained everything.

"Furious."

"Good, your vocabulary's improving." Leo responded by glaring.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to protect you. I thought by not knowing what Hydra did you would be safer, but they're coming for you and I'd rather you know the truth."

"Lies don't protect." Leo remarked.

"In my defense, I didn't even remember not sleeping with your mom until the DNA tests came back telling me that you have three genetic parents instead of two. My memories were altered." Knowing what he knows about the Tahiti project, Fitz wasn't surprised about memories being removed or altered. However, the concept of the three parent embryo, does surprise him.

"That's still in testing phase." Leo remembered reading a journal article about the process a few weeks ago.

"Well, Hydra isn't exactly known for following FDA protocols for new procedures/research or any guidelines really. They're not rules people, unless it's their rules. The bastards are all about control. Okay, that's totally off-topic. I... I have no idea what to say to you right now."

Leo responded with a shrug of the shoulders.

"I am sorry. I knew this was going to blow up in spectacular fashion. I just figured we would have more time before it went to shit. And I was planning to tell you the truth soon."

"Hydra wants me?" Leo asked.
“Definitely yes, which is why you need to know what’s going on. The problem is we don’t know why they want you. You’re my kid and a genius, so what evil organization would not want you? We just are not sure of the two which would be the main reason.” Leo was going with the former due to the brain damage and especially because of something Simmons said earlier.

"I have the serum?" He asked, still not quite believing what Simmons told him.

"Yes." Tony confirmed, which meant everything else that Simmons said was true. Also, due to his poor decisions post Las Vegas, Leo transferred it to Ward. Leo was still trying to decide if it was better that he swallowed or not. At least by swallowing, Leo knows that Hydra doesn’t have a sample of his sperm to make more children. Now they just have to deal with the fact that Ward has the super soldier antibody in his system.

“It’s not a bad thing - even if your friend is worried. That serum is the reason why I lived long enough to find a cure for my Palladium poisoning and why you’re recovering as well as you are from being in the ocean.”

"I was in a coma for…” Fitz then holds up three fingers.

"No, you were in stasis, we think.” Tony tells him and this is the first he’s heard of this. “Stephanie believes that the serum may have been trying to do to you the same thing it did to Steve when he crashed into the Arctic. You are months ahead of where you should be in your hypoxia recovery process.”

"The words can’t…” Get out. Leo finished in his head.

"Because you’re upset with me for lying. Words tend to get muddled together when you’re angry no matter what. You’re working on it." Tony said.

"Not angry at you. Mom." Why did she not tell him the truth? Why did she not try to introduce him to Tony again? Why did she go back to Alastair?

"I don’t think you should be mad at her."
"Hydra." Alastair.

“Sometimes people make bad choices for good reasons.” Tony tried to reassure. “Your Aunt Marcy said that she was promised schooling and a way out of poverty if she just seduced a teenager.”

"Rape." Tony was only 14 when Leo was conceived. If it actually happened the ‘old fashion way’, it would be considered statutory in many states.

"I think I told you that no actual sex was involved.” They stole your sperm. I think that counts. Leo did not say that out loud. “She did what she had to do to survive and she tried her best to protect you.”

"Alastair.” He still despises his stepdad. But now that he knew his real father, his resentment was changing into something darker.

"Oh, I heard about your stepdad from Marcy. He was a complete piece of shit who wasn’t worthy of you. If he wasn’t already dead, I would fly to wherever he is, and unleash the full power of Iron Man on him.” Leo just looked at Tony for a moment, blinking. “Oh shit. You didn’t know that because no one ever found the body. Apparently Auntie Marcy is that good, and she really hates abusive parents."

"My aunt killed my stepdad?” Leo asked surprised.

"Yes. He was Hydra.” At least that answers Leo’s earlier question. “We think he was trying to abuse you to the point where you would become susceptible to the Hydra party line. Apparently, they really like abuse survivors.”

“Ward.” Fitz mumbled under breath. He doesn’t even want to think about if things were different, he could’ve ended up like Ward. That was his biggest fear. It was even worse now that he knew he was created by Hydra. What did they want from him? Why did they make him the first place?

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"I slept with him."

Xxx

“Mack?” Leo wished. “I’m not surprised. Although I am a little upset that he lied to me…” Leo puts his fingers to Tony’s lips to keep him from talking.

“Ward… I slept with Ward.” Leo spluttered out.

Tony doesn’t react for a good two minutes, because he doesn’t want to say the wrong thing. Okay, this was the type of moment that made you wish that you did not give up drinking. How the hell did this happen? Then Tony remembered a very awkward conversation with Obadiah after the Tony Stark sex tape came out and he bit his tongue. Leo doesn’t need that.

“That’s why Simmons told me the truth.” Leo confessed bringing him back to the here and now.

Now Tony has to be a little less mad at Simmons for what happened. She had to ask the guy she had a crush on if he had sex with the guy who put them in the ocean because she was trying to figure out why super soldier antibodies were in the traitor’s bloodstream. That would be awkward all on its own. At the same time, she would have to give him some explanation for why she was asking these questions, which meant telling Leo more than what Tony was ready for him to know. Also, why did this conversation have to happen so early in the morning?

"She thought I was sleeping.” Tony’s trying to decide if her sneaking into Leo’s room in the middle of the night was better than her sneaking into his liquor cabinet in the middle of the night. It was a tough one, but he did like Simmons. He was worried about her, but he did like her.

“I’m not going to yell at you for a bad hook up decision. My last random hook up before the Afghanistan incident was Christine Everhart and you’re aware how badly that has gone.” If Everhart wasn’t on the Hydra kill list, he would be almost certain she was Hydra.

“Still wrong.”

“It’s relative. You didn’t know who he really was. I’m not surprised that it happened. He was pretty and you are on a plane with him for what six months. Stuff happens. It wasn’t like you knew he was a Hydra loving bastard.” Or that you have super soldier antibodies in your bloodstream.
“Stuff like this happens sometimes, especially at our level. Remind me to tell you the sordid story of
the Tony Stark gay sex tape and the asshole boyfriend responsible for it.” Tiberius Stone is a fucking
asshole.

“Simmons thinks he used me to make more Starks.” Leo tells him which gives Tony another reason
not to be mad at his assistant. She had to have that conversation with him and that conversation
would require him to know the truth. At the same time, Tony wished Simmons did not tell him the
truth; that was Tony’s job. However, the bastard hurt his son and…

"I am going to fucking kill him." It took Tony a moment to realize he said that out loud. He didn’t
mean to. It just slipped out.

"Tony." Leo called out his name.

"He doesn’t get to use you. They don’t get to use you. I am so tired of everything that Hydra has
taken from me. They took your grandfather. They took your mom. They took you.” Tony said
angrily. “Okay, they gave me you in the first place which is good because I love you. It also means
they are never getting you back. Just because I have you now, does not negate the fact that they tried
to keep you away from me. And that being said, there is no way in hell they’re taking your kids.”

"I’m here now." Leo squeezes Tony tighter.

"I know, but I can be mad on your behalf for somebody stealing the condom afterwards. I mean,
that’s something that happens in our income bracket occasionally, but usually not by international
terrorist organizations.” Tony got very good at condom disposal.

"No condom-- oral." Leo confessed and Tony tried to keep a straight face. At least Leo trusted him
enough to tell him this. Tony would have never had this conversation with Howard, at least not
without screaming.

"Dental dams are your friend and I can’t believe we’re having this conversation." Tony sighed.
When did his life get this weird?

"Me too."

"I want you away from him. We should go to New York soon." Or maybe the private Stark island in
the Caribbean. He just wanted Leo somewhere safe.

"I need him to talk. I think I should talk to him." Hell no.

"No, you don’t. You need to never see him again. Natasha is taking care of it." And if anybody can get a confession out of him, it would be the ninja spy queen.

"He won’t talk to her, only Skye, and maybe me." Leo tells him.

"So why put yourself out like that?" You don’t owe him anything Leo, Tony thought to himself.

"I need to know — why he chose me. If he targeted me because I’m your son or else. We connected.” Tony had the same questions and concerns, but he wasn’t going to risk Leo.

"Sex doesn’t always make for the best connections." He tells his son.

“I need to know… especially because… Kids.”

“I understand, but I think the risk is minimal for that. You said he swallowed, which means we are only going to have to deal with him having a slightly better immune system, but it’s okay. Seriously though, condoms.”

"He has --answers. I need them." Leo explains.

"We’ll get him to talk. Natasha is good. You’ll be amazed at what she got out of your aunt this afternoon." Like Nick Fury showing up at her door with special thumb drive in hand. The week before all hell broke loose in SHIELD. Because she was so cooperative, Natasha said that she would bring her to see Stephanie while Tony was dealing with this family emergency.

"I hate to interrupt, but Marcy Carter-Jones has overpowered the security system for vault D and is currently attempting to strangle the prisoner. Agent Romanoff is not able to respond because she was incapacitated with an icer grenade. Marcy Carter-Jones apparently is immune.”
"Why did I have to get the homicidal sister?" Or suicidal sister for that matter, because as soon as Black Widow woke up Marcy was a dead woman.

“I do not know Sir."

"JARVIS, suit." Tony said as he pulled his arm away from Leo.

“On its way.”

“Great. I have to go save his ass because we need to know what he knows, but I will try to knock him out at least once for you. I owe you that.” He received an awkward smile. At least Leo didn’t completely hate him for what happened. And for right now, that is enough.

To be continued.
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who read or reviewed the last chapter. You are all absolutely wonderful. Hey look, a new chapter in under two months. This is pretty good considering I went on vacation (I was proofreading in the airport) and moved apartments in the interim. Okay, I managed to get this off to proofreading before I disappeared.

There’s a time jump of about a week in this chapter. We really do need to start moving things forward timewise.

"Where am I?" The voice from the bed called. He was tied down in restraints that even Steve couldn’t break. Natasha was sure that if his training was anywhere near as extensive as hers, he would be able to get out if he hadn’t been drugged for several days. At least the super antibodies in his system only made him slightly less susceptible to various sedatives and not the Dendrotoxin immunity that several others have managed to acquire.

"You know I can’t tell you that." Natasha responds impassively.

"So I’m in hell?" Natasha rolled her eyes at his dramatics.

"You are still at an undisclosed location. You have been out for more than a week." Because Marcy Carter-Jones tried to kill you for what you did to her nephew. Of course she doesn’t say that part out loud.

The day after her attack, the truth of Stark’s parentage came out to most of the Avengers and May who was on base by that point. The truth came out because Stark wouldn’t let Natasha hurt his sister (Apparently, the man has lots of sisters that he was just finding out about. She wondered if he would be as nonplussed about Natasha Stark/Natalie List as he was about Marcy). They weren’t even allowed to keep her locked up in vault E.

"You’re probably wondering why you’re not dead." Natasha said turning to her prisoner.

"You still need information from me."
"Not need, want." Because they did have other sources including Trista, who was already being brought into the confidence of von Strucker’s estranged wife. Natasha knew she would be meeting with the director soon to exchange information.

“There are several people here who are perfectly okay with a very angry CIA assassin strangling you to death. It wouldn’t be the first time she’s killed a Hydra agent for hurting her nephew. I doubt it will be the last either.” It was decided to let Ward know about the familial connection between the two and Natasha decides to do it in a way that would frighten the captive.

“SHIELD was a big organization, but I remember Agent Carter-Jones only having a niece that was SHIELD and I never worked with her.” Ward told her.

“Agent Triplett’s real last name is Carter-Jones.” Natasha watched his face closely. No reaction except for the eyes.

“That explains why Garrett wanted Triplett, despite his reputation.”

What did he mean by that?

“Carter-Jones nephew is Leopold Fitz, your teammate. The man you tossed into the Gulf of Mexico like garbage even though he was the only one who still had any faith in you.” Her words were carefully chosen for maximum effect.

“Nice try, but I’m not saying anything else. I remember Fitz’s file and there were no mentions of Carter-Jones or Stark anywhere in there. Just Alastair Fitz.” The prisoner said before turning away from her.

“Alastair Fitz was Agent Fitz’s stepfather. He was also a Hydra sleeper agent. Did you know that? Maybe not, if you didn’t even know Agent Triplett was the grandson of SHIELD founder Margaret Carter-Jones.” She paused again gauging his microresponses. “It seems there are quite a few things you don’t know about your former teammates.” Natasha said pointedly.

“You’re trying to get me to talk and as I’ve stated many times, I’m only going to talk to Skye.”

“That’s not something we can give you because she doesn’t work here anymore. She is now an employee of Fitz’s father working as a programmer for Stark Industries.” Technically, it wasn’t a lie as they were a subsidiary of Stark Industries now.
“Again, I don’t believe you. Because if that was true, I’d doubt the man would have pulled agent Carter-Jones off of me. Not that I needed the help.”

“You got your larynx crushed by an almost 50-year-old little Asian woman just a few months ago. Marcy Carter-Jones is just as deadly. If we want you dead, you would be. And make no mistake, without our intervention, you would be dead.” The prisoner rolls his eyes at her words.

“Nearly 18 years ago Agent Carter-Jones slit Alastair Fitz throat after he broke her nephew’s arm in two places. They have yet to find the body. You’re lucky that she went for this slow method considering you tried to kill her nephew by dumping him into the ocean.”

"I was trying to save him." The captive argued.

"Or were you trying to kill him in a way where you could absolve your conscience.”

He looks away from her and doesn’t say another word for the next 30 minutes making her realize that this attempt was over for the day. She reactivated the barrier and made her way out of the vault to director Coulson’s office. She knew the man would be watching the feed from Ward’s cell. However, she wasn’t expecting Fitz-Stark and his father to be watching. Or at least they had been. Now they were arguing. This was a regular occurrence recently.

“Absolutely not. You’re not sending my friend-- no, no, no." Fitz-Stark yelled at his father.

“But we need to know what he knows and I’ve would really like to be assured that Hydra is not breeding an army of little Fitz’s to be raised by sadistic Hydra bastards. Who knows who you would’ve become if Marcy hadn’t killed Alastair.” Someone like her, Natasha thought to herself.

“She’s not even --here.” Fitz stuttered out. “She is on a mission.”

“And they can tell Janice that Trip needs to visit his mom, who’s recovering from a nasty car accident. Stephanie would really like to see her son.” Stark argued. He would know since he’s been spending a lot of time with his sister in the time since her shooting.

“Let me talk to him.” Fitz-Stark volunteered.

“I don’t know if it would be best at this time.” Coulson said from his seat. “I also don’t think we’ve reached the point where we need to pull…”

"I’m an adult-- not an inv-- I’m not broken.” Fitz-Stark said forcefully.

“Of course, you’re not broken. You beat Steve at chess last night. Maybe you should be playing another game with him instead of watching interrogations that go nowhere.” She wanted to agree with Stark but couldn’t bring herself to say it out loud.

“You’re still one of my best agents.” Coulson interjected. “It’s why I’m okay with you being here because you can obviously see things we don’t, but I don’t want anybody who has a connection with Ward down there. More accurately, Dr. Suarez does not want anybody with a connection to him down there, not even me. I’m going to be out of the country for the next week trying to recruit more people. If we don’t have something by then, we will look at other options.”

“I’m just the money, so it’s not like my opinion really matters.” Stark said almost sounding annoyed. “I mean, I would really love to know what they did. Could I have other Hydra created kids out there? That something I would like to now.”

“And that is what Trista is looking into.” Coulson reassured.

“Have you received an update from her yet?” Stark asked.

“We are meeting for burgers on my way to the airport. Why am I still flying commercial?” Colson glared at Stark.

“Because I have to make it look like I’m actually running a real agency. Be glad I’m letting you splurge for business class. This is not the first time I’ve done this. I bet you’re all happy that the DODC was running the salvage operations in New York and not Shydra.”

Except for the companies you put out of business. Natasha thought to herself.
“When will you be getting back to New York?” Natasha asked instead.

“Whenever Leo is ready to leave at this point.” Stark told her. “Sooner might be better to get out of DC since the government is on a SHIELD witch hunt again due to the incident at Georgetown medical center.

“I’m not going back.” Fitz told his father. "I want to stay here. I need to stay here. I am an agent.” Tony looked over at Coulson.

“Fitz, you are still an agent.” Coulson reassured.

“One who is in rehabilitation.” Stark said pointedly.

“I’m doing better.”

“You are.” Tony reassured. "I just want you with me. But you don’t want that. Is this because I lied to you? Because honestly I was still trying to wrap my head around a lot of it. I wanted to find answers before I told you.”

“I need to help find answers too.”

“And you are helping. When Dr. Campbell clears you for duty, you will be going back to the lab Agent Fitz. Or are you going by Stark?”

“Fitz-Stark,” he corrected.

“But just the lab right?” Stark asked. “No more trying to chase down Hydra agents in Havana?” Fitz-Stark just glares at his father in response. “Now I know how Pepper feels.”

Before or after you cheated on her? Natasha manages not to say that out loud either.
Stark finds her in the lab attacking a punching bag an hour after she was dismissed. She’s frustrated that she still nowhere with the Hydra traitor and hasn’t heard a word from agent Carter regarding her other mission.

“Next time you visit the asshole, I want to be with you.” Stark requested.

“I think Coulson said no to that idea multiple times over the last week.” 12 to be exact.

“Director Agent is in another country which means Agent May is in charge. She’ll say yes because it’s better me than her protégé.” Natasha sighed at Stark’s point.

“You wanted to send her into the lion’s den a little more than an hour ago.” Natasha pointed out.

“Because I need to know if I have any more family members that Hydra is hiding from me,” At least one more, which she doesn’t say. She’s starting to feel guilty about her silence because she can see firsthand how much Stark actually cares about his family. He tried to relocate Dr. Triplett to a private island in an effort to keep her safe. She said no.

"Fine," she acquiesced wondering if the small amount of guilt she was feeling altered her decision.

“But you follow my lead and do what I say."

“As long as I’m in the room, I’ll do what you want.”

Xxxxxx

Trip has been on many stakeouts during his career. He has also been on lots of undercover missions. But he can’t remember feeling this restless before. Maybe it’s because he watches Janice paint strange alien writing all day when she is not asleep like right now. Her waking up at 2 AM to go on a painting jag is starting to scare the hell out of him mainly because he wonders if one day soon he’s going to wake up to find Skye doing the same thing.

What happened to his mom last week while he was away wasn’t making things easier on him. If he wasn’t worried about Skye acting like Janice, he was worried about Hydra finding him. They murdered his former fiancée and tried to kidnap his mom. Was he next? Maybe it was best that he was in upstate New York watching the screen in front of him.
He was also worried about his mother. Yes, she was supposedly healing and safe in West Virginia, but his mom had a nasty habit of lying to him for his protection. He thought about texting Sharon, but he knew she was deep cover to as Trista’s girlfriend in their effort to keep an eye on Natalie. He still can’t believe that Miss ‘I make rice crispy treats for the entire nursing home’ married the head of Hydra and may actually be Hydra herself. Thankfully, Sharon texted him instead.

Cousin Sharon: Hey, you know you should call or text every once in a while. Your wife’s dad said this wasn’t that type a job. I’ve spoken to him more recently than you. While he is talking to Tristan over milkshakes, I thought I would text you.

Cousin Sharon: We are having ‘lunch’ with him before he leaves for wherever he is going. He’s really a burger enthusiast. He knows all the best places in DC, even ones that are still open after midnight.

Me: Because he worked there for a long time. It makes sense that you’re spending so much time with him because he’s your boss too.

Me: I didn’t write because I wasn’t sure what type a job you were doing. I know you’re living with Trista.

Cousin Sharon: We’re not talking about that, but it is okay for us to talk. Seriously, what type a job are you doing?

Me: One that involves too much time at clubs with all eyes on my wife. Other than that I can’t say much.

Cousin Sharon: Well, your wife is pretty.

Me: I’m talking about the target. She keeps trying to talk Skyler into a three-way.

Cousin Sharon: Is it just me or does it seem like everybody who did not go to the dark side at our former place of employment are members of the LGTB community?

Me: I used to think you weren’t, but you are now living with your girlfriend, so obviously there are things I don’t know about my cousin. How is living together going? Or is that something we’re not talking about?
Cousin Sharon: Well, actually. Trista likes her new job. Most of her coworkers seem nice.

Me: What about the boss?

Cousin Sharon: We’re trying to decide if her boss not being in contact with her soon-to-be ex-husband is a good thing or a bad thing.

Me: I’m not sure either. Of course, if they were in contact, the job would be over sooner.

Cousin Sharon: Not necessarily. Sometimes good people fall in love with bad people. You had no idea that your ex-boss was a member of the black and red. Skyler had no idea that her ex-boyfriend was one as well. I think Natalie didn’t know who she was married to. It happens a lot.

Me: Are you watching Married to the Mob again?

Cousin Sharon: Possibly. I have a lot of free time on my hands. I’ve known Natalie for years. I just really think she didn’t know who he was.

Me: And you’re not just taking her side because she always brought you the flourless chocolate cake that you like from Buzz?

Cousin Sharon: + the ham and cheese scones. You can’t be evil if you bring ham and cheese scones.

Me: Except her family is part of the red and black mafia.

Cousin Sharon: And as both you and I have been saying for years, we are not our family.

Me: We still somehow ended up in the family business.

Cousin Sharon: But the family business is saving the world on a regular basis, so it’s probably good that we followed in the family footsteps. That being said Uncle Tyrone ended up being a mild
mannered accountant and an asshole.

Me: Uncle Antonio wasn’t even raised by Granny and still turned out to be a big damn hero.

Cousin Sharon: Which is giving me hope in a way. How’s your job going beyond the clubbing and the fact that your wife is constantly being hit on?

Me: Worrying.

Cousin Sharon: You can’t tell me why, can you?

Me: It’s better that you don’t know.

Cousin Sharon: How are you dealing with Rob being dead?

Me: As well as can be expected. It’s been over between us for a long time. I’m just upset that the red and black mafia got to him.

Cousin Sharon: You mean not at all. And it’s only been two years. Despite how you guys left things, I know that you still loved him.

Me: Well, I would be better if the red and black mafia did not go after mom as well.

Cousin Sharon: We’re trying to find him, but it’s a hit-and-run.

Me: You mean they made it look like a hit-and-run.

Cousin Sharon: Yes, but we are going to find them. It’s just going to take a while.

Me: I know you're working on it; I just want this over.
Cousin Sharon: Have you talked to your mom?

Me: The day after. She was groggy and upset at Margarita.

Cousin Sharon: Because we all wanted to take a swing at your wife’s ex, especially because he fucked our recently discovered baby cousin, literally as well as figuratively while he was chasing Skyler.

Me: Seriously?

Cousin Sharon: Yes. But you can’t tell anybody I told you that. Trista told me in confidence and I’m really not supposed to tell you, but no one fucks with our family.

Me: And Uncle Antonio still kept Margarita from beating the asshole senseless? Did he know?

Cousin Sharon: Considering how much cursing he was doing afterwards, I say yes. However, he does have intel on the black and red mafia.

Me: Or Uncle Antonio wanted to do it slow and painful as possible himself after we get the info on the red and black mafia.

Cousin Sharon: Possibly. I’m sure he learned some torture techniques during his extended stay at the 10 Rings Hilton.

Me: Probably.

Cousin Sharon: You should call your mother. She misses you.

Me: Not that type of job right now.

Cousin Sharon: Yet you can talk to me?
Me: Text messaging while observing. Mom would require Skype and dealing with more baggage than I can handle at the moment.

Cousin Sharon: Considering what happened, maybe it’s time you guys work through some of that baggage.

Me: And we will, once I get back into town. I think we’ll be back in a week or two unless something’s wrong.

Cousin Sharon: Again, she’s fine just annoyed with Margarita. She also refuses to go to Uncle Antonio’s house in the Caribbean. They’ve been fighting about that all week.

Cousin Sharon: Guess what our new uncle is so rich he owns an island. An island!

Me: Were you not at his boyfriend’s party on the yacht? We are related to money now. I expect an Audi for my birthday.

Cousin Sharon: The thing is I think you might actually get one. He gave me some of his special toys for work and he gave Trista an Audi for her work with our cousin, the doctor. Trista is letting me borrow it, since she already has a decent car.

Me: Because your car is still probably at an impound lot in Bethesda.

Cousin Sharon: I wish it was just in an impound lot somewhere in Bethesda. It’s a total loss because the thing is stuck in the garage of our former place of employment buried under at least 30 tons of materials. My insurance company does not cover cars getting destroyed due to acts of terrorism.

Me: That sucks.

Cousin Sharon: It was the reason why I was living with Margarita until Trista decided we should live together.
Me: Trista has to be a better roommate than Aunt Margarita.

Cousin Sharon: Yes. I think the other reason why your mom doesn’t want to leave is because Aunt Margarita will go with her.

Me: And mom can only take her family in small doses - especially her siblings. I assume Montana’s off the table because of that.

Cousin Sharon: Yep. We’re trying to avoid family members killing each other.

Me: Skyler’s ex wasn’t family.

Cousin Sharon: But he screwed over family.

"You know, I’m reading over your shoulder and know your cousin and yet I’m still completely lost about what you two are writing about." Skye said from behind him, startling him.

"And that is why we have a family code. You’re not supposed to be reading my cell over my shoulder." Trip said, placing the phone in his pocket. He wonders how much Skye actually read. Hopefully not much, because as a specialist he should’ve realized she was behind him immediately. Maybe the stress is starting to get to him. This is supposed to be an easy mission, but it wasn’t.

“Your’re supposed to be paying better attention. Actually, you’re supposed to be watching the monitors in Janice’s apartment.” Skye told him.

“She hasn’t woken up yet.” Trip said, pointing to a sleeping Janice. Looking at the clock though, she would any minute. The compulsion was too great.

“Great. I don’t like watching her spend the entire night painting that design. I was hoping she’d already gotten it out of her system for the night.” Skye said as she sat down next to him.

“Are you afraid that you’ll have the same compulsion?” Trip asked.
“Possibly, but Coulson’s not doing this and he’s had the drug in his system a lot longer. You would think he would react first?” *He did.*

“Did he react first?” Skye asked after a moment of silence.

“Why are you asking that question?”

“Because you’re not looking at me.”

“I am looking at you.”

“No you’re not. You’re keeping something from me and I hate when people keep stuff from me. You know I’m not a fan of compartmentalized classification. It’s why I’m glad Coulson is getting rid of levels.”

“But there is still the need to know.”

“That drug is in my system. I think I have a need to know.” Skye tells him.

“You’re right. You do.” Trip took a calming breath and looked into her eyes. “He is having episodes like Janice.”

“For how long?” Skye asked.

“Since we stopped Garrett and he found the writing on the Bus. At least that’s what May told me. That’s why they called in my mom.”

“Because she’s a specialist?”

“Yes.”
“Is he as bad as Janice?” Skye asked fearful.

“No, his episodes usually only last an hour. They also happen no sooner than about a week apart according to May. He hasn’t even had an episode since Cap’s birthday party.” Skye responds by lying down on the bed.

“Every single day. Janice paints that design every day. We’ve had cameras in her apartment for more than a week and she hasn’t taken a day off. Shit! You’re telling me that AC is doing this to which means I’m going to be doing this to and…” Trip put an arm around Skye as it becomes obvious that she is on the verge of hyperventilating.

“It’s okay. Maybe you won’t react the way she is. May said Coulson didn’t start until after he saw Garrett’s writings.” Trip told her.

“And I’ve been seeing that pattern for several days and nothing.” Thank God, Trip thought to himself.

“And even before then you were exposed. I know Coulson had you searching deep web contacts for it. If you were going to be triggered, I think it would’ve happened by now.” Trip hoped that would be the case anyway.

“Why am I reacting differently than the others? Even Coulson is acting differently. Why do you know this and I didn’t until just now?”

“May only confirmed I was right when I came to her with my hunch. She told me I could tell you if you needed to know.” Trip explained.

“Good thing that we have separate rooms because if we did actually have to share a bed right now you would so be on the couch.”

“If we were actually sleeping at the same time.”

“You that’s not the point. Is your mom the only one working on this?” Skye asked.
“I’m sure Simmons is still working on it. I don’t think Coulson trusts that many of the new people that were brought on probably to include the new doctor my mom brought to the base.”

“Just-in-time apparently.”

“Definitely.” His mom did tell him all about Dr. Campbell saving her life.

“Great, this means I need to talk to Simmons.”

“Not my mom?” Trip asked.

“Your mom is recovering from being shot multiple times. Also, she’s really good at lying to people.”

“Too good really.” Trip remarked.

“Simmons sucks at it though, which means she might actually tell me what I need to know. You know what she accidentally told Fitz?”

“Too much.” Trip told her.

“Also, she’s been writing me. She’s been writing me drunk, but she has been writing me. Like for example, I know who Uncle Antonio is. How did your grandmother have another kid in her 50s?” Trip actually groaned when she said that. Did Simmons learn nothing at the Academy?

“We think Hydra. She said that in an email to you? Please tell me you destroyed that?”

“Kind of and yes. She was really drunk and it was heavily encrypted. I think JARVIS is doing it automatically.”

“You should at least let her know about the drunken emails or Coulson. Probably Coulson.”
“Technically, she now works for your uncle, so I should probably report the bad behavior to him, but I need answers about what is in me. I don’t think we’re going to get them here.” Skye said, pointing to the screen where he could see Janice waking up.

“She’s waking up.”

“Do you think she’ll paint something different today? Butterflies would be nice.” Skye asked, almost hopeful.

"No." Trip said grabbing his phone to send another message to Sharon.

Me: Skyler came in to talk. Sorry, I ended things abruptly. If Uncle Antonio wants mom out of DC so badly, maybe she can come visit. Besides, you’re right. There are a few things we need to talk about face-to-face sooner rather than later.

Cousin Sharon: I’ll talk to our uncle.

xxxxx

“You bring me the great Tony Stark, but not Skye? I don’t know if I should be offended or flattered.” The prisoner said as soon as Black Widow pressed the button on the Stark pad allowing the screen that separated them to become translucent. He liked this piece of SHIELD technology.

“Skye works for me now and I really don’t want her to talk to you considering you fucked my son when you were supposedly in love with her. That just makes you seem like an extra sleazy guy. Not to mention your dumping my son into the Gulf of Mexico thing. I’m still furious about that.” Tony said, waving the gauntlet he had on at the bastard that tried to kill his son.

He wanted to wear the whole suit, but Steve put his foot down. Okay, he threatened to withhold sex, so he was doing this Natasha’s way with Steve watching in Coulson’s office with one of the brothers K. “I’m pretty sure this can kill you even if I don’t take the screen down. I’m just looking for an opportunity to test that theory.”

“As I’ve told your friend and Coulson, I will give you whatever you want as long as Skye is the one I’m talking to.”

“I don’t think Skye is going to want to talk to when she finds out that you fucked her friend, her other friend, all while pretending to be in love with her.”
Natasha snickered at him. She really can’t get over the cheating thing. If Pepper is okay with it, it’s none of Natasha’s damn business

“I want to talk to Skye.” The asshole demanded.

“I want to know if your bosses made me a grandfather. I’m hoping at least one of us gets what we want.” Tony smiled viciously at the man in front of him.

"Probably. Although, I doubt Hydra had anything to do with it, considering how promiscuous you were." Natasha actually smiles at the prisoner’s remark. This is probably part of her plan.

"What do you know about Project Lullaby?" Natasha asked, standing behind him.

"Where is Skye?"

"Not here.” Natasha responded.

“New York, working on a secret project.” Tony said, moments later.

"Then I have nothing else to say. If you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to my morning workout routine. It’s the first time in a week that I’ve been conscious enough to do it.”

“I’m starting to really wish I had let Marcy kill you.” Tony mumbled under breath.

“Go upstairs, Tony. I’ll deal with this.” Natasha yelled.

“You’ve been dealing with it for weeks. I feel like trying out some new toys.” Tony said positioning his gauntlet to blast through the invisible wall.

“So do I.” Widow said pulling out one of the ICER’s and shooting him, which hurt like hell. The Dendrotoxin had no effect on him anymore thanks to the serum in his system. This meant he had to
mimic the effects of the weapon which was hard because it still hurt.

“Did you just shoot him?” The prisoner asked.

“He was annoying. It was an ICER.” *So she could gain your trust, you idiot,* Tony thought to himself as he lay on the ground.

"We have a lot in common." Natasha tells the prisoner.

"You’re the only person who has espionage scores higher than me. You also have no trouble shooting your teammates." He remarked flippantly.

“I had no trouble killing my teammates, at least before I switch sides. I grew up chained to my bed at night, and fed propaganda each day. I was made into a perfect little assassin to the point that I was okay with them taking a part of me away." Natasha told him and Tony wondered if Natasha forgot that the Dendrotoxin doesn’t work him anymore at all.

"I’m sure it was more pleasant than living alone in the woods for five years."

"Did you have to kill your friends so they wouldn’t kill you first? I was six the first time I killed someone."

"Garrett made me kill my dog." His voice was cold and emotionless.

"You always have a choice." Natasha tells him.

"Did you?" The prisoner asked.

"I left. I couldn’t bring myself to kill a small child and his mother. I left and made it to the other side.” Why did Tony have a feeling there was more of a story there.

"And the only reason why you didn’t end up with a bullet in your head was because Hydra wanted you on their team.” Tony wishes he could see her reaction, but he doubts it would tell him anything
that’s going through her head.

“I don’t doubt that, but that doesn’t mediate what I did.” Natasha tells him.

"And are you here to interrogate or rescue me?" The prisoner asked.

"You can only rescue yourself. No one can save you, but you." Natasha tells the prisoner.

“I’m currently locked in this room, so I doubt that’s an option.”

“Or you can start being honest. Were you ordered to have sex with Agent Fitz?"

“No, that was me.”

“Why?” Natasha asked.

“You have seen that ass and the curls are cute. Unfortunately, we didn’t get that far. It’s very difficult to do that on the Bus.” Tony felt a little nauseous listening to this. There are some things you just don’t want to know about your child and this was one of them. He’s been trying to repress this information for most of the last week. Tony is almost certain the only reason why Leo isn’t madder at him for lying was because he was keeping this secret for so long.

"Which is why you opted for a blow job. Although, I’m surprised you were the one on your knees. Actually, I’m surprised you went that route at all, if you were trying to get a sample for the Lullaby project I would’ve thought you would go with a hand job."

"Why did I want to be present for this conversation?"

"I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He did sound genuinely confused. Considering who this person was though, it was probably an act.

“What do you know about Natalie von Strucker?”

"That you should use Google.” The prisoner responded.
"Her husband took over for Pierce, or rather ex-husband. I’d doubt that would be on Google."

"How do you know that? Or is this another lie."

“Stark being Fitz’s father is not a lie. He was a product of Project Lullaby. We discovered that much without you. Do you really think you are our only source at Hydra?”

"Then why am I still alive? Why did you knock out your teammate, who obviously wants me dead?"

“Maybe because I see a little of myself in you. The person who gave me a second chance, probably hates you too much to do the same for you, but I’m still here. Did you really give Leo Fitz a blowjob because you wanted to?” Did she really have to phrase it like that? Tony thought as he continued to lie on the floor.

“Yes.” The prisoner answered.

"Why?"

“Because he actually believed in me and looked up to me as if I could be somebody. And after what happened in Vegas, I needed that. Garrett didn’t know; I would never tell him about those encounters. He wouldn’t have approved.”

“Of you having sex with somebody other than your target?” Natasha asked.

“He was okay with that, if they were female. Contrary to what you and Skye think, Hydra doesn’t hold the same values as it did in the 1940s. And never did.” Bullshit. Tony thought to himself.

"You want to take over the world. That seems pretty fascist to me.” Natasha retorted.

“Some branches did. Others were in it for the science. Pierce definitely wanted to control, but there were certain resources at SHIELD, he wouldn’t touch. He avoided GLASS like the plague.” If Tony remembered correctly, that was the name of the LGTB affinity group at SHIELD pre-implosion.
“So what loyalties do you have to an organization that will not accept you for who you really are? Garrett is dead now. Coulson killed him. You could be next. You’re only still here because of me. Coulson would like shoot you for fucking with his current girlfriend. When Stark wakes up, he may leave you alive until he’s 100% sure you didn’t turn his son’s sperm over to make an army of super geniuses. However, I’m sure he would have no trouble torturing you until you give him what he wants. You should be really glad we brought in a new doctor otherwise you would've been seen by the wife of the woman you killed in cold blood. I'm sure she would've had no trouble finishing the suffocation process.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Whatever you’re willing to tell.”

“Well, if Fitz got to find out who his real father is then I think Skye deserves the same courtesy.”

“And you will only tell her this information in person?” Natasha’s voice sounded skeptical.

“It is personal.”

“Why should I pass along this message?” Natasha asked.

“In the meantime, you might want to check the quantum distribution channels on the old SHIELD frequency. Maybe you’ll find what you’re looking for underneath the white noise.” Note to self, have JARVIS check that out immediately when he gets out of the room.

“Maybe if you find what you’re looking for, you’ll send Skye ne…” The prisoner was cut off mid-word as the barrier went back in place.

“I think I want one of those for the limo.” Tony said pushing himself off the ground, now that he no longer had to pretend to be unconscious.

“Do you think he actually gave us something other than an explanation for why most of the SHIELD members who were not part of Hydra are members of the LGTB community?” Natasha asked.
“Possibly. JARVIS do your magic.”

“Of course, Sir.” JARVIS said as they exited out of the room. Steve kissed him as soon as they were through the door. He glared at Natasha once it was over.

“I didn’t know you were going to shoot him.”

“I’m fine, baby. I’m not even groggy, probably because I got several doses of the good stuff last night.”

“I did not need to know that.” Natasha said impassively.

“You shot Tony.” Steve said visibly and audibly upset.

“But it got us our first breakthrough with the prisoner,” Natasha rebutted.

“He may have given you nothing.”

“If I may interrupt, please turn your attentions to the pad that Mr. Stark is holding.” JARVIS directed and Tony did as instructed to find a world map on the screen covered in blue and red dots with more red than blue.

“What are the red dots?” Steve asked.

“Locations of Hydra outposts.” The AI responded.

“Shit!” Tony exclaimed. This was not good.

To be continued
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. You are all wonderful. Your words of encouragement keep me writing. I love all your reviews.

I’ve been asked multiple times to do a family tree for this story because the branches are twisty and even the characters have no idea who they are related to half the time. Since most of the genetic surprises have been revealed or will come out in the next couple of chapters, I decided to finally do one. So be on the lookout for this on Archive of Our Own when the time is right. I’m actually rereading the story to make sure I have everything right because I lost my original notes.

I don’t think I’m going to post this on fanfiction.net because they don’t have a feature to link stories together as part of a series on that site, unless I get a lot of demand. I know for my MCU stories, I have more readers on AO3 then fanfiction.net. It helps that on AO3 you can search by character.

There are people that argue that what makes Steve Grant Rogers “Captain America” is his speed or his physique or possibly the strength to bench press a Buick which goes along with those muscles. However, considering that Stark, May, and the descendants of Steve’s sexual partners have some of these characteristics, Natasha is now inclined to disagree more than before. What makes Steve Rogers “Captain America” is his ability to look at any situation and come up with an effective strategy to deal with the situation.

For the last 24 hours, they’ve been aware that when she and Steve exposed Hydra to the light by uploading all of SHIELD’s files to the internet, all they accomplished was to send the clandestine terrorist organization scurrying back into the darkness. Yes, some high profile members were exposed to the light like Senator Stern or the soon to be former Secretary of State’s Jonathan Robin, who was just arrested a few hours ago along with 10 other top officials. (One of these individuals just happened to be Melinda’s ex-husband and considering what Clint told her about their divorce, even Natasha hoped he rotted in the Fridge’s successor.) Marcy Carter Jones was responsible for their arrest as part of an investigation that she had been leading since before the implosion. This explained why Stark and Coulson would not allow Natasha to kill the woman for rendering her unconscious last week.

But now, thanks to Grant Ward finally giving them something useful, they knew Hydra was much bigger than that. Hundreds of red dots on the map represented various Hydra bases and research facilities. Every single one of the strongholds would need to be destroyed as well as the tech and people recovered. She was sure that the missing scepter be at one of those strongholds. That meant immediate action was necessary.
While everyone else is trying to process what the data meant, Steve was already putting a plan together to take down Hydra one red dot at a time. Step one was choosing which ‘dots’ needed to be targeted first. Steve already had a list of the top 10 targets to infiltrate with more to be added.

If they still trusted anybody in the federal government, they would turn over the targets as Hill argued, but Natasha, Steve, and Stark knew better. First, the federal government was back in witch hunt mode due to the Georgetown incident a few weeks ago. Despite Stark’s lawyers and her Congressional testimony, the probability of being arrested on site as increased exponentially for anyone not named Tony Stark or Steve Rogers.

In addition, they weren’t sure who they could actually trust, especially in light of a high-level cabinet member turning out to be Hydra. As a side effect of that, Talbot was freed because the Canadian invasion could all be traced to his following orders from those officials with Hydra connections.

They needed to act alone. That seemed quite obvious and meant that the Avengers would need to be reformed. Natasha knew this day was coming when she spoke in Congress for the first time post implosion. They would be needed to protect the world from things that they weren’t yet ready to handle, but apparently Natasha herself would not be needed. This was explained to her as she sat in Coulson’s office/situation room with Stark, his doctor sister, May and Steve. The supposedly great strategically minded Captain America wanted her to stay behind in DC. She was not happy and was starting to question her earlier faith in his strategic abilities.

“What is the advantage of me staying behind? I’ve been a member of this team since the beginning and we are used to working together, including several months of just me and Steve working together. I shouldn’t be forced to stay behind in DC, especially because I’ve infiltrated literally hundreds of places like this before. You need my experience.” Natasha argued.

“Yes, you have a lot of experience with similar missions, but so have other agents who are here.” Steve said looking directly at Melinda. “However, you’re the only one that Ward has warmed up to at all. We wouldn’t even have this intel without you. We need you to stay here to get more information from him. That is the strategic advantage of you staying behind.” Steve had a valid point and she knew that.

If Clint were here, he would point out the same thing. Instead, he was checking up on his kids one last time before it would become an extreme luxury again, because of course he was going.

“If you’re going to bench me, then who will take my place. Who is going to do the Lullaby Protocol with Bruce?” Who will watch Clint’s back when I’m not there to do it? But she doesn’t ask that question.
“Since both Bruce and Hulk like me, I think I can take care of lullaby duty or we can even see if Simmons can do it, if Banner would prefer I not control both the Lullaby and the Veronica protocols. Those two really bonded during lab time, so she might be able to pull off a lullaby. We really need to change the name of that,” Stark remarked. Natasha agreed.

“How about Operation Naptime?” Steve responded with a glare at Stark’s suggestion.

“Okay, mission first and renaming protocol so I am not reminded of Hydra stealing my sperm to make their army of who knows what later.” Stark quipped.

“Melinda, I want you to come with us instead.” That explains why she was in the meeting. “You are a seasoned specialist with much of the same training as Natasha and you’ve worked with Clint before. You and I have spent a lot of time sparring together, so you know my style and I know yours.”

“So that’s what they’re calling it now.” Stark mumbled under his breath with a snicker.

“I think you can easily perform the same function on the team.” Steve finished now glaring at Stark.

What was left unsaid was that May now had the super soldier serum in her system or at least some aspects of it in her system, which meant she was stronger and recovered faster than Natasha which actually made her more of an asset in the field.

“So, if you take May, who will be running SHIELD when Coulson is off recruiting others? Maybe it would be best if she stayed behind for that reason. I know it’s not something we want to consider, but the captive may respond more to Agent Skye then even me. He may even know something about her parents, which could be helpful in other regards, and I know he’s not going to tell me that.” Natasha suggested.

“Dr. Suarez was very adamant in her opinion that nobody from Ward’s old team should be allowed anywhere near him. She’s already pissed at your little stunt yesterday.” The ‘so am I’ was left unsaid, but she could hear it in Steve’s tone. Maybe that was the real reason she was being benched.

“It did get us a map full of Hydra targets.” Stark remarked, earning him a glare from his sister and another glare from Steve. This time Stark responded by kissing Steve on the mouth gently. Natasha fought very hard not to roll her eyes at that unprofessional display.
“I spoke to Coulson.” Steve said pulling out of the kiss. “He’s okay with you being Acting Director. Honestly, he’s the one who suggested May going instead of you.”

And that’s when it clicked in Natasha’s mind. In case the worst-case scenario happened, Coulson wanted her there to pull the trigger. More accurately, he didn’t want May or Clint to see what he could become.

“If you’re going to make Romanoff Acting Director, she shouldn’t be here alone. Maybe Antoine and Skye should come back, especially if you’re planning to stash me up there anyway.” Dr. Triplett suggested. “This place is short staffed as it is, even if we do get a few more people trickling in every day.”

"Someone needs to keep an eye on Janice." Tony argued.

“Because of her medical condition. Guess what? I’m a neurologist. There is no point in wasting them up there when I can do the job. I might be able to spot what’s wrong faster than my son. If you’re forcing me to hide because Hydra has a price on my head, I might as well be useful.” The doctor argued. “Look, I could start a clinic up there under another name. I know your AI is talented enough to set up a new identity for me complete with medical license.” Natasha is not even surprised that Triplett is playing on her brother’s vanity.

“It’s not a bad idea. Actually, I’m kind of planning something along those lines. Dad had a warehouse about 15 miles north of the city which has been vacant ever since we stopped using it for weapon storage. Steve and I have been talking about turning it into another Avenger facility. While Arlington is going to be useful after it’s completed, it is still an urban area. We need a place away from civilians for some of what we do, like hold training.” All valid points.

"It would be good to have someplace to patch people up, that would not result in leading the military straight to the main base." May commented.

"You could oversee the new upstate facility in the meantime." Tony suggested and Steve agreed.

“Fine. I’ll stay and be the Acting Director but if I’m doing this, I do want agents Triplett and Skye back by the end of the week. I don’t want to be the only specialist here in case aliens attack Congress.” Natasha finally acquiesced.
“Because you would be way too tempted to let the aliens eat Congress.”

“Tony!” Steve admonished his boyfriend as his sister elbowed him.

“Stephanie, that hurts. Natasha, you know you would be tempted to let them all die between the Hydra members and the deadbeat dads like Senator Ward. Although speaking of aliens, does anyone know where the God of Thunder is? Apparently, he’s still not taking anybody’s calls. He would kind of be useful right now if we’re going to be looking for the scepter his brother used to mind fuck us all.”

“Until you create a phone that can communicate with Asgard, I think we’re on our own.” Natasha commented. She was equally annoyed. Thor should be with them on this because his brother was the one who brought the scepter down to earth in the first place. Unfortunately, nobody had been in contact with the God of Thunder since a week before SHIELD imploded.

"Which means at the very least you need another flyer.” May said pointedly.

“Very true. And as much as I would so love to get Rhodey on loan from the US military, that’s not an option. Especially with the Air Force thinking it’s a good idea to bring Talbot back and the SHIELD agent witch hunt back in full swing. Hydra is fucking everywhere and the only people I trust at the moment are in this building which is mostly due to everybody having gone through at least two polygraphs.” Stark commented. “And even then it’s not complete trust, not even for family members.” Because in this business, you trust no one. Natasha thinks to herself.

"What about Wilson?” Natasha suggested. “He did well in DC.”

"He’s looking for a Barnes in a haystack. Although, I did make him spiffy new wings and gave him a couple of shiny new toys to help.” Stark commented.

"That’s an easy problem to solve, get Sharon to take his place.” Triplett suggested.

"Why? Isn’t she busy already?” Steve asked, probably because he never considered the possibility.

“Pretending to be Trista’s girlfriend which she can do in her sleep. Like your point earlier with bringing May instead of Agent Romanoff, Sharon can find Barnes just as easily as Wilson maybe more so because of her training and connections, but nobody else can fly the armor. You’re going to
need that if you’re going to be storming Hydra enclaves. As somebody who spent several months in one, I can tell you they’re not the easiest places in the universe to find.

"Well, maybe with some training, I could get Simmons in one of the suits." May responded with a glare to Stark.

“Okay, I won’t put any of your children in danger.

“We don’t have time for that anyway if we want to leave as soon as possible.” May pointed out.

“We’re not going to leave for a couple of days. Not until Coulson gets back from meeting with a few contacts. I don’t want to go into this completely blind.” Nor should they.

“And I need to get the rest of our supplies and goodies together. They don’t know that we know, so we have some time to prepare to do this right.”

“Still not enough time.” Natasha pointed out.

"I’ll talk to Sam, but if he’s in the middle of a lead, we’ll think of something else." Steve finally acquiesced.

"And I’ll talk to Sharon. She already put in her notice at the CIA, so she is available for her new position at Stark Industries." Apparently the agency had made a big deal about Sharon’s new live in girlfriend working for the estranged wife of a suspected terrorist. That was in the notes that Coulson passed to her. Of course staying behind also meant that she would be in direct contact with Trista, which would actually be helpful in determining how they should tell Stark about his other unknown sister. She had under two weeks left.

"Okay, that means the team is going to be Sam, Tony, Bruce, May, Clint, and me." Steve sighed.

"With Simmons on the ground with us as medic/tech support as well as functioning as our liaison with Maria, I’m going to go ahead and send her up to NYC later today to start getting things ready and to follow up on another lead that she got from looking at some of our government’s other failed super soldier attempts." Tony added. Natasha wondered what that lead was. It was probably related to the DNA analysis. JARVIS was now keeping her in the dark about that.
"That will leave Campbell and Hand-Cline here for medical support here with Stephanie on standby in New York." Steve pointed out.

"Dr. Cho is available." Tony amended.

"For the Avengers anyway." Natasha remarked. "Don’t we need the director to okay this or am I able to do it since I’m the AD?" She asked.

"Phil already talked to Steve and agreed that whatever you decided would be what we were going with," May told the group. "It’s a solid plan, especially with Romanoff, Agent Triplett, and Skye remaining behind as backup." Natasha concurred which is why she finally acquiesced.

"I also have a suit for Leo. Just in case." Because of course he did.

"Somebody’s a little overprotective." Triplett teased. Once again Natasha was surprised at how easily they slipped into a sibling dynamic.

"Of course I am, considering Hydra keeps going after my family. I’m hoping that my son’s mother will be the last actual casualty," Natasha hoped that as well.

"So when do I leave for Rembrandt?"

“I have you booked on a commercial flight leaving from Dulles at 3 PM tonight." Stark’s AI tells his sister.

“That is so unfair. I'm going to miss my nephew's birthday party.” Triplett actually pouted.

“We will freeze you a slice of cake, if we do cake. I probably should ask what he wants or even if he celebrates his birthday. I’ll do it tomorrow. Maybe.” Tony babbled.

“Probably a good idea. Will I be traveling to New York by myself?” Stephanie asked.
"How uncomfortable would you be with Agent McKenzie pretending to be your husband?" Tony asked.

"Extremely, considering he had sex with my son. That’s going to be a hard no baby brother especially because you’re only sending him with me because you don’t want him to have sex with your son. Mack is a super sweet guy, however…”

“It sounds extra-creepy when you say it like that.” Tony interjected.

“That’s because it is creepy baby brother.”

“You’re just loving finally being the older sibling.” Stark remarked.

“So much. You have no idea the torture they put me through.” Dr. Triplett remarked almost joking.

“Well since Agent Mack is in no guess you can take one of the brothers K. It feels like they’re multiplying.”

“You are so much eviler. Now I’m really regretting suggesting Sharon for Bucky duty. I should’ve gone with Marcy.”

“You could still go with Marcy.” Tony suggested.

“I’ll take one of the brothers K. Killing a sibling is frowned upon.” Natasha wasn’t sure Triplett was joking.

“Do you need me for anything else? Apparently, I have an agency to run.” Natasha asked becoming impatient.

“No, I just need to discuss a few things that Simmons found. Actually, we can do that elsewhere.” Tony responded.

“How about my quarters, since I need to pack.” Stephanie joked and Natasha took that as her cue to
Stephanie wasn’t expecting a hug from her son after being separated for weeks. Actually, she was expecting angry glares at the bare minimum. She was almost glad they would be heading back to DC in a few days because that would mean she would be given a reprieve from the fallout of telling him everything and yet he was hugging her. She’s pretty sure that he almost crushed her ribs.

"I’m not going to disappear if you let go." She told Antoine.

"I’m just glad that you’re okay. You are actually okay?" He asked, still hugging her.

“Yes. The bullet scars have all healed up.” Thank God for the accelerated healing factor. “Which is good because you’re squeezing me hard enough that the stitches would have popped if I wasn’t.” That made Antoine finally ease up.

"Sorry about that.” Antoine quickly pulled away.

"It’s okay. Emotions get high when you’re undercover for a while, but you’ll be going home soon.” Judging by the way her son was blinking at her, Agent Romanoff did not pass that along.

"Why? We still need to keep observing Janice."

“Change of plans. I’ll brief you more later, but basically they need you and Skye back in DC and I am going to watch over Janice.”

"You’re not an agent." Antoine said concerned.

"No, but I am a doctor and I think that’s what is needed here.” Antoine looked at her for a moment, but he knew that she is right. “If it makes you feel better, I will have another agent with me.”

“A little bit.”

“Who will be pretending to be your brother-in-law because somebody decided it would be easier for
me to pretend to be your sister than your mom.” Stephanie told him with a sigh.

“Seriously whose idea was that?” Antoine asked amused.

“Your un… It was Tony’s idea.” Stephanie corrects herself, but it was too late. This wasn’t how she wanted to break the fact that his uncle was now Tony Stark.

“I knew that before I left. Or at least I had a theory and Sharon confirmed said theory. We have text messaged a few times.” Antoine explained. Again, this doesn’t surprise her because Sharon and Antoine have a system to stay in contact during undercover missions. It’s why she freaked out so badly when nobody was in contact with them for weeks after SHIELD fell.

“Of course you did. And of course she did. How much did your cousin tell you? Do you know the truth about your parentage? The real truth?”

“More than I actually wanted to know. Like why Aunt Marcy tried to kill Grant Ward.” Antoine tells her.

“Unfortunately, she wasn’t successful.” Stephanie would have enjoyed that.

“That’s a pity. So who did you end up with? Hunter?” Stephanie wished.

“No, he is babysitting the secret love child of Christopher Ward.” They were currently relocated to one of Tony’s many properties in DC due to bullets being fired in the door of the last place.

"Who then?” Antoine asked. That’s when Billy knocked on the front door. What happened next was Billy hugged Antoine and called him son, because the idiot forgot the changing cover, and it was probably only her son’s training as a specialist that kept him from reacting or possibly throwing up. It was a near thing.

"I’m so glad Skye is busy watching Janice right now." She heard her son mumble under breath after the encounter was over with. Stephanie was almost inclined to agree.

"Why did this happen?" Antoine asked once her fake husband went to talk to Skye about something
she obviously wasn’t briefed on.

“Your Uncle Tony is ridiculously paranoid and would not let me come here by myself. Also, because Agent May is now an Avenger and Natasha Romanoff is acting director of SHIELD, I had little recourse.” Stephanie explained annoyed.

“It’s not paranoia if it’s true. Hydra did try to kidnap you. Again.” She could see the worry on Antoine’s face.

“I know, but baby at least they were significantly less successful. I tried to point that out to Tony, but unfortunately he’s my boss right now. Look, it could’ve been worse. The other options were your ex-boyfriend pretending to be my husband or coming with Marcy.”

“I find neither of those options appealing."

“Neither did I, which is why you get a Koenig for a brother-in-law which is so much better than stepdad.” She was very happy with May for pointing out that it would be easier to pass her off as her son’s sister.

"And what did your actual husband have to say about that?” Antoine asked.

“He couldn’t stop laughing, according to Virginia. She is my contact to the outside world since she’s the one funding my clinic through the Maria Stark Foundation. Right now, I just want to eat something and have a conversation about something other than Star Wars.” That’s when Antoine showed her to her room for the next unknown amount of time.

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“So, your Aunt Stephanie said I should actually ask you what you would like to do for your birthday, instead of just planning something ridiculous like an excursion to my private island and a cake made in your likeness from Charm City cakes. So what would you like to do for your birthday tomorrow?” Tony asked and Leo actually had no idea how to reply.

His birthday had never been something special for him, especially during the early years. It was mostly an excuse for Alastair to be even more of a bastard. His worst beatings were usually connected to his birthday. Alastair liked to blame everything going wrong in his life on Leo. Knowing that all the abuse was done in the name of Hydra didn’t make him feel less bitter about the experience. After Alastair left (or was murdered by Marcy more accurately), he would get a cupcake and maybe a small present if his mom could afford it. Last year he got a dozen cupcakes from
Simmons (blood orange with chocolate ganache) and a call from his mother.

Deep down that was what he wanted again this year, but neither was really an option. Even if things weren’t awkward with Simmons now that she knew the Grant Ward truth, she was already in New York preparing for the mission that he’s not supposed to know about. The phone call from his mother wasn’t happening because she was killed by Hydra less than three months ago. It was still so fresh that sometimes he forgot like today. Tomorrow would be his first birthday without her. He didn’t really want to celebrate without his mum.

Yet, Tony was still here, purposely still here. Leo was very aware of the mission that he needed to begin as soon as possible. Generally, he had other responsibilities too. He was well aware his father kept putting off various board meetings because he doesn’t want to leave him after Hydra tried to kidnap his recently discovered aunt. Pepper had actually called him about that, thinking he might be able to get his father to meet with Katie from the board after canceling twice.

“You don’t have to… do anything.” Leo stammered out.

“Of course I do. You only turned 27 once. We should celebrate.”

“I can’t leave the base.” Because Hydra tried to kidnap his aunt a week and a half ago.

“Point. Which is probably why the trip to the private island would actually be practical, but I’m guessing you’re not up to that.” Leo shook his head. “And it’s not exactly like we can get catering delivered here. Well, I could, but the Russian ninja would kill me and Agent Scary would help her hide the body. We could have obscene amounts of food brought down from our cover restaurant. Their bacon poppers are ridiculously good. Steve can bake, I mean really bake, no box cake mixes required.”

“You don’t have to stay; you could leave for the mission. Simmons already did.” Even though things were awkward between the two, Simmons was now speaking to him in emails that he wasn’t entirely sure that she was intending for him to read. He didn’t want her to miss his birthday. He needed something to not be different. And yet she wasn’t here.

“Only because Simmons found some interesting things in the old SSR files and is following up in New York. Besides, Coulson is coming in the morning with more intel and maybe more bodies - hopefully more bodies.” They really did need more people.
“Are you mad that Simmons is not here? I can ask her to come back.” Tony offered. Leo shook his head.

“Although you’ll be happy to know that she did not forget about you.” Tony says handing Leo an envelope that had already been opened. “I did read the card though to make sure she didn’t accidentally on purpose tell you anymore deep dark family secrets.”

“Are there more secrets?” Leo asked as he pulled the card out of the envelope. It was a self-made card with a picture of the two from the Academy on the front. Happier times. Less confusing times.

“Not that I’m aware of, but she is in charge of running your DNA through every database known to humanity to find out who your other genetic parents are. At this point, the only thing were sure of is you are not genetically related to Alastair Fitz in any way.”

*Thank God.* Leo thought to himself.

“Did I ever tell you that I met him once? At least I think I did, if Jarvis’ aging software is working appropriately. He pretended to be your mom’s brother. I guess he was her handler, maybe? Total asshole.” Tony explained.

“Probably, Alastair.” Fitz mumbled to himself as he started to read the card.

*It’s been a hard year. I should probably apologize again for suggesting we go into the field, but it did bring you to your real father in a roundabout way and kept us from Hydra. I’m sorry I haven’t been the friend that you needed me to be. The type you could tell things to. I’m really sorry about how you found out about your mom and the truth about your dad. I promise next time I find something out, I’ll tell you and Triplett directly.*

*I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for your birthday this year, but at the same time I feel like I need to do everything possible to take Hydra down for hurting you in so many ways. I wish I could bring Alastair Fitz back from the dead so I could kill him again.*

*Anyway, there’s an entire tray of cupcakes in the main freezer for you. I hope Sam K doesn’t eat them all.*

*Anyway, Happy Birthday. I hope we can start really talking to each other again when I get back.*
Maybe things will be safe enough that we can actually go to lunch. I hope so.

She was rambling which almost made him smile. She left him an entire tray of cupcakes which was nice. At least he had one thing similar to last year’s birthday which bizarrely enough happened the day before he and Simmons joined Team Coulson. It surprised him that it was only a year. Everything was different. He was different.

“So you apparently like your card because you’re not ripping it to pieces and I promise the cupcakes are still there. I should’ve brought one in with me.”

“Probably.” Leo shrugged.

“We will sneak in later. I don’t care what we do as long as I’m here. Honestly, Howard was never there for my birthdays or any other holidays. And let’s not even talk about the last Christmas because definitely too much baggage there. I just kind of want to not do that with you. I missed the last 26th birthdays, so I’m going to do my best not to miss the next 26.”

“You didn’t know.” Leo tried to reassure his dad.

“Because I listened to Obadiah and let myself be lied to and… The two Ferraris that I picked out as possible birthday presents are not going to alleviate that guilt.”

“You’re getting me a Ferrari?” He asked kind of surprised.

“I did, but I canceled the order. I thought you rather build something yourself so Agent Mack is picking out a fixer-upper that happens to be a 1962 BMW convertible. You know, something to keep yourself occupied with while you’re still in rehab.” Leo didn’t know what to say about that. “Hopefully, I’ll be done with Hydra in time to help you make her fly.”

“I hate to interrupt this moment, but Kathleen is currently at the restaurant above the Playground.” Jarvis interrupted.

“That’s not ominous at all. Did she bring Pepper with her?” Tony remarked under breath.
“No. Kathleen would like to speak with you immediately. Apparently, you’ve missed two appointments with her in the last two weeks and she has decided to come to you.” Jarvis explained.

“And I don’t even want to know how she found me.” Tony sighed.

“Apparently, you were created here.” The AI replied.

“I’m not even surprised. So do you want to go up and meet your… Let’s just go with step-grandmother right now. I think if it had been legal back then, Grandma Maria would have divorced Howard to marry her.” Leo looked at him slightly shocked.

“Wait, did I tell you that Maria was really gay and Howard was her beard?” Tony asked.

“Not in those words.” Or any real words at all.

“Okay, maybe there are some family secrets left to be shared. Kate probably knows more of them than I do. I think she even knew about you before I did. Howard told her of the possibility. I think she would like to meet you as well, which would be good because I don’t want to deal with her by myself. We are probably going to have a ridiculously awkward conversation about the fact that I know that I know that she was actually my gestational carrier.”

“More secrets?”

“Yes, but in my defense, I’ve known that for about as long as I’ve known that Peggy Carter is your grandmother. Well, one of them. You have a ridiculous amount of grandmothers.”

Leo was realizing that yet, he followed behind anyway.

Xxxxx

Trip and Skye were originally going to stay three more days, but when Skye realized that she could be back in DC in time for Fitz is 27th birthday, they decided to leave early. Fitz needed her due to Simmons ‘abandoning him for the Avengers after accidentally telling him he was conceived in a petri dish’. Trip wanted to leave before he accidentally found out something similar.
They were already packed and ready to go even though Trip was a little sad that he was heading back. He was really starting to like being the Carters. Trip always knew that eventually he would have to go back to his real life, but he didn’t think it would be because the Avengers needed to start actively hunting Hydra since they now had a laundry list of possible locations to choose from. This meant that his presence was required back in DC.

He was a little surprised that his mom was his relief (along with one of the brothers K). It made sense for her to take his spot. She couldn’t be in DC or Manhattan or any other place that was extremely obvious. It would just make it easy for Hydra to try to kidnap her again. It was the whole reason why he suggested that his mom come visit them in the first place, but he didn’t think his mom would be working while hiding.

"So what do I need to know about Janice? Or rather, what did you not put in the report?" Stephanie asked after dinner with Janice herself.

The whole purpose of the dinner was to explain why they decided to settle in DC instead. Essentially they told Janice that his “sister” was tapped to start a new clinic in the city. Due to his really complicated relationship with her, they were choosing elsewhere to settle, especially because his uncle offered Skyler a job in the DC Metro. Skye was the one to explain this whole thing in hushed tones when Stephanie went to the restroom. Of course Skye also asked her to keep an eye on Stephanie and Janice agreed which would work in their favor in the long run.

“Why do you think that I left things out of the report? I even included the fact that Janice asked for a threesome.” He did leave stuff out of the report, but he would prefer not to tell her. Maybe she would just drop it.

“Because stuff like that is benign and distracting, but it makes who ever actually reading the report think that you included everything, because why would you leave something out if you are willing to include something so embarrassing. However, we both know that your grandma taught you better than that.” Trip sighed at his mother’s words. Of course she wouldn’t drop it; she knew him way too well.

