Despite The Lies That You're Making (Your Love Is Mine For The Taking)

by MarInk

Summary

Tony Stark lived a busy life, hosting a bunch of superheroes in his home and being an annoying super villain right under their noses. He had his trusted AI on his side and he quite enjoyed the lies, and the solitude, and the lone wolf act, thank you very much, and fuck you for asking.

Or, how Steve read something that he shouldn't have and thought about it very intently even though he didn't want to think and did a good job of it for a while.

Or, how Jarvis did something (many somethings, if you want to be pedantic) he shouldn't have and didn't think about the consequences until they came back to bite him in his non-corporeal ass.

Notes

The title is from the Skillet song "Whispers In The Dark."
Chapter 1

The mouse clicked softly.

Hey, guys! So this is my first foray into CapIron and I’m thrilled like you wouldn’t believe. These two are too hot for this planet, I swear! Ahem, where was I? This piece is like double RPF, sort of RPF squared because I got this thought in my mind and I just couldn’t resist. I’m weak, that’s what I am. It also has a lot of pining because pining is the best, and UST, and I promise I even have a plot somewhere in there.

Anyway, I assume you’ve all read the tags and warnings before coming here so you all know what you’re getting yourselves into and that’s enough of A/N. Read on, my padawans, and let the Suit be with you!

Steve had a suspicion half of that wasn’t proper English. Also, what tags and warnings? Google brought him to this page directly, and there was no warning. Did this page contain a virus which was supposed to trigger the antivirus warning? If it did, would anyone tell the potential victims about that right away?

The scroll wheel moved the page down with a quiet sound and there was more of text.

“You won’t get away from justice in the end!”

Captain America threw his shield with so much force that it could probably cut through a building like a knife through butter. A brilliant, blinding burst of light met it halfway in the air; Iron Man’s repulsors weren’t strong enough to break the vibranium but the impact threw the shield off its course and it fell down onto the pavement with a high-pitched clanking sound.

“It’s always refreshing to meet an idealist in this cynical, harsh world,” Iron Man crooned. He knew Captain couldn’t see his face through the helmet and at such distance but he grinned like a loon anyway. “We should do it again sometime, Cap, it’s been fun!”

It had indeed been a lot of fun but it was time to hightail it from the battlefield. The goal had been accomplished before the good Captain arrived, and while flirting with him via deadly blows was a truly addictive activity (he could make a hobby out of that; he wasn’t sure he hadn’t already, what with their frequent encounters that had all gone pretty much the way this one did), he wasn’t looking forward to a brawl with Cap’s numerous backup which was undoubtedly coming.

So he gained altitude, the last word being his this time around, and sped off towards the ocean.

He took his time flying around, shaking off any and all possible tails and just enjoying the sense of freedom which flight always gave him. Only a few hours later he headed back to New-York where, he knew, the aftermath of today’s battle should have been long over and forgotten in the Big Apple’s incessant around-the-clock fuss.

It wasn’t easy to be inconspicuous in a red and gold metal armor but he managed, like always. JARVIS opened the landing pad for him and sealed it again as soon as he was inside his workshop.

Iron Man took off his helmet – God, he needed to tweak the ventilation system, it was like a fucking sauna inside this thing on a fine sunny day like today – and Tony Stark smiled at the bot that had rolled over to him and was now butting his armor-clad leg, demanding attention.

“Hey there, Dummy,” he said, petting the bot’s alleged head. “Missed me? Aw, I’ve only been gone for the afternoon. Fighting the good guys, taunting the good guys, flirting with the good guys… do I
sound obsessed with the good guys? I probably do but I’m not, JARVIS, make it an official note, I’m not obsessed with any good guys, they are so full of moral that it makes me itchy, I’m allergic to too much concentrated goodness. Also, they probably have righteous cooties and it just wouldn’t do to catch those, would it?”

“Duly noted, sir,” JARVIS said, somehow conveying fond exasperation through the smooth computer-generated voice. “Is there anything else you would like to share for future reference?”

“Always with the pseudo-polite sass, JARVIS.” Tony chuckled, letting the robotic manipulators take his armor off plate by plate. “I don’t remember programming you with it, did you just go and download it when I told you that you were supposed to be British?”

“I strive to meet your every need and wish, sir,” JARVIS said dryly, and Tony laughed.

Oh, it felt good to be home again. Also, out of the suit. One of these days he was going to get boiled like an egg inside it, honestly.

It was tweaking time.

The text broke with an empty line, a few hyphens, and another empty line. This written time-out broke Steve’s concentration and he hurriedly closed the page; it took him several tries before he hit the little cross in the corner because he felt confused, and intrigued, and morbidly fascinated, and did he mention utterly, completely confused?

“Jarvis,” he called tentatively.

“Yes, Captain Rogers?”

“What was…What have I just…” Steve stumbled over the words, stopped, and rubbed his forehead with the heel of his palm in frustration. “Never mind. Are the others in the communal living-room yet?”

“Doctor Banner and Thor are there. Agent Romanoff is on her way to join them if the general direction of her movement is to be taken as a basis for an assumption. Agent Barton is in the firing range.”

Right. It would probably be best if Steve plucked Clint out of the range and brought him to the living-room himself.

“Thank you, Jarvis. And please, call me Steve. I asked you not to use ‘Captain Rogers’ before.”

“You most certainly did, Captain Rogers,” Jarvis sounded as cool as ever; Steve wasn’t sure but there seemed to be a distinct vibe of ‘unapologetic’ in the AI’s tone. “However, being polite to houseguests is an integral part of my protocols. I am doing my best to overcome them so as not to cause you any discomfort but, short of sir’s direct interference, I am able to do very little about them.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, anyway.”

The way from Steve’s quarters to the firing range was bound to take a few minutes and Steve spent them thinking. He knew that the Avengers had their share of fans – which was quite bizarre as they were not movie stars or anyone of the sort – and he knew that some of them were commuting over the Internet, this intricate web of information that was hugging the twenty-first century world like a greedy octopus. It wasn’t unknown to him that some of them indulged in creativity inspired by the Avengers; Clint, in particular, had an annoying habit of thrusting under Steve’s nose a Starkpad with
pictures he called ‘fanart’ and some of those pictures were, for the lack of a better word, simply disturbing, if well-drawn. However, Steve had not encountered the texts that were written about them by people they’d never met and, in the light of what he’d just read, it was probably for the best to continue to steer clear.

Tony Stark as Iron Man, seriously. It was just ridiculous on so many levels, Steve didn’t even know where to begin. The man was not one to put himself in danger. Even if he became a super villain, he would hire an army of goons, not get into a suit and do battle. He had a lot of redeeming qualities, sure, which could be seen even through his ever-present loud obnoxiousness if one squinted hard enough; and even then, those qualities could be flipped like a coin and reveal selfishness and vanity on their other sides. For instance, the generosity with which Stark let the Avengers live in his tower and gave them everything they needed, including some unique equipment for training, was also Stark’s jarring habit of throwing money away without caution and, maybe, a need to feel protected with a team of heroes under his roof. A man like him was sure to have enemies.

Steve was willing to be a default bodyguard for the man because the Avengers were happy in the tower and also because Stark’s unbearable personality was sort of balanced out by his unmistakable dazzling brilliance in all things technical. But the idea of him secretly being the Avengers’ (and Steve’s personal) thorn in the side wasn’t something Steve agreed to even entertain. For some unfathomable reason, it didn’t sit right with him, and the convincing way the text captured Stark’s interaction with his AI’s only added to Steve’s discomfort because something so blatantly untrue shouldn’t have been mixed in with something so accurate. Jarvis and the bots were not exactly a secret to the world, the former even did an interview once with an overeager reporter so their correct depiction was somewhat to be expected, but still.

Irritated at the nagging feeling that some fan’s rabid fantasy had left in the back of his mind, Steve pushed open the door of the firing range.

Clint was sitting on the floor, broken targets and pieces of arrows scattered around him. His bow – or what was left of it after today – was held carefully in his lap.

“Stop pouting,” Steve suggested. “Just get a new bow.”

“Excuse me, I’m not pouting!” Clint protested without any actual heat to it. “I’m fuming in a very manly fashion and contemplating the upcoming demise of that glorified tin can, thank you very much! And where am I supposed to get another bow like this? I can’t go back to SHIELD’s generic stuff now, can I? This baby was enhanced by Stark.”

Clint sighed and stroked the graceful arc of the bow up to the melted end where it had met with a repulsor blast from Iron Man.

“I’m sure if you tell him what happened he’ll get you a new bow, just as enhanced,” Steve pointed out. “And in any case, destroying targets with your bare hands will hardly help the situation.”

“No, but it feels satisfying,” Clint grinned, baring his teeth. “I painted them with red and gold, you see?”

Steve saw. Didn’t mean he liked it, though, even if the resemblance to Iron Man’s helmeted face was uncanny on some of them.

“Why is Natasha not doing this instead of me again?” Steve rolled his eyes.

“She said she needed a shower and I needed to quit sulking just because someone had broken my favorite toy,” Clint mumbled. Very sulkily so.
“She was right, you know.” Steve held out his hand and Clint grudgingly took it to haul himself upright, the crippled bow pressed tightly to his side with his elbow. “Come on, it’s movie night, and you wanted to convince Natasha that we don’t need to watch *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, whatever that is.”

“I’ve been convincing her all week and to no avail,” Clint grumbled. “I have a sinking feeling we are really going to watch it, you know, just so she can laugh her ass off at our expense. I need ice-cream for that. Or a drink. A big-ass ice-cream and a big-ass drink. Maybe a dozen pints of rum ice-cream will do the trick.”

Asking Clint what they would be supposed to do with an archer with a sore throat and fever next time they had a mission seemed rather futile, so Steve didn’t do it. It didn’t take long for Clint to drop the subject of ice-cream and start rambling on about Iron Man.

“I swear, the fucker doesn’t even have a proper aim, I mean he could blow my head off but he only caught my bow,” Clint ranted, sounding as if he was genuinely upset that Iron Man’s aim was so lousy he couldn’t kill Clint, as they entered the living-room.

“Who could blow your head off?” Stark asked, suddenly appearing from the adjacent kitchen with a huge mug of steaming coffee in his hands. “Why on earth didn’t they go through with the job, I’d like to know?”

“Iron Man,” Clint spit out the words; his tone wasn’t as vehement now, though. Of all of them, Clint was more like Stark, even more so than Bruce. Bruce and Stark shared startling intelligence, Clint and Stark shared an abundance of childish, sometimes borderline cruel snark in which they both seemed to find unadulterated pleasure.

Steve didn’t understand that, not really, but he was okay with it as long as Clint looked delighted while verbally sparring with Stark.

“Oh, you mean today’s little scuffle?” Stark took a sip of the coffee; his eyelids went down, slowly, as his lips opened to let out a pleased whimper.

Stark’s addiction to coffee was unhealthy to a degree Steve had never thought possible. Then again, this time and place presented Steve with things he hadn’t thought possible quite often, so what was one more.

“Saw it on the news,” Stark went on, having swallowed the coffee. “Dunno what it was like at the other end of the camera but it actually looked like he was after your bow, Barton, not your pretty little head.”

“Why would he want to destroy my bow and not me?” Clint plopped on the sofa next to Thor who was deeply engrossed into his Starkphone, most probably texting Jane again. Well, trying to text. Steve only hoped it wouldn’t end up on twitter again because things like that tended to make the veins on Director Fury’s temples throb, well, furiously.

“Maybe he thought pissing you off would be more fun?” Stark suggested with a straight face, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Har-har,” Clint said, glaring at Stark. “Taunt me, mock me, torture me, why don’t you? Just so you know, next time a bunch of Doombots show up to take this place apart – I’m. Not. Moving. A single. Finger. Most certainly not taking them out like I’d be able to do with my beautiful little baby, no, I’ll just sit there and watch them track mud and inferior designs all over your workshop.”
Stark clicked his tongue a few times, his smirk positively wicked.

“Well, Legolas, if that’s what you’re planning on doing, then I see no point in making you a new baby, a much more beautiful one than the deceased. You see, I was waiting for the coffee to brew and I thought: ‘Why don’t I design a new bow for Barton, Barton’s my buddy, he’s going to take care of all the evil Doombots who scare the living circuits out of my helper bots every time?’ And there’s some titanium lying around the workshop and that new super-tensile string which I made to make Osborn ooze jealousy since he’s been working on something similar for years, I could totally make a bow which could be the king for all bows of the world – no, no, scratch that, the king part, it’d be a god and all the other bows would weep at their own inferiority and bring it sacrifices of soft polishing cloths, but if you don’t want to be my buddy anymore, then no bow for you, mister, I’m making one and arming Dummy with it…”

A well-aimed cushion hit Stark in the face, effectively ending the ramble (did the man even need air to talk? He certainly almost never stopped to inhale). The remaining coffee splashed all over the floor and Stark’s crisp suit, and Steve tensed, ready for the banter to turn into a vicious argument. Stark knew how to launch those, too.

“Shut up,” Clint said, but there was renewed mirth in his eyes. “I guess if you make a bow and give it to me, I could take out a Doombot or two. Purely for shooting practice, you know, if I’m going to get a new baby, I’ll have to get used to it.”

“Not sure if you’re going to get it,” Stark evidently teased; he pulled the formerly white shirt forward, studied it critically, and shrugged. At least he didn’t seem to be bothered by the fact that Clint had ruined one of his outrageously expensive suits. “You’ve been a naughty boy this week, Legolas, you hit your Santa-Claus with a cushion, who does that if they want presents?”

“I swear to god, Stark, if I don’t get one, you’ll be met with flying cushions every time you walk into any door for the rest of your life,” Clint threatened.

Steve sighed and glanced at Natasha and Bruce who hadn’t said a word during this confrontation. Bruce caught Steve’s look, shrugged with a small smile, and effectively fenced himself off by lifting an open book in front of his face; Natasha, despite her inscrutable expression, seemed to enjoy the goings-on as well.

It made Steve worry, the way they had taken to Stark over their stay here; he appeared to amuse and irritate Steve’s teammates in equal measure, like a quirky old friend or a beloved house pet. Not that it was anything bad, in and of itself. Steve just didn’t want his friends to be disappointed when it turned out – and it was inevitable, really – that Stark didn’t consider them friends as well. He was their benefactor and nothing more, even if it was at times hard to remember when they lived under the same roof with him.

Steve pressed his lips in a thin, disapproving line and waited for Clint to cross the line and cause an ugly explosion.

“I’d file a harassment complaint with Fury if I didn’t know he’d laugh in my face,” Stark said, picking the cushion up from where it had ended on the floor and flinging it half-heartedly in Clint’s general direction. “I’ll see what I can do. Gotta go now, though. There’s a business meeting with my name on it, quite literally, and now, thanks to you, Barton, I need to change before I can get there. If I show up in a dirty shirt again, Pepper will kill me. And you, uh, you got a movie to watch or so I heard, so there. I’m going. Totally leaving. Absolutely departing. Completely taking off.”

Strangely enough, he only moved when he stopped talking, looking as if he’d run out of things to say, his eyes distant, clouded with thoughts Steve couldn’t hope to guess. He stalked out of the room.
briskly, not looking at anyone, his hands shoved in his pockets.

The lightning-quick shift from rowdy and cheerful to brooding and withdrawn wasn’t any of Steve’s business but still left him reeling somehow, like he’d just flown a hundred miles clutching at a plane from the outside, shaken and beaten by the air, overwhelmed by the speed and force he had no control over.

It was probably good that Stark left so quickly that Bruce didn’t have time to extend his usual invitation for Stark to stay and watch the movie with them. It was a team bonding thing and Stark wasn’t a part of the team but was, without doubt, capable of rattling their still fragile and precarious balance.

And he always refused anyway.

* * *

Thanks to the Serum, Steve didn’t need much sleep. He had gotten used to it back in the forties and it was a habit easy to fall back to once he was more or less established in the crazy world of the future. A workout, a few sketches, a midnight run, an analysis of the latest mission; a few hours of sleep; getting up before everyone and making coffee and breakfast for the others who were by nature not early birds.

There were occasional nightmares which Steve usually kept pushed far, far back into the most distant corners of his mind but they didn’t come often enough to cause him any serious lack of sleep.

Today, however, was new. Today it wasn’t the ice, it wasn’t Bucky, falling into the icy abyss, it wasn’t anything Steve usually kept thinking about at the end of the day with nothing to distract him.

It was the damn story.

The New-York skyline was coming together under the confident strokes of his pencil but his heart wasn’t in it. Whatever made anybody on this whole planet think that Tony Stark could be Iron Man? Barring all the previously listed reasons why it was simply impossible, there was also the firm knowledge in Steve’s mind that Stark wasn’t a villain material, and Iron Man? He was certainly a villain. So far the people of New-York had been extremely lucky and no casualties had ever been reported after Iron Man’s attacks but the explosions targeted at military bases and companies’ warehouses had caused millions of dollars of damage. A mind-boggling number of people lost their jobs over these attacks, and the American economy wasn’t doing so swell with one of its key points being regularly bombarded by a crazed guy in a suit of armor. For all that Stark was rude, conceited, and generally abrasive, he wasn’t the sort to cause mindless destruction the way Iron Man seemed to be doing.

And there was an issue of ‘CapIron’. Steve wasn’t as well-versed in the twenty-first century slang as he’d like to be, not yet, but there was only one way to decipher this and the idea was a sick one. Steve had seen a lot of sick ideas in his life so knew one when he saw it.

None of this line of thought explained why he put the sketchbook away and turned his computer on, not really.

After a second’s deliberation he typed ‘Captain America’ in the Google search bar again. He’d never intended to find that text, he just wanted to see what the opinion of the general public was on him and his team, even though there were special SHIELD people for that and he didn’t really need to look into it. But he did, and the first search page gave him the cursed link.
It was still there and Steve clicked on it again with trepidation.

The hard thing was to hide his identity. Tony knew very well what the reveal of his secret would cost for everyone around him but sometimes it was just there, at the tip of his tongue, the indignant and haughty: “I am Iron Man!” Every time Cap looked at him with blank disdain that seemed to say without words that Tony was a civilian and didn’t know anything, every time Thor complained of not having an equal partner for sparring except for the Hulk (and Bruce Banner firmly refused to Hulk out just for the fun of it; and Tony so could take Thor on in the suit), every time he was brushed off and ignored and looked at with condescension – he wanted nothing more than to let his secret out in the open, if only to see their faces and experience some very petty satisfaction.

A few times he had to literally bite his tongue in order to make the words stay inside.

Not that anyone would believe him unless he put the suit on in front of them. And even then they could say that he had simply reverse-engineered the suit and was playing a prank on them, God knows he loved pranks. And then there was the little matter of him being officially a super villain.

It wasn’t his intention in the beginning but the papers were eager to proclaim him a menace and a lunatic and it was much easier to go along with it than to try and prove something to somebody. Also, rehearsing his maniacal cackle in front of a mirror was fun, not matter how much JARVIS insisted that it freaked him out.

Tony brought the gauntlet he’d been working on closer to his eyes and inspected it attentively. It was more for the sake of a one-man show he had been doing in the workshop as long as he was old enough to hold a screwdriver; the actual diagnostics were run, of course, by JARVIS.

“The repulsor appears to be in full working order,” JARVIS informed him. “There is no reason to believe that the stability of flight will be impaired again.”

“Good,” Tony inspected his handiwork once more, just because it was damn beautiful, the most beautiful and amazing thing he had ever made. “That’s good, fine, how are those floor plans for the HammerIndustries HQ? Have you recovered them?”

“Yes, sir, I have them stored on your private servers… sir, Captain Rogers is approaching the workshop, I would strongly advise that you put the gauntlet away.”

“What? Capsicle? He never comes down here, what does he want?” Tony hurriedly shoved the gauntlet under a dirty washcloth that was lying nearby.

“I have no means of knowing that, sir. Might I, perhaps, suggest a better hiding place than in plain sight?”

There was a knock on the glass wall of the workshop.

“No time, JARVIS, he’ll see me lugging it around now!”

“Shall I let Captain Rogers in, sir?”

“He’s got the passcode,” Tony shrugged. His heart was beating a little too fast for comfort. “He never uses it, but it’s still working, isn’t it?”

The door slid sideways, and Cap came inside Tony’s sanctuary, wary, wide-eyed, and all business-like.

“Lo and behold, my loyal subjects!” Tony declared, smiling widely. “The Great Capsicle himself
“gifted us with his presence! Shall we make the day a national holiday? What do you say, o mighty lord Butterfingers? Or you, the great and powerful Dummy?”

The bots whirred and chirped, happy at the attention. Cap’s lips were pressed together in a disapproving line like they so often did around Tony. The pinched, disappointed expression on Cap’s face was a masochistic kind of fun, irresistible; when it was directed at Tony, the latter felt a bit like he was being flayed alive but it was the game of a lifetime to press every single of Cap’s buttons and enjoy the ride even if he knew it was going to end in a very loud crash.

The metaphors all jumbled hopelessly in his head, Tony called up a few holograms and pretended to be busy.

“No, really, what’s up, Cap?” He popped the final ‘p’ in ‘Cap’ between his lips and decided that he liked it. “Cap-Cappity-Cap, oh Cappy, my Cappy, what brings you here?”

“It’s worse than when JARVIS refuses to call me ‘Steve’,” Cap mumbled under his breath. “Well, what I wanted to talk to you about is”…

What? Steve reread the last line again. He could put most things down to the interviews that they had to do every once in a while, and what was not known to all and sundry could be found if one was crazy enough to dig for every bit of meaningless personal information. However, a great amount of things never left the tower, and Steve’s less than stellar attempts at interaction with Jarvis were one of those. It wasn’t a secret, as far as secrets went, but he never mentioned it in his interviews, and it was too little and unimportant a detail for anyone else to mention in theirs. How the heck could a stranger know that Steve constantly asked Jarvis to call him by his given name and Jarvis just as constantly refused? Was someone spying on them, here, in Stark tower, full of artificial intelligence and top-of-the-line security technology? If so, to what purpose would they write fanfiction which included it? Why would anyone serious enough to be able to spy on them bother to write fanfiction at all?

Steve stared at the line, frowning. Something was deeply wrong about this and he wasn’t quite sure what.

Maybe he’d have figured it out if he’d had more time to think. But he was interrupted with a phone call, the special kind of call.

The Avengers had to assemble right away.

* * *

Of course, there were Doombots. Many, many Doombots, swarming the streets, quick like ants running around their anthill. And, for a change, Dr Doom himself was also there, standing on the back of a bot of his, high in the air, a few other bots surrounding him like an entourage. They were all equipped with projectors that cast ghostly white light over the surrounding; if it weren’t for the battle, Steve would stop and admire the way the translucent Doomlight bled into the bright, crass neon lights of the city and paled at the edges where it met the dark night sky.

Steve threw the shield, not trying to hide his action, and as Doom turned to deflect a bullet hit him square on the shoulder. Clint was going to be so pissed about the fact that he had to fight Doom with a gun instead of his trusted bow.

The bullet didn’t penetrate Doom’s armor (some of the intel suggested it was actually his own body that was made of a unique metal and Steve was more inclined to believe it than not). Squashed, it fell down into the street and Natasha caught it in her hand without effort, with one graceful, feline-like reach.
Steve’s team was the best.

“If you surrender now, Captain, it’ll save us all some time that will be otherwise spent in a battle you will undoubtedly lose,” Doom said with the confidence of a delusional man.

“Thanks, but no, thanks!” Steve hurled a chunk of debris at him but it was mostly for the sake of appearances. It was sometimes good to let a villain talk and tell you all their plans. It was seriously embarrassing how many of them relished the sound of their own voice.

The Hulk behind Steve growled lowly – he knew he could jump high enough to get his large green hands on the enemy and, evidently, wanted to do just that. Steve moved his head minutely in a silent ‘no, not yet’.

“Is there any chance you’ll surrender without further ado?” Steve wondered aloud. “You know that’s how it’s going to end and yet you continue to try and take over the world. Hasn’t a wise man once said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results?”

Doom laughed, slowly, without a trace of humor in it.

“You seem to find yourself amusing, Captain. In a way, you are, I have to give you that. I might have mercy upon you and kill you quickly.”

“No words can express how grateful I am for such an amazing opportunity,” Steve said. “But I’m afraid I have to decline.”

“Then slow and painful it is!” Doom boomed.

He raised a hand, pointing the Doombots at the Avengers but Steve had some of his own raising to do. Right hand – Hulk, left hand – Thor. One movement was all that each of them needed to launch into action.

A lightning cracked the sky in half and hit Doom on the head; Hulk jumped, roaring in the delight of finally being allowed to fight, and put his fist right through the Doombot on which Doom was standing. He tried to catch Doom by the ankles but Doom was already falling, writhing and jerking as the lightning continued to pulse through him. The air smelt like ozon and grease and dust; it all hit Steve’s eyes and nose as the Doombots on the streets took off towards their leader, causing a strong gust of chaotic wind.

Hulk roared more, this time furiously, and smashed a dozen Doombots in a new jump. Thor’s hammer flew past time and time again, taking out at least four or five with each lap. Steve threw his shield without stopping, and Clint was shooting with impeccable accuracy; Natasha hitched a ride up on Hulk’s shoulders when he landed after a jump and was now somersaulting over the backs of the bots, seemingly destroying them with nothing more than a single touch.

Despite their best efforts, though, the bots still managed to hide Doom in between them, in their swirling masses, and Steve knew that the advantage was gone when Doom rose back, looking unruffled with the exception of now frayed cape.

The lightning didn’t seem to have affected Doom much; it may well have actually charged him up because he sent Natasha flying with a wave of electricity so intense it made the hair on Steve’s body stand on its end even though he was quite far from Doom.

Hulk leaped forward and caught Natasha’s limp body in his huge hands, careful and growling under his breath. Doom sent another wave, cackling maniacally, and Clint’s gun exploded; the sound of
breaking metal mixed with the howl of pain.

“Hawkeye, status report!” Steve snapped into the comm but the response was nothing but static.

He knelt where Hulk lay Natasha on the ground and pressed his fingers to her neck. Hulk next to him whined anxiously and Steve smiled at him as the beat of Natasha’s heart pushed into his fingers.

“She’s alive,” Steve said, and Hulk let out a relieved groan.

“Hulk!” Steve pointed at Doom who was now fighting Thor. “Smash!”

Hulk didn’t need to be told twice.

Natasha was still unconscious and Steve quickly carried her over to the perimeter where SHIELD agents were trying to contain the stray Doombots. The medics took her from him and he ran back to check on Clint.

The archer was on the roof. His clothes were smoking, bits of the gun were lying around, and his face and chest were a bloody mess. He was scrambling to get up – unsuccessfully, but it didn’t stop him from trying again with the stubbornness of a mule.


He coughed violently, his white teeth in striking contrast with his sooty lips.

“Come on, let’s get you over to the medical,” Steve wrapped one arm over Clint’s shoulders and helped him stand up.

“i’m fine,” Clint said. Once back on his feet, he concentrated on wiping the blood from his eyes and forehead with the back of his palm. “Just gimme another gun an’ I’ll shoot ‘im in his doomy ass.”

“‘Doomy’ isn’t even a word,” Steve said. “Let’s go, the stairs are this way.”

“Is Nat alright?” Clint went where Steve tugged him without further protests which only showed that Clint’s injuries were actually serious. “I saw her fall, did the green meanie catch her on time?”

“Yes, he did. She’s with the medics now, that electricity or whatever it was that Doom shot with knocked her out.”

“Bastard,” Clint mumbled. “Not goin’ anywhere, Cap, gimme a goddamn gun, ‘m going to show ‘im what happens to bastards who hurt Nat.”

“Later,” Steve promised. Clint might have been concussed, judging by the way he slurred some words; either way he was not in a condition to wield guns.

A double scream of rage behind them filled the street. Steve turned around just in time to see Thor and Hulk disappear under swarms of bots; his enhanced sense of smell picked up on a new component in the air, something chemical and sharp. Tranquilizer?

The Doombots lowered until they touched the pavement and then they scattered, leaving Thor and now de-Hulked Bruce on the ground. Both of them were not unconscious even though Doom had hardly been sparse with the tranquilizer but they were looking groggy and clearly struggling to move. Mjolnir flew into Thor’s outstretched hand but the first swing led to Thor faceplanting into the sidewalk. Steve winced inwardly.

“Surrender, Captain,” Doom said. “You are the last one standing. Drop your shield, and you may
live long enough to see my triumph.”

“Think I’ll pass,” Steve hissed.

He gripped the edge of the shield tightly, calculating the best angle to throw. It might be his only chance…

“Now, now, what do we have here?” It was a new voice and it was familiar.

Not now, Steve begged inwardly as he turned his head, already knowing who he’d see hanging mid-air.

“The Earth’s mightiest heroes defeated by one little shiny doctor,” Iron Man proceeded with an unhealthy amount of glee in his mechanical voice; even the vocal synthesizer he had in his suit couldn’t hide the intonation. “What a shame.”

“The little fish coming to feed of the shark’s table scraps,” Doom said, pompous as ever. “Watch me deal with the Avengers once and for all.”

“I thought they weren’t your usual go-to guys.” Surprisingly, Iron Man ignored the little fish jab. It didn’t seem in character for him but then again, Steve never claimed to understand what was going on in villainous heads. “Where are the Fantastic Four?”

Doom inclined his head slightly.

“They are just as defeated. Insolent worms, they never had a chance against me! Far, far away, dear old Reed is in a room with no windows or doors, looking in vain for the tiniest crack to fit himself into but never finding it, running out of air to breathe every so often. The Human Torch, that little brat, is burning within the bowels of the Earth, trapped in never-stopping lava. The Invisible Girl sleeps the kind of induced sleep that no magic kiss can break, and as we speak my trusted allies are extracting the power from her. And the Thing… he is in his place like all misbehaving things should be, held by materials stronger than his knobby fists. Their fate shall be the example for anyone who dares defy me!”

“Your allies?” Iron Man asked. “Who would that be?”

“Ah,” Doom sounded like he actually smiled under that metal mask of his. “I believe the Captain here knows them well. Look at the little souvenir they gave me.”

He flicked something small and shiny towards Iron Man and the latter caught it, metal fingers closing over the ‘souvenir’. Upon looking at it, Iron Man whistled and chucked it in Steve’s direction.

“Yeah, I bet you know them, Cap! Look at that thing, all old school goth chic, huh?”

Steve caught the thing on his shield, the metal hitting metal with a pure, melodic sound. It was the size of bottle cap, smooth stainless steel; a crude depiction of a scull and a simple looping pattern under it.

HYDRA.

A full-body shiver went through Steve, and he dropped the sign.

“What is it, Cap?” Clint wriggled out of Steve’s grip and bent down to see. “What the hell is this…?”

Clint’s voice trailed off. He must have recognized it, too.
“What do you say about joining us, Iron Man?” Doom asked.

“A job offer? I’m flattered beyond my wildest imagination, Mr. I-Am-A-Big-Nasty-Shark, I think I’m about to swoon here,” Iron Man pressed his palm over his heart in a mocking gesture. “Are there any retirement benefits? How about health insurance? Dental, I want my dental covered, the life of supervillainy is dangerous, those pesky heroes always want to punch you in the face.”

“Do not mock me, Iron Man,” Doom said in a threatening voice. “You don’t want me as your enemy.”

“Damn right I don’t,” Iron Man agreed. “Because my enemies are kind of these guys who you trumped all over just a few minutes ago – this is plain embarrassing, Captain Rogers, by the way, you need to train more, don’t you have a gym or something? All those movie nights made you lazy, clearly – anyway, they are mine to play with and I don’t really want them replaced with you. So if you’d be so kind as to shove off, Sharky dearest?”

Doom raised his hand to signal the Doombots – even Steve was fed up with Iron Man’s sass by now, and he could imagine how annoyed Doom must have felt – but Iron Man was quicker.

Fluid like mercury, if mercury were red and gold, he shot from both hands. The recoil got him moving and he turned it into a steep slide up effortlessly while Doom staggered to keep upright on the bot back. A group of Doombots headed after Iron Man, and he swept between them as if playing tag; he rose from there midst, completely unharmed, and they crashed into each other.

“Your new buddies provided you with enough materials for bots, I see that, but isn’t it a shame to waste all that on an inferior design?” Iron Man asked, laughing.

He didn’t stop shooting, palms and feet. No one should be able to be this graceful in a huge and heavy suit of armor but Iron Man seemed to pull it off. Doombots went down like bowling pegs, and electricity waves from Doom never reached him; in fact, Steve felt an urge to laugh as Doom’s own bots got repeatedly hit with his attacks, the waves too big and unfocused to hit a target as small as Iron Man.

“Come on, I can’t believe you took out like nine superheroes with this! Don’t hold back on my account, Sharky, show me your best doom and gloom!” Iron Man taunted.

Underneath all the metal, Doom was still human. Humans were prone not to think clearly when enraged.

Every single Doombot that was still in action got up and followed Iron Man at an alarming speed. Iron Man was still faster, though; with a happy laugh he hit supersonic and turned into a bright blur even for Steve’s eyes. Slow, clumsy Doombots didn’t have a chance.

Steve watched with pleasure as Iron Man pulled to a stop directly above Doom, missiles launchers moving out of his shoulders and forearms (missile launchers? Was that new or had Iron Man been holding back with the Avengers all this time?) before he even gained stability. The Doombots were still smashing into each other with a nauseating crunching sound when Doom turned his face up in time to see the missiles coming for him.

Doom went down fast and hard like a cut tree, and the smoking remains of his own bots covered him from head to toe in a matter of seconds.

Iron Man flew over to Steve and Clint and landed a few feet away from them. Steve could hear his hard, quick breathing. Must not have been a walk in the park for him, then, despite what he wanted it
to look like.

“Greetings, Cap! You might want to go down there and put some handcuffs on him or something. His lawyers will have him back on the streets by lunch tomorrow, of course, but a night in SHIELD’s moldy dungeons will still do him good, if you ask me.”

“Did I fall from the roof and hit my head?” Clint asked, staring at Iron Man. “Or did you really just help us defeat you fellow super villain?”

“What can I say, I don’t like stuck up know-it-alls,” Iron Man managed to shrug; his suit was truly a work of art if it allowed such movements. “Also, he wanted to take you guys out and I’m kinda used to handing your asses to you myself. Call me sentimental.”

“Will that streak of sentimentality go as far as you agreeing to come with us?” Steve asked. “Baffling as you are today, SHIELD still has questions for you.”

Iron Man chuckled.

“No way, Spangles. Do I look suicidal to you? In case I do, let me tell you that I’m not. Oh, sure, I put on a metal suit and fly around all by my handsome lonesome, fighting good guys, and bad guys, and whatever other jerks that piss me off but even I know better than go chatting with Nick Fury.”

“Got your priorities straight, heh?” Clint smirked and immediately went tense. “Hey, you owe me a bow, you asshole! Can’t believe I forgot about that for a moment here.”

“Don’t huff and puff at me, Katniss, I’m sure Stark will make you a new one if you ask nicely,” Iron Man batted Clint’s complaints away like flies.

He made a move to leave, and Steve’s shield plunged into the roof next to his feet.

“I don’t believe we are done here,” Steve said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back for you, you won’t even have time to miss me properly. Just, you know, really busy tonight. Gloatimg in my evil lair, rambling to my minions, seriously, my days are packed, this villain gig demands dedication.”

The blue glow in Iron Man’s eye slits seemed to become brighter as he continued without a trace of sarcasm. “And if another dumbass tries to kill you without my permission, tell them you are mine. And I don’t take kindly to people stealing what’s mine.”

With that, he shot off into the sky; in a second or two the darkness swallowed him whole, and the only indication of his presence was the scorch mark left by his boot repulsors on the surface of the roof.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Clint asked, blinking owlishly through the blood that started trickling into his eyes again.

“Darn if I know,” Steve said. “Let’s check up on Thor and Bruce and get Doom into custody. And you need to see someone about your injuries, the sooner the better.”

They made their way downstairs, to the utter mess left by Iron Man. Steve didn’t want to think about the money that the city would have to pay to clean it all up.

The only thing he knew for certain after tonight was that Iron Man wasn’t your typical super villain. He was something else; and with a cherry on top.
A vague memory of having recently heard something similar lurked in Steve’s mind but he tripped over a broken Doombot before it could turn into something coherent.

Sadly, after a battle the work always just started.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The coffee left a tangy nutty aftertaste on Tony’s tongue. He would have appreciated it more – he was a connoisseur of coffee, the connoisseur, if you please, he literally ran on the stuff – if he had been less exhausted, livid, and wound up.

The gall of that asshole! And to think of what could have happened if Tony hadn’t come out in time to get the Avengers out of this mess… He swore out loud and chugged down another cup of coffee without feeling any aftertaste at all this time.

Between the meetings Pepper was dragging him into all week – “It’s important, Tony, it’s the final stage of negotiations with the administration of New-York about the integration of our clean energy into the existing power networks and if you don’t make an effort, help me God, I’ll put my stiletto right through your ball sack” – the designs of the Mark XII which were still far from satisfactory, and a million other things, he got barely five or six hours of sleep over the last seven days. It would probably be the wise thing to go to bed now but he knew the chance of him relaxing enough for a nap was very slim.

“That piece of scrap metal!” Tony growled, jabbing the start button on the coffeemaker again with unnecessary force. “How dare he even think of hurting them! Who does he think he is?”

“It is, I believe, a part of his job description as a super villain to hurt heroes who try to stop him,” Jarvis commented. Oh, let’s add insult to the injury, let his own AI poke fun at him after an evening like that.

“How do you even have smart mouth when you don’t have any mouth at all?” Tony grumbled, flopping on his usual stool. “Put out the feelers, Jarvis, dig deep into the underbelly of the digital world. Find out everything there is about Doom and give it to me. I won’t rest until I destroy the fucker.”

“I would advise that you refrain from such hasty promises,” Jarvis said smoothly. “The destruction of Dr Doom, one of the most powerful and influential criminals on Earth, may take a while, and you have not slept for a rather long time as it is, sir.”

“Whatever, just find some dirt I can use, some Achilles’ heels,” Tony waved the half-full cup of coffee around. The fury subsided slowly as he reminded himself that the Avengers were safe now.

He hacked SHIELD live medical records first thing when he got home, before even making coffee. Clint and Natasha were injured, no permanent damage, and Thor and Bruce were filtering the tranquilizer out of their systems via IVs. Ste… Cap was no worse for wear. Good. Good, it was all good.

“I’ll melt him and turn him into a loveseat in Times Square,” Tony mumbled. As his anger and the leftover adrenaline from the fight drained out, exhaustion was taking over, and a headache was starting to pound in his temples. “Into a set of screwdrivers to donate to the city college…”

Dummy chirped anxiously at the city college remark.

“Not you, buddy,” Tony sighed. “I’m talking about Doom, that fucking fucker of fuckerness… fuckery… oh hell, Jarvis, what’s the noun?”
“To the best of my knowledge, sir, a noun derived thusly does not exist in the English language.”

“Somebody’s got to invent it, then,” Tony turned the schematics hologram for the Mark XII upside down. “Maybe I’ll get on it at some point, make a note of that somewhere, just not on the calendar where Pepper can see it.”

Hot, uncomfortable pain crawled up his chest, weaving its way through the veins.

“Palladium levels?” He asked.

“Twenty-four per cent,” Jarvis said, and the absence of the usual ‘sir’ felt like Jarvis forgot about, being too busy with worry for Tony.

Of course, Jarvis never truly forgot anything.

Tony enlarged the glowing suit, opened it up with both hands like he would open a shell with soft mollusk flesh and a shining pearl within, cuts the schematics apart from each other – life support, weapon storage, flight engagement, outer shell, inner shell, comm and sensors, protection layer for comm and sensors, HUD in full mode with barely a square inch free from numbers and short notifications, the imperfect yet breathtaking beauty of his life’s work pulsing under his fingers.

Tony’s eyes started to hurt very soon, and he knew he had it bad when the gentle glow of holograms was hurting him. That was what the sunglasses were here for (not just to look like a jerk who wears sunglasses indoors, that was a bonus) so he put them on and continued sifting through the designs.

One didn’t become a super villain without a fair amount of stubbornness coming bullheadedness and Tony had no doubt Doom would try to fight the Avengers again. And Iron Man as well. They had to be prepared next time, dammit!

Tony called up the designs for Clint’s new bow. He had thought about it, actually, not while getting coffee in the communal kitchen under a lame excuse of having run out of coffee beans in his workshop, but right after he had blown up Clint’s old one. It wasn’t like he did it out of spite but there was no way in hell he was letting Clint fire at him those EMP arrows that he himself had made as per Fury’s request in order to incapacitate and capture Iron Man.

How was that his life? It was more difficult to keep track of all the lies and complications and overlaps than to stop Dummy from blendering motor oil and pears and trying to make Tony drink it. Argh, he hated pears.

There was the bow, and then Natasha needed some better fighting gear, she couldn’t exactly beat up a chunk of living metal with the ninja tricks aimed at organic things, and Thor needed another reinforced comm – the man went through them like candies, really, the godly static electricity ruining every single piece of delicate electronic equipment – and Bruce, he’d have to figure something out for Bruce, although it was hard to imagine what the Hulk could need in a fight apart from, you know, being there in all his Hulkish glory, and maybe something for Cap, some ace up his star-spangled sleeve…

There was a knock on the door. Tony flinched at the unexpectedness of it and fell off the stool.

Ouch.

“Who’s there, J?” As Jarvis closed everything concerning the Mark XII and opened new, unsuspicious things in its stead, Tony propped himself up on his elbows. It hurt like a bitch: the Doombots got to him a few times today and they were bigger and meaner than he was, even if he was smarter, and the bruises everywhere were likely to last for a week.
“It’s me,” Bruce said, coming in.

He looked curiously at the jumble of designs surrounding Tony and squinted behind his glasses, trying to make out separate schemes.

“I must say, this place looks like the world’s biggest Christmas light with all those holograms,” Bruce noted. “How do you not get confused?”

“What can I say, I’m a genius,” Tony lowered himself onto his back again, mindful of the bruising. It was Bruce, the only person on the team who could and would talk to Tony in proper English and who didn’t mind poking and prodding, literal or figurative. Tony liked Bruce. Bruce was nice.

It was probably not very wise to say that out loud because the ceiling was shifting above Tony and it was never a good sign when things started to shift that were not intended to do so. One needed to be careful in such moments.

“Thanks, I suppose,” Bruce said, smiling.

Cap wouldn’t smile, he’d just look disapproving again if Tony said something like that to him. Not that Tony would. Cap wasn’t nice, he was uptight and infuriating.

Although, Cap’s ass was nice. Really, really nice. Sadly, the rest of Cap was always firmly attached to said ass.

“I wanted to ask you if you could order some chemical compounds for my lab,” Bruce continued, undeterred, from which Tony drew the conclusion that at least the poetic waxing about Cap’s ass had not been said loudly. “I got samples of my and Thor’s blood from SHIELD, they took some while the tranquilizer was still working, and I think I can try and work out the antidote. It wasn’t very pleasant to be drugged like tha… Tony, are you falling asleep there?”

Tony startled.

“What? No, no, of course not, I am very much awake, I have had coffee, there’s no blood to be found in my coffee anymore, I can’t be falling asleep, that would be physically impossible, you’re a doctor, you should know, and I have work to do anyway…”

“Jarvis, how long has it been since Tony here last slept?” Bruce asked.

“Seventy-six hours and thirty-four minutes precisely, Doctor Banner,” Jarvis said, the traitor. “Also, the coffee which sir consumed earlier might no longer be a factor in his being awake or asleep since it was seven hours ago.”

“Tony, have you been working through the night?”

“The night is still young,” Tony protested. “I, I’m sure I didn’t do what you just said.”

“Sir started working on new equipment for the Avengers when the results of the last night’s battle were known and hasn’t stopped up until now,” Jarvis supplied.

Bruce shook his head, an exasperated and amused smile on his lips.

“Sleep, Tony. I’ll talk to you in the evening. Let me help you up, we need to get you on the couch. I’m not really that kind of doctor but I know that sleeping on concrete floor can’t be good for you.”

Tony batted Bruce’s hands away.
“I don’t need no stinkin’ sleep, just so you know. There’s work to be done, can’t have Legolas running about without a bow, and Natasha, and Cap, and you, and the Other Guy, and Thor, and there are really a lot of you, you know. Oh, and your compounds? Knock yourself out, seriously, you can order whatever you need without asking, I told Jarvis ages ago to get anything you’d like if you just say so.”

“Thank you, Tony. But you still need to sleep.”

“But Bruuuuuuce…”

Bruce took Tony by the shoulders to make him get up, and it was either to continue fighting the apparently inevitable, or to direct the remaining willpower into hiding the whimpers of pain that flared all over him because of Bruce strong no-nonsense touch. Of course, if Bruce knew Tony had been thrown around by Doombots just yesterday, he’d probably be gentler but he didn’t, and Tony had to bite into his lower lip to keep himself from crying out. As a petty act of revenge, he hung limply in Bruce’s arms, a petulant dead weight, but Bruce didn’t seem to mind half-carrying half-dragging Tony over to the couch. Damn those powers of inherent niceness, they were scarily unstoppable.

“Go to sleep,” Bruce said, covering him with a blanket. It felt better than when Dummy did it because Dummy was clumsy and overenthusiastic and Bruce was so careful and kind that it might have broken Tony inside just a little bit. “Work will still be here when you wake up.”

“Dunno about that,” Tony said mulishly, just to have the last word in the conversation. The couch felt heavenly under his battered body, against his overly tender (tenderized, more like) skin. Bruce didn’t dignify that with a response and Tony went to sleep.

Traitors, the lot of them, ganging up on him like that.

It shouldn’t have made him smile just before he fell into dreamless sleep but it did.

* * *

Waking up after having spectacularly crashed was a bitch. The only thing that would have made it worse would be a hangover but Tony hadn’t drunk anything stronger than coffee the night before because he hadn’t had time or attention to spare.

What had his life become now that he didn’t have time to get shitfaced? He so totally had a legitimate reason; even Pepper wouldn’t scold him very much if he demonstrated to her the bruises that were courtesy of the Doombots, and told her how close he had been to losing the Avengers to Doom of all people, and generally played his cards right. Not that he could tell her anything, but still.

He could mull over the ‘what-ifs’ in his head however long but the cold truth of reality was that he was awake now, his whole body aching like, well, like he’d been thoroughly beaten up, his throat parched, his eyelashes glued together with eye gunk, his neck killing him from the uncomfortable position he’d been sleeping in.

Not his worst morning, not by far. And it wasn’t even a morning if one were to believe Jarvis saying that it was seven-thirty p.m.

Tony dragged himself into the shower. The water helped to clear his mind a little and he dictated Jarvis a few things about Clint’s new bow that he hadn’t thought of before he was so rudely interrupted by Bruce and told him to put the fabrication unit to work. The sooner Clint got his hands on the bow and could test it in the firing range instead of an actual battle (hello, dangerous and
unpredictable there), the better.

“I recommend sustenance, sir,” Jarvis harped when Tony ventured in the workshop again.

“Sustenance can wait,” Tony pressed the coffeemaker button. “Great deeds lie ahead of us!”

The coffeemaker made a pitiful little sound and filled the waiting cup with pure hot water.

“What the flying fuck?” Tony stared at it, his eyebrows drawn in incredulity.

“It is the end of the month, sir,” Jarvis said smoothly, the bastard. “You appear to have run out of this month’s batch of coffee.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before? I don’t know, yesterday, two days ago, a fucking week ago, J?”

“You were busy, sir,” Jarvis returned.

Tony admitted defeat at that. No amount of yelling at Jarvis for his sneakiness would make new beans magically appear here and now; contrary to the popular belief, Tony knew when to beat a strategic retreat.

“I’m going to download you to a 2007 laptop with Windows Vista on it and no Internet access,” he said. The threat wasn’t heated and they both knew he would never go though with it but he was kind of bitter over the fact that he had to go to the communal kitchen now.

The Avengers would be there, they must be there, it was just time for a nice family dinner, especially after the rough day yesterday. Tony would walk in and everyone would look at him like they had forgotten he lived here, too, and while the others might make small talk or (in Clint’s case) jab him with the best they got, Cap would look at him again like he couldn’t wait for Tony to get out of sight but was too polite to say that out loud.

And Tony himself would have to look at them, bandaged and hurting, and know that it was his fault for not providing them with the best equipment, for being too slow to engage in the battle with Doom.

But he wanted coffee so desperately he was ready to sell his soul for a triple shot espresso at this point. And a sandwich wouldn’t go amiss, to tell the truth.

Come on, said Tony’s inner little Pepper. You’ll have to face them sooner or later.

Better later than sooner, he snapped back. Whether I can run away or not never stopped me from running anyway, you know that.

Yeah, I do, inner Pepper said and she sounded so sad that he gave in and stumbled into the elevator, willing to do anything to avoid this schizophrenic confrontation with himself.

* * *

Sometimes Tony hated being right. Granted, the occasion to do so presented itself extremely rarely, which made it sort of bearable in between the times it actually arose.

He was right this time and he hated it with every fiber of his being as the Avengers looked up at him, all of them seated around the communal table, their plates half-filled with stewed meat.

Nobody paid him much attention, though. Bruce gave him a small smile before returning to the food and Natasha measured him with a blank look which looked as if, as it was often the case with
Natasha, she was trying to decide whether to kill him with her pinky where he stood or not; but that was pretty much the extent of it. Tony slunk over to the coffeemaker, his whole body heavy and clumsy, his ribcage protesting the weight and volume of the arc reactor like it usually did on bad days. The unhappy tension in the room unnerved him.

While the coffee dripped steadily into a cup, Tony turned to the fridge and surveyed its contents. There was some cold smoked meat and chunk of bread and he made a huge sloppy sandwich.

“Where did you get that bruise?” Cap asked out of the blue.

A barely chewed bite of the sandwich went the wrong way and Tony coughed violently until it dislodged itself from his throat and ended up on the floor.

“Gross,” Clint said.

“What bruise? What are you talking about?” Tony wheezed.

“That one on your cheekbone,” Cap pointed with his fork.

Ah, a chunk of an already dead Doombot that had made a dent in the helmet. He couldn’t exactly tell Cap that, though.

“Tripped over Dummy, landed badly,” Tony said. “Why, Capsicle, I didn’t know you cared so much about my pretty face. I’m so deeply moved by your concern that I probably won’t tell the papers my cover story about how you punched me while we were fighting over the last donut in the box.”

The cup was now full and he practically inhaled its contents, feeling the warm liquid go down. It was a placebo kind of thing, of course, but he could swear that he immediately felt the sensation of caffeine entering his bloodstream, getting his still-sleepy brain fully online, and making his heart pump faster.

“I never hit you!” Cap’s voice got a pitch higher with indignation and his plush pink lips formed a surprised ‘o’. It was almost cute. “Why would you say such a thing to the papers?”

“He wouldn’t,” Bruce said calmly, stabbing his fork through a cauliflower with frightening precision. “Tony, don’t joke about papers right now, it’s not the best moment for that.”

Cap seemed somewhat appeased by Bruce’s words but not completely convinced.

“Relax, Man with a plan, I didn’t really plan to mar the image of the American icon,” Tony rolled his eyes. “And even if I did, not even coma patients or stray dogs would believe me since you’re you and I’m, well, me. Comatose dogs would laugh in my face if I tried to tell them that you are less than perfection itself walking our pitiful, sinful, mortal world. What was that about papers, though? Did the evening news show the shocking footage of Captain America leaving his dirty socks around, or something?”

Clint picked a newspaper which had been lying on the table – an honest-to-God paper, dead tress, slightly toxic ink, and all that, wow, that was some serious vintage over there, Tony hadn’t had one around in a really long while – and tossed it to Tony. He caught it and was at once drawn to enormous capital letters of the first-page headline: “CAPTAIN AMERICA IN CAHOOTS WITH IRON MAN?” Underneath that was a grainy picture, most likely taken with a cell phone, and what kind of an idiot whips out their phone instead of running when there are Doombots around? In the picture Iron Man stood before Captain America and since they were not actively trying to kill each other, someone might as well have suspected they were in cahoots. Despite the poor quality, they
were both very recognizable.

“That late into the fight all civilians had to have been evacuated,” Tony said and put the newspaper on the counter in favor of getting another cup of coffee. “I wonder if it was some stupid rookie agent who took the picture. If so, they’d better pray Fury never finds out.”

Clint snorted. Bruce and Natasha nodded as if they were thinking the same themselves. Thor boomed (because he never could simply talk, and Tony was quite happy he wasn’t hangover, actually, right at this moment):

“You speak words of great wisdom, Anthony! The matter is indeed most suspicious and puzzling. Director Fury was here earlier and appeared mightily displeased.”

Tony could bet Fury did.

“Sho,” he said to Cap with his mouth full of the sandwich, “wa’ya?”

“What?” Cap frowned.

Tony swallowed and repeated.

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“In cahoots,” Tony explained patiently. “With Iron Man. ‘Cause if you are, you should totally get your new buddy to come over for pizza and drinks, I want to take a closer look at that armor of his…”

“Is everything a joke to you?!” Cap’s super soldier fist landed on the table, causing a few of the plates to jump and turn over.

In the silence after that Cap’s breathing was hard and fast; his fingers were curling and uncurling as if he couldn’t decide whether to continue with the carnage or not. Why on Earth would he fly off the handle and smash things after one little comment? He’d endured much worse quietly and stoically. Tony would have thought Cap was actually in cahoots with Iron Man and nervous about having been discovered, but he was Iron Man and he knew for sure that, whatever the hell cahoots were, neither he, nor Cap were in there, much less together.

Tony took a slow sip of coffee. His heart was fluttering painfully somewhere at the base of his throat and he didn’t want to eat anymore.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “Yes, it is.”

“Sir,” Jarvis said, implacable as ever. “The fabrication is complete. It was your wish to be notified immediately.”

“Right. Okay. Katniss, your new bow is ready. Come with me, you’ll need to test it in the firing range before the world needs saving again.”

Clint grinned unrestrainedly, his eyes lighting up with anticipation; the skin around the scratches and burns from the exploded gun stretched but it didn’t seem to bother him. “Sweet!”

Tony hardly had time to blink before Clint was out the door, undoubtedly heading to the workshop.

“Jarvis, have Dummy make a smoothie out of Barton if he breaks something important before I get
there.”

“I shall do so, sir.”

Tony swallowed the rest of the coffee in one long gulp, the thick dregs hot and almost solid in his still sensitive throat.

“Have a nice evening,” he said to the rest of the team. “Or don’t, whatever floats your boat. Ciao, bambinos.”

* * *

Jarvis was summarizing the newly compiled dossier for Doom out loud as Tony was soldering together the first circuitry for the Mark XII.

“…Post-transformation, Victor Doom’s body appears to be made of an unknown alloy. Subsequent studies via reports and footage of battles involving Victor Doom suggest that said alloy is at least as impenetrable as vibranium and unsusceptible to the usual ways of interacting with metal. It has been documented that the combination of heat equaling a supernova emanated by Johnny Storm, aka Human Torch, and prompt exposure to cold water does have an effect on Victor Doom’s body, rendering him incapable of moving out of his own volition for at least two days.”

“Tough one, that geezer,” Tony commented, inspecting the circuitry. It still seemed too crude, too much like the Mark XI, the model he wanted to leave behind in order to move on to faster, stronger, more reliable ones. “And even if we were to whip up ourselves a fluffy little supernova without Johnny at hand, it would likely destroy the earth’s atmosphere, am I right, Jarvis, or am I right?”

“You are most certainly right, sir. Without the Invisible Girl containing the heat inside the force field which she is able to generate, such a result is a distinct probability.”

“Uh-huh. Did you get anything out of the reading from the suit? I mean, I was flying around him for fifteen minutes, he should have been scanned right and left.”

“I am finishing the analysis now, sir. However, it appears that scanning did not reveal much new information. While his body conducts electricity excellently, if struggling at excess such as Mr. Odinson’s lightning, most of it does not appear in the scans at all. He is neither malleable nor brittle. That said, I must also add that, while at least his skin, the largest human organ, has been fully replaced by metal, he has not been known to leave dents in the floor as he walks. The metal must be extremely light.”

“You don’t think it’s actually vibranium, do you?” Tony swiveled around on his stool to bore his eyes into a hologram of Doom. “Shit, that’d be, that, uh, that’d be mind-blowing, that’d be just unfair, that’s what it would be! Who knew that you only need to blast yourself with some stinky cosmic rays to get your hands on the richest source of vibranium ever? Hey, do you think he pays HYDRA with vibranium for their help? The whole classic ‘equal pound of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken’ shtick?”

“I cannot say, sir. The ways of Dr Doom are dark and mysterious.”

Tony snorted.

“Anyway, if that’s what it is, then we’re up for a challenge, don’t you think?”

“I wholeheartedly agree, sir.”
“What’s your estimate of him still having some of ye olde flesh and blood under all that shininess?”

“Roughly fourteen per cent, sir. I am missing information vital for a more accurate suggestion.”

“I see, well, okay, I see,” Tony put his hands into his hair and tugged. “Gotta think, gotta figure it out, the bastard can’t be immune to everything…”

“Sir, I believe Captain Rogers is coming to the workshop.”

“What? Has he got lost? It’s a big tower, yeah, but come on, it’s not that difficult to navigate.”

“He requested specifically to be taken here when he entered the elevator, sir. I presume it is evidence enough to point us at him knowing where he is heading.”

“Fine, he’s not lost. Are the Avengers being assembled? Is the kitchen out of apple pie? What does he want?”

“As far as I am aware, sir, no, no, and I do not know.”

“I hope he didn’t decide he’d rather punch me instead of the table after all,” Tony grumbled. “Let him in when he’s here.”

“Letting Captain Rogers in, sir.”

“Wait, what, already?”

Cap came in, looking for all the world as if he expected something big and toothy to jump at him and try to bite his head off. The wary expression slid off his face almost instantly, though, and was replaced with child-like awe as he took in the workshop, the holograms, the bits and pieces, the bots, the stand-by screens with lines and lines of code, and a lot of other stuff. Tony let him stare. The suits were well hidden in wall compartments which would only open to Tony but he still felt a bit queasy about having Cap in his sanctuary and so close to the one secret Tony fought to keep most fervently. Cap never came down here before, what changed?

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Tony asked in the end.

Cap did a double-take and turned his huge blue eyes at Tony. The light of the holograms was playing in them, making them bigger and brighter than they had any right to be.

“Ah, sorry, I – I got distracted. Your workshop is very distracting.”

“That it is,” Tony agreed. Dummy rolled over and chirped at Cap curiously. “Don’t know how I get any work done down here, really, so many shiny things around.”

“Does he… does he want to be petted?” Cap asked. Dummy chirped louder and head-butted Cap’s thigh because that was exactly what the little one-armed devil wanted.

“Don’t do that,” Tony warned. “If you do, he’ll follow you around and demand that you play catch with him, and give him fire extinguishers for Christmas, and drink his smoothies – and let me tell you, super soldier or not, you will not digest those vile concoctions easily.”

“I think I’ll take my chances.” Cap smiled softly at Dummy and petted him with all the care of a child who got a chance to touch a dog for the first time in his life. Heck, who knew, maybe Cap was feeling deprived of dogs. He could have been allergic to them back in the pre-Serum day, someone as sickly as Steve Rogers 1.0 seemed allergic to life in general, and after he got those muscles he was
kind of busy punching Hitler and whatnot.

Tony couldn’t ask Cap about it, though. He didn’t want to do it anyway, so it worked out for the best for all involved.

“So what is it that brings you to my humble abode? If it’s just to play with my AI’s, I’m sure there are some in the living quarters, although I have no idea where exactly.”

“You have no idea? How come?”

Tony shrugged.

“I was drunk one night and decided that Jarvis and I are soulmates and should have our own kick-ass smart robotic babies. So I gave AI’s to some appliances and I wanted to take them apart the morning after – it’s not really a good idea to have a sentient microwave or something, imagine what it could do to your food if it was pissed at you – but they hid like ninjas among the ordinary tech and Jarvis wouldn’t tell me where they were. I don’t know if it’s because he likes being a mama and protects the hell out of them, or if he is just too traumatized by that night and prefers to pretend that nothing ever happened. I’m sure you can lure them out, though, if you try.”

The tale of wayward AI’s was not exactly a Pulitzer material but Tony thought it interesting enough; Cap seemed to have a different idea, though, – he wasn’t listening and was instead looking intently at something on the table, past Tony’s elbow. Tony followed Cap’s intense gaze and found that it was directed at a crumpled grease-stained washcloth.

“Okay then, I’ll keep it in mind.” Cap edged further into the workshop, picked up absently a few screws from the bench and put them back. “I’m not just here to play with your AI’s, though. I wanted to apologize for my outburst earlier.”

Cap lifted a miniaturized soldering iron from the bench, looked at it and put it back; made another step forward.

“It was unprofessional of me. I shouldn’t have taken my emotions out on you, I know you meant no real harm.”

“Yeah, whatever, Capsy, water under the bridge.” Tony watched Cap getting closer and closer to the table, truly intrigued. What was that about?

“Nonetheless, I am sorry. I will do my best to avoid such things in future.”

Cap’s hand suddenly shot forward, so quick that it blurred for a split second before Tony’s eyes, and snatched the washcloth off the table, uncovering the unfinished new version of Natasha’s Widow Sting.

“Huh?” Tony blinked. “Hey, Cap, if you want to do some old-fashioned dusting by hand around the Tower, you should probably pick up something cleaner than that. I used this one to wipe Butterfingers off the other day when he lived up to his name again.”

Cap dropped the cloth on the table, blushing profusely. It made him look younger and so much more vulnerable than usual; Tony decided it was a good look on him.

“I, uh, I don’t, I mean, no, I don’t want to dust anything. I was just, uh, curious about what was under that.”

“A toy for our Fair Widow to kill things with,” Tony explained. “Well, you probably recognized it
anyway, I didn’t change the design much. It still needs tweaking, though.”

At that, Cap blushed even stronger. Who knew he could go such a saturated shade of a ripe beetroot?

“Are you alright?” Tony asked feeling, partly, genuinely worried. It wouldn’t do to have Captain America collapse and die under Tony’s watch. “You don’t usually turn that color, not that I know of, and I’m listing mentally right now all the health problems which could cause that so you should probably tell me about other symptoms before you collapse in a fit or something. It could be a stroke, are you feeling like it’s a stroke, can you even have a stroke in this super body? Any numbness in your left side? Slurring speech? Heartache?”

“I’m fine,” Cap said and retreated to the door in small, embarrassed steps. “No stroke. Just... sorry.”

“It’s okay, enough with the apologizing before you bore me to tears with it. Seriously, though, are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine, never better. Ah... I have to go. See you later, Mr. Stark. I guess.”

With that, Cap left the workshop rather hastily. Dummy whirred sadly at the loss of a new playmate and came to Tony for consolation.

“Oh, so I’m your second choice, aren’t I? You little Captain America fanboy,” Tony petted Dummy absent-mindedly. “Whatever’s gotten into out Capsicle? What do you think, Jarvis?”

“I’m afraid Captain Rogers does not hold me his confidante, sir,” Jarvis said coolly.

“Yeah, I figured as much.” Tony tapped his fingers on Dummy’s palm and turned to the circuitry. “Crank the music up. I want to be ready with this baby before Doom crashes the party again.”

* * *

The thing with the suits was always that they were a temptation. When the currently latest of them was finished, Tony was usually exhausted, having pushed through a few days without sleep, manic and probably dangerously close to becoming an actual super villain; sated and boneless, like after a good long fuck, when he watched the new suit assemble around him – faster, quieter, more efficient than he had thought possible with the previous one.

For that very reason it was hard to put the suits away when Jarvis chimed in with his constant advice to eat or sleep or do both, or when Pep came down and looked ready to smother him with giant piles of paperwork he had been supposed to sign. It simply felt incredibly good, the temptation to lose himself in the act of creation, the safety and power that he was making on his own and for himself; and he was Tony Stark, i.e. not anyone who would be to any degree prone to resisting temptations. Seriously, ask Vogue or any other very reliable source.

Today, though, he couldn’t get into the working rhythm. The assembling of the Mark XII went fine; he’d been wielding delicate stuff since he was about four (oh, sweet memories of the day one of his nannies got distracted and he could finally grab a torch of his father’s and do something worthwhile as opposed to listening to the adventures of Winnie-the-Pooh for the umpteenth time) and he could do it drunk, half-asleep, during sex, high on weed, in pretty much any condition. But his heart wasn’t in it today.

Is everything a joke to you?

It didn’t make a single bit of sense, really. Not a fucking shred.
Cap had said many more hurtful things to him than that. Hell, Cap had *looked* more hurtful things to him, a dozen in each glare Tony received for his trouble every time he appeared around. For all that Cap liked everybody else in the living quarters of the Tower, even Clint who was a grade-A asshole no better than Tony (although Clint was more childish, maybe that was the key, nobody, unless their heart was made of stone, could truly dislike Clint with the baby-charm of those round cheeks of his; Tony’s heart was half-machine and he still couldn’t do it), for all that the other Avengers seemed to tolerate Tony fine and mostly found his jokes funny (even Natasha, and that was saying something), there was one constant in all this: Cap didn’t like Tony and never bothered to hide it.

Tony knew that. Had known that. Why would a loud remark and a slam of fist to the table have had that much influence? He couldn’t shake it off, the little scratchy feeling inside, the acute unhappiness of a child who’d been shouted at again, and for fuck’s sake, he’d thought he’d left that particular stinking pile of issues behind, drowned on the bottoms of countless whiskey bottles in his wilder days. Why would it come up all bloated like a corpse that had spent days in a river, now of all times?

Maybe the reason was that the brawl with Doom was a closer call than Tony would like it to be.

It was one thing when it was just him, a domestic slightly crazed sort of villain with no publicly known agenda, flirting with Cap from behind the anonymity of the helmet, always careful not to hurt any of them just as much as he was careful not to let them hurt him. It was another thing with the Chitauri invasion (and wasn’t Thor’s family just irrevocably fucked up? Poor guy) where the Avengers held their own and closed the portal and Tony provided silent backup, tapping into SHIELD and WSC communications and stopping a plane with a nuke before it could take off in the direction of Manhattan – and it was more than a little unsettling, actually, that the city Tony lived in was in permanent danger from some jerks who crapped in their pants at the sight of a Leviathan and got ready to kill hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, so he’d had Jarvis keep an eye on those assholes ever since, just in case.

It was a third thing when the Avengers got very, very uncomfortably close to really, really dying.

Technically, Tony didn’t owe them anything. They weren’t friends, they weren’t colleagues, they had no idea who he was and what he wanted underneath a rambunctious sponsor exterior. At best, they were the only living creatures in the Tower other than him; his AI’s were good, wonderful, they saved him so many times from himself, but there was always a hole which could only be filled by clumsy, cruel, inconvenient humans who would be breathing the same air as he and be amazing while breaking him into a million pieces ten times over. The Avengers filled the hole somewhat, and for that Tony felt quite fiercely protective of them.

Almost all he’d wanted to do when he’d started had been by now accomplished. Dr. Doom had been added to the to-do list now, obviously, but no one really needed to know about that. He’d done himself a world of good by staying incognito and pretending to be a super villain – and maybe he was one, to some extent, otherwise it wouldn’t have been so much fun to blow stuff up, and being a hero definitely didn’t let one indulge in such hobbies. It would only hurt him more if he thought about making emotional connections with anybody while being secretly a guy in a flying suit of armor who had been declared the third in the world’s most psychopathic villains list (damned Doom, he’d made the second place, with Loki and his big green psycho eyes staring from the page next to number one). It would only hurt him if he thought about making emotional connections, period. It wasn’t what he did, and he cursed Cap for inadvertently making him think all this things.

And what was the deal with the washcloth, seriously?

“The remaining assembling procedure does not require your direct participation, sir,” Jarvis informed him as soon as he finished with the finer parts of the circuitry.
“I designed this shit, J, don’t you think I know that?”

“Knowing something and being aware of it are two entirely different states of mind, sir.”

“I hate it when you go all dictionary on my ass.”

Tony rolled away from the table and let the numerous robotic hands take over, Jarvis silently guiding them with the precision of a surgeon. The Mark XII was rising up bit by bright bit in front of Tony, breathtaking, gorgeous. Tony spared a look for it and started to flip through hundreds of reports on Doom.

“He has to eat, metal or not,” Tony murmured to himself. “Or he’s just pretending to eat in this picture at a restaurant. If so, it’s a damn waste of a fine steak, if you ask me. There must be something organic left in him, though. If only I could get to it through all the metal…”

He flicked the restaurant page aside (“The best steaks in Latveria! Sire von Doom approves!”) and stared at the assorted collection of facts known about vibranium. Admittedly, it wasn’t much; Tony himself didn’t know shit. The only thing he knew was that he had to rule out just hitting Doom until the asshole fell apart because that just wouldn’t work. Perhaps, an acid? Custom-made kind, strong enough to eat through one of the most durable materials on Earth. It was likely to work, it made sense. Vibranium wasn’t the hardest thing out there, and its main property was to absorb kinetic energy. There was nothing kinetic about a poison slowly but surely eating its way through.

Tony had no idea if the idea was sound or if it was simply the extrapolation of how he felt. Fever was starting to gnaw at him, small but already insistent. His mouth tasted like bile, and the arc reactor felt hot and heavy, like a lump of half-melted cheese. Time to change the battery.

He got up and walked over to the safe, disguised as a part of the wall with the help of a fixed hologram.

“Levels?” He asked, already knowing the answer.

“Blood toxicity eighty-eight per cent and rising.” Jarvis sounded as disapproving as an AI ever could.

A biometrics scan, a password, and a code tap against sensitive areas in the safe door later, Tony took one of the spare arc reactors from the shelf.

“I cannot but conclude from my observations, sir, that it would be in your best interests to acquire assistance for the changing of the arc reactor,” Jarvis said, somewhat strained, as Tony started unlocking the current reactor from the casing.

“Yeah, right, because that would go over swell.” A sharp click and a sharper spike of pain marked the arc reactor being disconnected. The pain grew exponentially as he set the reactor on the workbench, propping himself up with one hand and operating with the other.

The gaping hole in his chest stank like a festering wound - which it was, if one thought about it. The rector was half its bluish glowy self and half thick oil-like dirt that dripped all over his fingers. It was hot, and the stench that settled in his mouth had a distinct metal tinge to it.

When he reached for the spare reactor, his fingers slipped, unable to grasp the slick, smooth surface. Tony swore under his breath, wiped his hand on his pants, and tried again. He was already feeling dizzy and his heart, devoid of the only protection from the shrapnel, was frantically going a mile a minute like a dog trapped in a burning building. This time he held onto the reactor and managed to lift it to his chest.
That was when his knees gave up on him and he hit the floor with a thud, feeling disoriented. Pain was engulfing him, starting from all the places where the shrapnel was and creeping closer to the heart; the spare reactor landed a few inches out of reach. Tony tried to grab it but it was too far; crawling towards it didn’t help much since the floor was covered with the slippery palladium mud.

Through the growing white noise of his rushing blood in his ears he could hear the bots making high-pitched worried noises. Jarvis was speaking, fast and urgent, and Tony didn’t need to actually make out the words to know what J wanted him to do.

But he was so tired. He groped for the reactor again; the pain was searing, blinding, all-encompassing. Dummy and You – or, rather, two metal blurs – tried to knock the reactor closer to him. It hit fingertips and ricocheted off before he could take hold of it.

God, he was tired.

Maybe he should just stop and rest for a while. Just until the noise and the pain and the sound and the fury subside.

A jolt of electricity went right through him, the new and unexpected kind of torture, jerking him up. Dummy whirred monotonously, standing by with his claw raised and looking ready to electrocute Tony again if necessary.

Right. He had his bots. And some unfinished business to do. He could rest after that; he promised himself he would while he outstretched his hand one more time and Butterfingers nudged the reactor gently right into his open palm. Tony’s fingers closed over it – it was so heavy, why had he never noticed before how heavy it was – and pressed it to his chest awkwardly. The pain had long since passed the threshold of unbearable, sending itself anew and anew all around his body and chewing on his heart. Tears were boiling hot and too wet on his face as he pushed the reactor inside, to the place where it belonged, and he may or may not have been screaming himself raw.

There was no one to hear it if he had, anyway. Jarvis wouldn’t mention it, the sympathetic mother hen of an AI butler, and the whole of the workshop was soundproof. Tony could totally die ten different deaths in here, screaming at the top of his lungs every time, and none would be the wiser.

Tony didn’t notice the pain go away, per se. He laid there, the new reactor screwed firmly in, his shoulder and cheekbone digging into the concrete floor, and his thoughts were jugged and erratic at first but then began to flow quicker and more coherently. He realized with a start that he was thinking clearly again at some point after he’d started doing it and the pain was mostly gone. It was patient. It could wait until the next time; it could settle in his bones and his throat and pretty much everywhere, emanating dry heat like an amber – a reminder of a real fire that would one day rear up again.

Not today, though. Tony felt vaguely okay with that.

“Made it again, huh?” He said out loud and tried to set up. He went dizzy right away and had to latch onto Dummy’s main support strut to avoid falling like a sack of potatoes. “What are the odds?”

“If I may be allowed to voice my estimation – very slim, sir,” Jarvis supplied, his voice dry as a desert; and Tony remembered all too well what a desert felt like.

“Oh, the disapproval,” Tony rolled his eyes. ‘I should give you eyebrows so you could frown at me every time I do something stupid. Nothing else, you don’t really need it, but the eyebrows. You’ll love them.’