“Janice will probably wake up sometime between 1 and 2 AM to paint or draw the unidentified Hydra glyphs. Her sessions usually last for 45 to 75 minutes. Afterwards, she usually falls asleep on the couch.” Trip reluctantly explains.

“Does she even remember doing this?” His mom asked.
“From things she has said the Skye, we don’t think that she does. She doesn’t even remember the artwork in the morning, but she doesn’t find it alarming.”

“Because they programmed her to see it that way,” Stephanie said annoyed.

“Unfortunately.” Trip mumbled under breath worriedly. Unlike the others, Skye didn’t have her mind messed with.

“Has Skye done any type of similar carvings or writings herself?” Trip wasn’t surprised she asked that question, considering she actually knows that Skye has the GH serum in her blood.

“Not yet.” Thank God. “How’s the director doing?” Trip asked to redirect.

"Not for over a month.” Trip exhaled in relief. “Dr. Simmons hypothesized that exposure to certain antibodies from the super soldier serum may have countered the effects of the GH 323.” And we are just going to not ask questions about why vast quantities of the super soldier serum got into the system because Trip never wants to know if his boss had an orgy with his uncle and the man’s boyfriend. There are just some things he would never want to know … ever.

"So if I want to make sure Skye doesn’t have a reaction, I should just have sex with her?” Trip joked, sort of.

"Blow job, actually, with her on the receiving end, of course. It’s the best way to get the antibodies in her system and we so did not just have this conversation.” His mom actually shuddered and so did Trip a little bit. “If you do decide to do that and include Janice just to save her, please do not put it in any reports.”

“First of all, I wouldn’t do that. If I did, I definitely would not put anything about it in writing.” His mom just gave him her patented, ‘I don’t believe a word you’re saying to me look’.

"Not with Janice. For Skye, you would.”

“I’m not...I...” He couldn’t begin to even articulate what he was thinking in regard to Skye.
“I’m well aware you are pansexual. Besides, anybody is an improvement on your last major relationship. Yes, I will speak ill of the dead because he’s still a prick.”

“I was going to say I am not to sleep with a coworker.” His mom gives him that look again.

“I’m not going to sleep with a coworker, again.” He re-phrases.

“Don’t lie to mommy because I know better. You can find love in the strangest places, you shouldn’t just discount it arbitrarily.”

“I don’t think it’s called love when you’re being held by Hydra and they are one of your captors.” He said, thinking back to the story of how he came into existence. He still doesn’t believe it, even though Skye has found nothing yet to disprove it.

“I think Natalie was there against her will as much as I was. She took a bullet for me to get out of there. That alone should prove that it was real in some regards.”

“I thought you told me my father’s name was Nat and you know capable of actually being a father?”

“Actually, I just told you that I had relationship with Nat which is true because Nat is short for Natalie.”

“I’m well aware of how to lie by omission.” It’s what happens when you grow up in a house of spies.

“Shit!”

“Since you repeatedly said you were not raped…”

“Which I swear on your grandmother’s life is the absolute truth. It was about the only thing that they didn’t do to me.” Stephanie told him.

“I have to ask if I was created in a petri dish like my cousin and his father before him?” He asked
99% sure he already knew the answer and he really didn’t want to.

“Did your Uncle Tony call?” Trip was going to take that as a ‘yes, you were created in a petri dish’.

“Simmons has a big mouth or Jarvis is accidentally/on purpose emailing us her therapy letters.” He explained.

“I’m going to go with accidentally/on purpose.” His mom sighed. “So your Uncle Tony and I have had a long conversation about my tendency to lie to you a lot and he was probably worried I was going to back out again so he had his AI do his dirty work for him.”

“I kind of like the fact that Uncle Tony knows you better than most of your other siblings already. You just keep lying.” Trip interrupted angrily.

“I never said she was the one who got me pregnant, I just told you that we had a relationship which was 100% true. She kept me from falling apart in that hell. She was one who helped me escape because I loved you from the moment I knew you were there and I wasn’t going to let them have you.” He wanted to believe that part. He really did. Maybe deep down he does, but he’s still afraid.

“She was still part of Hydra.” How exactly did this happen Mom?

“If she was, I don’t think it was entirely her choice. She was my age and probably only there because of her father, who was one of the bastards who experimented on me. I don’t think she was a true believer, because otherwise she would not have died for us.”

“So is she one of my other parents? Are you even one of my biological parents?” His mom responded by pulling a Stark phone out of her bag.

“Obviously, Simmons told you about the three parent embryos?”

“Yes.”

“Tony is in so much trouble for using his AI and his assistant like this.” His mom mumbled under her breath angrily. “Yes, you were created via artificial insemination and you were created with DNA
from three people instead of two. However, they did use my DNA so you are mine. Although you’re only 25% me genetically, you are all my son.” He blinked shocked but not shocked, not really hearing her words.

Trip has always known that he wasn’t like other kids. It’s hard not to realize that, when you realize your scraped knees managed to completely heal themselves within 48 hours. The acknowledgment of the super soldier antibodies in his system finally, provided him with a logical reason for why he wasn’t like everyone else. But obviously there was more to it than just that.

“They replaced my mitochondrial DNA with that of another person which is why you are only a quarter me. I have an MD and I was still a little loss about what happened but everything you need to know is on this ridiculously encrypted and program to self-destruct Stark phone. Congratulations, your family tree is even more ridiculous than we once believed and we’re still missing a branch.” His mother said as she placed the Stark phone in his hand, but he was too shocked to do anything more than grab it from her.

So this Natalie is my other mother? He wanted to ask that question, but he doesn’t. Instead, he runs out of the room as fast as possible straight into Skye, who probably heard more of that conversation than he wanted her to.

To be continued
“So, how much did you hear?” Trip asked, his voice almost on the edge of tears. That doesn’t surprise Skye, not one bit. Maybe it’s a good thing that she’s leading him to the garage with the already packed car. At this point, they should probably leave. Plus she really, really wants to avoid Sam. Or was it Billy? She gets them confused.

“Not that much. I just know that you and your cousin Fitz have another thing in common.” I also know that oral with swallowing will probably keep the alien math carving down to a minimum, but I’m going to ignore the fact that I heard that part of the conversation. We will never talk about it, ever, even though part of me really wants to.

“Great.” As Trip exhales in relief, she knows she made the right decision not to talk about that. This conversation was going to be awkward already.

“Although in my defense, I knew that before I walked into the room. Actually, it was the reason why I was walking into the room. I got another email from Simmons. She’s trying to find an ex-SHIELD agent named Elijah Bradley who may or may not be a relative of yours. Sometimes I wonder how she actually ended up in a spy agency. My NSA friend is never that careless.” Skye said with a sigh as she sat down in the passenger seat. Apparently, she’s still banned from driving. Trip quickly slid in the driver seat beside her.

“It’s not her fault. I don’t think she intended for us to read that or anything that she’s been sending. I’m pretty sure my Uncle Tony has been sending you Simmons’ therapy letters to clue me in on everything my mom won’t tell me.” Trip explained.
“In that case, she’s a bad spy for not using hard copy and then promptly burning everything especially when your boss is a computer genius, who probably monitors everything.” Skye huffed out right before JARVIS interrupted.

“Mister Stark is actually not responsible for the forwarding of those letters, I am.” JARVIS confessed. Of course the AI was listening on their conversation.

“Why?” Trip asked.

“She was doing it as an exercise at the suggestion of Dr. Triplett, but was unable to send any of the letters to you. I chose to forward them to you on her behalf. I’m quite concerned about her. She has been displaying many symptoms of depression as well as manic behavior. In addition, her alcohol consumption is quite high. I believe that she is in need of emotional support. She was afraid to reach out especially after accidentally telling Leo about his mother’s death.”

“Are you going all Skynet on me JARVIS?” Skye asked, not sure she was joking. If anybody was going to accidentally build an AI that would kill them all, it would probably be Tony.

“Taking care of those under my charge is part of my coding,” JARVIS replied.

“At least tell me they are encrypted.” Trip asked the AI.

“I resent the implications. Of course the messages are highly encrypted.” The AI replied almost upset.

“Do you want to talk about what you just found out?” Skye asked.

“No.” Trip answer too quickly.

“I’m not even going to ask you if you want to talk to your mom again right now.”

“Good choice,” Trip said with a nervous laugh.
“Do you want to read Simmons’ latest email?”

“Not really, but I probably need to at least know the basics. Summary JARVIS?” Trip asked the AI.

“According to files recently discovered by Dr. Simmons, Agent Bradley’s grandfather, Isaiah Bradley, was a nonconsensual participant in the US government experiment to re-create the super soldier formula during the early 1940s. Since, unlike your mother, you have two slightly different forms of the super soldier antibody in your system. Dr. Simmons hypothesized that you were exposed from two different sources. She believes that one of your other genetic donors either participated in such a program or at the very least is a descendent of such a participant.” The AI explained.

“And so now she’s in Manhattan trying to chase down some wild lead?” Skye asked concerned.

“The Bronx. It’s not that wild. I worked with Agent Bradley before he left SHIELD and we look so much alike we went undercover as twins once. I don’t even know why I didn’t think of the possibility before?”

“Because you’ve only recently found out that you were created as part of various efforts to re-create the super soldier serum. But silver lining, your mom loves you enough to make sure SHIELD and subsequently Hydra never laid a finger on you.” Trip responded to her words with a glare.

“Did Simmons compare my DNA sample to Eli?”

“No. Despite being a former SHIELD agent, Mr. Bradley, codename Patriot X, did not have a DNA sample as part of the SHIELD database. Nor was it in the toolbox.” JARVIS explained.

“That’s not good.” Skye mumbled.

“Considering Hydra was inside SHIELD like an evil multi-headed parasite, it was probably for the best. I’m not even surprised considering my sample wasn’t there. Fitz’s sample was also removed along with those from most of the Avengers.”

“Because apparently Nick Fury was a paranoid bastard who knew something was about to happen.”
Skye supplied.

“Always. Elijah was on the Avenger Initiative short list.”

“And now Simmons is on her way to find him and probably get that DNA sample. Is that safe? I mean, I’m pissed at Simmons, but I don’t want her to accidentally walk into the Hydra lion’s den.” Skye explained.

“Eli has about the same probability of being Hydra as I did. His Grandma Faith would roll over in her grave at the thought. This is a woman who wore a full burqa to her world religion classes after 9/11 to make people confront their own subconscious bigotry. Miss Faith definitely raised her baby not to be a fascist. But you’re right, she shouldn’t go there alone. Things are still too raw for former agents.” Trip sighed.

“JARVIS, please email Simmons and tell her to meet us at the tower in two hours. Add not to go to Eli’s house without us. I want to be there.”

“So we are going to Manhattan?” Skye asked confused. “That may take a little while with this traffic.”

“If you utilize the cloaking and flight capabilities of the SUV you are currently sitting and you can be at the tower in 25 minutes.” The AI suggested.

“Tell Simmons to wait for us.”

“I’ll email your mom so she doesn’t worry.”

“Don’t tell her about Eli yet.”

“Of course not. We should wait until we have something.”

“Thank you.” Trip said, squeezing her hand.

Xxxx
“I like the booth elevator. It’s very classic spy movie.” Kate said walking into the base. Tony doesn’t doubt that she’d been there before, because she did not get lost at all on the walk to the lounge. He hoped that by the time they get there JARVIS would have the place cleared out.

“If this was a classic spy movie, it would have been a barbershop.” Tony snarked.

“Havana.” Leo said from behind.

“I am not surprised.”

“You must be Leo.” Katie pulls his son into a hug. Of course she goes for a hug. She’s a hugger when not around other board members. “You’ve grown so much over the years.”

“How do you know me?” Leo spluttered out as he pulls out of the embrace.

“Howard gave me a photo of you and your mom right before… Right before it all came apart.” They don’t like talking about December 1991, even though it’s been nearly 23 years. It will probably be worse this year. Tony is actually thankful to be so busy with Fitz’s birthday and Hydra, that he completely forgot about Howard’s birthday this year. He would’ve been 97 last week, if things were different.

“So you knew back then?” What did Howard tell you? When did you know? Why the fuck did you never tell me?

“I knew that Howard was checking a paternity claim, but he was sure it was just a formality. Then the accident happened and we had other things to worry about. So I left it to Obadiah.” Kate explained. He wasn’t exactly satisfied with that explanation, but he also wasn’t ready to ask too many questions just yet.

“Yes, except the accident was actually an assassination.” Tony remarked bitterly, trying not to think of recently unearthed intel.

“We know that now, but not then.” The woman said sadly.
“Why didn’t you… I don’t even know how to phrase the question.” Tony said shaking.

“Why didn’t I tell you about Leo, if I knew the truth?” Kathleen said instead.

“Exactly.”

“Because your father had always been paranoid, he had Marcy running the test as well the other lab. I was the one who got the results along with Obadiah. Claiming he didn’t want the tabloids to figure out who I really was to you, allegedly because the stock prices were a mess from losing Howard, he said he would take care of it.” Kathleen explained.

“By lying through his fucking teeth and sending Fitz back to live with that abusive…” Tony stopped speaking when Leo grabs his hand.

“I’m okay. I survived.” Leo whispered.

“Obadiah told me you paid off the mother because you weren’t ready to be a dad. You have no idea how sorry I am now that I believed him.”

“You’re sorry. I lost 22 1/2 years of being with my child because you were afraid of stock prices dropping. Why the fuck did you not question his bullshit story?” Tony asked angrily. All the agents in the hallway were looking at him now, but he really didn’t care.

“Considering your parents just died and you were barely drinking age, it seemed really plausible. Tony, you were a fucking mess.”

“Because I thought I just lost my last piece of family. How could you have trusted him? He was only at SI because he was blackmailing Dad about you.” Shit. He hadn’t meant to say that. It just slipped out. Leo was glaring at him.

“I didn’t know that he was blackmailing your dad about my relationship with your mom. No one bothered to tell me that. If I had known, that would’ve sent red flags up before the asshole actually tried to kill you. I definitely wouldn’t have believed him.” She was angry enough that Tony believed her.
“Howard liked to keep his cards close to his chest. The man wasn’t much of a sharer.” As evidenced by the fact that he only recently found out about the stillbirth of Natasha Stark.

“That was the thing that annoyed your mom the most about Howard. She never did figure out why they were such good friends. They really did love each other.” They just didn’t want to actually sleep together without an extra partner. Tony was fine with that, now.

“But I think he told you a lot.”

“Of course he did. They were best friends. And I know a lot of the secrets too and I will tell you what you want to know, but I think you need your boyfriend for this conversation and I need a drink.” Tony wished he could have a stiff drink as well.

“Steve, I can do. The drink is a no because if you drink I’m going to want to drink.”

“I meant tea.” Leo smirked at her comment.

“I’ll put on a kettle or maybe have Steve do it. Leo, can you take Katie to the conference room upstairs?” Because I want Natasha or May to watch this not quite interrogation from the sanctity of Coulson’s office. “That space might work better for this conversation.” Because of all the cameras. Leo escorts her up there while he wordlessly sets everything up with JARVIS’s help including quick texts to Steve, May, and Romanoff.

Xxxxx

Trista had very conflicting emotions when it came to her current undercover assignment. Honestly, she didn’t want to be doing this assignment, but it was necessary. Playing the girlfriend of the friend that she’s had less than platonic feelings about for the last three years was only making her more frustrated with the situation. Playing an alternate version of herself was proving to be slightly more difficult than completely immersing herself into someone fake.

The fact that she hadn’t been a real agent in three years wasn’t making things easy for her either. Technically, Trista never really left SHIELD until SHEILD left her, but for nearly 3 years she had been working as a physical therapist/nursing assistant to keep an eye on a woman who had probably forgotten more secrets than what was released on the Internet a few months ago, during the SHIELD data dump. Despite the dementia, Margaret Carter Jones wasn’t exactly somebody that you wanted to end up in the hands of the enemy.

Perhaps the hardest part of her assignment of keeping an eye on Wolfgang von Strucker’s soon-to-be
ex-wife was the fact she was such a nice person. She was her boss and yet she would bring Trista sandwiches and other snacks. She brought the office doughnuts and fresh fruit each morning. This shouldn’t surprise Trista because she used to do the same for the staff taking care of her mother at Woodbine.

In the weeks that she’d been observing the woman, Trista hadn’t seen anything that would make her think the woman was Hydra. Then again, she didn’t think Bobbi would turn out to be a traitor either. Natalie hates her husband, but still loves him at the same time. There is definitely no love lost for her father.

Natasha List von Strucker was the type of person that let herself be cried on when she broke the news to her patients about the last round of fertility treatments being unsuccessful. She makes her son fill up the stock room so he doesn’t become in her words ‘a rich idiot with no day job’. She adored Alex despite the fact he wasn’t biologically her son. She’s kind and sweet to everybody. She treats everyone with respect and dignity. That type of behavior doesn’t scream ‘I belong to a terrorist organization started in Nazi Germany’.

God, Natalie even kicked a client out who referred to a lesbian couple also seeking treatment at the clinic by various homophobic and xenophobic slurs. The staff was a rainbow of people from different nations and backgrounds. They already had a summer food drive at the clinic. Natalie even does an IVF lottery for one family a year who couldn’t afford her services otherwise.

Needless to say, it was hard to reconcile this with the fact that this woman is married to the head of Hydra and was raised by his right hand. How can you be related to people like that and not know the truth? What did she know? Is she a part of it? Had her husband or father been in contact with her at all since the fall of SHIELD? At least Trista has an answer to that question, but it was the only one, so far.

Although nice, Natalie was not the type of person who would talk about her problems with the staff even though she knew Trista for a while. Especially when it came to talking about her husband and father. She only really talked to the FBI about it. And even then it wasn’t that much.

Thankfully, the agents were back again and new SHIELD has great eavesdropping equipment that could live stream the conversations several miles away. Currently Trista was pretending to listen to her iPod as she looked at charts. In reality, she was listening to the interrogation going on elsewhere. Fitz tech is awesome. Unfortunately, the interview was repetitive and once again provided them with nothing actionable regarding finding von Strucker or his father-in-law. Natalie’s lawyer was already trying to pull her out. ‘Lawyering up is not an admission of guilt. It just means you’re not stupid.’ Trista told herself.

“Look, I wish I could tell you more.” Natalie said about an hour into the interrogation. “Nobody is
angrier than I am to find out that my husband and father are traitors, but I didn’t know. Hydra hid in plain sight of SHIELD for decades and nobody saw it. So why would I be any different?” Trista could hear the sound of a chair scraping against the floor, which told her that Natalie was trying to leave.

“Because you were having sex with this man for 13 years.” The male agent in the room said. This doesn’t surprise Trista at all.

“Actually, we’ve been fucking for 16 years. We’ve only been married for 13. It will be 14 next month, but next month doesn’t count if I can find where he is to serve the divorce papers. I am sorry Wolf never spilled major intelligence secrets to me when I was riding his dick. Trust me, I want to find the bastard as much as you do.” Natalie told the agents with conviction.

“The fact that you call your husband Wolf should have told you he was never a good person to begin with.” The slimy agent replied.

“I believe the saying is ‘love isn’t brains’. I was blind. He was good to me. He never hit me, never hit Alex even when he decided he wanted to change his first name from Werner.”

“So he was a good husband, but that didn’t mean anything. Where did the Audi that you drove here come from?”

“From being the proprietor of the best fertility clinic in the DC Metro. And before you ask, I got my start up capital from a personal loan from Gideon Malick, Mr. World Security Council member himself, not the First Bank of Hydra. And as I’ve told you many times before, there were not any financial red flags telling me that. There was no unusual amounts of money showing up in our bank account. No lavish trips that I didn’t pay for. No summerhouse in the French Riviera or even Ocean City for that matter. Wolf wasn’t taking unexplained trips all over the world. Everything was work related.” Natalie explained angrily.

“Considering he worked for a terrorist organization, that’s not surprising.” The female agent in the room stated. Trista really needed to find out the names of the two agents, but apparently they introduced themselves to Natalie long before Trista started watching her.

“SHIELD is not now or ever was a terrorist organization. That was Hydra. I know three people outside my soon-to-be ex-husband that work there and they’re all good people. Two of which are set of cousins who I met because they are taking care of their grandmother with Alzheimer’s. She was my mom’s next-door neighbor at the Woodbine rehabilitation center. The other one is now one of my nurses. She also took care of my mom for years. They’re not terrorists. They don’t believe in
Hydra’s take over the world philosophy.” Natalie argued in their defense.

“Well, you married a terrorist, so I don’t think you’re the best judge of character.” The male agent remarked.

“Nobody’s perfect.” Natalie said just as the sound of the chair scraping against the floor could be heard again. “I’m ready to leave Jesse.” A.k.a. Natalie’s lawyer.

“Not yet. We want to ask a few questions about your father.” The male agent stated.

“Well, I know my father even less than I know my husband, so I don’t think I can tell you anything different than I have for the last two months.” Natalie sounded annoyed at this point.

“How can you know your husband better than your own father? You’ve known him three times as long as you’ve known your husband.” The male agent responded.

“My client suffered from retrograde amnesia due to an incident in June of 1986 and does not remember anything before that date.” This is new information to Trista.

“After the doctors cleared me from the fallout of the vacation from hell, I got out of the house and went straight to college. The most time we spent together after that was when I was trying to get the clinic off the ground and that was mostly the smooth things with my investor. After that he stayed away which is what he does best. He hasn’t visited mom since before aliens fell from the sky.”

“You really expect us to believe that?”

“You believe nothing else that my client has said since she notified you of her husband’s involvement in a terrorist organization. Why should you start now? However, this is my client’s truth, whether you choose to believe it or not.” The lawyer responded.

“Could you please elaborate?” The female agent asked.

“We don’t like each other very well. I’ve never felt comfortable around him since coming back from Tahiti. I don’t know why. I’m sure there’s a reason.”
“I mean elaborate about your memory loss?”

“I can get you the police report from Tahiti for more details, but essentially my client was shot in her hotel as what we believe a robbery gone badly and then thrown in the pool. How she survived, I’m not sure.” The lawyer replied

“Do you remember a specific date of when the incident occurred?” The female agent asked.

“It will be in the police report.” The lawyer replied. “If you’re done, my client would like to leave now.”

“We have a few more questions. When was the last time you heard from your husband or father?” The male agent asked.

“My father, I’m not even sure. Maybe I spoke with him on the phone in March. I don’t remember. The week after SHIELD fell apart is when I received plane tickets to Moscow by courier which I turned over to you guys instead of joining him with Alex.”

“Why didn’t you join him?” The female agent asked.

“Love is not everything. I draw the line at being married to a possible Nazi. If he tries to contact me or Alex again, I’ll let you know, but I doubt he will. Wolf was never stupid.”

“And your father?”

“The same.”
“We’re done here.” The lawyer replied angrily. This time Natalie and her lawyer were allowed to leave without being stopped again.

Xxxxx

There are moments when Tony Stark actually acts like the genius he is supposed to be. They are few and far between, but right now Natasha is glad that Tony arranged for her to be able to watch his conversation with Kathleen a.k.a. the only living and consensual Project Lullaby participant that they’re aware of.

He wouldn’t let her be in the room, but she was watching from Coulson’s office, which was now her office since she’s acting director. May was with her, but that was it. She wanted Fitz-Stark to be in here as well, but he wanted to be in the room to give his father support. Or at least that’s what he told her when they refused to go along with her attempt to pull him out. The fact that he’s been holding the man’s hand for the last hour while Steve held the other one points to that being a good decision.

So far they have learned:

Kathleen was actually a former SHIELD agent and Maria Stark’s bodyguard until they fell in love with each other. However, she didn’t become her bodyguard until after Tony was born.

She gave birth to Tony Stark and was technically the first known case of successful in vitro fertilization.

She was one of five participants and the only one successfully impregnated. Even then she miscarried at least once before caring Tony to term.

Howard was unaware that Maria’s egg was not the one actually used until 1986. Howard was the one to discover the truth. He didn’t tell anyone including Katie for several years.

Maria knew before her death, but didn’t care that Tony was not her biological son. She always loved him unconditionally.

Peggy Carter was never informed, at least as far as Katie was aware. They were planning to tell her once they informed Tony of the truth, but the discovery of possible Stark heir delayed that and then December 16, 1991 happened. The letters were left as a failsafe, but of course Stark was too stubborn to open the letters. Natasha wasn’t even surprised.
Apparently, Stark Senior knew something wasn’t quite right with SHIELD and was planning for the family to relocate to the private Stark Island. Being a former SHIELD agent, he brought Kathleen into his confidence. He was trying to make it look like a family vacation.

Unfortunately, Obadiah knew of these plans and well it's not hard to draw conclusions. That was when Stark broke a teacup by throwing it across the room.

“How did Howard find out that I am not Maria’s son?” Stark asked once he was no longer throwing objects at the walls.

“I think I told you already that when she found out about the egg mix up, Maria still considered you her son.” Kathleen sounded annoyed at this point. “She adored you and was looking forward to being a grandmother, even if it was sooner than we all hoped, but it wasn’t your fault. It was Hydra.”

“OK then, how did Howard figure out that Peggy Carter Jones was my egg donor? It didn’t happen until ’86, right?” Tony asked per Natasha’s instructions. Melinda and she had been feeding Stark questions the entire time.

“Yes. Howard was trying to find out who the father of Stephanie’s son was. Because you two were friends, they were kind of all hoping that you two were experimenting with each other so the child wouldn’t be a product of rape. I’m sure you know by now that her pregnancy wasn’t the result of running off with her boyfriend.”

“We know. Also, I’m so happy that even before I knew she was my sister, I never saw Stephanie as anything other than that.” Tony said with a slight shiver.

“Well, we didn’t know that at the time. Not until the DNA test showed that you were related to Stephanie and-the woman who helped Natasha get out of the nursery facility.”

“Her name is Natalie. That’s what Stephanie told me a couple of days ago when she finally went on record about what really happened to her there. Are you saying I’m related to this Natalie?”

“I’m saying that she was Howard’s daughter.”
“So, Hydra stole some of his sperm when they were trying to conceive me? Not surprising. It’s what they do.”

“Howard had Natasha’s grave exhumed. The baby buried there wasn’t your sister.”

“Wait. You’re telling me that my sister was kidnapped and died in 1986 instead of at birth in 1970?

“When they raided the appellation facility, they never found Natalie’s body.” Kathleen explained.

“So she’s alive or at least survived what happened in 1986?” Tony asked after May prompted him this time. Natasha already knew better.

“Howard believed so. He was looking for her when he died. I think that’s part of the reason why he was killed.” Kathleen answered somberly.

That’s when Natasha realize that she was going to have to tell Stark the truth now. Shit!

Xxxx

“JARVIS, I can’t believe you actually sent my private thoughts to Skye. I wasn’t planning to...”Jemma was so upset with the AI that she could not continue speaking. This is what she gets for trusting a piece of technology.

“Were you planning to send any of those letters to Fitz?” Skye asked from the front of the car as trip parked. She should probably be happy that they waited until the car ride to the Bronx to tell her how they knew she was trying to get in contact with Elijah Bradley.

“What? Oh God, I talked about…” Everything from her feelings for Fitz to her attempts to find Trip’s biological father. “Shite.”

“It’s okay. Well, it’s not okay but… I’m really sorry that your parents are getting divorced.” Skye told her. Simmons just placed her head in her hands. Why?
“JARVIS, I hate you.” She mumbled under breath.

“Don’t be mad at the AI. It was protocol. Stark added you to his favorite people list and apparently he shows that by having his AI watch you.” That actually made sense in a Tony Stark way.

“It is still not appropriate, but possibly somewhat understandable.” She said trying to regain some semblance of composure. “Also, thank you for your condolences regarding my parents’ marriage. I’m not that upset about it. It is for the best, considering he impregnated his assistant and…” Jemma trailed off, remembering some of the worst things she said during those letters mostly regarding Fitz and Ward.

“Oh God. You know, don’t you?”

“About Fitz and the asshole?” Skye asked and Simmons just nodded her head.

“Yes. Sharon told me.” Triplett said, trying to make her feel better.

“They’re more like siblings than cousins, not that I would really know. They tell each other everything. It’s like what I’ve seen on TV.” Simmons doesn’t know what that’s like, either, considering she has gone months—without contacting her siblings, even before she joined the intelligence community.

“We grew up together. The only secrets we keep from each other are for national security reasons.” Trip defended.

Apparently they have this cousin thing where they take care of each other’s evil boyfriends.” Skye said, rolling her eyes and honestly Simmons was just happy that Skye was really speaking to her again. “He broke her prom date’s nose for taking too long to learn no means no and she broke Robin’s dick. I think they’re planning to put Ward in a ditch.”

“He is too valuable for that right now. Maybe after Widow is done extracting info.” Trip said, completely serious. She doesn’t doubt that they would do it and she would help. But not today.

“As much as I would like to help you find the best ditch to leave a decomposing body in within the DC Metro, we need to turn our focus to the mission at hand,” before I died of actual embarrassment.
“Right. We need to see if Trip’s work twin is actually his cousin.” Skye told them both.

“Which you don’t necessarily need to be here for. I didn’t want you to even know until I was sure.” With that Skye passed Jemma her phone displaying a picture of Triplett with Agent Bradley. She could barely tell them apart in SHIELD fatigues. Why didn’t anybody think to do a DNA test before?

“Well, at least the photographic evidence lends credence to my hypothesis. However, I don’t need assistance to get a simple DNA sample. I’ve done it before.”

“Right when Hydra attacked and killed my ex-fiancé. Sharon was also with you.” She hated it when Trip was logical.

“I doubt that they will be lying in wait for me.” Jemma argued.

“But Elijah will be. He managed to get to level VII before his 30th birthday and was on the short list of agents to be recommended for the Avenger Initiative.” Triplett argued. “At best, Eli will slam the door in your face, and at worst, you’ll find out why he was on The Avenger Initiative short list.”

“Considering May is the only other person we are aware of that made it onto the alternate list, I would be a little concerned.” Skye added.

“You have a point, but this could be confirmation that we are on the right track. If Agent Bradley had super soldier like antibodies in his bloodstream, he would most likely have enhance abilities like yourself and your mother, which would have made him an asset. It’s something that should be studied. The whole thing is really quite fascinating. They used samples of Steve blood taken post transformation to re-create the serum and...”

“And this is why you can’t go alone.” Trip sighed.

“I don’t think Mister Bradley is going to see it that way. The US government in their quest for the next Captain America/weapon of mass destruction used unsuspecting black soldiers, all while lying to their families about them dying in battle. In the case of Elijah’s grandfather, they falsely imprisoned him for over a decade on trumped up desertion charges after various rescue missions to cover up what they did. He only got out because Trip’s grandmother was asked to investigate a
woman who kept writing to the president every day. Instead, Peggy Carter helped her get her husband out.” Skye explained. Trip and Simmons stared at her in complete surprise. It was a good thing they were parked already.

“What? I read the file on the way here. It was a long drive from the Tower. Your grandmother was such a bad ass.”

“Okay when you explain it like that. It’s less fascinating and more…”

“Completely evil.” Skye interrupted.

“I was thinking along the lines of completely unethical and the antithesis of what science should be.” Jemma added.

“That works. Trip, are you sure he’s not team Hydra? Because that sort of thing would make you not respect your government very much or at all. Having this type of information would have been a wet dream for Rising Tide this time last year.”

“Now they have the Hydra dump. Let’s go.” Trip said and the other two followed him to the Bradley brownstone.

When the trio were brought in for sweet tea and biscuits (chocolate with orange zest), Jemma was willing to concede that Trip’s plan probably would yield better results than hers, mostly because she really didn’t have one. Mr. Bradley was a gracious host, despite the fact that Trip brought along work friends. Apparently, Trip forgot to mention he wasn’t coming alone. He was friendly enough during introductions, although he snickered when Skye introduced herself as her recent undercover identity of Skyler Carter. They were currently listening to Mr. Bradley’s stories about being a self-defense instructor and taking care of his grandfather.

“I’m glad that you’re adjusting to civilian life.” Trip finally spoke once the story was over.

“Well, it helps that at least one of my sisters came to help. Everyone else, including mom are too busy with their Arizona lives.” Mr. Bradley said annoyed.

“That’s the same situation I was in in DC until recently. Mom was on the other side of the country and she made more time for grandma then Tyler did and he only lives like 2 miles away.” Trip
“Your uncle was always a horrible person.” He paused to take a sip of tea and began again. “I’m really glad that you called. I was worried that you may have died during the uprising.”

“I’m still here and not evil.” Trip joked.

“How’s your family?”

“Sharon’s at CIA, at least for the moment. She hates it there, so she will probably be switching to the private sector with me. Also the parasites that took over her former employers attacked my mom and grandmother within about three weeks as well as successfully killed my ex-fiancé.” She wasn’t expecting Trip to tell Mr. Bradley all that, but…

“I didn’t want to say anything while you guys were dating, but he was kind of an asshole. He used to hit on me all the time despite the fact that I’m straight and he was engaged to you. That doesn’t mean I want him murdered by Hydra though. That’s too bad.”

“I’m not even surprised.” Jemma heard Skye mumble under breath and obviously so did Agent Triplett because he glared at her.

“Okay, I know you loved the guy, but he was a prick. I may have been raised by nuns, but I have no trouble speaking ill of the dead, especially when they were awful to you when they were alive. It wasn’t your fault that he was killed.” Skye said grabbing his hand. Jemma noticed and began to wonder if something happened while the two were undercover.

“I like her.” Mr. Bradley said with a smile.

“I do too.” Trip smiled back.

“So where did you meet Ms. Carter, no relation, and Dr. Simmons?” Mr. Bradley asked.

“Work.” Skye and Trip replied simultaneously, and Mr. Bradley started to stare.
“Yes, we met there. Actually, Trip saved my life before we actually met. Don’t worry, we’re not evil, either.” Skye added.

“A slob yes. Evil, no. They’re both good people, still fighting the good fight at a new place of employment.” Triplett added.

“I am not a slob.” Skye said defensively.

“I’m going to be cleaning Teddy Grams from the car for at least a week. See a Hydra agent would never do that. Totally not evil.” Skye looked offended at Trip’s words.

“You always did leave a trail of M&Ms from the galley to your bunk on the Bus. I’m not surprised about the Teddy Grams.” Jemma said supporting Trip.

“I do no such thing. I’ve totally grown out of that.” Trip responded to Skye’s words by snorting into his tea.

“Really?”

“You would know if you didn’t ditch all of us for your brand-new job with your ex friend’s dad.” Skye spat out.

“We’re still friends, we are just…” She trailed off.

“Of course you’re still friends. Even though you can’t even have a conversation with him unless he’s pretending to be asleep. You’re even ditching him on his birthday.” Skye rebutted.

“Because of work. I wanted to be there. I made them cupcakes. Although maybe I should’ve baked cookies. These are quite lovely.” She said trying to change the subject to safer ground.

“Cookies and cupcakes don’t fix everything.”
“I realize that there’s not enough cupcakes in the world to pay back somebody who nearly died in the Gulf of Mexico because they love you. I’m well aware I don’t deserve Fitz. So there’s no point constantly reminding me of that fact. I’ve been a horrible friend. He couldn’t even tell me about…” She covers her mouth in horror. Realizing that she is saying way too much in front of a perfect stranger.

“That wasn’t your…” Skye started to say, but Trip interrupted her mid-word.

“These are really great cookies. Are they your grandmother’s recipe?” Trippelt asked obviously trying to change the subject. Maybe if she was in a better place emotionally, she would’ve let it happen, Jemma thought.

“He chose to sacrifice himself for me. So yes, it was my fault. I can’t do this.” Jemma said before leaving the brownstone as fast as humanly possible. She barely managed to make it to the car before crying. A few moments later, Skye slid into the seat beside her and wrapped an arm around her.

“I’m sorry.” She’s not entirely sure which one of them said it.

Xxxx

“Excuse me, I think I’d better go after her. Will you be okay alone for a few minutes?” Skye asked, but she was already out the door before he could replied.

“I would ask what happened but you probably can’t tell me.” Eli commented.

“Not everything, but essentially Simmons’ partner saved her life during the uprising and ended up in a coma for several weeks. She isn’t dealing with it well.” Super soldier enhanced suspended animation actually, but Eli didn’t need to know that. He already knew too much because somebody flunked spy school or in Skye’s case never actually went in the first place.

“A lot of good people died. Simmons is just taking longer to adjust, but Skye will help.” He hoped they would actually talk to each other at least. He knows that the entire time they were undercover Skye was itching to respond, but never did.

“I’m not surprised. Where did you land? Not CIA like your cousin.” Eli asked. He was being pumped for information. Trip is not at all surprised.

“Stark Industries.” Trip replied, which was technically true. “Actually, we are all there now.”
“Where your dad works?” Eli asked.

“Adopted father. Anything related to my actual biological father was classified at level 10.” Because Simmons and Skye were gone, he decided to be as honest as possible and if it moved this conversation forward to the reason that he was actually in the Bronx right now, then so be it.

“Which means nothing good, especially because your grandmother used to be the big boss. She probably had your biological father killed. Wasn’t your mom like 16 when you were born?” Eli asked.

“About and I always wondered if that was the case until my new job at Stark Industries where I’m analyzing information from the data dump and I came across the few things that I was never supposed to see.” Like my entire existence may have been a conspiracy to make SHIELD more vulnerable for Hydra interference.

“You’re working as an analyst?” Elijah asked shocked.

“I’m acting on the information.”

“So you’re working in Stark’s other business of saving the world?” Elijah asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you here to recruit me?” Eli asked and Trip laughed.

“Coulson is in charge of recruitment, but don’t be surprised if a middle-aged white guy with a Captain America briefcase shows up at some point in the future.” Yes, Coulson had one. Stark got it for him for his birthday among a number of other presents.

“Although I do have a reason to be here, because I came across something that I think you should know about. Dr. Simmons was trying to find intel on a possible Hydra project. She came across a passing reference to a US government sponsored attempt to re-create the super soldier serum from
World War II that mentioned your grandfather by name.” Eli dropped his cookie which fell to the floor.

“I thought everything about what happened would have been burned or buried long ago.”

“I’m sure it would have if my grandmother wasn’t involved. Most of the file was written in my grandmother’s handwriting.” That’s when Trip brought out a highly encrypted Stark pad with the file Skye read in the car.

“At least I didn’t drop my tea.”

“Skye read it in the car. You may want to consider something a little harder.” He can bring up the relative thing later. Maybe he’d be lucky and JARVIS put the basics of the Lullaby program on there. One could hope.

To be continued.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Recently, thanks to all my comic book friends, I started reading the miniseries ‘Truth: Red, White and Black’ and realized that a lot of elements of that miniseries were things I have done in this series or were planning to do. So I decided to use some elements from the series. Of course, it’s a pragmatic adaptation, so even if you read the series you will not know exactly what I’m doing. For example, I had to make Eli Bradley old enough to be born to a mom conceived during World War II, without resorting to comic book time.
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter you are all wonderful. I’m sorry this chapter took longer than a month. Real life happened and I had to change betas in the middle due to some unforeseen circumstances. Ursula, who normally works on my Star Trek story, was gracious enough to proofread this chapter. I would like to take a moment to think Sandy, who has been the beta with this series since the beginning.

The next chapter is done and will be going off to proofreading as soon as I read through it one more time. Here’s hoping the next update will come before Infinity War is out.

“I feel like I should be surprised that we are sitting in the parking lot of a fertility clinic about to meet another one of your long-lost siblings who you didn’t know about 24 hours ago.” Because Romanoff and Tony’s AI, that his boyfriend is no longer speaking to, kept that information from everyone until Tony’s birthmother said too much yesterday. “But I think too many surprising things have happened recently.”

“I’m surprised I have another sister. This time one who may be Hydra because apparently there were worse alternatives than being raised by Howard. Oh God, it’s a small miracle that Leo came out as adjusted as he is.”

Steve can hear the panic in Tony’s voice. He responds by kissing him. It’s about the only thing that has calmed the man down over the last 24 hours. Well, not the only thing, but the only thing Steve is willing to do in a public underground parking garage in the middle of Rosslyn.

“Just take a deep breath and calm down, Tony.” Steve told him pulling out of the kiss. “I just want to point out that despite being raised by Hydra operatives, Trista doesn’t think she is.”

“Trista doesn’t know everything.” Tony replied, annoyed.
“According to Trista, Natalie doesn’t remember anything before the summer of 1986. That’s a few months after she supposedly helped Stephanie escape.” Steve pointed out.

“So that means that she may have been an unwilling participant like your BFF. You threw up when you read some of the encrypted files on the Winter Soldier project.” Which surprised Steve, considering the super soldier serum was supposed to keep that from happening. “What if they did that to her?”

“Maybe it’s not that bad.” Steve said, trying to sound hopeful.

“I mean, it’s not the worst thing. Even if she is Hydra, she probably is still a better person than Tyler.” Steve only thinks Tony is half joking.

“I’ve already managed to become the good brother in under a month and I haven’t even started handing out birthday presents yet. Should I get Stephanie’s baby a Porsche or a Lexus? A Porsche is a Porsche, but the Lexus might be more practical. It’s what he uses at work. I also don’t want to be ridiculously ostentat…” At this point in Tony’s babbling, Steve disrupted him with another kiss.

“Are you OK, Tony?” He asked.

“Only when you’re kissing me.”

“You don’t have to joke with me. I’m worried about you. What’s going on in your head right now?” He questioned from against Tony’s lips.

“I don’t even know how to begin answering that question because nothing has been okay for a while and the last 24 hours have been intense even by my standards and I’ve dealt with an alien invasion before.”

“I know.” Steve places an arm around Tony and pulls the man closer to him.

“I mean, how many times will everything I think I know about myself be proven wrong? Let’s see Maria Stark is not my biological mother. My cool sort of step mom, gave birth to me and is ex-Shield. Good ex-Shield not Hydra ex-Shield. Also, she wasn’t my egg donor, but rather someone
else. Apparently, Howard knew something was rotten in the state of Shield and was making plans to get the family out of Dodge, but then Obadiah sold him out for 30 pieces of silver or whatever the going rate for backstabbing would be. Finally, my dead baby sister that I’ve known about for less time than we’ve been together is not actually dead and Romanoff knew about it for weeks. Adding insult to injury, the child of my own creation also knew about it and said shit. So, you know what, I am not okay. I am nowhere near okay. Like if I didn’t need to go help you find Hydra, I think Suarez would find a nice mental health spa for me to spend a couple of weeks at.”

Steve responds to this rant by kissing Tony’s head and rubbing gentle circles on his back. He’s not sure what to say.

“Jarvis apologizes profusely for his role in Agent Romanoff’s duplicity. Jarvis would like to know when he can be loaded back to your vehicle?” Asked the female voice coming from the console of the vehicle. He assumes this is Tony’s replacement AI.

“Never Friday. You’re my new best girl. The backstabber can just hang out the Skye and the nephew. Maybe if he keeps Stephanie’s kid alive and well, we’ll talk in 12 years or something.” Tony told the new AI in all seriousness.

“I still can’t believe you switched out your AI system.” Steve shook his head.

“Well when you’re stabbed in the back by your electronic friend, the only thing you can do is switch AIs.” Tony remarked. Steve glared.

“I didn’t kill him. I can’t do that. He’s still Jarvis. I just think we need some time apart to process things.”

“He set up this appointment for you today.”

“That’s the least of what he can do after conspiring to keep the possibility that I may have another sister out there somewhere in the world quiet.”

“You’ve had a lot of sisters kept away from you.” Steve pointed out. Natasha Stark would be the third one.

“This is different. I feel like my entire life I’ve been living in the shadow of Natasha Stark even
though I didn’t know about her until recently. How can you compete with a dead child? They’re always going to love her more because dead babies can’t disappoint you like real live teenagers.”

“Oh Tony, it’s not like that.” He placed a kiss on Tony’s forehead. “You know that they’ve always loved you and wanted you so badly.” That was clear from a lot of Howard’s diary pages.

“But they wanted another child because they lost Natasha. Now it turns out they never lost her. She was stolen right from under their nose. Mom and Howard went through all that pain and dozens of miscarriages because of Hydra taking her. At the same time if they had not kidnapped Natasha, I wouldn’t even be here. I’m the replacement goldfish. It’s all I’ve ever was.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Maria couldn’t have any more kids because things went so badly with Natasha. Howard would not have bothered to create in vitro fertilization if they already had a baby together.” Tony argued.

“I don’t buy that. You’re supposed to be here with me. I don’t want to contemplate a world where you’re not here.” Tony responded with a kiss.

“You’re sweet.”

“You’re scared.” Steve replied.

“Of course, I am. I mean at least I used to play with Stephanie growing up and Marcy used to babysit and Tyler was just a dick. But regardless of that fact, I knew them, and they knew me.”

“I get the impression you don’t like your half-brother that much.”

“If you ever meet Tyler, you would understand.”

“And now we’re going to meet Natasha. How do you feel about that?” Steve asked.

“Natalie. We should use the name she goes by now. It is Dr. Natalie which totally makes sense
because my sister would totally be a doctor. Obviously, something Howard passed on.” Tony babbled.

“Okay, now tell me how you feel about her?”

“Ambivalent. Worried. Slightly in disbelief. So, I want to get another DNA sample. I don’t know how I feel. Maybe we should have waited.”

“Too late. We’re already here, we might as well get out of the car and go inside.” Steve said as he unlocked the door, but Tony did not move.

“My appointment is not for five more minutes. We have time, especially because I’m going to the celebrity entrance. No paparazzi is always a good thing.” Tony said with a smirk which worries Steve because Tony was obviously faking everything right now.

“Which means that we should have went in there at least 10 minutes ago. The sooner we get through this, the sooner we can get back to the base for the party. I heard the menu was going to be great.” Because Tony spent half the night planning it. The other half the night was spent switching out his AIs. Steve is not entirely sure that Tony has slept in the last 24 hours.

“I don’t actually want to go back to the base. Can we just stay in this car forever? It’s a really comfortable car.”

“No, because you would regret missing your son’s birthday. If you were okay missing his party, we would’ve already left for the Hydra mission. Romanoff is not even going to be there. She left early this morning to get Clint.” Because Steve asked her to stay away until they left.

“You’re using her last name. You’re pissed at her too.” Tony remarked.

“Yes, because I’m team leader and as team leader, she should’ve told me the moment she received additional intel that would’ve been useful. I don’t need her to keep running side missions.” He assumed that they were done with that sort of thing after Hydra fell. He should know better than to assume anything with her.

“She is always going to be running side missions.”
“I realize that now.” Steve sighed.

“So, me having a third sister is useful intel?”

“Knowing that Hydra kidnapped a member of your family is something that would’ve been useful, especially because your family seems to be a favorite target.” Steve explained.

“It is nice to know that Patches was the one who ripped out certain pages from the Howard diaries. At least, they didn’t end up in Hydra hands, although sometimes I think Patches is worse. At least you know they are evil.” Tony said honestly.

“You really don’t like him?” Steve asked.

“Well, the man didn’t tell me about my kid so I’m going to hate him.” Tony responded. “You don’t like him either.”

“He’s willing to sacrifice too much for the greater good.”

“Personally, I don’t like his definition of greater good. I am never going to forgive him for hiding Fitz from me. Especially when I was dying.”

“I know.”

“And I should’ve been told about Natalie. The moment those diary pages were handed over to Romanoff, they should’ve brought us in and if not us then at the very least Coulson.”

“Yes. But I understand why she would want to verify if Natalie was Hydra. If I didn’t know you as well as I do now, I probably would’ve done something similar.” Like not tell him about Hydra’s involvement in the assassination of his parents. However, Steve knew better, and Christine Everhart managed to expose everything anyway.

“Because in her mind, it would be so much easier for me to kill my own sister if she turns out to be
“Maybe that’s what she’s thinking.” Okay, that’s exactly what she was probably thinking, but Steve doesn’t want to say that out loud.

“See the problem with that thinking is…” Tony never finishes that sentence because of a tap on their window. He is surprised to see that it is Natalie List in the flesh. She looks exactly like the picture of Tony’s mom that he keeps in their bedroom. Steve realized that this could go badly very quickly.

Xxxx

So, after Romanoff finally told him the truth, and he installed Friday on his stark pad, Tony looked up everything he could on the woman who is allegedly the child of Howard and Maria. And yet that research did not prepare him for how much she looked like Maria. Same dark hair, same eyes, same complexion. There was hardly any Howard at all in her. Then she spoke, and Tony swore he heard a ghost.

“So, my favorite nurse who has the day off to go to her girlfriend’s cousin’s birthday party called me and told me that her celebrity former boss has been hiding in the parking garage for half an hour but couldn’t get the courage to actually come in to the fertility center for his scheduled at the last-minute appointment.” She sounded ridiculously like Maria.

“Of course, Trista called you.” Tony groaned, trying to hide how unsettled he felt now. Romanoff was wrong. Even if he didn’t know the truth, Tony would have trouble pulling the trigger because Natalie was Maria personified. “I’m not scared to meet you. I’m just…” Fucking terrified.

“Afraid I may give you unwelcome news?” Tony shook his head in agreement.

“Which is understandable. I have the power to either make dreams come true or completely crush them for you and your boyfriend. But I promise I’ll try my best to avoid the latter.” Tony’s mouth opens for a moment slightly surprised.

She was so Maria’s daughter. You could never get anything past her. Tony was planning to say that Steve was just a friend there for moral support on Tony’s journey to become a single parent (of a child he’ll actually get to raise this time). However, they wanted the ‘Tony Stark is now dating men story’ to drown out the ‘Tony Stark has a 27-year-old secret love child’ story and this was probably a very good first step.
“I already know this is hopeless. I investigated the possibility with my last girlfriend. She was happy I couldn’t have kids and I wasn’t which is why she is now my ex-girlfriend.” Tony groaned realizing he was being too honest. “Oh, please don’t sell that to the tabloids.”

“That’s between us. Doctor-patient confidentiality began the moment I knocked on your window. Look, it doesn’t matter if some of the best doctors in the world told you the situation was hopeless.

“No situation is hopeless even if the option is adoption or using Steve’s super sperm instead. If you want to be a father, I can help you on that journey.” That’s when Natalie placed a hand on his shoulder.

“And what if I shouldn’t be a father?” ‘I didn’t even look for Leo when I should’ve known Obadiah was lying through his fucking teeth.’

“Just because you can find a not dead sperm or two or the fact I can afford unlimited attempts at in vitro as well as pay for the world’s best gestational carrier doesn’t necessarily mean I should.”

“And the fact that you asked that question means that you’d probably be a good one. Come into my office. We will talk test options and go from there. I promise I don’t bite.” He was starting to believe that.

“I guess we have a doctor’s appointment to get to.” Tony said, finally being ready to leave the car much to Steve’s relief.

Xxxxx

LeoFS: Thank you for the cupcakes. I really like them.

Simmons was surprised to see a text message from Leo for a multitude of reasons. One, there was her ridiculously rambling card to him that she rewrote three times. She was half convinced Tony would throw it away before giving it to him. Why would he want to talk to her after that rambling mess?

Then there was the fact that Jarvis has been forwarding Leo her multiple attempts at trying to write him a heartfelt letter. Especially all the attempts she made after discovering the Grant Ward truth.

Finally, the fact that she was seeing the message pop up on her actual phone screen instead of having Jarvis relay it to her which is something she’s gotten used to over the last few months. Maybe the AI
realizes that she’s not ready to speak with him. It doesn’t matter. What’s important is that he contacted her. Thanks to her getting out of her meeting with Maria Hill a full 15 minutes early, she had time to text message Leo back.

J Simmons: You’re welcome. I got you another present. It’s coming with Skye and Trip. Did they arrive safely? They ended up stopping at the tower for a couple of hours to do some work things on their way back to the Playground.

LeoFS: Yes, they’re here, but they didn’t mention the tower. Why?

J Simmons: We think we have a lead on paternity. Trip’s paternity, not yours. They didn’t want me to go by myself, but it’s okay.

LeoFS: I think I’d rather not know.

J Simmons: Well it’s too late for that now and Tony seems to be an upgrade on Alastair.

LeoFS: Anything is an upgrade from Alastair. He was Hydra.

J Simmons: I know.

LeoFS: I’m glad I know about Tony. That’s enough. I don’t need to know the rest. I don’t want to.

J Simmons: I think he really does love you. I got 13 text messages yesterday about appropriate birthday menu ideas. I think my prosciutto and pesto sandwiches are being turned into some sort of slider.

J Simmons: Jarvis told me that he was sending you my therapy emails. So, if you can start yelling at me now, that would be good. I have lab results coming in about 20 minutes and I really would like to get downstairs.

LeoFS: Not going to yell at you. I’m glad you’re talking to me without me pretending to sleep.
J Simmons: I’m trying. I cried on Skye yesterday during a mission. It was awful. Though my tear streaked face was the reason why I was able to sneak into his bathroom to take a toothbrush for Jarvis to analyze.

LeoFS: Why did you cry?

LeoFS: You stole someone’s toothbrush?

J Simmons: Yes, sort of. For work reasons.

LeoFS: Why did you cry on Skye?

J Simmons: I was hoping you would forget that question.

LeoFS: No.

J Simmons: I didn’t really leave the team. I just couldn’t stay there after what happened with Hydra. I’m just…. I’m not OK. Not since the Gulf of Mexico.

LeoFS: Since I told you that I love you?

J Simmons: Since you died for me or tried to die for me and I barely saved you. I thought I lost you and that was all my fault. I wanted us to be out in the field. Everything has kind of been a mess since then. It’s not like we’ve had time to talk about what happened and what was said because you came out of your coma only to find out you have a real dad.”

LeoFS: You find out that you don’t.

J Simmons: I think I’ve been aware of that for a while. He is also an arse.

“Dr. Simmons, there is an Elijah Bradley at the front desk who would like to speak with you.” Simmons hears a female voice coming from the ceiling of her room.
“You’re not JARVIS.” She remarked slightly confused.

“Mr. Stark has reassigned Jarvis to be the personal AI of Agent Skye. My name is FRIDAY and I am now the AI running the tower, all essential Avenger functions, as well as all essential functions for the foreseeable future. Should I let Mr. Bradley up to speak with you?” The AI asked. She couldn’t help but wonder why Tony suddenly decided to change his AI.

“In a few minutes. Could you please see who is available to join me? I’d rather not meet with Mister Bradley alone. Preferably not Ms. Hill, but if she’s the only one available, go ahead and send for her.” Because Simmons still wants to punch out her former employer, for multiple reasons, mostly related to keeping Leo from his father for years. However, she was smart enough to know she shouldn’t deal with Elijah Bradley alone. Best case scenario was in demanding his toothbrush back. At this point she is regretting that choice.

“Of course, Dr. Simmons.” The AI responded, too chipper in her opinion.

“Miss Simmons is fine since Mr. Stark refuses to be referred to as Dr. Stark despite the five PhDs. Also, could you let Leo know that something work related came up and we can try finishing our conversation later?” She really did mean that.

“Of course, Miss Dr. Simmons.” She sighed, missing JARVIS. She surprised because she was so angry at him earlier.

“Why did Mr. Stark replace JARVIS? Does he know about the letters being sent forward without consent? I mean he was just trying to help me process things with Leo and Skye. It was a dangerous thing to do, but at least we’re talking which is better than what we were.” She rambled.

“JARVIS processed a DNA sample belonging to the biological daughter of Maria and Howard Stark and did not notify Mr. Stark immediately of the match at the behest of Agent Romanoff. He felt that JARVIS should be Agent Skye’s personal AI for the foreseeable future.”

“You needed me?” She heard Sam say as he popped out of the elevator. Part of her was relieved it wasn’t Maria. The other part was shocked to see him. She’s not even sure they’ve spoken since he drove her home from Captain Roger’s birthday party. He’s been gone so much.

“You’re here at the tower? I thought you were trying to find Sergeant Barnes.” She doesn’t refer to
him as the Winter Soldier anymore, mostly at the behest of Dr. Suarez. He really had no say in his service to Hydra.

“Well with Mr. Hammer somewhere unknown, Steve needed someone else to run air support. Carter is taking over the search for Barnes. So, I’m waiting for everybody to get back from the birthday party of the century.”

“I know exactly where Mr. Justin Hammer is. He’s currently in federal custody at…” The new AI started, but she quickly interrupted.

“He was referring to Thor.” She corrected the AI making a mental note to inform Tony that there were bugs to still be worked out in the new operating system. “Which Carter is taking over, Marcy or Sharon?” She asked turning her attentions back to Sam.

“Sharon. She’s supposed to come up tomorrow after the birthday party. Why aren’t you in DC for that?”

“Work.” Trying to find out if Trip is the son of the other Captain America. “But I sent another present.” Three-layer chocolate cake filled with raspberry buttercream and covered in chocolate ganache with the TARDIS on top. There may have also been a Doctor Who lanyard along with other goodies.

“I will be letting Mr. Bradley into the apartment shortly.” Friday interrupted.

“And here is that work reason right now.” Simmons mumbled to herself as the man walked off the elevator. There was no gun being pointed at her now, so she considered that a good thing.

“It’s wonderful to see you again, Mr. Bradley. I’m sure you have questions and concerns regarding the information Mr. Triplett brought to your attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.” She finished with a smile. A nervous one.

“Just one. Why did you steal my grandfather’s toothbrush?” Rightfully so after that question from Mister Bradley.

‘Oh, it was your grandfather’s? I thought it was yours.’ She thought to herself. Sam was looking at her strangely right now.
“You stole a toothbrush? DNA sample?” Sam asked glaring at her.

“Yes. I am currently analyzing the sample. I am trying to determine if said sample is a genetic relative of Agent Triplett. Results should be completed in 15 minutes and 32 seconds.” Friday answered. She was already composing an angry text message to Dr. Stark about his malfunctioning AI that needs to learn how to lie.

“What was that?” Mr. Bradley asked, startled.

“Mr. Stark’s AI? She runs the entire tower.” Simmons explained.

“Where is JARVIS? He was better at subterfuge.” That last part was whispered, but she still heard it.

“Reassigned to Agent Skye.” The AI replied before she could.

“Agent Skye? So, Shield isn’t dead?”

“Just privatized.” She replied.

“Which does not surprise me considering what I read. You think that I am related to Antoine? That my grandfather is his grandfather?” Mister Bradley asked

“Possibly father.”

“And you didn’t think to ask instead of stealing a DNA sample?”

“Agent Triplett wanted confirmation before discussing the possibility with you. We also felt it was best that you read through the data packet before that discussion took place. Friday is still processing.”

“The results will be available in 13.2 minutes. I have ordered tea and various accoutrements to arrive
beforehand. Mr. Bradley, would you like anything in particular?"

“Something with a high alcohol content?” Bradley asked.

“I’m sorry, I was ordered not to provide Miss Dr. Simmons with alcohol. Captain Rogers is worried that she is an alcoholic.” Simmons groaned, but said nothing else. If the results showed up positive 10 minutes later, she would really remonstrate the AI.

Xxx

“I’m sorry Miss Simmons is no longer able to continue your conversation. A Mr. Bradley has arrived.” His father’s new AI FRIDAY told him via his phone. Leo wondered who Mr. Bradley was, but the expression on Skye’s face told him it wasn’t anything good.

“Shit. JARVIS are you still on speaking terms with the main house despite your probation? Simmons is dealing with a Specialist on her own right now, isn’t she?” Skye asked somewhat panicked.

“Friday and I have a cordial relationship. She has given me access to the security feed as she keeps Mister Bradley in reception temporarily.”

“Is there anybody at the tower other than Hill that can be up there with her?” Skye asked.

“Protect her?” Fitz asked.

“Yes.”

“Mr. Wilson is on his way. Although I do not have time to completely brief him on the situation.” Friday replied

“Simmons can take care of it.” Skye answered.

“Who is Mr. Bradley?”
“Possibly Trip’s cousin, probably. It’s all kind of a little convoluted which is why we had a detour to New York City yesterday. But she sent you another birthday present.”

“Food?” He asked.

“Yes, along with a bunch of Doctor Who gear. You know she stress cooks and… OK, she’s a mess.” He is aware. “And I’m worried and I feel like I made it worse by not talking to her for the last few weeks. I’m worried about the drinking and really worried about Trip’s possible cousin showing up because he was a goddamn Avenger candidate.” Skye explained worriedly as she sat back down on his bed and laid her head on top of him.

“Mr. Wilson is with her and the situation seems to be cordial now.” Jarvis informed both after about a minute of silence.

“You’re still the best even if you mess with things you shouldn’t. You don’t happen to actually know where my biological parents are.”

“Not at this time, but I can assist with the search.” Jarvis offered.

“Did you talk with Simmons?” Leo asked.

“Yes, there was a lot of crying and yelling which is why I told you to text her. She blames herself for you being hurt and I think seeing you go through rehabilitation makes her feel worse about it. Maybe it’s better that she’s going to be with your dad and May running back end for a while during the search for squid October.” Leo agreed, even if he was only half sure “squid October” meant Hydra.

“It wasn’t her fault. It was my choice.”

“Because you loved her or love her. You loved her enough to die for her and I think that scares her. Love can be scary if she’s never really had it before. I don’t think I even had people who cared at me before I ended up on the bus, so I understand.”

Fitz understood this too. His years with Alastair really screwed up his perspective. But at least he had his mom. She loved him. He didn’t really want to think about that. Not today.
“I just believe that we all need to really talk about everything, probably with Dr. Suarez present, but were starting to make some headway and so the visitor showed up.”

“You can try again later.”

“If things don’t go badly in New York.

“True. Jarvis, how are things going?”

“Things are going well. However, you should find Mr. Triplett. The results of the DNA analysis will be available in seven minutes. I suggest a video conference with the tower so that he may discover the truth at the same time. I am also tying his mother into the call.”

“Clever idea J., although let’s put Dr. Triplett on mute.” Fitz looks at her for a moment.

“So, your Aunt Stephanie has a real tough time telling the truth, even if it is for the right reason when it came to what happened to her in captivity 28 years ago. She didn’t want Trip to realize he was created in a petri dish, so she implied that Nat who helped her escape was his father. However, Nat was really Natalie and that’s not possible. Well, it could be the way you guys were conceived, but I’m sure they recovered the dead body and ruled out the possibility early on.”

And even though his mind was still not working at 100%, all the pieces clicked together. So apparently his aunt Stephanie and his other aunt Natalie were held captive by Hydra and had a relationship, probably fueled by Stockholm syndrome.

When they found Trip and Sharon a few minutes later, Fitz decided to keep this information to himself. That was for the best, considering Friday informed his cousin that Isaac Bradley is one of his other biological parents. He had enough to deal with.

Xxxxx

“So Stark actually punched you?” Clint asked her after she got out of the Quinjet. She’s still surprised that she could take one to pick Clint up from Iowa, but it’s probably because no one wants her on-base. And apparently base gossip also managed to get to Clint because he asked that question. Despite the fact she has been wearing concealer the day before and now, because she didn’t want to scare the kids.
“No, but that’s only because his boyfriend held him back. Which surprises her only in the sense that he was equally furious at her. He’s been calling her Romanoff ever since. There was also another lecture about running side missions without telling him or at least Coulson. “This was caused by his birth mom.”

“And you let her which means you must feel guilty about all of this. I mean the woman would have to be in her 60s to be Starks birth mother. Also, Stark has a birth mother? Seriously, what actually came out while I was gone?”

“Current alias Kathleen Worthington is 68, but she is a former Shield agent and her SO was Peggy Carter herself.” Natasha discovered that when she began to do extra digging into the woman’s past.

“Apparently Stark, Tony; was Shield’s, but really Hydra’s attempt at re-creating the super soldier serum. It was triggered by the kidnapping of Stark senior’s daughter to trick him into participating.” That’s what she believes anyway. She read the diaries of Howard Stark and the supposed death of his daughter made him desperate and Hydra cashed in on that. “Triplett and Fitz Stark were the second and third attempts that we’re aware of.” And she was sure there were other attempts in the interim.

“Jesus. This is awful.” She agreed.

“Yes. Stark is now out for Hydra blood.” And hers for that matter.

“Understandable. How pissed off is Stark?” Clint asked.

“Furious. He switched out his AI and yelled at me for a good 15 minutes as Steve held him back. This morning, I decided I would be more useful giving you a ride and spending a little time with my niece and nephew.” Really, Steve asked her to leave, but Clint doesn’t need to know that.

“And you decided to come here instead.”

“Temporarily. I have a base to run because Coulson is still recruiting. I’ll go back after I drop you off at the tower. That’s the rendezvous point for the New Avengers.”
“I’m still surprised I’m part of the New Avengers. Is Stark going to try to punch me tomorrow?” Clint asked, concerned.

“No. He doesn’t know that you were involved. As far as he’s concerned, I was the one running the side mission from Fury and I am the one who made sure Jarvis suppressed the DNA results. If you’re asked, I did this all on my own and you knew nothing. That goes for Carter to.”

“I understand. I guess I should thank you for having to tell him ahead of schedule.” That’s when he leaned over and kissed her, careful of the bruising.