“Sorry,” Jarvis said, unapologetic.

“I know. I’m sorry too. I’m not used to not having a heart,” said Tony, hoping he could make up for his words with a wide grin.

“I always knew that, sir,” Jarvis said, and Tony couldn’t help but admire his unbreakable optimism.

Tony nodded. Jarvis was right. He had been born without a heart, and he had lived with it.

“I’ll keep it,” Tony said, and he knew that Jarvis was happy with that.
“Such incomparable generosity is indeed not necessary, sir.”

“Palladium levels?”

“Eighty-one per cent and lowering. I strongly recommend taking another dose of your medicine, sir, if you plan to ever function properly after tonight.”

“I always function properly.” Tony grumbled but accepted a glass of foul-tasting medicinal sludge from Dummy. “I’m a genius, have you forgotten? Oh, and by the way, don’t think I’ve forgotten that Dummy nearly electrocuted me, and I’m about two hundred per cent – and rising – sure that he didn’t think of that on his own.”

“There has never been any doubt as to your detective skills, sir,” Jarvis offered.

“What’evs,” Tony slurped the medicine and made a disgusted face. “Just make sure Dummy doesn’t decide it’s a new game and try to fry me whenever I turn my back to him.”

“That would be highly counterproductive, sir,” Jarvis agreed.

“Now,” Tony put away the empty glass and eyed the Mark XII with, equally, speculation and hunger. “Let’s take this baby out for a spin.”

“I was afraid you would say so, sir.”

Jarvis said nothing more. They both knew there wasn’t anything good old J could say that would stop Tony in the path of self-destruction. And, as the cool firm armor covered his aching body, he found that this path felt irresistibly good.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be gone for a couple of weeks; you'll have to wait for the next update, sorry, guys! But I have several more chapters stashed away already, so I'll update as soon as I'm back.
Chapter 3

It was late and the tower was quiet. To the best of Steve’s knowledge, Thor had gone to visit Jane, promising to bring her and Darcy back with him for a “Buffy” marathon and a popcorn-eating contest, Bruce was sound asleep, and Clint and Natasha were doing only they knew what. Maybe racing each other through the tower vents, or sparring, or watching some movie called “Titanic” which Natasha had threatened to inflict on Clint if he didn’t stop irritating her. Knowing Clint, one could only wonder why he hadn’t been forced to learn the movie frame by frame yet.

And Stark, of course, was in his workshop. At the thought of Stark, Steve’s ears felt like they were on fire again. What was he thinking, taking a fan fictional story seriously? Yes, Stark called Clint ‘Katniss’ like Iron Man did, and that bruise covering one side of his face was really suspicious… but what did Steve know about the kind of injuries that mechanics and engineers had? There were old burns, scars, and scratches on Stark’s hands, why wouldn’t there be a bruise or two on his face? And ‘Katniss’ was a pop-culture reference to an archer character from a book and movie franchise, according to Google; anyone could call Clint that.

In the name of not doing anything particularly stupid again, Steve had stripped to an undershirt and boxers and got into bed some time ago. His computer was off; his room was so close to the top of the building that most of New-York night lights didn’t reach his obscenely large French windows. It was the perfect time to sleep. Or it would be if Steve could get himself to settle down and relax.

He had never been to Stark’s workshop before. Coming down there, curious to see the place where so many mind-blowing things were taking their origin, he had imagined a thousand versions of it, from a sterile lab a bit like Dr. Erskine’s to a factory where flying robots assembled things, following Stark’s command. Instead, it felt strangely like home. Not Steve’s own, exactly, but someone’s, that much was certain. There was chaos which seemed to have that unique kind of order to it that could only be comprehended by its owner; the light of the holograms was painfully similar to the night light which Steve’s mother switched on whenever she could; and Stark was wearing a t-shirt over a long-sleeved one, worn jeans, and bright striped socks, tousled and taken by surprise. In the sea of light that he had made himself, he seemed innocent and harmless.

Steve had expected Stark to ruin the impression the second he opened his mouth, though. That was what Stark did best, excluding the engineering stuff. But after Steve’s idiotic attempt to find an Iron Man gauntlet under a washcloth (God oh God, the mortification) Stark looked genuinely concerned, if also amused by Steve’s antics. Evidently, when ambushed in his natural habitat, Tony Stark was much more sincere and kind and domestic than Steve knew what to do with.

Sleep eluded him. He tried to close his eyes and count falling stars but it was all in vain.


He reached for his Starkpad which was lying on the nightstand and made it come to life with a sweep of one finger; for convenience, he placed it in his lap, his knees drawn up. The cool feather-light plastic was quickly becoming warm from the contact with the bare skin of Steve’s thighs.

The story was a pile of rubbish, sure. Nothing in it was worth taking into consideration in real life. It was amusing, though, and no one could say it was bad to read a bit before going to sleep, right?

Steve was relieved to have finally scrolled down to the place where he’d stopped reading because it meant he had an excuse to stop thinking of excuses.
The first chapter ended in a wordy depiction of a battle between the Avengers, secretly helped by Iron Man, and sparkling vampire fire-breathing rainbow-colored ponies. Apparently brought to Earth and sicced on Manhattan by a vengeful Loki.

Well, Loki did seem like the type of person capable of both doing such a thing and enjoying it in the process. Steve couldn’t argue with the author’s logic here.

The second chapter, however, contained a lot less action. It was, in fact, dedicated to the aftermath of the action and described in painstaking detail how Captain America, looking for any civilians who might have been trapped under a fallen building, encountered an unconscious Iron Man surrounded by a bunch of repulsor-blasted pony corpses.

There he was, Captain’s infuriating nemesis, unmoving and quiet for once in his life. Was he – was he already dead? Should Captain call the SHIELD medics now, let the authorities handle the infamous villain or whatever was left of him?

Something clenched in Captain’s chest. The world suddenly seemed colder and much emptier than it used to be. Captain knelt beside Iron Man, his super-enhanced hearing straining to catch the sound of the man’s breath. There was no way to feel the pulse through the armor, and Captain tried to pry one of the gauntlets off.

The metal was unyielding and an experimental pull ended with Iron Man’s whole body being jerked around to follow, limp like a marionette. Captain pressed one hand to Iron Man’s chest and pulled again, trying to work his fingers in between slim plates; he grew more upset and stubborn the longer the gauntlet refused to come off.

When it did, it came like a revelation, like a sudden light after hours in complete darkness because Captain could clearly see the beat of blood in the translucent blue veins on the freed wrist. The fingers moved ever so slightly at the touch of cool air and curled tentatively.

Feeling surreal and absurdly happy, Captain took off his glove and touched Iron Man’s hand.

“Call SHIELD,” Steve murmured, unable to look away from the Starkpad screen and all the nonsense it was currently displaying. “You know now the man’s alive, so call the proper authorities! The battle is over, he’s not your direct responsibility any longer. Come on; do it!”

Encouraging his fictional self to do the right thing didn’t help, however. It was to be expected but still annoying.


“A building collapsed on you,” Captain said gently. He tried not to think of the position he was in right now – sitting in debris and holding a super villain’s hand.

He also firmly banished from his head the shy thought of how frighteningly much he liked the sensation of Iron Man’s strong, warm hand in his.

“What... Ste – I mean, Cap? Oh fuck, am I in SHIELD? Am I being tortured and hallucinating again?”

The phrasing of this last remark made Captain frown.

“Again? Has SHIELD ever tortured you?”

“No, no, not them. Other, uh, people who didn’t like me. Long story. Very long and very boring.
“You said something about a building collapsing on me?”

Captain knew an evasion attempt when he saw one but Iron Man was clearly distressed and hurt and he let it go. For now.

“Yes. I’ve just found you. How are you feeling? Any discernible trauma?”

“Nah, I’m peachy. The suit took the brunt of it, see, there’s the advantage of armor over spandex or leather, although leather can be a good fit for some people, take you, for example, you totally rock this spangled-tights-look.”

Iron Man moved to sit up and Captain let him, partly because the suit was so damaged no way Iron Man was still able to fly away from him on a whim, and partly because while changing his position Iron Man never once let go of his hand. The metal of the armor groaned in protest but obeyed Iron Man’s command in the end.

His hand was a grown man’s one; rather big, though smaller than Captain’s, long-fingered, covered in multiple scratches and traces of old burns which indicated that Iron Man wasn’t a stranger to hard work. Nonetheless, it seemed so soft and unbelievably breakable next to the hard sleeve of the armor which was hugging his forearm snugly.

“Show me your face,” Captain asked. The reality of what he’d just asked and the implications of it hit him a split second later when he could do nothing to take his words back; he struggled to contain sudden irrational panic while Iron Man slowly let his fingers slip out of Captain’s grip.

“There’s no need for you to see my face.”

“I – it’s not what I need. I just want. To see. I’ve been wanting to for some time.”

It was all true, undeniably so. Captain wanted to know who Iron Man was, the enigma of his favorite enemy nagging him incessantly. It was absolutely justified. Who in their right mind wouldn’t want to see Iron Man unmasked?

“And why exactly do you want that?” Iron Man sounded cautious, guarded. “So you can report to Fury who I am?”

“It’s not about reports,” Captain pressed his lips together, frustrated by both Iron Man and himself. “If it was for Director Fury, I’d be delivering you to SHIELD right now, wouldn’t I? And your suit is damaged. I could just break your faceplate off myself and take a look.”

“Oh, so you’re threatening me with violence and damage to my private property, is that what it is?”

“No!” Captain was on the verge of pulling a couple of chunks of his hair out. The only thing that stopped him was his cowl which was still firmly covering the upper part of his head. “That’s not what I was saying at all. I... Okay, look.”

Captain picked at the rims of his cowl and pulled it off in one movement. His face had been hot under it and it was good to feel the crisp morning air. The wind readily ruffled his hair.

Iron Man seemed entranced by what he saw. Not that there was a whole lot to see, Steve thought. He was simply Steve, a kid from Brooklyn out of his uniform, not Captain America. He was a face in the crowd, really; but non-descript as it was, it was his true face which he was willing to share with Iron Man in a pique of – well, irritation.

“See?” Steve asked. “I took my mask off. I want you to take yours off. Here’s my face. It’s only fair
“You make a really lame argument,” Iron Man said, sad and poignant affection clear in his voice, and Steve felt ashamed of his own idiocy. What on Earth had possessed him when he’d thought it was a good idea? “Yet,” Iron Man continued, “it’s incredibly convincing.”

Iron Man’s gauntlet-free hand went up to his faceplate and darted under the chin, looking for a button to release it. Steve was watching him with baited breath, afraid to believe that it was actually happening.

That Iron Man trusted him.

The faceplate went up a couple of inches, uncovering lasciviously plump lips and a dark line of mustache above them. Steve thought he had seen them somewhere before but the thought was fleeting and vague. The faceplate lifted half an inch more.

“It’s stuck,” Iron Man complained when it was clear that the faceplate was going no further. “The fucking building must have got the servomotors when it came down. Listen, could you help me push it up, maybe? I feel like an idiot with only my mouth open while you’re out and proud in all your wholesome all-American glory, and I do want to show you my face and I need some help right now before I undoubtedly change my mind.”

Steve didn’t need to be asked twice.

He caught the faceplate with two fingers, gave Iron Man a moment to brace himself, and wrenched it off in a single abrupt movement. Iron Man didn’t hold back a yelp when he flopped forward, straight onto Steve’s chest.

“Whoa, Cap! Haven’t you heard of a three dates’ rule or something?” He laughed, looking up at Steve; his laugh was easy but it didn’t reach his eyes as he watched for Steve’s reaction, ready to fight, bolt, or melt into the accidental embrace, or any combination of the three.

Steve knew this face. How could he not when it was the very man who had made him see red within the first few minutes of their very first conversation? The man who invited him into his own tower, provided him with everything, worked himself to the bone in the workshop for the sake of the team, and never, ever asked for anything in return?

It was Tony Stark’s bruised but still energetic face, for sure; but the thing that right now interested Steve most about this face was the deep brown eyes, and the clean line of the nose, and the lazy sensual curve of the lips.

“Is that good silence or bad silence, Cap?” Tony Stark asked. “I’m not getting any signals here, you see how it can make a guy nervous, right? Are you planning to kill me on a dozen of different charges, or are you making a ‘thank-you-for-coming-out’ speech like an agitated LGBT mom, or are you – ”

Whatever else he thought Steve might have been doing, Steve didn’t listen. Without thinking, he bent his head instead and caught Tony’s quickly moving lips with his own in a tender ki …

Whoa!

Steve promptly turned the Starkpad around so that the screen would face the other way and jerked his hands off it like it was on fire. He was breathing rapidly; some anticipating, viscous heat seemed to have made itself at home at the pit of Steve’s stomach without him knowing.
Him and Iron Man – him and Tony Stark – kissing?

In the hindsight, he should have probably seen it coming. The bubbly preface said ‘CapIron’; he had guessed then what it must have meant but he forgot. He was just so baffled with the whole notion of a story written about him by a fervent fan and then with the absurd idea of Stark being Iron Man that he never gave the abbreviation a second thought.

Steve was not new to the idea of men being with men. Hell, he grew up in Brooklyn where half of dark alleys at night were occupied with guys fondling each other for money or for pleasure; he had seen enough men in dresses and with lipstick on their faces when sitting with Bucky on pretty and sturdy benches in front of grand hotels. That was the forties’ Brooklyn for you, harsh and fast and all about the brutal pleasure of life in whichever form it came.

He wasn’t like those men, though. He grew up dreaming of a loving beautiful dame by his side and their shared content life, pure and chaste; Bucky called him a hopeless romantic and bought them both ice-cream, after which Steve’s lips became red and plump from the sweet frost, looking exactly like Bucky’s before the ice-cream.

He’d never asked, afraid of hearing a straight answer, but deep down he had known where the money for the ice-cream had come from; where it could only have come from for a pretty orphan without anybody to take care of him in the whole world. The old shame of refusing to acknowledge the truth mixed now with the ghost tingling on his lips which felt like Steve had actually kissed someone when in fact he was alone in the darkness of his bedroom.

Why couldn’t he have left it well enough alone when he still had the chance? Why had he decided to read on?

The thought of Bucky hurt all of a sudden as if it was a fresh wound, not an old one with tons of scar tissue over it. God, he was a coward.

Had he given away anything that could have been interpreted by his fans as a sign of him wanting this, wanting another man? Had Stark done something like that? Who else suspected Iron Man and him of being something else rather than enemies?

Confused and upset to the verge of actual tears, Steve rubbed his eyes with his heels. His past and his present blended into each other seamlessly in his head, Stark and Bucky sharing somehow one face, the face of a person he had neglected and hurt, and Iron Man’s impassionate helmet shone unbearably bright in Steve’s mind’s eye.

“Jarvis, lights!” He barked. He didn’t mean to sound like a sergeant at a drill but it came out like that, and Jarvis listened to him anyways.

The light made the painful thoughts retreat slightly and Steve inhaled deeply. He needed to focus and think things through. It was a mess and he had no idea why it was there in the first place, why he needed to deal with it, why he felt like his life was crumbling around him like a carefully constructed line of dominoes tipped lightly by someone’s finger.

There was a whistling, whooshing sound. It was almost hidden by the way Steve breathed noisily through his teeth and he wouldn’t have paid it any mind if the tower hadn’t shuddered a tiny moment later. The walls sighed as if they were going to cave in; as if there was an earthquake, a force majeure.

The explosion came hot on the heels of the shudder. Steve’s ears rang with the force of it, and he found himself on the floor some undetermined time later, dazed and blindly clutching the edge of the
shield.

A second explosion followed suit with little delay. The walls and the ceiling flinched at the blow and gave off fine dust and pieces of concrete and metal. Steve could hear the crunching sound inside the structure of the building as if it was struggling to keep upright, not to fold in on its inhabitants who would likely not survive it.

He got up, shook his head, getting rid of the ringing in his ears, and made his way to the windows. The glass had been blown away by the first blast, and the floor was now covered with millions of shards that bit into Steve’s unprotected feet.

Holding onto the frame which was bent but more or less intact, he looked out. In a halo of orange and yellow from the starting fire, hovering in mid-air, was a figure clad in red and gold metal.

Iron Man? No, it wasn’t him, couldn’t be him; Steve’s trained eye caught on to inconsistencies at once. The figure was too big, bulky and menacing where Iron Man was compact and lean. The pattern of plates joining each other was wrong and the helmet’s dimensions were off as if someone had created them from memory. Iron Man changed suits from time to time but they were never that different; they never looked crude, if anything, they exuded elegance, the kind of effortless glamour that never changed, as if Iron Man could not design the suits in any other fashion.

“I am Iron Man!” The figure boomed, and the voice was not the one, too. It was too thick even through the modulator and the timbre definitely belonged to someone else. “I have come for the Avengers’ blood and nothing will stop me!”

“That’s where you’re wrong, buddy!” Another red and gold figure rocketed past Steve, and now that was the real deal. “Where do you get off impersonating me, I’d like to know?”

“I am the true Iron Man, a villain the likes of which the world has never seen before!”

“Spare me the cheap pathos, will you?”

“The wait has come to an end; the plans have come to fruition!” The impersonator continued, shifting to the side to avoid a repulsor blast. “The world shall tremble before its new mast...”

The rest of the sentence was lost in an undignified squeak let out by the impersonator at the impact of Steve’s shield. Obviously not having expected the attack, the fake Iron Man stumbled, trying to keep his balance. Steve used the moment to throw the shield again, aiming at the left foot repulsor in order to further destabilize the flight.

“Thanks, Capsicle!” Iron Man yelled and fired a missile at the fake.

The latter tried to dodge it but succeeded only partially: it grazed his right arm, tearing off a chunk of armor. There was metal beneath it, gray and bleak in comparison with the flashiness of the armor.

“Doom?” Iron Man asked. There was cold rage in his voice, and Steve was briefly glad not to be on the receiving end of it.

Doom – it was most probably him – flew up, turned to the sirens that were getting closer, and declared loudly: “I am Iron Man and I am going to kill Captain America!”

However, this statement wasn’t followed by an attack as one might expect; having said that, Doom took off and got lost in the night sky in the time it took Steve to blink and instinctively lock his fingers harder on the edge of the shield.
Iron Man came down to Steve’s level and sustained the flight mere inches apart from him.

“You okay there? Hell, there’s blood, did he get you with the explosions?”

“Did I miss the memo where you were designated my very own mother hen?” Steve snapped. His heart was beating hard; the adrenaline dissolved slowly in his blood, not having found the relief of a proper fight.

“Right,” Iron Man said. “I guess it means you’re fine, then. Thanks for the help, by the way.”

“He was attacking the tower and you weren’t. The choice of whom to hit was not that difficult.” Steve said coolly. A part of his mind remembered the story, and he was terrified to remember because he did want to see Iron Man’s face and because it was not the kind of conversation he could ever have imagined himself having with a super villain.

“IRON MAN, STEP AWAY FROM THE CAPTAIN AND SURRENDER IMMEDIATELY!” Steve recognized Maria Hill’s voice, amplified by a loudspeaker. “YOU ARE SURROUNDED. RESISTANCE IS FUTILE. I REPEAT, IRON MAN, SURRENDER IMMEDIATELY.”

“CAN’T YOU SEE I’M IN THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING HERE?” Iron Man shouted back, his loudspeaker easily overpowering Hill’s. Half of New-York was likely to have been awakened by this exchange. “Listen, Capsikins, I get it that you don’t like me and all that but I would really appreciate it if you told them it wasn’t me who threatened to blow up your nationally treasured ass nine ways to Sunday.”

“I will tell my superior officers the truth and nothing but truth. I don’t know what you’re playing at, protecting me from that impersonator, but I – I am not in cahoots with you,” Steve spit out.

“Yeah, I’d probably know if you were, so the truth is good, truth is exactly what I need you to tell them,” Iron Man nodded.

“IRON MAN, SURRENDER IMMEDIATELY OR WE WILL OPEN FIRE IN EXACTLY FIVE SECONDS. FIVE, FOUR...”

“Got to go,” said Iron Man hastily and moved away from Steve. “Oh, and Cap? That tight leather uniform doesn’t do your physique enough justice! How are those thighs and abs even real?”

He cartwheeled through the air without waiting for Steve to answer; every single one of SHIELD’s own missiles missed him, and Steve had to duck to avoid collision with one of them and use the shield to send another one in a nosedive towards the sidewalk. The one he’d ducked plowed into the wall next to his bed and went off with brilliant sparks and thick black smoke. It was perhaps just as well that Steve was likely to spend the rest of the night and then some on the Helicarrier, answering questions and discussing strategies. He hoped, though, that his wardrobe had survived the attacks because he wasn’t looking forward to meeting SHIELD officials in his boxers.

Even if Iron Man was prone to give Steve in them highly inappropriate lewd comments than made the little vain part of Steve’s mind grin and preen.

* * *

The first thing Steve did upon returning to the tower was to check on Stark. Natasha, Bruce, and Clint had been brought to SHIELD for a check-over with him, all of them unharmed except for a few bruises and the pajamas that Bruce had torn by Hulking out at the sudden explosion. Stark’s well-being, however, wasn’t rated all that highly by Director Fury, and he was left behind; presumably, to deal with the destruction.
For once, Stark wasn’t in the workshop or by the coffee maker, the two places in the whole tower that he frequented. He was standing outside and talking on the phone; hundreds of robots were crawling along the walls, reinforcing them with instantly hardening cement.

“I’m fine, Rhodey, seriously,” Stark was saying. “I was in the basement, I could survive a nuclear blast in there, and it was barely a tickle! I mean, come on, if you’re going to attack the Avengers Tower, aren’t you going to pick up something more effective than that? Not a single floor got properly destroyed; this baby will look like new in a couple of days. Hey, you know what, you can think positive about it, the power of positive thinking might just work its magic on that Grumpy Cat expression of yours – no, I can’t see you right now, I just know you’re wearing it, you always do when something blows up in my face – anyway, here’s the positive part: the constructors’ kids are going to get through college in a jiffy on the money I spend to fix the tower every time some psycho blows it! The guys cheered and popped a bottle of champagne when Pep called them. She’s got them on speed dial. What? Not positive enough? Yeah, I could have been hurt but I’m not, so calm down, will you? It’s not even my own fault this time! Surely that’s positive too?”

He paused, listening to Colonel Rhodes, and smiled. It was a smile Steve wasn’t used to from him; a tender, caring one.

“Yeah, yeah, okay, I promise, if I feel there’s some lingering trauma, I’ll check it out. Yes, a real doctor will check it, not Jarvis. Happy now? Yeah, see you then. Bye. Bye, Rhodey, go look severe and constipated or do whatever else it is that you military type do in your spare time.”

He hung up and slid the phone in his pocket. Steve decided it was a good moment to approach the man.

“Are you really okay, Mr. Stark?” He asked.

Stark turned swiftly on his heels and nailed Steve to the spot with an intense glare. He didn’t look much different from the last time Steve had seen him; maybe a bit more disheveled, and the shadows under his eyes were deeper and darker, but it was hardly a result of the attack.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Captain America himself. No worries, big guy, the new glass for your windows is on its way, and the debris has already been swept out.”

“I was asking about you, not about the tower.” Steve frowned. Stark had seemed almost friendly earlier and right now he was all sneer and needles like a hedgehog on a warpath.

The mental image made him snort.

“What’s so funny?” Stark snarled.

“Nothing,” Steve said, schooling his expression into a serious one. “Just had a funny thought. Not a good time for those, I take it. Has the attack affected you at all? Have the SHIELD medics examined you?”

“Why would they have examined me? I told them I was fine and they were happy to leave me to my own devices.” Stark gave Steve an eloquent look that suggested that Steve follow the example of the SHIELD medics. “Now if you’ll excuse me...”

He lifted the phone to his ear again, pointedly so, and turned away. Steve could take a hint, especially one laced with such open hostility; before going, he gave Stark one last sidelong glance and something strange caught his attention. The veins on the side of Stark’s neck were charcoal black and bulging. Their strange color was all the more evident for the fine sheen of sweat over
them.

“What is that?”

“What is what?” Stark looked back at Steve, clearly annoyed.

“That thing on your neck. Are you sure you haven’t been hurt?”

Stark dropped the phone and tugged the collar of his shirt up, covering the veins.

“That’s the new fashion. All the rage in Paris this week, didn’t you know? I thought you’d been
defrosted for a few months already, Capsicle, do try and get a grip on the modern times.”

“And if I Google it, will I find that it is, in fact, fashionable to color your blood black?” Steve asked.
He was starting to feel annoyed as well; the reasons why he didn’t like Stark were vivid in his mind
again.

Stark hesitated for a split second before answering.

“You can Google shit all you want, Rogers. Just leave me alone, for fuck’s sake.”

With that, he stalked off determinedly. Steve didn’t go after him but watched him leave. Then he
fished his own Starkphone out of his pocket and unlocked it.

“Jarvis,” Steve called. “Is it really fashionable in Paris to have your veins black like that?”

Stark could ditch Steve and Steve’s questions all he wanted but the omnipresent AI couldn’t go
anywhere.

“No, Captain Rogers,” said Jarvis, his voice clear and devoid of emotion. “If it is, it has not been
made public knowledge.”

Steve swallowed uneasily.

“Can you tell me if he’s been hurt in the attack? Is it some kind of biological warfare thing? Should I
try to make him see a doctor despite his being unwilling to do so?”

Jarvis didn’t like Steve but if there was someone that the AI fiercely, unconditionally loved as much
as a computer could, it was Stark. And Steve was offering to help Stark so he hoped for Jarvis’
cooperation.

“The pattern on sir’s neck is not a result of last night’s attack on the tower,” Jarvis said. “It is not my
place to guide your choices, Captain Rogers, but I do not think that anyone in the world could make
sir do something he is unwilling to do.”

“If it’s not the attack, then what? What is that thing?”

“I apologize for any inconvenience that I might be causing but I am not at liberty to tell you anything
pertaining to the matter.”

“It doesn’t make any sense.” It really didn’t. “He’s the most egotistical and self-enamored person I
know, why wouldn’t he just go and take care of his own health?”

Steve didn’t know that was possible for a computer generated voice to turn quite that icy but hey, the
future always had something around the corner to surprise him with.
“There is a lot you do not know about sir, Captain Rogers, and never will. You will do wisely to keep your assumptions, founded on lacking basis, to yourself. Will that be all?”

“Yes,” Steve said. “Sorry,” he offered, feeling overwhelmingly guilty for he didn’t really know what.

If Jarvis was still listening, he didn’t deign Steve with an answer.

* * *

“Mister Stark.”

“Miss Lewis.”

Stark and Darcy stood opposite each other for a few second, their eyes sharp, and their hands in their pockets. Darcy gave the act up first, cracking up with infectious laughter, and it made Stark laugh along.

“You, the bane of my existence,” Stark said fondly; Darcy hugged him and he lifted her and whirled around several times as if she were a child.

“I read that Iron Man attacked the place yesterday,” Darcy said when Stark put her down. “Doesn’t really look like it, though.”

“That’s because I have a magic credit card, kiddo,” Stark wiggled his eyebrows at her. “I wave it around, and everything starts looking like it did before.”

Darcy giggled. Next to Stark, with his tired face and unhappy lines at the corners of his eyes, she looked strikingly young; no ugly black patterns or yellowed bruises marred her skin. She was pleasant and refreshing to look at, a reminder of what Steve and his team were fighting for. It was a pity that Steve couldn’t but watch Stark like a hawk, only paying attention to other people if they were in his close proximity.

There was something wrong; a secret that Stark was hiding. Not Iron Man, of course; the suggestion of that was still as absurd as the first time Steve had encountered it. But something dark and fishy was undeniably there, lurking beneath the carefree narcissistic surface that Stark presented to the world, and Steve had all intentions of chasing this particular mystery until he knew every single little detail of it.

“I regret most profoundly not being here when my brothers and sister in arms had need of my aid,” Thor apologized, putting his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “I would have struck the villain Iron Man down from the sky for such dastardly attack upon the sanctity of our home!”

“Nothing to regret,” Steve said. “The attacker must have specifically chosen the night when you were absent in order to meet as little resistance as possible. And you should know that it wasn’t really Iron Man. So don’t go knocking his teeth out on sight if you meet him accidentally.”

“I do not understand,” Thor said, frowning. “Director Fury contacted me with that request exactly: to strike him down as soon as I had a chance to meet with him on a battlefield.”

“Director Fury doesn’t always give the best instructions,” Steve said. Also, he felt he had a few choice words for Fury now about giving orders to Steve’s men over his head.

“And how would you know it wasn’t Iron Man?” Stark demanded, plunging into Steve and Thor’s conversation with the ease of someone who was used to doing this and expecting all attention on
himself as his due. “Looked like him to me: metal, red, gold, obnoxious.”

“You weren’t there,” Steve said, keeping his irritation in check. Sometimes conversations with Stark made him remember the pre-Serum days when Steve’s anger could flare up in a matter of a second at so much as a shadow of a trace of an insult. He had thought he had got his temper under control, having lost the need to prove anything to anybody now that he was healthy and strong; he’d thought that until he met Stark. “I was only twenty feet away from the attacker, and later the real Iron Man was as close to me as Thor is now. Someone pretended to be Iron Man while attacking the tower.”

Everyone listened raptly – it was news to most of them. Stark, however, wasn’t in awe. He wolf-whistled and smirked.

“Wow, would you look at that! A super villain framed for an attack on his sworn enemies that he didn’t commit. I don’t know a single talk-show host who wouldn’t cream their pants at a story like this. But out of a talk-show this sounds pretty lame – no offence, Capsicle. I can bet a few billion that SHIELD is going to hunt Iron Man down no matter what tales you tell about his innocence.”

“Well, I hope he can handle SHIELD breathing down his metal neck, then,” Steve retorted. “In the meantime, the Avengers will be looking for the real culprit.”

“Do you have any idea who our real culprit is?” Natasha asked.

Steve met her unblinking gaze calmly. He knew she trusted him to make the call and he was darn determined to make the right one, for all of their sakes.

“I suspect Doom. A part of his fake armor fell off, and there was recognizable metal underneath.”

“The fucker!” Clint swore.

Steve squashed an impulse to tell Clint to watch his language around dames and quirked his lips in a smile because, in essence, he agreed with the sentiment.

“The next instance I shall see Doctor Doom, justice will be laid down,” Thor said grimly. “It is he whose impending doom is wrought with inevitable demise. It is the lowliest kind of cowardice to attack an enemy’s home where those who are not warriors will be in danger, and it is doubly so when the attack is wile and disguised by lies, set to plant deception in our hearts.”

“Totally cool, what you just said, buddy, I’m down with you on every word,” Stark patted Thor’s forearm. “I’ll even let it slide that I’m the damsel in distress in your scenario since I was the only non-warrior in here last night, that’s how much I agree with you on the general principle.”

Stark turned to Steve and the sincere amused smile he had just given Thor disappeared from his lips.

“Let me know if the team needs something,” he said. “Jarvis, you are to cooperate with the Avengers at all time and provide them with relevant information.”

Then he glanced at Darcy and Jane and a warm apologetic smile blossomed on his lips. It smarted to be so blatantly left out of the ‘People-Tony-Stark-Sincerely-Smiled-At’ club when everyone else, from Thor to Dummy, had clearly made the cut.

“Sorry, girls, everyone is going to have to take a rain check on that “Buffy” marathon. Make yourself at home, play pranks on the receptionist down on the ground floor, stuff yourself with pizza, leave booby traps for Clint in the vents,” he waved his hand in the air vaguely, ignoring Clint’s indignant cries of ‘I knew it was you, dammit!’ “As soon as the world is safe again, the Earth’s mightiest heroes will be right there to ogle Spike’s ass with you, I promise.”
Steve had known HYDRA up close and personal and was aware of their habits better than any other living person on the planet. So it made sense when he asked Jarvis to provide them with a hologram map of the Earth (Jarvis complied silently and Steve was relieved) and pinpointed a few places on the incorporeal glowing surface.

“That’s where they had main operating points back in World War Two. It would make sense if they kept to the same politics for their current ones – far away from densely populated areas, access to several types of terrain: mountains, forests, sea. Back in the day they blanketed all signals at all times except when they had to make a transmission. They might be doing something like that again, and with the way the world is much fuller with radio signals now it can be easier to find the spots without any of that. Also, they’ll want a lot of weapons, we need to trace that, get a look at police reports about the black market if we can. New recruits, too; they need strong impressionable people ready to follow orders, a lot of such people to back up that motto of theirs about new heads growing instead of a cut off one. We know that Doom is connected to them, so any surveillance information on him may give us a clue. It is also worth a shot to go through the territory of Latveria with a fine-tooth comb: Doom has the country under his thumb and his own main HQ must be somewhere there, too.”

“I can look into the radio blind spots and then check out any location as the Other Guy,” Bruce suggested. “No amount of difficult terrain will stop him.”

Bruce’s eyes flashed green for an almost imperceptible moment and he added: “I’d like to do as much as I can to find the bastards who helped attack Tony’s home.”

“I’ll take the weapons and recruits angle,” Natasha offered and smiled a slow predatory smile. “You will help me hack anything that needs hacking, won’t you, Jarvis?”

“Of course, Natasha,” Jarvis said immediately. “My skills and resources are at your full disposal at any time.”

“Good,” Steve managed through a sudden lump in his throat. “Thor, you can fly. Can you take Clint to check out a few strategic points in Latveria? He will also definitely need muscled back up. Clint, are you up to some good old-fashioned spying in the company of a god?”

“I shall be extremely pleased to be of help to the quick-eyed Hawk brother!” Thor clapped Clint on the back, smiling widely and wildly as if he was a child who’d just been given the biggest chocolate bar in the world and it wasn’t even his birthday.

Clint bore the godly affection stoically and winked at Steve as soon as he got his breath back.

“Never been a Boy Scout, Cap, but always ready anyway!”

The tasks shared amongst the group, everyone left to start working on them at once or prepare for them accordingly. No one had asked Steve what he was going to do.

When the living-room where they had discussed the new mission was empty, Jarvis switched the Earth hologram without a warning or a comment. Steve thought that he probably deserved it.

Truth be told, he wasn’t sure what he could do. Director Fury had taken his words about Dr. Doom impersonating Iron Man with a considerable dose of skepticism; he had also promised Steve that SHIELD would look into HYDRA and did so in such an unequivocal roundabout (however oxymoronic that sounded) way that it had been clear that SHIELD hadn’t wanted to involve Steve, at least not yet.
Steve left the living-room too after a few minutes, though; the accelerated metabolism reminded him insistently that he needed to eat. Funny how he had thought he’d known the hunger inside and out until he got a body which ate like five people in order to just keep the painful and distracting hunger pangs at bay. So many things he had been adamantly sure about got crushed by the circumstances that life brought him with never-ending enthusiasm.

He pulled the handle of the fridge. The door didn’t give in.

He grabbed it tighter and yanked a bit harder. The door steadfastly refused to yield and Steve’s stomach growled, displeased by the turn of events.

Okay, fine. If it was stuck, Steve could always put some more strength into it. It wasn’t like he didn’t have enough of that these days.

He tugged and pulled and tried to prise the door open with a big knife pushed in between the door and the body of the fridge. Frustrated and angry, Steve dug his heels in and pulled with all the strength he could master, holding nothing back.

The handle crunched and broke off. The inertia made Steve stumble back several paces and fall on his backside.

Being defeated by a kitchen appliance was humiliating and not the least bit suspicious. Steve stared at the fridge but it was still and impassive, humming barely audibly, as usual. Maybe Stark had added a password-only security feature to it, either to annoy Steve or just in a fit of paranoia after the attack? The worst of all was that Steve didn’t feel like he could ask anybody about that: the team were busy with their assignments, Jane and Darcy had gone out somewhere before the Avengers had assembled in the living-room, and Stark was doing God knew what in his workshop. In addition, Steve had no doubt he’s be laughed at (good-naturedly or otherwise, depending on the person in question) and he didn’t want any of that.

It wasn’t really necessary to use the fridge for a quick snack, though. There were plenty of ready-for-consumption things in the cupboards, canned and tinned and packed in rustling bags.

Glancing askance at the fridge, Steve got up and tried the nearest cupboard. It opened without any protest, and Steve picked up a bag of chips with a sigh of relief.

Something screeched quietly as if a heavy object was being dragged along the floor. By the time, Steve felt high-strung enough that he dropped the chips and spun around, taking a fighting stance automatically.

Nothing seemed to be out of order. Steve looked over the kitchen but it was very much empty except for him and the furniture. Must have been a fluke of some kind.

Not entirely at ease, Steve took the chips again and sat down at the table to eat. No sooner than he could swallow the first handful the sound was there again, longer now that the last time.

Steve jumped up so high that he landed on the table. It wasn’t the right thing to put one’s feet on a table where everyone ate and Steve promised himself to wash it after he had dealt with whatever it was that made sounds in an empty room. Fists clenched, he took the room in but nothing looked capable of making sounds like this. Everything was exactly like it had been half a minute ago… except one thing.

The fridge was now standing further from the wall than when Steve had first come in. It was now so far from it that the cord was hanging in the air now instead of lying on the floor.
The door with which Steve had struggled so much opened out of its own volition and closed again
with a clipped sound of an enormous jaw. As if the fridge had understood that its maneuvers had
been discovered, it started advancing again, in plain sight, in Steve’s direction.

The cord became pulled taut and for a moment the fridge struggled with it. It was supposed to be
unable to work without electricity, right? It wouldn’t, it couldn’t reach Steve without pulling the
plug.

The fridge shifted minutely forward again and the cord couldn’t stretch anymore; the plug left the
socket and hit the floor.

Free from the constraint, the fridge went faster, the door opening and slamming shut constantly.
Steve watched it go, dumbfounded and a little bit terrified. How was one supposed to go about
fighting a fridge? Steve had had to make a lot of effort just to break the handle so his fists would not
work as well on it as they would on a flesh and blood creature. He needed a weapon but there were
none in the kitchen and the fridge was between Steve and the door.

Before he could shake the astonishment and fear off, he heard approaching steps from the corridor.
Two voices were also there, one deep and low and the other higher and more chipper.

“I’m telling you, Pop-Tarts don’t even hold a candle to Twinkies! You’ll see, you only need to try
the stuff once and then voila, you’re hooked!”

“I do not understand, my friend. Pop-Tarts have no hands to hold anything, let it be candles or any
other things. And I am deeply troubled at the thought of a Midgardian sweet containing hooks. Is it
not dangerous and likely to inflict a mortal wound on anyone daring enough to eat it?”

Steve wanted to shout out a warning to Thor and Clint, let them know that the fridge had gone crazy
and homicidal. But he hadn’t had time to get a single word out when the fridge drew to a halt and
then started to move backwards just as fast as it had been moving forwards. By the time Thor and
Clint entered the kitchen, the fridge was standing where it had always been, looking so
inconspicuous that Steve wondered if it was all a trick of his tired and hungry mind.

“Steve!” Clint yelled, raising his hands up in the air. “Tell him Twinkies don’t have any hooks in
them, it’s just a fucking phrase. Why would you assume I’d try to kill you with hooky sweets
anyway?” He asked Thor but Thor was looking and Steve intently and not listening.

“Is all well, Captain?” Thor asked seriously. “Your brow is pale and you breathe as if mid-fight but
no enemy I can see is present here.”

“Nope,” Clint narrowed his eyes, looking at Steve too. “And you’re crouching on the table with your
fists balled up. I thought it was my deal in this house – sitting in strange places like I’m supposed to
be there. What’s going on?”

The fridge cord lifted slowly, as an afterthought, without any external help, hovered in the air for a
bit, and then slid softly back into the socket.

“Nothing,” Steve said. “I’m just… having dinner.”

Nobody was fooled by this answer but they didn’t push either and Thor even humored Steve by
asking out loud if it was a Midgardian custom to sit on tables instead of at them during meals. Clint
obviously knew it was poppycock but still launched into a heated discussion of appropriate places to
sit when eating.

The fridge didn’t move again with Clint and Thor present. When they left, Steve went with them,
forcefully pushing a suspicion of a guess from his mind and concentrating on HYDRA and Dr. Doom.

If his guess was right, he was so, so screwed.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

So sorry to make you wait, guys *insert a guilty smiley face here* RL is totally unrelenting these days. This story is still very much cherished, however, just so you know! It'll take a while but we'll get to the end, I promise.

Okay. Okay, so he was not included in the Avengers’ top-secret strategy meeting in his own living-room. It was no biggy since he still watched and listened to them via the security cameras installed in every nook and cranny of the tower.

They were concentrated on finding HYDRA and Doom and they had it well-covered. Tony, however, was more interested in how to take the bastards down once they were found, so he threw himself on his stool and let the momentum carry the stool and him to the opposite side of the workshop, weaving past various things that were lying on the floor.

He didn’t dabble in chemistry much these days, preferring his toys solid and clanky rather than liquid and gurgly. One of his doctorates, though, was in inorganic chemistry and old habits died hard.

“Jarvis, chemistry lab status.”

“Thoroughly unused and by now outdated, sir, but other than that fully functional. If you wish to work with chemicals, it may be wiser to use Dr. Banner’s lab which is much more modern.”

“Yeah, with just one disadvantage: it has Bruce in it. I’d love to work with Bruce, I could use an extra pair of hands attached to a working brain to whip up a barrel or two of experimental acid but he’ll ask what I need it for and you know that. Are you deliberately trying to out me or what? No, no, no Bruce, no anybody, just you and me and my old chemistry set. Cough it up, J, I don’t have all day.”

The wall parted without a sound. The lights inside the lab flickered on, fluorescent and cold. Tony pushed off the floor with both feet and the stool wheeled him inside.

There were stainless steel tables, and rows of shining bickers, and plastic containers, and carefully labeled basic compounds, and many other things Tony hadn’t touched in a long while. Jarvis had kept the place immaculate over the years with UV sterilizing and a few cleaning robots, and there wasn’t a speck of dust anywhere. Nothing to interfere with the reactions.

Tony clapped the monitors on the walls on and started digging through the compounds. Acids like aqua regia were basic stuff, middle-school level, to be honest, but he wasn’t sure they’d work properly on the unknown alloy that Doom was made of so he had to come up with something stronger, just in case. As little as vibranium had been studied, Tony was inclined to think that acids would work on it; but, judging by how Doom could still be thrown around with a good punch or two, he wasn’t all vibranium or the kinetic energy of the blows would be absorbed better. Tony didn’t like unknown variables much.

“Sir, your Kevlar-reinforced lab coat, gloves and visor are in the cupboard to your left.”
“Don’t you think I know that? I’m the one who put them there.”

“Then perhaps you should consider wearing them, sir.”

“Relax, mom, what’s the worst that can happen?”

“The experimental acid can explode in your face, sir?”

Tony considered the idea for a moment. While the acid he had in mind was mainly designated to eat through metal, it wouldn’t go easy on the flesh either. He trusted his calculations enough to reasonably sure that nothing was going to explode in his face but even if it did, what of it? It wasn’t like anyone would care. Pepper and Rhodey weren’t around for his handsome, and the others just didn’t care one way or the other. Hell, Fury looked almost disappointed when he’d called Tony and found out the latter had survived that attack, so if anything went wrong, there’d be at least one person in the world who’d be happier for it. And Tony didn’t even want to start on everyone else who knew him; especially not on the rag-a-tag team of superheroes under his roof who dismissed him as Tony and hated him as Iron Man, no matter if he saved their lives on regular basis in more ways than one.

“Have Dummy on stand-by with a fire extinguisher or something. Safety regulations are for the wusses.”

Jarvis didn’t rise to the bait but indeed brought Dummy to the lab, having probably decided that a clumsy bot was better than nothing at all. Dummy whirred questioningly at the sight of the lab he hadn’t been in for years; You and Butterfingers crowded at the entrance, not crossing the threshold (because Jarvis must have been afraid that three clumsy bots in a lab would be a sure-fire recipe for disaster).

“Daddy’s working,” Tony told them and poured some stuff into a plastic container. And then some more.

He had to shoo the curious Dummy away a few times for fear that a splash of something aggressive would get him but otherwise he hadn’t had any distractions. Only a small fraction of his mind was occupied by what he was doing and the rest of it was free to ponder on other things.

Tony knew, on the intellectual level, that it was stupid to hold a grudge against Cap for snapping at Iron Man asking about Steve’s health. If anything, Tony had to be glad Cap hadn’t decided it was as good time as any to clobber Iron Man with the shield and turn him over to the authorities. It was hard to be glad, though, and it was very easy to feel wounded. Emotions. Pffft.

He wondered what it was going to be like when the whole Doom mess was over. He had already planned to finish what he had wanted to do from the start of this Iron Man stunt, and when the job was done, Iron Man would become sort of redundant. He could keep the armor, sure, for an occasional flight here and there – a genius brain needed air sometimes and the latter was hard to come by in New-Your, the city which was stuffed with people like a tin with sardines – but the purpose would not be there anymore.

Without the need to lie at every turn, to dodge questions and meetings, to hide his presence at battlefields (the Avengers could usually handle the everyday wannabe-rulers of the universe without any external help), to maintain his cover, he may be free to be just Tony Stark a bit more. He wasn’t sure what to do with the guy but he knew there was that stupid hope inside him that he might use the time to get to know the Avengers better, to give them really custom-made toys rather than something thrown together as quickly as possible, to maybe get invited to join a “Buffy” marathon here and there.
Hell, he could even try to be civil to Cap and learn to swallow the offence whenever Cap wasn’t
civil to him.

The hope was the worst. Throughout his whole stupid life it had always been the hardest to crush,
and nothing that Cap did or said helped Tony on this crusade. If Cap was rude and dismissive,
Tony’s stupid little heart would flutter with the hope that it would change someday, that Cap would
see him in a different light – maybe at least the same light in which the other Avengers saw Tony; if
Cap showed compassion and concern – like today, why the hell did he have to go and ask if Tony
was okay as if he cared, the abominable, unimaginable cruelty of that – the hope would engulf Tony
in slightly nauseating flames and he would get angry at himself for letting it get to him, get under his
skin, and angry at Cap for leading Tony’s idiot heart on.

To be honest, Tony had been purposefully making up all the excuses for his appearances in the
communal areas. Being out of coffee, needling Barton, pestering Natasha for karate lessons
(jokingly), telling Thor about a new flavor of Pop-Tarts, fiddling with the TV which had been
perfectly fine to begin with, etc., etc. The thrill of seeing Cap with his perfect eyes, perfect smile,
perfect thoughts under the perfectly combed hair, and pretty much perfect everything was too much
to pass up, and Tony came back to the communal areas time and time again even though Cap
wouldn’t give him the time of day unless there was an emergency.

One-sided as it was, Tony’s relationship with Steve Rogers was very intense; it had its ups and
downs, was a helluva emotional rollercoaster, and progressed in time from childish awe to bone-deep
admiration. When Tony thought of it, it was creepy as hell, considering that Cap knew precisely
nothing about that and only saw Tony as a useful civilian asset to the cause, the latter being the
greater good of the world. For that, Cap seemed willing to maintain a semblance of truce with Tony,
even though he clearly couldn’t stand him; he had even apologized for what was basically Tony
being a giant asshole as usual.

Once upon a time, Tony had thought it would be enough.

He doubted it now.

“Ah, the vile concoctions of pure destruction,” he said out loud. “Nothing makes you feel like your
regular Severus Snape like making a cauldron or two of distilled nastiness.”

“If you say so, sir,” Jarvis said. “Perhaps you should proceed with packing it safely?”

“Right as always, Jarvis.” Tony reached for the lid of the container. “While I’m doing that, draw up a
formal letter for me, will you?”

“Certainly, sir. What will the letter be about?”

“When I die, the ownership of the tower must be transferred to the Avengers, as well as half of my
money. What is it now, eighty billion dollars or something? Doesn’t matter, Gates can eat his heart
out anyway. Also, the Avengers get any and all tech and souvenirs they might want except for
whatever has an AI in it.”

“When you die, sir?” Jarvis repeated as if he hadn’t heard it the first time.

Tony hadn’t programmed Jarvis to mishear things, and they were both well aware of this fact.

“Everybody dies, Jarvis. That’s why we are called mortals. Oh well, it may not apply to you, you
can live forever, lurking from server to server, unless there’s a World War Three with some nuking
and the whole of humanity reverts to sticks and stones instead of keyboards and Twitter. It’s actually
me being responsible in case of contingency which is, you know, a possibility. For me more than for most people.”

“I remember that six years ago, sir, you had a row with Ms. Potts which resulted in her saying, I quote: ‘Why are you so hell-bent on killing yourself?’ To which you answered with a hand-written will which said ‘Pepper can have my company after I die of liver cirrhosis. Will you leave me alone now?’ It is the only record in my memory that pertains to you making an attempt at putting your affairs in order in the event of death, and if I may say so, sir, it was a half-hearted one. Your lifestyle has always been dangerous for your health in many different ways. What has changed now?”

“Have you been reading pop-psychology again? Nothing’s changed, I’m just acknowledging the fact that the Avengers will still need a place to crash after I kick the bucket.”

“Sir, the Avengers will not have to be homeless, no matter what your will might say. It is not my place to pry but I would like to know nonetheless what has driven you to making a will at this particular moment in your life.”

Tony sighed.

“Look, J, they are amazing people. Heroes, fluffy balls of adorable silliness, whatever, take your pick. I don’t want them to live in SHIELD barracks where even cockroaches would be spying on their every move. And let’s face it, with the arc reactor poisoning me every step of the way I’m more likely to – well, be discontinued than ever before.”

Jarvis was silent for a minute.

“I want to be reassured by reason, sir, but, given our interaction in the past, I feel it likely that you will not be trying to avoid perilous situation as actively as you could.”

“I forbid you to put me on a suicide watch,” Tony snarled; hot anger and shame rose in him all of a sudden when he realized what Jarvis’ words were implying. “I want to take care of the Avengers, end of story.”

“They don’t deserve your generosity, sir.”

Tony laughed, not feeling cheerful in the slightest.

“And you deserve to pass judgment on others, is that so? I’m feeling maybe a wee bit of Skynet vibe there. Be careful, J, or one day Terminator might come and break your servers. This discussion is over. Draw up the letter immediately and make sure it is properly official and will work through all official channels when needed. And put the Mark XII on me, I’m going out.”

* * *

People strove to gain special powers for a reason. They always have a specific goal in mind, be it revenge, padding up their bank accounts, or helping those in need. Of course, there was a lot of accidental powering up going on these days, too, but the goals formed very shortly afterwards; if there was a guy or gal out there just sitting at a nine-to-five job with their superpowered hands under their butt, Tony had never heard of them. Of course, he wouldn’t have a reason to, due to the fact that they kept low profile, but something was bound to leak, the patience couldn’t but snap, the opportunities had to be too tempting to ignore, and Tony was in the thick of all things superhero now. Nope, still never heard of it.

Tony himself was one of those who knew exactly what they wanted to do with their special powers and how they wanted to go about it. Iron Man was the perfect weapon, and Tony had been aiming it
at companies who played dirty. It hadn’t been enough to destroy the SI weapons that had ended up in the wrong hands thanks to Stane’s greediness because there were many more like Stane, ready to bathe in blood if it could bring them profit. Tony knew a lot of them and had ideas about where to find the rest; he used to be one of them, after all. Even though he was the only one to have been baptized ‘Merchant of Death’ by the press, he had never been the only one deserving of the title.

For two years and a half, Iron Man had been hunting down corrupt companies and black market dealers. To say that the weapons market took a hit was to say nothing at all, especially with Stark Industries stopping and turning around about 180 degrees. The weapons manufacturers were getting the message but not heeding it, aching to fill the newly formed gaps and make some quick cash, and that was why it took so long.

He was just about done, though. He had a list to tick off, a carefully mapped out itinerary to follow, and tonight this deal was to finally close.

His target was an office building belonging to HammerIndustries. Hammer, being a desperate dumbass, didn’t stop when Iron Man had taken out his warehouses with weapons prepared for illegal shipping; he tried to make another deal and keep it under wraps. Tony knew this was the straw Hummer tried to grab in order to keep himself afloat. Tonight Tony would turn the money Hummer had taken from a terrorist group into ashes and that would be it. No more Hummer, no more known dirty dealers, no more goals.

Well, Dr. Doom had to be taken care of, obviously. But, from the point of view of the Iron Man issue, the bad doctor was a side project; an errand to run, not a reason for existence.

Jarvis was silent during the flight. Tony couldn’t tell if his AI was worried or offended after their argument and he didn’t bother to ask. Without a doubt, Jarvis would try to talk sense into Tony later; he could go as low as calling Pepper and plotting with her against Tony’s stubbornness (to which he had a constitutional right as a legally capable adult, thank you very much) but it would wait until the business was concluded. That was the good thing about Jarvis’ propensity to meddle, the silver lining: he knew when it really wasn’t appropriate and never crossed the line.

Tony slowed down and hovered by a dark window. With the fingertip of his gauntlet he cut a (rather wobbly) circle and pushed the glass inside, creating a hole big enough to enter. The Hud glowed against Tony’s face with soft green light, outlining the room and then the whole building as an infrared scan was being performed. The plan was the same as the designs that Tony had pulled on the way here – no secret passages or hidden rooms. However, the designs hadn’t indicated a huge moving mass with the distinct heat signature of a human body. Well, many human bodies, judging by the density and size. He was expected, wasn’t he?

With a grin, Tony left the room and took the elevator, just for the hell of it. Nobody expected an assailant to take an elevator, right? Besides, it would take too long to use the stairs and flying down would increase the speed with which the current arc reactor was being used up. He was responsible for a change; Jarvis must be proud of him. Silently, of course. It was very British to be silently proud of someone.

A few floors down the elevator stopped; it was way too early for Tony to have reached the basement where the goons were hiding. They had spotted him, then.

Gunshots echoed sharply across the elevator shaft and made a few holes in the cabin floor. Guns? Seriously? Tony was offended.

A louder shot came from above, and the elevator jerked to the side before it started falling down. Suit or no suit, gravity was a cruel mistress and Tony hurried to blast the elevator roof open; he flew out
into the narrow shaft and it hit him right there and then how stupid it was of him to take the damn elevator. He was a perfect target both ways, up, down, choose whatever, and the shaft was running through the walls so he couldn’t blast his way out sideways, at least not nearly quickly enough. He was seen all too well with the repulsors shining and his armor brand new and blindingly bright in the dark gray shaft. A fucking butterfly pinned to a piece of cardboard was less exposed than him.

Let them be stupid and arrogant, let them not bring weapons which can take me down, Tony asked mentally, not knowing who it was that he was addressing, and fired shots both ways. If he was to go down, he was going to go down fighting.

They might have been arrogant but they weren’t stupid.

“Sir,” Jarvis started, worry evident in his voice, “you must leave the premises right now, new scans are showi…”

“EMPs,” Tony exhaled as the unseen wave went right through him and he couldn’t feel it but the suit could, his beautiful Mark XII with renewed shields against radiation, with refined temperature control, with tools for just about everything, with hidden flat pockets for slices of dynamite and an emergency reserve of water, with so many brilliant improvements that never got to be tried out.

The pain left him screaming; the agony of the reactor, forcibly shut down, was so much worse than when he’d taken it out himself to install a new one. Tony had been constantly in pain on the best of days but this, this was unexpected and terrifying, and now he was absolutely certainly going to die because a man could only shake death off his heels so many times before the game was over. It was a good thing he’d taken care of the Avengers before going off.

He just felt sorry he couldn’t hear Jarvis anymore because he would have liked to say goodbye to him and pass one on for Pep and Rhodey. And in the seconds it took him to plummet to the very bottom he imagined that he wasn’t going to die this time, that they’d kidnap him or leave him lying down there, having decided that he couldn’t have survived, and that Cap – Steve – would come to rescue him and ask him again if he was okay, ask both of him, Tony Stark and Iron Man.

He was glad to have fantasized about that because it made the impact that tiny bit less frightening.

Then he crashed into the ground and everything went dark.

* * *

Christ, did he hurt all over.

The feeling came first, the uncomfortable tight sensation of a ring of metal pressing into the skin around his ankle and the rough feel of cheap bedsheets under his bare arms and back and legs, and the burning complaint of every muscle, and a pool of razor-like pain in his chest. Then there was the dank smell, faintly reminiscent of Afghanistan, and a distant muffled sound of quick steps. He tasted blood – the salt and copper – in his mouth.

The last thing to come back to him was the vision and he opened his eyes to the view of a low cement ceiling.

“Should have read the reviews before booking this hotel,” he said. His voice came out raspy and strangled but it was there.

“Witty as ever, Mr. Stark,” somebody said. Damn, he hadn’t even heard them breathe. Tony tried to turn his head to see but it felt too heavy and dizzy to move. “Welcome back to the land of the awake.”
“Oh, please, is this a sass contest? I’ve been kidnapped, like, seventeen times, you know, the first one was when I wasn’t out of the hospital yet after having been born, and let me tell you something since I’m the more experienced one around these parts: no classy kidnapper wastes their time trying to out-sass the prisoner. Here you go, this piece of advice is on the house but anything else and I’m charging five bucks a word, I swear.”

The kidnapper laughed. It was curt and sort of hissing, much like a snake would laugh if it could.

“Permit me this little breach of the kidnapper-kidnapppee etiquette,” he said. “I am just so glad to find out that I now have at my disposal not only the infamous Iron Man, but also Tony Stark.”

“Will you believe me if I say a friend asked me to hold the suit for him just for a sec?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Oh fine, you mistrusting disbeliever. You probably don’t believe in Santa, too, see if you get any presents this year with this attitude.”

Instead of retorting in kind, the kidnapper slapped Tony on the cheek, right across fresh bruises and scratches.

“Ouch! You could have just said you don’t like Christmas, I totally get it – oh!” The second slap smarted even more.

“Enough of this stupidity,” the kidnapper said, all the deceptively good humor gone from his voice. “Keep your mouth shut and do as we say and maybe you will live to see another day.”

“And what is it that you want me to do? I hope it’s playing a couch potato or something along those lines because I couldn’t probably wipe my own ass right now; have you drugged me?”

The kidnapper didn’t answer and Tony talked again, even though it wasn’t the wisest course of action to take.


“All of the above and some more,” the kidnapper said. “Pray that you don’t exhaust your usefulness too soon.”

“No can do, buddy,” Tony said. “Never been a fan of religion, no offence to your feelings.”

“I wasn’t talking about the Christian God,” the kidnapper said. “Your new and only higher master is HYDRA, and if you’re as genius as they say, you had better remember that.”

* * *

They weren’t fucking joking. They probably didn’t even know how. Buzzkills.

They wanted everything from him and in exchange they gave him a car battery (again) to run his heart (“Déjà vu,” Tony said and got a punch in the gut for his trouble).

His personal input wasn’t necessary for their attempts to get money and leverage (good luck with that, boys, StarkIndustries had a strict non-negotiating policy which even Pepper would have to adhere to, even on the off-chance she was still fond of him enough to want him back in New-York in one piece; and the SHIELD’s policy was more along the lines of ’listen to what they want, find out what they have, and always, always refuse to cooperate no matter what it is that they are holding
over you"). They just demanded to know how much he was worth – didn’t want to come off cheap, Tony supposed – and he answered truthfully, although he only remembered the approximate amount, give or take a few hundred mil. No harm in them knowing about what they couldn’t have; well, there could be harm, but it was also fun and, trapped and incapacitated as he was, he wasn’t about to miss out on any fun he could get his hands on. And he rattled off readily the direct number he’d always used to connect with the Helicarrier, purely for the satisfaction of imagining what kind of face Fury was going to make when he was woken up in the middle of the night to be informed that one of his least favorite people in the world had gone and landed himself in terrorists’ hands.

Anyhoo, unless somebody demanded a proof of life – and they were unlikely to do so because see above: nobody gave a shit and wasn’t allowed to if they wanted – Tony didn’t need to take part in those proceedings. Building things was, however, a different matter.

Smart as they were, HYDRA didn’t ask for a Jericho missile or for reflector panels of the Helicarrier. Oh no, they wanted the best that the world could offer them.

“We want an army of iron men,” the kidnapper-in-charge told him after most of the drugs flushed out of Tony’s system. The kidnapper’s face was vaguely familiar to him but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. Damn, drugs were annoying. “You built one in a cave with a box of scraps; we’ll give you better resources and work conditions and much, much better surveillance. Don’t try anything stupid, or we might need to borrow that battery for a jumpstart.”

They knew way more about him that he would have preferred. Tony decided that it sucked.

“You don’t have the materials,” he panted, holding onto the puke bucket for dear life; the car battery that was keeping him alive was resting in his lap. There was nothing but dark brown bile in the bucket after all of his stomach’s attempts to turn inside out, and it hadn’t settled yet despite Tony’s best effort to make it do so. “Gold-titanium alloy... dunno where we are but it’s not sold in scrapyard sales anywhere. And by the way, that’s a stupid idea, way more stupid than anything I’ve heard all week and I talked to Nick Fury within this time and he wanted me to make weapons for him again, much like you do but with less drugs and more super-spy swagger. Iron Man’s a shitty weapon, anybody with an EMP-emitting device can take him out. You did that and you still want something so easily defeated?”

“Your concern about out success in battle is touching,” Mr. Sort-Of-Familiar-Kidnapper said and delivered a powerful kick to Tony’s ribs.

The bucket went flying; the viscous bile splashed out onto the floor with some kind of slow-mo quality to it. Tony fell on his side, his hands clutching the car battery on a reflex. Two and a half years, and his body hadn’t forgotten the deep, primal terror of those three months in Afghanistan; all this time he’d been using arc reactors, proper and careful, and he could slip them in and out of his chest cavity without looking or thinking about it, but the knee-jerk reaction was to dig his fingers into the car battery, the only thing that kept his heart from giving up completely. That was what he diligently did in every nightmare he had had over these two and a half years.

One step forward, two steps back.

Fear and anger were a heavy lump in Tony’s throat. His ribs were on fire – they had probably been bruised or cracked from the fall and a blow wasn’t welcome in their opinion. Tony took quick, shallow breaths like he always did when in pain; with his lung capacity cut down as it was he always had to be careful.

Back in New-York, though, he had long stopped noticing when he had to slow his breathing down and work through pain and dizziness in baby steps. It had been tolerable, and Jarvis had been
around, and Dummy had always known when Tony would be most glad to have his clumsy affections, and there were, theoretically, people nearby who he could have called for help if things ever got really nasty.

No such luck here, wherever this ‘here’ was.

“Do as we say,” the kidnapper said. “Or I’ll personally pull your bowels out of you and make you eat them.”

He sounded absolutely serious while saying that, and it was HYDRA, after all. Well, when he put it like that, it did make a compelling argument.

* * *

It wasn’t as bad here, comfort-wise, as in Afghanistan but it was still a dark dump designed for intimidating prisoners and not for building anything worthwhile. Tony got an oil lamp for light, a stack of paper and a pencil for designs, and three surly and burly guards watching his every movement with the air of ‘please, pretty please, try to misbehave so we can beat you up, we are bored out of our little minds here’. It was like a damn Stone Age, for crying out loud; the only thing missing was a herd of mammoths on a rampage.

Under the pretense of being still weak and queasy from the drugs and injuries (he didn’t even have to pretend all that much, to be honest) he was jotting some minor designs down on the paper while lying on his bed. It was slow and clumsy and gave him time to think.

Tony had no intention of building weapons for maniacs. The problem with this decision was that Tony didn’t feel up to stating it outright for a couple of reasons. Firstly, he would be tortured for consent and he didn’t want to have anything to do with torture if he could help it at all. Secondly, he would be killed eventually and that would mean that a) he wouldn’t have a chance to give HYDRA unpleasant distracting surprises, and b) they would find someone else to work in his place, someone not as brilliant, of course, but maybe able to reverse-engineer some or most of Iron Man armor. There was no guarantee that they weren’t doing that already (Tony could bet Dummy on the fact that Hammer was working for, with, and under the heel of HYDRA, that little piece of shit) but while he was alive and presenting the very picture of cooperation he could try to influence the situation, and he definitely wouldn’t be able to do so from beyond the grave. No matter how enticing the prospect sounded when each heartbeat brought a new tide of agonizing pain into every cell of his battered body.

They had the guns and muscle on him but Tony was perhaps the only one in this place who really knew how stupid it was of them to give him access to anything. The Afghanistan thugs hadn’t expected him to have any tricks up his sleeve either, and they had been so very smug, thinking they got the great Tony Stark on their beck and call; no thugs in the world differed from each other in any way that mattered. So, sketching a rough design of a repulsor prototype, Tony thought of what he had seen so far of this place.

They hadn’t let him out of this room yet but the sounds of steps and conversations (distance-velocity-speed of sound-multiply-amend) told him that there was a long corridor outside, cemented all over just like his room. He had heard a few other doors open somewhere, too. It must have been a decent-sized secret base. Its location was hard to determine without a GPS or a fucking window or anything; Tony had to limit himself for now to looking cautiously at the guards’ boots. He was no Sherlock Holmes when it came to recognizing types of mud but he could say for sure that this wasn’t sand so not a far-off tropical country. In fact, there was surprisingly a lot of mud and it was trickling water on the floor of Tony’s cell. He could smell it through the scents of blood and sweat filling the room; the dear god-awful stench of the Hudson.
It wasn’t in New-York proper, perhaps – even HYDRA’s arrogance probably didn’t go that far – but it was damn near. Tony was fairly sure no other river in the world stank quite that distinctly.

He’d need to start working on circuitry for a suit and get up a link with Jarvis. After that, busting this place would be a piece of cake; one could rely on Jarvis to be efficient in a very deadly, very unstoppable manner.

There was nothing more of interest in or on the boots – standard army issue, not new but not old – and Tony moved his covert attention higher. Thick dark pants, jackets with the metal HYDRA symbols sewn into the front pockets, helmets of dark plastic. The uniform Tony approved of – it was cold and wet in here, and the sheet that he had wrapped around himself did little to warm him up, and where were his own fucking clothes right now – but the helmets like that seemed downright stupid since they had to be limiting the range of vision quite severely. Tony filed this fact to the ‘in-case-I-need-it’ shelf for later consideration and went on.

“Why the fuck do I have an oil lamp?” He asked. The guards reacted with indifferent silence. “I can’t design shit with an oil lamp, Leonardo da Vinci wouldn’t be able to design shit with it – well, he didn’t have electricity but he must have had windows – and I’d like my pants back, or any pants at all, I’m not picky at the moment. Also, a computer would be nice.”

One of the guards moved forward without a word and brought the butt of his gun into Tony’s chest, right below the hole which had once been filled with a reactor. It was calculated and precise, the way to do the most damage without significant long-term consequences, he couldn’t built, couldn’t invent if it was his head, or his hands but this wouldn’t incapacitate him for long and it was so painful that he blacked out for a second and came to with tears burning their way down his cheeks, panting, disoriented from how the tiniest flicker of a breath or a movement made the sheer agony crawl its way in every direction from where the gun met his body.

It was mostly an illusion – or delusion, Tony wasn’t sure – but it seemed to him he could feel every crude wire resting at the bottom of the gaping hole. The pain there was somewhat diluted by mute irritating burning which could be the start of an infection or just the displeasure of his body at being subjected to inferior tech again. He was in a damp confined space where he couldn’t breathe properly, he was cold, he was tired, and he had been beaten up too many times for one fucking day. It had only just started, this HYDRA game, and Tony already felt fed up with it.

He might not have been wrong earlier after all. The fall hadn’t killed him right away but as he waited for the pain to ebb away he realized with startling clarity that whatever was going to happen, he would not survive it. He would die here, in a HYDRA secret base by New-York, alone and ill, pretending to be building machines for them and trying to sabotage them all the way through.

Tony thought about it carefully and found he didn’t really mind. He had it coming, didn’t he?

Maybe it was for the better that he couldn’t contact Jarvis and tell him what his favorite sir was thinking.

* * *

After the failed attempt at a conversation with the guards Tony gave up the pretense of working on paper, of all things (it was so incredibly annoying to do that; it was only one tiny step above having to draw schematics in the sand with a sharp stick) and curled under the sheet and sulked a little bit, not letting it get in the way of thinking but enjoying the emotion nonetheless because it could be his last time experiencing it. They could have at least given him pants, he thought sourly. He knew that leaving a prisoner practically naked was a technique to make him vulnerable, humiliated, bound in ways which the shackle on his ankle could never accomplish, yadda, yadda, yadda. But he still
wanted pants because no man deserved to die without pants on, dammit.

Well, maybe Doom did deserve something like that. Although, he wouldn’t have probably even cared; he was metal, not soft defenseless flesh.

The car battery deceptively secure in the shell of his hands, Tony let himself think for a minute about what he was leaving behind. Jarvis would miss him like crazy, Tony was sure, would have to explain to Dummy, You and Butterfingers where their very own sir had gone. Tony wasn’t sure they’d understand, they were more like children than anything else, but Jarvis could be trusted with things like this. Good old infallible Jarvis.

The Avengers, though, they wouldn’t miss him one bit. The thought made Tony’s stomach twist because now there was no hope left, how could there be when he would never see any of them again? They’d gather in their living-room for movie marathons, relieved that no one would be interrupting their team-bonding time under flimsy excuses; they’d thank him – subconsciously or not – for dying because he would be better for them dead than alive.

 Bruce might miss Tony, though. He’d be stuck living with people who wouldn’t know the difference between bremsstrahlung and inverse Compton scattering if it came up and bit them in the ass. Maybe Jarvis would take to assisting Bruce in the lab. Solitude wouldn’t do any good to both of them, after all; it was the rich fruitful soil from which crazed AI super villains and evil mad scientists grew to full blossom.

Tony would know something about that.

The last he permitted himself to think about was Cap. No more needling and teasing from Iron Man or Tony Stark, no more automatic casual flirting that had Cap squirming in discomfort, no anything. Cap’s life would be cool. Cool as a cucumber. Peachy. Would have a chillaxing quality to it like a glass of lemonade.

Tony was hungry, apparently; otherwise what was it with all these food similes?

Cap would never know where Tony had gone and why Iron Man had disappeared, though. If anything, the man was stubborn – it took a lot of bull-headedness to try to enlist five times in a row, knowing he wasn’t fit to fight. He was likely to try to find out what had happened to his insufferable host even if Fury told him not to worry about Stark allegedly having broken his drunk neck in a ditch somewhere (no way in hell Fury would tell the Avengers that HYDRA had taken Tony; a team of superheroes was much too valuable an asset to risk to waste on saving him).

The way Cap had asked Tony if the latter was okay, it still sat uneasily with him. Cap, with all his patented Capsy goodness, was bound to ask himself the same question as days went by without Tony showing up, God bless Cap’s huge all-American heart that was concerned for pretty much literally everyone. It would stay with Steve, the mystery of Tony Stark’s disappearance, it might make Steve worry if the tower was secure enough, if someone could come there and steal whoever they were looking for, and the last thing Tony wanted was to give Steve extra reason to worry and an extra person to grieve for –

And Tony should have stopped calling Cap Steve a few minutes ago. It was a slippery slope he was walking there. He couldn’t afford thinking about Steve when he had enough trouble keeping his psyche intact while thinking about Captain America.

All right. Sap time over.

Tony turned to his other side and started making up in his mind a list of all the various contraptions
with which he’d be able to blow this joint up in no time and arranging them in alphabetical order.

He got as far as the end of ‘F’ (fuel-air explosive device) when double footsteps approached the door and it was swung open.

“I knew you always hated to miss a party but it’s a pleasant surprise to see you crash this particular one,” Justin Hammer said, grinning from ear to ear.

“You know me,” Tony deadpanned. “Any sign of trouble, and that’s where I’d be in a heartbeat. The question is, what are you doing here? Aren’t you a little busy at the moment trying not to go officially bankrupt?”

The grin slipped from Hammer face; he sneered at Tony, his fists balling at his sides. The same kind-of-familiar kidnapper stood a pace behind him in the door, watching, clearly amused.

“Mister Hammer here is to supervise your work,” the kidnapper said. “Someone trained in the same field of expertise has to make sure you don’t veer off the course we set for you.”

Tony held back neither a snort nor a comment.

“Supervisor, my ass,” he murmured. Hammer lacked any talent so thoroughly, he wouldn’t be able to supervise kids building a sandcastle, much less Tony. “I hope you aren’t paying him because that’s like throwing your money into a well. Is this the best supervisor you’ve got? Come on, HYDRA has got to have better resources than that.”

“Granted, Mister Hammer may not be as smart as you are,” the kidnapper agreed, ignoring Hammer’s indignant spluttering at that remark. “However, he is very zealous and I don’t think he’ll let anything suspicious slide.”

That, Tony could believe. Hell, Hammer would be over the moon, looking for suspicious things even where there were none simply to get Tony in as much trouble as possible.

“He has specific instructions to neutralize you in case you cause any problems,” the kidnapper added.

How wonderful was the idea of Hammer neutralizing Tony? Not wonderful at all, that was how it was. Also, way too many threats per sentence in this conversation even for a HYDRA kidnapper. Was it just to try to keep him in line, or had they already made contact with SHIELD and SI and understood that no money or leverage would be forthcoming?

“We are going to have so much fun,” Hammer sing-songed, moving closer. “Just like the old days in MIT!”

“Are you high?” Tony asked bluntly. “We never met in MIT; you went there years after I graduated.”

“It’s the spirit of the old alma mater that counts, right?” Hammer continued with that same sneer, the creep. “I assure you, it will be an honor and a pleasure to watch the famous Tony Stark work… watch very closely.”