“I had no choice, after Stark’s birth mother said too much. You’re making it up to me.”

“Well, Laura is making your favorite dinner. I also assume that you’re bunking with us tonight?” Sometimes when she stayed over she stayed in her regular room, but not tonight.

“Of course, I am. We may not see each other for months at a time and I’m worried that you might get yourself killed out there.”

“May has my back and Stark doesn’t have a reason to kill me, thanks to you.” He grabs her hand. “Let’s get into the house. The kids miss you.”

“I miss them too.”

Xxx

Antoine Triplett is personally surprised that he hasn’t thrown up yet. For years he’s wanted to know who his biological father was and now he had the answer. And it was not something he wanted. Be careful what you wish for. Because you might just get it.

He wasn’t upset about Isaiah Bradley being his biological father. He was upset that it confirms Hydra really was using him to re-create the super soldier. That fact made so many pieces about himself start to slide in place.

“You know you could’ve told me this possibility yesterday?” His cousin or was it nephew said from the other side of the screen, breaking him out of his thoughts.
“I wanted to ease you into it after you read the report. Although I had no idea that Simmons would steal a toothbrush.” And confirm the truth before either of us would have time to process it.

“Don’t be so shocked. I did graduate from the Academy.” Simmons said almost defensively.

“The science division.” His cousin snickered from the back.

“I still graduated top of my class.”

“What does this mean now? Great, Trip knows the identity of one of his other parents and turns out Hydra likes to steal sperm. Where do we go after this? ” Eli asked.

“I think we were aware of that.” Leo mumbles from beside her. “It is why I’m here.”

“We have to run more tests if you agree.”

“After that? I mean, do we tell grandpa that he has another kid that is younger than most of his grandkids? Do we tell my mom she is not an only child anymore?” Eli clarified.

“I don’t know.” Trip answered.

“I’m thinking that Simmons should run the test in New York, but for now Eli should keep this to himself.” Sharon suggested. She was the only one not shaky. “Hydra has been systematically hunting down members of the family. They tried to kidnap Aunt Stephanie again just a couple of weeks ago.

“So, this is probably an appropriate time to go visit my mom in Arizona and buy the tickets under a fake name?” Eli asked only half joking.

“That may be advisable. Actually, Jarvis can do that.” Sharon suggested.
“Friday will actually have to be the one to do it, but that might not be a bad idea. We will be in touch.” Simmons said as she ended the call.

“So, are you okay?” Sharon asked turning to him.

“No, not really.” Sharon responded by placing an arm around him.

“You know I think I’m going to go get a lot of alcohol and the chocolate cake and let you guys hang out among yourselves. This feels like a family thing.”

“You’ve been my fake wife for weeks. I think you get to stay.” He said as he held out his hand for Skye to grab.

“Okay. I’ll stay, but when we find out who my biological parents are, you’re so bringing me cake?”

“Agreed.”

Xxxxx

“OK this doesn’t look like a hopping birthday party. The cake is missing.” He said as he made his way into the lounge at the base after his very interesting meeting with Natalie List. He is still not 100% sure he can think of her as a sister yet. It’s why he may have sneakily grabbed more material for a second DNA analysis. “Where is the birthday boy and your fake girlfriend?” He asked Trista, the only one who was there.

“Being emotional support. Simmons found out who Trip’s biological father is and well, they’re eating cake in Leo’s room with most of the alcohol after Sharon made me bring it to them. I decided to wait out here because it’s a family thing.” Trista explained.

“Let me guess, he’s a known member of Hydra?” He asked as he sat down next to her. Steve took the chair in front.

“No. Isaiah Bradley. Victim of a very nonconsensual effort by the US military to re-create Captain America using black soldiers and Steve’s blood during World War II. Apparently, Hydra stole a sperm sample at some point and Agent Triplett was born. Parent three is still unknown but could be another one of the participants.”
“What?” Steve asked confused. Tony was slightly less confused because Simmons found the suspected match, but he didn’t know about this part of it.

“Were you not briefed on this? Sharon told me a lot of everything going on last night after Trip told her. There are more like siblings than cousins.” Trista explained.

“No, I was not briefed on this. What did the government do? How did they even get a hold of my blood?” Steve was furious and so was Tony.

“I told you there were other programs. I exist because of one.”

“That’s not what I meant. They didn’t use my blood to create you.”

“Thank God because I feel like the family is already incestuous enough.”

“So how did your appointment with my boss go?” Trista asked obviously changing the subject. Bless her. Especially for referring to Natalie as her boss and not his sister.

“I’d rather we keep talking about…”

“Not right now.” Tony responded, and Steve gave him his puppy dog eyes.

“Steve, I have a feeling that Simmons probably knows more about what happened then Trista.” Also, I’d rather have this conversation where random agents cannot walk through at any moment.

“Which is easy because I really know nothing at all other than about what I just told you. So how did your meeting with Natalie go? Was she able to answer all your questions? Are you giving Fitz a new family member?” Okay, Trista was good.

“She was nice. Ridiculously nice. I don’t know how she ended up married to an asshole.”
“Told you. And I don’t know how she ended up in that family either. I always assumed brainwashing.”

“Well she doesn’t remember anything before summer of 1986, so that’s not outside the realm of possibilities. Did she have a weird reaction when she met Stephanie for the first time?”

“You know I don’t think they ever met. Being in California, Sharon and Triplett were the ones who spent the most time with Peggy. I just don’t think they ever crossed paths.” Tony was trying to decide if that was a good or terrible thing. Would Stephanie have recognized her or just assumed that the woman in front of her was a ghost?

“Stephanie is good at avoiding people.” Tony remarked darkly.

“So, I assume that I’m going to be at the fertility clinic of Arlington for a while?”

“Yes. I don’t think she knew what her husband was doing, but if that’s the case then she’s a target. Like I need Hydra coming after more family members.” Tony sighed.

“I promise I’ll keep an eye on both while you’re gone.”

“Thank you.”

To be continued
Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. You are absolutely wonderful. Look, a new chapter in under two months. You even get it before Saturday because I had a snow day today and had time to go through the edits. I may even try to squeeze another chapter in before Infinity War comes out.

This chapter has been proofread by the wonderful EveSpring who is taking over proofreading duties on this story.

We have a large time jump in this chapter of several weeks. It is now late October 2014. We are also getting to the point where things are going to diverge heavily from season two of Agents of Shield and the rest of the MCU. Material has been gathered from these episodes (and subsequent movies) but has been twisted for the new timeline. There’s even been some stuff that’s come to light in season five of AOS, which will be incorporated to give the characters more depth.

October 2014

“I’m going to kill Stark.” He heard his girlfriend say the moment she popped up on the large screen in his office. Phil wasn’t even that surprised. He is certain that two months of working closely with Stark would make anyone near homicidal. The fact that it’s been two months of minimal progress makes the situation worse.

“You can’t kill Stark. He’s Fitz’s father. Besides, I doubt he’s done anything to warrant it.” Phil replied with a smirk.

“He doesn’t even listen to his own boyfriend and he’s going to get himself killed. I don’t want to have to deal with consoling Steve or Fitz.” Melinda replied.

“Which you would have to deal with anyway, if you kill him.” Phil pointed out to his girlfriend.

“You didn’t have to listen to him have sex with your friend for the last two hours when all you actually want to do is sleep after spending the day fighting Hydra agents. It is the middle of the night here. Yet, I can’t sleep because of their ‘I’m so glad you’re not dead sex.’ They are way too loud.” Considering what happened on his birthday, he’s sure she’s mostly complaining because of the sleep deprivation.
“He is the main reason I don’t have to fly coach all by myself right now to find additional agents and we are getting another non-toolbox location. We are also not completely in hiding because of the Stark lawyers, so you can deal with Stark being Stark until we find what you need to find.” And Coulson really hoped that was soon because he missed his girlfriend horribly.

“Have you found other agents?” May asked.

“A few. Several actually. And I’m sure 90% of them are not just new shield for the Stark industries dental plan, but there’s still going through vetting. I have a good feeling about Davis.” Phil explained.

“If you’ll find someone who can take my place, I will do the thing with the tongue and the handcuffs as soon as I get back. I just want this mission to be over. This safe house is way too small for this many people.” Melinda complained.

“And as much as I want you to do the thing with the tongue in the handcuffs, you are the only person I trust to be there that Stark won’t shoot on sight. I assume the fact that you’re calling from a safe house over a highly encrypted line that Jarvis initiated means that you didn’t find anything?” Phil asked.

“Friday is the one responsible for this highly encrypted call updating you on our lack of progress. Stark is upset with Jarvis for cooperating with Romanoff and therefore has not switched back yet, which is causing problems in its own right, such as flying into walls.” Melinda remarked dryly. He almost wants to ask if video exist of that.

“Still?” Melinda nodded her head on screen. “It’s been weeks, months, even. Actually, it has been so long that Dr. Campbell put Dr. Cline-Hand on maternity leave this morning.”

“I bet she hated that.” Melinda snarked.

“She is absolutely furious. And she only agreed to it because she may be in the early stages of labor.” Phil sighed. “We lost one of the nurses because of her. She’s transferring to an actual job in the Stark medical division because she can’t deal with Isabel anymore.”

“And now you understand my Stark Dilemma. The needle is apparently in a different haystack. Which means we have to keep looking. Which means spending time in this tiny safe house to
regroup before the next mission instead of coming back to the tower or playground.”

“It always is.” Phil side. Annoyed that his murder weapon was still out there. Who knows what Hydra could be doing with it. He would sleep better at night once they have it back. “Was there any progress at all?”

“The Hydra stronghold in Budapest is now under UN control.”

“And?”

“We found another haystack to look into. The new joint task force also has 15 operatives to question.”

“Only 15?” Phil asked.

“Those were the only ones we could prevent from taking their cyanide pills or throwing themselves in front of bullets to avoid being captured.” Melinda remarked. “Also, Everett Ross from CIA is a useless moron.”

“Of course he is. Cyanide pills are so ridiculously cliché. It’s like our lives have become a bad spy movie.”

“We are spies.”

“Yes, but it’s usually more interesting than this. More aliens, less paperwork.” Phil said pointing to the stack of the stuff on his desk. He really wished everything could be done on the Stark Pad but that wasn’t always an option. Mostly because they’re afraid to transfer a lot of it to digital. The newly created file for the first 084 was currently on top of the pile and he doesn’t want anyone else to get their hands on it.

“Recruiting new members and avoiding getting shot should be exciting enough for you right now. We did agree no fieldwork while I am on detail. You’re actually doing what we agreed?” Melinda asked with a glare.
“Yes. If Natasha was not in the middle of her daily staring contest with the prisoner of vault D she would verify that I’ve done nothing remotely close to fieldwork since you left. I haven’t even been doing a lot of recruiting for the last week due to other more pressing things. Maria has been doing most of it. I think this is her punishment for not telling Stark about Fitz.” Or Natasha/Natalie for that reason.

“Maria also chose Ward. We all paid for that mistake.” Melinda mumbled under breath.

“We all learned from that mistake. Our candidates are going through orientation.” Phil told Melinda to put her at ease.

“Good.”

“If I actually have a choice, I would be overseeing the orientations myself. Instead, I am spending most of my days at an undisclosed military base going through various objects that I really wished Nick actually shot into the sun.” Yes, the laser gun from Peru turned out to be helpful, but a metal obelisk that turns everybody who touches it into stone really should’ve been sent up into the sun. Stark’s gauntlets so far have been the only thing that can touch it.

“So Colonel Rhodes has convinced the military that you’re a subject matter expert that can help them sort through everything that came from Shield?”

“Marcy helped as well.” Phil replied.

“I am almost surprised she has been nearly useful for once.”

“I think it’s just to pacify her boss Roslyn Price. Or Piss her off. I’m not sure which.”

“Did you find anything interesting?” May asked.

Lots of artifacts with alien writing, none of which resembles what I’ve been carving on walls. Something that may be a cryo pod. Also, the original 084 is sitting in Vault E after we switched it out for a fake two days ago.
“Nothing I want to disclose over this line, despite Stark’s assurance that it’s encrypted.” He answered instead.

“It is encrypted.” Melinda pointed out.

“Yet we keep talking about haystacks and needles which tells me you don’t believe the line is encrypted enough to have a real conversation.” Phil responded.

“Even Stark’s Tech isn’t infallible.” Melinda responded just as he heard the door to the room open.

“I brought you a sandwich.” He heard Simmons say just as she came into frame with a plate of food in hand. “The good news is unlike the last place, the kitchen is well stocked with fresh food, even if the soundproofing leaves much to be desired.” Phil could hear a moan in the background.

“Really, I thought they would be done by now. ‘I survived getting shot twice’ sex should not take that long. Nor should they really be engaged in anything that strenuous.” Simmons remarked as she sat down next to Melinda.

“Stark or Rogers?” Phil asked with a sigh.

“Rogers.”

“Nothing to worry about. The bullet went straight through the shoulder and was halfway healed by the time we got to the Quinjet.” Simmons expanded. “You really need to eat.” She said passing May a sandwich before she sat down on the other bed almost out of frame.

“I assume Simmons is your roommate?” Coulson asked.

“Yes, because nobody wants to share with Tony and Steve and I preferred not to share a room with Dr. Banner and Sam.” Simmons responded.

“Does she at least snore less than Clint?”
“Yes.” May replied. “He’s being relegated to the couch after what happened last time.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Apparently, sleep deprivation can trigger a Hulk transformation.” Melinda replied dryly.

“I’m not surprised.”

“How is Leo doing? Has there been any progress with the occupational therapist?” Simmons asked excitedly changing the subject. Note to self, asked more about what happened next time he’s alone with Melinda.

Or maybe she just wants to know more about Leo. He’s pretty sure this is the first time he’s really spoken with Simmons in at least a month. Any readouts he’s been getting on the ongoing hunt for Hydra has been coming from either Melinda, Rogers, or Stark.

“You know if you actually spoke with him he would give you the answer to that question. Have you been in contact with anybody?” He asked.

“I have a little. Skye set up a fake email account. But he always says he’s fine when he’s not fine. And I’m sure Friday is filtering the messages. I don’t think she likes me very well. Skye hasn’t been that helpful either. Most of my conversations with her have centered on her asking about my alcohol consumption and me asking her how to use most of the surveillance equipment. I really regret not spending a semester at the school of communications as suggested by my advisor.” Simmons explained and Phil stared to where she was talking to his girlfriend alone.

Was it so much to ask for a little time to talk to one another? It wasn’t like he seen her in the last few weeks. These check in calls are really all he had and he was lucky to get one a week. The team has mostly been staying dark with Stark popping up in various well-publicized locations for business meetings to throw Hydra off the trail.

“Fitz is in the lab right now analyzing a few things that we picked up from the military recently.” Part time but she doesn’t need to know that. “He’s good. Happy even.”

“Really I…” Simmons started to speak but was cut off by May.
“I’ll check in again in a few days if where not back by then.”

“I hope your back by then.” Surely they will have to come back to New York soon. How many more Hydra strongholds can there be?

“We might be back soon. Stark wants to make contact with his sister, again.” Melinda explained.

“Which one?” Phil asked just as the screen went blank. That’s when he noticed Natasha was standing behind him just out of range of the camera. Of course she was.

“So should I assume that you didn’t tell her you spent two hours carving on the walls three nights ago?” Natasha asked. “Just like when it happened the first time, three weeks ago?”

“No because Simmons showed up to try to get May to eat something that’s not a ration bar before I had a chance to.” Actually he wasn’t planning to tell her anything but Natasha didn’t need to know that, Simmons provided him with an out.

“I spent half the night replacing the drywall so it is a big deal and you owe me. Also, you use Stark interrupting your call with her as an excuse not to tell her last time. I’m not sure how many times I’m going to accept that excuse.” Natasha said as she takes the seat in front of his desk.

“You didn’t need to repair the drywall in my office. I would’ve done it later.” Phil said trying to redirect the conversation.

“No, I had to because there are too many new people on base who don’t need to know about what their boss does at 3 AM when his girlfriend is not around. I don’t completely trust half of Maria’s recruits or the new doctor yet and he would be the first one brought in because Dr. Hand is officially on maternity leave and the main nurse quit.”

“Not quit. She asked to be reassigned, and I granted it.” Because Dr. Hand yelled at her for an hour last week

“You’re carving on the walls again.”
“It could’ve just been a fluke.” Phil said defending himself.

“A fluke was when it happened last month. This is the second time since May left. Obviously the super soldier antibodies that you ingested during your birthday orgy have finally worn out of your system and May is no longer around to provide you with a booster.”

The director would love to deny her accusations except his chronic episodes of carving took a 10 week break after the incident on the night of Steve’s birthday, the day before he and May decided to go along with Starks idea of the perfect birthday present.

“I think you need more than four people for an orgy.” He joked trying to distract Natasha.

“That does not change the fact that you were exposed to vast quantities of the so-called “super soldier antibody” and obviously they were counteracting the side effects of what was used to bring you back.”

“May has the antibodies in her system.”

“And you haven’t had sex with her in two months due to the search for the scepter. I could have Dr. Campbell run a test to see what your antibody count is as well as try to figure out why it’s behaving differently in you than everyone else but I don’t think we want that.” No, he did not, because that meant he would have to explain everything to Dr. Campbell and he did not want to do that.

“You don’t because you don’t trust him.” Phil said out loud.

“I trust no one but I really don’t trust him.” Natasha argued. “He’s hiding something and not just the fact he has powers.”

“You know?” He knew because Stark told him, but agreed to keep the information close hold for now. Everyone just thought Dr. Campbell was taking shooting training as a precaution not Phil slowly preparing Dr. Campbell for fieldwork once Hand was back from maternity leave.

“I’m observant.” Natasha replied with a shrug. “Of course he doesn’t know that I know.”
“Which means he still thinks he’s keeping a secret from you and he actually is keeping it a secret from everyone else.” Phil argued.

“Or it isn’t the fact that he has powers but how he has powers.” Natasha replied.

“That’s a possibility. Right now I prefer you not scare him away because we need a doctor with Isabel on maternity leave and Simmons and Dr. Triplett on assignment.”

“Fine. Although we’re telling May about the carving next time she makes contact.”

“Not until she’s back in person.”

“Unless it happens again before she comes back.” Natasha told him with an angry glare. He didn’t think anybody’s glare could be worse than May’s but Natasha’s was. That gave him another reason to hope that Melinda found the scepter sooner rather than later.

Xxxx

“I’m not backing down on this.” Natasha has never met anybody more stubborn than Phil Coulson. Of course if it wasn’t for his stubbornness, she probably would be dead right now. However, she won’t back down on telling May if this keeps happening. She may have agreed to pull the trigger if things go badly, but not keeping May in the dark. Natasha learned that lesson the hard way after the Stark debacle.

“OK.” He reluctantly agreed. “So did you get anything out of Ward this afternoon?” Phil asked trying to move the conversation to safer ground which was unfortunately Grant Ward at this point. Obviously, he really doesn’t want to discuss the literal writing on the wall.

“I thought you would’ve been watching?” Natasha asked with one eyebrow raised.

“Dr. Suarez won’t let me.” And by his tone, it was obvious he was not happy about that. “Apparently it’s better for my emotional health if I completely divorce myself from the Grant Ward situation. Especially after finding out he manipulated two of my agents into having sex with him. As my deputy director, you get to make all Ward based decisions.” Natasha raised an eyebrow at his use of the term deputy director.
“I thought I was just your Acting Deputy Director until May gets back.”

“You think that May actually wants the job of deputy director?” He asked seriously.

“No,” she answered quickly without hesitation.

“Do you think you and Stark will be able to work together anytime soon?” Considering she hasn’t even talked to him in the last two months, the answer to that was obvious. Maybe she needs to amend her earlier statement.

“No.”

“Then I rather have you here as my number two for as long as you wanted.”

“Just so I can handle your Grant Ward problem?” She asked only slightly annoyed.

“No just that. Although at least you are making some progress with him.”

“Very little progress.” Much to Natasha’s frustration. “The only thing I got today was that his source for the information about Skye’s parents is someone he refers to as the scientist in the flower dress. He won’t actually give me a name unless Skye is there or anything else for that matter.”

“We don’t need him to give us a name. His source is Raina.”

“The one responsible for kidnapping you last December?” Natasha asked vaguely remembering reading that report.

“Yes. Her we can find.”

“And you want me to find her?” Natasha asked. Not that she wouldn’t be that upset about finding the woman because Natasha would like to hit her a few times, for kidnapping Coulson in December.
“I don’t exactly sleep well with her still on the streets so I would like to find her anyway. Unfortunately, even with the money from the patents we still don’t have all the resources to chase down every lead, especially if they could just be a wild goose chase.”

“And we already have enough of those.”

“At the same time, Skye only showed up on our radar because she wanted to know where she came from.” Coulson explained.

“I always found it’s better to focus on where you’re going then how you got there.” Natasha replied. “But I’ll talk to Skye about it before I decide how to proceed.”

“Thank you.”

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“I feel like we should have invited Trista over for movie night.” Isabel said as she laid in her bunk trying to get comfortable.

The keyword was “trying” because she looked quite uncomfortable and in a lot of pain in Trip’s opinion, despite the special memory foam mattress brought in for the really really pregnant lady. To distract Isabel from bedrest, Trip decided that they should have a movie night. Okay, Skye decided that the two should have a movie night. Trip was really Isabel’s only real friend on base as well as her baby coach. According to one of the baby books Skye picked up while he was getting to know family in Arizona last week (under the guise of installing new security equipment at his half-sister’s house) Isabel could be in labor for a while. And yes it was weird to have a sister older than Aunt Marcy. Hydra was creepy.

“She’s busy.” Keeping an eye on my uncle’s sister who may or may not have slept with my mom. But he couldn’t tell Isabel that. He wasn’t even supposed to know that. Why did he let Skye and Jarvis hack that file? That was why Trip decided not to look for parent three. What he’s learned so far has been traumatizing enough.

“Yes with your cousin. You have no idea how happy I am that Trista finally made a move. Apparently only the evil Hydra agents were heterosexual. You know, except for the asshole who killed my wife, but I guess deep-seated closet cases don’t count.” It turns out that Zola’s algorithm
made Hydra deliberately avoid GLASS members for recruitment which explains why new SHIELD has such a high percentage of LGTB members.

“Not like that.” Because Sharon is just pretending to be Trista’s girlfriend, even note Trip knows Trista really has non-platonic feelings for her friend and pretending to be her girlfriend is hard on her. However, just like the old SHIELD, some things are still need to know and Isabel doesn’t have the clearance to know about the constant surveillance of the current head of Hydra’s estranged wife.

“Besides, Sharon’s not even in town right now. She’s chasing down possible ex-Hydra members in I think … You know I’m not sure what country she’s in at the moment; probably Western Europe.”

The hunt for the elusive Sergeant Barnes has not been going well. Considering the stories he heard from Uncle Dugan, Trip is neither shocked nor surprised.

“I’m sure I’ll find out where she actually is when she gets back, hopefully not empty-handed this time.” Trip tells her.

“I’m sure whatever she’s actually doing is significantly more exciting then forced bedrest.” Isabel complained.

“Well you’re 50 weeks pregnant.” Trip joked.

“37 you asshole. I could totally work for another week.”

“I thought Dr. Campbell said that you were in the early stage of labor? Is Friday monitoring you?”

“Yes, but whatever. He’s a baby doctor, what does he know.” Trip responds with a look. “I don’t mean OB/GYN. I mean, fresh out of med school and this is not even his specialty. I think I might be the first uterus he has seen that has not belong to a girlfriend. Unless he just plays for your team, then I’m even more concerned.”

“He said your cervix has started to dilate.” Trip shot back, ignoring her other comment.

“Just a little bit. This could take days. It’s not like in the movies where the amniotic sac breaks and
instant baby. I really wish I still had all the baby books that Victoria got when we decided to go the in vitro route, just so I could make you read them all. I just wish she was still here.” Isabel said sadly. Trip knew that she missed her wife greatly. That added to the stress of this pregnancy. It must be hard to carry the children of a dead woman.

“Skye picked up a bunch when we were in Arizona. And she’s making me read them.”

“Bless her, but that kind of makes me miss Vic more. We were supposed to raise these babies together and she’s not here now because of the asshole. I hate him so much.” Isabel said on the verge of tears.

“I know.” Trip gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

“Would it be cruel and unusual punishment to stream me going into active labor down to his cell as I curse him out for being the reason I don’t have my wife’s hand to crush as I squeeze two watermelon sized children from my vagina?” Isabel acted like she was joking, but Trip knew that she wasn’t.

“Unusual although I don’t think somebody who has done what he’s done would be affected by it.” Stuff like that doesn’t work on the heartless and obviously Grant Ward was heartless.

“True but it’s still going to be my happy thought during active labor.”

“I thought you were supposed to picture a beach or something peaceful like that. I’m going to have to read that coaching book again.”

“You can think of beaches when I’m accidentally breaking your hand mid-contraction, I’m going to imagine torturing the hydra asshole that killed my wife.”

“Fair enough. So are we doing Star Wars, Star Trek, or Lord of the Rings tonight?” He asked.

“Vic was the Tolkien lover in our relationship, so not right now. And, As much as I want to stare at Chris Pine’s beautiful eyes or rather you want to stare at Chris Pine’s beautiful eyes, I don’t think I can watch Winona giving birth as her husband dies.” Dammit, he forgot about that opening scene. Definitely not something the ready to pop Isabel should watch right now.
“That also rules out Star Wars, at least the prequel trilogy. Maybe we can go through Skye’s ridiculous romantic comedy recommendations. Love, Actually should be safe.” He suggested.

“Doesn’t that movie have a widower trying to raise his stepson after his wife dies of cancer?” Trip sighed. He really should have screened everything on Skye’s list.

“The next on Skye’s list is Ms. Congeniality. Is this safe for viewing?”

“We can watch that. That way you can reminisce about some of your worst undercover assignments like that time you had to make out with your cousin in Budapest.”

“Let us never speak of Budapest. Okay, now I’m mad Skye added that to the list.” Trip said half joking, as he went to pull up the movie. Thanks to Stark and Friday, every TV on base now had access to pretty much every film in creation.

“Where’s your girlfriend by the way? Shouldn’t she be here to watch us watch her list of romantic comedies?”

“First of all, she’s not my girlfriend. Second, she got pulled into a meeting with Widow to discuss some special project but she may join us later.” Trip explained.

“OK possibly wife. She’s going by Skye Carter, and sharing a room with you.”

“She is keeping the last name Carter because that’s how she introduced herself to my nephew and why make two sets of IDs. We’re sharing a room because we have way too many new agents coming in and we’re not moving to Arlington for another two months and they need to sleep somewhere. At least I don’t have to worry about Skye freaking out because she’s afraid that I’ll make a pass at her. I rather bunk with her while we’re doubling up.” Trip explained.

“Because she would welcome it.” Isabel commented as she started to rub her back again. That had to be another one of the early contractions.

“She keeps having lunch with the new doctor so I think you’re wrong.”
“You sit with her on those lunches. You also took her with you to Arizona last week to meet the family. How did that go?”

“Badly.” Is the only reply he’s going to give her. The whole thing was a disaster. Eli is the only one who actually knows of the family relationship because it’s too sensitive right now to tell anybody. But hey at least they are able to keep an eye on his half-sister and father. He hopes Hydra doesn’t go after either of them.

“I need details. How did your new biological dad react to finding out that he is your dad?” Isabel asked.

“We didn’t tell him. I don’t even think he knows that his wife died three years ago. It’s like he’s in his own little world. Healthy body but his mind is gone. It’s like grandma but worse.” Now he understands what uncle Tony is going through. Also, let’s not even bring up the fact that his biological dad is older than his grandmother. Fuck Hydra for that.

“Because of the serum?”

“Or because of the torture he endured while in prison. Eli isn’t exactly full of details on what happened and neither is the file. And I think I’ve learned my lesson about looking for the truth in SHIELD’s files. I’m done looking for answers because all I get are more questions.” And he was just tired right now. It’s great knowing that he looks so much like Eli because they were related. However, his relationship with his mom is messy again. Most of their conversations for the last two months have been only about Janice and Skye. That’s not good.

“Have you talk to Skye about that? Or anyone else for that matter. You shouldn’t keep this all in and I know you’re not talking to your mom like you should be.” How did Isabel know him so well? It was disturbing. Maybe it was a SHIELD thing.

“A little; I think she almost doesn’t want to look for her parents anymore because things went so badly for me.” He tells Isabella.

“At least you got a nephew out of it.” Isabel stated with half a smile.

“Who’s older than me.”
“And you have cousins who are young enough to be your children. Your family is weird like that.” Isabel groaned a little as she spoke. “Embrace it.”

“Are you OK?” Trip asked.

“Early labor. Friday is monitoring my contractions as you pointed out earlier. As soon as they drop below five minutes or my amniotic sac ruptures Dr. Campbell will be notified and you get to do your job as my coach. I rather be here. Right now your job is to distract me so put on the movie or tell me more about what’s going on with you and the new agent Carter.”

“I’m just going to start Ms. Congeniality right now.” Trip said, pressing the button to start the movie.

“Good choice.”

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Dr. T: So how is life at the playground?

Lincoln looks at the message on his screen and he isn’t surprised at all that he is conscious at 3:23 AM so that he can read this message as soon as it arrives. He hasn’t been sleeping as well as he should have since he has started working at the playground. Waking up in the middle of the night seems to be normal for him. He is also not surprised that Stephanie is texting him in the middle of the night. And since he was sure he wasn’t going to fall back asleep anytime soon, he decided to reply.

Dr. Lincoln: It’s ridiculously busy. I swear the agents get themselves shot on purpose. Thankfully, not your son.

Dr. T: That’s good.

Dr. Lincoln: It was worse today because Dr. Hand is ready to pop and I had to pretty much drag her back to her room to rest. She’s actually dilating already. I think I’m going to deliver my first baby within next few days, if you’re not back by then.

Dr. Lincoln: Outside of a classroom setting anyway without an instructor watching over me. This is
not how I thought my medical career would go.

Dr. T: No one pictures working for a secret organization during med school, even someone like me who was aware of said secret organization since before pre-K.

Dr. T: I am a neurologist. Outside of med school, the only baby I have delivered has been Antoine. It's a different experience when you're the one pushing it out of your uterus.

Dr. Lincoln: At least you understand it from the other side. That's more than I can say.

Dr. T: Sorry, I'm going to have to miss it. If Isabel is already dilating, I doubt I will be back in time.

Dr. Lincoln: Why? At this point you should come back. There hasn't been a sighting from the squid gang in weeks.

Dr. T: Because my brother has been taking the fight to them. If we keep storming their castle, eventually they're going to try to storm ours.

Dr. Lincoln: Possible.

Dr. T: And I'm not just hiding upstate, I'm actually up here for a reason.

Dr. Lincoln: A reason you can't tell me about since apparently I have a level one security clearance.

Lincoln has been in this place long enough to know that there are things he isn't being told. He would really like to know why agent Romanoff was carrying drywall up to the director’s office earlier this week at three in the morning.

Dr. T: I thought that Coulson got rid of levels. That was something Pierce put in place after they kicked mommy out. Compartmentalizing everything makes it easier to hide the evil deeds apparently.

Dr. Lincoln: Apparently I haven’t hit the trust enough that they will tell anything to outside of when they’re hurt or sick and even that information is like pulling teeth. I know something’s wrong with
the director but his file is under six levels of encryption.

Dr. T: And the soon as he gets hurt you will have access.

Dr. Lincoln: I doubt that will happen anytime soon. He is not allowed to run field missions.

Dr. T: I got shot doing your job interviews so nothing is outside the realm of possibilities, especially with Hydra lurking in the shadows. By the way how’s your firearms training?

Dr. Lincoln: Better now that your son has taken over from Romanoff again. She terrifies me. She filled in last week when he was running a mission in Arizona. Let’s just say I’m glad he’s back in preparation for Hand going into labor at any moment.

Dr. T: Visiting the new family probably. The one that didn’t lie.

Dr. Lincoln: So you were told about that?

Dr. T: Jarvis put me on the call when everybody found out the truth and Tony filled me in on everything else. Apparently, my son is on speaking terms with his new uncle at least. All my communications with Antoine have gone through Jarvis for the last two months and most of it has been work related. Obviously, he is still not happy about the lying.

Dr. Lincoln: Yet he keeps asking me if I’ve been in touch with you every time we have been on the gun range together.

Dr. T: And your responses?

Dr. Lincoln: Email your mom.

Dr. T: Thank you for trying but I messed this up on my own which means I’m going to have to fix it.

Friday: I hate interrupt this conversation but Dr. Klein’s contractions have decreased in time to just four minutes and 57 seconds. It may be time for you to examine her and move to the medical
facilities.

Dr. Lincoln: Hey I have to go.

Dr. T: Yep it looks like your crash course in labor and delivery is going to happen very soon.

Dr. Lincoln: I’m so glad I went over those chapters again last night in my medical textbooks. Especially all those chapters about when things go badly, like the placenta being delivered first.

Dr. T: Don’t panic. I knew this was going to happen so I made sure you would have some help. Agent Long is a registered midwife in addition to being a nurse. She can walk you through everything. Actually, she can do everything you’re just there in case something goes badly.

Dr. T: Not that I think it will. But always be prepared.

Dr. Lincoln: She also left two days ago for a job in the private sector because apparently a very pregnant and easily annoyed Dr. Cline-Hand is too much to deal with.

Dr. T: OK, I will activate Plan B.

Dr. Lincoln: Thank you. I think.

Dr. T: I’ll talk to you in a few days. Have a safe delivery.

Lincoln put down his phone and took a deep breath before reminding himself that it was way too late to call Gordon to get him the hell out of here. He’s been there two months and that was his choice. He actually liked being a doctor here when not dealing with lots of gunshot victims. Unfortunately delivering a baby was on his list of things to do but he can do this.

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Red Malibu: So how is my big sister doing?
Trista: Tony, do you know what time it is in this country?

Red Malibu: Late enough for you to be getting ready for work since you do a lot of early-morning egg retrievals now.

Trista: That’s beside the point.

Trista: However, your sister is good. So is her son. Neither have been contacted by the evil soon to be ex-husband/abandoning daddy. Which is good because Alex kind of hates him with a fiery passion.


Trista: Also no contact.

Red Malibu: Are you sure?

Trista: Your Friday has been monitoring every bit of communication going in and out of that building and her personal residence and nothing. No dead drops or anything else either.

Red Malibu: She really doesn’t remember anything that happened in Appalachia?

Trista: Nothing before Tahiti. Although she does refer to it as a magical place a lot. I think there might be some more recent gaps too. But I can’t prove it.

Red Malibu: Which obviously means that they took those memories from her instead of killing her out right. Yes, SHIELD has that technology. It was called project Tahiti by the way.

Trista: This Should Not Surprise Me. Although I am surprised she was wiped instead of just killing her. It’s Hydra. They did kill Trip’s former fiancé a couple of months ago, even though he was a dick.
Red Malibu: I’ve always believed that even evil people love their children. Some evil people anyway.

Red Malibu: Or they had other plans for her that require her to still be alive.

Trista: That seems more likely. I’ve been invited to a small pre-Halloween party dinner party before the large Halloween party. Sharon will be back by then probably because the last hit was extremely unproductive. Maybe I’ll find something in her house.

Red Malibu: Maybe. So obviously, Kraków was a bust?

Trista: Of course it was. He doesn’t want us to find him yet. Do you really want her to find him? He murdered your parents. I know you didn’t want to watch the video file but I did.

Red Malibu: I would rather have him in a facility where Steve can visit from time to time than out on the streets were Hydra can get to him again. Okay, I want him in a secure facility so Hydra can’t reactivate him to murder more family members. What happened really wasn’t his fault.

Trista: You almost sound forgiving, sort of.

Red Malibu: Because Sergeant Barnes was kidnapped and brainwashed by Hydra to do bad things instead of the asshole who screwed my son literally before dropping him into the Gulf of Mexico. Now him I want to strangle with my bare hands. But director agent won’t let me.

Trista: Obviously, you really hate Ward.

Red Malibu: He fucked with my kid. Of course I’m going to hate him. How is my kid doing? I text him all the time but even though he’s in his late 20s, he is doing a good impression of a closed off teenager. He never really tells me anything

Trista: He’s fine. Actually, he’s ecstatic at being back at work, at least part-time. He’s angry at everybody for not using the lab system that he and Simmons created. Most are now scared of him.

Red Malibu: Of course. I’ve already been yelled at twice after using the wrong bags to collect
Trista: Of course. He misses you though. And I can’t see him as much as I like because of the job. I’m sure it will be better once Arlington is done.

Red Malibu: It will be done soon. Right now just a lot of furniture needs to be added. Although the Playground is still going to be the main base because there’s an airplane hangar. Arlington is more of a public front, but the labs are going to be better.

Red Malibu: You know I want my kid to have the best labs. Also it’s a lot easier for me to get to DC than the Playground.

Trista: Hey I have to go I just got a text from Stephanie on my other phone. Dr. C is in labor and Campbell is kind of freaked out after the nurse that was supposed to help resigned.

Red Malibu: So apparently, you now have to drive to the Playground at way too early in the morning? Have you actually delivered a baby before?

Trista: Yes. A few times in the field. It was part of the mission that made me decide that I was done being a field agent. Instead, the big boss made me your mom’s security detail.

Red Malibu: Okay Friday will create an excuse for your boss.

Trista: Thank you.

To Be Continued


Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or review the last conversation. I’m glad that you are all enjoying the story. Good news, an update before Infinity War comes out. Something nice to read before you watch that won’t spoil you at all since it takes place 4 years earlier.

I know the familial relationships are getting ridiculously complicated, which of course is the design of the story. There’s only a few more familial twists to calm and then I can create a family tree of sorts. It’s going to be twisty.

Warning: Violence. Also, reinterpretation of a scene from agents of SHIELD episode 2.7 The Writing on the Wall.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 30: After Birth

Isabel Cline-Hand never thought that she would experience anything more painful than finding out her wife of almost 3 years was murdered during the collapse of SHIELD by one of the Hydra traitors and she has been shot multiple times. Then she gave birth to twins without her wife holding her hand. That was real pain. All those months ago at the fertility clinic of Arlington, she never envisioned giving birth by herself at a secret SHIELD base. No Victoria and not even her own OB/GYN, just her, Dr. Campbell, and Trip. That last one is probably for the best since Dr. Sinclair turned out to be Hydra. The squids really did infiltrate every part of the agency.

All the books she read did not prepare her for 22 hours of hard labor. She’s still surprised she didn’t break Antoine’s hand sometime during the process. Of course she had to deal with Dr. Campbell consulting various medical textbooks whenever Friday notified him of something changing.

Thank God Trista showed up about four hours in. Unlike Campbell, Trista has delivered a baby before due to her being undercover as a midwife for three months, several years ago. Now she knew what she was doing.

Isabel really appreciated that past mission when at 10:18 PM on October 27, 2014, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl with 10 toes and 10 fingers and Victoria’s lungs. Definitely a screamer.
Isabel was almost afraid to look at her daughter when Campbell first put the little girl into her arms not even cleaned up yet. She was terrified of seeing Victoria’s eyes looking back up at her. Her heart hurt so much. Victoria was the one who wanted to be a mom, the one who would be good at it. She had a normal family who actually loved each other and loved her, not the abusive screwed up mess that Isabel survived.

Then Antoine started talking about how the baby was adorable and kind of looks like his not a girlfriend which seems odd considering they chose a sperm donor that looked like her. Okay Isabel thought it would be funny to put down Captain America look alike on the form. Victoria was not amused, but did not make her change it. She misses her wife.

She’s pretty sure that Trip only made the comment about the baby looking like Skye because he is seeing his girlfriend everywhere. Even when she’s high on a better version of an epidural, Isabel was still going to make snarky comments about his not a girlfriend. Or maybe he was trying to distract her from the fact that Dr. Campbell was examining her vagina to see if she could deliver the second baby vaginally or if she was going to need to have a cesarean at the playground. She didn’t want that. She did not want to be Dr. Campbell’s practice patient.

“Okay, you’re seeing your not a girlfriend everywhere.”

“They’re not dating.” Campbell remarked from between her legs.

“Concentrate on the other baby Campbell. Is there an amniotic sac that needs to be broken?”

“Yes, actually. The baby is in a good position, and his heart rate is strong, so I think you’ll be able to deliver this one too.” Campbell said trying to use his reassuring doctor voice.

“Although you definitely should look at the first baby girl before I hand her over to Teresa to be cleaned and checked over.” Trip said and Isabella is just glad that there are other halfway competent people here, now that that incompetent nurse volunteered to get transferred somewhere else. She’s definitely going to need a better nursing staff post maternity leave. Too bad it seems like she was one of the few medical professionals at SHIELD that was not Hydra. Isabel is going to have to build the department from the ground up with Stephanie and Campbell.

“I’m telling you she looks sort of like Skye or actually May. She is making May’s annoyed face. I thought you said you went with somebody that had similar features to yourself?” Trip asked.
‘That was the plan.’ Isabella thought to herself, but she was too tired to actually say that. Instead, she finally looked down only to see that there was no Victoria in the little girl she was holding. Dark hair, dark eyes. And she did kind of look like Trip’s not a girlfriend as well as Agent May. If it wasn’t for the fact that Teresa took baby girl hand away, so that she could deliver baby 2 and the placenta maybe she would’ve said something. However, baby number two was coming quickly now that her second water was broken.

This time when baby boy Hand was placed in her arms after delivery, Isabel looked at her child right away. Again, this baby looked nothing like her late wife. Maybe she’s just thinking that because the baby is covered in various fluids, but her observation didn’t change when the freshly wrapped and clean babies were placed back in her arms, a few minutes later.

Baby girl Hand was 5 lbs. 15 oz. and baby boy Hand was 6 lbs. 1 oz. Small-ish but a pretty good weight for being born a little early. Even better, they were not going to need to spend time in the incubators brought in just in case because their lungs were very well developed as evident by the fact the two were screaming quite loudly.

Now several hours later(that involved some much-needed sleep) her babies were swaddled in the purple butterfly blankets that Antoine brought from Arizona and laying in the bassinet beside her asleep after experiencing the joys of breast-feeding. They were sharing a cot because that works better with twins. Even though they looked absolutely adorable lying next to each other, Isabel could still see no Victoria in either child. She told herself that the babies were just displaying the characteristics of their biological father and maybe that was the case. But considering the twins look like they were Agent May’s children, that biological father was obviously not the one they chose. Not that it mattered, because these were still her babies.

It is entirely possible there was a sperm sample mixup at the clinic. The whole base knows the truth about Stark by this point. Although, in that case it was an egg screw-up. Maybe something like that happened again. Accidents can happen.

Except, her former gynecologist was Hydra and the clinic she went to is run by the wife of the new head of Hydra. Victoria always said there’s no such thing as coincidences. Victoria would want her to follow up on this even if it meant acknowledging that no part of her wife was left in the world.

Of course, because Dr. Campbell would not even let her get up to pee without supervision (she’s been getting really close to former field medic Teresa), she was going to need help. Although the good doctor did get through the delivery in one piece, she didn’t quite trust him yet. She also didn’t want to bring Antoine into it because he would probably suggest she see Dr. Suarez, assuming that she lost it. That meant asking Trista before she left the base to get back to her mission of stalking the head of the fertility clinic that created her babies. Of course, when she brings up the subject with Trista, she begins to wonder if Dr. Suarez will be involved anyway.
“You want me to run a DNA analysis on your children just to certified that they are actually the children of Victoria?” Trista asked, obviously bewildered by her earlier request. “Maybe I should see if Dr. Suarez has some time to come by the base to give you a check up. You’ve been through a lot in the last few months.”

“I’m not crazy.” Isabel asserted. “I’m just 99% certain my children are partially of Asian ancestry, most likely Chinese. You can’t say they don’t look like my boss’s girlfriend. I would just like to be sure that the clinic used the wrong sperm and not the wrong egg like they did with Stark.”

“That incident happened because Stark was the first of his kind. Modern clinics are better than that. Maybe you’re just not seeing the resemblance because you didn’t want to see the resemblance.” Trista suggested which was kind of true, but still pissed her off. “You haven’t been dealing with the loss of Victoria as well as you could be. You don’t even really want to talk about her.”

“Have the love of your life murdered by Hydra and see how you deal. I’m not crazy. You knew Victoria for years, do these look like her kids?” Isabel asked.

“I am definitely picking up some of her attitude from baby girl Hand but I felt like baby boy Hand has your temperament.” Trista replied back as she stared longingly at the sleeping babies in the bassinet.

“Apparently, that’s a nurture trait since you know that there’s not one speck of my DNA in there by design. I’m starting to think there may not be any of Victoria in there either.”

“Does it matter?” Trista asked.

“I’ve carried the kids for over eight months. I have literally killed to keep them safe. They are totally mind, however, my OB/GYN was Hydra. The fertility clinic I went to was ran by the wife of the new head of Hydra. As soon as Hydra fell I was put in a nice room and given plenty of food because I was going to give birth to the next generation. I was hiding in the middle of nowhere West Virginia and they still came after me. Why? I never worked in any of the big projects outside of Tahiti and not that many people knew what Tahiti actually was. Even then I never actually made it to the facility because my dad got sick before the transfer.”

“You never mentioned what they said to you during your first kidnapping.” Trista said with a worried side.
“I didn’t think it was important until now. What if they used me as an incubator for some genetically modified child/super soldier? They sent an entire strike team to kidnap me, an entire strike team. What if I have something they want back?” What if they did something to her kids? The thought terrified her.

“Part of me still thinks I should make Campbell bring in Suarez for a psych console. I know being a SHIELD agent in a post SHIELD world makes everyone a little paranoid, but I’m a little concerned.” Trista said just as Antoine walked into the room carrying a bag of good food from the bar upstairs.

“So Dr. Trista is the patient allowed to have a cheeseburger and mozzarella sticks?”

“You can’t call me that. I never did get my MD although I’m starting to wonder if I should go back if I keep getting dragged into this place. Natalie even offered to pay for it.” Of course she would. Natalie was a nice person. Even though she worked with Dr. Lawrence at the fertility clinic of Arlington, she met Natalie List a few times and the woman seem like a sweetheart. Not the type of person who would end up married to Hydra and who may be an agent herself. And now she’s wondering if Friday will let her research Dr. Lawrence when she’s alone again. Maybe he’s the Hydra one.

“Stark probably would too.” Trip suggested. “Once the hunt for Hydra is over, Simmons said she is going back to med school. Since my Uncle will only go to her or Bruce for his injury on mission, she feels at least one of them should have an M.D.”

“Or an OD. We are the best.” Trista rolls her eyes at that comment, as she inspected the bag of bar food.

“Since you were smart enough to not bring Isabel’s preferred jalapeño poppers, she can eat the good food.” Trista acquiesced.

“Thank you.” He said grabbing a mozzarella stick out of the bag and handing it over to Isabel. Real food was yummy.

“Although I am almost sure she only has five minutes before the babies start screaming for their late afternoon milk. However, Trip, you should only stay for a few minutes. Isabel needs to rest and for some reason the babies always wake up around you.” Trista warned.
“It’s because I’m their favorite uncle.” Just then, baby girl Hand started crying. Definitely healthy lungs.

“You’re this close to losing that honorific. Make yourself useful and grabbed her from the bassinet.” Isabel said as she put down the cheese stick and unbuttoned her nursing bra. She’s glad that the courier brought over some necessities this morning. Nursing bras are wonderful.

“Of course. I hate to leave you with a screaming baby but Skye is waiting for me in our room.” Antoine said as he handed the baby girl to her.

Note to self, look through book of baby names. Baby girl definitely doesn’t feel like a Victoria or Vicki or any other V name that she could think of. Maybe she can use Victor for baby boy Hand but he doesn’t look like a Victor.

“Of course flee the screaming babies for quality time with the not a girlfriend.”

“I’m meeting her for lunch. We’re avoiding the kitchens because it’s filled with recruits. She’s actually the one who went out to get stuff from the diner.”

“Tell your girlfriend thank you.” Isabel quipped.

“Not my girlfriend and Campbell will be with us. We are going to discuss how you are an awful patient.”

“Enjoy your lunch three-way. Campbell does have very dexterous fingers and really knows his way around an vagina. I’m sure he could just as easily take care of you.” Isabel joked.

“Feed your daughter.” Antoine said just as he placed a kiss on her forehead before leaving.

“You know it wouldn’t be the worst thing if your babies were Hydra engineered. See that guy who just walked out of here after bringing you the good food and holding your hand through 20+ grueling hours of labor. He along with his cousin were Hydra test tube babies and both of them are loyal to SHIELD to the end. But it doesn’t matter because Antoine is the sweetest guy in the universe and probably your best friend. His cousin isn’t far behind. Does it matter to you if they are
Hydra test tube babies? I know you well enough to know that you’re still going to be the best mom in the world to both of them.”

“No, it doesn’t matter because I still love my children. But to be the best mom I need to know if Hydra was targeting me or them. I have to figure out how to protect them and to do that I need to know.”

“And what will you do either way?” Trista asked.

“Keep them safe. I need your help to do that because the moment I get up from this bed, Dr Campbell will be in here. You’re the only one I trust with the medical knowledge to do what needs to be done.”

“You want me to draw blood from the twins?” Trista questioned.

“And let Friday do the analysis. I know she has Vicki’s blood on file.”

“Are you sure this isn’t some sort of crazy postpartum thing? I mean postpartum depression is a thing. Maybe postpartum paranoia exists as well. You realize that you’re safe, here?” Trista argued.

“Again, my gynecologist was Hydra. And the place where I had the in vitro done is ran by the wife of the head of Hydra. It’s not paranoia if it’s true.” Isabel argued back as the baby kept eating. At least she had this part of motherhood down already.

“Who is completely disgusted with him and wants to find him just to serve him with divorce papers.”

“Oh honey, I have this friend at work who wants to leave. Do you think you can give him a job? He’s mostly been working on trying to recreate Captain America but how hard can fertilizing a few eggs be?” Isabel said as sarcastically as possible.

“OK you have a point. Anything else Princess Isabelle?”

“Next time you come by the Playground, could you pick up and deliver my stash of baby stuff at Target and buybuy BABY. The courier only brought the basics like the bassinet and nursing bras.”
“Then you can have the courier make another pick up. But I’ll take care of it. I hate going to Springfield.”

“You’re the best.”

“You won’t be thinking that when your babies start screaming because I stuck them with a needle.” Trista said before leaving to do what was asked.

And yes, both children started screaming like crazy during the blood work, but it was necessary. She needed to know the truth was even if that truth might be that she didn’t have Victoria’s children with her after all.

Xxxx

Dr. T: I’m restless and can’t sleep. How are you?

Dr. Lincoln: Mostly okay. I never want to deliver a baby again. Why couldn’t you have come back early? Also, your kid is still ridiculously stubborn and won’t email you.

Dr. T: No email, but he did send me a text message thanking me for sending up Trista. It’s the first time he’s texted me directly in months. So, thank you for your good work.

Dr. Lincoln: At least, that’s progress.

Dr. T: So how did the birth and delivery of your twins go?

Dr. Lincoln: Really well actually, even if there was like an hour between twins. Also, thank you for asking Trista to come. She was a big help. Although, I’m still exhausted. I’m going to be catching up on my sleep for at least a week.

Dr. T: Yet you responded to my almost 1 AM text messages?

Dr. Lincoln: My sleep schedule resembles that of my patient because I’m the only doctor here right
now.

Dr. T: That’s understandable. How are the babies doing?

Dr. Lincoln: Baby boy Hand and baby girl Hand are both happy and healthy. No incubators although Dr. Hand-Cline insisted that we do a complete work up an analysis. She’s so paranoid that she wouldn’t let me draw the blood instead Trista did it before she even told me that she wanted it done.

Dr. T: Not that paranoid. Her gynecologist turned out to be Hydra. It’s possible that something was done to the babies in utero, like engineering them for superpowers. It would be the smart thing.

Dr. Lincoln: I’m not even surprised that this has become my life. Do you think Friday will let me look at their sequence? There is a couple of things that only I can catch.

Dr. T: Probably not, but Jarvis would and I love my brother, but he forgot to make his new AI untrusting of his old AI.

Dr. Lincoln: Point.

Dr. T: I should probably send Isabel a baby gift. She is best friends with my son and I really want her help in convincing him to send me more monosyllable text messages. What are their names? I should probably put that information on the card.

Dr. Lincoln: Right now, baby girl Hand and baby boy hand.

Dr T: So she’s going with the deceased wife’s last name. That is not surprising.

Dr. Lincoln: Apparently the only reason why Isabella kept her last name because it was very hard to change your name at SHIELD unless you were completely changing your identity.

Dr. T: Also not surprising, from what Antoine told me about her family. Also there’s a reason why my mom stayed Agent Carter after two marriages.
Dr. Lincoln: That is not surprising.

Dr. T: Do you feel that she’s not naming the twins because she’s not bonding? Have you mentioned it to Suarez?

Dr. Lincoln: She has baby name books everywhere so I think she’s looking but she is very paranoid. I think she’s convinced that the clinic mixed up the sperm because everybody says that the babies kind of look like Skye or Agent May. Maybe I should bring in Suarez?

Dr. T: Definitely probably.

Dr. Lincoln: I’ll email her in the morning. I hope I actually sleep.

1. T: Hey I have to go. The roommate showed up to talk. Go to sleep.

xxxxx

Stephanie quickly hit the send button before placing the special Stark phone in her pocket so she can give the agent in front of her her full attention. She didn’t know why he was in her room right now when he was supposed to be monitoring Janice. Their target was currently being talked up by some blonde guy, who must be at least 15 years older than her. It was enough to make Stephanie have Friday do a facial recognition search on the creepy guy.

She was still getting used to Friday, but she does miss Jarvis. Maybe because he sounds so much like the real Jarvis. He was about the only one she let close to her after the kidnapping. He was the only one she really trusted. She couldn’t even trust her parents or her sister because they were spies. You can never really trust spies (as Marcy recently taught her), but Jarvis was Jarvis which probably explained why Tony is reacting the way he is and regards to the electronic Jarvis keeping his other half-sister a secret (Supposedly, Tony told her everything regarding that messy situation, but she feels like he’s still holding something back). Stephanie is still trying to wrap her head around that one. But that was neither here nor there.

“What did you find that was so important that you’re in my room at nearly 1 AM?” Stephanie asked trying to get her mind back on the mission at hand.

“We got a hit on the guy who has been chatting up Janice at the bar for the last hour and a half.” That’s when Agent K 2 (as she has named him in her head) handed Stephanie a Stark pad with the photo and a SHIELD biography of a Sebastian Derik on the screen. He looked exactly like the man
chatting Janice up earlier. Yes, they did put a couple cameras in Janice’s favorite Thursday night hangout place. It was necessary after that time she started drawing the symbols on the bathroom wall of the place with her lipstick.

“He is a former SHIELD agent?” She asked as she started to read the bio. She really hoped he wasn’t Hydra. Stephanie is getting so tired of dealing with the squid Mafia.

“A dead former field agent who is not that dead anymore.” Agent K2 told her.

“This is not good.”

“Not at all. This ether means he faked his death which probably means he’s Hydra or…”

“He’s another Tahiti patient?” Stephanie asked already filling a headache building in the back of her mind.

“Exactly.”

“Shit.” She exclaimed as she pulled up the feed of the bar only to realize that neither were still there.

“And while we were talking they left the bar.” K2 said as Stephanie pulled up the feed of the apartment. Janice was walking into the apartment and the not so dead agent who may or may not be Hydra is walking beside her.

“How long ago did you stop monitoring her? It’s at least a 15 minute ride from the bar. She asked the agent, annoyed.

“I may have been playing call of duty.” She was going to kill him. “I didn’t think it was that important until Friday showed me the results of her search.” It’s at that moment that Sebastian pulled out a knife.

Fuck!
“We have to go.” Stephanie said as she grabbed the weapons go bag that Tony made for her. She didn’t have time to put on her gear but she was fully armed by the time they arrived at Janice’s apartment less than five minutes later. She could already hear the screams. She didn’t remember much of what she did over the next few moments. It pretty much blurred together until after she puts three Dendrotoxin bullets into Sebastian’s chest. Thankfully, he falls backwards instead of on top of Janice.

Apparently, he took the time they were driving over there to tie her up because she only had a few knife marks on her. It looked like he was planning to carve her body up instead of chopping her up. Not that one was better than the other and she says that as somebody who was tortured by Hydra for months.

“Who are you?” Janice asked after a few moments as Stephanie was untying her.

“I’m Dr. Carter, Roger’s sister. The one he doesn’t get along with. Me and the hubby were making a late night snack run to the 7 Eleven on the corner when we heard you.”

“It’s after 1 AM and why were you caring that weird gun.”

“It’s not a gun. It’s an icer. It’s a prototype. I’m testing it for my brother because he’s really paranoid.” Not a total lie.

“You’re not really a doctor are you? Doctors don’t break doors like that and they don’t shoot like that.” Janice said, still dazed.

“Can we please do 20 questions in the car?” Agent K2 said as he handed a pair of sweats and a robe to Janice. “I really would like to be out of here before the cops show up or he wakes up.”

“Tony said it would last for at least two hours.” Stephanie said as she helped Janice put on the robe. She’s too jittery to do anything more than that.

“I don’t exactly trust Mr. Stark.”

“Who are you?” Janice asked again.
“Stark industries humanitarian, international education, and life-saving division.” Agent K responds.

“Avenger offshoot?” She asked as Stephanie tied the belt around her.

“Why do you think I’m an Avenger?”

“You Just broke the hinges off my door.” Apparently she did rip the door off its hinges. Considering what was seen on the monitors, she knew to get there as soon as possible.

“Let’s go with that.” Stephanie said as she grab Janice’s arm to drag her out of that apartment and into the car.

“Where are you taking me?” Janice asked once they got into the SUV. Even though it looked weird, Stephanie got in the back with Janice. She really shouldn’t be by herself right now.

“Somewhere safe where he can’t hurt you. I won’t let him hurt you.” Stephanie told Janice what she wanted to hear after her rescue from her kidnapping.

“But I need to make a statement to the police.”

“We’ll take care of it when we get you away from him. Safe house?” Stephanie said, asking Agent K2.

“No. He might know about us and I don’t trust your brother and nephew’s invention to last the full two hours. We’re heading to the airstrip under construction at the compound. From there we should either go to the Playground or the tower.”

“The Playground.” As much as she would’ve enjoyed an excuse to see her husband, she knew that there were other resources at the playground that she would need right now.

“You’re really an Avenger?” Janice asked, no longer shaking.

“I am the sister of an Avenger.”
“And I’m assuming that sibling is not Roger?” She asked.

“His real name is Antoine Triplett and he’s actually my son. I’m Stephanie by the way.” She introduced herself.

“Adoption? You look too young to have a kid his age. That Name sounds familiar.” Oh good, she’s remembering. Maybe the guy triggered something.

“He’s my biological son. I was still in high school when he was born. The reason why that name is familiar to you is because...” Stephanie started to say but she realized that Janice was shaking again. She needed to tread carefully, “You know, it’s a long story and considering what happened I don’t think you need to hear it tonight.” Because Stephanie doesn’t want to explain the GH 325 truth of it all.

“We got at least an hour until we get to the airstrip, you might as well tell her everything.”

“Everything?” Janice asked, still dazed and confused.

“Your real name is Rebecca Stevens and you were part of an experimental procedure to cure your cancer but it went badly and they had to wipe your memories.” Agent K 2 said from the front seat. If he wasn’t driving, she would strangle him.

“What?” Janice asked even more bewildered than before if such a thing were possible.

“How exactly did you get a security clearance?” Stephanie asked before she had Friday put the car on lockdown and then started to tell Janice the truth complete with Friday, pulling the very super-secret SHIELD file for her as well as some of Antoine’s private pictures of her. By the time they arrived at the still under construction compound, Stephanie was almost sure Janice believed her. Almost. Well, they had a less than an hour flight before they arrived at the playground. Maybe things will be better by then.

She sent Lincoln a quick message to let him know to be prepared. She also sent another text to Natasha to let her know about Sebastian. Finally, she sent a text to Suarez. They were definitely going to need a therapist for this.

Xx
To be continued

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter was mostly from the perspective of the OCs but it was important to the plot. Also Janice is still alive. Yay, we save somebody.

Also you can help Isabel come up with baby names for the twins. I love to hear your suggestions.
Chapter 31: Parental Instinct

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or review the last chapter. You are all absolutely wonderful. More twists in this chapter.

This chapter is Infinity War free because it still late October 2014. However, information from season five of Agents of Shield will be used to flush out various characterizations in the next few chapters.

At 4:22 AM, 23 minutes before her alarm went off, Trista felt a body fall into the bed beside her. A normal person would assume this would be their lover coming home after a late night at work or something similar. However, Trista is not sure what country her fake girlfriend is in at the moment even though she supposed to be coming back soon. And considering Trista is undercover, investigating the soon to be ex-wife of the head of Hydra, the only logical thing was to grab the Icer she keeps in her nightstand for such emergencies and shoot first. They were trying to take Hydra agents alive for interrogation purposes (which is now easier now that they know about the suicide pills).

Also considering it was Sharon sliding into bed next to her it’s probably best that she went with the non-lethal weapon. Thankfully she realized it was her pretend girlfriend before pulling the trigger.

“Sorry I woke you up. I thought I could sneak into bed without you noticing.” Sharon said with a yawn.

“You should know better than to try to sneak into the bed of an agent. Seriously, you could be unconscious right now.” Trista said putting the weapon back in the drawer.

“Unlike my cousin, I’ve only dated civilians. Also, you’re a pretty sound sleeper, usually.” Sharon said with another yawn.

“I have to get up in less than 20 minutes so my body was trying to beat my alarm. Why did I have to go undercover somewhere that has such early hours?” Trista asked. Yes she’s worked at a nursing home for the last few years but she always had the evening or the afternoon shift.
“I have no idea why. This bed is so soft I don’t know how you possibly could wake up in 20 minutes.” Sharon joked as she laid her head down on the pillow. Sharon really looked exhausted. The search for Sergeant Barnes must be tiring, but she knows Sharon feels like she owes it to her uncle to find his missing brother at arms.

“That’s because you’ve been mostly staying in various safe houses and hostels through most of Europe. Still no Barnes?” Trista asked.

“Not a single hit. And also since I’m doing this under Avenger jurisdiction I’ve been having to work with Ross of the CIA and I kind of want to punch him in the teeth. I really thought I was done with him, when I came back to Shield.”

“Tony said something similar like two weeks ago. This is why you should’ve stayed at the CIA. That way you could of been in charge of the investigation instead of him.” Trista joked.

“I can’t work at the same agency as Aunt Marcy right now.” Sharon hasn’t spoken to her aunt in months and, Trista doesn’t think that’s going to end anytime soon. “Also I feel like I’m more useful doing this.”

“I don’t know if looking for a Barnes in a haystack that you have yet to find is helpful.” Trista commented.

“However, I have successfully found 13 other hydra operatives at two separate Hydra-strongholds and have turned them over to various government entities throughout Europe. The CIA is still chasing after the good Shield agents.” Trista perked up at that despite wanting to crawl under the covers and snuggle down until her alarm went off.

“Well as long as you’re being useful. I’m going to get up and go to work and you can sleep.” Because sharing a bed with Sharon would be too much this morning. Due to the fact that Hydra could be watching, they tried to look like an actual couple is much as possible, even at home. That meant no one slept on the guest futon.

“Despite being totally jetlagged, I assume I need to go with you to dinner at your boss’s house tonight before everybody else shows up for big Halloween spectacular?”

“The Halloween party is Saturday which I’m not going to which is why I was invited to dinner Friday instead. So you have a little time to recover” Trista explained.
“Good. I’m glad I arrived back in time to help. It will be easier to plant bugs and search her bedroom if you’re not alone.” Sharon joked.

“And her husband’s study. It would be so much easier if the evil guys kept journals or something, although from what I’ve heard from the clinic rumor mill they would probably be in German. Allegedly he always sent Natalie explicit cards in German for Valentine’s Day.”

Trista was regretting never picking up another language at the Academy. Thankfully, because of her previous career life in medicine, the additional language requirement was waived. Why couldn’t he write the journals in Spanish, she’s fluent in that language.

“That’s OK, I read German. Uncle Gabe taught me.” Sharon tells her.

“Of course he did,” Trista sighed, Sharon was too perfect sometimes.

“Since I know you’re not going to try to go back to sleep for just 15 minutes, let me see pictures of the cutest babies ever. I can’t believe you actually helped deliver Isabel’s twin.”

“Neither can I, but I’m not shocked Isabel scared off the nurse we brought in specifically to help with that. I thought your cousin would have texted you dozens of pictures by now.” Trista said as she searched for her phone.

“He refused, citing security concerns since Hydra tried to kidnap Isabel more than once.” Sharon explained.

“That’s a valid reason not to.” Trista said as she pulled up the pictures of the twins.

“They are absolutely adorable. They don’t look a thing like either of their mothers but they are still cute.” Obviously, Sharon saw whatever Isabel saw when she looked at the twins. Trista was hoping that the DNA test that Friday was currently running would just prove that baby boy and baby girl Hand favorite their sperm donor but she has uneasy feeling that maybe Isabel is not just being paranoid.

“When did you meet Victoria?” She asked Sharon after a moment.
“She did a couple of guest lectures at the Academy when I was a student as well as a few social things, but I never worked with her. My cousin was right about Isabel choosing a Captain America look alike as the sperm donor. I swear that looks like Steve Rogers’ chin on that little girl.” She said pointing to the picture of baby girl Hand.

Trista quickly looked at the picture, only to realize that Sharon was right. That girl looks like a mini Steve. Actually, both babies did just with darker hair. Okay, it was starting to become obvious that Isabel wasn’t completely paranoid or suffering from a weird postpartum paranoia.

Of course, Trista didn’t say this out loud. Instead she got ready for work and completely forgot about it until one hour and 22 minutes later when Friday confirmed that Victoria Hand is not genetically related to either baby.

“Neither baby is Vicki’s child?” She asked the AI again for clarification.

“Neither child matches the genetic sample in the deceased agent’s shield file. Baby girl Hand is also of Irish and Chinese ancestry. According to the DNA sample, Agent Hand is not descended from either region. However, I could speak to Dr. Cline about this. She may have an additional sample I could compare the DNA to.” Note to self, yell at Tony for not giving his new AI a sensitivity filter. Jarvis was better at that sort of thing.

“No, don’t. I’ll come to the compound as soon as I can, most likely Saturday morning, and tell her myself.” Because there are some things you don’t want to find out from an AI. “What about baby boy Hand?”

“He is also of Irish and Chinese ancestry. However, unlike his sister, DNA from a third individual was used in his creation. This individual seems to mostly be of British and Italian ancestry. Would you like me to run the DNA of baby girl Hand and baby boy Hand against the larger database?” Trista could hear her Friday still talking, but she stopped really paying attention after Friday said that Isabel’s child contain DNA from three different parents. That meant Hydra was actually involved.

Shit!

This also meant they were really going to have to go through Natalie’s house Friday. Trista really, really hoped Natalie was only guilty of trusting her husband’s advice on who to hire. This was going to end up messy.
Being a shield agent, Antoine Triplett was really used to waking up at all hours of the day especially since Shield fell and he’s been spending most of his time in hiding or on missions. However, he wasn’t expecting his mom to show up at the base in the middle of the night with a very shaken Janice/Rebecca. Which was understandable because apparently another former Tahiti patient tried to carve alien writing on her or at least that’s how his mom explained it. Trip didn’t watch the footage from Janice’s apartment because the description alone made him nauseous.

“Is she really OK?” He asked his mom after she and Dr. Campbell settled Janice into one of the beds in the infirmary for the night or rather morning.

“I don’t think anyone would be OK after what she’s gone through last night or rather this morning. But she was at least starting to believe what we were telling her before Dr. Campbell gave her a sedative so she could sleep.”

“That’s good. I think.” The sedative thing concerns him a little. But who wouldn’t need drugs after what happened?

“Believing you are resurrected with the use of alien DNA is going to be difficult for anyone to believe under the best of circumstances. Maybe you should stay here. She knows you from now and before. It’s always weird waking up in a strange place, especially after something traumatic. It might be easier if there’s a friendly face by her bed. Okay, it will probably keep Campbell from having to give her more sedatives.” His mom suggested.

“I will. Are you going to be staying on base for a while?” Trip asked his mom not sure what he wanted the answer to be.

“Maybe.” His mother shrugged. “I should monitor Janice here and the construction on the new upstate facility is going pretty well so I don’t need to be back up there to watch. We might be able to move in and January. But if I’m not needed to do those things, Tony kind of wants me to join him on the road a little bit since I am technically working on various Stark industries projects as Georgetown medical recovers from what happened. Now that’s one place I can’t go back to.”

“At least they’re actually blaming Hydra it now.”

“Tony’s lawyers are good. The PR department is even better,” his mom added.
“I guess I should be glad that he is my uncle.” After a few months, Trip was getting used to the idea of Uncle Tony. The first class tickets to Arizona last week helped.

“Well, I’m glad I gave you one better than Tyler.” His mom joked.

“It wouldn’t be that hard. Did you know that he turned over custody of the kids to Aunt Jackie? So he could get back to his regularly scheduled life in DC without the hiding from Hydra.” If there was one family member he would be okay with getting kidnapped by Hydra, uncle Tyler would be it.

“Tony didn’t mention it and he’s the only sibling I’m allowed to have contact with.” Because Marcy is still persona non grata and everybody else’s gone dark on purpose because that’s how you do things in the Carter-Jones household, except Tyler because he’s an idiot. “Although, maybe that can change now that I’m back on base. However, Tony did say that you met your new sister and your nieces and nephews last week.” He is not surprised Tony told her that. Maybe that was the price of the first-class tickets.

“It was okay but weird and they don’t even know I’m a blood relative, yet. They just think I was a security consultant friend of Eli’s. It’s also strange that all my new nieces and nephews are older than me. Elijah is the youngest and he still a few years older than me. It’s weird.” Trip tells his mom, surprised he’s telling her this much.

“The age gap is not surprising, considering I was impregnated by a man who is just slightly younger than your grandfather. Then there’s the fact that Hydra / the government stole his DNA from him during World War II. I hate Hydra.” His mother lamented.

“So do I,” Trip replied in agreement.

“Since you have been talking to me voluntarily for the last 10 minutes, I should probably take this as another opportunity to apologize. I am sorry I kept everything away from you.” His mom said sounding sincere.

“You’re not sorry. You’re never sorry that you protected me.” Trip tells her, knowing his mom a little too well.

“But I’m sorry that you were hurt by all of this.” His mom tells him with a sad smile.
“The specialist part of me understands why I wasn’t told the truth. It is too sensitive. And I could understand you not wanting to talk about the kidnapping at all. However, I kind of wish you would have told me once I had a security clearance.”

“The whole thing was level 10 Fury’s eyes only and that’s only because apparently he helped Marcy with the early investigation. But once you were older, I should’ve at least told you more of the truth, including the kidnapping.”

“And not lied to me about Nat once I started to put together pieces of the truth.”

“I’m sorry. I want you to believe that you were still conceived in love and not in a petri dish. Because I do love you. Besides maybe she is your other mother. I think I would like that a piece of her would live on in you.” His mom said nearly tearing out.

He did not have the heart to tell his mom that that Natalie was definitely not his third parent or tell her that was a good thing since she was Uncle Tony’s half-sister and kind of sort of the soon to be ex-wife at the head of Hydra. The family already felt incestuous enough. Also Uncle Tony pretty much told him not to say anything about Nat to his mom until they were sure she wasn’t Hydra or Tony was able to break the news in person. Yes, the hypocrisy of keeping this a secret from his mom is not lost on him.

“What was Nat like?” He asked instead.

“A good person in a bad place who was unfortunate enough to be born in the house of Hydra. At first I would only see her every once in a while when her dad would bring her by. Apparently she was going to some sort of Hydra school, not that she called it that. She said it was where people went to learn to be ruthless and horrible.”

“If Shield had an Academy, it would make sense for Hydra they have one as well.”

“Anyway, after some argument between father and daughter where Natalie refused to kill her dog, she became my cellmate instead of my occasional caregiver. We were close before then, but the connection got stronger after that. That’s when we started working on a way to get out of there. I just wish we both got out. Her dad was an abusive asshole and she didn’t deserve to die. I mean what type of sick person locks up his own daughter because she won’t kill her dog?”

The same type of sick asshole who kidnapped her after faking her death to make her biological
parents suffer as much is possible. Even if she did marry the head of Hydra, Trip was starting to feel really sorry for Natalie List von Strucker.

Thankfully he didn’t have to say anything else to his mom because Janice started to wake up.

“That sedative was supposed to last at least another two hours.” His mother said, looking at her watch. “I’m going to go get her some breakfast. Could you go in there and keep her company until I get back?”

“No problem.” He said quickly.

“Thank you.” He hears his mom say before he walked in to Janice’s room.

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“Where am I?” Janice asked as she opened her eyes. It looked like she was in some sort of hospital, one probably constructed during the 40s.

“The Playground.” She heard a familiar voice say.

“Where is this playground?” She asked, still confused.

“About an hour and a half outside of DC. Somewhere underground and safe from whoever tried to kill you last night.” She heard the voice say again, although this time she was pretty sure it was Roger Carter speaking.

“I don’t think he was really going to kill me. I think he was going to carve on my body and then rape me.” Janice said with a shiver. “Who are you really by the way?”

“You might know me as Roger Carter, but my real name is Antoine Triplett. And trust me, anything that guy was planning to do to you would not have been good.”

“How do you know?” She asked.
“Because I was conceived while my mom was held hostage for six months by a terrorist organization. She spent my early childhood as an alcoholic because of it.” Roger -- Antoine tells her. “So I’m well aware of the bad people in the universe.”

“Shield?” She asked.

“Hydra because her mom was a high-ranking official within the organization and they use my mom’s teenage pregnancy as a means to force her out. They couldn’t carry out their evil agenda with her around.”

“That was what I thought. I’m glad you told me. Your sister… Sorry your mom, said I was part of Shield and that you knew me before my memories were wiped out after alien DNA was used to free me of cancer.” Janice still sounded skeptical, which is understandable considering the circumstances. Resurrections were not a normal occurrence.

“Yep. You went to the Academy with my friend Isabel. You were best friends with her years, up until your death or rather when we thought you died.” Trip tells her.

“And then I apparently took alien DNA-based wonder drug to get better but then went crazy and suddenly I had to become an art teacher in upstate New York with half of my memories gone. I don’t even remember who my third-grade teacher was or who through my first kiss was with.”

“I don’t either.” Trip said with a shrug.

“But at least what you remember is real, I’m not even that sure of that. Where is this Isabel? Can I talk to her? She is not evil or Hydra now?” Janice asked.

“She wasn’t Hydra. Actually they tried to kill her a couple times which is why she lives here on base.” Trip tried to explain.

“So I can see her?” Janice asked, still confused. But she would like to talk to at least somebody who knew her from before.

“As soon as you’re well enough to go to her. Even though she was healthy enough to vacate this room a few hours before you showed up she did give birth to twins just a few days ago.” Trip tells her.
“OK, I think. Did we ever hang out? Or date?” Janice asked. He seemed like her type.

“Yes to hanging out. No to dating. I am gay in real life.” Or maybe not. “Although, I do remember you trying to talk me out of marrying my now former fiancé, Robin. Considering how things ended it was for the best.”

“So that woman you’re with was just part of your cover? It seemed like you two were really in love with each other.” Janice tells him.

“That’s agent Skye and she is a friend in real life, just a friend.” The man said a little too quickly.

“Are you sure? You know bisexuals exist? I am one.” She tells him.

“I’m aware. My uncle is bisexual and possibly my grandfather and maybe my mom although that could’ve been situational or Stockholm syndrome.” Antoine tells her.

“At least your family is accepting. I don’t think mine was or I don’t think they were. I don’t remember.” Janice really hated that she didn’t remember so much which is part of the reason why is willing to believe that her mind was wiped, even if it seems so far-fetched. It felt like something out of a good science fiction TV show.

“They were better than Isabel’s family, but that wouldn’t be that hard. They were kind of horrible.” Antoine said just as his mom, Stephanie, opened the door.

“OK that new Agent Davis made pancakes this morning with chocolate chips. I feel like it’s a chocolate chip pancake kind of day for you.” Stephanie said, putting the tray of food down in front of Janice.

“It really is.” Janice said, taking a bite. Chocolate was necessary for everything she’s gone through in the last 12 hours.

Xxx

Tony Stark does not trust people, at least not that many. It may be because he has spy in his DNA on
both sides. Or it may be because his father figure murdered his other father figure to keep him under his thumb as well as hide his only child from him, sold his weapons to terrorists, and then ripped out his heart literally. Regardless of why, Tony had serious trust issues that were not going away anytime soon.

Now these trust issues have expanded to his technology after Jarvis kept the existence of Natalie a secret from him for several weeks. So when Friday performed a DNA analysis on a sample and had a hit for him he was already on the phone with the one who ordered the DNA test even though it was 1 AM his time.

“So perform any interesting DNA test lately?” Tony asked as soon as Trista answered.

“Now I’m really glad I’m in my car after a grueling day at the fertility clinic. Why did you call? I didn’t think you weren’t supposed to contact me again until the fourth. Did something go wrong?” Trista asked concerned.

“Well that was before the DNA samples you loaded to the system yesterday managed to match to somebody on my ‘Friday you are not allowed to hide this from me’ list. I kind of need answers now.” He didn’t tell her that it matched to him. He wanted to know more before he told her that.

“I’m not even surprised. This is in response to what happen with Jarvis and Romanoff? Good thing you’re violating the trust of spies who already know not to trust anyone.”

“Of course I put in a protocol to prevent that from happening again. Although, unlike them I don’t think you’re deliberately hiding something from me. Especially because Friday said the samples that you asked her to analyze were Isabel’s twins.”

“Isabel asked me to do it because she was concerned and apparently she had a right to be. So did you know that Isabel’s Shield gynecologist turned out to be Hydra? I believe she was killed by the FBI three months ago.” Trista explains.

“Fuck.” Tony exclaimed. That is not good.

“Because neither one of her brand new babies looks like her deceased wife…”

“You decided to check to see if they were designer Hydra babies?” Tony interrupted.
“Isabel insisted. Personally I’m wondering if she suffering some weird type of postpartum but I felt it best to humor her because Hydra did tried to kidnap her more than once. It turns out Isabel was not being paranoid because baby boy Hand has three genetic parents.” And that explains why he matched one twin but not the other.

“What about the little girl?”

“Baby girl Hand is a more conventional child with two of her parents being the same as her baby brother.” And Tony was obviously that third parent Tony thought to himself. So Hydra still had his DNA and was still using it to make more babies. Tony felt like he was going to throw up.

“I asked Friday to compare the samples against the rest of the database to see if there are any matches. I was originally hoping this was all a lab screw up. But….”

“Three parent children are not a lab screwed up.” Tony finished for her.

“And considering you would’ve only been notified if Friday made a match to someone on the team I’m guessing they probably went for the real Captain America instead of a Captain America look alike. Yes, Isabel phrased it that way on her paperwork”

“I don’t find that surprising at all.”

“So are the twins Steve’s children? Friday did tell me that one of the parents was of Irish ancestry.” Trista asked and a part of Tony hoped that was actually the case that he was a little too afraid to consider that possibility.

“I have not compared the child to Captain Rogers’s DNA yet, because I need authorization from Mister Stark or Director Coulson to do so. However, I did compare the children samples to both Mr. Stark and Agent May who are both matches. In addition, both twins do have the super soldier antibody in their systems.” Note to self, put a filter on Friday or maybe reconcile with Jarvis.

“Shit!” Trista exclaimed.

“Friday go ahead and compare the samples to Steve.” Because Tony is 99% sure hydra made him a
kid with his boyfriend and is not entirely sure how he feels about that. On the one hand, they made another kid without his permission. On the other hand, this time he would be around to see these kids grow up, if their literal birth mom allowed it.

“I think we’re going to need to put the search for the squid Mafia on hold for a little bit.”

“I was planning to come up this weekend to tell Isabel everything once I knew the truth. Do I need to hold off?”

“No. Will be there by then. I think it might be better if we tell everyone at the same time.” Unless he needs to tell Steve and May earlier.

“Probably. How did they even get these DNA samples?” Trista asked.

“You know how they got mine. Although I’m surprised it’s still viable after all this time unless they managed to get more before the Palladium poisoning.” Which he could totally see happening because evil. “I know Stevie bear had a full work up after he was defrosted so I’m sure somebody asked him to jerk off in a cup and the idiot didn’t know better.” Because it wasn’t like they knew Hydra was making designer children at the time.

“How was he supposed to know that Hydra was making designer kids?” Trista voiced what he was thinking.

“I don’t know.”

“That makes sense for Steve, but how did they get May’s DNA or rather an egg from her?” Trista asked.

“She had a hysterectomy about the time I was in Afghanistan or a little before. Before you ask, I know because it’s in her medical file.”

“Which you read?” Trista asked.

“I’m the leader, so I had a need to know. She allowed me to read it. The redacted version anyway,”
which did not have any details to why a hysterectomy was necessary but rather just told him one took place.

“Now I’m glad I have dinner with the boss tomorrow night and Sharon’s back to help.” Trista tells him.

“You’re going to be busy hiding bugs and cameras?”

“So busy.”

“Do you still think she’s clean?” Tony asked.

“I think she is. I know she didn’t work with Isabel personally. However, I can see the clinic being dirty because of her husband’s influence, without her being aware. I’m going to go back upstairs to grab my sweater that I conveniently left in my locker and plug Friday into the computers to see who actually inseminated Isabel.”

“Actually Friday can do that from the parking lot, no need to go back upstairs just let her do her thing for a minute.”

“So how are you taking the fact that you have another kid and the other parents are your boyfriend and his ex-girlfriend?”

“I don’t. Those babies already have a mom that killed multiple hydra agents for him. That’s going to be an awkward conversation.”

“Nothing about the situation has not been awkward.” Trista tells him.

“That’s true. Keep me posted on what Friday finds in the clinic.”

“I will.”

To be continued
Chapter 31: Post Midnight Conversations

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last conversation. You are all absolutely lovely. Sorry, it’s been a while. This story is sharing a beta with, I hope you have unlimited text messaging.

Just to remind everybody that I’ve been writing the series for going on 4 years now. This also means that I also started before Andrew Garner was revealed to be Melinda’s ex-husband. In this universe that fell apart before the wedding and on the rebound May married someone so much worse. And by worse, I mean someone that gives Ward serious competition for worst hook up decision ever.

Warning: Nudity and Light Sexual content

Steve knows Tony. After dating for five months and knowing each other for the two years before then, Steve can tell when his boyfriend is keeping a secret. First of all, there’s large amounts of avoidance. The man is also ridiculously fidgety even by Tony Stark standards. His boyfriend has been displaying both these symptoms for the last day. Whatever the man is keeping to himself right now is obviously a whopper because even sex isn’t calming him down.

“Spill Tony?” Steve prompted after post mission sex. Another raid, this time near where Simmons grew up. Something referred to as the ‘Destroyer of Worlds’ project. Something about finding a chamber that reminded him too much of Project Rebirth made him crave Tony. Or more accurately, he needed Tony to soothe his fried nerves which meant physical contact. Tony needed to talk and Steve was hoping that he would be more open to it post-orgasm.

“Sorry can’t do that again. I mean you have a refractory period that would put teenagers to shame, but I’m still in my mid 40s. Hell, I have a kid in his mid-20s. Even with the super boost, I am going to need at least an hour and maybe a protein bar and definitely some Gatorade.” Tony said lying down, exhausted and still naked beside him.

“Tell me what you found out on that phone call that had you so on edge? It wasn’t Sharon was it? Is that why we’re going back to DC tomorrow?” Steve asked. A Bucky sighting would definitely explain Tony’s recent behavior.

“It was Sharon’s fake girlfriend calling. Also, it wasn’t one of those updates because Sharon is back in DC to help Trista with something else. Sharon has found more Hydra, no Barnes. She also give us the tip that led us to this place before going back to DC, so it’s all good.” Tony tells him without prompting.

“At least she found more Hydra and let us here.” Steve said sadly. He really wants to find Bucky. But he’s also glad Hydra doesn’t have that chamber anymore. Who knows what they would’ve done with it. Those bastards could’ve brought the end of the world about with it.

“Honestly, I think he’s leading her to the agents. I don’t think we would’ve found this place without help. I think he will show up when he’s ready. I hope so at least.” Tony tells him.
“That wasn’t what your call was about though?” He prompted, realizing there was more.

“I was hoping to distract you.” Tony reached over to kiss him, but Steve just gave him the look. “OK I was hoping to hold off this conversation until we get back to the Playground tomorrow.”

“Well you’re too fidgety for it to wait that long. It must be big if we’re going back.”

“You’re not willing to believe that I want Leo to look at that Project Rebirth knockoff we found? We went through a lot of agents this afternoon to get it. It must be important.”

“Except I knew we were going after the raid, before it even happened. How big is the secret?”

“It is life-changing, call Pepper to change the Will big.” Tony tells him with a sigh. “I guess it’s Simmons now although she’s on the mission with us despite abandoning us tonight to go visit her mom. I need a normal assistant. Simmons is my Avenger and science baby assistant but I need somebody to do things like schedules and dealing with the lawyers.”

“I thought that was Maria or Friday?” Now that you’re still not speaking to Jarvis.

“So cruel, Cuddle Bunny.” Tony smirked at him. “And no, she is Pepper’s play toy because I just can’t talk to her right now. She’s on my top 10 people I would love to just disappear list.”

“I’m sure. What did Trista tell you?”

“See I was hoping to distract you.”

“I have no trouble calling Trista, even though it’s probably the middle of the night there.”

“It’s not even midnight there, yet.”

“That’s not winning you any points.” Steve shot back with a glare.

“Honestly, I rather have this conversation once, preferably with May here to hear it at the same time and she is currently spending the night at the Simmons house.”

“So whatever you found out involves May? Has Coulson been getting worse?” Steve asked.

“He’s relapsed twice since we’ve been gone but apparently Natasha is watching and if symptoms come back again he will tell May. However, she already knows.”

“You have your new AI spying on people?” Steve asked.

“Actually, the old one. I think he was trying to ingratiate himself to us by forwarding the video file.” Steve sighs.

“You’re still mad at Jarvis for waiting until the best time to tell you about Natalie and yet you’re waiting to tell me whatever you’re not telling me.”

“It’s not the same thing. I’m totally planning on telling you when May gets back from a very Simmons place,” Tony argues.

“And Natasha was going to tell you as soon as she was sure Natalie wasn’t Hydra. You do realize this makes you seem hypocritical?”

“Completely. But I’ve never really been that rational,” Tony shot back.
“Look, whatever you’re keeping for whatever reason is bothering you, so I think it’s best that you tell me.” Steve grabbed Tony’s hand and pulled it to his lips.

“You’re like a total Bastard using your mouth against me like that. I still rather wait until morning.”

“You can tell me now and will tell her together. We’re a couple and we should share each other’s burdens whenever possible. This is obviously weighing down on you.” He kisses his neck.

“What if what I’m trying to do is to keep this burden from you? I know it’s hypocritical but I just want to keep things close until I know for sure.”

“I love that you’re trying to protect me, but I don’t need protection. I do need to know what’s going on with you.”

“You are totally going to regret saying that.”

“No I’m not. So start at the beginning.” Steve kissed him again.

“Fine, you win. I’m not even going to ask to take a shower first even though I’m still like covered in cum.”

“Thank you.”

“No, thank you.”

“Tony!”

“Fine. You know that the Twins were born a couple of days ago?” Tony begins to explain.

“Simmons told me. She was actually going home to retrieve her baby blanket for the twins since her mom was planning to give everything to charity anyway.” Steve explained.

“The side effects of divorce. I’m going to have to send the inventory of a toy store at least or maybe we pick up one on the way. I don’t know.” Tony sighed again.

“You don’t really know her you don’t have to do that. A gift card would probably be fine. ”

“Now, but I feel like it’s not to stay that way. That’s where the secret comes in. Did you know that her gynecologist turned out to be Hydra?” Tony asked his boyfriend.

“What? Why would Hydra have a gynecologist?” Steve asked, confused.

“Remember I have a 20 something-year-old kid because I was kidnapped and had my sperm stolen and big sister has an Antoine because she was kidnapped and forced impregnated with her now 20 something-year-old kid. Remember everything we found today. You know they want a super soldier by whatever means necessary.

“You have a point.” Steve sighed. “So how does this lead to the babies?”

“So Agent Cline-hand realized pretty quickly that her babies look nothing like her deceased wife and had Trista run a DNA analysis.”

“And I assume her instincts were right?” Steve asked.

“Very right. Unless someone tampered with the sample. Her children are not genetically related to Victoria hand. Actually, according to the analysis. The babies are of Irish and Chinese ancestry, well
baby girl hand is. That’s when Trista decided to run the children against the full database.” Tony explains.

“And the children were a match for somebody on your Friday tell me now list?”

“You know me so well, Snuggle Bunny.” Tony smiled at him. But it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Who?” Steve asked.

“Me,”

“But you said the children are of Irish and Chinese ancestry? I thought Howard was Jewish Italian?”

“And you know more about my family tree than I do apparently.” Tony sighed again. “That would be baby girl Hand, still pending first name. The baby boy has a little Stark in him just like his big brother. Although a little less than big brother since I am the quarter parent this time.” Steve quickly wrapped an arm around Tony.

“I’m sorry.” Because what else could he say at a moment like this.

“It’s okay,” Steve glares at him. “Okay, it’s not okay but hey, at least I figured it out sooner this time around. Bonus, at least the mom raising my kid worked from against Hydra since the beginning instead of willingly being their incubator.”

“I’m still sorry. Is May one of the other parents? Was that why you wanted to wait until she got back?” Steve asked, still trying to process everything. And if he’s trying to process than this must be a lot worse for Tony.

“Yes.” Tony confessed. “Friday confirmed it. I’m waiting for her to confirm it a second time. Then when we get back to the playground, I’ll have Simmons re-draw blood and do a fresh sample just to be sure. Hydra could have totally screwed with the database. Natalie’s sample doesn’t match the one on file for her.”

“That’s prudent. How did this even happened? How did they even get Melinda’s DNA? She had a bad miscarriage six or seven years ago. It was so bad she had to have a hysterectomy. It crushed her because she and her husband were trying for so long. At that point, they were using in vitro.”

“That explains how they got her DNA. I’m sure the fertility clinic of Arlington was involved. Maybe she had some eggs removed and well her ex-husband was revealed to be Hydra last month so…”

“Shit!” Steve cut Tony off. “She’s going to kill somebody.”

“Yep which is why I wanted to tell her in DC, or rather in the West Virginia sort of suburbs of DC where the playground is located, so Coulson can hold her hand as I tell her the kid she thought she never could have exists and is in a crib two doors down. Two babies, actually. Oh God, we are probably going to have to tranquilizer.”

“Probably. Although this explains why Hydra was after her?”

“I guess they really want their property back.” Tony sighed.

“Does this mean your sister’s dirty?” Steve asked. “It was her clinic that impregnated Hand.”

“I don’t know.” Tony answered honestly. “Friday and Jarvis are going through the clinic’s files, well
Jarvis is going through files. Friday is still running multiple DNA test and breaking into various FBI files to find out as much as possible on Client-Hand’s now dead gynecologist.” Tony sighed again.

“You’re talking to your AI again?” Steve asked surprised. He wanted Tony to make up with his AI but he thought it would take a few more weeks at least and maybe the threat of withholding sex.

“Totally beside the point. And I’m not talking to him, Friday is talking to him on my behalf and distributing workload because I really want this done as fast as possible. Two AI’s are better than one, even if one of them doesn’t understand the importance of telling me stuff.

“You’re trying to find out who the other person Hydra used to make the twins? What are they even trying to do?”

“Build a new super soldier. That’s why they kidnapped Stephanie. She had the serum. Maybe even why they made me using Peggy Carter DNA. Considering what we found today, it’s obvious that this is on their goal list.” Tony explained.

“If they were going after more Carters, there would be a bit more British DNA in there. They would’ve used you for both babies.” They are both aware that Tony had some of the serum in his system before they were even together. It’s why the Palladium took longer to hurt him than it should have (which Steve is very grateful for).

“While you were in Shield medical did they ever ask you the jack off in a cup?” His boyfriend asked bluntly. Really, he shouldn’t be surprised.

“Yes, actually. Along with multiple blood samples… It’s me?” Steve asked as everything started to click together.

“Why go with the diluted Carter version when you can get the real deal complete with blue eyes. Although if they’re using Agent May as the other parent, I guess they’ve gotten over some of their more racist idea.”

“Schmidt was more of an opportunist then a true believer. Zola was the same way. The people that we have arrested recently have been from every culture and place on the planet.” Steve pointed out.

“Although Pierce was homophobic, which is why new shield is the most LGTBPAQ place there is. Also, female slanted. You know we have been arresting men 2 to 1.” Tony rambled, but honestly Steve really wasn’t listening at this point.

“We have kids. We have a kid together.” Even knowing how Tony’s son came into the world, he still didn’t think he and Tony would have a child together.

“There is a baby that contains our genetic material but we don’t have a kid because he has a mom already. They might be genetically ours, but those are Isabel Hand’s kids. She killed to keep them safe. If anybody else is going to raise my child I feel like that’s a major key requirement.” Tony quipped, but he wasn’t making eye contact with Steve

“We don’t know if she’s going to want to keep the kids when she finds out the truth. Does she even know?”

“Her suspicions was what started this ball rolling, but I don’t know if she knows for sure yet. We were planning for everyone to find out at the same time but you just had to approach me post-orgasm.”

“Because we need to talk about this; what if she doesn’t want them now that she knows that there are
not her wife’s children? They can’t go into the system, not with Hydra out there, which means we have to step up.” That fact did not terrify Steve as much as he thought it would.

“I don’t think that will be the case. We will cross that bridge if and when we get there. There might not even be a bridge to cross.” Tony said darkly.

“What if there are other babies out there?” Steve said worriedly. “I know Hydra. They won’t stop with just one.”

“How many samples did you get them?”

“Two.” For first time in more than 70 years Steve felt sick to his stomach.

“Shit! I will have the AI’s looking through the files for it. I think I might have to co-op Henry to look through the Shield data dump files as well.” He said referring to his son’s AI. His older son’s AI.

“I feel like I’m going to throw up.” Steve told his boyfriend, trying to breathe again. What could Hydra do to his child?

“The bathroom is that way. Don’t feel bad. I threw up about a minute after I hung up with Trista. Another kid. They made another kid. How did they even get more material? The Palladium poisoning pretty much destroyed everything. How is Leo going to take this?” Tony asked worriedly.

“I don’t know. We’re going to have to tell May when she comes back to fly us to DC.” He said gravely still trying to absorb everything.

“Not without Coulson.” Tony told him. “This is going to require either him or an Icer and I rather go with the boyfriend. May is going to want to kill the ex-husband when she finds out the truth and he is in custody right now. So that’s off the table. That means she’s going to have to look for a replacement. I’m not sure if we’re allowed to do angry sex without Coulson being present. And I don’t feel like getting hit right now. We should have negotiated earlier.”

“Point, but I don’t think she’ll take it that bad.”

“No, it will be worse but we’ll deal with it in the morning. Go take the first shower and I will change the sheets. Once were both clean, then let’s try to fall asleep for a couple of hours.”

“Do you think you’ll sleep?” Steve asked as he made his way to the shower.

“No.”

“I hate Hydra.” Steve lamented. He wanted to burn them from the earth.

“Same.”

Xxx

For Janice, it’s bizarre being around people who know you but you don’t know them. Janice keeps getting this weird sense of déjà vu. She knows that she has met Director Coulson before more than once. There’s just something about him that seems familiar. But with him it’s fine because he doesn’t remember her either. He doesn’t give her a sad look when she doesn’t remember him, like everyone else.

At least now she knows he doesn’t remember her because Shield messed with his memories too because he was also raised from the dead by the same means. The difference was she volunteered or
at least that’s what she was told. He didn’t.

Isabel was constantly giving her that sad look because Isabel knew her. Not just a passing acquaintance or friend from work, but they were best friends for years. She was Isabel’s maid of honor. Apparently, Isabel accompanied Janice to her mother’s funeral. According to Isabel, her mom died of breast cancer years before while the two women were at the Academy together. Her father died a few years later which explains why nobody was looking for her, not her but who she was before. The other reason was everyone else thought that she was dead including Isabel. Apparently, there was a funeral.

She liked Isabel because unlike everyone else outside of Roger, sorry Antoine, she wouldn’t lie to her. She wasn’t treating her as if she was going to fall apart at any moment, it was good. She needed to know the truth even if it was unpleasant, including the real reason for the major design element that keeps occurring in her art.

“So I keep using this similar design element and all of my pieces because of the alien DNA in my system used to cure my cancer?” She asked skeptically. But deep down she knows better. Her muse was way too focused.

“Yes. We’re trying to counteract the side effects. Because of my maternity leave, Dr. Campbell is your primary physician and you started doodling on the table in front of him, I think I’m going to have to bring him in to the research now.”

“He didn’t know?” Janice asked.

“He is new to Shield. We were testing to see if we can trust him. Well he’s already seen the writing on the wall or rather the writing on his notes so he might as well know the truth.” Isabel explained.

Before she could ask any more questions, Isabel’s daughter started crying. Janice quickly walked over to the bassinet and handed her to Isabel without even thinking.

“Baby girl apparently needs to have her breakfast right now. You really think you could wait like 15 more minutes for us to finish talking?” Isabel said to the baby who continued screaming at her.

“We have been talking a while. Go ahead and feed her, breast-feeding doesn’t bother me. I am sure I’ve seen it before, I think.” Janice remarked.

“We hooked up once before we realize we were much better as friends. Also a lot of alcohol was involved. But it was when you figured out you were bi, so that was good.” Isabel explained and Janice was grateful, it was another piece of her past.

“That’s good to know. What’s her name?” Janice asked.

“I am still trying to figure it out. I don’t want to give the kids the wrong names. You rarely get a do over. Although, I think Janice suits you better than Rebecca. You feel more like a Janice.” Isabel said with a small smile.

“Which is good because I don’t even remember who Rebecca is. I only know what I’ve been told. It almost feels like a story about someone else.” She told Isabel honestly.

“So you become who you are now. We had Professor Madison at the Academy who said who you were five years ago no longer exists. You are who you are now because the life you live changes you. I’m definitely a different person than I was a year ago. From super agent wife, to single mother in hiding. Try to remember that.”
“That’s nice, except for the fact that you lost your wife. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not okay but I am adjusting to the new normal. But I am realizing that Professor Madison was right. So maybe it’s okay that you are not who you were before, you just need to find who you are now.”

“But at least you remember who you were. I don’t even remember taking that class or what happened to Professor Madison. There are all these blanks in my past.” Janice told her frustrated. For a while, Janice felt like something was missing. And now she knew that she was right. She just wasn’t sure how to get that missing part back.

“We ended up working together later on, once she decided to go back in the field. She died during the uprising. She actually helped me escape.” Isabel said sadly.

“Well how about Madison for this little one? To honor those we lost.” Janice suggested. “She looks like a Madison.”

“Madison Hand sounds good. Do you want to be a Madison?” Isabel asked her daughter. However, the baby just kept on eating in response.

“I think Madison may work. I was originally going to name her Victoria, but there’s still too much tied up in that name. Madison has less baggage even if it is another dead girl, Jr name. At least it’s not the name of a mom that she’ll never meet.” Isabel said bitterly. Janice is sure she’s nowhere near as okay as she claims to be.

“She doesn’t look like a Victoria, Although, I take that back if she is the spitting image of her mom. I don’t remember your wife. I kind of remember you. There’s this fuzzy feeling of déjà vu but nothing specific.” And Janice has really been trying the last few days to remember her past life now that she knows she had one.

“No she doesn’t look like her mom. So much that I kind of forced Trista to run a DNA test just to alleviate my fears. You’ll meet her tomorrow I think. She was friends with us before she left the agency. Hey, Friday! Is Trista coming up tomorrow?” Isabelle asked the AI that pretty much ran the base. One of them anyway. Janice is starting to like Friday a little more.

“Yes. She would’ve came tonight but she is having dinner with her boss and her son but she will be arriving first thing in the morning. Yes she will bring you pumpkin peeps.” The AI informs both of them.

“And ghost peeps. You can never have enough peeps. I should totally make her go to the Peeps store in national harbor.” Isabel commented.

“Actually she is having Sharon go there today to pick you up in assortment of other Peeps, despite the fact I offered to have them delivered.” The AI actually sounded annoyed if such a thing were possible.

“You already have the results of the DNA test because that is the only reason why Trista would be sending her not a girlfriend to National Harbor to pick up peeps.”

“I believe she is also picking up a peep plush as well as stopping off at the build a bear workshop.” The AI replied not actually answering Isabel’s question.

“They are not Vicky’s kids are they?” Isabel asked almost sounding like she was about to cry.

“I’ve been told not to answer that question too.” The AI replied snappily.
“I will take that as a yes. Get Trista on the line now.” Isabel ordered, now closer to yelling. “A secure line.”

“I can go.” Janice offered because she felt like this was going to get extremely awkward in the near future.

“That’s probably best. You probably don’t want to know the details of my crazy mixed up life.”

“I do but only once I know more about the details of my crazy mixup life. I will get Antoine though.”

“And the director. Actually you know what I’m going to his office.” Isabel said as she struggled to get off the bed while breast-feeding.

“Aren’t you supposed to be taking it easy? Besides are you going to carry two babies with you? One of which is still trying to have breakfast.”

“That’s what strollers are for, along with pre-pumped breastmilk. Can you please get the stroller out of the closet before leaving?” Isabel asked.

“No problem.” Janice said before grabbing the stroller and helping Isabel get her son inside. Madison refused to stop eating.

“I’m going to go get Antoine now. Maybe Madison will stop eating, by the time he gets here.”

“I hope so. I don’t want to walk through the halls breast-feeding, but I will. Did you know you were always the only one in our group who called him by his full name outside of his mom and me. Although that’s been a recent development. Everyone else called him, Triplett or Trip.” Isabel explained.

“So maybe I remember something,” Janice said almost wistfully.

“Maybe so. When I get all the baby stuff squared away with possible egg mix ups will talk more about figuring out a way to keep you from drawing on the walls. We have something we’re working on and maybe Campbell come up with something that we haven’t, once he knows the truth.” Isabel suggested.

“Maybe,” Janice said before leaving the room to find Antoine.

Xxxx

Since leaving her Majesty’s service due to bad marriage decisions, Lance Hunter has done a lot of questionable things for money. Although posing as the nanny for Evil Hell Beast II and her niece had to be top on the list. Little Alana he liked once he managed to keep her from drawing on the wall and waking him up at strange hours of the day. It only took a month. Now they did after school art sessions and baking time and it was all good.

Her Aunt Christine on the other hand, he hated with a fiery passion. He was trying really hard not to gouge her eyes out with a grapefruit spoon as he prepared Alana’s lunch. You would want to gouge her eyes yourself if she suggested that you walk around the neighborhood, dressed as Oscar the grouch.

“No bloody way.” Lance said as he finished packing Alana’s lunch. He did so because, one he really did want to look the part of the nanny in this neighborhood, who knew who could be spying on them. Two, if he made her food, he wouldn’t have to worry about Alana getting drugged or
poisoned at school. At least Alana knew now not to trade her lunch with other kids. (However, he was perfectly okay if the Hell Beast got poisoned. Then he could finish off this operation as a single parent.)

“First of all, I’m not actually your nanny. I’m just playing the part for the sake of the neighbors.” They were currently in an Alexandria neighborhood that was filled with Porsches and Audis right down the street from old town. Lance hated it and couldn’t wait until the new house on Arlington Ridge was ready. Of course part of that was the fact that house would be connected to a Shield installation. It’s always good to be able to escape quickly if attacked.

“Second, taking a six-year-old trick-or-treating when she’s technically in hiding from her bastard father and her evil uncle’s former employer is a bloody stupid idea. You might as well just paint a target on her back.” Lance argued, desperately trying to get out of trick-or-treating.

“She needs to be a kid.” Everhart argued back. Lance wanted to punch her.

“There are tons of perfectly well-adjusted kids who don’t celebrate Halloween. Just buy her a giant bag of candy tomorrow when it’s half price. At least this way you don’t have to worry about people putting razor blades inside of Snickers bars.” Christine continued glaring at him.

“You’re being overly dramatic.”

“No, I’m not. Your daughter is being hunted by the axis of evil. You remember that they placed a bomb in your car two months ago.” Thankfully, Bobbi warned him about it before Christine got in the thing.

“You’re risking your child’s life for candy and not even good candy at that. American chocolate is rubbish. At least we could get some of that Belgian chocolate at Union Station or stop at the Russian specialty store down the street. At least some of that stuff is decent. American mars bars are the worst.”

“You said that repeatedly.” Christine said as she took a sip of her coffee. “Tim is coming for the weekend and he would really like to trick-or-treat with his niece.” Of course the Ward formally known as Thomas would be coming. He showed up at least once a month and for the most part, Lance liked him.

“If I must be there, then I should at least have a costume I can fight in. I could go as the Green Lantern. The TV version. Or Batman. But the Terry version, not the Bruce Wayne version.” Anything that would allow him to conceal some weapons.

“Alana is Elmo, so you need to match.” Christine said as Alana ran into the room and went straight for the box of cinnamon toast crunch sitting on the table.

“I wanted to go as Black Widow, but Aunt Chrissy said that would make her look like a hypocrite.” Too late for that, Lance thought to himself. Everhart had another not so nice segment about the Avengers and Shield last night. “What does that word mean?” Alana asked looking to her aunt.

“That Aunt Chrissy said some things on air that she doesn’t necessarily agree with because she needs her job. A job I have to go to.” Christine said, putting her coffee cup into the sink. “I’ll be home tonight to read your story before bed. Take me lots of pictures.” With a kiss to Alana’s head, Everhart was down the stairs and out the garage door.

“You know my ex-wife used to work with Black Widow.” He told the six-year-old, once he heard the garage door lift. He did neglect to tell her that technically Black Widow was now his boss as of a
few days ago.

“Really?” The six-year-old lit up as he poured the milk into her cereal. He learned early on not to let her do that because then he would end up cleaning.

“Yep. I’ve even met her a few times. How about after I drop you off at school, I hit up the party store to see if I can put you a Widow costume together?” Just to piss off your aunt.

“Thank you.” Alana hugged him excitedly.
“‘This way you can go as hot guy from the Avengers.‘”

Which Lance was okay with because that meant he can hide weapons easily. He is almost certain he actually did bring a bow and arrow set with him, but that would probably scare the neighbors. So of course, that meant looking for it, once the munchkin was at school. He hated the neighbors.

“I think you mean Hawkeye.”

“Aunt Chrissy always calls him hot guy.”

“I’m not even surprised. Finish your cinnamon toast crunch, then off to school you go.” Okay maybe he liked this part of his job when he was just with Alana. But her hell beast of an aunt can just die.

Xx

“Trista is unavailable to conference with you at this time but she will head over to the compound after her dinner with her boss this evening to discuss my findings.” Friday told her much to Isabel’s annoyance, about a minute after Janice left to find Antoine.

“She cannot be unavailable to talk to me right now considering I know that she knows because she had to be the only one that could order you to completely locked me out.” Isabel said looking frustrated at the Stark phone in her hand. She’s been trying to access the file on the server herself as she waited for Antoine to show up. Even with the stroller, she would rather have someone with her when she storms Coulson’s office for answers. Also Madison still would not let go of her nipples. That kid really enjoyed breakfast.

“Actually my orders came from Mr. Stark. Agent Trista is at work and even with my ability to disable all of the FBI equipment currently watching Dr. List, she does not believe this situation is secure enough for the phone call you want to have with her.” The AI tells her. Isabel hates it when the AI is actually logical.

“So is my ex doctor still there?” Isabel asked already sure what happened.

“He retired in May. I believe he moved to the Caymans. Trista is investigating. She’s currently having coffee with his former nurse to see if she can get additional information.” Friday explained. “However, as soon as agent Triplett arrives, I can unlock the file for you.”

“Of course he moved to the fucking Caymans. I’m not even…” Isabel started to rant, just as Dr. Campbell cut her off.

“Just because I let you out of the infirmary, doesn’t mean that you can be up around shouting. Your blood pressure is spiking, which is why Jarvis told me to calm you down. It can’t be good for the baby trying to have breakfast or the one sleeping… in the stroller? Why is your son in the stroller? You are not supposed to take them on a stroller stroll for at least a few more days, especially when the other baby is eating. Bed rest.” Campbell said in frustration.

“Because Trista won’t tell me what the fuck is going on, me, Madison and her baby brother are
going to visit Uncle Phil. Also my Shield appointed OB/GYN turned out to be Hydra and my fertility specialist recently retired and is now living it up in the Caymans. The Caymans!! Only criminals retire to the Cayman Islands.” Isabel said shouting again.

“Good that you named the baby. Bad that you’re freaking out about your gynecologist and maybe Director Coulson can come to you.”

“Already on it Dr. Campbell.” Friday called from somewhere in the room.

“Of course I am going to be screaming my gynecologist was Hydra and the other guy was probably Hydro to because he is now living in the goddamn Caymans.” This is when both babies started screaming. With Madison, it was probably because her breakfast got cut short but baby boy was probably angry about the shouting.

“So I was called in for a panic attack?”

“Take Madison. I will deal with baby boy Hand.”

“Nope never take a kid eating. So this is definitely Madison now?” He asked as he grabbed her son out of the stroller old though that did little to quiet the boy down.

“She definitely likes Madison. I still need a middle name for baby brother who won’t stop screaming.”

“You should totally be my namesake.” Antoine walked into the room grabbing the screaming baby from Campbell. Now that got him to calm down a little bit.

“I’m not calling my kid, Triplett.” Isabel remarked as she tried to convince Madison that it was time to stop eating for the morning. The newborn wasn’t quite convinced yet.

“What about Antonio? Close but different.”

“Add it to the list.” Isabel sighed.

“So why am I here other than to get you to come down. Are you finally going to tell Campbell why his patient keeps drawing on every surface.”

“I wish. Although that’s not exactly the strangest thing going on here. I really would like to know more about the guy in the basement that keeps hurting himself. Why am I the only one allowed to go down there with Deputy Director Romanoff, besides Dr. Suarez?” She’s not even surprised Romanoff has been named Deputy Director. With the fighting going on between her and Stark, it was obvious that she wasn’t going to be an Avenger again anytime soon.

“Hydra backstabbing asshole who murdered my wife.” Isabel explained.

“And that explains why I’m the only one allowed down there.”

“And I will explain the special graffiti once I get the OK from the boss. You need to know especially with me being on maternity leave.”

“You helped with a gunshot wound yesterday even though I told you not to which is totally the reason why Jarvis and Friday are monitoring your vitals.” Antoine just shook his head as Campbell explained what happen yesterday.

“I fully acknowledge that I am awful at taking time off. Friday, Antoine is here so let me know if I
should contact Stark’s lawyers to sue my fertility clinic?” Isabel asked.

“I was told to recommend against that course of action since it would alert Hydra to your presence and the fact you are aware that the children are not biologically related to your deceased wife.”

“Designer babies?” Antoine asked because Isabel couldn’t find her voice at that moment.

“Madison hand is the child of Captain Rogers and Agent Melinda May. Her twin is the genetic child of Captain Rogers, agent Melinda May and Tony Stark.”

Isabella’s proud of herself for making it to the trashcan and not throwing up on her kid but just barely.

“How can a baby have three parents?” She heard Campbell asked as he grabs Madison from her.

“Seriously, if you guys are going to bring a doctor here, read him in on all the top secret stuff. He obviously has a need to know and I thought we got rid of our bullshit levels sometime when I was incarcerated by Hydra.” Isabel yelled before she began throwing up again. She felt dizzy and was grateful that Campbell had Madison.

That’s the last thing she remembers before losing consciousness.

To be continued.
Chapter 32: What Haunts Us

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last chapter. You are all wonderful. I am glad I successfully managed to get this chapter out before Halloween. Fingers crossed for the next one as well.

May was glad they were heading back to DC. She wanted to hunt down Hydra as much as any of the other Avengers but being away from Phil and the team for nearly 3 months was hard. Yes, Natasha and Skye were there to keep an eye on things (along with Skye’s AI friend Jarvis), but she was still concerned. It wasn’t the same as her being there. They were going to have to have a long talk about Phil not telling her really important things like the return of the carving when she arrived at the Playground within the hour.

Despite her eagerness to get off of this Quinjet and away from the other Avengers, a part of her wondered why they were coming back now. She knew Stark was anxious to talk to his sister again. Maybe Trista found some valuable intel that confirmed once and for all Natalie’s only crime was tragic bad taste in men. It could have been since May was affected twice.

Her ex-husband was Hydra. He supposedly divorced her for being a Shield agent when he was Hydra. Maybe he joined after they were married or maybe he was always a true believer. She doesn’t know, nor did she care. All she wants to do is spend a night with Phil, after she yelled at him for hiding that the carving came back.

Of course being an hour out, she was shocked to see Phil pop up on her screen in the cockpit. She was happy to see him, nonetheless. Until she saw his face anyway. Phil Coulson was an open book to her so she could tell when he was concerned about something

“Why do I have this feeling that you’re not calling to see if I want to go out for dinner?”

“We can. We should celebrate or commiserate. I’m not sure what you’re feeling right now.”
“I’m glad that we’re heading back. Although I wish I knew why. Yes, a date would be good. Not Ryan’s.” Because, although her boyfriend enjoyed the make your own dessert bar, she did not. “Do you think we could have a secret base with other restaurants nearby? All we have is the bar, a few fast food restaurants, and the buffet place.”

“We will when the Arlington Ridge base opens up. We will be right by Crystal City. In the meantime there are couple of local places that are pretty decent. We are near Harper’s Ferry. Therefore, there are some touristy restaurants we can go to. It would be good to get out.” Phil suggested.

“You just want to go to the historical chocolate shop again.” Melinda rolled her eyes. He was such a history nerd. It was kind of cute.

“You never turn down a chocolate bar and the history of candy is so fascinating. Besides, I feel like you can use chocolate right now.”

“Why do I need chocolate?” She asked a little confused.

“Did Stark tell you yet?” Phil asked.

“Tell me what?” A normal person probably would’ve let out a curse at her question. Her boyfriend just sighed.

“Baby boy Hand has three genetic parents. His sister Madison on the other hand, is normal, normal-ish considering. Although Simmons is probably going to have to do a genetic study. Campbell has already started on it.” Surprisingly, the most shocking thing of everything Phil just told her was the last part.

“You trust Campbell enough to tell him about that?” She was still under the impression that everybody was wary of him, but they needed doctors so they were going to overlook the fact that he doesn’t want anyone to know about his powers.

“Not completely, but I have little choice. I just spent the last hour briefing Campbell on the Hydra/project lullaby situation because he needed to know why Hand fainted. I’m also going to have to brief him on the alien writing situation right after your plane lands because Janus has no impulse control. I’d rather have him do it instead of bringing someone else in. The fewer people that know
things, the better.”

“She’s on base?” May asked.

“Dr. Triplett brought her in a few days ago due to an incident or somebody trying to attack Janice. We might be looking for an ex-Shield serial killer that was brought back from the dead using Kree DNA maybe. Really, it’s a small miracle they got to her in time. I am going to have to brief you on that when you get back. Stark really doesn’t tell you anything.” Phil commented.

“What should he be telling me?” Melinda asked concerned.

“Are you flying?” That question made her concern intensified.”

“I’m conscious, so of course I’m flying.” She responded with a roll of her eyes.

“Let Clint take over for a moment.” Phil ordered. That would just piss her off if she wasn’t sure he had a reason for doing so. That in and of itself concerned her.

“Got it boss.”

“You should go find Stark.” Phil said once Clint took over.

“You should tell me what you need to tell me. Are you finally going to tell me that you’re carving on the walls again?” Phil visibly flinched at the question for just the second. “Friday already told me.”

“Of course she did.” Phil shook his head. “It’s not as often. We think the antibodies counteract the GH 325, but my body is not producing enough on its own. Yet.” The ‘like you’ was left unsaid.

“Even if I’m annoyed with you, we are still going to have sex tonight.” She would convince Steve and Stark to have another orgy if she thought it would help.

“I can still hear this conversation. And although Laura says I could join, I’m going to leave that to Stark and Rogers from now on. I’d rather bunk with Natasha anyway.” May glared at him. “Seriously, can you guys put that conversation on private? I’m trying to fly here.”
“Transferring called to personal Stark phone.” She heard Friday say as she felt the phone in her pocket begin to vibrate. She quickly grabbed the phone and opened the screen.

“Not if you don’t want to. Also I’m pretty sure that Natasha is Clint and Laura’s mutual girlfriend, but she doesn’t even realize that.” She heard Phil through her com unit. It was obvious Clint couldn’t hear her, because he wasn’t reacting. Good.

“As much as they talked while we were hunting Hydra, I’m not even surprised. Now tell me what I need to know.”

“I promise I’ll tell you when you get home. I was going to tell you about the carving when you get home as well. There’s just some conversations you want to have in person.”

“What don’t you want to tell me?” She asked, glaring right at the phone.

“I think we’re losing connection.”

“I am not Blake.” She remembered all too well Phil’s little stunt several months ago when Simmons was dying.

“I am really not sure this line is encrypted enough. Stark knows. It’s best that you talk to him.” Phil pushed again.

“He’s been avoiding me all day. Although if it involves super soldier babies…”May trails off as various pieces of information begin to come together. “One of the babies is Steve’s?” She asked.

“This line is not secure enough for me to answer that question.” That would be yes. Especially because Phil said that to her in Mandarin.

“That explains why Steve has not eaten anything all day. He threw up twice last night which I didn’t think was possible. Simmons was concerned, but they won’t let her run any tests.”
“It shouldn’t be, but is an improvement on Hand throwing up then passing out. She barely had time to pass Antonio to Trip and thankfully Campbell was already holding Madison.” Phil explains, but May was too shocked to really process.

“I’m going to go check on Steve.” Because she really needed to know what was happening and she knew that Phil wasn’t telling her everything, and security actually was the reason. “We are going to talk about you not telling me about the carving when I land. Be grateful that Stark programmed the new AI not to keep secrets.”

“Which can be dangerous for us as an agency. I think I would rather have Jarvis monitoring us. At least he is based on an actual former agent.” Phil said before she ended the call.

Xxx

“So May is the other mom or the other parent or whatever we’re calling it.” Seconds after May hung up, Clint was back on his screen again asking questions that he really did not want to answer. He blames Friday.

Phil is now sincerely regretting not waiting until May arrived at the Playground to talk to her, but he was worried. He should’ve realized that her radio silence was because she didn’t know.

“I don’t think this frequency is encrypted enough for me to answer that question.” No frequency was.

“That’s a yes.” Clint sighed. “She’s going to be pissed. You know she can’t have kids because of Bahrain.” Because of the emergency hysterectomy after whatever the hell happened in that warehouse.

“I know,” she finally told him a few months ago “but I’m pretty sure she’s adopted Skye at this point. It doesn’t matter to me. Not that many people in our line of work and have kids. I have yours if I get lonely.”

“I heard you visited. I also heard Lila kicked you in the genitals. Tasha sent pictures.” He’s not even surprised. He wonders if Natasha included a picture of Laura throwing up on his shoes. She said it was a stomach bug, but Phil wondered if that was the case.

“Natasha made me go. I’m glad I did. Except for that part. I realize I definitely should’ve told you guys I was back earlier.”
“Yep.”

“I saw the wedding pictures. It looked like I missed a nice ceremony.” Why didn’t you tell me earlier you were married? As well as both dating Natasha. I know which room she slept in while I was there and your walls are thin.

“We would’ve invited you if we knew you were alive. Natasha made a better best woman anyway.” Clint said bitterly.

“I deserve that.” Phil sighs, wondering if it was ever not going to be awkward between the two of them.

“Yes you do. Since you know May can’t have more kids, did May ever tell you about what happened during the divorce?”

“It was bad.” Phil replied.

“That is an understatement. He got everything but the Shield pension, which is shit right now. Personally, I’m surprised his body didn’t show up in a ditch somewhere. Director May still has connections, despite being retired. I should’ve known he was Hydra. Might be the only way to escape the wrath of director May.” He agreed with that. May’s mom was terrifying. The only boyfriend of May’s she ever liked was Andrew. Although considering what happened with the ex-husband, that is not surprising.

“He still may end up in a ditch.” Phil mumbles under breath.

“And I’ll help. Did you know that they were doing in vitro to get pregnant because he had a low sperm count?” No, he did not. May never mentioned that. Then again, things were very raw after Bahrain. He was already trying to deal with Stark by the time they were speaking again. “Not only did he get the house and the money, he also got her eggs. So you see where this is going right?”

“I’m going to fucking kill him.” Phil was shocked those words were coming from him but from May in the background.

Fuck!”
“Obviously she knows. Let her know I’ll be waiting.”

“You’re going to need those handcuffs tonight and probably a list of best places to hide a body.” Clint remarked.

“Probably.” Phil said, aware that Melinda was going to be pissed when she got home.

They were three minutes out from the Playground and May was just starting not to picture the various ways to torture her former husband. She should have eloped with Andrew to Hawaii then none of this would have ever happened. But no Andrew got jealous of her relationship with Phil and she ended up married to Hydra after hooking up with him in Hawaii on the rebound. What type of agent was she? Her mom would be so ashamed.

At least Grant Ward was just a fling. Not even that really, it was a honey trap. She’s angry at herself for falling for it but she wasn’t the only one. The fact that he fucked Fitz as well didn’t make her feel better. Actually, it made her furious at the prick, but it reinforced the fact that this was just a job to him. At least he didn’t steal her genetic material not that there was anything for him to take. He could have stolen Fitz’s genetic material, but so far over the last two months he has yet to say anything regarding that. Natasha almost believed that Ward didn’t know.

“So how are we going to handle this?” Melinda asked the two men in front of her.

“Go see the babies.” Steve answered simply.

“If Hand will let us, they are her kids.” Tony responded.

“They are genetically our children.” Steve shot back.

“If you kill that many Hydra agents to keep those kids alive, then they’re your children. We should just take our lead from her.” Tony suggested.

“We have to protect them from Hydra.” May whispered, remembering exactly what Garrett wanted
to do to Fitz. What he did do. Unlike Fitz, the babies couldn’t shoot back. Not yet.

“That we agree on.” Tony sighed. “The only thing I’m sure of at the moment is they’re going to want the babies back.”

“Are they like me?” Steve asked.

“Friday says that they have the antibody, but I didn’t have her run more tests than that because I find it slightly unethical to run tests on newborns, especially tests like this.” Stark told him. “Also, apparently Mom and Aunt Peggy stopped talking to Dad because she caught him running similar lab tests on baby Antoine. You know my rule about not being like Howard. If Howard did something, I’m going to do the exact opposite just on principle.”

“How’s that work so far?” May asked.

“Pretty good with Leo at least. He doesn’t hate me and knows that I love him so that’s a step in the right direction”

“How are you dealing with this?” May asked Stark.

“Little bit nauseous. I’m fucking furious that Hydra made another kid that I am not going to raise, but at least this one I will get to meet while he is still in diapers and maybe I’ll get to visit.” She could hear the fake cheerfulness in Stark’s voice. Stark was a mess, and he was hiding behind the snark as usual.

“We might be able to work something out. We shouldn’t go speculating until we at least talk to Isabel.” Steve said as he grabbed Stark’s hand. Steve was hopeful. Which makes sense because the man always wanted the white picket fence reality. Maybe not in the traditional sense, but the superhero version of it. This could be his chance to get it.

“Do you think that she’ll be reasonable?” Stark asked. His voice sounded almost hopeful. “I don’t think I would be reasonable if somebody was trying to take my kids from me.”

“They are…” Steve started to speak, but Tony cut them off with a finger to his lips.
“And don’t say they are our kids because DNA means nothing. Maria will always be my mom. She was the one who was there. I’ll even count Katie because best stepmom ever. My biological mom will always be Aunt Peggy, even if she was the good aunt growing up. This is messy.” Stark said just as Clint started to land in the hangar. Personally she is still shocked that the neighbors haven’t figured out that there was a base in the mountains next to one of the only decent bars in the area.

Of course Phil was waiting for her as soon as she exited the Quinjet. She is not even surprised.

“I feel that it’s in my best interest not to ask if you’re ok.”

“You’re learning.” She said just as Phil leaned into her for a kiss.

“I’m trying.” Phil said as he pulled away from her. They wanted to at least be semiprofessional on the base.

“How is Cline-Hand?”

“OK-ish. Although, Campbell moved her back into the medical bay. He wants to keep a close eye on her after the fainting even though he is sure it’s stress.”

“That makes sense.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. I want to punch something, but we are back on base and no longer hunting Hydra. Unfortunately, the person I want to punch is currently in jail. He is in jail right?” She asked.

“Yes, arrested as part of Marcy’s sting operation at the State department.” Phil explained.

“At least something came good out of it.” May sighed.

“Not all good. Rumor has it that Thaddeus ‘I’m the asshole really responsible for the Abomination’ Ross is the favorite to become the new Secretary of State.”
“Is the only requirement not being Hydra?”

“I think so.”

“Clint told you?” She asked because she felt like Phil knew a little too much.

“Some things, but I knew a lot. I understand why you really really want to kill your ex-husband and I’m very tempted to help you.”

“I keep wondering if he used the divorce just to get my genetic material to make Hydra super soldiers. Maybe even our entire marriage was just to further Hydra purposes. I should have married Andrew.”

“I didn’t think you guys ever got that serious?” Phil asked.

“We were, but it fell apart. Actually we were on our way to Hawaii to get married and then I said something about the mission before our first date and I got left at the airport and decided to go to Hawaii without him. That’s where I met the asshole.”

“I would say you have terrible taste in men, but we are currently dating.” Phil joked.

“We could have been together sooner, but by the time I was ready to move on after the divorce you were with Audrey and then you died.”

“We’re here now. And at least I figured it out before dying again.” Phil kissed her once more.

“I would kick your ass if you put me through that.”

“I will try not to. I’m going to go grab Dr. Campbell for a briefing with Dr. Simmons and Natasha about why his new patient keeps scribbling on the walls as well as more on the super soldier antibody situation.”
“I bet Natasha is not happy about that.”

“Natasha is completely furious that he needs to be brought in completely on these projects.”

“She has her reasons to be wary.”

“She does, but Campbell already knows that we have toddler infant super soldiers here created by Hydra. What’s one more secret? I’d rather not bring more people in then I have to. We need somebody with his skill set to know what’s going on.”

“More dead bodies.” May mumbled to herself.

“We will have dinner together later. Somewhere nice. Away from base.”

“I’m holding you to that.” She said giving him one last kiss.

Xxxxx

“Before I let the three of you in there, I want to make sure that you behave.” His sister warned the trio. Stephanie definitely had the mama bear thing down pack. “Isabel already passed out once today after throwing up. She is not well and she was already weak from giving birth Monday. So keep it civil, otherwise all three of you will be out on your asses and I don’t care if all of you have enhanced powers now. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes.” The three answered simultaneously.

“OK let’s go meet the kids.” Stephanie said as she opened the door. Personally, at that point Tony wanted to throw up himself.

“You just had to scare them before letting them come in.” Dr. Cline-Hand said from the bed holding Madison. Antoine was in the seat next to her. Tony is not surprised at all that his nephew was there. Apparently, he was best friends with Isabel and the original sperm donor choice. If they just went with their original plan, he would be meeting his great-nephew right now instead of kid.
“Of course.” Stephanie smirked before leaving the room, but not before kissing each baby on the four head.

“Let’s get this out-of-the-way. Will I need a lawyer?” The woman asked from the bed.

“No because lawyers would probably let Hydra know that the babies were born and we don’t want that.” Tony answered for the group. Probably because the other two were staring so intently at the babies. They definitely looked a lot like Steve and Melinda. Madison did anyway. The other baby was laying in the bed trying to ignore them. Definitely his kid.

“So I assume we all agree that our main goal is keeping the babies from Hydra and we’ll figure out everything else afterwards.” Dr. Cline-Hand told the trio.

“Of course,” “yes,” “I hate Hydra,” the three said simultaneously.

“Welcome to team Madison and Antonio. May, you can hold Madison and the happy couple can take Anthony.” Dr. Cline-Hand said with a yawn.

“I still say you should have went with Antoine.” His nephew said as she handed the baby to him and Steve. Now being an Avenger, Tony has gotten very good at holding babies, especially those dressed in armed man onesies. But this felt different. For example Steve’s arm was around him as he placed a gentle finger on Antonio’s cheek.

“He’s beautiful.” Steve whispered in his ear. He has never seen Steve so blissed out before, not even after sex. He was genuinely happy. So was Tony, deep down, even though he was equally terrified.

“You also could’ve went with Anthony. I mean he’ll have the last name Hand so it wouldn’t exactly be a junior situation.” Tony suggested already half in love.

“Or Rogers or May or Stark or any combination of the three. They’re looking for baby Hands, so may be a different last name.”

“I’m personally partial to May-Rogers.” Tony suggested. He had Leo to pass on the Stark name anyway.
“We can figure all that out later after I get some sleep.” That’s when Madison started screaming. “Or after I change some diapers.” The doctor tried to get out of bed, but Antoine placed her hands on shoulder.