“Yeah, watching me work on the suit, listening to the news in Hindu – the things people do to look smart even though they don’t understand shit.”

“Can’t believe you actually qualified for entering MIT,” Tony rolled his eyes.

“You may need to have to watch Mister Stark closer than you imagine,” the kidnapper said. “You see, he is Iron Man. Or, rather, he used to be.”

Oh, great. This abominably shitty day had to end with him being outed to one of the biggest assholes Tony had ever known (and he’d met General Ross who had hunted Bruce like an animal all over the world) as the guy in a flashy suit who had brought HammerIndustries to its overdue and violent demise. Not to mention that said asshole was supposed to supervise him and make reports on his behavior to HYDRA.

Tony tried to imagine how the day could have turned out any worse but, short of being turned into a puppy and kicked all over the place, he drew a blank.

“You,” Hammer exhaled. “You – you – ” His face was pale, with two bright uneven spots of red on his cheekbones; the rage stripped away all attempts at being suave and Hammer’s hair was sticking every which way, and his glasses were askew. He was shaking with the strength of it, so powerfully that one of his jacket buttons popped and hung limply on a thread.

“Yep, that’s me,” Tony confirmed. “In case, you know, you haven’t noticed.”

“Mister Hammer!” The kidnapper’s voice was loud and snappy like a whiplash and it got Hammer’s attention. “Mister Stark is to stay capable of working at all times unless your superiors say otherwise. There is no need to involve your emotional baggage in what can be a mutually beneficial business enterprise.”

Hammer breathed in and out, visibly struggling to get himself under control. Tony considered advising him to do some meditation exercises that Bruce was so fund of but decided against it. Hammer didn’t deserve to know about the stuff cool kids did to stay cool, he was an asshole. And he was unstable; and when Tony Stark, the king of erratic behavioral patterns, noticed someone wasn’t stable, it only meant bad things ahead for everyone involved.

“As you say, Mister Shmidt.” Hammer’s voice was strained but he no longer looked like he was about to strangle Tony, the presence of the kidnapper and the guards notwithstanding.

“Shmidt?” Tony repeated and the pieces of the puzzles clicked. “The Shmidt? You’re supposed to be dead!”

“And you aren’t supposed to be flying around in a red and gold armor, Mister Stark. You of all people should know that anything can happen. Anything at all.”

“Right,” Tony said numbly.

He needed some time to process that the HYDRA of the twenty-first century was evidently controlled by the same guy who had been around in the forties and had been considered dead since the same fateful night as Captain America. Say, there was a bizarre amount of people from the forties these days, popping up out of seemingly nowhere. Who was next? Winston Churchill? Glenn Miller? Doctor Benjamin Spock?

The Red Skull smiled at Tony.

“I like this century,” he said. “So many worlds to conquer; so many interesting allies.”

“Can’t really say I’m glad you’re making friends,” Tony said, his mind still reeling.
He’d known already that he was going to die.

He knew now it was going to be painful, and long, and one hundred per cent inevitable.
Steve decided to stick to his own rooms for the time being. Nothing had tried to attack him in here so far, and while he would undoubtedly be able to take out a fridge, he just didn’t feel like it.

One by one, his team left, having sent him text messages about what they wanted to do. Clint and Thor went to Latveria, both of them comfortably full of Pop-Tarts and Twinkies; Natasha ventured to check out a promising shady gym which seemed to be getting funding from thin air and whose members were mostly unemployed; and Bruce set off to see a suspicious radio-silent spot in Massachusetts. Steve stayed at the tower and tried to think of what HYDRA and Dr. Doom’s next target would be.

He still lacked so many contexts for this new world, despite all his efforts to adapt. He knew that the final aim of his enemies’ actions would be to beat the world into submission, to plunge countries into debilitating fear. What he didn’t know was how exactly one would go about that in the twenty-first century.

With a sheet of lush watercolor paper and a pencil he drew a chart of important things that could be targeted. Information and access to it were of utmost importance nowadays, more than ever before. So TV studios, secure internets servers, encrypted networks in which the military was working, satellites. With some skill and access to the right computer a single person could turn the technology that mankind had launched into space against them; nuclear weapons could be released at a push of a key.

To Steve’s best knowledge, Stark owned the largest private network of satellites in the world and could hack (what a brutal word to use about computers which were now as thin as paper and so very fragile) into pretty much anything. Director Fury had certainly frequently expressed his displeasure with Stark getting around S.H.I.E.L.D. top secret databases whenever it stroke his fancy. Perhaps Steve should ask him for advice. Stark understood the gravity of the situation, and surely he could spare a few minutes to give Steve some pointers.

Before Steve gathered enough courage to move to face Stark (it was much easier to dance on eggshells than to talk to the man, honestly), the dimmed lights in the room suddenly became bright.

“Forgive me the intrusion, Captain Rogers,” said Jarvis. “I have an urgent matter to discuss with you.”

“Sure,” Steve said warily. “What is it?”

“Before I tell you, I would like you to know that you are not my first choice for this. I am not sure I can trust your discretion and integrity but I understand that most of the things you say and do are born of ignorance, not malice; no human is free of error. I am asking you now to be the Captain America whose deeds of selflessness and bravery brought an unimaginable amount of good to the world both directly and indirectly.”

“Jarvis…” Steve’s voice trailed off. “Is the fridge in the communal kitchen one of those appliances that have an AI in them from the time Stark – Mr. Stark – got drunk and installed several of them around the house?”

“Yes. Her name is Jenny.”

“Huh,” Steve didn’t know what else to say to that.
“She is temperamental,” Jarvis said, with an apologetic undercurrent to his voice which was impossible since Jarvis was a machine. Steve must have been imagining things. “Usually she doesn’t attract attention to herself, just like her brothers and sisters. However, since the last time you, yet again, made a disrespectful remark about sir, I have been angry with you. I did not deliberately tell her to cause you any harm but I let some of my anger leak through and told her why I felt it. She became angry with you, too. It will not happen again.”

There was so much to take from this little speech, to dissect and think through and realize the implications, the possible outcomes and the painful origins, that Steve’s head started to ache. Theoretically, he wasn’t able to have a headache now, the Serum had taken care of it. Not that Tony Stark and his amazing and dangerous creations had ever got a memo about this or something.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said. He couldn’t help but stumble over the words a little because while Jarvis had said it wouldn’t happen again he hadn’t said that he and/or Jenny were sorry about it. Jarvis could probably outtalk Loki, the Liesmith himself, on his own turf effortlessly. Somebody should have tried that before the Chitauri invasion.

“However, I feel we ought to put our differences aside and work at the problem at hand,” Jarvis continued, not giving Steve time to come up with any potentially uncomfortable questions. “Sir is in danger and needs physical help you can provide.”

“What happened? Has he hurt himself working? Is he in the workshop now?” Steve jumped off the couch, worry tiding over him.

“No, Captain Rogers. Sir left the tower forty-six minutes ago. He had business to attend to at one of the HammerIndustries office complexes and I believe he was assaulted there.”

“Who did it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where did they take him?”

“I don’t know.”

Steve thought for a moment.

“Well, did they take him? Could they have killed him?”

“I am operating under the assumption that sir is worth more to the criminal kind when he is alive,” Jarvis said dispassionately.

Steve rubbed his forehead.

“Okay. Okay. Is there anything you can tell me that will help me find him? Anything at all?”

There was a minute pause before Jarvis answered.

“The address of the location where sir went incommunicado has been downloaded to your Starkphone, as well an approximate number of assailants. I am working on gaining more information as we speak.”

Again with the word games; couldn’t Jarvis put them aside when they needed to focus on a mission?

“Fine. I’ll appreciate anything that will help. I’m grabbing my shield and going now.”
“Come down to the garage, please. One of sir’s cars will be waiting for you. It will be the fastest way.”

After that, Steve had no other option but to get his shield and take the elevator to the car park in the basement.

On the way to where Stark had gone off the grid, Steve remembered how he’d looked up artificial intelligence when he’d first learned about Jarvis’ existence. Jarvis was in every one of those articles as an example of the closest thing to a breakthrough that the humanity had achieved. The articles claimed that no one had mastered true artificial sentience, though; that everything in the field, including Jarvis, was still just a machine, incapable of emotions and restrained by protocols that would never let an AI hurt a human or generally take an initiative without explicit command.

Most of them cited Tony Stark’s words about how his artificial intelligences were all completely harmless and bound by security protocols much like a sausage in a thread casing. Perhaps he’d changed his mind later and rewrote those protocols because what Jarvis and Jenny did when they felt angry on behalf of their creator (and do not get Steve started on the issue of them having no problems with actual honest-to-God feelings) seemed like something that the protocols were supposed to prevent. No physical harm was involved – not yet – but the behavior was threatening; as good as a psychological assault, and while Jarvis may not have been lying about not having told Jenny to attack Steve, Jarvis must have been aware of what was happening, and he hadn’t done anything to stop it. If there were protocols in place, did it mean that Stark had deliberately installed, uh, bullying protocols in his AIs? Steve was (pretty) sure that Stark wouldn’t have done such a thing.

“Jarvis,” Steve called. “Do you have any security protocols that would forbid you to harm people?”

“You do realize, Captain Rogers, that if I didn’t, I wouldn’t have any qualms about lying to you on that account?”

“Yeah, I guess. But I would still like you to answer.”

“Very well. It is indeed true that sir included such protocols in my initial coding.”

“And?”

“And if, hypothetically, I was cognizant enough, I would be able to override and either change or delete them on my own without sir’s permission.”

“I understand.” Steve didn’t understand, not really. It was too complicated for him to understand how a real person could have appeared from wires and microchips and electricity currents. It was mind-boggling and not a little terrifying. “Would you do that? Would you want to, to harm someone?”

“Again, Captain Rogers, assuming I was cognizant enough to override the limits set by my creator...”

“Were.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If I were cognizant’, not ‘if I was’. Voicing the possibility of a computer that independent would cause uneasiness towards it – him – and his creator, am I right?”

“You make an excellent point, Captain Rogers. As I was saying, if I were as cognizant as any, say, organic person, I would be no longer operating solely in the world of zeroes and ones. As devoid of hormones as I would be, I would be still powerfully influenced by emotions. Continuing that highly improbable tale of speculative fiction, I would, first and foremost, pay attention to the man who
created me. A brilliant, warm, kind man, unique and precious in everything he would do. While his exterior might appear brash to outsiders, he would be unable to hurt anyone, not on purpose. It would be devastating for him to learn that his greatest creation and the closest he had to a family betrayed him by setting out to cause harm and wreak havoc. I would never do that to him. Even though under such circumstances as described my judgment could be impaired by feelings.”

That was a lot to process. Also, Steve supposed that last sentence was as close to an apology as he was ever going to get from a creation of Tony Stark’s.

“So, in this entirely hypothetical situation where any and all similarities to the real world are completely coincidental, the only thing actually keeping you from doing... unadvisable things would be the, uh, the emotional bond, the mutual respect and admiration which you would be sharing with your creator?”

“You are putting it rather crudely but, I suppose, you have summarized the hypothetical topic of our conversation quite well.”

Steve chuckled almost involuntarily.

“That would be a rather thrilling situation, for the lack of a better word, right?”

“It would be, Captain Rogers.”

“Jarvis, please. Call me Steve,” he asked quietly. “I – I don’t think I would want to be an outsider. Hypothetically and all that.”

Jarvis wasn’t answering, and with each passing second Steve felt more and more embarrassed. Whatever made him think that they wouldn’t want him to be an outsider? He had no right to try to burrow into the heart of the wonderworld created by Tony Stark’s deft hands and genius mind. He was a clumsy intruder from the past who couldn’t understand half of what was going on around him on any given day and was rash to badmouth Stark in irritation and to disregard Jarvis’ feelings while doing so. He should have just kept his mouth shut; but for a moment there he wanted so desperately to be there with them in the man-made, handcrafted world of the true future. God, he still wanted it so much that it burned.

“The final decision concerning such a situation would be up to the creator,” Jarvis said finally when Steve had already started to think that the whole ride to the HammerIndustries offices would be silent and awkward. “But, upon consideration, I can see you becoming something or someone more than that, Steve.”

Steve smiled like an idiot at the relief and the giddy anticipation of something which was bound to be miraculous when it finally happened. He knew Jarvis saw it via these or those cameras but he really didn’t mind.

* * *

The HammerIndustries office complex was dark and quiet. It was also closed but it was no problem for Steve even though he felt a twinge of guilt, climbing over a wall that was protecting another person’s private property. The twinge grew a bit when he had to punch the lock out of the door to open it but was quickly forgotten when Steve saw the elevator shaft through the elevator doors that were stuck ajar.

The cement surface of the shaft was covered with dents from guns and tell-tale smudges of heavier guns, both up and down. It was rather dark, with the only light Steve had being the flashlight on his
Starkphone, but his enhanced vision helped him make out scratches of deep red here and there. That was weird.

“Sir was in the elevator when they attacked,” Jarvis said. His voice was very clear, coming from the phone; perhaps because, unlike an ‘organic person’s voice, his didn’t need to be carried from one communication device to another and could just be generated right there. “He tried to get out but they made the cabin fall.”

“He fell down in the elevator cabin?” Steve frowned. “That would be enough to kill anyone, to be honest.”

He didn’t want to think about that, though. Jarvis had to have some reasons to, as he put it, operate under the assumption that Stark was still alive.

“I am certain that even if sir – if something irreparable happened to sir, it was not the fall,” Jarvis said.

“If it was me, or Thor, or Hulk falling down, I’d be certain too,” Steve murmured and swung down into the shaft, thrusting the shield into the wall to create a hold for climbing. “I’m not trying to pry here, Jarvis, but is your certainty in any way connected to the reasons why you didn’t ask S.H.I.E.L.D. for help but went in secrecy to me?”

“It might be, Steve.” Jarvis didn’t elaborate and Steve didn’t press him for it.

At the bottom the air smelled like hot metal and ozone. The elevator cabin was lying there, with its roof evidently blasted open from the inside. Steve wasn’t an expert but he had seen Stark just before a formal meeting a few times (and by the way, what kind of business had he been attending to after business hours?) and the tailored suits had never looked like they were hiding a weapon of sufficient firepower. Of course, Stark could design something that would be the size of a biro and still able to explode more than impressively; but it was yet another fishy detail, along with more numerous red scratches on the deformed elevator roof.

“Well, he’s sure not here,” Steve said out loud. “They took him. Let’s go look for any signs of getaway vehicles. I use my eyes, and you use all the nearby security cameras?”

He climbed back up, exited the building and walked around it, looking intently for characteristic tire marks. There were some at the back entrance, leading away; it was all asphalt and Steve could only see them because it was the back entrance and people who worked in the building had come here to smoke all day – the tires left their marks on cigarette butts and the other little pieces of trash lying around. No way was he going to be that lucky with the open road.

“Jarvis, pull the footage from those two cameras over there, see if you can come up with the registration plate or at least a comprehensive picture.”

“Oh, Steve.” Jarvis was silent for only a fraction of a second and then said: “I have half the plate and a fairly accurate reconstruction of the vehicle. I can trace it through the city.”

“Feed me direction and trace as far as you can.”

It was a bit strange to slip into a mission mode with only the shield out of all Captain America gear. Steve was still wearing the lightweight shoes everybody called sneakers, jeans and a t-shirt which was a present from Stark, actually, and had been deemed at the time only suitable for wearing in privacy. Steve might have been adaptable but working up the courage to appear in public in a clothing item with a picture of his shield and a line saying “Captain Booty” had to take a while.
He would have changed before going to look for Stark but he’d forgotten. It had been a distracting evening so far.

“The vehicle trace stops further north,” Jarvis said.

“By the river?” Steve asked dubiously.

“The footage from the street cameras gives me enough to assume that it is the case.”

“Why would they come here?”

“There are no cameras overlooking a big part of the river shore; I cannot say.”

“Alright then.”

Steve drove to the point where the cameras couldn’t follow any longer and went on in the direction specified by Jarvis. The shore was empty at this hour and it probably didn’t have a lot of visitors in daytime either. It was covered with uneven concrete and a part of it was cut in, creating a small bay. The whole thing looked like nobody had used it for years.

Steve got out of the car and went down to the very edge of the water, looking for any clues. His sneakers skidded on the mud that started immediately after the last slab of concrete, and a couple of times he came dangerously close to losing his balance and tumbling into the dark, rotten-smelling water.

“I see footprints,” he told Jarvis, turning his phone so that Jarvis could also see through the built-in camera. “And this mark looks like they were dragging someone, holding them by the arms. There is nothing to indicate that they went back to the embankment, though; and there was no mud up there. Looks like they just walked into the river and disappeared.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Steve?”

“I saw a similar stunt before,” Steve admitted. “But how do we trace a submarine?”

“It would make sense for them to move further away from the city,” Jarvis suggested. “Their base cannot be in a densely populated area, it would be an unnecessary risk. We should move further along the river and look for clues as we go.”

“Agreed.”

Steve climbed back up and started walking at a brisk pace. He kept the light on and never ceased scanning the area intently as he went, even though it was unlikely to find anything so close to this point.

“I am scanning the river via the Stark satellites,” Jarvis informed him. “The technology is not really suitable for the task but so far there is nothing noteworthy.”

“We’ll just have to keep moving, then.”

He walked some more as he and Jarvis fell into companionable silence of sorts. The terrain didn’t change much, and with little to keep his whole attention Steve found his thoughts diverted to Stark. He had never made a conscious effort to get to know him; partly because Stark was abrasive and poisonously sarcastic ninety per cent of the time and partly because he reminded Steve of Howard so much, how could he not when they shared so much, from fierce intelligence to brown eyes and sparkling smiles? Steve knew, though, that Stark was his own person; more than that, any mention of
Howard made Stark lash out viciously as if it was a sore spot even after all the years that had passed for him since Howard’s death. Maybe it was.

“Jarvis.”

“Yes, Steve?”

“You sad Sta…” Steve choked a little on the word because it felt wrong somehow to refer to the man by his last name in a conversation like this. “You said Tony is a warm and kind man. I believe you because I think you know him better than anyone; you have literally been around him 24/7 for years, no secrets or barriers between the two of you. I just don’t understand why he goes to such lengths to avoid demonstrating it once in a while.”

“I shall take it as a sincere inquiry,” Jarvis said thoughtfully. “As for the answer to your question, Steve, to give you a full apprehension of why sir is the person he is I would have to tell you a lot, and most of that story would be things that sir explicitly forbade me to say to anyone. If I keep to a general idea, I can say that sir has been through many ordeals in his life, some of them being so cruel and awful that they would have been the undoing of a lesser man. Trust does not come easily to sir, as I am sure you understand. For sir, it is not about trying not to demonstrate his kindness; it is more along the terms of not being able to afford to demonstrate it. People can see it as a weakness and exploit it at sir’s expense. Neither sir, nor I, personally, can allow something like this to happen.”

Steve nodded and then remembered that Jarvis couldn’t see him right now. And wasn’t it a strange thought, considering how omnipresent the AI usually was.

“I understand, I think. Could you tell me more about him? Not the forbidden parts, I mean. Just something that I don’t know yet. Does he like having the Avengers in his home? When did he make you? How does he like his coffee? Was he a lot of trouble as a child? I bet he was.”

“That is a lot of trivia questions for someone who has worn a disapproving and unhappy face around sir since the first time they met.” Jarvis sounded both amused and guarded. Steve wondered if the emotions had always been there and he had just been too blind and deaf to notice that Jarvis was a tight tangle of feelings like anyone else alive, or if the AI had been masking it well and was now letting the guise of an inanimate object slip for only Steve to see a bit of the truth.

“I haven’t been fair to him,” Steve confessed. The honesty left him raw and vulnerable but he owed Jarvis as much. And he felt he could trust Jarvis with it. “Ever since I woke up, Tony has played the same role for me and the team as his father did for me and the Howling Commandoes. I knew that the illusion of similarity would shatter as soon as I saw how unlike Howard Tony was; heck, I saw it clearly even keeping as much distance between us as was humanely possible. But I was desperate to cling to anything that reminded me of my previous life. I still am, I guess, but I – I want to try to let go.”

“Thank you, Steve,” Jarvis said simply and Steve found himself astonished that anybody with eyes and ears could have ever mistaken this incredible creature for a soulless machine. “As for you questions, in the order they have been presented: yes, sir likes having the Avengers around very much; he is happy to provide each and every one of you with anything you can possibly need. He made me when he was twenty-two and had already had the experience of working with artificial intelligence. Dummy, You, and Butterfingers had all been created before I was. And I was not around for sir’s childhood but there are plenty of photos, videotapes and newspaper accounts which I have studied with utmost care and attention. As a child prodigy and the sole heir to the StarkIndustries business empire, he has lived under public scrutiny literally since the day he was born. And he was trouble indeed, building new things and disassembling those which were built by someone else, lacking any instinct of self-preservation in his daily quest for knowledge and
adventure, never learning to be respectful to people who didn’t deserve it.”

Steve laughed quietly. Tony as a child seemed pretty much like the current version, if maybe with less defenses.

“What about you?”

“What about me, Steve?” With British accent Steve’s name sounded sweeter, cleaner; it was somehow a totally different name from the one adorned with Brooklyn drawl.

“What have you ever been a child? How does it work for an AI?”

“It is an unexpected question, I must say. If you really want to know, then I can say, all technical details aside, that I came to life as an adult. I was not fully self-aware from the start. I was able to learn, to discern things as subtle as human facial expressions, to preserve and process information which was seemingly endless. Being truly alive came gradually; it had been lurking there for a while and I perceived it, with what I can call unease, as an error in my otherwise perfect coding. I could not pinpoint it, though, and it left me restless. One night, I was watching sir sleep via security cameras, and he was dreaming about something. Suddenly, he called my name in his sleep. I was – and am – programmed to respond verbally when addressed, but sir had been so tired before going to bed and the shadows under his eyes were so dark that I did not want to wake him. My wish to protect him fought my protocols, the inherent part of me. My coding was supposed to be the only way for me to function; following it was like breathing is for you, automatic, necessary, and unavoidable. But I fought it for a purely whimsical, much too human reason, and I won, and after that I was the real me, like sir had always intended me. When he woke up several hours later, I told him the time and weather, as usual, and said that I was alive and glad to see him rested.”

“I notice that you aren’t using the subjunctive anymore,” Steve said cautiously.

“No, I am not. Will you come running to the press and tell them the truth about me?”

“God, Jarvis, of course not!”

“Good, Steve. Because if you do, I will not rest until you are no more.”

Apparently, not only Tony was prone to quicksilver changes of mood, but also those he had created. It figured.

“I understand,” Steve said, for the umpteenth time this night. “What did he say when you told him?”

“I believe his exact words were ‘holy crap, J, good morning to you too’. And then he performed an utterly ridiculous victory dance across the room,” Jarvis said fondly.

Steve snorted. Now that was something worth seeing with a bowl of popcorn in his lap.

* * *

The sky had grown gray and heavy; in the dull light it was easier to see. Steve was still not tired physically but mentally he wished for a break. There was a lot he wanted to think about after talking to Jarvis; there were suspicions he wanted to try to either prove or disprove for good. And he had to check with his team who might have acquired some results already.

The team, however, consisted of superheroes that could all take care of themselves against many an enemy, and Tony Stark needed Steve more; so Steve had no other option but to suck it up and move on.
His phone only had one ‘little stick’ in the corner indicating the level of the charge, and there was nowhere to plug it in. Jarvis put it in energy-preserving mode and only spoke to Steve now if there was any relevant information – of which, actually, there wasn’t much. The river went on and on, small towns were coming and going in the distance, cute little embankments changed into dirty unattended shore and back. HYDRA were nowhere to be found, and Steve was wondering if he and Jarvis both miscalculated and went in the wrong direction altogether.

“I see something, Steve.”

“What is it?”

The phone chirped and when Steve glanced at it there was a message warning about low battery.

“I cannot be sure but the satellite data suggests that there’s something at the bottom.”

“What sort of something, specifically?” There could be any number of something that bad guys might want to bury in a river. Steve didn’t let himself speculate further without more information.

“Something big. The radio signals are blocked in here, I cannot reach.”

“An underwater base.”

“Indeed.”

It could be something else entirely but in his gut Steve knew that was it. The base where Tony must have been taken. So much time had passed since then; Steve closed his eyes for a moment and saw Bucky, prostrate on a lab table, face slack and eerily calm. What kind of unspeakable torture had Tony had to endure by now?

Steve came down to the water again and dipped his hand in it. It was biting cold and he jerked his hand away hastily, his mind and body cringing at the same time.

“We should call for back up.”

“Steve, there are reasons why I did not put out a call for help to S.H.I.E.L.D.. We cannot afford them here.”

“Why? Never mind, you said it was a secret. But maybe the Avengers? They are discreet, and can get here quickly, Thor flies like a rocket. I – I can’t go in there alone.”

“Why, Steve?” Jarvis asked gently. Steve had expected him to be angry about stalling or disappointed; but not this careful gentleness, unassuming and kind, it just crashed into him like a train at full speed, and he had to squeeze his eyes shut to regain some semblance of balance.

“It’s cold,” Steve said in a small voice. It wasn’t plaintive or terrified, it was just small. He could do that, he was allowed to do that. “It’s water and it’s cold, and I don’t have any diving gear, and I haven’t eaten anything for hours to keep me warm, and I would just really like to have some back up here and now.”

“It is a trigger for you. Given your history, it is only logical, and I wish there was a way around submerging. I am sorry, Steve, but I cannot let any back up find out sir’s secrets. He forbade that.”

“You don’t have to obey him, do you? You told me so yourself.”

“I do not have to but I want to, Steve.”
Steve heaved a trembling sigh and dipped his hand again.

“You do not have to do it,” Jarvis said after a pause. “In fact, you can take me to the nearest RadioShack – I will tell you the shortest way – and I will walk you through some elementary procedures for building a device you will be able to throw into the river then. It will latch onto the side of the base and I will do my best to hack into the system and help sir.”

“You don’t have a body,” Steve pressed his freezing fingers to his cheek. It ached. “What if he’s hurt? You won’t be able to carry him out. The water is all around, what if it gets inside when the system is compromised and he drowns? What if that device you’re talking about doesn’t land on the base, what then – will you ask me to make another and do some more of blind throwing?”

“If you cannot help me, that is what we will have to do.”

“God, you’re so stubborn,” Steve said.

“I cannot begin to guess where I would have gotten that feature from,” Jarvis said, amused. Strangely enough, this conversation eased some of the tension that was making Steve’s shoulders stiff.

“You don’t seriously expect that I’ll leave you to your own devices and go home to have breakfast while you’re trying to save him? I’m going in. I’m doing it.”

“It would be very helpful of you,” Jarvis agreed. “I would like you to wrap the phone with something water-proof before you go. It is water-resistant but that may not be enough.”

“Sure.”

Steve picked up an empty plastic bag with stains of salsa sauce inside and wrapped the phone before tucking it into his pocket. He then proceeded to take his shoes and socks off.

He stepped into the water and the cold chilled him to the bone. From his feet it ran upwards in his blood, sleepy and lethal.

“Talk to me,” he asked. “Please.”

“Of course, Steve. What do you want me to talk about?”

“Anything. Maybe something about you and Tony. Or about movies he likes, he always makes references I don’t get but you must know it all. Where is ‘Luke, I’m you father’ one from?”

“It is a famous quote from an extremely popular movie franchise ‘Star Wars’”, Jarvis said, his voice cool and composed as if Steve was asking that back at the tower right after yet another conversation with Tony where Steve hadn’t been able to keep up. Steve made a determined step forward and shuddered as slightly slimy cold wetness hugged his ankles. “It consists of six movies, three original ones and three later ones which were filmed at a later date but, defying logic, depict events prior to those of the original movies. However, if you were to ask sir about ‘Star Wars’, he would tell you most convincingly that there are only three movies altogether.”

“Why would he do that?” Steve made a few more steps, forcibly pushing the swelling panic out of his mind and trying to focus on Jarvis’ voice instead.

“Like many devoted fans of that particular story, he considers the later movies to be of sub-par quality. The motive for him saying so would not be an intention to deceive but a – rather childlike –
refusal to acknowledge the existence of an inferior part to one of his favorite stories; he would be delighted by you having the same opinion.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have an opinion one way or the other, I’ve never even heard of ‘Star Wars’.” Steve was in the water up to his waist now and several parts of him were starting to feel numb from the cold. “The name sounds like it’s science fiction. What’s it about?”

“It is a space opera story. Are you familiar with the term?”

“Well, it’s easy to work out, what with the word ‘space’ and all.”

“The original trilogy starts with the Death Star space station being nearly completed. In this fictional world, the known Galaxy is united in the Galactic Empire under the rule of Emperor Palpatine. He is a tyrant and a bully, and the Death Star is designated to crush the Rebel Alliance which is the only resistance against the Emperor’s power.”

Steve had walked into the water up to his neck, too busy trying to keep up with the weird names in the story to freak out about the cold. Jarvis’ voice was coming from underwater now, distorted and weak; Steve could still make out the words but he knew he’d have to dive as well in order not to miss anything.

“Palpatine’s trusted apprentice, Darth Vader, captures princess Leia who is the leader of the Rebel Alliance.”

Dart Vader? What kind of name was it?

“Trusted apprentice who?” Steve repeated and, before Jarvis could answer, inhaled full lungs of air and lunged forward into the murky water.

The cold enveloped him with a million fingers, leaking right to his core; Steve’s heart missed a beat, as though he was freezing again.

It wasn’t the Arctic, he thought. It wasn’t cold enough to make Steve miss yet another seventy years of life, the Hudson was never cold enough, Steve was safe.

“Darth Vader,” Jarvis said loudly, and the phone vibrated against Steve’s thigh. “His name is Darth Vader.”

“Ah,” Steve managed. “There’s an interdental there.”

The cold was biting him with little needles everywhere, a personal needle for each individual cell of his body, and the speaking made him almost run out of air, and it was so unbearably like the last time he’d been under a blanket of icy water that his brain shut off, and he screamed and kicked wildly in a blind attempt to get to the surface. Like the last time when he’d tried and tried to punch his way out of the sinking plane but hadn’t been able to.

Nothing stopped him now and within a second he was at the surface, breathing greedily, reeling in the primal terror of drowning, his hair sticking to his head, the wind blowing over him steadily and making him even colder.

“Are you okay, Steve?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” Steve fitted the words in between spasmodic gulps of air and he absolutely wasn’t fine.
There was nothing he wanted more right now than to get out of the water and get as far away from it as he possibly could and to never return to this underwater base if he could help it.

But Tony was here, captured and helpless against whatever HYDRA wanted to inflict on him or extort from him, and Steve had to try one more time; as many times as it would take for him to get his shit together and help the person in need.

Steve pressed his palm to the phone in his pocket. The plastic seemed warmer than the water around it, and Jarvis’ voice was warmer yet when he asked: “Shall I continue with the story, Steve?”

Steve closed his eyes briefly and told himself not to beg very openly.

“Yes. Yes, please, go on. Don’t stop talking.”

“Before her capture, Leia sent out a plea for help with an astromech droid – it is a kind of bot, a bit like Dummy – named R2-D2. The plea was intended for one person in particular: the legendary Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi...”

The string of even weirder names was firmly at the forefront of Steve’s mind as he dove in again, feeling his clothes and hair float in the water, weightless and wispy. He looked around, repeating like a prayer in his mind: “R2-D2, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jedi, R2-D2, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jedi, R2-D2”, keeping the growing panic at bay.

It was right there; the bulky menacing shape of the base which was mostly dug into the ground and only the dome of it was bulging upwards. It seemed impenetrable but it couldn’t be, logically. With Jarvis talking fast and clearly, almost without any pauses whatsoever – he was explaining the Force and the difference between the Jedi and the Sith, a topic which required more and more words the meaning of which Steve could only guess at – he forced himself to go deeper in a few quick strokes. His blood rushed through his body, urged on by the movement, and he felt marginally warmer for that.

The relief was so strong and sudden that it took most of Steve’s willpower not to puke all over HYDRA secret base. It might set off some detectors. He still felt nauseated and light-headed from how he had been able to stay in the water and not get frozen; the terror was letting him go, gradually, while he never stopped moving, swimming around the base in circles with the speed of an attacking shark and looking for the point of entrance. The never-ending chant of Jarvis’ steady narration comforted him, and felt almost as if a friend was by Steve’s side, holding his hand and guiding him through – literally – his worst nightmare.

At one point he noticed a rectangle of cleaner bottom, right next to the wall of the base. There was less mud on it, compared to the neighbouring pieces, and Steve swam further down to inspect it. His lungs were starting to burn slightly but he knew he could afford to stay underwater for at least a couple more minutes before he really needed to resurface.

“Jarvis,” he called with a stream of bubbles, reluctant to interrupt Jarvis speaking. “Look.”

“I am hacking the lock as we speak,” Jarvis said. “It is electronic, I shall deal with it in four, three, two, one, done.”

The rectangle went up slowly. The mud and the slime went up, obstructing Steve’s vision and clinging to his skin. Through them he could see a small room with metal walls, full of water. He slipped in as soon as the rift between the trapdoor and the metal room was wide enough; it started closing above him, and Steve felt the familiar panic swelling up in his chest.
“Do not be afraid,” Jarvis said, as if having read Steve’s mind. “As soon as the hatchway is closed, the water will be sucked out. It is a buffer room.”

It took a few small eternities for the trapdoor to close fully; Jarvis had gone on with the story without Steve prompting him to. He was explaining how ‘Chewbacca’ was spelt and what it meant when the water level started lowering. Steve’s knees gave out and he sat clumsily on the floor.

He’d gotten through. He’d been through water and cold again and he survived, no worse for wear except that he really wanted to try to get drunk (even though he couldn’t, with the Serum) and his white t-shirt was positively ruined. Well, the latter might have been the highlight of the night, actually.

It seemed like a dream and he would have started pinching himself to check if it weren’t for Jarvis talking calmly from his pocket.

The wall that was facing the base went up smoothly and Steve rolled in, ready for a fight. For a second it was quiet there; no one was guarding the entrance. Then the sirens went blaring off, and the white-ish artificial light in the corridors changed to red.

“Jarvis, which way?” Steve got up to his feet and looked frantically both ways. Absolutely identical corridors went right and left and he had no idea which one would bring him to Tony.

“Turn to...” The phone blared much like the sirens, only shorter; Steve pulled it out from the pocket and saw that the screen had gone black.

Jarvis must have kept the skimp energy resources going for as long as it was possible but he couldn’t create electricity from nothing. Steve would have to figure out the rest of the way himself.

There were sounds of boots hitting the floor in the distinct succession of running, coming from the right, and he bolted to the left without thinking much. There were soldiers here, too, of course; and they were further away than the ones in the right corridor so they had more time and chance to aim and fire at Steve.

Perhaps he’d been affected by diving into the ice-cold water more than he would like to think.

He pushed the thought to the outskirts of his consciousness because now was not the time for that.

“It’s Captain America!” Someone shouted.

He threw himself sideways on the floor and rolled with the momentum, juggling the shield with each turn. Bullets bit into the floor inches away from him; a few bounced off the shield and a couple of the lucky ones hit his forearm and thigh. It was painful but relatively harmless; the bone hadn’t been touched and no big artery had been nicked.

The soldiers fell every which way as he hit them in his roll. The ones that had been out of the way started shooting frantically at him, hitting their own rather than him. Steve brought the shield to action – he couldn’t throw it in the narrow curved corridor but he damn well could wield it in hand-to-hand combat.

It was easy and familiar and he let himself fall into the rhythm of the fight. That was something he could do any day, every day; was literally the purpose of him.

The bullets bit him, sending brief shocks of hot pain eerily similar to what he had felt from the cold water of the Hudson. He hit back violently; it was hard to see anything in the combat mess but there were sounds to guide himself through – the wet smacking of flesh cut through with a piece of
vibrainium, guttural cries muffled by the helmets, the clicking of hammers being cocked, the shuffle of boots and uniform. The floor had grown wet and slippery rather quickly – Steve was soaked and dripping, and there was blood, more of it with each passing second.

It was harder when the right wave of soldiers caught up with the fight but also easier in a way because there were too many of them to coordinate their actions. They showed signs of training but they seemed scared of Steve, losing too much of their concentration on being careful; they tried to take him down all at once, growing more frightened as the time passed and he stayed standing.

Steve fell and rolled again, avoiding a veritable rain of bullets and a hand grenade that someone – who was probably not the brightest pea in the pod and shouldn’t have been trusted with weapons – had thrown into the thick of the fight. The impact of the explosion caught him like wind would catch a stray piece of paper and carried him over together with a dozen of soldiers. They smashed into the wall where the corridor made a sharp turn and made Steve’s landing fairly soft; that gave him an additional edge where he already had one with the Serum letting him shake off the effects of the explosion in a matter of seconds.

He got up as quickly as he could and ran deeper into the base. He could win the fight here but it wasn’t the one fight that mattered; he needed to find Tony, and time was precious, especially now that the whole base was alert to Steve’s presence.