“Dr. Campbell said bedrest and I’m sure he means it. He threatened restraints earlier.”

“We can take care of it.” May offered.

“Have any of you changed a diaper before?” Isabella asked from the bed skeptically.

“Sorry my kid came potty trained despite the head injuries. Before then there was a catheter. In addition, he felt much more comfortable with the lesbian home healthcare worker turned assassin/secret agent to help them with that sort of thing. What do we consider Trista?” Tony asked.

“Trista.” Antoine responded.

“I have taken care of babies before.” May told the group as she rocked Madison back and forth.

“That’s a story I want to hear.” Tony said with a smirk.

“I can’t tell you.”

“You went on a secret mission as a nanny once?” Steve joked, but May face became completely serious.

“Trista went on the mission as a midwife, so I would not be surprised.” Antoine answered. “I will watch the kids, with the help of the other three. You sleep. Mom will be outside. She is an expert baby changer.”

“Oh good you’re calling her mom again. Did you guys kiss and make up? Because I really want to ask her what age is it appropriate to tell your kids that they are genetically modified super soldiers created by Hydra? Is there a right age?” Isabella asked.
“I hate it when you make a point like that.” Antoine sighed.

“I wasn’t just trying to make a point. I really do need advice on that.”

“Go to sleep Isabel.” And that’s how 20 minutes later, Tony, Steve, and May found themselves in a room full of baby equipment and his nephew taking care of the twins. This wasn’t exactly how he thought things would go when he found out about having another kid yesterday, but Tony wasn’t going to complain. Although he did need to figure out how to tell Leo. That was going to be a fun conversation. He’ll deal with that later because right now. Steve was wrapped around him and itty-bitty Tony (Antonio was such a big name for a little baby) was drooling on his shoulder.

Xxxx

Hunter was quite proud of himself for managing to put a halfway decent Black Widow costume together in a relatively short amount of time. He even managed to cobble together a fake version of the classic batons. He was almost tempted to give Alana the real thing, but even he knew not to give a six-year-old a dangerous blunt weapon. Instead, he went to the Michael’s on route 1 and fashioned a set out of foam.

He, on the other hand, was wearing his standard issue tactical gear with one of the Avenger patches over the Shield patch, the fake one that they sold at the party store. He probably could’ve got his hands on the real thing, if he had more time.

“I thought Christine said you guys were going as characters from Sesame Street. Not secret agents.” Tim said as Hunter allowed the man into the foyer and into Hunter’s room. The houses in Potomac Greens were weird. The help room was located right off the foyer with the kitchen on the second floor. Although, in a way he liked it better for security. Everyone would have to get past him first.

“Were not secret agents, Uncle Tim. We are Avengers.” She then proceeded to strike a pose with her batons. She actually looked more like Bobbi in that moment, now that his ex-wife was a redhead as part of her undercover duties that Hydra. Even though they were divorced now, officially, he was still worried about her over there. Especially because he was her one contact. He even carried a burn phone that connected directly to her.

“My mistake, I’m more familiar with secret agents.” He said looking at Hunter. Yes, Tim knew who he was. Christine felt it was best to be completely honest to the point he now knew that his brother was locked up by a secret quasi-government organization that was really being funded by Stark Industries. Honestly, he wasn’t that upset about it. Apparently there was a lot of bad blood among the Wards.
“I didn’t feel like dressing like Oscar the grouch and she really wanted to go as Black Widow.”

“Look at my batons.” Alana said holding them up for her uncle.

“Those are cute.”

“They are supposed to be deadly weapons to beat up aliens with.” Alana remarked with a frown. “Mister Hunter has better, but he won’t let me use those.”

“Because they’re real and belong to my ex-wife.” Also, Bobbi would kill him if he gave them to Alana because one, they were dangerous weapons. Two, he was pretty sure Bobbi wanted them back once she got out of Hydra undercover hell.

“Go put on your shoes and we will leave once you’re ready.” Tim told his niece.

“The black tennis shoes, not your boots.” Alana wanted to look more authentic, but it takes a lot of training to be able to even run in high heel boots. In case something happens, he would like his littlest charge to be able to run.

“Are all the weapons you have in your bag are real?” Tim asked as soon as Alana was out of the room.

“Yes.” Tim gave him a strange look at that. “But most of the guns are tranquilizer weapons and tasers. You can’t be too careful, especially after what happened a few weeks ago. Your brother is an arsehole.”

“Which one?”

“Both but I’m more concerned about the one not in government custody. At least Grant can’t hurt other people, when he’s locked up.”

“That’s true.”
“He’s also seeing a therapist.” Although, before Tim could respond to that Alana popped back into the room wearing the black tennis shoes as requested.

“I’m ready for chocolate now.”

“I still say we just drive to Target and I’ve will buy you a bag of sh-- American chocolate.” Hunter offered again.

“Let’s just do a few houses, just enough to get pictures for Christine. Then we can show off your costume at the Baskin-Robbins in Potomac Yard.” Tim suggested as a compromise.

“I knew you were the reasonable one.” Hunter said just as a bullet went through the front window of his room.

Shite!

To be continued.
Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last conversation. You are all lovely. I had to do a cliffhanger. I just had to. It’s still Halloween 2014. Let’s see what’s going on. You may want to grab some of the leftover candy. It might be necessary for this chapter.

Also, for anybody who wants to know when the next chapter of I Hope You Have Unlimited text messaging will be out, the answer is as soon as I get it back from proofreading. Right now I’m doing four stories and only have two people who are working as proofreaders. They are both absolutely lovely but real life is evil and there are only so many hours in the day. If anybody would love to volunteer to be another one of my fabulous proofreaders. Please contact me.

“So, are we ready to do this?” Sharon asked as they sat in the car in front of the von Strucker-List house in Old town Alexandria. She’s not even surprised Natalie lives in some giant old house in Old town.

“We have no choice. We need to know if Natalie was involved in creating the Hand babies. Although, I’m starting to think it’s less likely since Isabel’s actual doctor was last seen boarding a plane to the Cayman Islands from Dulles. I wonder what Hydra hidey hole he is in right now.” Trista told her undercover girlfriend.

“Who knows, but he’s now on my list of people to find right after the Winter Soldier.”

“I have a feeling that he has jumped in front of the Winter Soldier because Steve cannot be happy about this. Do you think that they made more than just Izzy’s babies?” Trista asked.

“I don’t know. A lot of Shield agents use that fertility clinic and ‘Shield Medical’ did get more than one sperm sample from Steve, according to my last very uncomfortable conversation with Uncle Tony.” Sharon answered.

“Part of me is surprised so many secret agents wanted kids. We have a very high mortality rate.”

“People with this job may not want kids immediately. I know I don’t. But maybe in 15 or 20 years, I would feel differently about that. Uncle Tyler didn’t have kids until his 40s. I’m sure by the time I’m his age, I would probably have a desk job and maybe a spouse. Kids might seem more feasible than.”

“And at that age, you might need the assistance of the fertility clinic in Arlington because time waits for no one.” Trista suggested. “I’m sure the Shield agent discount along with the fact that they take SHIELD insurance helped make them the fertility clinic of choice.”

“Shit!” And then Sharon cursed. “They were using agents for the lullaby program.”

“It makes sense. Who better to use as an incubator then Shield agents?” Trista sighed.

“Why not use Hydra volunteers? Wouldn’t they want their soldiers born to true believers?” Sharon
“I’m sure they would, but there probably were not enough uteruses. I think most of those that we have been arresting have been guys. Almost 90%.”

“Which makes you even more certain that Natalie is only guilty of really bad taste?” Sharon asked.

“Or brainwashed into it. We know she was held captive in Appalachia before, at least according to what you and Stephanie told Antoine earlier.” And according to Trip nobody has had the heart to tell Stephanie that the Nat that saved her and Antoine was alive and well and apparently married to a von Strucker as well as Tony’s sister on the Howard side.

“How are we doing this?” Sharon asked.

“I suck up to my boss and her son who keeps hitting on everybody. You make it least three trips to the bathroom. One of which is caused by spilling something all over your blouse. You have a backup outfit in your bag identical to what you’re wearing. Just splash some water on it to make it look like you spent 20 minutes removing the stain.”

“Floor plan?” Sharon asked.

“Jarvis was a sweetheart and grabbed it for us. Thankfully, there is not a half-bath off the kitchen, otherwise our plan would not work. I think that’s what I love the most about the houses in historical Old town.”

“I assume that you’re going to take at least one trip as well?”

“Of course. I even brought my own back up outfit.” Sharon leaned over and kissed Trista on the cheek.

“Alex is waiting for us on the porch.” She said pulling away from the kiss trying to cover up the fact that Trista wished it was a kiss on the lips instead. Yep, never fall in love with your straight friends. “I guess we better get up there.”

“Is he dressed as a Pumpkin?” Sharon asked surprised.

“It is Halloween and I believe they’re doing trick-or-treating in this neighborhood today. I’m not sure. Alexandria is weird.”

“Ridiculously weird. Let’s go manipulate the boss.” Sharon grabbed her hand pulling her out of the car. Unknown to Trista, Sharon didn’t let go until Sharon’s first attempt to snoop while in the bathroom.

There were a whole lot of Shield secrets that Lincoln was expecting to be brought in on. But finding out the head of the agency that he is now working for has free blood in his system wasn’t among them. Neither was finding out that properties of the super soldier serum could be transmitted through genetics and sexual activity. Finding out the babies he delivered this week had those genes and were the product of Hydra interference was not on the list either, but at least that seemed almost plausible compared to the other options.

So to recap, his boss, Janice, and the guy who tried to kill her earlier this week were all brought back from the dead using Kree blood or rather genetic material. Skye was also brought back from the brink using the same genetic material. The difference was that she was not carving on the walls. Also, the carvings were Kree symbols. Of course, Lincoln can’t tell them that because he can’t figure out why he would know that without explaining about his time in Afterlife or the fact that he also has
Kree genetic material in his system, sort of. He really wants a drink right now.

“I know that you’re probably overwhelmed by everything you found out in the briefing.” Skye said as she walked him back to his room.

“The only thing keeping me from falling off the wagon right now is I don’t know where the alcohol is.” Lincoln didn’t mean to say that out loud, but he tended to say a little too much when Skye was around.

“Since I had two different sets of alcoholic foster parents, I’m glad nobody showed you where the bar was. However, I am willing to show you where the ice cream stash is. I think we got a bunch of chunky monkey in. The brothers K love it.” Skye offered.

“I can deal with that.” Lincoln said as he followed her to the kitchen. A few minutes later they were sitting in the kitchen with bowls in front of them, along with a giant bag of Halloween candy. The base didn’t decorate for the holiday, but there were vast amounts of chocolate everywhere.

“I know you have questions. It’s safe for you to talk. Jarvis will let us know if anyone comes close to the room.” He was too afraid to ask if Jarvis was in the surveillance system, but her pet AI probably was.

“Even about why you’re still alive?”

“Mostly that. Although, the fact that Fitz has a new sibling. Not so much. I’m waiting for Tony to tell him that and I don’t want him to find out if he walks in on us. That guy has such a sweet tooth. I’m sure he’s going to want his own bowl of ice cream.” Skye then proceeded to lick most of the ice cream off her spoon.

“Understandable.”

“However, for the moment we are alone, so ask away.”

“Why aren’t you carving on the walls? Is it because it wasn’t used to bring you back from the dead, or something else?” Lincoln asked. That was one thing they didn’t talk about during the briefing.

“You would think that, but Garrett was also given the alien medication when he was still among the living and he still went to crazy town very quickly. Then Coulson saw his writing on the wall and we now must keep a supply of emergency drywall repair stuff. Janice wasn’t even exposed and well, you saw what she did to your notebook and the table by her bed. She has an apartment literally filled with paintings with that design.”

“I remember seeing the pictures during the briefing. But you haven’t done that?”

“And we are not completely sure why.”

“But you have a theory?” Lincoln asked.

“The current prevailing theory is that I’m an alien.” Skye said, completely serious. “I was expecting you to break out into laughter.”

“Before New York, maybe I would’ve started giggling, but I know better now.” Which happened to coincide with his trip to Afterlife. “It wouldn’t be the strangest thing I’ve heard in the last 24 hours.”

“That’s normal for this place. Maybe I’m just part alien. Part of me wants to find out I’m Thor and May’s love child. Although that’s probably the part of me that read a lot of NC-17 Loki/Thor
fanfiction on freaking cool.”

“Aren’t they brothers and didn’t Loki kill your boss?” Which was the reason why they were in the situation in the first place.

“Legally, but not genetically, and I didn’t know that at the time. Now I kind of want to find out if Icers work on Asgardians or whatever species he is. Maybe I’m that species.” Skye wondered.

“I’m sure a simple blood test would let you know if you were Asgardian.” He knew that his task was proving that she was Inhuman. If Skye was Inhuman than that would explain why she didn’t react the same way everyone else did to the GH 325 a.k.a. Kree DNA. She already had some in her system.

“Nothing showed up as different so far.”

Of course, that could be because nobody knew what to look for. He did.

“Which I guess I’m sad about because I was really hoping for lightning powers.” Okay, that comment made him choke on his ice cream.

“Are you okay?” Skye asked.

“I’m okay now. So why do you think that you’re an alien?”

“Did I ever tell you that Shield found me as a baby in the middle of the village filled with dead people in the Hunan province?”

No, Skye never told him that story, but he knew it. Not because of the Shield dossier, but rather the Afterlife rumor mill. Everybody knew about the kidnapping of Elder Jiaying and her daughter during the spring of ‘89. Of course, in the version of the story that went around it was Shield that was responsible for terrorizing and kidnapping of innocent baby Inhumans. Now he’s pretty sure that was Hydra that cut Jiaying into pieces.

However, Lincoln didn’t tell Skye any of this. Instead, he listens to her story and the more she talked the more things sounded like what happened to baby Daisy. What’s the probability of two biracial babies getting kidnapped from the same province in China within just a couple of months? Could Skye Carter be the long missing Daisy Johnson? This can’t just be coincidence.

He wondered if he called Alicia, if she would help him convince Jiaying to give him a DNA sample. She would slam the phone down before he even got a word out. They haven’t been on good terms since he took his new job or really any terms at all. He was a traitor, even if he was doing the one thing they taught him to do, which was not get kidnapped. Knowing what Hydra was capable of, he didn’t want to be alone right now.

“I’m sorry that happened to you.” Lincoln said sincerely as soon as Skye finished her story.

“I’m okay. I used to want to know where I came from, but after what happened with Trip and Fitz, I’m not as eager. I just want answers regarding the blue stuff in my veins and to have some sort of guarantee that I won’t wake up tomorrow and start carving on the walls of my bedroom.”

“I’m sure your boyfriend wouldn’t like that.”

“No, although Trip is not my boyfriend, despite whatever rumor you are hearing. We are just friends. Actually, you’re more his type.”
“Well I have had a boyfriend or two.” Mostly in college and none of the relationships were very serious. They rarely were with him.

“Good to know, so I won’t make the same mistake again. I keep hitting on gay guys.”

“I’ve also had some girlfriends. I wouldn’t be offended.” He would enjoy it because Skye and Antoine were one of the few people who talk to him on a regular basis. However, contrary to what she was saying, Lincoln felt like there might be something going on between her and Antoine. He’s not going to get involved.

“Is there anything else I need to know about the weird writing? Have you seen it anywhere else outside of Janice or Coulson’s work?” Lincoln asked trying to get the conversation back on more neutral ground especially because he’s 90% sure he was blushing at this point.

“Yes. We brought in an 084 a.k.a. an object of unknown origin like me a couple of weeks ago from a government facility. Colonel Rhodes did because nobody can encounter it without them turning into stone, and he can only do so in the suit. Although according to video footage, the thing made those symbols the last time it turned somebody into stone. So apparently people who work in top-secret government storage facilities don’t always follow protocols when moving something really dangerous.”

Lincoln had a pretty good idea what this object really was.

“What does it look like?” He asked to confirm his suspicions.

“Metallic, Geometric, and phallic. Very phallic and magically turns people the stone. Definitely alien. It is also connected to a file so redacted that it’s mostly six words and black marks. Actually, let me just pull up the file.” Sky said grabbing her Stark pad. “It’s easier if I just let you look at the security footage.”

Oh Fuck. It’s a small miracle, he didn’t say those words out loud when he watched the file. This was not good.

He knows exactly what that thing is. It’s a diviner. He touched the one at Afterlife before going through the mist as one last check to see if he was worthy of transformation. He’s also 90% sure if Skye touched it, the thing wouldn’t turn her to stone, just like him.

How would she handle this? What does he tell her? Should he tell her anything? Or maybe he should just run the same test on her DNA as the twins. He knew he had to at this point.

Lincoln didn’t have time to think about the rest of those questions because Skye’s Stark phone started to go off.

“Okay, as much as I want to continue. There’s the situation in Alexandria and we’re going to have to head out to the Arlington base.”

“We have a base in Arlington?”

“It’s being renovated. We are also moving into some office buildings nearby. They’re making a tunnel.” That doesn’t surprise him at all.

“Why are we going there?”

“Code 13 at Potomac Greens and they may possibly need discrete medical attention. Unfortunately, Trista’s undercover, therefore your medical expertise is needed, and Trip and I need to do an
extraction. Then we have to move everybody here.”

“Okay.” He said before finding himself being dragged off to a Quinjet.

Xxxx
“Did someone actually shoot at our house an hour ago?”

Really, Hunter didn’t even know why he picked up the phone when Christine called, but considering what happened, he felt like he had no choice. He already called in the cavalry from West Virginia. He hoped they would get there soon because his field medical training could only get so far. At least Tim wasn’t bleeding out anymore.

“48 minutes ago, actually. Stark’s team is going to have to replace the window in my bedroom. They are also going to have to get the blood stains out of the carpet. There’s three dead Hydra agents in your foyer.” Tim was rushing Alana out to the car at that point. So, he’s thankful the six-year-old didn’t see it. That was also when Tim got shot in the shoulder.

“Great. It really did happen. I’m sure you enjoyed explaining that to Alexandria PD. The neighbors called instead of you like you were supposed to.”

“Of course, they did. We didn’t stick around. Your niece is okay by the way.” Even if she only stopped crying two minutes ago. “Tim caught a bullet in the shoulder, but he’s also okay.” He wasn’t bleeding now anyway. “If you care.”

“Of course, I care.”

“Your first question was about the house.”

“Because I thought you guys would’ve been out trick-or-treating. Mrs. Martinez said you weren’t there.” Oh yes, the crazy next-door neighbor.

“Because I got us the bloody hell out of there before Mrs. Martinez called the cops.” Hunter sighed. He was already composing an encrypted text to Widow to let her know that they were going to need a cleaning crew.

“Where are you?” Everhart finally asked.

“Somewhere safe.” He decided it was best not to tell her in case Hydra was monitoring. Everhart refused a secure Stark phone on principle, and he doesn’t trust her to use the burner that he got her just to call him. “A friend is going to come pick you up from work.” Hunter tells her as he reads the message from Widow telling him exactly that. “I assume you just got off the air.”

“Yes. Only to find 15 text messages from Mrs. Martinez waiting for me. I don’t know what I’m going to tell her. You think that assassins could’ve been quieter.” Of course, she was worried about the bloody neighbors.

“I am sorry it was such an inconvenience. Next time we’ll make sure that assassins know what the bloody hell they’re doing.” Bobbi would have taken them all out before the neighbors would’ve had a clue. Of course, Bobbi would not actually be trying to kill them, despite the undercover job at Hydra. He thinks at least.

“Look, your friend is here probably to take me to wherever you are. We’ll talk later.”

“Skye’s driving is ridiculous, but I don’t think she would be there this soon, especially with rush-hour just winding down. I am pretty sure they would have to park the Quinjet here first to drop off
Dr. Cam...” Just then, Hunter was caught off guard by the sound of gunfire in the background. This was also when Skye, Triplett, and Campbell arrived at the safe house.

Fuck!

Xxxxxx

Unlike her cousin and even Trista, Sharon liked undercover work. She always found it freeing to step into the skin of someone else. She was quite good at it. Especially when she didn’t have to flirt with her great uncle’s ex-boyfriend. Who also happened to kiss her great aunt and is now fucking her son/Sharon’s uncle that they didn’t know existed three months ago. Her family is ridiculously incestuous.

Kissing Trista and acting like a girlfriend is a whole lot easier and significantly more pleasant. Even if her stomach did this weird flipping thing, every time she had to act like Trista’s actual girlfriend. Yes, even when she held Trista’s hand for the first part of the dinner. And no, she’s not going to analyze what that means because her life is already way too complicated right now. Maybe she was enjoying this assignment so much because Trista’s girlfriend has a much simpler life than agent Carter.

So far things were going well. She easily fell into the role of the girlfriend. The conversation was good as they waited for the food to be delivered. Somehow Trista managed to get Natalie to talk about a certain doctor that retired to the Caymans. Apparently, his decision to retire in April blindsided Natalie. He barely gave her two days’ notice about his unprompted retirement. It didn’t help that according to Natalie, this happened right after her husband fell off the grid and the FBI started camping out at her place of residence. To Sharon it made perfect sense that this was when the doctor left, but she kept that to herself.

The food was excellent even if it did take a little while for it to get there. Natalie got takeout from one of the restaurants down the street and waited until they got there to order. More importantly, the food passed the Allergan/drug test napkin. Yes, Shield does have napkins that can test for drugs and food because you never know what you’re dealing with as a Shield agent. Of course, the more time she spent talking to Natalie the less she felt like that was something she would encounter, but you can never be too careful. Even though Natalie has been bringing her snacks for years.

After the appetizer, fried zucchini that was still crispy when it arrived, Sharon took her first bathroom break. She found her way to the bedroom. The FBI had two bugs in place as well as a camera and she’s not even surprised. She already had Friday working on intercepting the signal and putting a fake feed in place. Sharon also put a Shield bug in its place. The video quality would be better if nothing else.

Sharon also took a few minutes to go through the bureau in the bedroom. She didn’t find any secret papers, but she did find a set of wedding rings as well as a copy of Natalie’s wedding pictures with her husband’s head cut off. Considering “love always” was written in German inside both rings along with Natalie’s wedding date, Sharon knew they belonged to Natalie and her estranged husband. Although she was slightly surprised that both rings were there. Maybe he left the rings there when he went into hiding or maybe he sent the ring back to her. Sharon didn’t know.

However, she didn’t have time to think about that because she needed to get back for the main course. She ordered Eggplant Parmesan which made operation stain very easy to implement. She wasn’t even trying to get marinara sauce on her blouse, deciding to wait for dessert, but it just happened. Trista accidentally spilled the rest of her plate on her when she tried to dab off the little
spot that was unintentionally dropped on her blouse. Instead, she ended up with a lap of eggplant. Which was sad because the food was good. Trista and she will have to order from that restaurant at some point in the future.

Sharon quickly went upstairs to change into her identical backup outfit. After a quick two minutes in the bathroom, she found her way to the study which happened to be on the opposite side of the upstairs guest bathroom.

Just like the bedroom, there were multiple FBI bugs in place. Again, she let Friday do her thing while she put in a Shield device. That’s when she turned to the desk. She was sure it was the husband’s because most of the notes around were written in German. There is also a film of dust covering the thing. Thankfully, Fitz created dusting powder. Perfect for when you’re trying to cover up the fact that you’re spying on somebody. Nothing was there but she didn’t know this. Something was off about the wall in front of her. There should be at least a foot more of space in this room.

Sharon was so distracted by that thought that she didn’t notice the soft footsteps of someone until they were already in the doorway.

“You know I am not surprised that you’re using your girlfriend to go through my husband’s study. I mean if you just asked, I would’ve brought you up here myself.” Sharon turned around to find Natalie standing behind her. She’s even carrying a bottle of oxy clean. Okay, now she felt extra-horrible.

“I’m not looking, I just got lost. The layout of these old houses are just weird.” Sharon lied, hoping she could still get out of this.

“This is the second time you used the bathroom up here.” Natalie said skeptically.

“I ended up in the bedroom the first time. Trista says I have no sense of direction.”

“How many bugs?” Natalie asked completely giving up any pretext.

“Two.” Sharon answered honestly realizing that she was not getting out of it this time. “Probably FBI. They’re currently listening to the best of the Backstreet Boys on repeat along with a loop of you lying on the bed. You’re having an ‘I’m pissed at my soon-to-be ex-husband’ day. And no, I don’t know how Friday already had footage to splice together. Friday is special.”

“That makes sense. I assume you know I have every album?” Natalie asked.

“You used to play everything for your mom when you were there. Remember I was there a lot.” Because Stephanie was in California and the other aunts was busy with work, which usually sent them out of the country. Tyler just didn’t care. She was still pissed that he just signed over custody of his kid, so he could get back to his regular life. Tony was the good one and she didn’t think that would ever happen, considering the man hates her. Yet here they were.

“So, you think I’m Hydra?” Natalie’s question brought her out of her thoughts. “Despite knowing me for years?”

“Not really. You’re right. I have known you for years. I’ve seen you be the best daughter possible to your mom. Despite the fact you were barely on speaking terms with your father. Honestly, I think your only mistake was being married to the wrong person.”

“Don’t forget my father is also believed to be Hydra. Good thing they haven’t been able to freeze my bank accounts, because otherwise I wouldn’t be able to care for my mother in the style to which she is accustomed to. Especially after moving her to the new facility.” Natalie tells her as she takes his
seat by the desk.

“Part of me thinks someone who’s Hydra wouldn’t care about that.”

“Wolf always took the trash out and brought me chocolates on bad days, so you never know. We actually met by him saving my life and somebody who tried to stab me while jogging.” Note to self, look through files to see if Hydra tried to kill her as a plot to hook her up with her soon-to-be ex-husband.

“I like to think that I know, and I want to prove that to my bosses. That’s why I’m trying to find proof that you don’t know anything about your husband.”

“I don’t know why you’re looking in here. I gave the FBI everything.”

“Not everything, Friday, can you do a scan of the back wall?” She asked the AI that was preloaded into the phone.

“I’m not even surprised you have a phone that can do that. Wolf used to bring home the best choice.” That doesn’t surprise Sharon at all.

“There is a bookshelf filled with books behind the wall.” Friday tells the two.

“I shouldn’t be surprised about anything at this point. How do I get to those books?” Natasha asked the AI.

“There is a biometric switch underneath your wedding picture.” The AI responded, directing Natalie quickly toward the picture on the wall. It fell to the ground, shattering. Considering the state she found the other picture in, she’s surprised it was still on the wall. Then again, this room is so dusty, maybe Natalie was avoiding it entirely.

“So, do you think if I put my hand up against the wall, it will let me in?” Natalie said, doing just that but the wall didn’t react at all.

“Apparently not.” Sharon responded. This was another thing that made her even more certain that Natalie didn’t know. At least not after her memories were wiped. You can’t hold anything against someone who can’t remember it. Besides she saved her aunt and cousin.

“If you hold this phone against the reader, I will be able to mimic your former husband’s biometric data.” Friday told Natalie.

“I think I like your phone. Ex-husband. I am so done with him.”

Just at that moment the wall opened to reveal a secret bookshelf, diaries, and a black stone in a case. Okay, that was weird.

“So, should we grab a book and see what evil secrets my husband was keeping? It feels like I’m trapped in an awful episode of who the Fuck did I marry.”

“Yes, although I’m not sure how useful it would be. It depends on how well you read German.” Sharon said as she grabbed one of the books off the shelf. Of course, they were mostly in German.

“I’m okay, although I’m better with erotic literature.” Natalie told her, and Sharon doesn’t even want to think about why that’s what she can read best in German. “What about you?

“My grandpa Gabe taught me.” Sharon said as she returned to reading a page that contains a
schematic of something that looked familiar. So apparently von Strucker was building his own home project rebirth chamber. She is not even surprised, especially considering what the new uncle found in England after acting on her Intel.

“Hey sweetie, you can work on that stain when we get home. I got a text from Trip. He needs me to swing by Arlington Ridge to work with one of my old clients.” She heard Trista say from the hallway. Okay she wonders what Trip really texted her about. It can’t be anything good.

“I can’t take you anywhere, can I?” Trista said as she walked into the room, seeing both obviously reading the diaries.

“Hey at least you know your girlfriend is a spy.”

“I took a corporate job at Stark Industries. He wanted to make sure you’re completely on the up and up before he hands over his and his boyfriend’s sperm to you.” That is not a complete lie. She probably should have used that earlier, but it’s too late now.

“So, you’re spy for the Avengers now. Still an improvement over Hydra. I am sure it is so much easier to take knowing from the beginning rather than finding out after several years of marriage.”

“Asked my cousin how his engagement fell apart.” Sharon said bitterly.

“His fiancée was screwing one of the physical therapists during the entire time they were dating.” Natalie told her, and Sharon was furious.

“What?” Sharon asked shocked, but she really shouldn’t be. She’s known for a long time that Robin was not a good person. “It was happening that entire time? I thought it was just a one-time thing. It was someone who did work with him?” Natalie confirmed with a shake of her head. Okay, now she’s madder she didn’t pull the trigger herself. Robin cheated on her cousin with more than one person. She was furious.

“Now is not the time to talk about Trip’s horrible dating choices, we have other things to talk about.” Trista reminded the two.

“Which were horrible, but not as bad as me. I’m sorry. I’m better at seeing other people’s bad choices than my own. I wonder what the black stones do. Do you think they’re part of some blood of the innocent’s ritual?”

“I have no idea.” Trista responded. “But I assume you want them out of your house?”

“Yes, I am so done with him.”

“I understand. However, I’m pretty sure there’s two FBI officers watching the house right now. Not to mention your son who I’m sure you don’t want to see this stuff trounced through living room. How do we get all of this out of here without either of them seeing?” Sharon asked.

“May I suggest letting me scan all the books. That way the physical copies can remain here.”

“Friday, that’s a clever idea.” Sharon told the AI. “We can figure out a way to get the stones out as soon as I figure out what they are. Did that thing just turn to liquid?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, we’ll figure out a way to get the science team here without the FBI noticing.” Sharon told both women with the side.
“However, we should probably do what we can now. The only problem is I wasn’t lying when I came up.” That’s when Trista handed Sharon her work Stark phone. She was expecting a text message. Instead she saw the breaking news headline stating that cable news journalist Christine Everhart was shot, and there were conflicting reports regarding if she survived. There were also conflicting reports about Shield being involved.

“Friday is checking hospital records, but it looks like the reports of her death are not exaggerated.”

“Shit. They need me on this?” Sharon asked.

“Yeah. I could stay here and scan the books and then you can come get me in like two hours. Maybe bring Simmons since I doubt Leo is leaving Appalachia considering what happened.” Cousin Fitz wasn’t leaving the house again anytime soon.

“Are you okay with that, Natalie?” Sharon asked.

“I’m fine. Oh God, there is a Hydra symbol on the bookcase and the rock is becoming solid again. I feel like I need to move now. I am so glad I can have kids.

“Moving wouldn’t be the worst thing. It would give us an easy excuse to get everything out of here.” Trista suggested and surprising even herself, she leaned over and kissed Trista on the lips instead of the cheek like normal.

“That’s actually a promising idea. I’ll talk to Tony to see if any of the Arlington safe houses are available and then see if Mac will play mover. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“It was only in the car 10 minutes later that she realized what she did.

“Friday, did I actually kiss Trista?” She asked the AI on her phone. She knows that Friday was watching at the time.

“You need to return to the house.”

“Why Friday?”

“The house is currently under attack and Trista activated her distress signal.”

“That’s not good.” Sharon said quickly turning the car around. Despite breaking the speed limit and Friday fixing traffic lights, she still got there too late. Mostly because she kept running into moving trucks and had to keep turning around.

When she found Alex unconscious in the living room, Sharon wonders if that was on purpose. Trista and Natalie were gone along with most of the books, but not the black stone.

To be continued
Chapter 34: The Morning After

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last conversation. You are all absolutely fabulous.

Let’s begin 2019 with a brand-new chapter. I will try to focus more on this story, once I finish I Hope You Have Unlimited Text Messaging.

Phil was looking forward to having a nice dinner with his girlfriend after her being away for months and maybe get in a conversation about the fact that she’s suddenly the biological mother of twins (with her ex-boyfriend that just happens to be Captain America). Instead, this Halloween was more trick than treat. Christine Everhart was dead because of another false flag operation which pretty much meant that they were never using the Shield name publicly again. May was on the scene with Davison. So definitely no romantic dinner in Arlington, even if that wasn’t going to happen because of mother child bonding anyway. (They really have to talk about that as soon as things are not going to hell).

Of course that wasn’t the only crisis he was dealing with as Director of Shield. Trista and Natalie List - Von Strucker were abducted by Hydra. They know this because Friday transmitted the footage. At 8:03 PM local time, two minutes after Agent Carter left a catering van pulled up in front of the house. Four people got out of the van. Three were in Shield fatigues. The other one was wearing jeans and a white tank top. He looked like he came straight from the gym or boxing ring. Of course, before then, the power was killed and according to Friday, two grenades were thrown into the house, one on each floor. Exactly 196 seconds later, 2 bodies were carried out of the house looking very much like Trista and Dr. Natalie List and the van left. 121 seconds after that the books were removed from the house.

Trista only had time to upload a few pages into Friday before the incident, but that was enough to make Phil very concerned about what Hydra now had in their possession. Gravitonium created super soldiers are not exactly something he wants to tangle with.

197 seconds after that, Agent Carter arrived back at the house and promptly found an unconscious Alex Von Strucker-List with both Trista and Natalie List missing. Friday was just starting to do a full scan of the area when the FBI finally showed up. Apparently, the two agents watching the place being shot dead was a dead giveaway that something was going on at the little town house in old town.

Now his immediate problem was Agent Sharon Carter was now in FBI custody and they need to get her out as soon as possible.

“Look, I’m telling you, I’m currently not affiliated with any federal agency. I quit the CIA over a week ago when they got uncomfortable about my girlfriend working for Natalie List. ” Sharon said on screen. Of course Phil couldn’t see her face because the camera was facing her two interrogators. Friday was still trying to find him a name in the FBI database.

“I’ve known Natalie List for years, even before she employed my girlfriend. Her mother used to be in the same nursing home as my great aunt.” Sharon answered.
“Yes, a nursing home that was targeted by Shield,” the agent on screen said.

“Hydra. It was Hydra.” Sharon corrected.

“Okay, a nursing home targeted by a terrorist group that was incubating inside of Shield.” Carter just sighed at the words.

“You do know who my great aunt is right? Your agency has been besmirching her good name since before McCarthyism was a thing. So that’s probably why the home was attacked in addition to all the other RED retirees at the place. Regardless, Natalie was always good people who would visit her mother all the time. She used to spoil me with the chocolate lava cake from Buzz. Over the years we’ve built up a friendship. So it’s not unusual for me to go over to her house for dinner. We have had lunch and brunch together before. We just had a bit of bad luck tonight or rather last night by this point.”

“You really expect us to believe that it was just a random coincidence that this just happened to occur the night you were having dinner with your girlfriend’s boss? Especially, because the cameras in the house switched to the best of the Backstreet Boys about 30 minutes before Shield walked into the house and extracted a high-level target and your girlfriend.” The agent looks skeptical.

“Again, that was Hydra. It’s highly probable that they knew that you were watching her and switched the feed before they kidnapped her. They knew to take out the people in the van across the street first.” Which either happened immediately after Sharon left the house or right before. Apparently, the van was out of Friday’s camera range. Although, Friday is currently pulling the footage from every security camera on the street that she can get her hands on. They will probably know more soon.

“How would you know that?” The agent asked.

“Well, my girlfriend hit her panic button and I came right back to the house. I would have been back sooner, but I got caught behind a truck trying to squeeze into a very tiny parking spot. I also saw the bodies of the dead agents outside the van when I arrived back. That was my first sign that something was really wrong.” Sharon explained.

“Do I want to know why you placed an undetectable video camera and bug on your cousin?” Coulson asked, rubbing his temple as he continued to watch the interrogation from his office.

“I think of her more as a niece and I did it because not only is she undercover right now, but she’s also been wandering around Europe by herself looking for the guy that kind of killed my parents. I would like for us to find her, if something goes wrong.” Stark explained.

“Valid point.”

“She knew about it. She’s the one who activated it before the interrogation started.” Tony explained.

“To let us know where she was.” Natasha added.

“Which I’m glad because I really would like to know immediately that Hydra managed to kidnap my sister and my kid’s friend.”

“Did you happen to give one of those to Trista?” Phil asked, hoping there would be an easy way to retrieve his agent.

“Yes, unfortunately, according to Friday, it is currently on top of a dresser somewhere in Arlington.” Tony replied. “Just sit back and watched the interrogation. It looks like Sharon’s attorney just
arrived.”

Jennifer Walters was a member of the legal team who has been helping various former Shield agents get back in the good graces of the U.S. government. Since her cousin has been unfairly hunted down by various government entities for years (i.e. General Ross until the heart attack), she was more than happy to help.

Tony also felt that she was the best person to get Sharon out of custody without causing issues. They were not really a government agency any more, more like freelancers with some government affiliation. In the old days, they could have just flashed a badge and got Sharon out. Now they use Walters.

“Along with your sister.” And apparently Marcy decided to be helpful. Phil doesn’t remember discussing that beforehand, but Marcy does what she wants...

“I’m not counting Marcy right now or Tyler. Actually, I think I will probably count Marcy as family again before Tyler, despite the secret keeping because Tyler is that awful of a person, but I’m not quite there yet.”

“I’m trying to remind myself that you’re acting like this because you’re worried about your family.” Natasha mumbled under breath.

“You don’t need to be here, Romanoff. For the record, I didn’t know Marcy was going to come there, but apparently the spy side of the family is just weird. They just know when it’s time to get another member out of confinement.” Tony replied back.

“I’m deputy director. I’m supposed to be here to discuss our next steps.” Natasha replied, glaring icily at Tony.

“And how did that happen? I’m the funding source for this thing. I should get veto power. I feel like the Deputy Director shouldn’t be somebody that keeps secrets from her teammates, but that’s just me.” Stark sniped.

“I don’t think Fury would agree with you.” Romanoff shot back.

“The pirate is a liar that lies. No wonder he had a squid infestation. I expect better from you, Director Agent.”

“You gave my girlfriend her spot and actually Fitz’s patents are our major funding source. I will choose whoever I feel is the best person to rebuild the organization and right now that’s Romanoff. Get over it.” Phil replied.

“I’m a better choice than Hill.”

“Marginally so.” Tony shot back. “And it’s not like it would be that hard.”

“I have way too much of a headache to deal with this argument right now. Nor do we have the time. Trista and Natalie List-Von Strucker are missing and we need to find them.” Phil was close to shouting at this point.

“Marcy and Jan are taking care of Sharon. Friday and the traitor AI are already analyzing what happened tonight or rather last night. So, I feel like it’s the perfect time to bring up that if Agent Scary, the liar, would’ve told me about my sister earlier, maybe we could have already put her in protective custody and she would not have been kidnapped out of her own house.”
“Not the time.” Phil replied, rubbing his temple.

“I’m not sure there’s a safe house that could keep Hydra from going after a high-level target and Wolfgang Von Strucker’s soon-to-be ex-wife along with his diaries would be something they would want very much.” Romanoff answered.

“Exactly. Did you get anything out of Ward?” Phil asked. He sent Natasha to question Ward again as soon as Hunter notified them of the attack on the safe house in Potomac Greens. The Von Strucker attack just gave them another reason.

“Nothing. And considering the circumstances, I think we need to consider something drastic.”

“We are not sending Skye down there.” Phil replied, already knowing what she was proposing.

“Why not? Natalie’s gone. Trista’s gone. Oh, and Christine Everhart is dead. I mean, do I want to give the son of a bitch who literally fucked with my son the satisfaction of quality time with his number one crush? Not at all. But I’ve had Hydra kill enough family members and I really would like Natalie back, before she’s added to that statistic.” Stark argued.

“I get that, but still no.” Phil replied.

“You’re too close to this, which is why Dr. Suarez suggested that I be the one in charge of anything related to Grant Ward. I think this might be necessary at this point.” Natasha argued.

“But I get to make decisions about Skye and every other agent under my command and I don’t think this is the best course right now. We have other sources of Hydra intel. Some of which might be more useful giving the situation.” Phil argued.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, I almost agree with Romanoff. I think you should ask Skye what she wants to do. She is an agent. You should treat her like one and give her a say in this decision.”

“So do you want to send Fitz down there instead?” Phil asked in response.

“Only in a suit. Oh, maybe I can go back fully armed. I feel like I owe him another visit. Our pissed off superhero/backstabbing good cop routine worked so well last time.” Stark suggested.

“Billy is authorized to tase you if you try to go down there again.” Phil responded.

“I’m wounded.” Tony actually clutched his heart, being as overly dramatic as possible. Phil just rolled his eyes.

“Billy is also authorized to tase me if I go down there. Suarez’s orders.” And he still not happy about those orders.

“Are you absolutely terrified of your therapist?” Tony asked.

“Considering she graduated from the Academy with top marks? Yes. She was operations before transitioning.” Phil explained.

“That doesn’t surprise me at all. Even if she is better at giving actual assessments. Oh yes, I’m such a narcissist. I only care about myself.” Tony said directly looking at Natasha. This was making his headache so much worse.

“I’m regretting not locking you two in a room with Dr. Suarez right now.” Both turn to glare at him.

“Obviously, you both have issues that should’ve been dealt with directly, instead of just separating
you on different teams and I apologize for neglecting that, but that is not something we can deal with right now. Now can we all concentrate on doing our jobs?"

“I know how to do my job, if you will let me do it that is.” Natasha replied. He knows that she’s implying that they use Skye.

“We have other options with more up-to-date intel. I’m not sure if we are desperate enough to bring in Skye yet.” He wasn’t even sure Ward could help in this case.

“Can we access it right now?” Stark asked flippantly.

“No. The mold can’t make contact with her handler for at least a week.” Maybe not at all. They weren’t sure if any of the people who tried to kill Hunter were still alive. Even then it would not be best to schedule a meeting with his Hydra affiliated soon-to-be ex-wife earlier than what was planned. He wasn’t sure if it would be safe for Hunter to make spur of the moment contact considering what happened. For all they know, Hunter’s contact with Bobbi may have led Hydra to the Potomac Greens safe house.

“A week we don’t have. They could be dead by that point. They could be dead now.” Stark argued.

“If Hydra wanted them dead, we would have found more bodies. Honestly, I think von Strucker just wanted his wife back. He did leave his son behind.” Natasha offered.

“Or it could be a whole other part of Hydra. Divisions within the ranks. I don’t see them being the most loyal of people. Kidnapping the head guy’s wife could be a way up in the organization.” Stark argued.

“Then why leave the kid behind?” Phil asked.

“Some dads don’t like their kids that much. The wife may be better revenge.” Stark suggested.

“Not everybody has your daddy issues, Stark. I would like to talk to someone who knows more about the inner workings of Hydra. Good thing we have an expert on Hydra politics in vault D.” Natasha suggested.

“Fine, you can bring up the possibility with Skye, but it’s her call.” Coulson was sure she was going to say no, but decided it was best not to keep this argument going.

“Okay. I’ll talk with her when she arrives back with Stark’s nephew from the hospital.”

“Step nephew.” Stark corrected.

“Adopted. Did you actually read the briefing paper on your sister?” Romanoff asked annoyed.

“Sorry, I was busy chasing down Hydra.” Stark replied.

“Stark, go check up on your kids, all of them.” Phil suggested, because he has reached his Tony Stark limit for the day and it wasn’t even 4 AM yet.

“Or I could go talk to Friday and check over her analysis of the footage from every single camera anywhere near the kidnapping.”

“Do that.” Natasha said as Stark left the room.

“Are you going to actually let him participate in this investigation? It was his sister that was kidnapped.” Romanoff asked.
“It’s safer than having him going around with the rest of the Avengers visiting random Hydra bases right now.”

“That could lead to a lead on where they’re keeping Trista and List.” Natasha suggested.

“Or it could force them to take the two further off the grid. Also because of the twins. All tests so far are telling us that Hydra created baby super soldiers. They are incredibly strong for newborns.”

“And have Steve’s healing factor already.” Natasha added.

“We can’t let Hydra get those babies. I’m wondering if I can suggest that Stark, Rogers, and Isabel take a vacation with the twins to Stark’s private island for a few weeks. Maybe send May there for extra security.”

“And maybe more baby bonding time. Although I’m not sure if anyone wants to leave the fight right now.” He knew Natasha was right about that. Especially May would not be happy with him trying to send her away, but he would hope that the logical part would kick in.

“Hydra already has enough of my people right now.” Phil said just as his office door opened again. Of course it was Stark.

“Friday wants to know if we should be worried about a guy who managed to turn his fist into granite and who is apparently supposed to be a dead guy being part of the kidnapping party. Apparently, that’s who knocked out the nephew.” Stark told him.

‘Please don’t let this one be another Tahiti patient,’ Phil thought to himself as he looked at the screen. ‘

“Nice to see you out.” Trip said as soon as his cousin walked into the room at the Arlington base. He quickly walked over to hug her.

“Well, apparently it helps to have a really well-connected cousin/uncle. I’m still not sure what we’re considering Tony.” Sharon responded as she pulled out of the hug.

“Uncle. It’s less confusing that way.” Trip suggested.

“That’s true.”

“I heard Aunt Marcy helped as well.” Because he’s been in constant contact with Jennifer. He couldn’t do anything about Trista now, but he could do everything possible to at least get Sharon out of lockup.

“It’s the least she can do. She also promptly ran away. Also, Ms. Walters did most of the heavy lifting. Uncle Tony apparently has good taste in legal counsel. I’m sure it comes in handy a lot.” Sharon remarked.

“You’re still mad at Marcy?” Trip asked.

“Furious. But that doesn’t matter at the moment. Have you picked up Trista’s trail?” Sharon asked worriedly.

“Jarvis and Friday are going over every piece of surveillance footage available trying to find the van that drove away.”

“Well, there’s more cameras around here than anyplace else.”
“Which would be great if the van didn’t suddenly disappear in Bethesda. They haven’t found anything after that point yet.” Trip explained.

“That makes sense. At least they were able to track the van into Maryland. Maybe they were going to a building in the area. Friday, can you check if any of the buildings in the area where you last spotted the van are owned by any suspected Hydra shell corporations?”

“Will do, Agent Carter.” Friday responded.

“This is such a mess.” Sharon said as she sat down on the nearby couch. At least Uncle Tony made sure they had comfortable furniture, even if some of it wasn’t completely assembled yet.

“Are you okay?” Trip asked, sitting beside her.

“Not at all. I won’t be until we find Trista. I shouldn’t have left.”

“Then you would have been gone too.” Trip didn’t want to think about his cousin being in Hydra clutches along with his best friend and his uncle’s half-sister. The situation was bad enough already.

“Yes, but I have a tracker necklace on.” She clutched her necklace as she spoke.

“I know. It’s how we knew where to find you before you were taken somewhere where we couldn’t find you.”

“Apparently, Trista’s version of it is on her dresser. Her phone was ditched somewhere on King Street.” Sharon sighed.

“That’s not helpful.”

“Not at all.”

“We will find her.” Trip gets his cousin a reassuring squeeze.

“How?”

“Hydra contacts and Friday’s searching skills.”

“33 has gone dark.” Sharon tells him.

“When did you have time to check that?” He asked.

“On the way here. Marcy apparently raided my burn phone collection before coming to get me from the FBI. Although, there was a message from yesterday telling me to avoid Old town.” Sharon sighed.

“That would’ve been useful yesterday.”

“Very.”

“The kidnapping probably would have happened anyway and then we wouldn’t have known that that Natalie was missing until the FBI showed up to interview Trista. We would’ve lost valuable time.”

“True, but Trista wouldn’t be with Hydra right now. So how do we find Trista and Natalie?” Sharon almost sounded like she was on the verge of tears. This was not good. Like most specialists, Sharon was very good at keeping her real emotions concealed.
“Campbell and Skye are supposed to be getting Junior from Inova hospital. We can start asking questions. Maybe he knows more than what he’s been telling the FBI and now that his mom is missing, he will tell us something useful.” Trip suggested.

“I hope so. Where is Hunter?” Sharon asked.

“Chasing his Hydra contact.” Despite not checking in with Coulson about that. “I’m supposed to be covering for him with the munchkin until he gets back.”

“That could be useful.”

“Except that means I get to tell a six-year-old that her aunt is dead as soon as she wakes up, probably in the next 20 minutes.” He doubted the six-year-old will sleep in past 6 AM. He’s surprised they got her to sleep at all and it took a video call with her personal idol Black Widow, still in full costume, to get her to do so. They didn’t dare tell her about her aunt last night. It would be too much for the little girl.

“I would still rather have him meeting with his Hydra contact. I just want my girlfriend back.” Sharon wrapped her arms around yourself.

“You mean your pretend girlfriend.” He joked, only to notice the serious expression on Sharon’s face. “You do mean your pretend girlfriend?” He is very aware of Trista having a crush on Sharon. She wouldn’t be the first person to fall in love with a straight friend. And despite being totally comfortable making out with Black Widow at a family gathering, Sharon was a Kinsey zero or so he thought. Although, being that comfortable with it probably made her a one at least.

“If we are not talking about you suddenly liking women then we are not to talk about me making out with my friend on a mission and actually enjoying it, a lot.” Sharon remarked.

“Not the time for such a conversation.” He said, putting his arm around Sharon again.

“Not at all.” Sharon said just as the door to the lounge open.

A certain six-year-old wearing an old Shield T-shirt along with the combat boots from her costume walked into the room. They’re going to have to get her some clothes and the responsibility fell to him because Hunter was gone, and her uncle was probably still heavily medicated. He will ask Friday to take care of it. Being a Stark meant that things could be handled quickly and thanks to his new billionaire uncle, he can take advantage of this privilege, especially when it’s necessary for work reasons.

“Where is Mr. Lance?” Alana asked, arms wrapped around her as if she was freezing.

“He said something about bagels, but he’ll be back soon. Let’s go back to your room and pick out some new clothes and toys with Ms. Friday.” He said walking over to the six-year-old and picking her up. She was so tiny.

“Coward.” Sharon called out in German.

“Yes, I totally owe mom an apology.” He replied back in the same language.

“Seriously, why are you here at 5:30 in the morning?” Bobbi said groggily as she looked up at her ex-husband or soon-to-be ex-husband. They were dragging out the divorce proceedings as an excuse to talk to one another.

Also the fact that they keep having sex every single time they meet up makes her wonder if a divorce
would actually keep. They still loved each other. Which was why she was making sure that the camera couldn’t see his lips. There was already a glitch that made the audio ridiculously crackly at random times. So they wouldn’t notice anything odd when the audio went out when her ex showed up.

They just didn’t necessarily like each other most of the time. Which is why they agreed to separate in the first place and she ended up in a rebound relationship with a guy who turned out to be really evil. Then Hydra happened and now they need to be in each other’s lives for the sake of the world.

“Christine is dead and I killed about three of your esteemed colleagues when they tried to attack us earlier.” Hunter explained.

“I’m sorry your employer is dead. I know you liked being a nanny, even if you hated her. What about my mini me?” She asked referring to Alana. That’s what they call the girl.

“Not in the custody of your employers. Although I’m not so sure about Trista or Mrs. Von Strucker. Although I’m sure the Mrs. is probably safe.” Hunter rambled.

“Not it all. Most of the higher-ups hate her husband and her.” Whitehall did at least according to rumor.

“I expect nothing less of the illustrious Hydra.” Hunter quipped.

“They think that she is his weakness. He was close to Whitehall before the marriage, and then allegedly there was some sort of falling out.” It looks like she’s going to have to have lunch with Whitehall’s number two again. It was obvious the man had a crush on her. She was going to use that to her advantage for as long as she could.

“So rivals fighting amongst themselves and not the husband trying to get his wife back?” Hunter asked.

“I don’t think so, but I will keep an ear out for office gossip. People tend to let their guard down around the grad school interns.” They don’t take her as seriously as they should. That was fine with Bobbi. She would use it to get as much intel as possible.

“So maybe it’s a good thing that Simmons ended up Stark sitting.” Originally, she suggested that they send in another scientist, but it didn’t happen.

“Although I would be chief of security instead of 33 right now.” She was going to have to pass a note to 33. She might be able to figure out where Von Strucker is.

“True.”

“If I hear anything, I’ll contact you.”

“Thank you. I tucked the new number into your slippers. Be a love and burn it.” Which meant that she had a new phone and it was in her purse or closet. She had to remember their code a little better.

“I’ll have 33 keep an eye out for Trista. She sees more.” Bobbi said just before kissing him.

“I thought you said last time that we were done with this. That it’s over.” They say that a lot. It’s a promise that they never keep.

“Well, there’s cameras in here though the audio has been disabled.” Although it will be reactivated in a minute.
“So you want to have sex on camera to maintain our cover?” Hunter asked.
“Maintain your cover. Also, why do you think that I’ve been keeping my head right in front of yours the entire time?”

“So they can’t read my lips?” He asked.

“You really are getting the handle of the spy thing.” She kissed him again. Just as the audio came back on.

“I had to learn from your treacherous self.”

“Shut up and kiss me again,” so you don’t get killed.

“Gladly.”

This was probably the 15th time in the last 24 hours that Campbell was questioning accepting the medical position with Shield/Stark industries. He didn’t think that his job would include sneaking into a hospital and pretending that he’s a doctor so they could sneak out a patient to question him about his missing mom and his father’s ties to Hydra. He wonders if the Larry King looking old guy with the cane and glasses realizes that he doesn’t belong here. Really, Lincoln cannot get off that elevator fast enough. He actually ran into some slimy guy in a three-piece suit.

“Stop panicking.” Skye whispered as they were walking to the room. “You look very doctor like.”

“I am a doctor.” Lincoln replied. “However, you are not a nurse.” ‘And let’s hope that we don’t walk into a situation where you are going to have to act like one.’ Lincoln thought to himself, before they walked into Alex Von Strucker’s room.

“Who are you?”

“I am Dr. Lincoln Campbell. And this is my assistant Skyler Carter.” He said using Skye’s fake name for this operation.

“And who are you really?” Alex asked.

“Friends of Trista and your uncle who will get you somewhere safe.” Skye answered.

“I don’t have an uncle.” Alex shot back.

“That’s what you think. See I knew we should’ve brought Sharon with us.”

“I think somebody is still trying to get her out of FBI custody. As far as I know.” Lincoln argued back, despite agreeing with her. Unfortunately, they couldn’t wait for Sharon to get back, before venturing to the hospital. They needed to get Von Strucker to safety as soon as possible.

Of course at that moment a nurse walked into the room. That just makes total sense. She is also followed by some guy in a suit that screams FBI. He would know that look since he is surrounded by agents regularly now.

“Who are you? You don’t work here.” The nurse asked.

“Dr. Campbell is my private doctor. I called him, or rather my friend, that was here earlier called him.” Alex lied.

“The British guy who I left you with, when I went to go get coffee?” Why did Lincoln have a
feeling that made this guy a really bad FBI agent?

“Yes.” Alex responded.

“I figured you would be more willing to let me sign myself out if I actually was in the care of a doctor. My mother was kidnapped out of our home so I personally would feel better if I wasn’t here right now.” Alex argued.

“I can’t let that happen.” The agent told the group.

“Why? Are you going to arrest him for being knocked unconscious, when his mom was kidnapped out of her own home?” Skye argued.

“No. He’s a person of interest.”

“Because you think his father is the new head of a terrorist organization.” The voice from the door said. She sounded a lot like Stephanie. “Really, you would think the FBI would have more finesse than that. Or at the very least not leave their posts for random coffee breaks.”

“And you are?” The agent asked annoyed.

“Agent Marcy Sousa, CIA, although I’m detailed to the joint agency task force dealing with the Hydra issue.” This was definitely Stephanie’s older sister. Lincoln is also aware that Trip is about the only person in the family still speaking to her. Apparently, hiding the existence of another family member makes you really, really unpopular despite having a really good reason to do so.

“That means that Mr. Von Strucker is my problem. Which is good because you obviously don’t know what you’re doing.” Marcy insulted the guy and he was not happy.

“List. My name is Alex List. I want nothing to do with my father’s legacy. So I really don’t know how to help you. I just want my mom back.”

“I understand that, more than a lot of other people.” The agent said before handing a Stark pad to the guy in the suit. “See, Mr. List is under my jurisdiction. After what happened while the FBI was watching his house, I personally would like to move him to another location.”

“Let’s discuss this in the hallway. I also want to speak with my supervisor.” The agent said making his way to the door.

“Go ahead, speak with your supervisor and then you can speak with my supervisor, Everett Ross, and my other supervisor, Roslyn Price. I’m sure you’ve heard of her.” Marcy said following the guy out the door.

“I’ll go talk to your doctor, the one that’s here. Considering the security situation, he might be willing to release you in the custody of Agent Sousa and Dr. Campbell. Of course I’m going to need some credentials for the doctor.” The nurse told the two.

“I already sent an email to your boss. Everything you need is there.” Skye told the nurse which led to him leaving.

“Why is Ms. Carter-Jones’s daughter here? I thought she worked for the State Department?” Alex whispered. Not that it mattered. The 2 agents were arguing way too loud outside for him to hear anything.

“You know who she is?” Skye asked surprised.
“Her mom used to have the room down the hall from my grandmother. At least once a month, she would visit on the weekend and bring food. She wasn’t actually State Department?”

“No.” Lincoln replied.

“Is anybody in that family who they are supposed to be?”

“Trip says his uncle Tyler is an asshole and he’s definitely that.” Skye responded.

“I don’t think I actually met him.”

“The one with the kids.” Skye supplied.

“They usually come with their Aunt Jackie because their dad is a prick. Everybody hated him.” Alex explained.

“That sounds about right. Do you remember what happened last night?” Skye asked.

“The house went dark and I was knocked unconscious. The next thing I remember is waking up here and the agent asking me if I remembered what happened to my mother. I know she’s gone.” Alex answered.

“But we’re going to find her. I promise.” Skye reassured. Campbell wasn’t sure they would be able to keep that promise, but they would try.

Xxxx

Trista really thought that her kidnapping days would be over when she left Shield, but really, she shouldn’t be surprised because, well, she never really left the agency. She knew she was in custody of the bad guys because her hands were in chains and she felt the groggy feeling of being drugged. Dammit, she should have worn the tracking necklace, but she just thought Stark was being paranoid.

Trista looked around the room to see that she wasn’t alone. Apparently, they decided to keep her and Natalie in the same cell. How nice of them.

“Do you have any idea where we are?” Trista asked Natalie.

“No. I’ve been up for a little while and nobody has come in.” Natalie responded.

“I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing.” Trista remarked.

“I’m going with bad. I’m going to go with bad in general.”

“Do you remember who took us?” Trista asked.

“They killed the lights first and then the room was filled with some sort of smoke and then I woke up here.” Natalie explained.

It was probably a Dendrotoxin bomb. You might have a partial immunity.” That would explain why Natalie woke up before her. Now she wants to know if Howard Stark had some of the super soldier antibody in his system. She knows he never slept with Steve, but Peggy Carter and her husband were possibilities.

“Of course it was at that moment the door opened and an older man with gray hair and wired glasses walked into the room. Trista had no idea who he was, but it looked like Natalie did.

“Of course, you’re here, Daniel. I’m not even surprise you turned out just like my husband. Were
you the one who brought him in to Hydra?” Natalie asked the man in front of them.

“He was always in. Born into it really. Your in-laws were always true believers. Your husband’s grandfather served with Red Skull himself.”

“That shouldn’t even surprise me. Also glad they were all dead before we got married.”

“But you’ve always known this. You just don’t remember, but you will soon and your compliance will be rewarded.” The creepy guy told Natalie.

“Fuck you. I don’t even know what you were talking about, but I’m definitely not working with you because you are a psychotic Nazi worshiping asshole.”

“You will. And if you don’t, well, we can always kill your friend.”
To be continued
DC Metro guide:
King Street is the main street of old town Alexandria, a.k.a. the historical district.

Inova is the name of one of the major hospitals/healthcare providers in the area. I decided to use something real this time instead of making another one up. Although, I didn’t specify which Inova hospital was involved.
Chapter 35: Shield Interrogation Techniques

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last conversation. You are all fabulous. I am posting this on an iPhone, so we’ll see how well this works.

“I want to find my mom as much as anyone else, but I don’t know anything. I didn’t know my father was Hydra. I don’t know who attacked our house. I don’t remember anything between being knocked out and waking up in the hospital.” Alex told Natasha as he sat on the other side of his room. Natasha wanted this to take place in the interrogation room, but Suarez and Coulson felt it best not to treat him like a suspect.

However, in Natasha’s mind Alex List formally Werner von Strucker was a suspect. Natasha was extremely suspicious about him being left behind, especially after what Agent Carter-Sousa found when searching the crime scene. Alex List knew more than what he was saying. That much was obvious. “So, can you just let me be?”

“You lived with Wolfgang von Strucker, the person the CIA and Interpol says is the new head of Hydra for 19 years, and you knew nothing? You really expect us to believe that?” Natasha asked again, getting up and walking closer to Alex. “No spy is that perfect. There are always signs. No unexplained absences? No school events missed for no good reason? No strange people coming by to visit?”

“No,” List answered quickly, but Natasha knew it was a lie.

“Are you sure?” Agent Carter-Sousa asked.

“Things you thought were completely innocent before may be important now. Any little clue could help us get closer to finding your mom.” Apparently, she was going to be the good agent for this interrogation that wasn’t supposed to look like one. Carter-Sousa demanded that she be part of the interrogation. Natasha had no choice but to play nice. Or rather, Coulson had no choice. She did secure von Strucker in the first place.

“You know you’re not that different than the FBI. If you ask about unexpected income or mysterious vacations I’m going to leave. You can read my FBI answers. There’s nothing else I can add.” Alex remarked. “Even if I could, how is that going to bring my mom back?”

“I did and I’m pretty sure at least half of what you said were complete lies.” Natasha said, putting a paper file on the table. “For example, we found your fingerprints on the biometric reader controlling access to the secret panel in your father’s office that happened to lead to your father’s diaries. Diaries that were stolen because they were never turned over to the FBI in the first place. Obviously, you know about these diaries before your mom did.”

“I knew about the secret compartment. I mean, we both thought my dad worked for a spy agency. Secret compartment to store work documents, not that unusual. Mom was unaware because dad never worked on work stuff when she was around. But yes, I’ve seen him access that panel and after the truth came out, I tried to access it to find out what was happening, and I couldn’t.”
“That sounds almost plausible.” Natasha remarked.

“I never thought he was more than a SHIELD scientist. Not a member of an organization that has its roots in Nazi Germany. He didn’t even talk about my grandparents. It’s a deep family shame. Did I think he was hiding something? Yes, but at worst, I thought he was having an affair with some general Howlers or Hele or something. Not this.” Alex’s words were angry.

Natasha made a mental note to investigate this general. They found a lot of Hydra at the State Department, so she wouldn’t be surprised if they were at the DOD as well. Pierce was there for a while.

“You didn’t know or didn’t want to know? There is a difference. I just don’t feel like your father was skilled enough to cover up everything. I grew up with the legend Peggy Carter as my mom. I’m sure you know who she is?” Alex just nodded his head in agreement at Agent Carter-Sousa’s words.

“She and dad, my biological dad, were both agents. My mom was the first female head of a major agency and my father was killed because he knew too much. My godfather Howard tried to cover it up. Keep us in the dark, but deep in my brain, I knew the truth and I bet you did too.”

“He didn’t want us to know. When I was little, did I see him working on things that I shouldn’t have? Yes. Did I have questions about what happened to my biological mom that were never answered? Yes. He was cold and mean back then. He hit me one time.” That revelation didn’t surprise Natasha. It did because it only happened once, she was expecting worse from von Strucker.

“Then Nat came along, and things were good. We were a real family with dinners together and homework help. I’m not sure how much of that was real. Possibly none of it, but it didn’t get good until Nat got there. And now, chances are that she’s gone because of what he did.”

“I can understand your anger. You feel like she would still be here if he was just a mild-mannered scientist?” Agent Carter-Sousa asked.

“This is his fault. I know Hydra took her. Maybe to punish him.”

Natasha knows Alex is lying right now. Every time he lies Alex’s left hand starts to fiddle with the blanket he is sitting on. Not about Hydra taking her because he seems very certain about that, almost as if he knew it really was the case and not just mere suspicion. It was the second part, that this was done to punish von Strucker. It was obvious to Natasha that Alex knew there was another reason behind the kidnapping. What was that reason?

“When was the last time you spoke to your father?” Natasha asked trying to see if that was the reason for his earlier certainty.

“April, right before Captain America took out the blue line. I really miss being able to get to GW without having to transfer. I’m just starting my second year.” Alex tried misdirection this time.

“I know, it’s awful. They’re just taking their sweet time fixing it. It’s probably going to be 2017 before the line is back to normal. They’re going to have to rebuild several sections of tunnel.” At that moment Agent Carter-Sousa walked over to sit with Alex on his bed.

“I’ll be out by that point.” Alex remarked.

“Of course, because Metro is Metro. However, they did promise that once it’s rebuilt that you’ll be able to get cell signal down there which would be nice. It would make it easier for you to contact your father on this.” That’s when Agent Carter-Sousa took a black flip phone out of her pocket.
“I don’t know what you mean by that because I was barely speaking to my father before I knew who he was. Honestly, I thought he was cheating on the parent I actually liked.” Alex responded. Again, his left hand was crinkling the blanket.

“Really, because I can take this phone down to the team and they can tell me every call that’s been made in the last five months. Maybe the more important question to ask is why do you have a burn phone?”

“Dad gave it to me in March, before it all fell apart.” No left-hand playing with the blanket. He’s telling the truth or at least a partial truth.

“Did it also come with a passport and bag of cash?” Alex’s face fell at Natasha’s question.

“We found it under your bed in another secret compartment. Wonderful place to stash your porn, bad place to put your fake passports and emergency getaway cash. And I do mean passports, because we found two, one for both you and your mom with fake names. Genuine State Department issued about two months before things fell apart. Also coordinates for a politically unstable country in Eastern Europe. That didn’t send up any red flags?” Agent Carter-Sousa asked.

“I mean, I was kind of suspicious already but running across my mom’s go bag was like the first time I figured it out.”

“Weren’t you just the tiniest bit suspicious by this?” Natasha asked.

“Of course, I knew something was off. I have for a while. I was not allowed to meet my grandparents except for the one that lives in a nursing home after age 9. I remember the legendary fight that my parents and grandparents had over me going to private boarding school. I wasn’t even allowed to have a dog because it triggered some deep memories that neither parent would talk about. Yes, there were signs, but I didn’t know what they meant not until April.

“Did your dad give you the passports and the coordinates?”

“Yes.”

That was productive.” Agent Carter-Sousa said as they walked out of the room.

“Especially because the coordinates in the bag happened to be near a suspected Hydra location. Although, do you think that von Strucker really was planning for his family to come to him?” Natasha asked.

“Yes. Evil people can love their kids. They can also be too f***ed up to love them the right way and expect things that are not going to happen, but there’s love or at least some sort of approximation of it.”

“You may be right, unfortunately. I wouldn’t be surprised if at some point von Strucker was near that location.”

“Are we briefing Coulson now?” Agent Carter-Sousa asked.

“After Skye gets done with her interrogation. Although, we could watch from his office.” Natasha suggested.

Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.” Ward remarked, the moment the barrier became translucent. Skye
was already halfway tempted to put it up again. But she was here for a reason and after watching Sharon fall asleep crying against her cousin last night, Skye knew she had no choice, but to visit the devil in person.

“I told Romanoff weeks ago that I was willing to speak with you, but she told me that wasn’t going to happen. Although, I’m not so sure about your doctor friend.” Lincoln came with her. One, Suarez felt she needed to be supervised by somebody neutral. Two, Natasha was busy across the complex questioning Alex List about the bag of cash and passports they found in his bedroom.

“Trust me, I’ve really don’t want to be here.” She was here for Trista, the woman who brought Fitz back after the Gulf of Mexico. She was here for Trip because his friend was missing, and his cousin was falling to pieces over it. It’s never good when you realize how much you care about someone once they’re gone.

“Something big must have happened. You wouldn’t be here, otherwise. You need me.” Ward’s smile almost made her nauseous. It also made her want to try out a move that Natasha taught her last week.

Instead, she channels her inner May and held up a picture of Natalie List von Strucker. One from Alex’s phone of his mom just being happy.

“Do you know her?” Skye asked.

“I know a lot of people.” Ward remarked.

“I can bring Natasha back in here. Or Stark. He still wants to kill you for fucking Fitz.” For just a second Ward’s eyes flickered with something she couldn’t quite read, maybe fear, she wasn’t sure.

“You know about that?” Ward asked.

“He is my best friend. Of course, we’re going to talk about our personal experience with the guy who was slowly fucking his way through our team, screwing us over both figuratively and literally, sometimes simultaneously.” Skye tried very hard to keep her voice neutral.

“It wasn’t like that.” Ward said defensively.

“You slept with May for months, probably to keep her from looking too closely at you. Then when she breaks up with you, you start fucking around with Fitz. He said it was just once in Vegas, but I think it was only the one time because Hydra happened only days later. Of course, during that fiasco, you kissed me. Thankfully, I found out you were a Hydra loving bastard before I fucked you. Really, you’re the best thing I never had. Thank God.” Okay she was unsuccessful with not sounding bitter this time, but it didn’t matter.

“It wasn’t like that. I really cared about you and Fitz.” Ward argued.

“Yes, you cared so much, you threw him in the ocean.” Skye spat back.

“I was trying to save him.”

“I’m sure that made sense in your mind. But that’s not why I’m here.” She holds the Stark pad up to him again, this time choosing a different image from the ones she downloaded from Alex’s phone.

“Natalie List von Strucker, but you probably already know that, considering the second picture there includes her husband. I’m sure you know who he is.”
“One of your new bosses.” Skye replied.

“I was never loyal to Hydra, just Garrett.” Ward remarked. Skye had to fight not to roll her eyes. She had to remember her training from the Natasha Romanoff school of hiding your emotions with supplemental instructions from Professor May.

“You knew people in the organization. I’m sure you heard things. Coulson said Garrett rarely did stop talking.”

“That was true. Garrett used to joke about how ridiculously clueless List was, completely unaware of who her husband and father really were. How they were using her to further Hydra’s plans, but she had no idea.” That explains the twins, Skye thought to herself.

“Allegedly, that was by design. Garrett always said that Natalie was von Strucker’s weakness because everyone knew that he loved her. She was his only exploit. A weakness and a true Hydra agent doesn’t have any weaknesses.”

“Yet von Strucker was put in charge and Garrett was just a mere foot soldier. Maybe someone was jealous?”

“He was more than that.” Ward replied angrily. Good. Ward was sloppy when he was angry.

“Yes, he made you. Other than the deceased, do you know of anybody who would want to use his wife against von Strucker?” Skye asked.

“Hydra wasn’t exactly a very benevolent place. Anybody who was probably the same level as Garrett would want to get ahead by whatever means necessary. Unfortunately, I wasn’t introduced to too many of the higher-level players.”

“Because you weren’t one of them. Just another puppet. I’m still convinced Garrett ordered you to fuck Fitz for his genetic material.” Skye remarked.

“Skye, stay on task.” Lincoln admonished from his chair. Honestly, Skye is shocked he didn’t interrupt her earlier.

“Just listen to Dr. Campbell. How are you today? Actually, why are you here today?” Ward asked.

“Because I am still the only physician here that won’t kill you in your sleep.” Lincoln quipped back. Skye is almost certain he’s been spending way too much time with Trip’s mom.

“I don’t think Suarez would, or could for that matter.” Obviously, several months in lockup has not deterred Ward’s ego.

“Suarez was a specialist. I’ve seen her spar with Romanoff, and she can hold her own.” Skye remarked.

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“I’m here to make sure Skye does not decide to utilize any of her Melinda May interrogation techniques. How’s your larynx by the way? I heard it got crushed last May.” Lincoln remarked coldly.

“Better.”

“Good to know. Skye show him images four and five.” A.k.a. the stills from the von Strucker house
during the kidnapping.

“Do you know any of the people in this image?” Skye asked.

“So, there was a kidnapping or an assassination? Considering that is Weiner von Strucker on the floor, I’m leaning towards assassination. Although, I’m trying to figure out why you would care if somebody took out Wolfgang von Strucker’s family.”

“You’d be surprised.” Skye heard Lincoln mumble under breath. She is glad that he didn’t say more. Skye didn’t want Ward to know who Natalie List was related to.

“I assume that the man in the tank top is the one you’re looking for. The others are just foot soldiers.”

“Our computers identified him as the allegedly dead Carl Creel. I assume your boss recruited him.” Skye remarked.

“Yes. Did your computers also tell you that he can turn into any material that he touches? He finds it pleasurable.” Ward explained.

“Of course, he does.” Skye mumbled.

“So that’s why you’re here. And you want to know who took and/or killed her.”

“Kidnapping. I am assuming it’s the soon to be ex-husband. I heard he’s not happy about the divorce. Or maybe he’s just afraid the wife will turn state’s evidence. He didn’t tell her anything, but he did leave a lot at their house.” That completely disappeared with Natalie. Ward doesn’t need to know that.

“It wouldn’t have been him. He wouldn’t let them kill his own son. I was wrong earlier, Natalie wasn’t von Strucker’s only weakness. His son was just as much an exploit.”

“Weiner was just knocked unconscious. He is perfectly fine and resting on base.” Skye tells him.

“Now I am sure it wasn’t von Strucker. If he was the one that arranged for the kidnapping, his team would have taken both his wife and son. If Weiner was left alive, then he was left alive for a reason.”

“And that reason is?”

“To probably force von Strucker’s hand. Of course, this will probably backfire, and no one will find the bodies. He is very protective of his family. A lot like your own father or so I’ve been told.”

As soon as Ward mentioned her father, Skye put the barrier up. She had enough for today. One more moment with him and there was a good chance she would take the barrier down just so she could hit him. That would not be good.

“Why did you bring the barrier back up?” Lincoln asked confused. “He was actually being almost useful.”

“Only long enough to start messing with my head. There’s a reason why Natasha is usually the only person that speaks to Ward and gets anything useful. He’s too manipulative otherwise. Give him a minute and he will convince you of any lies.” Skye warned as she started to walk back up the stairs and out of vault D.

“Or maybe he’s trying to be useful for once. Does he know about what happened to his niece two
days ago? Maybe he wants to catch the people that hurt his own family. I did remove the bullet from his brother. Two actually.” Lincoln remarked.

“No, Natasha didn’t tell him, and I know that for a fact because I watched all of the sessions.” And Lincoln knows better than to ask why she does that. “He doesn’t even know he has a niece. So, if he knows nothing about his family, I doubt he knows anything about mine. I know they’re dead. Their entire village was destroyed. Nobody could survive that.”

In the middle of all this chaos, Lincoln has been trying to decide how much he should tell Daisy about his suspicions. But the fact that Ward can use what he knows against her made Lincoln decide that he needs to tell her the truth, at least the part about her family. If not about the diviner or the fact that she does have the dormant inhuman gene. Lincoln confirmed that this morning along with baby Antonio. (Note to self, check to see if the parents are at least carriers of the gene.)

“Did I ever tell you that I was in China for a year?” Lincoln asked trying to create an opportunity to have this discussion.

“It was on your resume. You taught English as a second language.” Skye told him as they made their way to the lounge. It was empty except for Tim who was reading a Stark pad by the table.

“Hey Tim.” Skye said as she placed her Stark pad on the table, to grab an apple. They really should’ve gone directly back to one of the brothers to turn in the pad, but it was well after dinner time. And obviously, Skye was hungry.

“You talk to Ward or at least try to?”

“Yes. It went badly as usual. Although, I didn’t punch him, which I guess is good.”

“I’m not surprised. Although I wish he would tell you something so we can find out what happened to Christine.” Skye frowned at those words. They didn’t even get to asking about Christine. Skye ended things before that point.

“Natasha can try later. I think I’m done for the moment.” Skye replied.

“I understand. I will talk to you later. I need to check on Alana.”

“How is she?” Skye asked genuinely concerned.

“Clinging on to Hunter as if he is the most important person in the universe. She knows that Christine is dead and not coming back, but I think she still processing it.” Tim said as he placed his Stark pad in his bag and slung it over the good arm.

“That makes sense. Loss is hard for little kids.”

“I hope it gets better, but I’ll talk to you guys later. I need to talk Alana into bed and try to get her to sleep at a somewhat reasonable time.”

“Good luck with that.” Lincoln mumbles as he went to pour himself a juice.

“You know I have a drinking problem?” Lincoln said once Tim was gone.

“Which is why I did not take you anywhere near the bar or grab a beer out of the fridge for myself. Even though I really want one right now. I hate him so much.” Skye lamented as she took another bite of her apple.
“I appreciate that. My drinking was the real reason I was in China. I went there to get sober after I almost killed my girlfriend in a car crash. Although, I did eventually get sober enough to teach some classes.”

“I am glad it wasn’t a complete lie.” Skye remarked.

“I was at a place called Lai Xi or Afterlife in English. I worked with a lot of people at Afterlife. But the one counselor I remember the most was Jiaying. She really helped me get myself back together again. I was a mess.”

“That was kind of like Miles for me after I ran away from the system, but I feel like this Jiaying was a significantly less toxic person.” Lincoln felt like there is a story there that he’s going to have to find out eventually.

“She had her secrets, but she was very quiet. Kept to herself a lot even though she was good at her job. Thanks to the Afterlife rumor mill, I found out that was because once upon a time she lost everything. One day she was happily raising her new daughter with her American husband in the Hunan province, then the next Shield came along and kidnapped her in the middle of the night.” There was a flash of recognition in Skye’s eyes when he mentioned Hunan province. Good.

“I don’t think that was Shield. At least, not actual Shield agents more like the Hydra ones sleeping inside the henhouse. Also, it could’ve been like what happened to Trip’s mom, more than once. False flag operations are all the rage.” Skye remarked bitterly.

“I’m aware of the nuances of it now. I don’t think Jiaying sees it that way. She survived despite being tortured for weeks. She only escaped because they thought they killed her. But despite being left for dead, she survived. She was the only one of her village to survive. She believed everyone else died, including her daughter. The village was gone, burnt to ash. That type of loss does something to you, and she lost her way for a long time. Trying to get revenge on those who stole her daughter. I think a part of her wanted to believe that they just stole her Daisy, not killed her like everyone else in the village.”

“But did she find her way again?” Skye asked.

“Yes, but it took her years. Then she started helping people like me who have already lost their selves.” Lincoln explained.

“Does she have powers like you?” Skye asked shocking Lincoln. He started to choke on the juice, he just drank.

“How do you…” Lincoln doesn’t even know how to start that question. He thought he was being careful.

“Well first, why else would Hydra kidnap her? They do love their powered people and their offspring. Second, I saw the video footage of you escaping with Stephanie. Who do you think altered the video footage in the first place, so the joint task force just thinks you are some random med student with combat training?”

“You did?” Really, he should’ve known.

“Jarvis helped, but I did the heavy lifting.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised. Yes, she has enhanced healing abilities. It is the only reason why she survived being tortured by Hydra for so long.” Lincoln explained.
“Which was why they tortured her for so long? To test her abilities?”

“Probably.”

“What year did this happen in?” Skye asked starting to piece things together.

“1989.” However, before Lincoln could say anything else, one of the brothers walked into the room. He thinks it’s Sam, but he’s not entirely sure.

“Hey, I’m sorry to interrupt because I know you two were having a moment, but while you were distracted Tim managed to get into Vault D.”

“Shit! How did that happen?” Skye asked as she grabbed the controller for the room only to realize that it was just a normal Stark pad.

“He is a Ward. Of course, he swapped out the pads. Never trust a Ward.” Skye said angrily as they both started to make their way back to vault D.

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Tim really didn’t mean to take the control pad for his brother’s cell. It was an accident. Or at least that’s what he’ll say if anybody asked.

But the truth is, he wanted justice for Christine and for Alana. She was his friend and she didn’t deserve to be brought into the Ward family drama, and he is positive that was what led to her death either directly or indirectly. Tim just needed to know if it was because Christian was a sociopath or if Grant’s former employer wanted to send a message. Grant’s crush was never going to get the truth so that meant facing the devil himself.

“Back so soon. I guess you really do want to know about your family.” Grant said as soon as the barrier was down. He’s letting Friday run the show because otherwise, he will accidentally let Grant out and nobody wants that. Except for maybe Grant.

“I know all about my family although there are a few recent developments that you are unaware of.” Like the last 15 years. Tim hasn’t seen the man in front of him since the night their house burned down. Or rather the night that Grant burnt their house down the day they buried their sister.

“Thomas what are you doing here? What happened to your arm?” Grant asked almost as if he cared.

“Either our brother paid someone to kill me and they failed miserably, or your former employer did it. I’m not sure it matters either way.” Tim replied darkly, deciding not to let Grant know about his new name.

“And Coulson brought you here to stay safe?” Grant asked.

“Skye actually but her bosses arranged for it.” He doesn’t state that one of those bosses happens to be the father of the guy that Grant threw into the Gulf of Mexico. He has been here two days and he already knows a lot about his brother’s misdeeds. Not much of it surprises him unfortunately.

“That’s good. He’ll protect you.” Ward mumbles distantly.

“They’ve been taking good care of me and Alana.”

“Girlfriend? Wife? I know all about Christian’s family, but I know nothing about you. You kind of disappeared after high school.” He’s not surprised at all that Grant was keeping tabs on him. That
made Tim glad he changed his name and left his family behind as soon as he turned 18.

“That was a conscious choice. You don’t even know everything about Christian’s family. Alana is his daughter. Although, considering that either Christian or your former employers killed her guardian about two days ago, I guess that makes her my daughter now. If that’s what she wants.” They haven’t even talked about that yet. Right now he’s just in survival mode. Keep Alana safe and then afterwards figure out what to do next.

“Because there’s no way in hell you’re going to let Christian anywhere near that child. So, affair?” Grant asked.

“Affair. Her mother already died a few years ago.”

“Hit?” Grant asked.

“Surprisingly, no. She died in the battle of New York. First responder. Because Christian is Christian, Alana’s aunt Christine Everhart got custody. She was murdered on Halloween leaving work.” Tim explained. He kept his eyes trained on Grant looking for the smallest expression to tell him something.

“I know she wasn’t well-liked by some of the higher-ups. They blamed her for creating Stark. She was an Insight target.” Tim vaguely remembers Project Insight from watching one of Christine’s broadcasts. Although she never mentioned she herself was a target.

“This didn’t happen the same time von Strucker’s wife was kidnapped?” Grant asked and Tim knew the answer was yes. The house wasn’t even attacked until agent Carter left to go to the Arlington base to help him after being shot.

“I’m going to take your silence as a yes. Then it was my former employer and I do mean former. It was most likely a distraction.” Which again was possible.

“Or it was a warning message to me to keep my mouth shut. Hydra is not above using family members to serve as an incentive to those who are starting to waiver. I shouldn’t have tried to find you…” Before Ward could finish speaking, the wall came back down.

“Friday, why did you do that?” Tim asked the AI that was helping him. “I was getting somewhere.”

“Yes, you were getting manipulated by your brother.” Skye said as she walked down the stairs, furious at him. “You also told him about Alana. What were you thinking?”

“That I need to know why Alana is going to be burying her aunt as soon as it’s actually safe for her to go to the funeral. I’ve known Grant for a very long time. I grew up in a house of monsters. Ward was the worst because it was never his fault. Everything he did was always someone else’s fault.”

“And yet you want to talk to him.”

“Because I will do anything to keep Alana safe even if it means encountering the ghost of childhood past.”

“Fine, I’m having Natasha review the video to see if you missed anything. I’m also going to have a little talk with your co-conspirator.”

“He was going to do it anyway. It was best if I supervised.” Friday informed. Skye responded by putting her head in her hands.
“I’m going to spend some time with your coding later.” Skye remarked, annoyed.

“That may not be possible due to a man matching the description of the person who attacked Janice arriving at a tattoo parlor near Miami 30 minutes ago.”

“Isn’t he supposed to be in jail for trying to kill Janice?” Lincoln asked. Tim met a Janice a couple of days ago on base, but he wasn’t entirely sure what Lincoln was talking about.

“He is a former Shield assassin. Really, we should be surprised he stayed in lockup so long. Lincoln, can you walk Tim back to his room. I’m going to go discuss with Coulson and Friday on the way there why we didn’t know that the guy escaped prison.”

“Because no public notifications were made.”

“Lovely.” Skye remarked, before leaving Tim with Dr. Campbell.

“So, did you break in to see your brother because you want to know more about why Christine was killed or to face the ghost of your childhood directly?” Lincoln asked as they started to make their way up the stairs.

“Possibly both.”

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“So, what did you find out from Alex?” Coulson asked Natasha after they just finished watching (as well as discussing) Skye’s session with Ward. No one is surprised it ended so abruptly, even Natasha.

Currently she was in his office along with Marcy, Stark and Rogers. May was staying behind with Isabel and the babies. He’s pretty sure that May was practicing how to kick somebody while holding Madison or Antonio.

“That the passports and bag of cash were given to him by his father.” Marcy responded.

“So, the coordinates are probably real?” Tony asked.

“Yes, especially because they match one of the suspected bases.” Natasha replied.

“You mean the one that’s only showed up in chatter after the raid in England. That just seems like suspiciously good timing.” Stark remarked.

“Which means this is probably a trap.” Steve replied.

“It’s definitely a trap. Because I don’t even think Hydra is stupid enough to just leave this information around.”

“I’m not sure about that.” Marcy mumbled under breath. Phil glared.

“Obviously, it’s a trap. The more important question is who created the trap?”

“Whoever has Natalie.” Marcy responded. “After watching Agent Skye Carter’s discussion with your asset in our own discussion with Alex, I don’t think it is her ex-husband. However, the fact that he is the poster boy in Hydra for why you shouldn’t fall in love makes me think that it could be anyone else in Hydra. I wish we had more intel on leadership in the organization.”

“Did any suspected Hydra shell corporation show up in the vicinity of where we lost the van in Bethesda?” Natasha asked.
“Nothing.” Steve responded.

“Although a few buildings are owned by Gideon Malik, the World Security Council member that tried to nuke Manhattan. I know he also financed Natalie’s clinic. I have Friday digging a little bit to see if this guy isn’t as clean as he first appears. However, should we just dismiss my soon-to-be former brother-in-law? Maybe he kidnapped Nat because he was angry about the divorce. I just feel like he would have been a possessive little asshole.” Stark remarked.

“It’s possible, but it is more likely that someone else within Hydra kidnapped List and ran off with von Strucker’s diaries. I’m sure Hydra heads are not the most loyal bunch.” Phil added.

“They never were.” Steve replied.

“So, the question is do we head off to Sokovia in hopes of finding the brother-in-law when we’re only 12% sure we’ll find Natalie there? Is this a trap we want to spring? Because, I’m not sure.” Tony stated in concern.

“I don’t either. From the intel we found from other sources, von Strucker and his team were the last people with the scepter before Shield fell. Chances are it is still in his possession and we can’t just leave that where it is.” Steve argued.

“Which means we have to spring the trap.” Phil sighed.

“So, who’s going?” Stark asked. “Because as much as Stevie bear and I would like to play with the twins, I’d really prefer for the brother-in-law not to have your murder weapon.”

“You’re right. I need both of you on this. Natasha, do you think you’re going to get anything else out of Alex List?”

“No. At least, not me. Although I think he needs to be watched closely. Maybe Hunter when he’s not covered in six-year-old.” Natasha suggested.

“I agree. Since you don’t think you can get anything from Alex and you turned over Ward to Skye for the moment, I recommend that you go instead of May.” Phil suggested.

“The new team is working well together.”

“Would you rather have Natasha or May watch over the twins?” Phil asked Tony.

“May. I heard what she did to Ian Quan after he shot Skye. I also saw this morning’s baby tai chi session and I am impressed.” She did look adorable with Madison in a carrier this morning.

“I’m fine going with the rest of the team and it makes more sense for May to stay behind to watch the children. Do you think we should bring Campbell with us?” Natasha asked.

“Why? Stark asked. “We have Simmons for Medical.”

“Can she electrocute someone? I know you saw the unedited footage of Stephanie’s escape.”

“Yes, I saw the footage and if it comes to it, Simmons could do the electrocuting in the mini gauntlets that I’ve created for her. She can even do more damage in the suit or controlling the Iron Legion. If I had to choose between the two, I’d rather have Simmons with us and Sparky here to provide back up and medical care for the twins.” Stark explained.

“You gave her access to your suits?” Natasha asked incredulously. “Nobody has access to your suits.
Even your best friend had to take one by force.”

“OK that’s totally not true. Leo has access which is why I am leaving one here in case of an emergency. Also, I didn’t give her access. I made a different device just in case.”

“I agree with Stark. In addition to the twins needing medical, we also need somebody to stay around in case Ward tries to slit his wrists again and Campbell is the only doctor that can go down there and won’t kill him.” And even then, Coulson’s not 100% sure about that.

“Is that such a terrible thing. What else is there left for him to tell us? Unless Natasha is trying to rehabilitate him and make him an asset. Like her.” Stark remarked.

“I don’t think anybody here is going to trust him enough for that, not even me. Nor do I think he’s healthy enough for that. At best we might be able to wipe his mind and let him try over again under therapist supervision, but not yet. I think there’s other things he can tell us. So, Campbell needs to stay, but Stephanie could come with us.” Natasha suggested.

“I’m going to have to veto that, Deputy Director. We are trying to keep my family members away from Hydra, not bring them with us to raid the lion’s den.”

“I’ll go.” Marcy volunteered. “And if I go, Stephanie shouldn’t go because she kind of hates me right now.”

“So do I, since you probably knew about Leo since the beginning, but I like you more than Tyler. Seriously, how are we related to him?” Tony asked. “What happened? Was he dropped on his head as a baby?”

“We went through an early version of the Tahiti protocol to make us forget that our father was murdered in front of us, and instead left us because he couldn’t handle mom being mom. Howard’s idea. I eventually remembered the truth. Tyler is still pretty fucked up.” Marcy explained.

“Of course, it’s Howard issues. It’s always Howard issues. Although, this is a new twist.” Tony sighed.

“If you bring me along, I can talk to Ross, the one that is not a complete asshole, and get joint task force sanctioning and backup.” Marcy offered.

“Okay big sis, welcome to the Avengers.” Just as Stark spoke the door to the room open.

“I’m sorry about interrupting, but Sebastian Derik a.k.a. the guy who tried to kill Janice a couple of weeks ago was spotted at a tattoo parlor outside of Miami about 35 minutes ago.” Skye told the group, handing a Stark pad to Phil.

"Isn’t he supposed to still be in lockup?” Tony asked turning to Coulson.

“Yes, and there haven’t been any reports of him escaping custody.”

“That might be because my boss buried those reports.” Marcy told the group.

“And you didn’t think to mention this?” Tony asked annoyed.

“You need to focus on Hydra as well as getting back Trista and Natalie List. Others can deal with the attempted murder.”

“Also, surveillance saw 33 a.k.a. the one responsible for killing Trip’s former fiancé two blocks
away with some guy that Friday and Jarvis are currently trying to get information on.”

“Skye, Trip, and I will be headed to Miami with a team.” Phil said after reading the Stark pad.

“You’re not supposed to be doing fieldwork.” Natasha remarked.

“I agree. You shouldn’t be in the field right now. The joint task force can deal with them.” Marcy suggested.

“No, they can’t because they would’ve caught him already if they could. Also 33’s involvement means it needs to be us.” Because no one else would know that she’s a double agent.

“At least bring Sharon with you. She needs to do something.” Marcy suggested and Phil almost wondered if she knew the truth, but he doubted it.

“It’s probably best that she is not away from Trip right now.” Skye added.

“Okay, to Miami we go.”

To Be Continued.
Chapter 36: Confessions

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last conversation. All of you are fabulous.

I’m sorry it’s been a while. I had a family emergency, in February, and that just got everything behind. Also, resources went into finishing up I Hope You Have Unlimited Text Messaging as close to Endgame’s release as possible. However, now that that story is almost done, I’m going to try to push towards finishing this. Especially because I’m not planning to start the main big sequel to that story until probably January. However, there will be some “short” stories in the interim. Regardless, it gives me more time and resources to throw into this.

Continuity note: since I started writing this story before episode 5.15 of AOS, I had Wolfgang von Strucker closer in age to Natalie/Natasha Stark which would put him as being about 20 or 21 during the flashback scene which would be too old to be a student at the same time as General Hale. However, it’s more important for Natalie and her husband to be closer in age, therefore von Strucker is slightly older in this universe. Besides, you can always imagine that he was spending extra time at Hydra Academy because they were grooming him to be the head.

“So how are things going without me there?” May asked Steve, who she was video conferencing with from Phil’s office. With him in Florida, against her objections, she was technically in charge of the agency at the moment, even if she was supposed to be on parental leave.

She is still trying to wrap her mind around the fact that she has a reason to be on parental leave. It still hasn’t completely registered in her mind that she has two biological children. For so long, she thought that those she trained, like Skye, would be her only legacy. But now she has Madison and Antonio with diaper changes and all.
“Tony and Natasha only argue every other minute.” Steve said with an exasperated sigh.

“We are not that bad.” Tony called out from behind his boyfriend. It looks like they were at one of Stark’s safe houses. And by Stark, she means Howard. Melinda is even surprised by the paranoia of the grandfather of Shield. He did build a secret Shield base under his house in Arlington. They stayed at several of the safehouses during their earlier Hydra raids. Hill apparently had a list of all of them since they were conveniently left out of the toolbox.

“Possibly worse. So I’m hoping they’ll get over themselves before the raid, tonight.”

“We are a finally tuned machine.” Stark replied, sticking out his tongue at his boyfriend.

“I will throw a pillow at you.” Steve threatened.

“I am shaking.” Stark then proceeded to blow a kiss at Steve.

“Is this going to work?” May asked skeptically.

“It has to.” Stark told her now sitting next to Steve. “The brand-new cloaked drones picked up pictures of the brother-in-law and a few of his special projects. Like someone who can levitate blocks with her hands and another guy who can run across the room before you blink. We can’t leave them there.” Just then footage began to play for her.

“Lullaby?” May asked.

“Scepter test subjects, we think. We know that’s there too. But I’m going to need to be on site to find out more.” May flinched when she saw an image of the weapon that killed her boyfriend, even if said death was not permanent. “Good news we have Asgardian back up.”

“Thor?” Steve nodded his head yes at her question.

“And his special friend Lady Sif. Although, they left Reindeer Games at home to keep up pretenses.”
Stark snarked.

“Isn’t he supposed to be dead?” That fact was one of the few things that made cleanup duty last year tolerable, at least until she held the berserker staff. Then she was forced to remember everything she lost in Bahrain. (Although having biological children was no longer one of those things because her ex-husband gave her eggs to Hydra and Isabella Cline-Hand is pragmatic and in need of a co-parent.)

“Technically, so was your boyfriend, but apparently death isn’t so permanent in our world. Although in this case Reindeer Games faked his death, put his adopted father in a NYC retirement home, and then took his place on the throne.”

“I’m not even surprised.” Melinda mumbled under breath.

“He got away with it for a while until he reacted the wrong way when lady Sif told him that Coulson wasn’t dead. She got suspicious. Then she went and found Thor. The situation convinced the Electric Wonder that it was better to go back home over staying on Earth with Jane. Break up occurred. And apparently he’s been trying to straighten up things for the last couple of months, which is why he’s been MIA since before Shield imploded.

“Which was only two weeks after Las Vegas. That makes sense timewise.”

“A.k.a. the mission where Ward screwed my son literally.” Stark complains before correcting himself. “My oldest son. I’m still wrapping my head around that one.” They all were.

“Where is Thor’s father right now? Is he still at a retirement home in NYC?”

“No he’s been moved to a private facility in Norway because somebody cannot deal with his wife’s murder very well and apparently Loki is actually a benevolent ruler who just wants to sit around all day and put on plays about how great he is.”

“So, he’s not back in jail for what he did.”

“No, because apparently he was brainwashed and crazy when he killed your boyfriend and thousands of other people. One of the candidates running for Senate in New Jersey lost her mother and father during the attacks. Apparently, we are her favorite target.”
“You’re okay with this?”

“Neither one of us is okay with it, but we have other things to worry about. Like infiltrating a Hydra facility in 12 hours.”

“Have you talk to Suarez?” Melinda asked changing the subject. “Maybe she can help you work through your Natasha issues.”

No, because if I call her, she’s going to want to talk about my sister’s kidnapping and my surprise children, the new ones. We don’t have time for that. So, I’m going to let Point Break deal with his family issues after I have a face-to-face with the brother-in-law and the kidnapper.” He was obviously referring to Dr. List. “Especially the kidnapper. I hope they’ll be able to tell us something about where Trista and Natalie are.”

“I hope so too.”

“How are the kids?” Steve asked.

“Good. Thankfully, they are sleeping right now which is why I’m chatting with you guys even though I should be sleeping.” But she really couldn’t sleep so she appears to work.

“Miss May, Madison and Antonio are both now crying, and Miss Isabel needs your assistance.” Jarvis interrupted. Stark put Jarvis back in after Friday let the former Thomas Ward talk to his brother. It was probably for the best even though Tim actually got something almost useful out of Ward.

“Because that will happen. Let me know how the mission goes. I assume you’re going dark until afterwards?”

“Yes.” Steve responded. “We’ll talk again afterwards. I think things will go well because we have backup now.”

“I just wish we would find Trista and Natalie there, but I know better.” She heard just as the connection ended. She then went to deal with Madison who needed a fresh diaper and a bottle, as
Isabel gave the same to Antonio. Neither baby liked to wait.

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“I fucking hate Daniel Whitehall.” Natalie said as she was tossed back into the cell with Trista. She was covered in bruises, just like Trista was. Torture was a favorite hobby of the Hydra Hilton. She knew that they were trying to brainwash her. She was trying her best to make sure that didn’t happen. She wouldn’t be broken.

Regardless of her treatment, at least she wasn’t being used as a lab rat. That seems to be the case with the various pinpricks running up Natalie’s arms. She had several cuts that were still bleeding. Trista was surprised a few moments later that a first aid kit was thrown at her, an incomplete one. They would know better than to get her a pair of medical scissors or even tweezers right now. She could kill both of her guards in 20 seconds with either. She might be able to pull it off with the sharp part of the tape dispenser.

She doesn’t try, though. Not yet. Not until she has a better idea of where they are. Trista does make sure to hide the dispenser.

She knows they have already been moved once. Trista was unconscious at the time, but Natalie said they were on a plane and everyone was wearing parkas. So obviously they’re not in DC in November anymore.

“Same here. Let’s patch you up.” Trista offered

“There’s no point. There will be more in a few hours. Take care of yourself. I’m sorry. I never should’ve asked you to work for May. This is my fault.” Natalie lamented.

“Sorry. The bloody one gets first priority. There’s no need to apologize. I wanted you to offer me a job so I could keep an eye on you.” Trista tells her, grabbing her wrist to wipe away the blood.

“Did you know what was done to me?”

“By your father?” Trista asked for clarification as she continued to take care of the blood from Natalie. At least she was allowing this.

“Yes.”
“Only because we already knew who your father and husband are and I’ve met three people that have gone through the TAHITI protocol. You are now the fourth. Fifth, Trip’s uncle also went through the protocol to make him forget about his father’s murder which apparently is why he’s a dick.”

“What a lovely name for taking somebody’s life away.” Nat replied snidely. “I really didn’t know or rather I didn’t remember the truth, but something always felt off. I knew something wasn’t right. I knew I couldn’t trust my dad, but I didn’t remember why. The first time I remember meeting my husband, I just had this feeling that I had met him before. I just couldn’t remember when. The first time we kissed, it felt familiar. That wasn’t our first kiss. That happened after classes one day. Apparently we went to high school together. Although I was older, but he was being groomed for something. I don’t remember what.” Natalie tells her.

“So you’re starting to remember your past?” Trista asked.

“There’s a machine. A different type of torture, but every time I go in the stupid thing you don’t lose a finger. I remember my father screaming at me because I wouldn’t kill my dog. I’m pretty sure I was raised to be a true believer, but I was horrible at it.”

“This is not surprising.” Probably because she’s read the entire List dossier and Trista can see the man forcing his child, the one he kidnapped from someone else, to kill an animal in addition to training her to be a soldier for the cause.

“I also remember Wolf trying to protect me from my father, but he was younger than Alex at the time. That was our first time together after that. Then I was dragged and locked away with the prisoner.”

“So, he was your first love?” Trista asked.

“I don’t think either of us understand what love was at the time because we never saw it before. My mom cared about me, but not enough to leave, not yet. She did eventually. Different country different name. She wanted me to come with her, but I didn’t join her. My residency was too important. About a year later she ended up in a coma, and thus began her career as a longtime resident of Woodbine. Maybe by then she actually loved me. I don’t know. It was about that time I met Wolf again. I thought he loved me. I loved him and Alex so much. They won’t tell me what they did to Alex.” Nat was crying at this point.
“I am ok losing a pinky if you want to skip next time.” Trista offered only half joking.

“It’s okay. I’m starting to get to the less awful stuff, if you count being locked up in another place like this with Carter as being less awful. How bad was my childhood, if incarceration was the more pleasant part?”

“Catastrophically dreadful.” Trista replied quickly before realizing who Natalie was most likely talking about. “Stephanie Carter? Do you remember Stephanie?” Trista asked.

“Antoine’s mom?” Natalie asked. Of course she knew Antoine. Probably longer than she’s known Trista.

“Yes. Did Antoine ever tell you that his conception happened because his mom was forcibly impregnated by Hydra?”

“Fuck.” Natalie exclaimed. “I never met her. Stephanie lived in California, up until very recently and she usually only ended up in DC for the holidays. This was usually when my husband decided it would be great for us to spend your days somewhere warm and tropical. But Carter from that place has Antoine’s eyes and his smile.”

“That was her. She remembers you. You got her out of there before she gave birth. She thought they killed you.” Trista explained.

“They did. Whoever I was back then doesn’t exist. Why didn’t they kill me?” Natalie asked.

“Because you were still valuable to Hydra maybe even more so because you didn’t know who they were.”

“I did something?” Natalie asked.

“Someone at your clinic did, but I can’t tell you yet. I’ve already said too much.”

“Because the truth will come out eventually and as much as they say your compliance will be rewarded. They never pay an actual reward.” Natalie remarked.
“So why do you think we’re here now? Why make you take this trip down memory lane? Is there something particular that they want you to remember?” Trista asked.

“Or maybe I’m just the bait, but who am I here to trap?” Natalie asked.

‘Tony’, Trista thought to herself, but she wasn’t going to say that in case the cell was bugged.

“Your ex-husband?” Trista asked just as the door to their cell opened.

“Your son actually.” One of their captors said from the doorway. Of course it was the asshole.

“Daniel you’re early. Don’t you guys usually try to give me an hour between torture sessions? I don’t know what you want me to remember and I really don’t give a fuck.” Natalie said defiantly.

“But you do. Love is such a weakness. I should never let Wolfgang von Strucker take over once I became aware of his feelings for you. However, he was too brilliant to let that potential go to waste. Unfortunately, we all realized much too late that Strucker only cares for the science and you and his son. Nothing else. Hydra shouldn’t have a leader like that.”

“So this is about revenge for him taking your job? Not being enough of a true believer? That he loves me too much to be heartless?” Natalie asked, flippantly. “If that’s the case, maybe I’ll hold off on the divorce proceedings until we can actually talk.”

“So you know who you are now?” Whitehall asked.

“The wife of somebody who pissed you off? Or is it the daughter of somebody who pissed you off? You know I’m really tired of being defined by my connection to other people, especially when it leads to kidnappings. I’m a brilliant doctor and scientist in my own right.”

“The second option is more accurate. I expect nothing less of the daughter of Howard Stark.”

“Why did I offer to come with you guys to Miami again?” Stephanie asked her son after her 10th
consecutive hour of sitting in a car as she watched a monk carve alien writing into the wall of his room via Stark pad.

“Because the guy we’re hunting down is a Tahiti patient and he’s probably after another Tahiti patient and you oversee all the Tahiti patients. The A team is watching him and we’re watching his most likely target” Antoine remarked. She’s kind of surprised that it’s not Skye sitting next to her. But instead, she’s running communications.

“Although I didn’t realize at the time that we would be spending so much time sitting in cars watching surveillance footage of people carving what I think is alien hieroglyphics. I kind of thought that was over after coming back to the base.”

“I hope I’m better company than the brothers K.”

“Significantly better. Less complaining about Godzilla movies. So why did you volunteer for this especially when it means spending quality time with your mom that you are barely speaking to.”

“Because I’m not going to let Sharon run off by herself right now.”

“Understandable. I’m actually worried. I’m not even 100% sure she should be here. I’m not even sure she’s eaten anything in the last four days.”

“She has mostly mission rations, but she’s been consuming the necessary number of calories for a specialist.” That did not make Stephanie feel better.

“She is not OK.”

“Because she kind of realized that she had less than platonic feelings for her best friend, the moment that said best friend was kidnapped. However, me and her going on missions when we’re not exactly in the best place mentally is a bit of a tradition. Remember the six months I disappeared after my engagement imploded?”

“Yes, because I’m the one who had to return all your engagement presents. However, most people were cool with the wedding being called off on account of aliens. Actually, that was how I was able to get your deposit back on the reception venue.”
“And thank you for doing that while I decided that work was better or was at least easier to deal with. After three weeks cleaning up after New York, I was already running missions again. Sharon was there to make sure I stayed alive long enough to deal with my feelings.”

“Was this the Budapest Mission where you had to pretend to have sex with your own cousin?”

“Yes and we don’t talk about Budapest, ever. Although, this was when we added a note to our file stating we were related.”

“Duly noted. I heard from your uncle that you met your biological father. Apparently, you took Skye to Arizona to meet the rest of your extended family.”

“Yep, I’m not an only child. Also, I’m an uncle and some of my nieces and nephews are younger than me.”

“That’s good.”

“It makes it less awkward, at least. Although everything is awkward. Only Eli knows who I am. We didn’t even tell his mom.”

“Understandable. What about your father. How did you react?”

“It’s another grandma situation. He doesn’t know who I am. His mind is too messed up. I wonder if it’s related to the serum.”

“I’ll add it to my list of things to research.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you going to keep looking for your other parent?”
“No. Skye and I have been talking about it a lot. She gets it because she doesn’t know who her parents really are either. Now that I have some answers, I don’t think I need more. It doesn’t matter that Hydra was responsible for me being here. It’s what I’m doing now, that matters.

“That’s a healthy attitude to have.”

“Also I don’t think I want to know the truth at this point. I am 99% sure that the other parent was probably a Hydra operative or unwilling participant like you and Mr. Bradley. And unfortunately, not your Nat.”

“She would’ve been a good mom choice. She talked to me all the time about all the good things that would happen once we got out. I just wished she survived.” Stephanie lamented.

“Actually, there’s something you need to know.” Stephanie found the words coming from her son’s lips to be extremely ominous.

Xx

“OK that’s a new fun way of torture. However, I am not falling for any of your lies.” Natalie said looking directly at Whitehall. She was so tired of this. She never liked this man the few times that she met him in the past and that was before she knew he was a sadistic bastard. No wonder Wolf never trusted the man. (She will leave analyzing how much her husband was a true believer in the Hydra cause until another day.)

“I speak no lies. But your friend already knows that.” The look on Trista’s face told Natalie that maybe, just maybe there was some sort of truth to his words. “I’ll let you be for now. Tomorrow we begin again. Discoveries always requires experimentation.”

“Is what he said true?” Natalie asked.

“Yes.” Trista whispered.

“So, am I an illegitimate Stark child? One sent off to be adopted and had the misfortune of ending up in the clutches of Hydra? Is that why Tony Stark decided to use my clinic for his fertility issues? I mean I would say they made the issues up, but I know better than that.”
“He knows and he went looking for you. The truth or pieces of the truth came out when he found some of his father’s diaries. Although technically you’re not an illegitimate child because you are also the biological daughter of Maria Stark.”

“So they just gave me away? Did they just really want a boy to carry on the Stark legacy?

No. Somewhere in Manhattan, there is a room filled with toys and objects Tony found engraved with the name Natasha Stark. You were taken from them.” That’s when Trista began her story. Natalie is surprised to find out that the man who raised her, not only kidnapped her, but convinced the Stark family that she was dead just to manipulate them into an attempt at making the next super soldier. She would have thrown up if she was being fed properly.

“I wasn’t adopted, I was kidnapped. Not only that, but I was raised to be Hydra. I remember a school. I had science projects with Wolfgang. We studied the philosophy of Red Skull and hand to hand combat classes. Also I think I remember 20 different ways to kill somebody with a tape dispenser.” Memories were starting to come back even outside the machine. Her entire life was a lie.

“Good, do you remember how to pick locks?”

“Not yet, but I will.” Natalie replied. She had to get out of here.

Xxxx

Mentally, Trip was cursing his uncle and his boss for not telling his mom that Natalie List was also the same Nat that helped her escape Hydra hell, decades earlier. He can tell by his mom’s perplexed expression that she is not taking it well at all.

“So, you’re telling me that not only did Nat survive helping us escape, but she’s also Tony’s long-lost sister?” His mom asked.

“Yes. Finding her blood at the crime scene was how Howard realized she never died in the first place.”

“As well as Tony and me being siblings.”
“Yes,"

“I had sex with my brother’s sister?”

“She’s not your sister. Marcy and Howard checked that as well.”

“Well, that just makes everything so much better.” His mom said sarcastically.

“You didn’t know. No one did until afterwards.” Trip tried to reassure her.

“I’m not going to think about that part, but this means that she’s back with Hydra and we are here in Miami. Why are we in Miami?” His mom asked.

“Chasing another serial killer. An escaped serial killer, that may have been assisted in his escape by Hydra and who is stalking Tahiti patients.”

“So, we are following the threat?” His mom asked.

“Yes. It’s the only option right now and maybe it will lead to Natalie and Trista.”

“I hope so. Trista is like another member of the family.”

“And if we don’t find something, maybe Tony will do better.” Trip said trying to sound hopeful. He wasn’t sure they would find either woman again, but they had to try.

“I kind of wish I could be there for Tony’s interrogation of the soon to be ex-husband. Mom always said there could never be a one apocalypse at a time.”

“That is so true.” Trip said just as their com came to life.
“OK I totally wasn’t listening in on your very private mother son conversation, but Sebastian kind of just pulled a knife out on our alien writing carving monk.” At that, Trip looked down at the Stark pad in hand to see that yes, Sebastian was now attacking the monk. Great. This happens while they’re talking. “Also 33 and mysterious Hydra guy in the suit just showed up, so team A is busy.”

“Which means it’s team B to the rescue.” Trip said already getting out of the car.

“Icer ready.” His mom was following behind.

Good news, despite never going through formal agent training, his mom is an excellent shot. They were able to incapacitate him before he started carving on the monk.

“This time we are handing this guy over to Aunt Marcy’s team. They have to be better at keeping people locked up.” Trip said as he put Sebastian in restraints.

“After we interrogate him. I want to know what he knows.”

To be continued
Chapter 37: It’s a Trap

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has read or reviewed the last chapter. You have all been fabulous. It’s been so long that Endgame and Far from Home have been released. Let’s view this timeline as a happy timeline where Steve and Tony get their shit together before it’s too late. Well, a happier timeline compared to Canon because there’s still a truckload of drama to come as you shall see in this chapter.

Also, this is a timeline where Steve lets go and doesn’t latch onto an idea that may not even be real. I have opinions about certain things that happened in Endgame. However, they don’t affect this story. Although there may be some references because I love Easter eggs, mythology gags, and continuity nods.

Phil really wanted to watch Agents 13 and 33 fight each other mainly because he knew that both are on the same side. It would essentially be extreme sparring. The guy with 33 was not on their side, and unfortunately, Coulson was the one who had to deal with him. Plus the guy just had to disarm him first, so he had to do this the old-fashioned way and therefore utilize his Brazilian jujitsu and choke the guy unconscious.

As soon as the guy in the suit crumpled to the floor, he decided to interrupt the fight between the agents before someone could accidentally get hurt.

“Okay he’s out, and Jarvis has managed to slice together a loop of us fighting, so we have about five minutes.”

“Why are you in Miami?” 33 asked.

“Chasing escaped possible Tahiti patients.” Agent Sharon Carter responded.
“Same as well as potential alien superweapons. The boss thought Sebastian would help and freed him. I’m watching to make sure he doesn’t kill anyone else. You might want to get a team at the church on…”

“Already done. Trip is there.” Phil responded.

“I’m going to have to apologize for murdering his ex to maintain cover. Although he was embezzling from the elderly, so I don’t feel that bad.”

“I think he will be happy you’re alive long enough to tell him about it. Although maybe leave out the last part.” Carter responded.

“Have you heard anything regarding List or Trista?” Phil interrupted, knowing they had limited time. Who knows if the guy in the suit will wake up quickly? Okay, Sharon just iced the man. He knew he liked her for a reason.

“List is with his soon-to-be ex-son-in-law at what is being referred to as the twins’ facility. I don’t have a location. No, he doesn’t know that another Hydra head kidnapped his daughter. No one wants to tell him. Hydra agents do have some self-preservation skills.” 33 remarked. Considering Garrett was only a Hydra member to save himself, Phil isn’t that surprised that not everyone is a true believer ready to die for the cause.

“Of course. We think we know where the twin facility is. Working on it.” The raid should have been at dawn, which if he were doing the time difference correctly would be very soon if it hadn’t already happened.

“But you won’t find Natalie there. She is with my boss.”

“Are you certain?” Phil asked.

“First of all, he absolutely hates her and her husband because he feels like he took his place in Hydra. Second, he hasn’t been seen since November 1, and I’m here on this wild goose chase. I don’t think he completely trusts me, which is why I’m not with him at what the other operatives refer to as Ice Base Zebra.”

“Research facility?” Carter asked.
“Yes, but I don’t know anything else.”

That was okay because, in Phil’s head, he was already thinking of the 15 different bases or possible Hydra strongholds that they identified that could be easily and non-ironically referred to as Ice Base Zebra. Of course, SHIELD did have a prison called the Fridge, and it was in the middle of the Caribbean so that might not necessarily be accurate, but it was a start.

Of course, that also meant that somebody was going to have to talk to Ward and Natasha was overseas. Dammit.

“19 has been compromised. Hydra knows who her husband is. They know he’s the one who kept the Ward kid safe. Someone isn’t happy, and I don’t think she can stay under any longer.” 33’s words interrupted his thoughts.

“They are divorced, and they know that they are divorced,” Phil remarked.

“There’s a video file of them having sex three days ago.”

“Not even surprised,” Phil mumbles under his breath, and Carter just rolls her eyes.

“The live video feed will come back online in 60 seconds. Please be prepared.” Jarvis remarked.

“How are we doing this?” Carter asked, getting back into a fighting stance.

“I escape, and you arrest my boss’s, right-hand man. Maybe he knows were Ice Base Zebra is, since his boss kidnapped Trista.” 33 answered as she got back into position herself.

“Or you could come with us.” Phil offered.

“Bobbi’s compromised. You need me. I’ll make contact again when I can.”
“Back in 15 seconds.” The AI chirped.

“Secure Mr. Bakshi and don’t transmit anything said here electronically.” 33 said just as the feed went live again and she knocked out Sharon and ran away just in time to avoid the agents that flooded the alley. He’s only 35% sure they’re part of the CIA task force that’s supposed to be taking over SHIELD’s jurisdiction.

“Really, what took you so long?” Phil will regret saying that when he is handcuffed 30 seconds later.

XXX

J Simmons: Hey, I’m not sure when I’m going to be able to text, but we’re leaving soon for you know where.

J Simmons: No one could sleep. So, we’re heading out even earlier than initially planned. I’ve been on dozens of raids over the last two months, so I shouldn’t be afraid, but something feels different. I don’t know what.

J Simmons: Maybe it’s because May is not here. Black Widow is a legend who made me want to go into the field, but I’m used to May.

J Simmons: Your aunt is also here, but I don’t know how I feel about her yet. She talks a lot with your dad, but rarely to anyone else.

J Simmons: Actually, they fight quite a bit, and I think your father is on better terms with Natasha than her, which I didn't know was entirely possible after the last few months.

J Simmons: Of course, they’ve known each other since they were children and sibling relationships are complicated.

J Simmons: Mine is especially complicated because of the divorce. I’m going to have to visit soon. They’re not handling the divorce well or the new half-sibling.

J Simmons: I think I’m dealing with it as best as I can. The counseling and the fact I’m not allowed
to drink while on Avenger duty is also helping. Apparently, suppressing all my emotions is unhelpful, and I’m working on that.

J Simmons: Maybe I’m handling it better because I wasn’t shocked. I knew that things were terrible. Most of that’s because your dad told me about his dalliances at a clean energy conference, but even before then, I knew something wasn’t quite right. I wasn’t blindsided like everyone else.

J Simmons: Of course, maybe my parents getting divorced is relatively simple to handle compared to everything else in my life. I’m chasing down Hydra with the Avengers.

J Simmons: Sorry for all the text messages. You’re probably busy. I’ll let you know how the raid goes although it may be a little while before I text again. You should be used to that because we’ve been doing this a lot over the last two months, ranting and all.

F Stark: Sorry, I was in the lab working with Lincoln, and I left my phone in my room. You should visit your siblings after this is all done. It's not like you don't have the vacation time. Maybe if the situation with Hydra is resolved soon, I can go with you.

J Simmons: Oh, good you messaged before blackout mode begins. That depends on your overprotective father and if this goes well and I’m not sure if it will go well. As I mentioned, nobody slept last night.

F Stark: I’m not surprised. How is my dad?

J Simmons: Nervous to the point I’m pretty sure your future stepdad did something to calm him down that I don’t think we want to discuss but was quite loud.

F Stark: We agreed last month that we wouldn’t talk about that.

J Simmons: This is why I did not provide details. You should write to him after you get done with me. At least say hi before Jarvis starts holding all our text messages.

F Stark: I will text him right now.
J Simmons: Okay. I’ll let you do that.

J Simmons: Although, please know that I really would want you to come with me to Sheffield to help me deal with my family issues. I don’t want to deal with that alone.

J Simmons: I do not want to have dinner with my father and the mother of my future half-sibling alone, especially when I’m trying not to drink. Of course, by the time things wrap up said sibling will probably be born and even a toddler because this is taking so long.

F Stark: I think we might be near the end, and therefore, you can be in time for the birth of your new sibling.

J Simmons: I can’t believe we both have siblings young enough to be our children.

J Simmons: Children that we would’ve had with separate people because we’re not together. Unfortunately, too much has happened. I’m sorry about taking a job with your father even though we didn’t know that he was your father at the time. I’ve been horrible and not dealing with anything, and it just got worse with the family stuff, and that’s not counting Hydra.

F Stark: It’s not entirely outside the realm of possibilities. Just stay safe so you can come back and we can figure it all out.

J Simmons: Okay.

F Stark: Although maybe talk to Sam. He is functioning as your counselor, right?

Jarvis: All Avengers have entered blackout mode. However, I will pass your greetings on to your father.

F Stark: You mean Friday will?

Jarvis: Although I’m not running his suit, he is speaking to me because I am aiding in the search for your aunt, Natalie.
F Stark: At least, that’s progress.

XXXX

Dad: Got your message from the AI which I’m only speaking to because I really want to find your aunt. BTW, we are getting ready to confront your uncle and the asshole who stole your aunt and traumatized your grandmother.

F Stark: I thought you were already in communications blackout mode. Jarvis didn’t deliver my last message to Simmons.

Dad: That is totally my boyfriend, but I did get your message, so I thought I would talk to you until the actual storming of the castle portion of my morning. If I’m going to walk into a trap, I at least would like to hang out with my son before then. Do you have time?

F Stark: Yes. I’m done working on what I was working on.

Dad: Have you had a chance to hang out with itty-bitty Tony and Morgan?

F Stark: Antonio and Madison.

Dad: I like Morgan better. Morgan May-Rogers. Antonio is too big of a name for that cute baby. He will be itty-bitty Tony for at least the next 18 years.

F Stark: As a former Leopold Fitz, I think Madison May-Rogers is a superior name.

Dad: I assume this is why you switch your name to L. Fitz Stark. Although you should have kept the James. Your uncle James is very sad you don’t share the same name anymore.

F Stark: I did not want to keep the same name as the Hydra assassin that killed my grandparents [message not sent]
F Stark: I didn’t want to have four names.

Dad: Understandable. Regardless keep an eye on the twins. May is a ninja, and Isabel scares me, but two babies are overwhelming. Besides, they spit up everywhere.

F Stark: You’re nervous. Worried this is going to go badly?

Dad: I know it’s going to go badly, but in what way. What if your aunt is there, but already dead? Or what if she’s not there and the brother-in-law has no idea where she is. Why are we even here?

F Stark: Because you need to find the murder weapon.

Dad: Which is there.

F Stark: Trap?

Dad: This is definitely a trap.

Dad: In case this is a trap I probably should ask if you are okay with your new sibling or siblings. I mean if I end up marrying Steve, Madison will be like a stepsister. My therapist would probably say this is an inconvenient time to bring this up, but I ramble when I think I’m going to be walking into a trap in 15 minutes.

F Stark: Are you planning to marry Steve?

Dad: Would you be okay if I married Steve?

F Stark: Yes.

Dad: Are you mad at me for these surprise siblings? We haven't really had time to talk about the situation yet.
F Stark: I’m not mad. I have been working with Lincoln. We’re trying to make sure there’s nothing wrong with the twins.

Dad: That’s so sweet. So, are you trying to hook up with the doctor? Stephanie was trying to set him up with Trip. Although, if you’re interested, I can tell her to back off.

Dad: Although I thought something was going on with you and Simmons. Maybe you’re going for a full-blown love triangle.

F Stark: Things have been better with Simmons. We have been writing over the last few weeks while she’s been with you. Besides, Mack has been avoiding me lately.

Dad: It’s probably Trista. I know everybody’s friends, and this is hard.

F Stark: I think it’s something else, but he hasn’t been open to sharing with me lately.

Dad: Then, you need to make him share. Okay, Stevie Bear says I really must concentrate now. I’ll let you know if I get to punch out your uncle.

Dad: PS keep an eye on your cousin. Something’s not right with him.

Xxx

Somewhere in the back of Tony's mind, he thought all of this was way too easy. Okay for a moment, he may have had a vision of dead children and Steve laying broken and dying in front of him, and by broken he means the shield cracked in half. Before he could figure out what he was seeing, Lady Sif was knocking out the red one with Point Break dealing with that Quicksilver kid.

After that Hydra wasn’t putting up much of a fight, which was odd because over the last two months, anytime they raided a base they would end up dealing with at least 2 dozen soldiers ready to die for the cause and at least another dozen there just for the money.

Finding the brother-in-law with Coulson’s murder weapon without even breaking a sweat seemed too easy. Friday didn't have to do the heavy lifting to find the location. The kidnapper was running
away because of course, he was a dirty coward, but Wings and Stevie Bear can deal with that asshole. Besides, there was a 50-50 chance that Tony would just kill him, and they need him alive to find Natalie.

“You may not know me…” Tony said with repulsors at the ready.

“Everyone knows you.”

“But it’s different with us, we are family despite my invitation getting lost in the mail. I guess that happens when your sister gets kidnapped by Hydra and brainwashed into your little club. Of course, the fact that she was dragged out of her house Friday night by Hydra and Carl "Crusher" Creel pretty much proves that the indoctrination didn’t work that well.” Tony points the repulsor right at the man’s head. “I really would like to know where the fuck she is right now?”

Now Tony was expecting to get attacked especially because he was holding the Coulson murder weapon. Instead, he was surrendering.

What the fuck???

“What do you mean Creel took Natalie? What about Alex?” Of course, before he could answer Natasha iced the man.

“We were having a conversation.” Tony looked at Natasha, annoyed.

“Which we can have in an interrogation room after we remove his cyanide pill.”

“Point.”

Xxx

Phil: Hey, sorry I didn't check-in, but we kind of got detained by the CIA for a couple of hours.

May: You got picked up by the CIA? I would call to yell at you, but I have a baby on my lap that may fall asleep soon.
Phil: No point in waking up the babies. We’re out now. Carter took care of it.

May: Really, because I remember her being in FBI custody last weekend.

Phil: I may have name-dropped your mom. You're going to have to visit soon.

May: You’re coming with me, and we might bring the twins if Isabel agrees.

May: She says yes because the twins should have one grandmother.

Phil: Yes, she is less likely to kill me that way. We will do it when I get back.

May: When will you be getting back?

Phil: And we should be back to base tomorrow after we finish interrogating Bakshi.

May: You can’t bring him here?

Phil: Price and Ross, the one that’s not an asshole, said no and I don’t want to be arrested by the CIA for real. They’re letting us speak to him to help us with the private kidnapping investigation of Natasha Stark.

Phil: We just need to remove the cyanide pills first.

May: So that is the story that you’re going with?

Phil: Actually, that's a story that Marcy came up with. Price already knew something because Marcy set up an active kidnapping investigation. It's plausible that after Tony Stark discovered his older sister did not die but was kidnapped, he hired a few former secret agents to find her. We were just in Miami following a lead.
May: Does anyone believe that?

Phil: Possibly Ross, maybe. Ross already knows Carter from the search for Sergeant Barnes and their previous work together. Price not at all. I think she has her own reasons for going along with it.

Phil: We have Sebastian too.

May: The CIA is keeping him as well?

Phil: Yes, because he tried to kill a monk. Or maybe that’s the local police. They are still working out jurisdiction issues.

May: Of course.

Phil: Regardless, I’m not going to get back in time to pick up Barbara from soccer practice.

May mumbles several Mandarin curse words under her breath as she read Phil’s message loud enough to make Madison cried. She quickly put the Stark pad down and started rocking the child.

“Okay, that did not sound good,” Isabel said, walking over with Antonio in her arms.

“Bobbi’s cover has been blown,” May tells the woman.

“Does she need extraction?”

“I think so. But let me check.” She tried to grab the Stark pad again, but Madison would not let her. So, it was time to use the AI. “Jarvis, can you please type to Phil' And she can't wait or take the bus?”
“Of course, Agent May. I will also read his reply when it arrives.”

“Thank you.”

“At least you have an AI that will send text messages when the babies are too cranky.”

“It does come in handy.”

“Agent Coulson has responded, and I quote ‘I think someone needs to pick her up. There have been a couple incidents in the field. I don’t want anything to happen to her. Lance would be devastated.’”

“That would mean extraction,” Isabel remarked.

"Tell Phil, 'I would send him, but he doesn’t drive.' Also, Jarvis, what agents are available that can fly a Quinjet?"

“You should just go yourself,” Isabel tells her.

“You are the most qualified. Agent Davis is just beginning his flight training. Everyone else is in the field.” Jarvis replied.

“Of course.”

“Director Coulson replied and said, ‘I think you should go. It will take you less than an hour to get to Bethesda. I am sure Dr. Campbell can babysit. Mack is there as well, isn’t he? He can help’.”

“Tell Phil that he is in the building, but avoiding the nursery.” When they’re not in a crisis, she’s going to ask him about that because if she did not know that these two babies were her biological children, she might have done the same. After the miscarriage, she did similarly. "Also tell Phil 'We need more people’.” She mumbled, trying to put Madison in her bassinet only for there to be more screaming.

“He says that he will step up recruiting, once things have settled,” Jarvis replied.
“Which we will never be,” May mumbled under breath.

“Get Bobbi. I’ll be okay. Lincoln has lightning powers and don’t worry about Mack. He’ll come around eventually, or I’ll have Dr. Suarez talk to him. I should probably do that anyway.” Isabel argued.

“Madison won’t stop screaming.”

“May I suggest calling in Master Fitz. It may be beneficial for him to bond with his younger brother.” Jarvis suggested.

“They’re both his siblings. He can’t claim one without the other.” Isabell remarked.

“Especially if his father marries Steve,” May mumbled under her breath.

“It’s an idea. Can you please call Fitz in?” Isabel answered.

“Of course, Ms. Hand.” The AI responded.

Xxx

Mack has been having a hard couple of weeks. The arrival of the twins shouldn’t have bothered him. He lost Hope a long time ago. He made peace with it. So, the sight of Stark getting an entire Babies R Us delivered to the Playground shouldn’t bother him. Yet he won’t go anywhere near the “nursery wing.”

Maybe it wasn’t just the twins, but also Alana being on base. A child that young shouldn't be at the Playground, but her only parent was now dead, killed by Hydra. The only parent that actually cared about her. He was pissed about Christopher Ward throwing his daughter away like he did. How could he do that when Mack would do anything to have Hope with him? Even though Alana looks nothing like what Hope would have looked like if she survived, his heart still hurt. He was avoiding the young girl as well.
He should talk to somebody. He knows that he should, but there really wasn’t anybody he could talk to at the Playground now except for possibly Isabel, and this wasn’t a conversation she needed right now. Unfortunately, Trip and his mom were in Miami, and Trista was who knows where.