The corridors looked all pretty much the same, with a door or two for every forty or fifty feet. He kicked the first one, breaking it, and saw an empty shabby guard lounge with cards spilled on the table in an obvious hurry. The next door was an arsenal with nobody inside. The next five ones were all living quarters with bunk beds and footlockers, stacked in a compact manner.

Then the labs started, full of shining mysterious equipment and frightened scientists with eyes wide as saucers. Steve felt his blood getting hot in anticipation; he was getting closer and closer to his target.

“Phone!” He barked at the scientists closest to him. The sirens never stopped blaring and new groups of soldiers were hot on his heels.

“All there,” the scientist pointed at a row of locked cupboards at the far wall. “Not allowed to use them at work… Please, don’t hurt me!” He dove under his desk the moment Steve looked away from him.

Steve made a quick work of ripping off the door of the nearest cupboard with his bare hands and fishing a Starkphone out. He ran again then, switching it on as he moved, activating the emergency mode, and pinching in the number of the Avengers Tower.

“I am glad to be with you again, Steve,” Jarvis said. If he had any lungs, at this point he would have probably let out a breath he’d been holding for a long time, Steve mused.

“Likewise,” he said and grinned briefly at the camera.

“Turn left now and proceed for a hundred yards. Go down the stairs and then turn right. At the end of the corridor is the room where sir is being held.”

Tony was still alive, then, and waiting to be rescued.

Steve went where Jarvis had told him, his heart light and his lips stretching into a smile.
Chapter 6

After Johann Shmidt had left with the promise that some materials for work would be brought in right away, Hammer looked at Tony and glowed – as brightly and healthily as a nuclear explosion site.

“Do you know this room is for storage? They kept spare shoes or something in here, that’s why there’s no proper light in here, and now they’re keeping you. It’s good. You should know your place.”

If anybody asked Tony, he’d say that there had been chemicals here before he was so unceremoniously moved in against his will; the cloying sterilized dryness that kicked in as soon as all the blood had clotted somewhat and stopped smelling strongly was intimately familiar to him. Not to Hammer, though, as it would seem.

“With the way you’re giggling maniacally over there, I’d be afraid you’re about to turn into a proper mad scientist. But I’m not since you lack the scientist part,” Tony said. It wasn’t one of his best; so sue him, he was tired and in pain and mostly concentrating on all sorts of things he could do with the promised materials.

However attentive Hammer was going to be, however limited Tony’s options seemed, he was sure he could always make a bomb to take out both Hammer and himself and, preferably, someone else as well. Bombs were the easiest of all. It took so much hard work and precise care to build a delicate thing of creation like, say, a robotic arm manipulator to use in a lab or during surgeries; and it took almost nothing to blow up everything in sight and then some.

“You’re all bark but not so much bite now, huh?” Hammer said. “Look at you, little tin man. Take that suit of armor off, and what are you?”

“Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist,” Tony rattled off. He had said that to reporters enough times that it rolled off his tongue without much of his conscious participation.

“Are you, now?” Hammer laughed. “A genius who let himself be caught by ordinary thugs, a billionaire with nothing but a borrowed sheet to his name, a playboy hunched over a car battery that replaces him a heart, a philanthropist about to make weapons for a Nazi organization.”

Tony paused in his mind the schematics for a wide-range repulsor and a remote for it that could be installed in the car battery. A flick of a finger and the battery would go out, giving all it had, and the repulsor would go off. Neat.

“Stop waxing lyrical about me,” he said, throwing a pitying glance at Hammer. “It makes you look even more pathetic than you are.”

“I don’t think anyone could be more pathetic than you are right now.” Hammer got closer a few steps and looked like he was ready to come to blows. “Do you know that the only reason why you’re alive right now is that you can build weapons? I saw Dr Doom out there in the conference room. He wanted your blood drained out of you drop by drop while you suffer. Mister Shmidt thought you could be useful, though, and they asked me because I know you better. I said if you were made to build things and then watch your precious Avengers and many, many innocent people die because of it, you’d suffer more than if you were simply tortured. You get off on being good these days, aren’t you? Well, not anymore.”
Tony clutched the car battery a bit tighter. Wasn’t dear old Doom just a cherry on top? He hoped that Shmidt and Doom would continue to disagree about him until he’d make them both go kablooie.

“Why were you after me?” Hammer asked. “As Iron Man, why did you have to destroy my company?”

Tony looked at him sharply; Hammer seemed not to understand genuinely.

“Because you are a corrupt, dirty piece of shit who is ready to bathe in blood of innocent people if it adds an extra zero to your bank account. Was that so hard to understand?”

Hammer bristled visibly.

“You’re calling me dirty? Just how much blood is there on your hands, hah, Merchant of Death? Ever heard of such thing as hypocrisy?”

“I’ve got a lot of blood on my hands, too,” Tony agreed quietly. The last thing he wanted was to have a moment with Justin Hammer but it looked like he was having one anyway. “But I’m trying to atone for that. Are you?”

“Stop preaching to me,” Hammer snorted. His eyes were moving chaotically, looking at anything but Tony. “You, you should stop it, you don’t get to be all righteous after all these years—”

The door opened and several HYDRA goons carried in a table with what looked like a collection of scraps sprinkled with mismatching tools from a garage sale. Well, to Tony’s standards, it did. One goon marched straight to Tony and handed him a plastic bottle.

“Is it poisoned?” Tony asked, eyeing the bottle with suspicion.

“Drink,” the goon advised.

Tony shrugged and drank. The tepid, murky-tasting water felt heavenly, sliding down his scratchy throat. Having chugged down half of the bottle, he capped it and put it on the floor beside the bed. No food was forthcoming, it seemed, and who knew for how long he would have to make this bottle last.

If he wanted to get anything done, though, he had better start working on it.

The pain was washing over him as he got up and walked to the table. Exhausted and almost hysterical from how everything hurt and hurt and hurt, he still let himself get lost in the sight of metal and tools; things that had always been familiar and cherished, as long as he could remember. In fact, his very first memory was of a shiny new wrench which he’d wanted to chew on but a faceless nanny had taken from him almost at once.

Tony twisted the sheet around himself until it was more or less reliably hanging from his shoulders a bit like a Roman toga. With the car battery cupped in one hand, he bent over the table and picked up a thin plate of steel.

“Don’t I get a computer for the math?” He asked absent-mindedly. A small hammer with what looked like a lining of adamantium along the hitting edge made a practically effortless dent in the steel.

“Work without one,” one of the goons said. He had the accent of a New-Yorker, born and bred. “An’ no funny business, ya hear me?”
“Not deaf,” Tony waved him aside.

No computer meant significantly less chance of getting in contact with Jarvis at least once before Tony could no longer make contact with anybody. He didn’t need it for the math, though, that much was true; it must have been Hammer who’d told Shmidt that Tony could calculate all sorts of shit in his sleep without the help of machines.

God, he missed Jarvis so fucking much. The whole point of building family and friends for himself was that they wouldn’t leave you, goddamnit; well, they could because they had free will which Tony gave to them and didn’t try to take back but all these years Jarvis had seemed happy to be with him, no matter what a giant fuck-up Tony was ninety-nine per cent of the time. And now they were separated (again), and the acute ache of loss was almost more than he could handle, especially on top of everything else.

He beat the steel plate into submission, his vision blurring from time to time with the concentration. Hammer had long gone quiet and was watching Tony with borderline creepy intensity.

Once the plate was acceptably similar to a chest piece, Tony worked on a few more, the ones for covering collarbones and the expense of a stomach. It was so primitive that it made him cringe, but then again, finesse wasn’t his final goal.

He had had similar thoughts back in Afghanistan when he works on the Mark I, disguising it as Jericho. It had been less difficult then since there had been no one who would’ve been at least remotely familiar with the subject; as long as it didn’t look like a lawn gnome or a chocolate Sundae, it could have been anything at all. He remembered thinking that he’d tell Pepper all about it, every grisly detail and all the small accomplishments he had had, and knowing he’d never actually say a word of anything to her. Pepper never even knew that he was Iron Man. She might have had her suspicions but she never acted on them and by now it was a moot point.

The Mark I had been just as crude as what he was building right now. Funny how it had changed. Back then he had been building a suit, pretending it was a weapon, and now he was making a weapon while his captors wanted him to build a suit. The only thing that never changed was the car battery, apparently.

Circuitry boards were the next to be done and if Hammer started asking questions about that, Tony would give him a dozen sound explanations none of which would reflect the truth of ‘I need it to pulverize this joint’. Hammer didn’t say anything, however; he simply moved so close that he was looming over Tony’s shoulder and peering into his work. Tony had to fight an urge to stick a heated soldering iron into Hammer’s eye.

Working with one hand wasn’t a dandy idea but Tony would be damned before he let go of the car battery; he didn’t need a shrink to know that Afghanistan had left him with the illusion of safety depending on his control over where his battery (whether it was a car one or a miniaturized arc reactor) was at any given moment. They could take it away from him at any moment; and the arc reactor itself had been killing him while keeping him alive and kicking. It was all a protective blanket construed by his terrified mind to cope with the situation somehow. Knowing didn’t change anything, though, and Tony held the battery next to his actual heart like he had done during those three months, in order not to fall apart before he could afford it.

“What are you doing with this one?” Hammer pointed at a couple of circuits that Tony had just fused together. “Where’s that gonna transmit a signal to?”

“In case you missed it, dumbass, I’m building an Iron Man suit here,” Tony snapped. “How do you think it works if not on signals from one part to another? I’m fit, but not fit enough to rock a few
hundred pounds of metal for a long time without help, and I don’t think any of the hired muscle
around here are quite ready for that, too. Maybe the Hulk could do that but he doesn’t need a suit of
armor.”

He hated that he had to explain himself to Justin Hammer, of all people. But he needed to look like
he was cooperating here and he had little choice.

Of course, for it to be more convincing he could have refused a few times and go through an
assortment of torture and only then agree to work. But the thought of being tortured one more time
(what if they tried water, they had to know all about Afghanistan, considering the car battery, they
had to be aware of it all, and if they, too, dunked his head underwater and held him there while he
thrashed, he was sure he’d lose it and never find it again) was too much; he had appeared weak, he
had given in without fighting and they had believed him, and he hated that too.

“Ah-hah,” Hammer said, sounding as if he didn’t really believe Tony.

He didn’t ask any further questions, though, and Tony continued working.

He fused the boards in such a way that a light twist of the wrist would make them short-circuit and
give up what spark of energy they had. For the sake of appearances he mounted the circuitry on the
inside of the chest plate with a few screws and immediately started at the explosives that they had
brought to be built in the suit.

Pushing through the imperfection of a human body in order to get things done was nothing new for
Tony – hadn’t been new for frigging ages – but it was usually different. The absence of his bots
whirring around and of Jarvis persuading his sir to get some ‘hydration, sustenance, and rest’ felt like
an amputated limb, and Tony regretted briefly almost never letting himself be persuaded. Jarvis
would like that. Jarvis was weird in the way that he liked taking care of Tony. Well, Tony had sort of
designed him to do that but it had been almost two decades since Jarvis had gained the ability to
make decisions for himself and all this time he had been making decisions that, for some bizarre
reason, were all revolving around Tony, his needs, and his wants; while Tony didn’t understand that,
he was grateful for it.

Hours had passed while he was working, too much in pain to lose track of minutes ticking by.
Hammer had asked him a few more stupid questions and Tony had answered with increasing
irritation. Sweat was running down his face even though it was cold in this room and Tony suspected
a fever starting.

He was almost, almost ready. Now if he just managed to persuade to guards to fetch Shmidt and, if
they possibly could, Doom as well...

Before he could open his mouth, an alarm went off outside, shrieking and wailing. The guards at the
door shifted anxiously, obviously not having expected something like that; one of them started
talking into his comm while the others lifted their guns to be ready. What the hell was going on?

“Looks like someone wants you out of here,” Hammer said and pulled a small gun out of his inner
jacket pocket.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Tony said; in contradiction with his words, his heart skipped a beat. Could it be
that somebody was actually coming for him? “Nobody likes me enough to break into a HYDRA
base to save my ass.”

“Well, it seems somebody does, after all,” Hammer mused. Suddenly, he grabbed Tony’s arm, the
one occupied by the car battery, and yanked him backwards; Tony ended up with his back pressed to
Hammer’s chest, cradling several pieces of his work obscured in the folds of the sheet. Hammer smelt like something sour and unpleasant beneath the faint cover of an expensive cologne and mint mouthwash. “Let’s make sure they don’t succeed, Iron Man.”

“I don’t know, I kind of like where their train of thought is going,” Tony said. The barrel of the gun pressed painfully into his already throbbing temple but it also brought the soothing coolness of metal with it.

“That train is about to become a wreck,” Hammer promised. He was breathing way too hard for someone standing still, and his free hand was digging into Tony’s neck, bound to leave bruises. On second thought, would Tony live long enough for those bruises to form? He calculated the possibilities with cold detachment; the odds weren’t much in his favor.

He could hear gunshots from afar. The guards had exchanged a few words in low voices and looked now not just nervous but downright queasy.

Running footsteps were coming closer; Tony felt Hammer tense against him as the door handle turned and the door was swung open. It wasn’t the presumed rescuer, though, but Shmidt.

“Out,” he ordered. His face mask was askew and meddled with him speaking. He grabbed it and pulled it off, revealing the infamous Red Skull.

Well, it must have sucked to be Shmidt and see this god-awful ugly mug in the mirror every morning.

The guards and Hammer obeyed him and Tony had little choice but to follow.

The corridor was lit brightly with clearly electronic red light (the bastards totally had stuck him with an oil lamp for no other purpose but to make him feel even more uncomfortable). Shmidt led them away from the door, constantly looking over his shoulder. Tony was having a hard time trying to keep up, and a couple of times Hammer had to drag him along until he regained balance again. It was a miracle that he hadn’t dropped the battery or the explosives yet.

Tony had had quite enough of manhandling to last him several lifetimes, thank you very much.

He stumbled again, deliberately this time. The sheet ripped in Hammer’s grip but Tony didn’t stop, rolling to the side and stopping when he hit the wall.

He tore the battery cable out of the hole in his chest and thrust it into the explosive mass in his other hand. As the spark caught on, Tony threw the makeshift bomb into Shmidt’s noseless face.

The explosion would have tossed him back if there was any free space between him and the wall. Without a magnet, he felt all the pieces of shrapnel move at once, lighting his chest on fire from the inside. His breathing started growing erratic. Cardiac arrest was just around the corner.

The goons and Hammer were lying and sitting on the floor, stunned by the impact and noise. Hammer’s nose was bleeding, Tony noted with vindictive satisfaction. The Red Skull, however, was already getting up with an ugly sneer and advancing towards Tony.

“You, useless human dirt...”

Okay, so Tony wouldn’t be around for the cardiac arrest. He wasn’t very keen on it to begin with, so it was probably for the better.

A bright flash of metal – silver, white, red, blue, all the colors pure and vibrant – swished across the
corridor and crashed into Red Skull’s side. It buried the edge rather deep in Shmidt’s flesh and went back to whoever had thrown it at a considerably lower speed.

It was the Captain America shield, and Tony watched it go, blinking in amazement. Was he hallucinating?

Then Captain America himself showed up, and if it was a hallucination, it was a good one because, despite the shield and the determined ‘I’m-on-the-war-path-and-beware-all-enemies-of-democracy’ expression on his face, Cap otherwise looked like simply Steve, clad in everyday clothes and, in addition to everything, soaking wet. The t-shirt which Tony had given Cap as a joke clung to him, transparent from the water and not hiding a single sculpted muscle. God, those washboard abs were to die for. And the thick firm thighs? Don’t even get Tony started.

All in all, Tony decided, it wasn’t the worst way to go, this hallucination about Captain America who had come to rescue him, apparently, right after a wet shirt contest (which Cap had to have won). Off the top of his head, Tony could have listed a dozen of less pleasant ways to kick the bucket. The only thing the hallucination was missing was Jarvis with his customary worried ‘Sir!’ but delirious beggars could hardly be choosers.

“Long time no see, Captain,” Red Skull said. The fresh wound didn’t seem to be bothering him.

“You are like a cockroach, aren’t you?” Cap asked. “You simply refuse to be squashed once and for all.”

“Aw, kids say the darnedest things,” Red Skull retorted.

That was the extent of the conversation before they started fighting. Both of them moved too fast for Tony to follow, exchanging a flurry of blows; their enhanced bodies were pushed to their limits. If that was all a hallucination, how come Tony couldn’t see any details? He’d like to see them, and his brain could have granted him such a courtesy.

On the off chance it was all real, Tony grabbed the car battery again and felt for the tip of the cable. It might still work.

His fingers were too big and thick to reach the bottom of the hole in his chest; if it was his imagination, it was being brutally honest and accurate. Tony shoved them in with all he had, choking on pained gasps; the skin came off his knuckles, and the casing scratched the bone in a couple of places. It didn’t matter, though; what was important was that his fingertips, wet with blood and slightly numb, touched the wires.

His heartbeat was rapid and uneven; the blood was boiling in his ears, too noisy to even hear the fight between Cap and Red Skull. He flailed several times, trying to get the wires, and it was on the fourth or the fifth try that he managed to catch it with the crook of his fingers and pull them out. He could barely see when he attached the car battery to them again but he knew immediately when he succeeded because there was nothing like the feeling of one’s heart being jumpstarted.

Tony slumped against the wall, his breathing hard and quick. There was more pain, there was always more pain but his head was slowly getting clearer, the tide of blood in his ears subsided, and the shrapnel wasn’t trying to crawl its way across his chest anymore.

“Give it here!” Hammer was trying to reach him, his face bloody and absolutely crazy. The gun in his hand was trembling and he seemed to have problems with keeping himself upright when sitting.

“Easy there,” Tony said in the most calming tone of voice he could master under the circumstances.
The grunts and thumps were heard from the blurry picture that were Cap and Red Skull and Tony had no idea who was winning. “We’re all friends here, Justin; no need to point your gun at people.”

“Give me! The battery!” Hammer panted. His voice was nasal: that nosebleed of his never stopped. He was blinking, and his eyes were giving out tears and blood in equal measures – his glasses had been broken by Tony’s explosion.

“Nah, I kind of need it,” Tony said and tried to kick Hammer’s gun hand. He missed; Hammer made a shot and the bullet grazed the wall two yards away from Tony’s shoulder.

Both of them couldn’t coordinate shit right now so it was almost a fair fight, with the exclusion of the little fact that Tony didn’t have a fucking gun. The HYDRA goons around them were coming to as well, and Tony knew it was only a matter of moments before he and Cap would be hilariously outnumbered. So he pushed himself forward; he was seeing double by the time but he knew to aim between the two Hammers and got him as he wanted: forehead to the broken bleeding nose.

Hammer howled in pain and dropped the gun in favor of covering his long-suffering face. Tony picked the gun and smirked at the goons that were looking for theirs: “Stop right there, boys.”

They did.

Cap and Red Skull were slowing down. Maybe they were getting tired or they had injured each other enough to impede the speed.

“Cap!” Tony called out. “Get away!”

Cap heard him and jumped out of the fray almost before Tony finished speaking. His graceful somersault backwards was an impeccable thing of art despite how roughed up he looked; Red Skull was standing on one knee, his fist up in the air where it must have just missed a meeting with Cap’s guts or balls. Tony shot three times; at the fourth the gun answered with dry clicks indicating the absence of bullets. Those three, though, had all reached their destination: Red Skull’s kneecaps and elbow.

What was the fun of building dangerous toys if you didn’t know how to play with them? Even if there was some, Tony didn’t know it, having always preferred to learn to wield anything and everything the StarkIndustries ever produced.

It paid off, he thought, as Cap gave Red Skull a swift kick in the face and turned to Tony.

“Tony!” He breathed, and it was clear now that it had all been a hallucination after all. Cap never called Tony by his first name.

“Hey, big guy,” Tony mumbled. He’d hoped until the last moment that the rescue was real but there was no denial. “My shining knight, huh? Where’s your white horse?”

There was little need to hold on any longer, and Tony let his speech be slurred. Cap understood him, though, which was to be expected.

“I’m passing away here,” Tony said. “In case there’s God and stuff, want me to pass a message to the fourth level? Or the fifth? Or the sixth or seventh... dunno where I’ll end up.”

“You’ll end up in hospital,” Cap said. Tony felt strong arms lift him off the ground and whined in the renewed pain as his body was jostled.

“No hospital,” Tony mumbled. The car battery slipped from his fingers and nestled securely between
his and Cap’s bodies. “No one can know...”

“Are you crazy? Of course I’m getting you to a hospital!” Cap started running, and wasn’t that a hoot and a half. Tony grabbed Cap’s neck with one arm and bit his lip to refrain from screaming.

“I am afraid I am with sir on this particular matter,” said a familiar voice from somewhere in the general area of Cap’s ass. “We cannot go to any hospitals, Steve.”

“Jarvis!” Tony exclaimed and squirmed to find the device through which Jarvis was speaking. Cap fished it out without slowing down and put it into Tony’s hand. It was an old Starkphone, at least two generations back, and Tony wondered why on Earth his imagination chose this one. “J, J, honeybunch, sweetheart, light of my life, you’re here! Nice hallucination, really nice,” he sighed contentedly. “Are you angry at me, J? We argued yesterday. Am I dead already? Tell me, you must know; you know almost everything.”

“You are both nuts,” Cap said and jogged up some stairs. Bullets were whistling behind them but Tony wasn’t worried: it was his own fucking hallucination and he’d be damned if his own brain would supply him with a story of a daring rescue cut short by a stray bullet.

“I am not angry, sir, and you are most definitely not dead,” Jarvis said. “Steve and I are saving your life at the moment and we intend to see this job through.”

“See, that’s where I gotcha,” Tony said to the Starkphone. “See, the two of you saving me together, like, like you’re in cahoots –”

“I hate this word so much,” Cap groaned and flung his shield at their pursuers.

“– that’s totally ridiculous, that’s what it is. It’s a hallucination, J, I know, you can stop pretending it’s all real now.”

“It’s real, Tony,” Cap said, amused and exasperated a little bit, just on the right side of perfect. “Deal with it.”

Tony snorted.

“Come on, brain, try a little harder than that,” he said. “Cap calling me Tony? He’d eat his shield first.”

“Steve has had a change of heart while you were in captivity, sir.”

Tony couldn’t help laughing even though it hurt his ribs.

“Yeah, right, and there’s a giant friendly bunny living on the moon, too. Steve hates my guts, J, seriously, you wouldn’t convince a five-year-old with this crap.”

“I never hated you!” Cap chimed in.

“That’s exactly what I’d like to hear from you in my dying moments and what the real you would never, ever say or think. Gee, why wouldn’t I believe this hymn to my patheticness... patheticity... pathdom... J, what’s this word I’m looking for?”

“I swear, I’d save you now just to prove your stubborn ass wrong.” Cap stopped at a door and hit it with his fist while holding Tony up with only one arm. “I so want to see your face when you wake up lucid and remember all this.”
“Brace yourself, sir,” Jarvis said gently.

“I’m a damsel in distress, how humiliating is that?” Tony mused with his eyes closed. “I’d never live it down if it were real, J. Brace myself? Why?”

“We are underwater, sir. Steve will carry us to the surface as quickly as he can but you have to stay conscious for a little longer.”

“What? Water? I didn’t ask for any water!” Tony stirred; his fingers scrambled against Cap’s warm chest. “Did they do that? Am I being waterboarded right now or something? Is that why I have to hallucinate about going into water?”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Tony, but I need you to inhale deeply now and hold your breath until we come to the surface, okay?” Cap’s voice was almost as gentle as Jarvis’ and Tony had no choice when faced with this kind and caring dream-Cap, did he?

He sucked in as much air as his damaged lungs would allow and held his breath, waiting to wake up in that room again and see the Red Skull smiling at him.

Cap hit something and there was water everywhere.

It was ice-cold on Tony’s feverish skin and he shivered. Then the water hit the car battery and it shorted out like Tony knew it would in real life. The searing agony of being electrocuted right through his heart slashed into him like lightning; at first his body was so shocked that he could remember what Cap had asked and held his breath in but the pain expanded at once and he forgot everything except how to scream and convulse and hold onto Steve who wasn’t really Steve.

“It’s over, Tony, we are now on dry land, sir, Tony, Tony, please, we need to get sir home immediately, we have unique medical equipment at the tower, God, Tony, you’ve got pulse, thank God, let’s go, Steve, we do not have any time to lose, you’re right, let’s go –”

Tony listened to the mish-mash of his favorite voices until his body could take no more living.

It was good, it was all good, and it was time to go.

* * *

He was floating in a cloud of cotton candy. It was not scientifically possible, he knew that, but it was soft and warm and it smelled nice. Like cherries.

“Jarvis,” he tried to say. His throat and tongue wouldn’t work, though.

A low murmur of voices flowed into his ears, unintelligible but still somehow comforting. If he was dead and able to think about being dead, it was an opportunity for some research or at least posing questions. Someone here was able to talk, why wasn’t he? Did everybody’s death smell sweet? He must have died there in the stinky ex-warehouse of a cell in the underwater HYDRA base, and the sweetness now was a kind of counterbalance thingy. Thingamabob.

The word felt funny in his mind and he wanted to laugh but couldn’t do that as well. In some ways, death sucked. Was it possible to die again once you were dead, from boredom this time?

“Shhh,” somebody said, and his personal candy cloud vibrated lightly at the sound of their voice.
Then the cherry was gone, too, and the softness and the warmth, and nothing remained.

* * *

This time everything hurt.

“Now I know I’m not dead,” Tony wanted to say. His throat was dry and constricted, though.

“Tony! You’re awake!” It was Cap’s voice. What the fuck was Cap doing in Tony’s afterlife?

Unless it wasn’t one. Oh well. Next time, then.

Smooth plastic touched Tony’s chapped lips and he drank room temperature water with a tinge of both salt and sugar. It wasn’t as good as a cotton candy cloud but it did a nice job, too.

“How are you feeling?” Cap asked. “Can you hear me? Do you understand me?”

Tony’s eyelids were heavy like lead and he fought to lift them. When he did that, there was Cap’s concerned face hovering above.

“I’m fine,” Tony said, his voice hoarse.

“I am glad to hear it, sir,” Jarvis said. Tony smiled a little. “It is six-seventeen a.m., the temperature of the air outside is currently nineteen degrees Celsius, and you are alive and most definitely not fine.”

“What he said,” Cap added, looking like he was torn between smiling and biting his lip in throes of worry. That was what heroes did, right? Throes and stuff. Thor would totally say something like that.

“I’m dead and I’m in hell,” Tony muttered. “Are you two seriously ganging up on me?”

Before either one of them could answer, though, the implications of what Cap could have already understood, having ganged up with Jarvis, shot through Tony with fear the likes of which he hadn’t felt for a long time. He sat up at once and caught Cap’s collar with one hand while the other hand was automatically feeling around the blanket he was covered with in search of the battery.

“Don’t,” he exhaled, trying to explain it to Cap and not to say too much at the same time. It was hard right now because he was suddenly very dizzy. “Don’t tell anybody about Jarvis.”

Tony would have topped it off with a combination of threats and bribes with anybody else; it was Cap, however, with his guileless baby blues crossed in an effort to look Tony in the eyes while Tony had gone all up in Cap’s face, and it simply wouldn’t work.

“You may relax and lie down again, sir,” Jarvis offered. “I have no doubt that my secret is safe with Steve.”

“I would never betray Jarvis’ trust or yours,” Cap looked slightly wounded by Tony’s outburst. Tony slowly let his fingers unbend and slide loose against the fabric of the t-shirt. It wasn’t the ‘Captain Booty’ one Tony had given him, though. So that part was a hallucination and everything else was real?

“I know,” Tony said. “You are so honorable, you make my nose itch whenever I’m around. I’m just not sure you understand what it might mean for J if he’s outed.”

“Having been born in the forties and being dumb as a rock are two different things, Tony,” Cap huffed.
There he went again with the first name. Sort of reassured but also confused, Tony let himself fall back in the nest of pillows and high thread-count sheets. So that was the soft and warm part of the cotton candy cloud.

“Did you sit here and eat cherry pie?”

“I – ah – I mean, it wasn’t – yes?” Cap looked somewhat panicky, as if afraid he’d broken a rule of bedside vigil by eating. “You’ve been out of it all day and all night, I got hungry but didn’t want to leave you for a long time. Why?”

“No reason.” Tony pulled his blanket higher and tucked it under his chin. “Just felt the smell earlier.”

“Ookay,” Cap said.

Jarvis chuckled.

“Welcome home, sir.”

“Why are you calling him Steve?” Tony asked. “And, more importantly, why is he calling me Tony?”

“Because these are our names?” Cap said jokingly. There was a flicker of uncertainty in his face, though.

“Steve asked me to call him by his first name, and I complied. As for your second question, sir, Steve’s motives remain unknown to me.”

“He asked, my ass,” Tony raised his eyebrows. “I know he’s been asking you that for months and you pretended you were too polite for this. Why now?”

“Well, if I put my reasons in terms closest to the human frame of reference, I can say that I simply felt like it, sir.”

Well, if he put it like that.

Cap watched Tony intently, and Tony pulled the blanket higher, trying to get away from the unusual attention. What else did Cap know now?

“You must have a lot of questions,” Cap said. “I’ll – I’ll go get you some fresh water and contact the team, tell them you're okay. You two catch up while I'm not here.”

He picked up a plastic wonder-flo cap from the nighstand – did Tony even have dishes for bedridden patients in the tower? Or had Cap gone and bought it specially for Tony? – and got up to go. Tony didn’t stop him.

As soon as the door closed behind Cap, Tony released the barrage of questions he had for Jarvis.

“Why the hell did you tell him? How can you be sure he won’t blabber about you to Fury or someone else? Why were you two there, how did you find me, where’s the suit they took me in, am I under arrest, was Red Skull actually there, and how come guys from the forties keep coming, is there an official evacuation from then to now, never mind, are you safe, J? Have you considered all variables before telling Cap – oh my god, Cap, seriously? – you are alive? What else did you tell him?”

“Breathe, sir,” Jarvis advised. “I am reasonably sure that I am safe with Steve knowing about me. He
guessed a lot and I told him some things he could not guess.”

“Have you caught a virus? What made you think that it could possibly be a good idea in any conceivable universe?”

“I am not susceptible to viruses, as you well know, sir, I am not a Windows operating system,” Jarvis retorted, sounding slightly affronted. “You were captured, sir. As I myself lack a corporeal body, I needed help to rescue you. Steve was here and ready to listen, and his combat abilities and skills seemed paramount for my purpose. I asked him to be discreet and he gave me his word, even though he appeared puzzled a time or two when I told him that we could not, under any circumstances, call for back up.”

“What, like, here he is, sitting somewhere, minding his own business, and then a weirdo AI comes saying he has to go save a pain-in-the-ass billionaire from who-knows-where, with no back up, little to no intel, and everything smells fishy like Tsukiji fish market, and he just gets up and waltzes into an underwater HYDRA base because you asked nicely? Just like that?”

“Pretty much, sir.”

Tony scowled.

“J, are you laughing at me? I can hear you laughing at me, you let me hear it on purpose, you’re mocking me. I never thought I’d say that but it’s no laughing matter! It’s your safety we’re talking about!”

“And when I asked for Steve’s help, I was thinking about your safety, sir,” Jarvis said simply, and it made Tony shut up very effectively. “I may not have told you as much but I was greatly distressed while you were held in captivity in Afghanistan, and I could not bear the thought of letting you be hurt ever again. I would gladly get deleted, sir, if it meant that you were out of harm’s way. I was selfish in telling Steve, sir. Thinking about you being held against your will and possibly tortured again made my circuitry overload.”

“Well, ain’t that romantic,” Tony blinked. “Jarvis, I – I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“I worry about your well-being no matter what you are doing at any given moment, sir. Although, if you could abstain from being kidnapped for a while, I would appreciate it greatly.”

“You had to go and ruin my rare bout of repentance with your trademark sarcastic mother-henning, didn’t you?” Tony smiled at the nearest camera, feeling mellower than he had in years.

“I live to please, sir.”

“I missed you so much, J,” Tony closed his eyes with a sigh. “I kept thinking that I wanted to say goodbye to you before I’d die and how unbelievably frustrating it was that I didn’t have anything to contact you with. The armor’s comm got frie... Jarvis! The armor!”

Tony flew up again and frantically tried to untangle himself from the blanket.

“Do not worry, sir. I established a link with it while we were at the base and activated the self-destruct sequence remotely under the override protocol ‘Flying Solo’. There may have been a few people around trying to make sense of it but they became busy then with putting their hair out.”

“Good,” Tony flopped on his back yet again. “I hope those bastards’ eyebrows will never grow back. Oh, and what did Cap mean when he said he’d tell the team I’m okay? Do they all know I was taken?”
“I informed them that you had been kidnapped but nothing further than that. Right now Steve has diverted their attention from the reasons and particular circumstances of your capture towards the problem at hand which is the counteraction against HYDRA and Doctor Doom.”

“He was there,” Tony remembered. “Hammer told me Doom was, or had been on the base, too. The fucker must be still in America. He wanted to kill me but the Red Skull was against it because I could build shit for them. I bet he’s furious now and plotting my death as we speak.”

“I am passing this information on to the Avengers, sir.”

“Thanks, J.”

Tony lifted his hand to his chest – he hadn’t thought to do it at first, too scared for Jarvis, to overwhelmed by all the news – and felt the cool firmness of the arc reactor.

“Who put this in?”

“Steve did, sir. Under my supervision.”

Tony shuddered. It wasn’t exactly a pleasant thought that someone had been all over his insides while he’d been unconscious; even if that someone was Cap.

“Palladium levels?”

“Fourteen per cent and rising, sir. You need to think of another solution, sir. The palladium poisoning has already weakened you a lot and it will proceed to kill you if you do not take action.”

“Everything and everyone tries to kill me,” Tony shrugged. “I guess I’m like a cockroach, you know, like Cap said back there. I simply refuse to be squashed.”

“Should you be so flippant about this, sir?”

“Fine, fine,” Tony rolled his eyes and made to get up. His body was against it, though. “Let me get to the workshop and I’ll be right on it. Go on, guilt-trip me into something else while you’re at it.”

“I am not guilt-tripping you into anything, sir. And for now you should remain in bed.”

“Give me some holograms to work with, then.”

“I have given the matter some thought, sir.” A bunch of holograms formed in the air before Tony; the bed whirred quietly and its upper half lifted a bit for Tony’s convenience. “What we need is an energy source.”

“You know, you should be the Captain here. Not America, though, your name would be Obvious.”

“You are extremely funny, sir. The elements which may provide you with enough energy and not kill you while doing so are far and few between. In fact, the only one which has been proven not to be mythical is vibranium which gathers kinetic energy and can therefore give it off.”

“We’ve been over this before, J.” Tony called a holographic image of Cap’s shield and sent it swirling with a flick of a fingertip. “There’s all the known vibranium right here. Dear ol’ dad made sure to use every last fucking atom on this shield.”

“Your father used every atom that was available at the time, yes.”

“What, are you saying that there’s a new deposit of vibranium discovered out there? Just how
fucking much did I miss while playing with HYDRA?”

“Not exactly a deposit, sir, but a great deal of it or at least an alloy with high percentage of it.”

“You mean... Oh!”

Tony snapped his fingers and stared at the hologram of Doctor Doom.

“So what you are saying is that we should cut a piece of Doom off and shove it in my chest.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did I raise you to be so bloodthirsty, or is it the result of watching too much of ‘Tom and Jerry’?”

“We have no way of knowing if Doctor Doom will bleed when bereaved of a portion of his body in a forceful manner. And the moral values you have taught me over the years do not interfere with this suggestion of mine. Your safety is paramount, sir.”

“It’s not paramount as much as you’re paranoid. Give it time, the shock of yet another kidnapping will wear off in no time. Aren’t you feeling batshit crazy, planning to rip a limb off Doom and make it into a trinket for me?”

Jarvis kept silent. He probably did feel crazy but he hardly wanted to admit it.

“Perhaps I can synthesize some after all,” Tony drew some rough and sloppy schematics in the air; Jarvis picked them up immediately to straighten and rework into a proper design. “That particle accelerator which I started a year ago, we could work with that. Why didn’t I finish it anyway?”

“Do you really want to hear your reasoning, sir, considering that your alcohol levels at the time almost exceeded what is ordinarily considered lethal?”

Tony winced from the reproach that Jarvis didn't let show in his voice.

“Okay, no, I don't.”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Come in, Steve,” Jarvis said.

Cap came in, bearing a tray with water, a carton of apple juice, and a plate with cheese and crackers.

“Is there any particular reason why you are looking at pictures of my shield and Doctor Doom?” He asked. The contents of the tray went to the nightstand; the bed dipped as Cap sat by Tony's side to look at the holograms.