Fitz would’ve been an option, but he has brand new siblings, and when he tried to tell him a few days ago he found Simmons sleeping on top of him on the couch in his room and Mack needs a few days to process that. He’s not surprised. He felt things staying in more of a friendship direction anyway. As Bobbi would’ve said, it’s probably not a good idea to date someone that he’s closer in age to their father than him. She made a big deal about the age difference between him and Trip, and it’s worse with Fitz. If he’s honest to himself, being so much older than Trip did cause some problems, which is why they ultimately didn’t work out.

Also, he doesn’t want to freak Fitz out because his new siblings are only days old, and he doesn’t want the man to think about the worst-case scenario. So that leaves him with nobody, but himself to deal with this. Yes, he could go to Dr. Suarez, but he’s afraid to.

In the past, he would talk to Bobbi, but Bobbi was a traitor, and he doesn’t want to think about her. Even if he’s pretty sure Hunter will bring it up tonight. Mack is questioning why he is at the bar above the base with Hunter right now, but he needs something.

“So, are we drowning our sorrows in jalapeño poppers because Stark Junior chose the BFF?” Hunter remarks, already working on a scotch because it’s Hunter.

“No, we’re up here because nobody downstairs can actually cook, but I don’t have the energy for it,” Mack remarked.

“I don’t know about Davis yet, but anybody’s cooking is better than Idaho’s. I lost a tooth.” He is sure both wanted to say better than Bobbi but didn’t. Neither will talk about how they knew each other before joining New Shield.

“Okay, I’m bad at the indirect interrogation method, so I am just going to say it. Do you need to talk about Hope?” Hunter asked.

“I hoped that this dinner would be better than this, but at least the food is good.” He purposely misdirected. He doesn’t want to have this conversation. At all.
“I’m talking about your Hope. Bobbi told me to be on the lookout in April. Which seemed weird at the time because she was going with you on holiday in April but… Now that I see you in near tears every time you see Alana or the twins, I am piecing it together. I’m bloody awful at consoling and sharing, but I’m willing to try.”

“She also abandoned us for Hydra, so I don’t want to talk about it or her.” He’s annoyed that Bobbi warned him before leaving. People who join Hydra don’t care about the people left behind.

“This is it what it seems,” Hunter remarked.

“It is exactly what it seems. I’m fine.” Mack said before taking another jalapeno popper. If he’s eating, he doesn’t need to talk.

“You are not fine. You leave the common room anytime Alana is there. I’m pretty sure you agreed to have dinner with me up here, so you didn’t have to see uncle Tim chop up her chicken strips.”

“It’s usually you,” Mack remarked.

“Because I’ve been taking care of her for the last couple of months and I am the only continuity that she has left, but I feel like you need a moment and it’s either me or…”

Of course, at that moment, May walked into the bar.

“Getting more snacks for the baby’s mama?” Hunter asked, turning his attention to May.

“We need to leave now,” May ordered.

“I was just going to have another…”

“19 needs pick up from Bethesda.”

“She’s been made?” Hunter asked. Mack wasn’t entirely sure who he was referring to. 19 used to be Bobbi’s code number. He doesn’t know who has it now.
"Possibly."

"Fuck! Good thing I only drank half a shot." Hunter said, getting up from the table. He has never seen the man move so fast. Mack is starting to wonder if number 19 was reassigned. Then he remembered Hunter’s words from earlier.

“You said the Bobbi situation wasn’t what it seems,” Mack said turning to Hunter.

“You can brief McKenzie on the Quinjet.” He is going to take that as a yes, Bobbi is undercover at Hydra. Which was confirmed when he arrived on the Quinjet. Apparently, Hunter was her handler. Mack is very disappointed that no one trusted him enough to know the truth.

Xxxxx

As much as he likes spending time with the others in the lab, Lincoln was glad to be there alone right now. Okay, Jarvis and Friday were helping him look for Inhuman genetic markers, but he feels like that still counts as being alone. At least long enough to look at the results. He knows that the information will be passed on to Stark soon enough, but he at least wanted to look at everything in private first.

He’s not checking everyone just the twins and their family members along with Skye. They may not necessarily be Inhuman, but be like his parents and be carriers of the gene. If the test comes back positive in Skye’s case, he’s going to have to talk to her about contacting Gordon and getting her to Afterlife to meet her possible biological mother.

A part of him hopes that the test is not positive because that’s going to be messy. He knows that he’s considered a traitor now for being here. Lincoln is sure Skye being an agent would be viewed similarly. The people of Afterlife have been terrified of SHIELD for a long time and the revelations of April just made it worse.

However, he knows now that whatever he was told about the Bahrain incident wasn’t the truth because he has seen Agent May with Madison and Antonio. He’s seeing how far Stephanie will go to protect her son from Hydra. He has seen the same in Tony and Isabel. They wouldn’t be here if this place were everything Afterlife told him it was, but not everybody was as open-minded as Lincoln was and the elder was the worst of all. He will know momentarily if he will have to deal with all of that.
“What are the results?” He asked Jarvis because he knew that the AI wouldn’t tell Skye right away. Friday was dealing with some conflicting orders.

“As suspected Agent Skye Carter does have the Inhuman gene and would most likely develop gifts if exposed,” Jarvis responded, and Lincoln lets go of a long breath. He also realizes he’s going to have a very long conversation with Skye when she gets back. She knew he was going to test her, but now they would have to decide what to do next together.

“I’m not surprised. The twins?” Lincoln asked the AI.

“Antonio is Inhuman. However, Madison is only a carrier of the gene.” This result doesn’t entirely surprise them. He knows of several who have siblings who are not Inhuman. Also, Antonio has an extra parent.

“Anything else?” He asked Jarvis.

“Their bodies are producing the super-soldier antibody at a rate of only 10% less than Steve Rogers himself.”

Lincoln is not surprised that the Inhuman body reacts to the antibody differently than the human body. He wonders if an Inhuman with the super-soldier serum in their system can achieve transformation without Terragenesis. It’s happened a few times due to exposure to a different catalyst, but he’ll have to keep an eye on both twins even if Madison is just a carrier. Developing powers young is dangerous. Hopefully, this just means a healthy immune system and enhanced muscle development.

“Which one of the twins’ parents have the genetic markers for being a carrier?” Lincoln asked.

“Mr. Stark and Mr. Rogers.” This doesn’t surprise him. 90% of the time, both parents need to be carriers to create an Inhuman although he wondered if the super-soldier serum could’ve changed things. Now thinking about it, it makes sense that Steve Rogers was the only successful super-soldier. He didn’t have enough Inhuman DNA to trigger transformation via Terragenesis, but maybe enough to survive a different catalyst.

“Anyone else?”

“Stephanie Triplett is a carrier along with her two sisters on her father’s side. Her son is also a carrier, but not Inhuman. Fitz is also a carrier.”
“You don’t happen to have a sample of Howard Stark or Peggy Carter’s DNA on file?” He asked.

“Unfortunately, no. However, should I run an analysis on Natalie List?”

“And Trista, just to be safe.” Because maybe there’s another reason why both were kidnapped. Maybe Hydra knows how to look for Inhuman genetic markers pre-transformation.

Of course, it was at that moment that the base went dark and Alex von Strucker List in him walked into his lab with a gun in his hand. A gun that was pointed at little Alana’s head.

Fuck!

“You’re going to free Grant Ward for me, and then you’re going to help me get that 084.”

To be continued
Chapter 38: Hydra in the Henhouse

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everybody who read or reviewed the last conversation. You are all fabulous.
More action to be had.
Warning: This chapter is violent.

Leo Fitz always assumed he would be an only child, and considering that his stepfather was an absolute monster, he was okay with that. He wouldn’t want another kid to deal with Alistair even if it meant having a cure for Leo’s childhood loneliness. After Alistair left, his mom was too broken to meet someone else. She didn’t want to burden anyone else with her Hydra ties. Once he found out Alastair wasn’t his biological father that didn’t change because his biological dad was dating Captain America and the arc reactor had its own consequences.

And yet here he was helping Isabel give his baby brother a sponge bath because May, Hunter, and Mack had to run a quick mission. (And Dr. Suarez said that Tim could speak to his brother with her monitoring remotely and Lincoln supervising). The umbilical cord was still healing for both twins as well. So, no baby tub right now.

"I think you're a natural," Isabel remarked, holding Madison. Thankfully, the newborn wasn't screaming now. Leo was almost shocked. She’s been screaming her head off since May left.

"I am surprised my hands are not shaking," Fitz remarked as he ran the washcloth gently over his little brother.

“You’re getting better. Rehab is going well. Agent May mentioned something about you doing firing range training soon.”

“Because Trista was good at her job.” What he doesn’t say is he’s doing weapons training again because Trista is missing, and Hydra has already tried to kidnap him more than once in the last few months. He had to be ready to fight back. On his person, Fitz currently had three knockout bombs, an ICER, and a regular revolver. His father told him that even when he was on the base, he should stay prepared. The only reason why he was not able to call on the armor was they were either with his father now or still in New York. After having a so-called friend stab him in the back, Fitz knew to stay on guard.

"I've really wish she was here right now," Fitz says instead. Over the last few months, he and Trista have become great friends. Trista understood who he was now. Fitz was starting to rebuild with Simmons. It was helping that she was beginning to talk about what she was thinking instead of repressing everything trying to be perfectly English thanks to her sessions with Sam, but they weren’t entirely back to where they were before the Gulf of Mexico, and Fitz is not sure they will. That’s okay because Fitz realizes that they’re building a different type of relationship this time around.

His relationship with Trista was very different. He could tell her anything, and there would be no judgment. He could talk to Trista about the babies. About how he’s worried his dad is going to prefer them because they’re all sweet and little. He could speak to her about Mack avoiding him and not knowing why. He misses the man’s friendship.
Fitz could tell her about his apprehension of having Captain America as his stepdad. He likes Steve, he really does, but it feels like his dad was building a new family, and he's not sure he has a place in it. Then there’s the fact Fitz hasn't had the best experiences with stepfathers. Fitz doubts Captain America will secretly turn out to be Hydra, but that doesn’t mean that Steve won’t turn out to be nowhere near as lovely as he appears on the surface. He wants to say all the stuff to Trista, but she wasn't there and that hurt.

"I wish Trista were here as well," Isabel remarked. “I’ve known her for forever. She was at my wedding. I've been kidnapped by Hydra, and it is not a pleasant experience.” And they’re all hoping that she was just kidnapped not murdered. The fact that they have yet to find the body makes them almost hopeful.

“Dad will find her,” Leo remarked as he gently started to towel baby Antonio dry.

“I think your father is stubborn enough to find her.” What was left unsaid was that they both hoped Tony would find her before Hydra destroyed her one way or another.

“You know you can spend time with Antonio anytime you want, Madison too. They need you as their big brother.” Isabel told him as she started to wash Madison.

“Dad keeps calling her Morgan,” Fitz remarked as he placed the onesie over Antonio's head. The baby was quite fussy about it.

“If your father wants a baby Morgan, he’s just going to have to arrange for another gestational carrier. He can work it out with his sister once we get her back too.” Isabel told him.

“Maybe.” Fitz wasn’t so sure. He remembered his father’s apprehension earlier. The man was concerned, and if he was concerned, so was Leo. This whole situation felt like a trap, but a trap for who?

“I’m trying to be more optimistic. Although in the meantime, it’s good to have help for bath time from their big brother.” He couldn’t imagine trying to do both at the same time by himself. Antonio was screaming right now.

“Dad is afraid that once this is all over, you will leave, and he’ll never see the babies again. Or at least that’s what May said.” Because she has the same fear. Just because he hasn’t really talked to his dad about the babies doesn’t mean that he hasn’t spoken with May about it. Maybe that’s because Fitz has known May longer and it’s easier to talk to her. It also helps that she’s here. They talked a little about it before she left to bring their Hydra informant back to base.

“And I am afraid that once we no longer must worry about Hydra kidnapping you or your siblings, I will be dealing with an army of Stark lawyers taking them away.

“I don’t think —think that will happen," Fitz said just as the base went dark.

“Okay, that's not good. Not at all.” Fitz agreed with her words.

“It’s an old building. We could be having trouble with the power generators. Jarvis are you still there?” Fitz said, opening his phone.

“Thankfully, yes. I am an isolated system not connected to the Playground, so the attackers were not able to take me off-line. However, the electrical system was disabled.”

“See not just a power glitch.” She said quickly getting Madison into a diaper and a onesie. Leo had no idea that you can dress a baby that quickly. “Grab the baby bag and the two harnesses. Put one in
back and one in front. Are you armed?” Isabel asked.

“Yes.” He pulled back his shirt slightly to show her the hilts of an ICER.

“Good. You protect the babies; I will protect you. Our main goal is to get the babies out of here. No matter what. Do you understand?” He knew what she was really asking. Was he willing to die to keep his siblings safe?

“Yes. Protect the babies no matter what.”

Lincoln Campbell was not an idiot. He did stupid things sometimes like picking up drinking as a coping mechanism when he knew full well, both of his parents were alcoholics. However, Lincoln knew this moment was not the time to try to be a hero. Yes, he could use his powers to knock Alex out before he could pull the trigger, but he couldn't run the risk of that not working and him shooting Alana anyway.

Also, even if he did incapacitate Alex, Lincoln wouldn't be sure of what was going on beyond the doors. He knew Hydra was vast, especially after his last run-in with them. Lincoln knew they were good at infiltration and who knew how many of their forces were here waiting outside the door.

Therefore, it was in Lincoln’s best interest to think things through before acting. What advantages did he have in the situation? Alex had no idea he had powers. Therefore, he couldn’t risk using them right now, but if he could get Alana away, then he could take Alex out easily. The first thing Lincoln need to do was get Alana away from Alex without using his powers.

Then Lincoln remembered that Alex wanted him to free Ward. Mentally, Lincoln was snorting. Grant Ward may be an asshole, but Lincoln doesn't think he's going to cooperate with the man holding his niece hostage. Grant Ward might pretend to, but only long enough to get Alana to safety. Of course, Alex had no idea who Alana was to Ward. That's when Lincoln realized he had another advantage. If Alex wanted him to free Grant Ward, Lincoln would free Grant Ward. There is one thing he needed to know first.

"Alana, where’s your Uncle Tim?” Lincoln asked because if Tim was dead, Alex was a dead man walking. Grant Ward would eviscerate the man for killing his brother. Alana started crying harder, which made Lincoln fear the worst.

20 minutes earlier
Ward was shocked when his brother showed up in his room alone.

“I’m surprised they let you in here unaccompanied again. Where’s everyone’s favorite doctor?” Ward asked his brother.

“In his lab. I’m sure he’ll join us shortly, as soon as he checks his email.” Thomas remarked.

“I'm sure,” Ward replied dryly. "So why are you here?"

"If a Hydra operative referred to an outpost as Ice Base Zebra, which Hydra outpost would they be talking about?”

“I have no idea.” He really didn’t. Garrett rarely shared details about bases with him.

"Really or are you just refusing to answer?” Thomas asked, annoyed.
“I’m not going to lie to you.”

“You have been lying to me my entire life, so why stop now,” Thomas remarked bitterly.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Yes, you have.” Thomas’s words were filled with anger. “It was Christian that made you beat the shit out of me? It was Christian that made you toss me in that well? You had no choice, right? It was never your fault for just going along with it. That was complete bull shit. You always had a choice. You chose not to exercise it.”

“I was protecting you. It would’ve been worse if I didn’t go along with it.” Ward argued.

“By worse, you mean it would have been worse for you. Everything you did was about protecting yourself. Everybody in our family are monsters you included. Maybe you’re worse because you can never acknowledge who you were.”

“I am well aware I’m not a good person.”

“But you never acknowledge things are the way they are because of the choices you made. It’s always someone else’s fault. You refuse to take responsibility for anything,” Thomas told him.

“You can leave now.” He didn’t want to hear this. Maybe because deep down, he knew there was more truth to it than he ever wanted to acknowledge.

“I don’t think I will. Alana has a babysitter. There are a lot of things I need to say to you, and I’m not sure if I will ever have the chance again.”

"There is nothing left to say,” Ward remarked as he laid back down on his cot not even bothering to look at his brother.

“I don’t believe you’re completely lost. No one is, but you must want to change. The first step in changing is accepting culpability for what you did. I’m not sure if you can or even want to.”

“I’m pretty sure mom is,” Ward remarked.

“Maybe, but you don't have to be her, you can make amends. You cannot expect people to just forgive you because you come from a screwed-up family. You have to put in the work.”

“How do I do that, by telling you everything I know about Hydra? Is that going to make up for all the things I did? Do you have any idea how many people I’ve killed? There is no coming back from that. There is no redemption.” Ward told his brother angrily.

“Not an exact number, but I’m sure it’s high. I had lunch with the woman that you widowed while she was pregnant with their kids. She saved your life after one of your suicide attempts.” Thomas told him.

“She shouldn’t have. Death is my only redemption.” Thomas stayed quiet after that. Not another word was spoken until Dr. Campbell showed up.

“I see the doctor finally got the…” Ward started to say before he noticed that Dr. Campbell wasn’t alone. He knew that was Alex List. Ward has seen enough pictures of the head of Hydra’s son to recognize him.
instantly. Most have been in the last few days regarding his mother's kidnapping. Ward is not completely surprised to see him holding a gun on a small child, but he is furious that the little child is his niece.

“Free him, or I will kill her.” List ordered. That's when Ward realized that the man had no idea who Alana was to him. And he knew Alana was his niece not only because of what he was told earlier but because Thomas was yelling at the man. Although, Dr. Campbell telling him to play along in ASL as he did free him clinched it.

The first thing he did once he was free was knockout, Thomas. If he were unconscious, then List wouldn't bother to put a bullet through his head. Maybe Thomas was right that Ward tended to hurt people and claim it was for their own good, but when Alex turned over Alana to him and ordered him to find Fitz and the twins, he knew he made the right decision. He had to get them the hell away from Hydra.

“Don’t cry.” He told Alana partially because her crying would bring the attention of the other Hydra operatives obviously crawling through the base. If they weren't there yet, they would be coming to the Playground at any moment. They wouldn't send Alex in alone to get Tony Stark's son. Not that they had any common sense.

“You hurt uncle Tim.”

“Because the guy holding a gun would have done much worse. He’s just sleeping right now. Now can you tell me where Mr. Fitz is?” He asked, trying to sound this kind is possible.

“You’ll hurt him too.” the child argued just as Ward was attacked. He was shot once in the shoulder, not by a Shield agent on base, but Hydra. As he assumed, the Playground was under siege. Ward wasted no time fighting back.

“I didn’t think Hydra hurt their own?” Ward remarked now that he disarmed the agent, despite his injury. Thankfully it was just a graze. If he had body armor on, it wouldn’t have done any damage at all.

"You're a loose end. Hail Hydra.” Oh, he was one of those. He knew what needed to be done.

“Close your eyes,” Ward ordered Alana as he placed two bullets in the man’s head.

"Fuck Hydra!"

Xxxxx

Isabel is not shocked at all that Hydra found her. The safe space couldn’t last forever. She knew bringing Alex List here was the beginning of the end. Something wasn’t right with that kid.

She just knew it in her heart that he was responsible for the current situation. Jarvis just managed to get into the surveillance system and was directing them out. They passed several bodies on the way to the stairway to the other restaurant on top of the Playground. Even without the AI’s assistance, she knew better than to even try for the elevator to the bar. Jarvis confirmed that was how Hydra was infiltrating the base. But the other pathway was still a secret, and that's how they were going to get out.

They passed a few bodies on the way there and thankfully only one was a Shield agent. The amount of Hydra bodies concerned her. Were the twins really that important that they were sending this many people in? They were the children of Captain America and the Cavalry. Of course, they were that valuable. One of them being the son of Tony Stark was just a bonus. Leo being there was
probably another reason. She was sure they wanted him as well.

They were about 50 yards from the stairwell when of course they were attacked. Isabel should’ve expected it, things were going too well. Isabel got three shots off before being hit in the stomach. Getting shot hurts. Unlike childbirth, she doesn’t get a cute baby to hold afterward. She doesn’t have time to focus on the pain. She must keep fighting. She needed to protect Leo and her kids. Then get the fuck out of there.

However, before she can shoot again, the Hydra agent in front of her drops down to the ground. After being shot by that asshole who murdered her wife. Despite the pain and the blood, she points her gun at him only to notice the terrified six-year-old behind him.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” Ward tells her. She’s anything but reassured.

“I don’t believe you.” She hears Leo’s gun cock. “Why is Alana with you?”

“Because Alex thinks that I’m on his side, not realizing that he threatened to shoot my niece to get Lincoln to comply. I don’t work with people who try to kill the family members I don’t hate.” Ward tells them. “Alana, go to Mr. Fitz.”

“Of course, it’s Alex.” She called out, feeling faint. She knew she was losing way too much blood.

“Dad said to watch him.”

“I would love to chat, but we need to get out of here now.” His words are punctuated by shooting another Hydra soldier.

“Take the stairs.” She croaked out as Ward of all people tried to grab her. “Take the babies and get out of here. You don’t have time to bring me along.”

“They will find you, and they’ll kill you or worse. We can’t leave you here.” Leo argued.

“No, taking me will just slow you down. Protect the babies at all costs, no matter what, by whatever means necessary. You promised to do that.” She said, looking directly at Leo before turning her attention to Ward.

“You killed my wife. If you protect my children, maybe I will eventually forgive you.” Ward didn’t respond. Instead, he grabbed one of the weapons off one of the nearby bodies and pushed Alana and Fitz towards the door. Moments later, another Hydra operative came through the hallway. She managed to get two shots in before everything went black. Her final wish was that her children would be safe.

Xxxxx

Somewhere in the back of her mind, May felt that this extraction went a little too well. They weren't attacked during the rescue from the rooftop of the building in Bethesda. No need to fight their way out, just Bobby calmly waiting to be picked up. Something felt off.

“I see you brought Mack.” The now dark-haired Bobbi said as she took her seat in the Quinn jet.

“Yes, they brought me. Nice to know that you didn’t betray everyone.” Agent Mackenzie said bitterly. They knew he was furious at all of them. He argued with Hunter for most of the flight to Bethesda. Thankfully, it was a short flight.

“I took advantage of the circumstances. I had no idea that my rebound was Hydra.”
“But you had no trouble taking advantage of it,” Hunter mumbled under her breath.

“It kept you alive.”

“True, although I wish you would have texted me earlier so I could have been prepared. Maybe Alana would not be dealing with a dead aunt right now.”

“You can argue when we get back to the base.” Email from March.

“Incoming message from Dr. Suarez.” Friday interrupted. She was surprised since they went dark. Whatever it was was important.

“You need to get back to the base now.” The doctor said just before the screen switch to the video feed from Ward’s cell from 15 minutes earlier. She’s not surprised to see Tim in the cell although Campbell was supposed to be in there with him. Thankfully, moments later, he walked through the door with Alex List behind him. Who happened to be holding a gun to the head of a hysterical and crying six-year-old? Seconds later, the screen went blank.

“We’re headed back now,” Melinda told the doctor worried that it would be much too late.

xxx

Tony Stark was annoyed. Because Marcy was a CIA agent and he was just a billionaire in a suit of metal, the task force would not allow him to participate in the interrogation of the brother-in-law. The fact that he really wanted to question the man about his missing sister made it even less likely that he would be allowed to speak with him.

Instead, he watched Marcy and Natasha tear the man apart in front of him. Just because Black Widow was currently not a member of any intelligence agencies, did not mean the task force did not appreciate her skill set. She was being brutal enough right now that Tony was almost willing to forgive her for keeping Natalie a secret, almost.

"I don't know where my wife is or who took her. I haven't spoken to her since April. Although if you let me out, I can find out. I want Natalie back is much as you do. Possibly more."

“No. Because then we will never see you again and you have a lot to answer for, the least of which is human experimentation with alien artifacts. We’re still trying to figure out what you did to the twins."

Tony wondered which set of twins he was talking about. Probably the set in another holding room that Sam, Thor, and the task force interrogator were currently speaking to. First, Tony wasn't participating in that interrogation because of the little red witch mind fucked earlier. Second, the two apparently volunteered for the brother-in-law's experiments after one of Tony's bombs kill their parents. Three, because of that, Tony allowed “Quicksilver” to give him a black-eye. He didn't even try to raise the remote gauntlet. Therefore, Steve decided Tony wasn't going anywhere near the twins. Steve also decided he would be sticking close to Tony.

“We know who took Natalie," Natasha told the man on the other side of the two-way mirror.

“We do?” Tony looked to Steve for confirmation.

“One of the shield moles in Hydra made contact in Miami. They were also able to capture a high-level Hydra operative. He’s being asked related questions by the Miami group.”

"What does the name Daniel Whitehall mean to you?" The brother-in-law didn't react at all to Natasha’s question. Not even a twitch of his lips.
“Good, at least one of our teams was successful. Because I don't think this Marcy & Natasha team is going to get the brother-in-law to crack. He said more to me before Natasha ICEd him. I should be in there.” Tony tells his boyfriend.

“You can’t be,” Steve told him as he placed an arm around him. “You’re too emotionally invested in this, which could make you sloppy and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

It was at that moment that his cell phone chirped. Usually, Tony wouldn't look, but that was his “something terrible is happening” alert sound.

Jarvis: The Playground is currently being attacked. All power and security systems are off-line. I am presently trying to direct the children out to safety. Isabel is down, and the Mole is escorting the rest out of the compound. For the moment, he seems to be helping. His niece is with them. The Miami team will be alerted and redirected back to the Playground. May is already en-route. Will update.

“Fuck!” Tony is not surprised at all. He knew this was a trap because it was too easy to get the scepter back. Obviously, somebody was trying to get everyone away from the Playground because it’s easier to attack when it wasn't crawling with Avengers.

Tony was also regretting bringing the backup suit with him for Simmons to use instead of leaving it in DC, despite Leo being the one to suggest it. Unfortunately, this left his kid even more vulnerable. Tony knew he should’ve let the bots fabricate a new one without him there, but he wanted Leo to have more design input. That seems stupid right now. It’s going to take at least 40 minutes for one of the older models to get to Leo from New York.

"What's going on?” Steve asked, and Tony just passes the phone to his boyfriend. He also taps the side of his glasses.

“Friday sweetheart, can you open the door so I can speak to the brother-in-law.”

"No, Tony. You need to get to DC now and protect the kids. I don’t trust the Mole to have changed sides. I know you have tracking chips on all of them.” Isabel, being pragmatic and already experiencing Hydra hospitality, was okay with him implanting a micro transmitter into the near newborns. Leo volunteered for his. The Gulf of Mexico incident made him very willing.

“I will find out where Natalie is, and you will get to our children. I will follow behind as soon as I can.”

“Tell the ass hole that his son is at a base currently being attacked by Hydra, so any information he could provide would be greatly appreciated.”

“I will,” Steve said, kissing Tony goodbye. Within seconds Tony was making his way to his suit.

To be continued
Chapter 39: Ashes

May knew that they were going to get to the base way too late and unfortunately, she was right. She was unsurprised to see parts of it were actively burning by the time they got there. The fact that they had not been able to make contact with anybody on base was why May was unsurprised. She was worried. Her kids were there, and she wasn't there to protect them from the Hydra threat. They were probably the targets.

She was out of her seat as soon as she safely landed the plane, ready to go.

“Should we really be running into this?” May could hear Hunter say to his ex-wife.

“Probably not, but we don’t have a choice. Especially because Carl Creel and several other Hydra agents are walking into the hanger.” Agent Morris pointed out.

“Look, they have a hostage,” Hunter said, getting his gun ready. Thankfully, the hostage was Campbell and not Alana. May wondered why Campbell was now the hostage. She’s hoping that it wasn’t because the six-year-old was already dead. She couldn’t deal with another dead child, not now.

May also realized that Alex List wasn’t with them. She was hoping that was because he was the one who received a bullet to the head. Ward was also absent. That can mean many things and none of which was useful to the situation, at least on her side.

However, she didn't have time to think about that. Instead, she went straight for Creel.

She is not surprised to see Creel carrying the 084. That’s probably what this entire attack was about. Better the 084 then the twins. Though she was concerned, he wasn’t turning to stone like everyone
else who touched the weapon. She attacked, regardless, making sure to not touch the metal object.

Thankfully, while she was fighting Creel, Campbell was able to get the 084 away from him. Like Creel, it did not turn him to stone like everyone else. The 084 did turn the one that he attacked with it to stone right in front of her eyes.

May couldn’t think about that; instead, she needed to focus on her opponent, who could turn his hand to metal. He hit her arm hard enough that she wondered if he broke it. She kept fighting anyway. She had no choice. His current form made it impossible for him to be stopped with a bullet or an icer round. Fortunately, Hunter brought along one of the knockout grenades. That worked.

Unfortunately, that knocked her out as well. She did not have time for this. She needed to get to her kids now. That was her last thought as she went unconscious.

XXXX

Fitz wondered how his life got to this point. He was in the backseat with his siblings and a traumatized six-year-old as her uncle was at the wheel of a van that Jarvis took over. Unfortunately, said uncle was the former friend/lover/teammate who dumped him in the Gulf of New Mexico nearly killing him, putting him in a coma for three weeks. Not to mention the months of physical therapy to recover from the hypoxia. The super-soldier serum in his blood was probably the only reason why he was this functional. Fitz was amazed he was still able to shoot as well as he did when they were escaping the compound. He knows he killed at least one Hydra agent.

The thought made him nauseous, but he couldn’t think about that right now. They had to get the kids away from Hydra. Maybe if Fitz had not promised that he would do anything possible to protect his brother and sister, he wouldn’t be in this car with Grant Fucking Ward, but desperate times make for strange bedfellows. This situation definitely qualifies as desperate.

"You need to ditch the phone," Ward said from the front seat after they've been driving for at least 15 minutes. "They can use it to track us."

“That would be impossible, Hydra has yet to figure out the encryption system I use," Jarvis responded. Ward glared at the phone. “Your father is currently en route to your location, ETA 103 minutes.” Leo exhaled in relief. He only needed to spend a little more than an hour and a half alone with Ward.

“Hydra might be right behind him. Me taking the back roads won’t help when there is a giant blinking GPS light on top of us telling them exactly where we are.” Ward argued, trying to grab the
phone again. Leo responded by pointing a gun at him.

“I don’t trust you enough to be in a vehicle with you without an uplink to Jarvis. The phone stays.” Fitz said forcefully, weapon aimed right at Ward’s head.

“Fine, keep it if it makes you feel better. If we all end up dead because of it, that's on you.”

“We won't. Jarvis, where should we go?” Leo asked the AI.

“Uploading coordinates to the car’s GPS system.”

“New York?” Ward asked, reading the screen, and even Leo was surprised. He was sure that Jarvis would direct them to the secret Arlington base. But apparently, his father had a backup plan which meant leading them to the still under construction new Avenger HQ.

“An hour outside of the city. All public information about the location has it listed as an abandoned SI warehouse.”

“Safehouse?” Ward asked.

“Something like that,” Leo answered simply as he decided to turn his attention to Alana. She was still crying even though he now had an arm wrapped around her. Jarvis suggested that he stream a cartoon for the little girl. He agreed because it would get his mind off the ass hole in the front seat and the fact that Isabel was probably dead. He didn’t even want to think about the fact that less than two hours ago they were giving the babies a bath and now he's on the run, and he left her hurt at the Playground with Hydra running around. There is no way she’s still alive; Leo knows that deep down in his heart. Right now, he's just going to distract the six-year-old with something Disney.

Halfway through the episode, Ward interrupted his silent reflections.

“I’m…” Ward tried to speak, but Fitz was not going to let that happen.

“Don't even try to apologize. Don't. If I thought I could take care of two newborns and a six-year-old on my own while avoiding Hydra, I would shoot you in the head and leave you on the side of the
road.” Fitz replied in perfect French. He is surprised that he's not stuttering. He knew Ward understood the language, and more importantly, Alana did not. The small child was traumatized enough after watching at least one person being murdered. Hopefully, she'll ignore him and keep watching the best of Kim Possible. “I may do that when my father arrives.” If his father arrives. The possibility that he might not is why Leo has yet to pull the trigger.

“I'm not trying to apologize,” Ward said defensively from the front seat. At least he had enough sense to reply in French.

"Good. I don't need an apology you don't even mean. I don't even think you're capable of true contrition. I don’t trust you at all.”

“You shouldn’t. I know I’m not a good person.”

"You are a horrible person. I'm sitting back here with the kids you helped make orphans. You killed their mother before they were even born. Ward, you also killed Eric and dumped me in the Gulf of Mexico. Your words mean nothing to me only your actions, and those have been horrible," Fitz told him, miraculously keeping his voice calm. Alana may not understand his words, but she can pick up on his tone. So could the babies for that matter and he just got his siblings to stop crying.

“I know,” Ward whispered. “Garrett would have done worse to you and Simmons if the two of you stayed on that plane. I was protecting you.”

“That's a lie, and you know it. Or maybe you don't because in your world you are the hero of this little narrative. You’re probably telling yourself that you punched out Tim to keep Alex from killing him.” Leo told him.

“His name is Thomas.”

“No, he changed it to Timothy after he left because he wanted nothing to do with you or the rest of your family. Apparently, he didn’t trust you enough to know that.”

“I’m well aware nobody trusts me.”

“I don’t even really want you driving. Part of me wonders if you’re going to lead us into a Hydra ambush.”
“I know you don’t trust me, but my niece is also in this car, and I’m not handing her over to Hydra. I know exactly what they’ll do to her, and I will not let that happen.” Ward said emphatically, and Leo didn’t believe a word of it.

“You left your brother unconscious in a base infiltrated by Hydra, so I don’t find your words credible.” Again, he kept his voice calm and only stuttered twice. Leo is convinced he stutters less in French than in English.

“In a locked room that they can’t access. It was Thomas-- Tim’s best chance of surviving.” Ward argued, and Leo wanted to punch him, but he only restrained himself because Ward was driving.

“I’m sure that’s going to go as well as your escape pod scheme. And don’t say that you thought it would float again.”

“Even if I wanted to lead you into a Hydra ambush, your AI that you somehow managed to upload into this random vehicle won’t let me. He’s already changed our route 3 times. I think we’re now going deeper into West Virginia instead of heading to New York.”

"I prefer you not to know about our destination. Mr. Stark agrees with me. His representative will be rendezvousing with you soon to take over.” Jarvis responded.

"Thank you," Leo said to the AI switching back to English.

“I am just trying to make amends here. I wouldn't be in this car otherwise." Ward whispered also using English again.

“I don’t even think you know what that word means. I don’t think it’s possible after everything you did.” He said, going back to French. Again, Alana doesn't need to understand this conversation.

“I am aware of that now.”

"That's a bloody miracle. I still don’t trust you.”
“You’ve said that before.”

“You had sex with me just to turn my biological material over to Hydra. I will kill you with my bare hands if they create-- if they-- I will kill you,” he stumbles over the words. Of course, his stammering comes back right now.

“I didn't. I wouldn't do that to you. I wouldn't do that to another child. Do you know what Garrett did to me? He manipulated me into thinking he was my only savior, then kidnapped me from juvenile hall, and left me in the woods alone for five years. He groomed me into his perfect soldier. Why would I let that happen to Alana or to any other child? Especially those that aren't even born yet.”

“I didn't think you would throw me in the Gulf of Mexico either, but you still did. I was the only one who believed that maybe you were more than another Hydra snake. I was wrong.”

“I was supposed to recruit you.” This doesn’t surprise him, not after Garrett’s offer at the hub during the uprising. It makes even more sense now that he knew his very existence could be traced back to Hydra. They literally made him.

“Of course, Garrett wanted me.”

“Not Garrett, Sitwell. Garrett didn’t know.”

“Is that why you slept with me?” Leo asked, wanting to know the truth.

“No. That was for me. I already decided that I wasn't going to let you get caught up with Hydra. No matter what, I wasn't going to let them get you. You’re too pure to become part of that.”

“Even if it meant throwing me in the Gulf of Mexico.”

“Even then.”

Fitz did not respond to that because their tires were shot out before he could.

Of course, it was bloody Hydra.
May was not surprised to find herself waking up on a gurney being prepared to be loaded into a Quinjet as several other agents were scurrying about. It was apparent to her that they were evacuating the base since Hydra already knew about it. The military was probably on the way as well despite Stark’s interference. She woke up to Campbell telling Hunter not to touch the 084 directly or as he referred to it, a diviner. She was going to ask about that once they were not in crisis mode.

“Don’t touch unless you want to become a stone statue like the Hydra agents over there.” Campbell chided, as he checked over her arm. May really hoped it wasn't broken.

“Or there’s a chance I could end up like the one in handcuffs. Why didn't you turn him to stone?”

“Can we please have this conversation later? I would like to be out of here before the military, or more Hydra agents show up.” Agent Mackenzie said being the voice of reason.

“I thought these things would knock you out for at least an hour, yet you were only out for 20 minutes,” Hunter remarked

“Because agent May has partial immunity. I don’t want to find out if Mr. Creel’s powers give him partial immunity, so can you please hurry up and get him in the cryo-chamber.” Campbell answered as she saw the cryo-chamber brought into the hangar.

”Like you,” Hunter remarked.

“What happened?” May asked.

“Hunter realized that the knockout bombs would work on Creel, but you were in the blast zone,” Mack answered.

“With the Hydra raid.” May corrected.

“I was working in the lab when Alex broke in there with Alana at gunpoint wanting me to free Grant...
Ward and get him the diviner. I managed to convince him to turn Alana over to Ward. Although somebody needs to go back to vault D to get him out. Ward left him in there…”

“You handed a six-year-old over to her Hydra loving uncle? What the fuck were you thinking?” Hunter yelled 30 seconds from punching Campbell. Actually, he was punching Campbell right now, and he was promptly shocked.

"Unlike you, I’ve sat on most of his interrogation sessions recently, and I’m sure he would protect Alana long enough for back up to arrive, which is already on the way.”

“How are you planning to do that?” Hunter asked, but May already knew.

“I know Alana has a subdermal tracking chip, just like the twins’ because I’m the one who put it in there.” That told her that Friday/Jarvis would know where her children are per the protocol Stark created.

“See if you can make contact with Friday or Jarvis," May said, handing her personal cell phone to Mack. “Find Alana, the twins, and Leo.”

“Will do,” Mac responded quickly.

“What happened next?” She asked, turning her attention back to Campbell.

“Now that Alex no longer had a hostage, I was planning to electrocute List unconscious after I secured the diviner.” May gave the doctor a dark look. “I was planning to turn him into stone and keep it away from Hydra. Unfortunately, Creel showed up and promptly knocked List out unconscious with his fist after an argument. They had him convinced that if he brought Hydra to us, he would get his mom back. Obviously, they lied.”

"If Hydra is good at anything, it's backstabbing. It was why it was so easy for Bobbi to be undercover there," Hunter mumbled to himself.

“I tried to electrocute Creel, and he turned himself to rubber. He also apparently has an immunity to the diviner. It makes sense that he is inhuman if the diviner did not cause him to turn to stone. Although I have never met him before, and I know most of the others. I also never heard of anyone having that power.” May is not surprised by Campbell’s words even if the term inhuman is foreign to
“Maybe it just took Creel a little longer,” Hunter said, pointing to Creel as the unconscious man turned to stone slowly.

“I still think we should throw him in the cryo-chamber for good measure. Creel could be faking it.”

“Good point,” Campbell replied.

“Jarvis is online, at least on your cell phone,” Mack tells her. "But he refuses to tell me anything about the kids' whereabouts. Stark through Friday told him not to." Mack gives her phone back to her.

“Where are my kids?” She asked the AI. She meant to say 'the kids' but 'my kids' came out instead.

“Madison, Antonio, Fitz, and Alana are being routed to a safe location in a white minivan with West Virginia plates. A suit is currently being routed to that location. ETA 21 minutes if they keep on their current path.”

“Okay, Isabel will keep them safe until a suit can get there.” And considering its Isabel, she’s almost positive the woman shot Ward in the head to get Alana away from him.

“Actually, Isabel is not with them. She was shot multiple times when trying to escape out of the emergency stairwell and told the others to leave her behind. I do not know of her current status.” The AI responded, and May was very concerned.

"Bobbi may know where she is," Hunter said, grabbing his com. “She’s going through the base looking for survivors and stragglers.

“Mockingbird, can you check the emergency escape stairwell on the west core door.”

“I’m already here. Three dead Hydra agents and one of ours. I think she’s Victoria’s wife.” May felt sick at the words.
“Is Grant Ward one of the other bodies?” Hunter asked, but it’s Jarvis that answered.

"Grant Ward is currently with Madison, Antonio, Fitz, and Alana. I am monitoring his every move remotely.” At those words, May started to make her way up from the gurney. She was going to get in that Quinjet and fly to her children. She was not going to leave them alone with Grant Ward of all people.

Unfortunately, at that moment a helicopter carrying CIA Agent Everett Ross, the one in charge of the team taking over Shield's portfolio landed in the hangar.

May realized she was probably going to need to call her mom. This was fine because if the woman found out her grandchildren were in danger because of the actions of her own agency, she would burn the world down.

Xxx

Grant Ward was not having a good day. Yes, he has seen sunshine for the first time since April, but that means very little when you’re trying to keep a vehicle from crashing when the tires are shot out by your former employer that now wants you dead.

"I knew I should've tossed that phone out the window," Ward said as he managed to bring the car to a controlled stop. Not that it mattered because he knew they were going to be overtaken in a few moments or at least try. Not that Ward was going to make it very easy for them, he thought as he grabbed a gun.

“I’m the only reason the Hydra operatives did not find the Van earlier,” Jarvis argued with Ward.

“It doesn’t matter if they find us,” Ward yelled just as the van obviously caring Hydra agents behind them blew up.

“It’s Iron man. He came to rescue us.” Alana called out, and it's the first time she's spoken since they left the Playground.

“That is why I did not change your location. I felt it most prudent for the Mark 44 to take out the van following you.”
“Although it would've been better if your dad blew that up before our car was disabled,” Ward mumbled under his breath.

"Mr. Stark is still en route to your current location," Jarvis replied.

“Remote piloting?” Fitz asked just as the armor wrapped around him and Ward found two babies in his hands. He quickly places both on the floor of the minivan along with Alana so he could at least still shoot. He hoped that would provide the children with cover.

“A Quinn jet is currently en route to your location and will be arriving in 5 minutes.” Of course, as the AI said that another van with Hydra operatives arrived. He couldn't help but wonder why Hydra was sending this many people after two babies. Not unless they were the kids of Captain America or something. Not even Tony Stark's son would be enough of a target. It didn’t matter. He had to protect Alana at least until the Jet arrived. Even if it meant jumping on top of the kids and taking a bullet to the head. Maybe that’s what he deserved.

Xx

Tony wasn't sure what he was expecting to see when the Mark 44 reached Leo. Probably not a van full of Hydra agents about to attack his children with Grant Ward as their protector. He enjoyed blowing up the van a little too much. He wasn't happy to see Leo handing over the babies to Ward, but it would be better if Leo were in the suit. It would be harder for Hydra agents to kill him that way.

Now controlling the armor, himself, Leo made short work of the second Hydra van. However, while he was focusing on that, another Hydra agent snuck up behind the minivan. Fitz turned around just in time for Tony to see Grant Ward take a bullet meant for his babies. Usually, he would be okay with that sort of thing, but Ward was currently protecting his children. That makes Tony less likely to fire a repulsor at him.

Although Tony is pretty sure he heard crying in the suit as Leo took out the last two agents and quickly walked over to Ward. Tony felt this would be a good time to at least talk to his son.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm alive,” Leo said just as Tony heard the cries of two tiny babies that he already knew so well. He was relieved to listen to the cries of Antonio and Madison. The two babies were being cradled by a very terrified Alana. So, terrified she wasn’t making a single sound. Her uncle’s unconscious or possibly dead body on top of her. Thankfully that’s when a Quinjet arrived.
“I got your kids. Meet us at HQ.” Tony heard Hill say over the comms after a team loaded everyone into the Quinjet. It was the first time in his entire life that he was happy to hear the voice of Maria Hill.

To be continued
Chapter 40: Loose Threads

Thank you to everybody who read the last chapter. You are all lovely. Please remember that reviews make the writer happy and happy writers write more. We are getting into the home stretch of the story. I recently mapped out the end, and I think we only have 5 to 6 chapters left.

After some long conversations with my beta, I decided that I’m going to focus on finishing this story before I start on the big sequel to I Hope You Have Unlimited Text Messaging. I think it would be better for all of us if I stay focused on this and see if I can get all the chapters done over the next few weeks before I move on to the next project. Your reviews really will give me a reason to keep going.

During the time Steve was sleeping with May, he remembered the woman showing him her dead friend’s comic book collection including a copy of Captain America number 1 which featured the fictionalized version of himself punching out Hitler. Steve was very tempted to re-create that cover after spending the last three hours trying to get Wolfgang von Strucker to tell them anything. Steve would really like to break the man’s face.

Natasha’s hand on his shoulder was the only thing holding him back. Hydra tried to get his children. He is half a world away, and the only person protecting said children is Grant Ward, the man who put his stepson in a coma. (Now is not the time to examine the fact that he referred to Leo as his stepson even though he’s not married to Tony yet.) Hydra is responsible for the situation, and the man in front of him was the embodiment of Hydra. Steve wanted him to pay greatly, but they needed him to be conscious if they were going to find out where Tony’s sister is.

“Steve, take a break,” Natasha whispers to him. “He can’t say anything if his jaw is broken.” Apparently, Natasha knows him better than Steve realized. He wouldn’t mind checking in with Tony to see if he was able to catch up to Leo and the babies.

“Wolf and I can spend some quality time together, and I can show him some of the interrogation techniques I picked up from the Red Room. I’m sure you know what the Red Room is like. According to the encrypted files, Hydra joined forces with Leviathan in the 40s. Apparently, I was raised by a Hydra subsidiary and had no idea.”

“As much as I would love to witness some of those techniques firsthand, we are not quite there yet,” Marcy said as she walked back into the room.

She was pulled out of the interrogation room an hour ago to take a call from her boss. Steve had no idea what that call was about, but it was enough to keep her out of the room for an hour, or maybe she just needed a break from von Strucker.

“You’re back,” Steve remarked.

“Yes, and it was a very illuminating break.” Marcy handed the Stark pad to him. On top was a digital sticky note that said his kids were picked up by Maria Hill and were now at an undisclosed location.
Tony was there now too. He exhaled as he fought the urge to leave to text Tony. Yes, the kids were somewhere safe, but were they okay or were they traumatized by what happened. Also, there was no mention of Isabel in the note. Where was she?

As much as he wanted to talk to Tony, Steve was not able to because of the image underneath the digital sticky note. On-screen was a picture of Alex List holding Dr. Campbell at gunpoint as he grabbed a metal object out of the 084 room. A metal object that had to be put in the containment room with Col. Rhodes wearing his armor. Yet, Dr. Campbell could hold it without any consequence. Campbell looked like he was about to hit Alex List with the metal 084 in the still image. This was not good. The look Natasha was giving him after looking up from her own Stark pad told him that she agreed, but she didn't say anything. They just allowed Marcy to talk.

“So, while you were getting to know your brother-in-law’s boyfriend, I had a very illuminating conversation with my boss,” Marcy said as she took the seat in front of Wolfgang von Strucker. He already knew that Tony was his wife’s biological brother. He probably knew before them. “It seems they just arrived at a Stark Industries/Avenger’s facility in West Virginia after your son allowed Hydra to wreck the place and came across some fascinating video. Steve, would you mind pressing play.” Steve quickly did as instructed, even though he was worried about the CIA and the rest of the task force invading the Playground.

He was right. Dr. Campbell did try to attack Alex List with the 084, but before he could attack, a large man who Steve recognized from the video of Natalie’s kidnapping walked into the room. It’s at that moment that Marcy touches the screen to pause the video. It’s also at that moment that he realized that Wolfgang von Strucker’s heart rate has increased. It seemed like the ice-cold head of Hydra was scared. Apparently, Grant Ward's intel about his family being von Strucker’s weakness was accurate.

"See that's the guy who kidnapped your wife. It seems like you recognize him, probably because you’re the one who created him. Let's see what he does next." Marcy starts the video again. On-screen, Alex List is shot in the back. Von Strucker visibly flinches.

“I guess he has a grudge. The good news is your son is still alive and currently in CIA/Hydra task force custody.” Strucker looked relieved until Marcy mentioned the CIA. “I guess that last part is only good news to me. They did promise to get the bullet out. We are not cruel.”

“Which is your weakness. You could’ve used my desire to know if my son was still alive to get what you want.” Wolfgang von Strucker told the group, and Steve was inclined to agree. What was Marcy doing?

"But I don't need to," Marcy said as she started the video again. According to Dr. Campbell and the lip-reading program, your son is currently yelling at Carl about backstabbing and deals being broken. See, Alex thought that if he let Hydra into the base and stole the 084 for Whitehall, he would be led to Natalie. I'm sure you're aware Daniel Whitehall rarely keeps his promises.

"He only cares about himself," Strucker mumbled under his breath.

"But you care. You want your wife back, or at the very least you want her away from Daniel Whitehall because I'm sure you will, of all people, know what he's capable of. There’s a rumor that he dissected a woman while still alive and left her remains in the woods for her husband to find." Something dark flashes in von Strucker’s eyes.

“Maybe not a rumor. When you were younger, you admired Whitehall, but Natalie changed that. How I don't know, but she did. Now you probably see him for the monster that he is. Was that why you made sure he couldn’t become the new head when Pierce died. I’m sure he’s probably bitter
about that. He did just have your son literally shot in the back when all he was trying to do was get his mother back. He also led us straight to you.”

“Hydra isn’t known for loyalty.”

“That’s what happens when you put a bunch of power-hungry people together. Thankfully, I'm not like that, and we do want to help because we have a common goal.”

“Which is?” Wolfgang von Strucker asked.

“Getting your wife the hell away from Daniel Whitehall. We think we know where she is, but we need your help to figure out where that place is. If you tell me, I promise I will keep your family safe.”

“What do you want from me?” Wolfgang von Strucker asked, his voice wary. The bravado of the last few hours is long gone.

“In exchange for making sure your son doesn’t end up dead due to another Hydra assassination attempt, I want you to tell me the coordinates for the Hydra Arctic research center so we can rescue your wife from it. BTW, Daniel Whitehall’s number two is currently also in CIA custody. We can probably get the information from him, but you would be faster. We already removed the Sinai pill.”

“Maybe you’re not completely incompetent.” Von Strecker mumbled.

“You didn’t have one. I guess you’re not a true believer. Which may be why they kidnapped your wife. Or led us straight to you. Or had your son shot in the back after manipulating him. Why would you want to be loyal to a group that does this to your family?”

“Which one? Hydra has several facilities in the Arctic as well as Siberia for that matter, although I doubt, they took her to the Winter Soldier facility.” Note to self, look at the possible Hydra bases in Siberia.

“The one referred to as Ice Base Zebra,” Natasha said looking up from the other Stark pad that Marcy handed to her earlier.

“If I lead you to this location, Alex goes free.” Wolfgang von Strucker countered.

“If you lead us to that location, we rescue your wife. Now if you start giving us the names of other high-level Hydra operatives, then we can talk a reduced sentence for your son or even just having him go into witness protection. He is young and acted under duress.”

“What are the coordinates,” Steve asked.

“You’ll get her back?

“I promise.”

"Then I will lead you there and get you in."

XXXX

May was going to kill him. She was genuinely going to kill him. That was her thought as she was finally led out of the CIA interrogation room that she’s been in for several hours. Of course, there is the question of who that “him” is because it keeps varying between Grant Ward and Everett Ross. Maybe she’ll just strangle both. Grant Ward was God knows where with her children and could give them to God knows who and she was unable to prevent that because the man in front of her thought
it would be good to take her into custody.

She hasn’t been given a phone call, nor does she expect to receive one. The only way she’s cooperated so far is she hasn’t snapped anybody’s neck yet. She refused to answer any of their questions because they were stupid.

Of course, May is surprised to be led into a room with her mother and boyfriend, and thankfully, her boyfriend isn’t in handcuffs. However, she’s not surprised to see her mom slap Agent Ross across the face, nor is she surprised to hear her cursing him out in rapid Mandarin. It’s never a good sign when her mom refers to anybody as a "傻逼."

“I apologize for the miscommunication. I did not realize that we were interfering with an Avenger ope…” Agent Ross was cut off by another slap to the face as her mother continued to yell.

“I think we should leave while your mom is dealing with this. I think it’s best, there are no witnesses.” Phil whispered to her, and she was inclined to agree.

“Do you know where the babies are?” May asked as soon as they were out of the room.

“The new avenger HQ with Maria,” Phil responded, and May frowned.

“Considering the last time I went to her for help, Maria led Talbot straight to us, that does not inspire much confidence.”

"Tony is with her."

“Thank God.” She sighed in relief. If she couldn't be there, at least the twins had one of their parents.

“I never thought you would be thankful for Tony Stark,” Phil remarked, placing an arm around her.

“Things change when you have a child together, even if Hydra is the responsible party.”

“They do. Stark flew straight back to the states when he found out, although not before deploying a suit from New York to find Fitz. Apparently, our little Fitz managed to take out at least a dozen Hydra agents on his own with it.” She almost smiles at that, proud that Fitz has become such a competent agent. The armor is just another weapon, and she taught all of those under her that if you need a weapon, take one.

“Are the kids okay?” She was still so scared.

“Yes. The twins don't have a scratch on them. Tony says they refused to take the bottle at first, but they’ll get used to it.”

“Because they have no choice. Did they tell you what happened to Isabel?” May asked.

“They didn’t need to. I saw the security footage, and Jarvis had audio. She stayed behind to give Fitz a fighting chance of getting out with the babies.” Phil said as he handed a Stark phone with the video file and the additional audio from Jarvis.

“She literally made a deal with the devil to protect the babies.” She's not sure what to think about that choice.

“And he took a bullet for them.” She exhaled in relief, knowing that Isabel chose wisely. That’s when Phil played footage from the suit that Fitz was wearing of Grant Ward getting shot in the head by a Hydra agent as he watched over her children. She also sees Fitz take the agent out. (May hears
Fitz crying in the audio track.) She hated Grant Ward so much, but at least he did this one thing right.

“Is he dead?” She wasn’t sure what she wanted the answer to that question to be. If you asked her just 10 minutes ago it would be yes, she wanted him dead, but a lot can happen in 10 minutes.

“He still receiving medical treatment, but he is stable according to Dr. Cho’s assistant.” She looks at Phil slightly confused. “Fitz asked for it. I think he did so for Alana or even for Tim. Maybe for himself, but I don’t think this is the time to ask.”

“No, it’s not. So, what happens now?”

“We wait for your mom to stop attacking Ross. She’s our ride. Your stepdad Roger is,” May actually smiled at that. Roger may keep the conversation with her mom from becoming a complete disaster. “but he won’t leave without her. Although in the meantime you should probably call Stark and talk to your kids.”

“After that?

“We suit up. Steve found out where Natalie is. We have a rescue operation to undertake. There’s also a debrief with Campbell somewhere in there. We must multitask. Although he was a little more cooperative with the CIA. At least about Alex List. Nothing about why he can hold the 084 without consequence or why he knew it would turn other people to stone, which is what we need to talk about.”

“I would like to know why he could touch the 084.” She said, grabbing the Stark phone from him.

“I think we all would. Now call your babies.” May was never more relieved when the image of Stark and the twins showed up on the screen. Her kids were safe.

XXXX

Lincoln was surprised that Skye and Tripp hugged him when he made his way to the living room of the bus after being sprung from the CIA/Hydra task force custody. As soon as the SUV he was riding in stopped in front of the bus, he ran inside. He thought Agent Morris was behind him, but obviously, she went somewhere else.

“I’m just glad you survived being held hostage by the CIA,” Skye said as she pulled away. “I knew we couldn’t trust Alex.”

“We know. Although, I didn't think Alex was "bring Hydra into the base" evil. Do you want something to drink?” Tripp asked. “And I mean soft drink.”

“It wasn’t that bad.” But close, especially because Isabel is gone. You get close to someone after you deliver their children. He was still trying to process that, and he didn’t want alcohol to be part of that processing. “I'll take orange juice and maybe one of the protein bars.”

“We have actual food; I’ll get you a sandwich. You’re going to need it for later,” Tripp commented.

“You know that guy we saw in the elevator at the hospital when we went to pick up evil guy Junior?” Skye asked.

“The guy who kind of looked like that old guy from Mall Rats, the Captain America comic book writer?”

“The other one that kind of looks like a Fox News broadcaster. He's Hydra, and his boss kidnapped Alex’s mom. We picked him up in Miami. Sharon stayed behind with Price to interrogate him.”
“That makes sense. After being shot, Alex yelled something about being promised that if he got them the Diviner, they would let his mom go.”

“So, they got to him at the hospital? Tricked him into helping?” Tripp asked.

“Or just passed on his orders.”

“I think it’s most likely to be the first. Apparently, this happened right before we got there.” Lincoln responded, taking a seat on the couch as he grabbed the food from Tripp.

“Fuck.” Both Tripp and Skye said simultaneously. "We had no idea, and we just let him into the Playground, and now Isabel is dead.” That hurt.

“What about Alana? I know the twins are okay.” He overheard May’s video call with Stark for most of the Trip. He also knew that Fitz was okay.

“Safe with Tony and the twins at the Avenger B site,” Skye answered.

“Are we heading there?” Lincoln asked before taking a bite of his sandwich. Apparently, all the sandwiches here are prosciutto and mozzarella.

“No. We know where Natalie is.” Skye tells them excitedly.

“How?” Lincoln asked.

“Intel from our Hydra mole 33, I'm pretty sure my ex-fiancé was murdered for her to maintain cover. Ex fiancé who may or may not have been on Hydra payroll.” The look Skye is giving him tells Lincoln not to ask questions about that at all.

“We also have the cooperation of von Strucker,” Skye adds.

“Because kidnapping your wife and shooting your son in the back doesn’t make you very many friends.” Lincoln remarks.

“Exactly. We have the coordinates now and we’re preparing to infiltrate after we meet up with Widow and Captain America. We were just waiting for Coulson, and May to get here.”

“Aren’t you glad to find out she was actually just undercover at Hydra?” Skye asked Tripp.

“Yes.”

“I’m coming with you?” Lincoln asked.

“You're medical with lightning powers. Of course, you're coming with us. It’s the main reason why we are feeding you.”

“Because otherwise it will be Tripp's mom and we've already had enough awkward heart to hearts for the month,” Skye added.

“I much prefer you, which is why I'm feeding you. We may even let you take a nap if there’s time.”

“Although shouldn’t May and Coulson be here since I thought they were your ride? We know Bobbi is in the lab.” Skye asked.

“Currently being yelled at in Mandarin by Agent May’s mother as Agent May’s stepfather tries to talk her down. I thought it was best to leave them alone. She’s mad about not being told about her
grandchildren. I don’t think they wanted me there for that conversation.”

"Wise choice," Tripp told him.

“Why is she upset?” Skye asked, confused. “They didn’t have time to tell her. They’ve known for like a week, and we were trying to find Natalie for most of that time.”

“I don’t think that matters. So, is the Playground under CIA control?” Lincoln asked, concerned. He doesn’t trust most of the government with the project that he was working on earlier. It could be dangerous if people knew about the existence of the inhuman gene and how to test for it. It would also be awful if the government knew that the super-soldier serum was sexually transmittable.

“Military control, but don’t worry Jarvis moved everything you were working on to the SI servers before destroying the Playground network literally. Explosives were involved.” Tripp explained.

“I had everything exactly the way I wanted it, and now it's all gone.” Skye pouted in annoyance.

“Yes, but at least none fell into the hands of Hydra or the US military.”

“Okay, you have a point. I would hate for Hydra to know who my mom is before I do. That's what you are working on, right?” Skye asked.

“Not exactly because I don’t have a sample from Jiaying to make a comparison on.” Trip looked at them, confused.

“Lincoln knows my mom, or at least he thinks he does because he knows someone who has a story like mine. Down to her daughter being kidnapped from the same province in China in 1989. She was his superpower Yoda.” Tripp raised an eyebrow in confusion.

“And you were running a test to prove that without a DNA sample when you were taken hostage by Alex list? How do you do that without a DNA sample?”

“By looking for genetic markers that say I am like Lincoln and the woman who may be my mom? I am like you, right?” At Skye’s question, Lincoln just nodded his head in agreement.

“How? Skye doesn’t exactly shoot electricity out of her fingers.” Tripp questioned.

'Not yet, although if we had the facilities to activate the crystals inside the Diviner, Skye’s latent abilities could be activated, and she could have powers. Although not necessarily the same as myself.’ However, Lincoln would not say this out loud.

“Well, unlike your uncle’s future husband, Lincoln was born with the potential to have powers. No super-soldier serum or radiation required.” Skye remarked, and Lincoln decided this was not the time to mention Steve was a carrier of the Inhuman gene.

“And apparently, I have this gene too, which makes it even more likely that Lincoln’s old teacher may be my mom. Two babies getting kidnapped by Hydra in 1989 in China is just too much of a coincidence.”

“I thought you stopped looking?” Tripp asked.

“I did, but when I told Lincoln what I knew, it sounded familiar to him, and apparently I'm an…”

“Inhuman, we call ourselves Inhuman, in English anyway,” Lincoln explained.

“I’m sure it sounded less awful in the original language. What does that mean?” Tripp asked. Lincoln
hesitated before answering.

“You don’t want to tell us? Or do you want to wait until May and Coulson are here, so you only have to go through the whole story once?”

“Or you just don’t want to tell me?” Tripp asked. Lincoln looked away because that was precisely what he was thinking.

“It’s not that it’s just taking me a moment to work up to it. I was taught never to say anything to anyone outside the community.” But were they not part of the community? Skye was Inhuman. May’s son is Inhuman, and her daughter is a carrier of the gene. He knows that Coulson has Kree blood in his system.

“Especially if the outsiders are Shield. I get it, and I’m not offended. Mom always told me to be careful to make sure no one realized I was a little stronger than normal or that I recovered a little bit faster. Now I know that’s because she didn’t want me to end up in a cage-like her.”

Tripp is Enhanced not Inhuman, but he is Enhanced, and he exists because of a Hydra experiment. Lincoln knew that Hydra wouldn’t see any difference between the two of them, and maybe he shouldn’t either. They were both part of the bigger Enhanced community. Although he didn’t have time to say anything because he heard May and Coulson approaching them.

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“I’m personally surprised I’m not digging my own grave right now. She still mad at me for shooting you.” Rightfully so, Phil thought. He, in hindsight, regretted the way that he acted. Of course, they were in the middle of a hostile Hydra takeover, but that was still no excuse.

“My Mom wasn’t upset, just disappointed that I did not tell her that our relationship changed or about the twins.” Phil glared at his girlfriend. “Also, she wasn’t going to kill you with Roger in the car.”

“I know my Mandarin is only passable, but I recognize most of the curse words. She is beyond disappointed, not just about those two things, but also me contacting her just to get out of CIA custody.”

“She’s inviting us to dinner with the twins.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good thing. It’s not going to be a regular dinner but rather Thanksgiving dinner with the twins and your entire family. Your father’s going to be there. I didn’t even know your parents were on speaking terms with each other again. We all remember graduation.” Despite being divorced for 10 years at that point, a fight still broke out between her parents with stepdad Roger dragging the newly minted Agent Stevens away. May hasn’t been with both her parents at the same time since.

“According to Roger, she called my dad after Shield imploded to see if he heard from me. They’re both equally disappointed in my career choices. Technically being an Avenger has not changed that.” May answers.

“Except Roger. He was proud.”

“Roger is always proud of me. I wouldn’t mind spending time with him.”

“I like your stepdad too. Unfortunately, your mom also wants us to bring Tony and Steve over your stepfather’s objections. That’s going to be a disaster.” Phil said as he walked into the living room area of the bus only to find two agents and a doctor waiting for him.
“Oh, don’t mind us; we are just waiting for orders. Keep arguing about not wanting to meet the parents.” Tripp remarked casually.

"Or you could go up there and fly us to the rendezvous point while Friday gets Stark on the line. We need to do a debriefing. Dr. Campbell, we have a lot of questions.”

“I’m sure you do. I’ll answer what I can.” The doctor responded.

“You're letting me fly your plane?” Tripp asked, shocked.

“Agent May needs to sit in on the debriefing with Stark. She also needs to rest up for the Hydra infiltration. You, on the other hand, got to sleep while I was in CIA custody last night. Bobbi will join you there momentarily.” Phil explained.

“Point. Although I feel like I’m being dismissed because whatever is being said is probably above my clearance level and honestly, I don’t think I want to know.”

“That’s true. I wish I didn’t need to know.” Skye whispered as Tripp left the room, but Phil still heard her. He didn’t say anything because Friday already had Stark on screen.

“Okay, why did you guys call me up? I just managed to get Madison and baby Tony to sleep.”

“Antonio.” May corrected automatically.

“Which will totally be on the birth certificate once we figure out the last name situation, but as I’ve stated before he’s too little for such a big name. What are we going to put on the birth certificate? I like Stark Rogers, but I'm okay with May Rogers although May Stark Rogers feels like a full name by itself. Maybe May can be their middle name. That could work for Madison because I like the sound of Madison May although I’m not sure about Antonio May.”

“We called you here for a debriefing because you told us you wanted to be there for this conversation,” Phil said cutting off Stark’s rambling.

“That’s right I did want to know why Dr. Campbell tested my children for something Friday referred to as the Inhuman gene. Baby Tony has it. Although me, Madison, Leo, and Stevie bear are just carriers, whatever that means. Agent Skye also has the gene.”

“Of course, you saw the file.” Dr. Campbell put his head in his hands.

"Hydra didn’t, so be glad for that. If you don't want to start there, you can explain this video.” At that moment, half of the screen is replaced with security camera footage of Lincoln using the 084 to attack several Hydra agents.

“I think Everett Ross is still trying to figure out the bodies of stone thing. I’m okay with starting with a discussion about how you could use it as a weapon and not become stone.”

“It’s not actually a weapon. More like a storage container for a catalyst that will activate a genetically engineered mutation with a protective coating to keep those without the gene from using it. People who are Inhuman like me, Skye or even your son Antonio could touch it without turning to stone.”

“Okay, I think we need to back up a few steps here. What is an Inhuman? I would also like some clarification on genetically engineered mutation as well. Is this something Hydra did or something else?” Tony asked.

That’s when Lincoln told them everything he knew, including an alien invasion long ago and their
desire to use humans as test subjects to create a superweapon for their long war. About the time Lincoln started to explain what the 084 is, Phil really wished this was all above his security clearance. By the time he found out what may have happened to Skye’s mother, he nearly threw up; however, Skye did first.

Tony absolutely hated Shield debriefings, especially any Shield debriefing that involves finding out that the man who kidnapped his sister most likely dissected Skye’s mother and left her for dead and she only survived because of her power set.

Except his sister didn't have powers, or maybe she had the potential for powers, but they didn't know that because the Playground was ransacked by Hydra before Lincoln could run the test. That was just one more thing to worry about, and Tony did not have the bandwidth to worry about anything else.

Instead, he chose to text his boyfriend. He could call, but he had two sleeping babies that he just managed to get back to sleep and as much as Tony wanted to hear Steve's voice again, Tony will not be risking crying babies right now.

Alana was also with him. The babies made her feel safe, and they need to give her that as much as possible, at least until her uncle Tim showed up. She was currently sleeping on top of Fitz, who was also asleep thank the universe. He's like 90% sure Dr. Cho’s assistant slipped him some sort of sleeping pill, and he's not upset about it.

Tony: So, I heard you managed to get the brother-in-law to cooperate. Congratulations on convincing him to work with us. I heard it was not easy.

Baby’s Daddy: It took a video of his son being shot in the back for him to finally talk. He is not exactly happy that Hydra used the son by kidnapping his wife just to get his hands on that 084.

Tony: Maybe he has a heart after all.

Baby’s Daddy: Maybe. Why was that thing so important?

Tony: That is such a loaded question. Be glad you missed the debriefing. Short answer, alien artifact that Whitehall believes is a superweapon. Its mostly dehydrated alien super-soldier activating crystals in a can that turns anybody without a specific genetic marker to stone. Although if you have the marker, instant superpowers.

Tony: I really don’t want to think about the capabilities of an alien society that can create a metal that can do that or why they wanted to make humans their test subjects. That makes me want to look at Shield's old plan for a world security AI again. Ultron or something.

Baby’s Daddy: Start from scratch. For all, you know it could have been created by Hydra.

Tony: True. The only good thing they’ve created so far has been my kids, and that’s despite their best efforts to do otherwise

Baby’s Daddy: I’m a little confused. Okay, I'm very confused by your explanation. How did you get this information? Thor? Also, I think something may have got lost in the retelling.

Tony: Campbell. So, it turns out Campbell had superpowers because of prehistoric Kree (A.k.a. The donor species for the alien material used in the Coulson resurrection serum), genetic engineering of his ancestors. Once you add the chemical catalyst in the 084, instant superpowers. Not the same
power, but randomly chosen powers. I don’t get that part because I zoned out due to a crying baby that needed my attention.

Tony: BTW, our son has this genetic marker because apparently, we are both carriers of the gene, but don't have the gene ourselves. That means if we touch the 084, it will turn us to stone, but slowly. Me at least, you may be not because you’re different, but we're not testing that hypothesis.

Tony: However, our newborn could use it as a teething ring, and nothing terrible will happen to him. Also, Campbell theorizes that the super-soldier serum worked for you because you happen to be a carrier of the gene and therefore, you’re not really baseline human. You have a teeny bit of Kree in your DNA.

Tony: So do I, which is how we managed to make an Inhuman child.

Baby’s Daddy: I don’t understand any of what you just typed. At all. I'm also tempted to ask Friday when you last slept, but I think it might have been right before we left for the raid on the Hydra fortress.

Tony: You might be right about that. If I didn’t have babies to take care of, I totally would have let Cho’s assistant drug me too. That's okay; I didn't understand most of what was being said. I blame the sleep deprivation and the crying children. I will read over the report after I sleep whenever that will be.

Baby’s Daddy: We’ve all had a very tough couple of days.

Tony: The twins more than the rest of us. They had to run for their lives. At least they’re young enough not to remember it. Alana is still nearly catatonic. I’m not even sure I can afford all the therapy she’s going to need. I’m just glad she’s using Fitz as her teddy bear right now.

Baby’s Daddy: Has her uncle arrived yet?

Tony: Soon. Mack and Hunter are driving him up since they are not going to be part of the rescue team. Stephanie is with them as well. It was decided that she’s not going with you on the raid because we are not bringing my other sister to Hydra.

Tony: One that’s not Marcy.

Baby’s Daddy: She’s not going with us either. She is questioning the other assets. Why are they not flying up?

Tony: Stephanie wants to give him time to consider medical options and thinks the drive will allow for that as well as to calm him down since the last time he saw his brother, the man knocked him unconscious. It was to protect him from Hydra in some weird twisted way, but still not good.

Baby’s Daddy: That family is very complicated.

Tony: Very. Although my brother-in-law is the head of Hydra, so really, I have no room to talk. Your daughter is now crying. She's hungry, but she doesn’t want to drink the bottle. She hates formula.

Baby’s Daddy: Did the baby bag not have any breastmilk?

Tony: Isabel didn’t exactly have time to pump before the base got invaded and now, she never will be able to. Friday is looking for other formula options.
Tony: You don’t know yet, do you?

Baby’s Daddy: I know. I just forgot for a moment. Marcy told me and then I broke a wall. I wanted to break your brother-in-law's face, but Natasha said that I couldn’t.

Tony: At least hold off until after the mission to get my sister back. Then have at it.

Baby’s Daddy: Although I don’t know what happened. Marcy didn’t have details.

Tony: Isabel stayed behind to let Fitz and the babies get away from the Playground. They killed her for it. Now she’s another member of my family murdered by Hydra, even if it was just family by her giving birth to our kids.

Baby’s Daddy: Oh, God.

Tony: There's a video file of it. No sound because the Jarvis phone stayed with Leo. I didn't watch it because that’s something you don’t want to watch.

Baby’s Daddy: I understand.

Tony: This is also why team Coulson isn't picking me up for the rendezvous.

Baby’s Daddy: Because if this goes badly, at least the children will still have one parent.

Tony: Exactly. I'm not entirely sure if I should be the designated parent because I probably will totally screw them up, but if Hydra tries to attack the half-built new Avenger HQ at least I can fight them off mostly by myself. Also, this is more of a stealth mission.

Baby’s Daddy: And I'm better at that.

Tony: May is better at that, and you're going to need her.

Baby’s Daddy: And Fitz probably needs you.

Tony: Especially because his girlfriend is going to be with you.

Baby’s Daddy: Actually, Simmons is staying behind to help with the other twins. She's the only one Wanda will speak to.

Tony: That does not entirely surprise me.

Baby’s Daddy: Have you spoken to Fitz?

Tony: A little bit, but not much because for most of his time here he has a six-year-old using him as a teddy bear as they wait in the med waiting room for news on Ward. Stable but in a coma.

Tony: Well that was until a member of the medical team drugged him and a few agents brought him to my room. I decided this is not the time to talk about what’s going on.

Baby’s Daddy: You can probably hold off on that conversation until the drugs wear off.

Tony: At a minimum. We have so much we’re going to need to talk about when you get here. We are parents. Like we're actual parents because we're all they have left. I hate Hydra so much right now.

Baby’s Daddy: I know, and I hate them too. We will, but in the meantime, I asked someone else to
come by. She just texted me and told me she's there. That’s when Tony looks up to see Pepper walk into his apartment.

“I heard your boyfriend is off to rescue your sister, so I thought I would come to lend a hand. Friday had me bring what she referred to as a baby formula starter pack and more diapers.” Tony quickly wrapped his arm around her.

“Thank you.” And if he started to cry as he was hugging her, no one else needed to know.

To be continued.

Chapter End Notes

Translation: 傻逼 means something along the lines of "you fucking idiot" or "fucking moron." Thank you to Constanz for providing the translation. We have been working together to translate I Hope You Have Unlimited Text Messaging into mandarin.
“Are you okay?” Trip asked as he knocked on the door of her bunk. Skye was trying to sleep until they rendezvoused with Captain America and Black Widow.

“That is a very loaded question. You know I threw up a few hours ago.” She’s never going to forget Lincoln’s description of what happened to her mom. She knew Hydra was full of monsters, but even this was more than she expected of them. It was evil on another level.

“Lincoln told me. It could've been the hot pocket. They're evil. Therefore, I gave Lincoln an actual sandwich, and I brought you a ginger ale.” He said, handing the bottle to her.

“No, I’m pretty sure hearing what Daniel Whitehall did to my mom is what made me throw up.” Skye always wondered why she was abandoned. Now she knew the Hydra truth, and it made her physically ill.

“You don’t know if she’s actually your mom. You need a DNA test first.” Tripp argued. Skye knew better now.

“Lincoln found a picture of her,” Skye said as she grabbed her phone and pulled up the picture. “His ex-girlfriend sent it. They've been in contact recently.” Because of her. Alicia is the only member of the community still talking to Lincoln, and he's going to need her to get Skye an introduction.

“And?” Trip asked after looking at the image. It seems like she's going to have to explain it to him.

“Before you knew your dad was another Captain America, did you ever look at complete strangers and try to see if they had your nose or eyes?” Skye asked.

“Not after I realized I was conceived during my mother’s kidnapping, but I did before. I always wondered if Eli could be a distant cousin. Although I didn’t see nephew coming.” Tripp chuckle slightly, but it felt forced.

“Right, but you still saw a resemblance in him. I looked at that picture, and I saw pieces of myself, even with the scars. What happened to me is too outrageous of a story to happen twice, especially in
the same part of China.” Skye argued.

“That would definitely be too much of a coincidence. So, what happens next?”

“Lincoln, through his ex-girlfriend Alicia, is trying to arrange a meeting between the elder and me. They're kind of angry at him for joining SHIELD, so it might take a while.”

“Because when Hydra kidnapped your mom, they were probably wearing SHIELD patches.”

“Also, around 2007 or so, a child was exposed to the Inhuman transformation catalyst agent, that Lincoln refuses to tell me the actual name of, way too early. She couldn’t control her powers and was taken out by a Shield agent.” Skye thinks there’s probably more to the story because Lincoln seemed very cagey in the retelling of it. He also couldn’t stop looking at May the entire time for some reason.

“They’re angry about that?”

“Lincoln says it feeds into my mom’s Shield, and humans in general, are evil and will get the cute baby Inhumans line. Lincoln pretty much said that’s bullshit, but it’s what she believes, and it’s going to be difficult to overcome that.”

“And what do you think?” Tripp asked.

“I think that unless the agent was really Hydra, and Lincoln is positive that they were not, I don’t think they would have killed a small child unless there wasn’t an option. Lincoln pretty much said the same thing.”

“You’re going to look into it?”

“Maybe once we’re not trying to break into a Hydra base.” She doesn’t tell Tripp about May leaving the room as soon as Lincoln was done with his story or Lincoln going after her. She knows she’s going to have to start there.

“That’s probably best. Worry about the other stuff later, we have a Hydra base to infiltrate.”

“I’m trying not to, but I still couldn’t sleep. I’m scared.” She told him honestly.

“About the mission?” Tripp asked.

“About what happens afterward.” She has spent most of her life trying to find her parents, but after being there firsthand for Tripp’s family reunion, she stopped looking, afraid she would find something just as horrible. Then the truth found her, and now she's scared. She's a Shield agent, and her mom hated SHIELD. That’s just going to go badly.

“Don’t be. I’ll be there with you.” Tripp wrapped his fingers around hers. The simple gesture did make her feel better.

“The Avenger quinjet just arrived.” Bobbi interrupted. “There’s a briefing in 10 minutes.”

“Thanks. We’ll be there.”

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“You really did bring Natalie’s husband with you?” May asked, looking directly at Steve. She was obviously annoyed. May didn't need this on top of everything else. She couldn't even take a nap because the conversation with Lincoln kept bringing back memories of what she did in Bahrain.
Despite hearing about the incident in the worst possible way, Lincoln believed she had no other option. However, it still did not make her feel any less guilty.

Wolfgang von Strucker showing up on her plane is just one more thing she must deal with, and she didn't want to. So, of course, she's annoyed with Steve.

"He has Intel," Steve responded.

“That doesn’t mean you bring him on the bus.” May ground out between clenched teeth.

“I’m going to go with May on this. Is it the best idea to have the now-former head of Hydra with us after his son let Hydra into the base, kidnapped Lincoln, and got Isabel killed?” Skye voiced angrily.

“I want my wife back.” Von Strucker argued as everybody glared at him.

“Because all of that happened because your son wanted his mom back, we are a little reluctant to trust you at all," Phil responded.

“He’s wearing knockout bracelets that Stark came up with," Natasha explained as she held up the controller.

“Oh good, can we knock him out now?” Skye asked. Tripp and Lincoln nodded their heads in agreement.

“You need my Intel and my codes. Even cloaked, you won't be able to access the base undetected.”

“Actually, we don’t. And if you try to use your codes, they will know and blow us out of the sky because Whitehall set you up. This is a hostile Hydra takeover.” Phil explained.

“Whitehall wanted you out.” Agent Morris added.

“How do you know that?”

“One of our agents in Miami has been working on his number 2 for the last 24 hours. She managed to get that tidbit. Whitehall wants you gone and was using us to do it.” Phil explained.

“Apparently, you're too soft. You keep sending your genetic experiments to loving homes via your wife.” May notices Wolfgang flinch at Agent Morris’s words. There may be more accurate to that than initially assumed.

“Although because his number two is currently in custody, he had to bring in a new number two or should I say 33,” Phil smirked.

“We have a woman on the inside?” Steve asked.

“Yes.”

“Good news, Natalie and Trista are there and alive.” Von Strucker looked visibly relieved at Phil's words. "However, she was not sure of their condition. 33 has yet to get a visual on the two to do an assessment. Although, according to the Hydra rumor mill, Trista was taken for compliance reasons. If Natalie doesn't do what they want, Trista loses an appendage.”

“The incentive program.” Von Strucker said bitterly.
“Because of course, that’s what you guys do. I bet you never thought it would be your wife being held, hostage.” Tripp snarled.

“Natalie can handle a lot when she’s the focus, but not when it comes to others she cares about.”

“And I guess Trista will do because they needed Junior to recover the 084,” Tripp said with a roll of his eyes. He was furious.

“BTW, not a superweapon,” Skye added.

“I know, but Whitehall doesn’t. He was a soldier that rose through the ranks, not one of the original families. He was always bitter about that.”

“They’re still torturing your wife with the memory machine. Another version of it. We have the original version. What are they trying to get her to remember?”

“I will kill him.” Von Strucker spat out.

“Which is what he wants. This is a trap for you.” Phil explained. “He is expecting you to bring Shield, the Avengers, the CIA, or whoever else straight to him with your codes. He will blow this plane up with you on it.” It was at that moment that Von Strucker fell to the ground, unconscious.

“He was annoying me,” Natasha explained.

“We have nine more doses in the bracelet. In case von Strucker is planning to stab us in the back, he doesn’t need to be here for the rest of the planning session. I wish Clint came with us so he could shoot Von Strucker in the head. However, Clint was making headway with Pinto, one of the young people we took from the compound. Which is why we know that Von Strucker was taking a different road in Hydra. Apparently, others are not happy.” Natasha explained.

“Can we just lock him up?” May asked, annoyed.

“That’s not going to be an option in about 30 minutes.”

That’s when Phil explained the plan. They knew Hydra was going to blow them out of the skies, so they were going to go with it.

“Stark better be planning to make me a new plane,” May groused.

“I promise it will be the best plane ever.”

Xxxxx

When Natalie was taken out of her cell this morning, she was expecting to endure the memory machine again. It was their favorite torture even though she doesn’t know why they’re forcing her to remember everything.

She already remembered most of her time at Hydra Academy and why she flunked out. It really did involve her inability to shoot her dog in the head. A “good” Hydra agent couldn’t have a weakness, and she had many. Natalie loved her mother, who didn’t know she was kidnapped from the Starks, she didn’t even know her husband was Hydra until she was nearly beaten to death. That wasn’t a memory, but rather a video file that they kept playing in a loop in her cell. That was their other fun form of torture.

She also loved Wolf, and he loved her, at least his teenage self did. Instead of killing her, he convinced them that she should be used for Project Lullaby. A good uterus was hard to come by in
Hydra, probably because of all the misogynistic bullshit. That's how she became Stephanie's cellmate, waiting to become pregnant with a Hydra designer baby.

Natalie blamed Wolf for her torture, not realizing that it was the only way he could keep her alive. Honestly, teenage Natalie hated him at that point, which may have been why she kissed Stephanie that first time. In hindsight, she realized that she was never inseminated. When Natalie gets out of here, Natalie is going to ask about that. She's also going to ask why she survived after helping Stephanie escape. Natalie knows that Wolf found her near death in the woods of Appalachia. Was he the one who stopped her bleeding? She still didn’t know why?

Maybe she would remember after this morning's trip to the memory torture chamber. However, instead, she was led to a room with a monitor and two chairs. A guard was standing off to the side. Of course, Whitehall was waiting for her.

“I guess it’s movie day again. Will we be watching my kidnapper beat my mom again? That was very enlightening.” Natalie spat bitterly.

“No, your son instead.” That’s when an image of Alex showed up on the screen in front of her. She watches only to see Alex be shot. If they fed her anything in the last 24 hours, she would’ve thrown up.

“We told him that if he brought the 084 to us, we would set you free,” Whitehall said, smugly.

“Instead, you shot him in the back, once you got your weapon.”

“That’s just a bonus.” Although his frown made her wonder if he got what he wanted.

“What is the purpose of all of this? Why make me remember my past. Why kill my son?” Not that she believed Alex was dead because Whitehall wouldn’t play the rest of the video. She was aware she was being manipulated.

“Not everything is about you.”

“Am I just the bait here?”

“In the sense. We want you to bring your husband and brother to us, so we can destroy them. Afterward, you will take your rightful place as the heir to the Stark Empire.” His words just confirm to Natalie’s mind that he is entirely crazy, which may be a prerequisite for Hydra believers. “I'm sure my dead husband and a dead Avenger would be advantageous to you, but I don't see how me taking over Stark Industries would help the Hydra cause. If you think I'm going to go along with any of your evil plans, you don't know me at all. I flunked out of Hydra Academy for a reason. I was much too independent, and I don't shoot dogs in the head.” 'But for you, I'll make an exception.'

"Don't worry, we have ways to make you comply, and your compliance will be rewarded." Yep, Natalie was going to shoot him in the head the first chance she got.

Xxx

Pepper never thought she would see Tony Stark of all people trying to feed a fussy baby. Especially not after he received the news that the Palladium poisoning left him practically sterile. Yet once again, Hydra intervened and gave him something so precious. Considering everything they took from him, including his parents, they owed him so much. Tony was a baby person.

Technically, Madison was just Steve's daughter, but it was apparent to Pepper that Tony didn’t care. He loves both of his precious little babies, and he adored them. Although right now, he really needed to turn them over to Pepper so he could get some actual sleep. It was part of the reason why she
agreed to come up when Steve asked her to.

“You know if you are going to put her down for a nap, you should join her.” Pepper suggested. She’s been trying to get him to sleep ever since she got here several hours earlier.

“Because Friday sent you up here with a pop-up crib thing so Madison can sleep in her own bed with her baby brother after she's done eating attempt three at the formula. However, I’m not sleeping until Stevie bear has Natalie.”

“Tony, you need to sleep.”

“I’m aware of that, but not yet. Friday, sweetie pie, how many minutes until the team gets to Ice Base Zebra?” Tony asked his new AI. She missed Jarvis, but she could understand why Tony was upset with the AI.

“ETA seven minutes,” Friday answered.

“So, if all goes well in 45 minutes tops, I’ll let you pour me into a bed and take one of those pills that Dr. Cho’s assistant sprinkled into my son’s decaf latte. At least that child goes to sleep easily. It's fine, Pepper Pot, I’ve gone on less sleep than this.”

“You should at least lay down. You are a dad now. You have to set a better example.” Pepper argued.

“I’ve been a dad for a couple of months now. I’ve been a dad since the mid-80s, I just didn't know it. Well, I knew in 91, but Obadiah was a manipulate dick.”

“Newborns are different.”

“I am very aware of that. More crying, but less complicated feelings about members of terrorist cells, especially when that person gets shot in the head to protect your baby brother and sister.” Pepper blinked in confusion at Tony’s words.

“I don’t think I’m going to ask you to explain that.”

“Honestly, it’s better that you don’t.”

“But, you’re exhausted, regardless.”

“And not just physically. The last week has just been crazy. As soon as we found out about the babies, I told myself not to get attached, that they already had a mom who loved them. Blood doesn't mean anything. Howard was my biological father, and he was kind of a dick most of the time. I understand why now, but it doesn't change the way things were. Maria, on the other hand, did not give birth to me, but I never for one moment doubted that she loved me.”

“I know.” Pepper patted his shoulder in comfort.

“But then my nephew because he was desperate to get his mom back, his adopted mother, he brought Hydra into the Playground. Now Isabel is dead, and that means I have to step up.”

“How do you feel about that?” Pepper asked.

“Like I would really like to see if the bar has already been stocked, but I can't do that. They need me. I can’t ever let the alcohol control me. I won’t be Howard.”

“You can never be Howard,” Pepper reassured.
“It’s not hard to become a depressive alcoholic, especially when you're genetically predisposed to alcoholism and depression. He was self-medicating. There were so many things eating Howard up inside, like Hiroshima, not finding Steve, and losing Natasha. I started looking at some of the diaries again from the 50s, including some of the special pages dropped off by Fury’s courier. He blamed himself for Marcy and Tyler’s dad getting killed.”

“I doubt that that was his fault.” Pepper rebutted.

“They were looking for the Winter Soldier with an Agent Stevens who I think may be May's stepdad or step-grandfather. Anyway, from reading between the lines, I think they knew it was Bucky or at least suspected. They got too close, then Peggy's husband ended up dead, and she almost followed behind him. I think if she didn’t have the super-soldier serum in her system, she would not have made it. Because of what happened, Howard made a bunch of questionable decisions after including participating in Project Paperclip, memory wipes, stopping the search for the Winter Soldier, which led to even more drinking and his eventual death.”

“Oh, God.”

“So, I can't even completely blame my husband's BFF for my parents' murder because of Hydra brainwashing and Howard knowing the truth but stopping the search.” Pepper decided this is not the time to tell Tony that he referred to Steve as his husband.

“I hate to interrupt this conversation boss, but Shield 616 has been picked up on radar by Hydra per Agent 33.”

“We knew this is going to happen. The plan is still happening?” Tony asked.

“Yes, sir. I will let you know when Avenger 218 lands.” Friday told both

“I thought the ship was cloaked.”

“That usually works fine when you’re not trying to infiltrate a secret base in the Arctic Circle where there’s nothing around. Agent 33 informed us that if Friday tries to infiltrate the weapons defense system remotely using the brother-in-law’s codes, we would be shot out of the sky. They want Von Strucker and me for that matter to come to them to kill both of us. Hostile corporate takeover or whatever. Apparently, Von Strucker’s management style is too soft.” Pepper responds by sighing before turning her attention back to baby Tony. He was a sweetie pie.

“Shield 616 was just hit. 33 is sending infrared images.”

“Oh, God, Tony. I’m sure he’ll be okay." She said, looking over to Tony, who wasn't reacting at all.

“I know he will be.”

“You knew this was going to happen?” She asked Tony, still confused.

“Yes. We knew we couldn't sneak in without being detected, so Shield 616 is essentially a decoy. May is flying Avenger 218 with the team on board, trying to pretend that they’re debris.” She looked at him in open mouth shock.

“Don’t worry, Leo already has blueprints for the replacement. It’s going to run on arc reactor technology and be kind of a cross between the bus and a helicarrier. It will be great.”

“And you knew this was all happening, which is why you couldn't sleep?” Pepper asked.
“One of the reasons, I’m also worried about all my kids. Leo had to be tranquilized, again because he’s so concerned about Ward. Thankfully, Tim is here now and can deal with that and Alana.

“She is an adorable little girl.”

“Who’s been completely traumatized. Alana only started talking again when her uncle got here. Suarez will be here soon, though, to help with that.”

“Which is good because you probably need to talk to her too.”

“So much. The babies and just everything else.” Tony sighed in exhaustion.

“For what it’s worth, I think you’ll be okay. You’re not alone.” Pepper squeezed Tony’s hand in reassurance.

“I could be if this goes badly. It sucks being the one left behind. How did you deal with this for years?” Tony asked her.

“Not well. At least you understand why Steve is doing this, better than I did.”

"In this case, for me."

“Yes,” Pepper confirmed. “I never completely understood, but you do, and that's why you and Steve work better together.” She told him honestly.

“Boss,” Friday interrupted. “Avenger 218 has made contact. They have landed safely and will begin the rescue operation.”

“What about backup?” Tony asked.

"15 minutes out," Friday responded.

“Backup?” Pepper asked, confused.

“Yes,” Pepper responded.

“No,” but Pepper overruled him. “Friday, just let us know when Steve has Natalie.”

“Yes, Ms. Potts.”

“Why does my AI listen to you over me?”

“You’re the one who programmed it that way.”

“Obviously, I’m regretting that at the moment," Tony said as he burped Madison gently on his shoulder. She was now done with her bottle.

“Tell me about your plans for arc reactor powered aircraft. Is this going to be an Avengers only thing, or will we be able to sell a version commercially?”
“A passenger jet version at least. But the quinjet version is for Avenger/Shield use only because I would really like to avoid a repeat of the evil carriers over the Potomac incident.” Tony explained.

“So would the shareholders, but the commercial jet industry can be very lucrative. We have done avionics before.” The board loved the numbers on the Stark phones, but they always want more, and they’re going to be ridiculous once they find out about the new Stark heirs.

“Just imagine the amount of greenhouse gas emissions we can reduce if, in 20 years, all commercial jets are running on arc reactor technology.” And thus, Tony begins his pitch for how Stark industries will go into the jet plane business.

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Lincoln, never in his wildest childhood dreams, would think he would be on a rescue mission with Captain America and Black Widow. Well, Captain America anyway, since Black Widow was not a thing until med school. Obviously, he was nervous. It would be better if he were on the same team as Tripp and Skye, but he was a doctor, and that means he needed to go with the team rescuing Dr. List and Trista. He wanted to help Trista. They bonded when delivering the twins. He knows he wouldn’t have survived delivery without her.

Also, he knew Agent May wanted to stay close to him after their talk earlier. She was grateful that he didn’t tell the others that she was the one who killed Ava. He tried to convince her that she made the necessary choice. Some people cannot have powers. He instantly thought of James, who was kicked out of Afterlife. Unfortunately, he was sure that May didn’t entirely believe him. It was something to discuss after they infiltrated the Hydra base.

The base was everything he thought it would be, but somehow worse. The smell of death filled the air. He could feel the despair of the place. It was especially evident in Agent 33’s face when she met them by a back entrance.

“I’ll take you to Trista, but Natalie is with Whitehall for her daily torture session.” Her dark expression told Lincoln that was not hyperbole.

Lincoln watched moments later in amazement as the superheroes and secret agents managed to quickly take out any Hydra operative they came across. Most were unconscious within seconds, and that shield was very useful. Lincoln had no idea how it worked.

The team quickly found their way to the holding area. They did pass some dead bodies, and Lincoln thinks he might recognize one person from Afterlife. Because of course, Hydra kidnapped other Inhumans to do whatever the hell they’re doing here.

Eventually, they do find the cell where Trista is being held because of the sounds of a fight. He really shouldn’t be surprised to see her stabbing a Hydra goon with a pair of surgical scissors in the right artery to make a grown man bleed to death very quickly. After delivering twins with the woman, Lincoln forgot that she was a secret agent that just happened to have a medical background.

“I thought you would be missing a few appendages,” Lincoln remarked, looking her over. She was very bruised with several bandages covering her body, but she was mostly intact. Although there was a lot of blood, that was probably from the Hydra agent that she just killed.

“I would be if Natalie wouldn’t go into the memory machine of torture. That’s where Natalie is right now.” Trista explained.

“Of course, she is,” Natasha mumbled under her breath.
“I don’t know how long she’s been there. They don’t exactly give us clocks.”

“Natasha, get Trista back to the Quinn jet. We are going to find Natalie.” Steve ordered.

“Lincoln, you’re with us,” May said.

“They’ve been providing me with equipment to heal up her wounds, which is more than the other test subjects have been given.”

“Obviously, that's where you got the scissors from,” Lincoln remarked.

“Because they are idiots. I don’t think they knew that I was actually a Shield agent.”

“We will debrief later. Get out of here now.” Steve ordered again.

“We will definitely debrief later because we only have about 10 minutes before the military will show up to level this place,” May mentioned.

“Let’s go.”

xxx

As Natalie watched a Shield plane being blown to pieces on screen, Whitehall smiled and gave a speech about how this was a new chapter for Hydra, as if she wasn’t the only one in the room outside of his guard. She wanted to stab him in the throat. How dare you celebrate the death of her husband and possibly her brother.

This was just a game. All of this was a game, and Whitehall was a monster. She remembered that now, he used to be the old and wrinkly Werner Reinhardt. He killed somebody for his current younger body. This name was just a façade.

Natalie is so glad her son decided to change his first name to Alex. Of course, unlike her, he always knew the Hydra truth.

Now she will never get to talk about everything with Wolfgang. Or at least she thought that until the intruder alert was sounded and an image of her husband showed up on the screen. Whitehall was furious when his operatives, instead of shooting Wolf and the others with him, put down their arms at her husband’s command. It’s at that moment she sees Tripp in the background, and she knows this is a rescue operation. Why they brought her husband along, she has no idea although maybe it had something to do with everybody dropping their weapons as soon as they see him. They will have a long talk after this.

“It looks like your plan didn't work like you thought it would.” She snarked. “My husband is alive, and I don’t see my brother anywhere. Maybe they are smarter than you.” Those words got her a slap to the face. She didn't care. Now that she knew help was here, it was time for her to act.

“I always have a B plan.” He said to her viciously, staring her right in the face only inches away from her.

“So do I.” Quickly Natalie reached for the gun that she knew Whitehall had on him. “So good news, all the time in the memory torture machine made me remember all my training at Hydra Academy.” She didn't mention that she still regularly worked out with a trainer. Although now she knows why she did so well when she started Brazilian jujitsu a couple years ago. She wasn’t a beginner.

Also, apparently, weapons training is a thing because she quickly shot Whitehall in the head like she’s been wanting to do for days. Natalie was expecting one of the guards to now shoot her.
Instead, the now bleeding out on the ground Whitehall received another shot this time to the heart.

“That was unexpected.” Natalie blinks, looking at the guard in confusion.

“We like your husband more.” It was at that moment Trip and a brunette woman she didn’t recognize walked into the room with weapons in hand.

"We are here to rescue you, but obviously, we’re too late."

“Sorry, I took care of it myself as soon as I knew you were here. Also, apparently, Hydra management strategies leave much to be desired when it comes to loyalty.”

“He’s an ass hole.” The random Hydra agent told the group.

“And on that note, if you want to get out of here and maybe just surrender when the military shows up, that would probably be the best for you. They'll be here in nine minutes.” At that, the agent quickly left the room.

“We have to go get Trista,” Natalie told the others.

“Natasha and 33 have her.” Natalie exhaled in relief. “They’re making their way back to the Quinn jet.”

“I guess we should join them.”

“That would be best.” Trip said just before informing the rest of the team that they had her.

When she gets to the quinjet, she hugs Trista despite the fact the other woman is covered in blood. Although she reassures Natalie that none of it is hers. She is so glad that they’re both out. “We made it,” Trista whispered in her ear.

“Get strapped in. The military will be here in three minutes. We’re taking off in one with or without the other team.” An Asian agent says from the cockpit. Nat doesn’t know her name.

“Like you’re actually going to leave me behind,” they hear over the comms. “We are like 15 feet away. It takes a while to make a copy of a Hydra server even when you have all the good passwords.”

A few seconds later, the agent shows up to the quinjet with her husband and a woman she kind of remembers being with Trip before. She was introduced as his girlfriend, which kind of shocked Natalie because she thought he was gay, not bisexual. Who is Natalie to judge since she had girlfriends before.

Maybe she’ll get a new girlfriend after her divorce is finalized. If it became finalized, because in those few minutes when she thought Wolfgang was dead, Natalie realized she still loved him, but she hates him too. These mixed feelings came back the moment she saw him walk into the jet.

“I am so done with you.” She slapped him across the face.

“I know.” He said, but she still let him kiss her. One final kiss as she collapsed in his arms. Xxxxx

“Boss, I am happy to inform you that Natalie and Trista are safely on the quinjet. And the jet has departed from Ice Base Zebra. ETA to Avenger HQ is three hours and 43 minutes. Yes, Steve is with them and unharmed.” Tony was relieved at Friday's words.
“See good news, babies. Your daddy is safe. What about other mommy?” Tony asked the AI.

“Also, unscathed,” Friday responded. Tony was relieved.

“Wonderful news. Did anybody happen to shoot my brother-in-law in the head?”

“Tony,” Pepper reprimand.

“He’s a terrorist that experimented on teenagers. It’s deserved.”

“Unfortunately, no, although Dr. List did slap him.”

“I love my sister,” Tony said with a huge grin.

“And then he kissed her.” That grin fell away at Friday’s words.

“Love is complicated,” Pepper tells him, and she is very right about that.

"Shortly after this, she lost consciousness," Friday explained.

“Fuck!”

To be continued.
Chapter 42: Homecoming

Thank you to everybody who read or left kudos on the last conversation. Remember, reviews make your writer happy and keep her writing. We are really in the home stretch now. After this chapter, there will be a lot of jumping in time. We will start with just a few days between scenes, but then we will begin skipping months at a time. I'm planning for the story to end around 2017/2018 for reasons. If you read my story, Alex Suarez, you'll have an idea of what I'm planning to do for the end of the story.

Also, I am letting you know now that I'm planning to incorporate some elements from Endgame. I had an idea half-formed in my mind for several years on how I was going to end this story, but Endgame gave me a better way to do it. You're just going to have to wait and see what I have in store.

Despite being drugged by a medical team member at the Avenger HQ after finding out his sister lost consciousness, Tony woke up to Steve, trying to get into bed beside him.

"I find you trying to sneak into bed without kissing me offensive," Tony said as he reached out for Steve.

"I was told that you would be knocked out for hours when I tried to take the twins from Pepper."

"Which she refused to turn over to you?" Tony asked.

"She said they’re staying in the makeshift nursery because apparently, you haven't slept for days and therefore were drugged for your own safety," Steve remarked.

"As much sex as I have had with you, I should be metabolizing drugs at the same rate as you by at least Christmas," Tony smirked as he groggily kissed Steve's lips.

"And you probably conveniently neglected to mention that to Pepper." Steve settled under the covers.

"We don't talk about our sex lives. And we're trying to keep the fact that the super-soldier serum is sexually transmittable a big secret, so the technician that drugged me didn’t know the correct dose."

"Which is just a convenient way for you to get out of your drug-induced sleep."

"I am sure I'll sleep better once I know how my sister is doing. How is Natalie doing? Is she in medical? And what did Hydra do to her? Also, are you okay? Storming Hydra to rescue friends and family had to bring back some weird memories?" Tony asked excitedly as he tried to sit up in bed, but Steve placed a hand on his shoulder, gently pushing him back down onto the mattress.

"I will tell you everything you want to know if you will stay in bed."

"You only have to ask, sugar bear." Tony snuggled into his boyfriend.
“Yes, your sister is now in medical. And no, I didn’t have a flashback to the war.”

“That’s good.”

“Lincoln and Dr. Cho are taking care of her. Stephanie is with Trista. Dr. Suarez is on her way. We were able to get to both before Hydra could do their worst. They’re mostly okay.” Steve explained.

“Mostly? That concerns me.”

“You’ve been held hostage before, and you know that not everything is physical. It’s why we’re bringing in Dr. Suarez. They showed Natalie a video of her kidnapper, the man who she thought was her father, beating her mom to near death. That’s why she’s been at the rehab center for more than a decade.”

“Fuck!”

“That’s not even the worst of it. Hydra created a technology that helps recover forgotten memories.”

“Or memories erased by the Tahiti protocol or Hydra’s version of it. I know they used it on Coulson. I think that version of the machine is locked up at the Playground or was until the CIA raided the place. We’re still trying to get the really dangerous stuff back.” Like the fucking 084, that was the entire reason the Playground was invaded in the first place.

“According to Trista, they used this technology on her to get her to remember her time at Hydra Academy. She refused to kill her dog, the ritual required to join Hydra. Instead, they decided to make her a part of the Project Lullaby breeding program after Von Strucker presented it as an alternative to killing her. He confirmed everything Trista said as being accurate.”

“I just woke up, and I’m not 100% sure I’ve eaten anything in the last two days, but I feel like I could probably throw up,” Tony told his husband… scratch that boyfriend.

“Would it help your stomach to know that Whitehall is dead?”

“That makes the nausea go away a little. Please tell me you were the one to do it and that there’s video?” Tony asked gleefully.

“No video, and actually, Natalie was the one who pulled the trigger.” Tony smiled at Steve’s words. “By making her remember her past, they made her remember her years of weapons/combat training at Hydra Academy, or at least that’s what Trista speculated. Von Strucker said she was the top of their class. We haven’t been able to ask Natalie because she is still unconscious.”

“And what does Dr. Campbell say about this?” Tony asked.

“That it's mostly exhaustion, and her body now knows that she’s somewhere safe. Trista also fell asleep after the debriefing.”

“That makes sense. Although did Dr. Campbell check her for any internal injuries? I know the avenger Quinjet has the equipment for it. I made sure of that.

“Yes, and all her scans came back clean. She is just severely dehydrated. Dr. Cho’s team is following up now. They want to make sure there’s no long-term damage from the memory machine.” Which makes sense.

“Not Stephanie?” Because Tony would feel better if his sister was the one taking care of his other sister. Oh, that was so confusing.
“As I mentioned earlier, she’s taking care of Trista. She has a few broken ribs as well as a fractured finger but nothing major. It could’ve been worse.”

“I should go…” Tony tries to get up, but Steve won’t let him

“You should go back to sleep. Neither medical team will let you in the room because none of your multiple doctorates are in the medical field.” Steve tells him.

“I should totally remedy that. I think as soon as we are done storming Hydra facilities, Simmons is going to go back to get her MD. I could join her. It would be my version of paternity leave.”

“You do that. I don’t think Stephanie would be averse to knocking you out again, and she knows about your enhanced metabolism.” Steve threatened.

“She takes the big sister role way too seriously. It makes me almost miss being an only child.” Tony said as he laid his head back down on the bed.

“You don’t actually miss it.” Steve laid his head next to Tony’s.

“I don’t. It’s nice knowing that I have siblings, well sisters anyway. Tyler is a mess.”

“I’m aware.”

“Do you know he turned over custody of his kids because he couldn’t bother with his life being disrupted. I would never do that to our kids. I blame the Tahiti protocol.” Steve kisses Tony on his temple.

“Go back to sleep. When you wake up, you’ll be able to see your sister.”

“Fine, you win. Before I forget, thank you for sending Pepper. You're aware she's already claimed the godmother role," Tony says with a smirk, and he really is happy that Pepper is willing to step in this role after what happened.

“Absolutely. I really did try to bring the twins in here, and she wouldn't let me. She wants them to stay in their room.”

“Probably because you need sleep too.”

“I need less than you.” Steve rebutted.

"You still need sleep, and crying babies are not conducive to that. We’re going to have to figure out the custody thing. It's different with Isabel now gone.”

"I know, but that's not a conversation that has to take place right now," Steve tells his boyfriend.

“And whatever story we're going to tell the press. Also, did you hear that we're invited to a very May–Stevens thanksgiving? Mr. May sent us an invitation that explicitly states that we can’t bring weapons with us. That alone tells me it will be a disaster. I have to work on the nanotech gauntlets.”

“We’ll talk in the morning.”

“Oh, May’s stepdad looks like he could be your cousin or your twin, but without the cryo. He worked with my dad and mommy Peggy chasing ghosts during the 50s. I want to do a DNA test.” Tony told his boyfriend who’d thankfully didn’t mention his new name for Peggy.

“No DNA tests at Thanksgiving.” Steve admonished.
“What about Christmas?”

“Sleep, Tony.”

“Fine, but I want cuddling. I need cuddling. This is such a mess.” He responded by placing an arm around Tony and pulling him closer to him.

“I promise we’ll figure it out in the morning.”

When they got to the half-constructed Avengers’ HQ, Skye was exhausted. She was supposed to go to the room that she would be sharing with Tripp and Lincoln since they were short on space because the Shield support rooms were part of the campus still being constructed. Instead, Skye asked Friday where to find Fitz. She was so shocked when Friday said Grant Ward’s hospital room that she asked Jarvis to confirm. That’s when the AI told her the entire story, and she just knew that Fitz needed her.

Precisely as the AI told her, Leo was sitting next to Ward's hospital bed, Stark pad in hand. Wordlessly, she placed the children’s coloring book in the chair next to him on the floor and sat down.

“He looks so small like this. Vulnerable.” Skye spoke after several minutes of silence. “I don’t think Ward ever looked vulnerable before.” Not even when she watched his interrogation sessions with Natasha.

“He was always vulnerable,” Fitz whispered. "I assume the mission went well.” He placed his Stark pad on his lap and turned to her.

“We have your aunt back.” For a second, Skye almost thought she saw Fitz smile. “Natalie is currently with Lincoln and Dr. Cho. She is still unconscious, but the doctors are not worried about it. Your other aunt, Stephanie, is with Trista. Tripp is with her.”

“How is Trista?” Leo asked.

“Exhausted and dehydrated because you know that the Hydra Hilton doesn't supply you with enough bottled water, but she's okay. Trista is conscious, although she did take a nap on the way back.” She decides not to mention the broken bones.

“That’s good.”

“Tripp is in there with her for emotional support and maybe to get more details on what happened. Since I almost threw up during the initial debrief, Coulson told me to go to bed. I know that's not possible right now, so I thought I would find you. I didn’t think I would find you next to Ward’s bed.”

“It’s been a long few days.” Fitz sighed.

“Jarvis gave me a readout. I want to ask how cool it was to use the armor, but your frown is telling me this is not the time to ask that question.”

“I don’t even remember anything I did while in the suit. It was a blur.” Fitz stammered twice while speaking, so she knew he was exhausted. “I acted on instinct, but it was still too late.”

“I was told Ward got a bullet to the head, protecting his niece Alana. Did that actually happen?”

“Yes, and the twins as well,” Fitz answered.
“He’s never going to stop bragging about that when he wakes up,” Skye remarked darkly.

“He’s not going to wake up,” Fitz whispered, and he almost seemed disappointed about that.

“I know it may seem that way, but you were in a coma for three weeks, and now you’re significantly better and kicking ass in the Iron Man armor.”

“That’s different.” That’s when Fitz went into a scientific tangent that completely went over her head. From what she gathered, even with all their technical advancements, there’s only a 1% chance that Ward will wake up.

“It’s Ward. 1% is all he needs. He will probably stay unconscious until we all forgive him and then wake up to gloat about it.” Skye argued, not sure if she was supposed to be reassuring or not.

“Tim and I have been talking about long-term care options with Stephanie. He can’t go to a regular rehab facility.”

“Because he would break out eventually even if he’s in a coma.” Just because Grant Ward is in a coma, doesn’t mean that Skye trusts him at all.

“Or Hydra will come along and finish the job. He is a loose end.” Leo remarked.

“I’m not sure there’s going to be that many heads of Hydra left to order that he be taken out. Strucker was chatty on the ride back to the compound. Having your estranged wife lose consciousness in your arms after being tortured by your various colleagues, it makes you reevaluate most of your life choices.” Natasha and Agent 33 were currently trying to get as much intel as possible before they were forced to turn him over to the Hydra task force.

“Tim wants to end support and let Ward pass peacefully.” Something in Fitz’s face tells Skye not to say that Ward will survive like the cockroach that he is. Being in the system taught her how to read people, and this was one of those times to stay quiet. “Tim is letting me have the final decision. He says it’s the right choice.”

“You were in love with Ward?” Of course, instead, she accidentally blurted out the other question forming in the back of her mind ever since she found out about Las Vegas.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I know better.” Skye apologized quickly.

“You can’t love someone that was never real,” Fitz tells her in a whisper.

“But?” Skye prompted.

"Just before Ward was shot, he told me that he slept with me because he wanted to not because Sitwell told him to turn me into a Hydra asset," Fitz confessed.

“I’m not surprised about that last part, at least. I so would not have kissed Ward if I knew that you two had sex in Las Vegas. I’m starting to think his crush on me was him lying to himself.” It’s what Ward was best at.

“He didn’t want to bring me to Hydra. He didn't want Alana to end up with Hydra or the babies. He didn’t want us to end up like him.”

“And yet Ward wanted to make me dark like him. What does that say about me?” Skye asked.

“That Grant Ward is a complicated person,” Fitz mumbled.
“Understatement of the millennium.”

“What do you think I should do?” Fitz asked earnestly. The confusion was audible in his voice.

“I think Ward would want to go out fighting even if it’s just fighting for his life. I don’t think Ward would want to spend the rest of his existence in a room on a ventilator.”

“Okay.”

“But also, maybe talk to Natasha too. She spent a lot of time with Ward these last few months.”

“Where is she?” Fitz asked.

“Probably still babysitting your Uncle with agent 33. The more he talks, the more Hydra members we have to arrest, or rather the task force has to arrest because we’re taking a break for a few days.”

“And we have a funeral soon for Isabel. Janice is planning it.” Fitz tells her.

“Good to know that she survived.”

“The attack by Hydra made her remember her training. She took out two Hydra agents.”

“Seriously, how many people did they send to the compound?” Skye asked him in frustration.

“A lot,” Leo remarked.

“So, do you want to talk about something less traumatic, like the fact that I might know who my mom is?”

“This is safer ground?” Fitz asked eyebrow raised.

“Compared to talking about if Grant Ward should live or die? Yes, but most things are. You should probably call Simmons too.”

“She believes Ward should go out on his own terms,” Fitz tells her.

“Everyone should.”

“She doesn’t want me to make the final decision until she’s here.”

“Because she knows you’re going to need the support no matter what. It doesn’t matter what we think, it’s up to you and Tim.” Skye tells him.

“It should be up to Ward.” Fitz sighed.

“What do you think he would have wanted?”

“To go out fighting.”

“I think so too. I think you have your answer. When will Simmons be back?” Skye asked.

“Two days. She’s transferring the other twins to our facility for ‘rehab’.” Note to self, ask who the other twins are later.

“And I think you should take those two days to really think about what’s happening. In the meantime, I’ll tell you all about my possible mom and the fact that I have a gene that could give me superpowers. So does your baby brother. You’re just a carrier of the gene. Oh, we have a little alien
DNA in us.” Fitz gives her a strange look.

“I’m going to need coffee and real British junk food for this conversation.”

“I heard your dad imported Twiglets for you, whatever those are.”

“I regret never making it to a grocery store while we were in London last summer,” Fitz said with a smile. She was grateful for it.

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“You’re supposed to be resting,” Phil said when he found May in the makeshift nursery room feeding Antonio. He’s not using baby Tony just because big Tony prefers it.

“I’m fine. It wasn’t much of a fight anyway.” May remarked.

“It does help when the hostage tries to rescue themselves. It was more of an extraction then a rescue mission.” Phil said as he sat down in the rocking chair next to hers. They must’ve just arrived because there was a packaging box in the corner.

“I’m still not ready to sleep, though. I just want to spend some time with the babies, and Pepper could use some relief.”

“It is peaceful here. Besides, I’m sure you wouldn’t let Ms. Potts tell you no.” Phil remarked.

“Steve said that we would share custody wherever they end up. Which might be here for a while until the Hydra raids are over.”

“But it won’t be us doing the raiding.” May raises an eyebrow at him.

“Not only us. The Hydra task force team is salivating over what we brought back from the Arctic Circle. Turns out the World Security Council member that ordered nukes to Manhattan is Hydra. Although von Strucker passed that information along before the raids. I just watched a live stream of his arrest.”

“Of course, you did.”

“I couldn’t miss that. Although now that I can go to sleep, I was sad to not see you in our bedroom.” Phil said as he pressed a kiss to her temple.

“You know I always have trouble falling to sleep after a mission.”

“I know, but I feel like you're sleepless for several reasons this time.”

“You think I can be a good mom?”

“I think you already are. I found you here instead of in the gym, killing a punching bag.”

“The gym isn’t set up yet,” May tells him.

“That’s just an excuse. You never need an actual gym to work out.” May glared at him before going back to feeding Antonio. It was true, but he didn't need to bring that up.

“I told you that I was pregnant before.” May finally spoke after a moment. She knew her boyfriend well enough that he wasn't going to let this go.
“You miscarried after Bahrain.” His face is dark because she knows that he blames himself for what happened. They’re both very good at that.

“This resulted in me having a hysterectomy.”

“I know.” Phil places a hand on her shoulder. He would probably grab her hand if she weren't holding Antonio.

"I always thought it was a punishment for killing that little girl. It was as if the universe decided that I didn't deserve a child, so they took it away from me.”

“Just because you couldn’t save someone doesn’t mean you kill them.”

“In this case, I did,” May told him, looking down at Antonio. She's pretty sure the baby was done with his bottle for now. She quickly moved him to her shoulder. Phil thankfully took the bottle from her.

“Even Lincoln doesn’t see it that way, and he heard of what happened from a woman that excommunicated him from the Inhuman community for joining Shield,” Phil argued.

“You put the pieces together?” May asked, not making eye contact with her boyfriend.

“It was pretty obvious after you left the briefing so abruptly. Also, while you were getting into your tactical gear, I asked Campbell what country the incident took place in, and he told me Bahrain. Shield did a lot of operations in 2007, but not that many in Bahrain.”

“He doesn’t know everything. He heard about the incident secondhand.” May argued.

“From someone who is very anti-human and Shield. Understandably so considering what happened and yet Lincoln still believes your actions were justified, and so do I.” Phil argued.

“It doesn’t make the guilt go away.”

“It never goes away, but that doesn’t mean you're not going to be a good mom. You have essentially been the bus mom for the last year. You’ve been good at it.”

“It could mean I will end up like my mom. My father raised me because my mom was never around. She was always running missions. The mission was always the most important thing in her life. It’s why their marriage fell apart.” May tells them.

“That’s part of the problem of being with a civilian. Your mom's second marriage has passed the quarter-century mark. It helps when your partner has the same security clearance as you.”

“I completely understand being terrified of ending up like your parents, but I think we will do much better. Well, for one thing, you and Steve are already not together, but consider each other best friends.” Stark called from the hallway because, of course, he was listening in.

"That’s true," Phil remarked as Stark walked into the room.

“He’s dating my fabulous self. Also, one of those kids has a little bit of me, poor child. I don't consider myself a soldier, but I don't think any of us are actually civilians. This last mission went well, with one of us staying behind. We're just going to have to go on rotation because if you're keeping Natasha as your number two, I get to keep my babies' mama on as an Avenger.” Phil responded by rolling his eyes.
“What are you doing here, Stark?” May asked.

“Friday already knows me so well and woke me up in time to watch the guy who was responsible for me flying a nuke into a wormhole be led off in handcuffs. His daughter was also arrested. It was glorious.” Stark said as he walked over to pick up Madison.

“And since, according to Friday, my sister is still unconscious and Pepper has retreated to her own room, I thought I would check on the babies. Although now I understand why Pepper left.” He said, looking at May.

“She will soon. She’s strong.” Phil remarked, trying to be reassuring.

“I would repeat Howard’s mantra about Starks being made of iron, but I just don't feel like it right now,” Tony said just as his boyfriend walked into the room.

“Why is everybody here? You're supposed to still be sleeping.” Steve said with the glare directly pointed at his boyfriend.

“Friday woke me up to watch the arrest of the world security member who tried to nuke Manhattan. Turns out, he was totally Hydra. I tried to bring you with me, but you broke a lamp with a pillow.” Stark explained.

“Not surprising.” Tony raises an eyebrow at his boyfriend. "I mean the Hydra thing. I really hated him at that party a couple of months ago."

“Memories of that are making me nauseous. I can't go back to sleep nauseous, so I came to the nursery for quality baby time only to find out May was already handling feeding duties.” At that moment, Madison begins to cry.

"Thankfully, we have two," May remarked.

"The team really did get this together fast," Tony said as he walked over to Madison's crib. “When Pepper drugged me last night, there was only a pop-up crib in here, and now there's a full nursery complete with couches and everything."

"Not unremarkable with your resources," Phil remarked over the still screaming baby now in Stark's arms. Steve quickly walked over to help his boyfriend. Madison promptly stopped crying.

“I guess somebody wanted their Cap Dad.” Tony kissed Steve on the cheek.

“There’s another bottle in the milk fridge. You just need to warm it up, and I can't believe you have a bottle warmer." 

"Nothing but the best for our little munchkins," Tony remarked. May is 100% sure this is compensating for not being around when Fitz was a baby, but May chooses not to voice that.

“One fully warm bottle for you, Cap Dad,” he said a few moments later.

“I thought I would go with Papa,” Steve responded as he took the bottle from his boyfriend.

“No, Coulson is definitely going to be Papa. Or, Agent Dad.”

“Obviously, you are Iron Dad,” Phil remarked. “I’m included in this?” He trained his gaze to her.

“Of course, you are. You're the cool stepdad. Or the strict stepdad. Maybe I’m the cool stepdad.” Steve glared at his boyfriend, “or just daddy, I'm not picky.”
“You also have to be married to be a stepdad,” Phil mumbled under his breath. “You’re also Antonio’s biological father.”

“It’s legal in New York now, we could get married,” Steve said, turning to Tony, obviously not realizing that Phil was talking about her. They were talking about that later, but Tony was too much of a drama queen for her right now.

It was at that moment May decided it would be in her best interest to leave with Antonio and Phil.

“I definitely think they need to have that conversation without us,” Phil remarked once they were safely outside of the room.

“Which is fine because I have no desire to watch.”

“I think you’re going to be a good mom. No matter what, you're not going to be alone. I will support you completely.” Phil tells her as he reaches out for her hand.

“So, you are willing to jump into the stepdad role?” May asked.

"I was thinking crazy, Uncle Phil, but I'm open to other options, and I wouldn't mind stepdad eventually. I'm 100% in this with you regardless of what the babies call me." Phil said, leaning over to kiss her.

"I hate to interrupt," Friday began as she spoke. "But Agent Carter has landed. The agent said that she can debrief Director Coulson on her walk to Trista's medical room and would be there for the remainder of the day."

“I assume you’re referring to Agent Sharon Carter, who is supposed to still be in Miami.”

"Yes, Director Agent," Friday replied much to Phil's annoyance.

"Seriously, could Hydra have given you a less annoying co-parent? Tell Agent Carter I will be right there. Unless you need me?"

“I think we all need more sleep before we talk about custody arrangements.”

"Although I'm lobbying for somewhere in the DC Metro. Good news, we made some friends on the task force so we might become an agency again."

"We'll talk later," May said just as she walked back into the nursery to see a kissing Tony and Steve. Xxx

“Although we can’t get married in Virginia or several other states where I have houses yet. I think I’m doing an amicus brief or something with the Supreme Court. Is this your way of proposing?”

Tony asked, turning to his boyfriend in shock. Tony was so shocked that he did not register that Phil and May left the room.

“We have kids together. It would make sense to be married, especially because that's legal now, in New York anyway. Maybe if we do it, then they'll hurry up and change the laws in other states.”

Tony was torn between feeling joy that Steve was so happy that they could legally get married (in some states) and being annoyed at the fact Steve is probably only suggesting the idea because they have kids together.

“So, you only want to make an honest man of me because you managed to knock me up with the help of Hydra, sort of? Or as some sort of political statement?” Tony quipped.
“Of course not. I’ve been thinking about it for a while. Haven’t you?” Steve asked. Tony wasn’t sure how to respond. Of course, he’s thought about it. Like, browse engagement rings at 3 AM thinking about it.

“I feel like this is an appropriate time to inform you, Mr. Stark, that you refer to Steve as your husband six times yesterday, including once in the presence of Ms. Potts.” Friday interrupted, and Tony couldn't be frustrated at the AI.

“Tattletale. Jarvis would never do this.” Tony complained.

“You programmed me for complete honesty. I also must inform you that Capt. Rogers has referred to Leo as his stepson 13 times in the last two weeks.”

“I think it’s really time for you to consider bringing Jarvis back now,” Steve told his boyfriend. “It’s not that I don’t like you Friday, but I think maybe you can be the AI for the nursery.”

“Jarvis did protect the babies during the Hydra raid, so I'm a little less annoyed. Maybe I programmed Friday to be too honest. Which may be a good thing for a nanny AI, but not for other purposes.”

“You think,” Steve remarked. Tony couldn't help but kiss him. "No matter what, I do want to be with you, kids, and everything, and I want the world to know that I’m committed to that.”

"Okay, I still love you even though you remind me of an earnest puppy right now.” Steve smiled at him so brightly it made Tony feel like his heart could burst. It was extra cute because he was holding Madison. “And we are coming back to this conversation sometime soon, possibly at a jewelry store because honestly, I have been looking. Although I think I shouldn't even get a ring until it's legal for us to get married in all the states we have houses in, including Virginia. However, I'm fully willing to acknowledge that I want to marry you someday.” Steve responded by kissing him again.

“Actually, what state are we going to reside in?”

“Or at the very least, we should have a talk about who will have primary custody of the twins before you two go back to making out again,” May remarked as she was now back in the room with baby Tony, but her boyfriend was nowhere to be seen.

“I'm sure you would be feeling differently if your boyfriend was still here. Where is your boyfriend?”

“Sharon's back, and he has to debrief her before she gets to Trista.”

“Obviously, there will be more making out there,” Tony remarked.

“I assume the twins will be living with you and Steve, although obviously, the state is to be determined,” May remarked.

“You are equally part of this team. I heard enough of your earlier conversation with Phil to know you're scared, but we are not going to cut you out. Not unless you just want to be Aunt May." Tony offered, knowing that May had a lot of reasons to be concerned.

"No, I want to be their mom. I'm just not quite sure how we are going to do that." May confessed.

“Obviously, we're going to have to live next door to each other, whether it be here at Avenger HQ or in Arlington by the new Shield offices. Good news, Shield might be a government agency by the time construction is done, which were going to have to speed up due to the Playground incident. We have a meeting in DC next week to decide that.” Both May and Steve gave him a weird look.
“Handing over Gideon Malik and the Arctic base on a silver platter got us a lot of brownie points. So we are at least part of the Hydra task force now. There will be meetings next week.”

“And I assume Phil already knows. He mentioned something vaguely about it a few moments ago.”

“Yes. We don’t have to panic about the babies. There are four of us. We can figure it out. Mommy Peggy was the head of Shield and a single parent for years after Hydra murdered her first husband, and Howard made her forget about it. Marcy ended up a productive member of society.”

“Tyler?”

“Marcy ended up a productive member of society. We will do our best to make sure baby Tony does not become a Tyler. Your aunties are awesome, but your uncle is an assh...” Tony caught himself mid expletive. "Friday, let's start a swear jar charity fund."

“Our poor babies," May mumbled under her breath.

"Will be loved a lot," Steve said, placing a kiss on baby Tony's head. At least Tony agreed there.

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“So, you finally came back from Miami to see me?” Trista asked as Sharon walked into the room with Director Coulson by her side. On the brief walk over, she told him about what little she was able to get in Miami. Although they do now have the name of the last Tahiti patient, Cameron Klein (the other one, not the one who was with her the day Shield collapsed). He was living somewhere unknown under the alias Hank Thompson. She knows that she’s going to have to lead the search for him, in addition to her Winter Soldier duties eventually. However, there was somebody who she needed to see first.

“The director told me you were back, and interrogation is never my favorite thing. So, I thought I would turn everything over to Marcy now that she's on her way to Miami." And thankfully, Coulson is not contradicting anything she said.

“I knew you would want her here.” The director said to Trista as he walked back towards the door. “When you’re done here, we’ll talk about searching for Hank Thompson.” With that, Coulson was gone, and Trista was looking at her strangely.

“Alias for a possible Tahiti patient. It was one of the few useful bits of intel I got from my time in Miami.” Sharon tells her.

“I don’t know about that. I was told that you are the reason why the team knew they were flying into a trap. Although, Tripp is still sad that the bus had to be sacrificed to get me out of the Hydra Hilton of the Arctic Circle.” Sharon smirked at her.

“Most refer to it as Ice Base Zebra. That’s what 33 called it when we found her in Miami.” Sharon mentioned.

“Also fitting. It was ridiculously cold, and Hydra only gave us one blanket to share. “

“I'm sure you gave the Arctic Circle Hydra Hilton zero stars in your review.”

Trista giggled slightly at her joke before wincing. "Note to self, do not laugh with broken ribs."

“I’m sorry.” Sharon placed her hand over Trista’s.
“You have nothing to apologize for. I’m a big spy. I knew what I was getting into.” Trista tries to reassure her.

“I let you get kidnapped. I shouldn’t have left you there.” Since Halloween, she has been going over and over what she did wrong. Sharon continuously chastises herself for not seeing that night for the trap that it was.”

“Unless you’re secretly Hydra, nothing that happened was your fault.”

“It was a trap,” Sharon whispered.

“That you were lucky enough to avoid.” Trista squeezed her fingers gently.

“I felt so lost while you were gone. Completely alone.” A tear was rolling down Sharon’s cheek now.

“I guess our apartment was empty without me.”

“I didn’t go back, not for more than a couple of minutes. I was trying to find you, it’s all I could think about. Tripp picked up all my things. I couldn’t…” That’s when Sharon kissed her.

“You know you’re not my pretend girlfriend anymore,” Trista said, pulling away from the kiss. “I’m pretty sure the mission is over.”

“Have you ever realized something at the worst possible moment?” Sharon asked, trying to figure out how to really start this conversation.

“I think I realized Tripp’s ex-fiancé was an ass hole about an hour before the breakup happened. BTW, Tripp is 99% sure you arranged to have Robin killed to get 33 into Hydra. We could talk about that, or you could explain why you kissed me.” Sharon rolled her eyes.

“Because when I got back to the house and found multiple dead FBI agents and an unconscious Alex, but not you, I realized that I haven’t been faking it these last couple of months. Yes, you’re my best friend, but it’s more than that. I wasn’t supposed to leave Miami. But once I knew you were here, I couldn’t stay.” She’s still shocked that Phil didn’t yell at her.

“I adore your rambling” Trista placed two fingers on Sharon’s lips. “I love you too.”

To be continued.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Just a quick reminder that this chapter took place in November 2014. Same-sex marriage was not legalized in the US until June 26, 2015. However, it was legalized in New York State in June of 2011, in DC in December 2009, and Maryland in 2013. Virginia, in contrast, had its Constitution amended to ban same-sex marriage. Virginia has a history of that sort of thing, see Loving vs. Virginia.
I’m literally working on the next chapter right now. Remember, your reviews help me write faster.

*I found conflicting dates for Tony’s year of birth online. I swore I saw 1972 when I looked this up last June but several of those places are now saying 1970 and a few can’t even agree on the date. However, since I’ve already set up the timeline with 1972 in mind that’s the year I’m staying with. Besides, Natasha Stark’s existence in my universe may explain this discrepancy.

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