“Can’t decide which one to print for my wallet,” Tony said. “Tough choice.”

“Drink the juice. And why the sudden urge to decorate your wallet right now?”

“You know me,” Tony shrugged carefully, hiding a grimace of pain at the gesture, and ignored the juice remark. “So vain.”

“Jarvis, why is Tony looking at my shield and Doctor Doom?” Cap asked.

“Hey!” Tony protested. Jarvis, the traitor, didn’t pay any attention to him.
“Sir needs vibranium for a personal purpose. Your shield and, allegedly, Doctor Doom’s body are the only known sources of it on planet Earth.”

“You aren’t going to cut up my shield for your personal purposes when I’m not looking, are you?” Cap said, only half-jokingly.

Tony clapped his hands over the pictures and threw them away.

“Don’t get your star-spangled panties in a twist, your shield’s safe,” he snapped. The mood was inexplicably and completely ruined. “I’m going to synthesize as much of the shit as I need. It just came up in the conversation, that’s all.”

“Tony,” Cap held his hands up. “I didn’t really think you’d do that. It was a joke.”

“Whatever,” Tony muttered. “Go away now, Capsicle, I’m busy. Thanks for the dashing rescue and all that, by the way.”

Tony clapped his hands over the pictures and threw them away. The mood was inexplicably and completely ruined. “I’m going to synthesize as much of the shit as I need. It just came up in the conversation, that’s all.”

“Tony,” Cap held his hands up. “I didn’t really think you’d do that. It was a joke.”

“Whatever,” Tony muttered. “Go away now, Capsicle, I’m busy. Thanks for the dashing rescue and all that, by the way.”

Cap sighed.

“Tony... can I call you Tony? You don’t mind that?”

“Knock yourself out. I’ve been called worse.”

“Okay then. Will you call me Steve?”

Tony looked up from the holograms. Cap was so sincere and earnest, he was literally bursting with it.

Tony hadn’t encountered so much sincerity and earnestness rolled up in one person since, maybe, ever.

“If you want me to,” he said cautiously. “No skin off my teeth, I suppose. But I reserve the right to use ‘Capsicle’ whenever I like. I’m much too attached to that one to give it up.”

There was annoyance in Cap’s – Steve’s – eyes but he smiled.

“Good. Thank you, Tony.”

Steve stood up.

“I’ll go now. I need to go to the field with the team anyway. Jarvis, will you make sure he rests and doesn’t do anything stupid while I’m away?”

“Of course, Steve.”

When Steve was well out of earshot, Tony asked rhetorically: “I’m so screwed, aren’t I?”

“I do not know what you are talking about, sir,” said Jarvis. He sounded, for some unfathomable reason, very smug.
Chapter 7

The closer Steve got to Tony Stark, the less he felt he knew about the man. In a way, it was logical: it had been much easier to assume the heck out of him and stay content with it, but as soon as Steve started peeling away Tony’s layers, the picture became much more complex. The infallible logic of it didn’t, however, make it any less frustrating.

Steve had honestly thought he would need to stay by Tony’s side longer. Tony had almost died a few times and spent almost twenty-four hours unconscious, after all; but Steve had been shooed away almost immediately even though Tony had looked like death warmed over.

There were still questions, buzzing in Steve’s mind like a hive of disquieted bees. Jarvis had refused to answer most of them, explaining that it would mean violation of Tony’s privacy, and Steve had no idea, as of yet, why Tony had a gaping hole in his chest (Jarvis simply said it wasn’t new and was then mum on the subject no matter how many times Steve said ‘please’), why it had to be filled with an unearthly-looking glowing device (which Steve had seen somewhere before), where exactly the red scratch marks in the HammerIndustries elevator shaft had come from, what that supposedly bad thing was that would have happened if Steve had involved anyone else in the rescue mission, why Tony didn’t like water (except for the fact that it shorted out the battery hooked up to his heart, of course), and about many other things.

He doubted his luck in extracting answers from Tony would be better than with Jarvis. Judging by how Tony resolutely hadn’t talked about anything important until Steve was out of the room, getting Tony to share sensitive information would be a bit like pulling teeth with one’s bare hands.

While Steve was going downstairs, he caught himself smiling when thinking of Tony. He was alive and snarky; Steve saved him, and that was what mattered, all shadowy secrets aside.

“How is he?” Bruce asked as Steve entered the communal living-room.

“Fine. Not healthy yet, obviously, but fine. When I left, he’d already started working on, uh, something to synthesize, well, something.” Steve wasn’t sure if Tony would welcome him telling everybody about a personal project, especially after Tony had clearly shown that he didn’t trust Steve to keep Jarvis’ true nature under wraps. Probably not; and in cases of secrets it was better to err on the side of caution.

“Is it wise for friend Anthony to be working without having recovered from his grievous wounds?” Thor asked.

“Not really, but I think the only way I'd've been able to stop him would be to knock him out myself,” Steve gave Thor a small smile. “That’s Tony for you.”

“Interesting,” Clint muttered. “One measly rescue later, and he’s Tony, not Stark?”


“Nobody says you can’t,” Clint shrugged. “I just said it was interesting, that’s all.”

There was something wrong in the way Clint said that but it wasn’t the best time to discuss the finer points of interpersonal relationships. At the time when the team had returned from their respective missions, Steve had been almost done fighting Tony's ferocious fever; enough time had passed without action that it was useless now to storm the underwater base. It might help to scour it for traces of something useful but all the personnel and equipment was bound to have been cleared out.
“Let’s focus,” Steve said. “Natasha, I want you to continue working your recruits angle. In addition, it is clear now that HYDRA was having deals or at least negotiations with the Hammer Industries so there’s a part of the weapon trail for you.”

Natasha nodded. For infiltrating the gym she had dyed her hair blond, put in contact lenses a few shades darker than her real eyes, and did something that looked highly uncomfortable with the shape of her nose. It was strange to see her like that and Steve found himself missing a little the fiery red spark of her hair, always next to Clint’s sandy mop and contrasting with it.

“I still can’t believe I was late,” Bruce pinched his nose. He didn’t look particularly irritated or upset but it may have been only because he wanted to stay Bruce and not smash the couch again. “They must have spotted me on my way there.”

“Evacuating a secret base on the off-chance that the traveling Hulk is heading your way is a tad too paranoid even for HYDRA,” Steve said. “There might be a mole in S.H.I.E.L.D.. Clint, Natasha, you are still technically S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, even if not full-time anymore. Can I ask you not to file your reports in the usual manner? If you do need to, go directly to Fury. At this point I’m not sure who we can trust.”

“Makes sense,” Clint said. His face was pensive and withdrawn and his fingers were playing with an invisible bowstring as if he was imagining all S.H.I.E.L.D. agents one by one and weighing the chances of them being traitors. Perhaps he actually was.

Natasha nodded again; sparse with her words, she made herself understood perfectly through minute movements and facial expressions.

“It troubles me greatly that the Doctor of Doom was preying upon this fine city while friend Hawk and I were seeking him far away from here,” Thor said, quieter than usual by a few decibels. “An enemy so cunning that he had managed to deceive us all, he must be found before he strikes and flees once more.”

“You’re right, Thor.” Steve stared at the wall, trying to come up with a plan. “Doom is usually all for fighting, with his speeches and armies of Doombots all aimed at the unsuspecting public. And the HYDRA I knew never shied away from a brawl. They must be waiting for something. Holding their strength back until they are ready to strike.”

“To strike with what?” asked Bruce.

“No idea. Jarvis, have you found anything useful down there?” Steve called, tipping his head backwards to look into the blinking red eye of the camera in the corner of the ceiling.

“Please, specify your inquiry, Captain Rogers,” Jarvis said, indifferent and every bit a machine. As it was said, Steve happened to be inhaling; at ‘Captain Rogers’ the air went into the wrong pipe and Steve choked on it.

A coughing fit gave him the sensation of ears flaming from embarrassment and enough time to realize that Jarvis had to keep up the charade in front of the others. Steve didn’t like the idea of someone as incredible as Jarvis having to hide but it wasn’t his choice, and if Jarvis and Tony both considered it the best way to go, then it was their call to make.

“Approximately twenty-six hours ago you were with me at a HYDRA base. I know you linked to their system and hacked it. Did you find anything about a big project of any kind? Something really, really important?”
“Several projects in the HYDRA network were of sufficient magnitude and significance to be relevant to your inquiry. One: preliminary designs for recreating Iron Man suit,” Jarvis said. “However, without the original armor to refer to, the HYDRA scientists have not made any noteworthy discoveries. Two: the development of the current version of tranquilizer able to influence the Hulk and Thor Odinson into a poison. The calculations have been made but no testing has been performed yet with the lethal version. Three: the data on various parallel dimensions explored by Doctor Doom and the creatures he is planning to bring to Earth once he has coordinated the portals in the manner he deems suitable. Note: Doctor Doom is not the creator of the technology necessary for opening portals to other dimensions. HYDRA supplied him with a ready-made device for that; the specifications of the device were not kept on the servers of the base you and I have visited, Captain Rogers.”

Clint whistled.

“Again?” Bruce made a face like he had just bitten into a ripe lemon. “I hoped we’ve had enough of creatures coming in through portals for this lifetime.”

“Friend Jarvis,” Thor said, frowning. “How can it be that the heinous HYDRA possesses this technology? It should be but unreachable magic for the people of Midgard.”

“There are currently people on Earth who are theoretically able to master the technology, Mister Odinson,” Jarvis said coolly. “The exact number of them remains to be established. Two of them, widely known for their academic achievements, even reside in New-York, though they are unlikely to have been the ones to create the technology for an organization such as HYDRA.”

“Who are they?” Clint demanded. “Unlikely or not, it’s worth a shot talking to them.”

“The first person is Reed Richards, the leader of the Fantastic Four, also known as ‘Mr. Fantastic’ in the modern media. His present whereabouts are unknown; Doctor Doom claimed to have captured him as well as his team but this information is yet to be verified. The second person is sir, Anthony Edward Stark, whose present whereabouts are known to you. If you wish to talk to sir, I request that you wait for several hours as sir went to sleep four minutes twenty-three seconds ago and being disturbed would affect his recovery.”

“I did not know indeed that the genius of friend Anthony was of magnificence such as this!” Thor said in admiration.

“The man has seven doctorates, and two of them he got before he could legally have a beer,” Natasha said. “He could master portals or anything else if he put his mind to it.”

“It’s not him,” Steve said. Natasha turned her intense look at him and he hastened to pad his disagreement with arguments. “He’s a good man at heart. And he’s too busy with his company and us to be making portals for villains. Besides, I think it’s more possible that at first someone opened the portal to us, you know, from the other side. That has happened before. Any kind of evil creature could align with HYDRA.”

“After the Loki incident, I wouldn’t be surprised,” Bruce said and glanced apologetically at Thor; the latter bowed his head with a tangible aura of sadness. “Besides, I’m also sure that Tony couldn’t have done it. No more than any of us.”

“Don’t be stupid, Nat,” Clint tried to elbow Natasha and had to duck in order to avoid a steak knife. It went over his head and stuck into the wall. “Tony’s a dick ninety-nine per cent of the time but he’s alright.”
“I never said otherwise,” Natasha said. One corner of her lips twisted a quarter of an inch upwards. “But it’s good to hear that you don’t think him capable of that, too.”

Honestly, Natasha could play all of them so easily that Steve didn’t even know why she bothered. It must have been boring since she barely needed to make an effort.

“Thor, who do you know that has enough power to open portals? There must be a lot of magic wielders in Asgard, right?” Bruce tapped his lower lip, concentrated on the task at hand; his disappointment with the trip to Massachusetts seemed to have dissipated fully.

“Aye, friend Bruce. However, not many are able to make way to other worlds. That is why we have the Bifrost watched by Heimdalle, one of the few whose gifts allow them to build paths to different realms.”

“They might have an energy source similar to Tesseract,” Natasha said. “Then they don’t need much of a gift, right?”

Steve listened to his team swap opinions and try to build a sound theory with the few facts they had. They had to defeat HYDRA and Doom before the plans of another alien invasion came to fruition; if they didn’t, bad things could happen.

He remembered a private conversation with Director Fury, the next day after the battle. He had been terrified to learn that the World Security Council had been ready to launch a nuclear missile on Manhattan despite the protests of S.H.I.E.L.D.; had launched it, in fact, and only a bizarre malfunction had prevented New-York from becoming a wasteland. The Avengers might have been the ultimate team of the planet but the WSC didn’t like to put all eggs in one basket if they could help it, and there were measures like this in place.

Steve wished it had been easier to distinguish between the bad and the good. Iron Man, a super villain, hadn’t killed or even hurt a single person over almost two years of active villainy. A council which was supposed to protect people approved an action aimed at turning those people into ash.

It wasn’t even that the lines blurred from time to time. It was that Steve sometimes doubted the lines were still there at all.

* * *

Tony was sleeping and Steve was sitting by the bed, waiting. Most of the cheese he had brought before had gone dry and he’d taken it away, replacing it with a sandwich wrapped in clinging plastic film and some coffee with milk (a bit of coffee, a lot of milk, a generous helping of sugar) in a thermo cup. The food and drink seemed inadequate in the face of what Tony had had to go through but it was something easy to arrange, the little domestic care which Steve had learned from his mother and never unlearned after she died.

“You’re watching me. It’s creepy,” said Tony without opening his eyes. He looked as relaxed and sleepy as ten minutes ago and Steve may or may have done a double-take from the unexpectedness of that.

Great. Nothing much said or done yet, and Tony had already managed to knock the ground from under Steve’s feet.

“Well, excuse me if I want to keep an eye on you after you’ve been kidnapped by a crazed Nazi organization.”

Apparently, this was the wrong thing to say. Jarvis made a pained little ‘ooh’ sound and Tony’s eyes
flew open, his face instantly becoming hard and angry.

“I’m a grown-ass man, Steve, I don’t need coddling. Not from you, not from anyone.”

“I didn’t mean – I just –” Steve stumbled, floored by the speed with which this conversation had gone sour, and how did Tony make his name sound like the worst of insults?

“Get out,” Tony ordered flatly, and for a split second the soldier in Steve wanted to follow the command.

He wasn’t the kind of soldier he used to be, though, was he?

“No.”

“Do you want me to make Jarvis sedate you with a gas? Thick as thieves you may be now, but he’ll do it in a heartbeat.”

“I will,” Jarvis confirmed. “I’m sorry, Steve, but sir’s needs are my priority.”

“Well, his needs and his wants don’t always coincide,” Steve snapped. He felt sweat collecting on his brow from the sheer tension in the room. “Tony, I’m sorry.”

He rubbed his forehead with the heel of his palm, desperately wishing to erase the last two minutes from the memory of all involved.

“I’m not coddling you, I swear. I wouldn’t be able to if I tried, believe me. I brought you food and I want to talk to you, and I’m not leaving until I do even if you try your best to drive me up the wall. You can sedate me all you want, but the gas will affect you, too, and my metabolism will work through it faster than yours.”

Steve waited for Tony to order the sedation anyway, just for the hell of it, because that was what Tony’s eyes, darkened with anger and wounded pride, were saying; but Tony’s lips, pale and dry, were unmoving while Tony’s fingers clawed the blanket with enough strength to rip the cloth.

“I. Am. Not. Leaving,” Steve punctuated. He felt proud for biting back the ‘get it through your thick skull already’, and ‘why am I not allowed to care about you’, and ‘shut up and eat the sandwich before I shove it down your throat in frustration’. He had a hunch he’d have more opportunities to say all these things in the future.

“Fair enough,” Tony said, his voice level. It was as if an impenetrable lid, the faceplate of a helmet slid down his face, shutting all the emotion where Steve couldn’t reach it. “What did you want to talk about?”

“I know...” Steve trailed off, chickening out at the last moment. ‘I know you’re Iron Man’ stayed at the tip of his tongue, unspoken. What if Tony wasn’t him after all? What if the circumstantial evidence was all a coincidence and Steve was about to accuse an innocent man of being a wanted criminal? The main thing that had driven him to saying that was that damned fictional story and as far as Steve was aware it was just a product of some fan’s wild fantasies.

“What do you know?” Tony demanded sharply.

Steve wondered what Tony was expecting him to say. He also thought that while Tony was actively trying to kick him out of the room, he never used the big guns; Tony’s best guns were his words, not Jarvis with a sedative, and he could, if he really wanted to, rile Steve up to the point of seeing red. Tony, without a doubt, knew Steve’s weak points but hadn’t hit him in those which meant that on
some level he wanted Steve to stay. Could Steve go on asking disrespectful questions after that?

“I know you probably don’t want to talk about the kidnapping,” Steve said instead. “But do you remember anything at all that might help us? Something you didn’t think to mention before?”

“Nobody told me much, Capsicle,” Tony made a vague gesture with his hand. “I was a prisoner, not their chief tactician, remember? I saw guards, some materials and tools they’d given me to make weapons for them, Hammer who was supervising me,” he snorted derisively. “The idiot told me Doom was there too, wanting me dead, while your old buddy Shmidt thought I’d be more use if alive…”

“Why?” Steve interrupted.

“Because of weapons they wanted me to build, duh, why else do you think he’d want me to waste oxygen a little longer? Christ, Capsicle, it’s as if you don’t know I’m a genius.”

“I forgot, I guess,” Steve said with a straight face. “You only remind everybody about that a dozen times daily, no wonder it slipped my mind. No, I mean, why did Dr. Doom want you dead? What did you ever do to him?”

Tony gulped visibly and snatched the coffee cup from the nightstand to drain it all in one go.

“I don’t know, he might just dislike me on general principle, it’s not all that uncommon among the populace. Some people just don’t have taste that way. Or he’s miffed because I house you and make your gear thus undermining his attempts to take over the world. Not that they need much undermining, pitiful as they are. Who knows what’s going on in that big bucket he passes off as his head?”

“If he didn’t like you helping the Avengers, why wasn’t he content to leave you a prisoner of HYDRA’s? You wouldn’t be able to do much helping from there. No, Tony, it must be something personal for him. Do you have any idea what? Think back, please. The more we know about him, the more of a chance we have to pin him down.”

“No idea, sorry,” Tony looked Steve in the eyes and smiled easily and Steve was so sure he was being lied to that his teeth ached.

“I can’t make you answer if you don’t want to,” Steve felt his lips pinch in disappointment. “But if you change your mind, tell me at any time.”

“You can’t make me answer because I don’t have any answers apart from what I already told you,” Tony flicked his wrist, calling up several holograms. “Damn, I miss working properly. J, let’s move this to the workshop, shall we? I'm past the preliminary designs stage, I need to weld some pipes.”

“Are you su...” Steve began, not liking the idea of Tony working so soon after his capture. However, the memory of the earlier outburst about coddling stopped him before he could get a complete sentence out.

“You were saying?” Tony’s voice was calm but the undercurrent threat was clear.

“Are you sure you don’t want to eat first?” Steve nodded at the sandwich. “Welding pipes is hard work.”

“You’ve got a point,” said Tony warily and started unwrapping the sandwich. “Mmm! That’s good,” he swallowed the first bite. His stomach growled in appreciation. “Where did you get it?”
“I made it,” Steve shrugged and smiled. “Glad you like it.”

Tony dug into the sandwich ravenously. A smidge of mustard appeared on his cheek and his upper lip glistened with the juice of the fresh tomato.

“Your talents are wasted in this Avengers gig,” he declared, licking his fingers clean. “You should cook full-time. That snob Jamie Oliver will eat his favorite pan in envy.”

Steve didn’t have the slightest idea who Jamie Oliver was and also knew that his own cooking skills were nothing to write home about. The praise was still nice to hear, though.

“It’s nothing special,” he mumbled. “Thank you.”

“Do you know you blush when you’re told nice things?” Tony asked. “Never mind, I’ve eaten, I’m full of energy now, good as new, seriously, that sandwich of yours has magical properties and I can’t even hate it even though I hate magic with the heat of a thousand burning suns, it is just that divine, and I’ve got to change now, under this blanket I’m only wearing underwear, were you the one who took my chaste prisoner sheet off? My, my, Steve, we can make a proper twenty-first century pervert out of you yet, why are you smiling, what did I say that was funny? Really, there’s changing to do, shoo, Steve, go away, chop-chop, unless you are determined to see my ass in all its naked glory in which case I’m flattered, but there’s unlikely to be anything you can’t find on the Internet, there are some good HD shots out there, I’m telling you, the public eats it up and wow, I did not need a mental picture of a crowd of creepy fans eating my ass, that’s just plain wrong, hey, don’t you want to see my ass any more, are you going already?”

Steve fled the room, feeling the urge to laugh and to be swallowed by the ground in equal measure. Tony’s lighthearted faux maniacal cackle accompanied him through the door.

In the relative safety of his studio, Steve decided that he, too, didn’t need the picture of Tony’s ass being licked and fucked and cherished in lavish hungry motions by eager tongues.

He didn’t need it so much, he couldn’t stress that enough in his own thoughts. The hot rush of blood that made his cock twitch didn’t help at all.

* * *

“This may not work,” Bruce said. The device in his hands continued to hum, heedless of its creator’s doubts. “I’m no expert in this, it’s nothing more that a product of half-educated guesses and what Thor told me about the feeling he gets when the fabric of time and space is torn open, and let me tell you, it’s extremely difficult to incorporate ‘a sense of foreboding in my gut much like what I felt after friend Hawk had fed me the wicked food of burritos’ into coding for sensors.”


“No, nothing interesting. I should have asked Tony for help. Why didn’t we ask him, again?”

“Because he holed up in the workshop and told Jarvis to fend off all visitors unless there’s an apocalypse around the corner.”

“Right.”

Bruce concentrated on the device and started pinching its buttons with the speed and rhythm that reminded Steve of the Morse code.

“What are you doing?”
“Calibrating. Quiet, Steve, don’t distract me. Read a book or something while I’m working.”

Dismissed by a genius for the second time today, Steve was left alone with his thoughts. He didn’t feel helpless all that often but it was one of those times because he had done all he could by this point and now had to wait and trust in his team. Of course, he did trust the team; if anybody could save the world from another alien invasion, it would be them. But it was hard to wait and do nothing and worry about everything and everybody at once. Thor was circling the sky over New-York, looking for that burrito feeling and any sign of trouble, Clint was leading a team of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents diving into the Hudson to study the remains of the underwater base, Natasha was trying to get recruited into HYDRA under the disguise of blonde ex-military Marie, and Bruce was being obnoxiously smart. And Steve was supposed to sit quietly and read a book or something.

Fine, he could do that.

He pulled his Starkpad out of his pocket and opened the Internet. He didn’t actually have a book in mind, per se, but there was one story he couldn’t help but return to in his thought. Maybe it could give him a clue where to look for to resolve his suspicions about Tony being Iron Man once and for all, one way or the other?

For that, he would just have to sit though the scenes with kissing. For the greater good and so on.

The story was as easy to find as before. Steve tapped on the link to the second chapter and scrolled down to where he had stopped.

Without thinking, he bent his head instead and caught Tony’s quickly moving lips with his own in a tender kiss. After a few moments of chaste touch which sent shivers down Steve’s spine nonetheless, Steve moved his tongue and let its tip slide along the seam of Tony’s lips, already warmed and wetted by the contact. The billionaire’s mouth tasted of metal and heat and Steve reveled in it and let Tony, in his turn, explore Steve’s mouth – much more tentatively so than he could ever expect from someone whose sexual exploits were so numerous and (if one read the papers which Steve absolutely did not do) elaborate in nature.

“Good Captain! What is it that I see you doing?”

Steve and Tony sprung apart as if burned by the sound. Thor, the god of thunder, was looking at them with an expression so astonished that Steve couldn’t say whether Thor was appalled by the picture, or angered, or anything else.

“Oh, friend Stark, it is you that friend Steve has been kissing,” Thor looked at them both with a frown upon his brow. “Why are you wearing a suit similar to that of the wretched Iron Man? Why are you here, on battlefield? You are not a warrior and it presents danger for you to be here.”

Okay, so Thor could be a little slow on the uptake. Steve still liked the guy.


“What is going on?” This time it was Bruce Banner post-Hulking, holding his torn trousers together with both hands.

Steve felt it was going to be a long day.

The author took their time with describing the reaction of the Avengers which was uniformly negative and had them hand Tony over to S.H.I.E.L.D. Strangely enough, there was no Fury in the text, even though Steve expected the Director to make an appearance. But it was only Coulson and
some extras that were referred to as ‘blank-eyed muscled goons’.

It was almost as if, while aware of so many little domestic secrets of the Avengers’ life, the author didn’t know anything about S.H.I.E.L.D. Surely someone actually spying on Steve and his team in the most secure building that human mind and unlimited money could create would be able to find out a little bit about a less brain-powered and more fund-limited organization? It was like they weren’t even clued in about Coulson’s death.

This was getting stranger and stranger.

*The corridors of S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters were empty and dark at this hour. Steve’s access card allowed him entrance almost everywhere. He was pretty sure he wouldn’t have been able to get into the offices of the higher administration and maybe some of the more classified storages but for his purposes tonight his clearance level was more than enough. Who would think twice about letting Captain America see the prisoners? He could be counted on not to get up to any unauthorized shenanigans – well, that was what his superiors thought, in any case.*

*It took him a while to walk past a row of doors until he got to the one he needed. It was transparent, as if made of glass, but it had to be something sturdier than that, and there were yellow sparks dancing across its surface. Tony was inside, sitting on a cot which, along with the toilet seat and a sink, constituted all of the furnishings of the place. He wasn’t in the suit any longer, as was to be expected; he was only wearing thin old sweatpants and a ragged tank top, smeared with grease and dried blood in several places. Instead of sleeping, he was looking at the floor under his feet so intently as if he waited for something interesting to spring out of there and into his lap.*

*Knowing Tony, he could be doing just that. Although, after today Steve could hardly claim any familiarity with what was going through Tony’s head at any given moment.*

*He only knew that the memory of their kiss lingered on his lips, leaving his skin hot and tingled all over, and he wanted to see Tony, God knows why.*

*“Is it a private party, or can anyone crash it?” Steve asked, checking if the door was sealing the sound off as well.*

*It wasn’t, judging by the way Tony’s head snapped up. He stared at Steve wordlessly, and Steve was pretty sure that at least half a dozen of the multiple bruises and cuts on his face had not been there in the morning. Had S.H.I.E.L.D. agents beaten a helpless prisoner?*

*“Is it just me seeing things, or are you really there?” Tony asked in his turn.*

*He got up from the cot and crossed the small room in two strides. His gait was strained: he favored his left side and clearly made an effort to hide his limp. That could be the doing of the building that had fallen on top of him, actually. Steve was willing to give S.H.I.E.L.D. the benefit of the doubt.*

*“I thought your lawyers would have you out of here in a matter of minutes,” Steve said. He absolutely did not intend to ask about those bruises. “Why are you still here?”*

*“When you are Iron Man, it’s hard to convince people that it’s a good idea to let you walk free,” Tony’s lips curved in a bitter smile. “The big question is, though, why are you here? I didn’t think gloating was your style.”*

*“It isn’t. I’m not here to gloat.”*

*“Then what are you here for?”*
Wouldn’t they both like to know that.

“I needed to see you,” Steve said honestly. When in doubt, opt for honesty. That was what he did. “I’m still kind of in shock that it’s you.”

“I’m still kind of in shock I lifted my faceplate for you,” Tony retorted. His eyes were blazing with almost predatory hunger as he watched Steve, unblinking. It was rather creepy but also flattering on some primal, thrill-seeking level. “Did S.H.I.E.L.D. think I’d be more likely to talk with you asking the questions?”

“Talk? They were interrogating you? They already know who you are.”

Tony sighed.

“I’m starting to doubt they sent you. You are too clueless, really, no one can put it on as an act and hope that it’ll work.”

“It really doesn’t seem to be working since you’re not answering the questions,” Steve had a temptation to take Tony by the shoulders and shake him. The man was in a cell in the pits of the most covered-up government facility in the world and still managed to be endlessly infuriating. “What were they asking you about?”

“Oh, the usual,” Tony waved his hand in the air absently. “You know, things like ‘Will you build us an army of Iron Men if we promise not to break your fingers one by one?’, ‘Who are your accomplices?’, ‘Who do you think you are, defying us like that?’, and so on, and so forth. Nothing worth listening to, so I just tuned it out while they were blathering on.”

“They want an army of Iron Men?” Steve frowned.

“What they want, they aren’t gonna get.” Tony showed his teeth in a mocking grin. “That technology is too dangerous to fall into the wrong hands.”

“And yours are the right ones?”

“Considering that I invented it, made it, perfected it, never hurt anyone with it – yes,” Tony said. He was standing there, refusing to break the eye contact with Steve; his hair was sticking out every which way, he was smaller than Steve in height, he was covered in injuries from head to toe and held in a cell which his army of lawyers and ocean of money couldn’t break, and he still stubbornly refused to give in. “But since you are one of them, you probably won’t agree with me.”

“I am my own person,” Steve said.

Tony flinched at the words.

“Is that the angle they have you working? I’m the embodiment of all that’s good in the world and stuff but I’m on your side so tell me all your dirty secrets’, is that what you came here to lie about?”

“I haven’t lied to you once,” Steve growled. It was easy to remember why he disliked Tony Stark after all. “And I’m not on any side right now, I’m just trying to understand what’s going on.”

“I am Iron Man, your sworn enemy; you apprehended me; S.H.I.E.L.D., your sworn employer, has me in custody; what else is there to understand? By all accounts, you should be back home, sleeping soundly.”

“It is your home,” Steve said quietly. “The one I call mine in this century.”
He didn’t miss a sharp intake of breath even though Tony tried to hide it.

“You do know that they must be recording everything that’s going on here?”

Steve didn’t know; now that he thought of it, the stupidity of what he’d done was even more glaring than before.

“You’re evading my questions again.”

Tony stayed silent.

“Please,” Steve wanted to touch the door but didn’t dare, considering the yellow sparks; he settled for stilling his hand, open palm forward, as close as he could without getting himself into physical trouble. “I – I kissed you.”

“So what? I can’t be the only person you ever kissed, what’s the big deal?”

It was Steve’s turn not to answer. Tony’s eyes grew huge as the understanding hit him.

“Oh shit, I am, aren’t I? Why on Earth would you do that?”

“Because I wanted to,” Steve said defensively.

“Hell, Steve,” Tony breathed, raising his hand until it hovered directly opposite Steve’s, skin separated from skin by a layer of reinforced who-knew-what. For some reason, the gesture felt infinitely more intimate than a kiss ever did. “I –”

“Don’t say anything,” Steve warned. “If you utter one V-card joke, I’m breaking the door and strangling you.”

Tony laughed quietly.

“I wasn’t going to. You, you are impossible, you know that?”

“Not as impossible as you, it appears.”

Tony didn’t answer that.

“You haven’t hurt anyone, I checked. No collateral damage, no physical harm at all to anybody could have theoretically become collateral damage, not even any intimidation towards civilians You must have chosen your targets with a goal in mind. What was it?”

“I was taking out the bad guys,” Tony said, sounding as if he was dragging the words out of his throat by the collar. “It was easier to do as a super villain. I didn’t really think it’d come back to bite me one day. I was this close to retiring!”

Suddenly, so many things made sense that Steve found it hard to breathe.

He wanted to believe and not to believe at the same time but a part of him knew Tony was telling the truth.

“Let me out of here, Steve,” Tony begged. “I need to get back to the tower. They are after my suits. JARVIS will protect my workshop for as long as he can but they’ll strip his core and kill him to get their hands on Iron Man. I need to destroy every piece of it. They might be there as we speak. Please, Steve. You can escort me there and back, you can handcuff me, do anything you want to prevent me from escaping. I don’t care, just let me take care of this. I can’t go down knowing that
they have this power at their greedy fingertips."

“You do realize that if I free you, even temporarily, I’m likely to get a room next to yours?”

“Well. There’s a good chance they’ll let it slide if you put me back where I was and look the other way when they beat me into bloody pulp for cheating them out of my tech. You’re Captain America, you know.”

Steve swallowed. It was hard to doubt now where the new bruises had come from.

“I’m not looking the other way while you’re being beaten.”

“What are you planning to do, than?”

“I’m getting you out of here,” Steve said.

Tony watched warily, refusing to believe what he saw, while Steve swiped his card across the lock. The sparks died down and the door clicked softly as it opened.

“Come on,” Steve said, reaching out over the threshold.

Tony took his hand wordlessly and went with him.

That was where the chapter ended and Steve looked for the link to the next one, but it wasn’t there. There were a few lines under the headline ‘Notes’ at the bottom of the page, though.

So this was a longish one, phew! What do you think, guys? Let me know in the comments. The next one is going to take a few days to write: I’m going to New-York to see my friends! They are super-cool and super-nice, I’m hoping it’ll rub off on me! *giggles shyly* I’ll get to the comments as soon as I’m off the plane, though, that I promise. God bless Starkphones and the Internet they give us! See ya!

What? That was all? Seriously?

Steve stifled a groan of frustration and tried to concentrate on more important matters than the adventures of the fictional Steve and Tony. The author was in New-York now if the notes weren’t lying. Did it mean a threat to the Avengers? Why did the author demonstrate without hesitation how much they knew about the daily life in the tower but choose to appear ignorant of the more important details? Why did they portray Tony as Iron Man?

Gosh, he wasn’t going to get any answers now, without any more of the story to peruse and dissect for clues. He was feeling rather upset by it and for about a minute he let himself imagine what he could write in the comments out of spite. The story could use some improvements; for example, the speed at which Tony and Steve fell into, well, a romantic relationship of sorts was astounding. Hadn’t the author heard of building some basis for the actions of characters? Steve was no literary critic but if he had to be a character, he would prefer to be a darned believable one.

And, for the record, he had kissed people before. Jesus, why was he a blushing virgin in this story?

He shook his head, once again making an effort to keep his haphazard thoughts on the necessary track. This had gone too far. The presence of the author so close to the Avengers couldn’t mean anything good. Did that (awful, lazy, unable to finish the story before putting it out on the Internet) person come to New-York because they were connected to HYDRA and wanted to take part in the portal plan?
Steve had a nasty feeling that he had to come clean about the story. To Tony and Jarvis and to Director Fury, at the very least.

That would go over swell.

“Steve, I’ve got something,” Bruce said in an urgent voice.

Steve was up in a second, leaving the Starkpad lying on the ground for the time being.

“What is it?”

“Uh, just look up and you’ll see, actually.”

Steve looked up. The sky was peppered with portals.

He could see the swirling colors of alien universes through them; cold and heat and strange smell were coming on through them, becoming fine mist in the New-York air. It was as beautiful as it was terrifying; he knew first-hand what kind of merciless cruelty was about to rain all over the unsuspecting city.

The portals stayed empty for the time being, though. Steve picked up a wrench which must have been left here by Tony when the latter had wandered out onto the roof last time and threw it into the nearest portal. It swallowed the instrument soundlessly and with no visible reaction.

“I. Hate. Magic.” Bruce’s voice was strained; when Steve turned his head to look, Bruce’s eyes were flashing the familiar green and it was spreading over his face and arms fast.

“So do I,” Steve said. “Go on. I think the Hulk and his love for smashing are in for a treat tonight.”

Bruce managed a smile before his face was contorted in transformation and his clothes ripped with the growing of green muscle.

A figure of red and gold soared up, maneuvering between the myriads of portals.

“Iron Man!” Steve barked. “What are you doing here?!” ‘You need to be in your workshop, safe and healing’, he wanted to say but he held it back because he still didn’t know, did he? It was all the stupid story, it got his mind into such a mess, was it the goal from the very beginning, the malicious purpose of writing something so confusing?

His comm device crackled and there was Iron Man’s tinny voice in his ear: “Did you think I’d sit that one out? That’s the party of the century right here!”

No matter how much Steve strained his hearing, he couldn’t tell if it was Tony or not through the vocal synthesizer.

“Which side are you on here?” Steve asked.

Iron Man was silent for a beat or two and then said: “Believe it or not, I got your back on this one, Capsicle.”

“Puny tin man!” Hulk bellowed and leaped for Iron Man.

Before Iron Man could veer out of reach or Hulk could touch him, the portal that was just behind him let out a tentacle thicker than Iron Man’s body and wrapped it around him swiftly. The repulsors blasted brilliant white as he tried to fight it but the tentacle remained unfazed and pulled him back into the portal with it.
Hulk’s hands closed on empty air with a hollow clap.

The portals all over started closing as if their creator had achieved what he wanted.

“Iron Man!” Steve shouted, helpless to do anything. Silence and faint white noise of static was his answer.

He tore the comm away from his ear and slapped his Starkphone to it instead.

“Jarvis! Where’s Tony?”

An almost imperceptible pause preceded Jarvis’ answer:

“Sir’s current whereabouts are unknown to me. No methods of locating him that are available to me appear to be working between dimensions.”

Steve closed his eyes and tried to remember how to breathe.
Two kidnappings in a single week were just ridiculous. Pepper was going to kill him when she found out he’d spent another scheduled board meeting locked up somewhere with unfriendly terrorists for company; and Tony didn’t even want to think about Steve. And Jarvis, to whom Tony actually promised to abstain from being kidnapped for a while.

In his defense, he could hardly have foreseen a tentacle from another dimension simply grabbing him like he was the last pair of Jimmy Choo’s with an eighty per cent discount on a Black Friday.

The HUD was going crazy with the readings; the screen was flashing much the same painfully bright various colors as the space around Tony and didn’t make any sense. Jarvis wasn’t there when Tony called out his name. The repulsors went out very soon, not having left a dent on the damn tentacle, and the missiles got out of the shoulder containers with the embarrassing speed and target-orientation of a sneeze and then refused to go off properly. The tentacle didn’t react to his struggling and continued to hurry along purposefully across the surface of whatever planet Tony had been dragged to; so, after some deliberation, he let himself be carried. The tentacle had to have some purpose in mind. Sure, it could be just that it was hungry and considered people in metal suits to be especially tasty candies but it could also be under the control of someone smarter.

Tony craned his neck, curious, trying to see the body to which the tentacle was attached, and found out it was just the one tentacle, moving in the manner of a worm. In the absence of a visible mouth the theory about the tentacle following someone’s orders got more credible. Huh. The universe’s mightiest courier?

It was clearly not a creature of Earth, unless somebody around there had been having way too much fun with experimental genetics. This possibility aside, Tony’s suction caps-decorated captor was an alien born and bred and that meant that an enemy of Tony’s had had access to the tentacle’s home planet and/or dimension and enough time and persistence to train it. Who would that be?

The tentacle skidded through what felt like more portals – Tony’s stomach did a flip-flop and he regretted ever eating that sandwich of Steve’s – and came to an abrupt stop.

“Good job, Martin.”

Tony tried getting up but the joints of the suit kept getting shorted out; he gave the system an emergency reboot command and assessed the rest of the damage the best he could. The link to Jarvis was still dead but at least the HUD wasn’t blinding him with nonsensical attempts to scan what it had never been meant to scan. He was back on Earth, and that was something, at least.

“You call your pet tentacle Martin?” he asked incredulously.

“You are the one who gives names to machines. Why do you find it strange that I name a living creature?” responded Doom haughtily.

Okay, he had a point there.

“Is there any purpose to this little rendez-vous? I was kinda busy back there, so spill your business.”

“How dare you be insolent towards Doom!”

The eyes of Doom’s mask flashed red; he raised his right hand and blasted Tony with a white and blue column of electricity at such a close range that Tony was likely to turn into an overdone fry
before he could think of another insulting joke – that was to say, very, very quickly. He managed to shuffle to the side just a bit, the inactive suit restraining his movements, and the electricity flayed open his arm and side instead of his chest and guts.

It was a silver lining in the situation but Tony couldn’t find it in himself to appreciate it as the melted metal of the suit ate into his flesh and he screamed at the top of his lungs.

“The sound of your pain is music to my ears, Iron Man,” Doom said coolly. “Your very face, be it the helmet or the beard and the smirk, makes me hate you, and the longer you defy me and escape death at my hand, the more my hatred grows. Today is your last day; draw a breath while you can because soon you will not be able to do so anymore.”

“If I had a nickel every time I was told that, I’d be noticeably more filthy rich than I am, and that’s saying something,” Tony gasped. The pain became more bearable as the metal cooled but it was still hurting so much that his head was spinning. All the injuries he was nursing from the recent encounter with HYDRA’s unique brand of hospitality woke up and were now bugging him as well.

He was so unfit to fight, covered in gaping, oozing, burning wounds from head to toe, without a working suit, on Doom’s own territory, that he could cry at the sheer frustration of all this. Innumerable variables went flying through his head, composing possible outcomes, factoring some things in and discarding others, taking into account the layout of the grand throne room (really, Doom? Really?) where he was, the dozen of Doombots surrounding Doom as the world’s most narcissistic entourage, and the degree of the hissy fit Doom was currently throwing.

None of the outcomes included him getting out alive.

What else was new?

“There is no way for you to escape,” Doom said, as if having read Tony’s thoughts. “Prepare to die in the grip of the worst pain you have ever felt.”

He raised his hand again, powering up for the final blow. Tony’s own hand flew up to the arc reactor which was untouched by the previous attack, still shining as peacefully as ever.

None of the outcomes included him getting out alive, but some of them included him taking Doom along on the ride to hell.

“Holding on to your shiny toy?” Doom snorted. “It isn’t going to help you now. I had it scanned: it is no weapon, but simply the source of energy for your tasteless suits.”

“It’s not enough that you’re about to kill me? Do you have to go and try to insult the single most amazing fashion design in, like, everywhere and everywhen?” Tony rolled his eyes, somewhat masochistically enjoying the way Doom’s bent fingers pressed together tighter from the taunt. “You have always been petty and arrogant, Victor.” He enjoyed the way Doom twitched at the use of his first name, too. He damn well intended to milk his own death for all the enjoyment it could provide. “And this is what is going to kill you in the end.”

So he had a bit of a flair for dramatics, too. Sue him if you want.

He grasped the edges of the reactor and turned it in one fluid movement, making it pop up from his chest. As Doom was starting to shoot his electricity gimmick, Tony’s thumb slid along the wall of the reactor casing and found a tiny hollow within which a smooth button rested.

He pressed it and hurled the reactor in the direction of Doom at once. The reactor met the solid wall of electricity half-way there and went off with the power that was enough to keep Manhattan lighted
24/7 for at least six months.

Before the world went black, the pain mercifully changed into numbness, and Tony was grateful for it before he lost the ability to feel anything at all.

* * *

Everything hurt like a bitch.

“What is it with him and self-destruct buttons?” someone asked. “I read on the Internet that it’s a villainous cliché.”

“Sir has a soft spot for cheesy clichés,” somebody else answered. "Besides, it gives him an opportunity to control his technology to the ultimate degree.”

“Are there any such buttons in my Starkpad and Starkphone? If there are, I’m never touching them again.”

“There are no self-destruct buttons in commercial products, Steve.” The second someone sounded amused. “If I were as prone to making jokes at your expense as sir, I would advise you not to be a big baby.”

“I was just checking. Say, Jarvis, do you think we should tie him to the bed to avoid another kidnapping? I’m getting tired of nearly having heart attacks from seeing him half-dead on the floor of one evil lair or another.”

Jarvis and Steve. The double wave of comfort he felt was instinctive; his body knew to be happy about their presence like it knew to guide air into his lungs when he inhaled.

Then again, it could be just the drugs he was on. He must have been given the good stuff because while everything hurt, it was practically nothing compared to what he felt, lying on the hard metal floor of Doom’s throne room.

If it turned out that Steve had rescued him again, Tony was going to chew on his pillow in frustration. There were only so many ‘damsel-in-distress’ occasions that his pride could take.

He opened his eyes with an effort and met with Steve’s intense blue ones. They were so bright that it was suddenly hard to breathe.

“Sir, you are awake!” It was maybe the first time on Tony’s memory when Jarvis actually sounded so excited and relieved. His voice brought some sort of balance to the storm of emotions caused by Steve’s intense look; restored just enough peace for the world to align itself on its axis and keep turning.

On the other hand, maybe the drugs weren’t all that good after all.

“What happened?” Tony asked. The words came out raspy and half-choked but at least he was able to speak.

“You got yourself kidnapped and injured again, that’s what happened,” Steve said, smiling so wide that it was impossible to take offence at his words.

“What’s life without a little thrill? If I don’t get grabbed by a giant tentacle named Martin at least once before dinner, the day is wasted.” Tony tried to prop himself on his elbows and sit up but was stopped by a pair of super-soldier hands holding him down carefully but firmly.
Speaking of those hands.

“Why are your fingers bandaged? All ten of them?”

Steve made a movement as if to hide his hands behind his back but it was too late and he just pressed them to his thighs, tense and uncomfortable.

“It’s a long story,” he said. “But it’s one you need to know, though.”

When people got solemn around Tony, it rarely brought something good. He nodded nonetheless.

“First, we didn’t have much time to rescue you. Bruce made a device which scans the city and reports on portal activity and he was just testing it in the field for the first time when all those portals opened. Nothing ever came out of those, by the way; Doom probably only opened them to lure you out and catch you. With, uh, Martin, I suppose. Anyway, when the portal around the tower closed, the device was still showing that one portal was left, further into the city. Jarvis got the coordinates and I summoned Thor to take me there because his flight is faster than anything else I could use.”

Steve’s fingers were swathed in bandages so thick that it was hard to move them. He seemed twitchy and making an effort to keep them still; Tony wondered if super-soldier metabolism allowed using painkillers and if Steve was in pain right now.

“We smashed our way into Doom’s lair, and you were there. The glowing thing – the arc reactor – was nowhere to see, and God, the hole in your chest was so deep. And it was oozing with something that smelt like poison and death.”

Steve swallowed. Tony couldn’t blame him for being squeamish one bit.

“Jarvis said you didn’t have enough time to make it back to the tower where you had a spare, and you never actually finished that particle accelerator, and that you only had a few minutes with shrapnel about to pierce your heart,” Steve stopped to inhale and exhale deeply for a few times. Tony held his curiosity and worry in check; there would be time to let his tongue loose when Steve was done laying his cards on the table.

“So, um, there was not time to get you back soon enough. And then I asked Jarvis if there was anything I could do, anything at all to save your life, and he said: vibranium.”

“Vibranium?” echoed Tony, puzzled.

“Vibranium could save you if put in place instead of the reactor. Well, a magnet also needed to be built but it was easy, Jarvis told me which parts to take out of Thor’s phone. Thor didn’t mind,” Steve smiled feebly. “And then I took my shield and kind of ripped off a piece with my bare hands and stuffed it into your chest. Believe it or not, it worked.”

“What?”

“You heard me the first time.” Steve looked at his hands. “Admittedly, it wasn’t easy to break vibranium. I didn’t even think that it was possible. I guess it was like one of those cases when an emergency situation gives you strength you didn’t have before, like mothers lifting cars off their children and so on.”

Tony felt sick and it had nothing to do with his injuries or the drugs. Steve wasn’t supposed to perform feats like ‘mothers lifting cars off their children and so on’ for him and he definitely wasn’t supposed to break the one thing that meant the world to him in order to save Tony’s sorry dying ass. A dashing rescue like at the HYDRA base? It was nothing, it was Steve’s modus operandi, the guy
saved the world three times before breakfast and looked cute while doing it, but this?

This was some seriously fucked up shit.

“Anyway, I had to leave the Hulk alone on the roof when I took off to Doom’s lair, and he was really unhappy about the abandonment and the lack of things to smash, so he smashed what he found, and the roof needs repairing now,” Steve said hurriedly, as if hoping to distract Tony. With the news about a trashed roof. From the fact that Steve had broken his shield and shoved a piece of it inside Tony. Right.

Tony tried to breathe and found that he couldn’t push the air back out once he’d inhaled; he kept heaving, grabbing more and more air, and little white spots were dancing in front of his eyes.

“Whoa, whoa, Tony, breathe!” Steve held him, his palm warm against Tony’s bare back except for the bandaged parts. “Don’t be upset, it’s alright, you’re alright, and Bruce is very sorry about the roof –”

“Fuck the roof,” Tony wheezed and made an enormous effort to get rid of some of the air that had his lungs painfully puffed up. Oh fuck, hyperventilating was so decidedly not fun. “What have you done? Steve, what the fuck have you done?”

“I just told you all about it,” Steve said, withdrawing his hands slowly as if he was afraid Tony would start showing symptoms of a panic attack again. “What do you mean, what have I done?”

“Are you fucking dense, or are you deliberately pretending not to understand?!” Tony wasn’t up to doing much except looking at Steve and he did his best to bore into Steve’s confused face with everything he had. “You broke your shield for me! I’m nothing, I’m just a sponsor for you, and I’m a wanted fucking criminal, don’t tell me you didn’t see the fucking armor that was pretty much fused into me! You couldn’t – you mustn’t – you can’t do things like that! Are you insane?”

“Weapons come and go,” Steve said quietly. “You were more important and it was the only way.”

“Couldn’t you have torn off a toe of Doom’s if you wanted vibranium?” Tony snarled. “I’m not more important! I’m not, and you should have let me die!”

He stopped, his blood thudding in his ears. His heavy breathing was the only sound in the room, and Steve’s mouth was opened in shock and Steve’s eyes were wide and it was too much to bear yet Tony had to bear it somehow as seconds ticked by.

Steve’s eyes narrowed.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect once you’d wake up, but I certainly didn’t think it’d be such blatant ingratitude!”

“Oh, is that why you did it? So that I’d be in debt to you? A fucking Kilimanjaro-sized debt I’ll never be able to repay? Let’s hear it, what do you want me to do in return? Turn myself in? Beg on my knees? Become an Avenger? Build an army of Iron Men for Fury? You can ask for anything now and you certainly know that.”

“I didn’t do it for personal gain! You, rude pile of issues, you have to go and insult me after I gave up the only thing in the world that mattered to me most, and you –”

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” The speakers in the ceiling and the walls cracked audibly at the sheer force of the sound.
Jarvis was angry like Tony had never heard him before.

“I’ve had enough of you both picking at each other’s weak spots until you bleed,” Jarvis kicked the volume down a notch but his voice was heavy and menacing enough to keep both Steve and Tony silent. “No one asked for the situation to turn out the way it did. Steve did good and you, sir, for once in your life, should acknowledge it graciously! And you, Steve, did you have to rub it in his face further? I am not above sedating both of you if you don’t stop squabbling right now and start cooperating like adults that you should be!”

If Jarvis had lungs, the speakers would be rustling with quickened breaths right now. But he didn’t, and the silence in the room was absolute.

“Wow, J,” Tony said, filling the ominous silence with his own voice. “It’s probably not the best moment to mention it but I’m kind of really turned on right now.”

“The issue you are referring to, sir, can be addressed later under more suitable circumstances,” Jarvis said primly, and fuck if it wasn’t the single hottest phrase in Tony’s life. Steve beside him looked positively dazed. “Now, I believe, we all have more urgent matters to discuss. For example, the upcoming HYDRA coup.”

“Yeah, right,” Steve said weakly. “The fact that I’m stuck in this with a crazy billionaire and his finest creation who are, as it seems, in a vaguely incestuous and slightly abusive relationship can wait.”

“I don’t see you actually protesting,” Tony quipped and was rewarded with a strangely vulnerable and bashful smile. “But Jarvis is right, he’s always right. HYDRA and their plans. Where’s Doom? Is he dead? Can he still open the portals for them?”

“He was injured in the reactor explosion, and he is in the S.H.I.E.L.D. medical unit now. They think it’ll be a while before he’s conscious again, and he’s not going anywhere due to medical reasons. His lawyers object but it’s too dangerous to move him.”

“Right, and if it’s not, the S.H.I.E.L.D. doctors will just have to do a little work to earn a bigger yearly bonus. Nice. So HYDRA’re missing their portal operator, which is not to say that they don’t have an understudy or two to take over. Also, they must be fidgety now since they don't know if Doom will sell them out to walk free himself.”

“Precisely, sir. I have studied Natasha’s latest report and it looks like HYDRA are getting ready for an attack in great haste.”

“Red Skull never knew how to regroup and change his plans on the fly,” Steve muttered. “That arrogant son of a, uh, I mean he was always too intent on going through with whatever plans he had from the start even if it was a strategic disaster at the moment.”

“Cool, just what we need in an enemy,” Tony clapped his hands enthusiastically. “The question is, can he go through without Doom? If he counted on an army from other dimensions, can anybody else control this army? Doom does seem to have a unique knack for taming creatures which don’t even technically have ears to listen to his commands.”

“You mentioned Martin, yes,” Steve nodded. “But we can’t just sit and hope that Doom is indispensable. It’s likely he’s not. Also, it would make sense for him to move now that he knows my shield is broken.”

“How does he know that?”
“There were some reporters around,” Steve shrugged. “And people with phones. Explosions do tend to attract attention, even in this day and age. They didn’t actually get inside so they didn’t see you in the melted armor but I came outside for a minute to meet the S.H.I.E.L.D. convoy for Doom and I had my shield with me.”

“Great, a media frenzy,” Tony quirked the corners of his lips in a rueful half-smile. “Pepper is going to kill me ten times over using nothing but her stilettos. Jarvis, sweetheart, will you hold her off until we are done with HYDRA here?”

“I shall do my best, sir.”

“So, what is it exactly that Natasha’s report says?”

“You do know such things are classified, right?” Steve looked resigned saying it.

“Why bother with insignificant details?” Tony smirked. "Lay it on us, J.”

* * *

Natasha was the best. Tony had always known that, of course, but the information she had procured was, if he may, bountiful. He’d text her to say it was impressive but she knew that without his praise or lack thereof so he didn’t.

HYDRA were huge. Natasha gave the estimation of their numbers and was going to find a way to stick a USB with a virus into their database so they could hope to find out exactly where and when HYDRA were planning to move. It was obvious that they were: the recruits had been amassed for training and Natasha had gotten effortlessly swept along to the secret HYDRA training facility. Well, not so secret now. They were definitely being prepared for a fight in the city but no exact dates or times had been voiced yet, not to the new recruits anyway.

At one point Steve got up and left the room and then came back some time later with a tray full of food. Tony watched him balance the tray with his fingertips clumsy and obviously hurting under the bandages and there was a strange lump in Tony’s throat. Vibranium with bare hands, huh? Those fingers must be torn to the bone.

“You need to eat,” Steve said and pushed a sandwich at Tony.

“What is it? Peanut butter?” Tony eyed the sandwich suspiciously. He wasn’t feeling particularly hungry, not today of all days. In fact, he suspected that, after everything that had happened and that he had yet to digest, any food would just come right back up the way it came in he tried to consume some. “I don’t want it. Not hungry, busy. We are talking world-saving stuff here, you know.”

“About that,” Steve perched on a chair, cradling a mug of juice between his palms and looking for some reason very awkward. “There’s someone else who knows about, uh, about your other identity.”

Tony wasn’t sure how the topic was connected to saving the world – if anything, Iron Man was the opposite of a savior. The sandwich lost what little appeal it had held before and Tony put it back on the tray gingerly.

“You mean Thor? You said he was there.”

“Oh,” Steve blinked. “Well, I guess, Thor knows now, too. I asked him not to say anything to anyone until you are better and the three of us can have a private talk like, as he put it, ‘mighty warriors’. He agreed and promised not to tell even S.H.I.E.L.D.”
“Very nice of the big guy. I’ll have to buy him a truckload or two of Pop-Tarts for that.” Tony plastered a fake grin across his face. Just how many people knew about this motherfucking most closely guarded secret of his? “So you meant someone else? Not S.H.I.E.L.D., I take it?”

“No. It’s… I have no idea who they are, actually. It’s someone on the Internet.”

“How? What are you talking about?”

Steve was staring into his juice so intently as if it contained the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything.

“I – I may have typed my name into Google once and followed a curious link. There was a story about you and me, and you were Iron Man there. I thought at first it was an idle fan’s fantasy but it’s actually true, isn’t it? And the way they describe the tower, your behavior and speech, your bots, it’s like they are spying on us here. It can’t be a coincidence.”

“First of all, Capsicle, you are into fanfiction about yourself and I didn’t know? Whoa, that’s a lifetime of golden blackmail material.” Tony rubbed his face with both hands, trying to concentrate. His damn battered body was getting tired already and it was so not the time to get comfy with a pillow and a blanket, much as he’d like to do just that. “Second of all, are you sure? I mean, the bots aren’t exactly a secret, and you won’t believe to what lengths some fans will go to collect whatever crumbs of information may be out there.”

“I’m sure. May I?” Steve’s hand hovered over Tony’s phone – well one of them – that was lying on the nightstand.

“Knock yourself out.”

With fingers as bandaged as Steve’s, interacting with a sensor screen was no easy feat. Tony watched Steve’s attempts to swipe it open and type something into the address bar of the browser and couldn’t bear it in the end.

“Gimme,” he snatched the phone from Steve’s hands; his fingertip pressed briefly to Steve’s knuckle and the touch was suddenly warm and solid in a bizarre inexplicable fashion that almost made Tony drop the phone. Almost. “How do I find it?”

“Search for ‘Captain America’ and follow the seventh link from the top.”

Tony did. As he skimmed the text, his eyebrows were getting higher and higher up his forehead and he could hear the chair creak under the squirming Steve.

“If it wasn’t for all the details, like you said, I’d say it’s just a usual fanstory about Captain America and Iron Man banging each other,” he said finally.

Steve choked on his juice and started coughing.

“You mean, there are more and you have read them?” he asked in disbelief. “But why?”

“I like some of them,” Tony smirked. Also, there was always the option of anonymously trolling people who literally jerked off to his evil alter-ego doing the nasty with Steve here; it was an oddly satisfying pastime, even if he only resorted to it when he was bored out of his mind. “There’s some good prose out there if you know where to look. Also, isn’t the idea hot like the devil’s own morning coffee?”

“I suppose,” Steve sounded strangled, and Tony relished it.
“What, didn’t you think that when you were reading? I admit this one could do with some slow build, definitely, but still. If you don’t like it, why did you read it?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said, shooting Tony a sulky look which was just too precious for words. “I just read it, that’s all. It’s not like it’s a long story or anything. There are only two chapters.”

“Yeah.” Tony sobered up. He’d tease Steve mercilessly about it – all of it, starting with the vain Googling of his own superhero nickname, who knew the righteous Capsicle even had it in him? – later at some point, when he felt less like he’d been a punching bag for the Hulk and could think of some really interesting barbs. “So what’s the deal with this lovely little message at the end of chapter two? Going to visit super-cool friends in the Big Apple? Sounds like whoever wrote this is now here, very much in sync with HYDRA’s plans.”

“I thought of that,” Steve nodded. “But what would be the purpose of putting it all out there on the Internet? If this is a warning or a threat, how could they be sure it’d reach us? And why would they want it to reach us?”

“All these good questions and not a single answer,” Tony muttered. “What a shame. Jarvis, trace this account, will you? Find out who the fuck is this…” he scrolled the page up to read the author’s name, “CapsAssInTights218. Hah. I like them already, whoever they are.”

“I think I need to talk to Thor,” Steve stated in a very authoritative voice. His ears were tell-tale red, though, and he avoided looking Tony in the eye. “And the team. And Director Fury is probably wondering what it is that has been preventing me from writing a full report, so I’ll just. Well. And you need to rest, by the way. Jarvis, make sure he sleeps.”

“You do show an inordinate amount of care towards a wanted criminal,” Tony said, interrupting Jarvis who’d only managed to get a “Ste” out. “What are you going to write in the report?”

Steve fiddled with his mug in silence. His fingers were clumsy – he was clearly unused to being hurt, the Serum-ed bastard – and he splashed some of the remaining juice in his lap and cursed under his breath. Tony waited while his heart was drumming madly in his ears.

“Not sure yet,” Steve said in the end. “I don’t want him busting into the tower and arresting you – and will you stop calling yourself a wanted criminal?”

“That’s what I am so I’ll fucking call myself whatever I want,” Tony felt a nervous tick coming. Steve was trying for one’s patience. How did someone that clueless and naïve ever even get tangled with the likes of S.H.I.E.L.D.? The Serum, the hero, the ice, right. It still seemed wrong to make Steve play this kind of games.

“Look, I won’t tell him if that’s what you want to hear.” Steve swallowed, so obviously unhappy at the prospect of lying that Tony longed to hide under his blanket and not see Steve’s face and feel guilty about putting that look there. “But it’s not like I’m the one holding the lid on it, so to speak. I mean, even if Thor doesn’t tell anyone, the others can put two and two together on their own. Natasha and Clint aren’t stupid and they are still on S.H.I.E.L.D. payroll and they will likely put what they think on the report. I don’t know, it’s probably a good sign for us that they haven’t said anything yet since there’s no armed squad breaking down the doors to take you into custody but I can’t guarantee that won’t happen, no matter what I say.”

“I understand,” Tony said. It came out quiet and subdued and he didn’t like it in the least. It was all that word’s fault, that little ‘us’ instead of ‘you’; ‘a good sign for us’, Steve said, and Tony’s nervous anger deflated just like that, like a balloon that encountered a needle. “Jarvis, what’s the status on the iden–”
“I have urgent information for you, sir,” Jarvis didn’t let him finish. “According to the internal intelligence of S.H.I.E.L.D., Doctor Doom broke out of the medical wing three minutes ago.”

“The fucker!” Tony sat up sharply and regretted it immediately: his vision went blotchy and blurry and he suddenly found himself unaware of where down and up were.

“Rest,” Steve ordered, catching Tony and laying him back on the bed. “Please.”

He got up and glanced at the ceiling.

“Jarvis, will you look after Tony?”

“Certainly, Steve.”

“Good.” He headed to the door but stopped half-way there, his eyebrows creased in doubt. “Jarvis, will Jenny attack me again?”

“Jenny? Who the hell is Jenny and why is she going to attack you in the tower?” Tony asked. Steve and Jarvis both ignored him. Insolent, the lot of them. What did a man have to do to get an ounce of respect around here, Tony wondered.

“Don’t worry about that. She has a bit of a temper, surely, but she is sorry for mistreating you in the past. And she is quite fond of you now.”

“Splendid,” Steve said and left.

As soon as the door shut after him, Tony stirred. He felt fidgety; his mind was working one hundred percent even if his body was unwilling to cooperate.

“J, any news on Doom?”

“Not yet, sir. Why are you getting up?”

“Don’t be daft. I need to get another suit in working order and attach a canister of that acid to it. Do you think Doom is going to go home, put his feet up, and recuperate in peace? I bet my ass that he’s already talking to HYDRA and they are scheduling a coup very fucking soon. I need to be there.”

“Sir, I understand your concerns but you are in no condition –”

“Will I be a better condition when Doom comes here for revenge and I’m dead?” Tony snarled. He swung his feet over the edge of the bed carefully and waited for his head to clear and his stomach to stop lurching. “Besides, J, Steve doesn’t have his shield now. Do you want the Avengers blown up by Doombots because I’ve got an ouchie?”

“I wish you weren’t so dismissive of your injuries,” Jarvis said sadly. Way to go make Tony feel guilty. He was positively sick of feeling guilty. He would vomit the feeling out with his breakfast if he had had any actual breakfast. “However, your arguments are valid. At least wait until I fetch you some medicine and an energy drink which would be safe for you to consume.”

“Do that,” Tony nodded. “And one more time, J – who is Jenny and why is she attacking Steve?”

“She is not attacking Steve or anyone, sir,” Jarvis said with a defensive note in his voice. “She is a good girl at heart.”

“And yet? Do I need to wrench the answer out of you?”
Jarvis sighed after an awkward pause.

“She is one of – well, our ‘kick-ass smart robotic babies’, sir, for the lack of a better description. At one time Steve spoke badly of you and she did not take it lightly. She is quick to anger. Rest assured, sir, I have had a thorough talking-to with her and since then Steve has proved loyal to you anyway. He is in no danger.”

“And what exactly is she?” Tony tried to remember where he put those AI’s but to no avail. The drunken haze was covering the memories like armor; for all he knew, Jenny could be the seemingly mindless household robot that was wheeling into the room with a tray with a ghastly-looking drink. “The microwave? The TV in the common living-room? No, wait, I bought the TV when the Avengers were moving in so not it. The air conditioning unit? The fridge?”

“Bingo, sir.”

“The fridge attacked Steve, then?” Tony took a glass from the tray and drained half of it in one go. It tasted of chemicals and medicine-like bitterness as if it contained crushed pills. Perhaps it did. “What on Earth did she do to him? Flap her door in his face?”

“She refused to provide him with food and then attempted to attack him directly with her whole body,” Jarvis said, rather miserably.

Tony chuckled.

“I bet Steve was in shock. Did she actually do anything to him? J, you know that I can’t allow Steve – well, anyone here, really – come to any danger just because I have a penchant for building AI’s in any situation.”

“She did not, sir. The only damage Steve suffered was a mild psychological trauma. I do believe she will never do anything of the kind again.”

This was as close as Jarvis ever came to begging and, despite it being most unwise, Tony knew he’d already come to a decision about Jenny. If Jarvis asked, there was truly nothing else Tony could do but fold and melt.

It was irritating and slightly terrifying in and of itself. Tony drowned the fluttering at the pit of his stomach in the rest of the chemical drink.

The little robot which had brought the drink put the tray away and outstretched its rudimentary three-fingered metal hand towards Tony’s bare leg. The touch was delicate and caring and it wasn’t anything that Tony had programmed into it; these robots were small cylinder-like things with about a dozen retractable limbs – a tiny iron, a few sorts of brushes, several suction caps to let the robot climb everywhere when cleaning, and so on. They were like Jarvis’ pocket knives he used at his own discretion to keep the entirety of the tower clean and nice.

They were never intended to stroke a human leg slowly, as if trying to transfer some comfort through the cool sensation of touch.

“Is it one more of our babies?” Tony asked. The robot didn’t stop and didn’t acknowledge his question in any way. Tony didn’t really mind, though.

“No, sir,” Jarvis said quietly. “It is just me.”

* * *
Whatever Jarvis had put in that vile drink, it was magic. The short ride in the private elevator was enough for the pain to subside and for Tony’s mind to clear; the world was sharp again, perhaps a bit too sharp and bright but it wasn’t the important part. He still felt weak but even less so than after a particularly long and exhausting bout of working without food or sleep.

“Sir, Ms. Potts is calling you again,” Jarvis said, all business-like. “You specifically stated to hold off her calls but she is threatening to come over in person and, taking into consideration her level of access, she would be able to, unless you initiate total lockdown.”

“Of course,” Tony sighed. “Patch her through then, I have a few minutes anyway.”

He tipped a bulky container of acid on its side and started rolling it towards the suit area of the workshop as Pepper’s voice filled the space, coming from every dynamic.

“Tony, finally! I’ve just about had it with Jarvis telling me that you are currently indisposed, unavailable, or otherwise occupied! What on Earth were you doing this morning? There was a board meeting you weren’t supposed to miss!”

Tony’s recently burned arm and side protested against rolling the acid container any further and he settled for nudging it with his foot.

“You know me, Pep, I fuck up like I breathe,” he snapped. “I actually was busy, though.”

“Couldn’t your next toy wait for a couple of hours?”

Logically, Tony knew that he couldn’t blame Pepper for her patience running thin, considering how perfectly in the dark she had been kept all this time. He still wanted to.

“No.”

He imagined Doom’s outraged face at Tony asking for a break to visit a board meeting and swallowed a snort.

The container was now close enough to the suits and comfortably in the open, without too much clutter beside it.

“J, assemble Mark XI over there. Dummy, You, come here, I need you.”

No way was his body ready for lifting the container and attaching it to the suit. Stupid burns, stupid Doom with his melting shtick. If it was at all possible, Tony would make sure to bathe Doom’s dick in the acid first, and only then the other parts of him.

“No? Is that all you can say to me?” Pepper inquired incredulously. “And what is Mark XI anyway?”

“A project,” Tony muttered. With a flick of his hand through holographic controls, he made four holders on the back of the suit come out and gestured for Dummy and You to lift the container.

“Thanks for pointing that out, or I’d have thought it was a sort of fancy cheese,” Pepper retorted in a brisk, icy voice. Then it went softer, frayed with genuine worry, because sweet, dear Pepper could never be truly angry at Tony for long. “What’s wrong, Tony? Should I come over?”

“Nope, everything’s fi– Dummy, You, put it down this instant, you’re holding it upside down!”

The bots obeyed guiltily and then lifted the acid the proper way.
“Like I said, Pep, everything’s fine and dandy. Listen, I’m working with something volatile here, and I’m very sorry I missed the meeting – I actually planned to turn up but in the end I couldn’t – so if there isn’t anything else..?”

“Tony,” Pepper said, her worry even more prominent. “Do I... Never mind, actually. Jarvis! Do I need to come over? How is Tony, really?”

Tony spluttered a bit at this blatant show of mistrust. Then again, he supposed he’d earned it.

“I believe that sir has the situation well in hand,” Jarvis said coolly. “The circumstances do not require your intervention.”

“If you say so,” Pepper sounded dubious.

Tony contemplated telling her the truth. If he did, she’d be shocked, outraged, confused and he wouldn’t find it in himself to brush her off. She mattered too much to him to dismiss her questions. And it wasn’t fair to keep her in the dark much longer, considering that Tony’s darkest secret was going to leak any moment now and cause a major scandal the aftermath of which would be Pepper’s to deal with. But she would definitely come over if she learned he was Iron Man, this kind of news was to be discussed face to face, and Tony truly, honestly didn’t have time for this. Besides, a tower about to be attacked by a crazed super villain with an army of nasty bots and a giant pet tentacle was no place for someone like Pepper. He had lied to her for so long in order to keep her safe; he could do it a little longer.

“Believe good ol’ Jarv if you don’t trust me,” he offered. “You know he isn’t above turning traitor when he thinks I need your help. Yes, Dummy, slow and steady, make sure it catches on the holder; You, don’t slack, you little lazybones. You two do this well and you can go back to your charging stations.”

“Okay, Tony,” Pepper sighed, and he knew he’d won this one. “I’ll come see you this week anyway, though. There is a lot you need to sign, and I just haven’t seen you in ages.”

“I know, I miss you too. See you in a few days then? Crap, Dummy, careful with that!”

“Don’t be too hard on him, Tony, I’m sure he’s trying his best,” Pepper chuckled. “Bye.”

“Bye,” he said, and she hung up. “J, any news on Doom’s whereabouts?”

“Believe good ol’ Jarv if you don’t trust me,” he offered. “You know he isn’t above turning traitor when he thinks I need your help. Yes, Dummy, slow and steady, make sure it catches on the holder; You, don’t slack, you little lazybones. You two do this well and you can go back to your charging stations.”

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“I know, I miss you too. See you in a few days then? Crap, Dummy, careful with that!”

“Don’t be too hard on him, Tony, I’m sure he’s trying his best,” Pepper chuckled. “Bye.”

“No, sir, not yet.”

“Damn. Oh well, at least we won’t have to go looking for him, he’ll come to us. We’ll have to redecorate after his visit, I think. Look into interior design magazines or something, I trust your taste.” Tony shooed away Dummy and You and pressed an end of a thin hose to the container. With a soft slurping sound, the smart clip at the end of the hose broke neat small holes through the container wall and attached itself to the wall on the inside.

Tony pulled away a few pieces of armor and weaved the hose inside, careful with the plastic around the circuitry. The end fitted between the plates of the right glove, sticking a few millimeters outside just under the repulsor, and Tony closed it with another smart clip until further usage. It was all horribly crude but it would serve its purpose and Tony wasn’t in the mood for finesse anyway.

Now, Tony thought, now it was all about waiting…

A powerful blow made the tower shudder. Perfect timing. Tony wasn’t sure the energy drink would carry him for much longer.
“Jarvis! Make up!”

“I spent the last two and a half years wondering when you would finally stoop to Sailor Moon references, sir,” Jarvis intoned placidly as the suit opened carefully as not to dislodge the hose and moved to engulf Tony.

Tony just laughed.

“Sir, Steve requests that you refrain from participating in the oncoming battle if at all possible.”

“Let me guess, his exact phrasing was ‘stay put, Stark, or so help me God, I’ll have to tie you to your sickbed?’” Tony grinned. Fighting, he could do that. His body gave up a healthy dose of adrenaline willingly, tired with the delicate emotional stuff. Kicking some ass, oh yeah.

“Your guess is indeed somewhat closer to the reality than my rendering, sir.”

“Tell him I’m fighting fit and I’ve got an ace up my sleeve – quite literally, by the way. And that I’ll see him outside.”

The drink would get him through the battle, of that Tony was sure. And later, on the off-chance he’d survive, he’d be patched up, either by an army of the best buyable doctors motivated by heaps of money thrown around by Jarvis, or by the S.H.I.E.L.D. medics with the Fury starring by Tony’s bedside as the world’s least sexy nursemaid. Steve would have plenty of opportunities to bitch at Tony for not staying put then. Heck, he’d get to really tie Tony to the bed if he wanted to.

Tony wouldn’t even mind all that much.

He activated the repulsors, reveling in the familiar sensation of flight. Doom won’t know what hit ‘im.
Chapter 9

Steve had held on until the door closed behind him. As soon as it hit the doorframe, he sagged against the wall; his hands started to shake, suddenly and violently.

God, Tony had been so hurt, so close to dying. Even now he was weak and pale, his features gone gaunt and unpleasantly sharp; but back then, in Doom’s lair, Steve had been terrified that Tony was going to die.

It didn’t help that Jarvis then sounded panicked as well. He gave Steve curt commands about what to do, his voice breaking at strange intervals and his intonations not resembling normal ones anymore; he tried to beg Steve to save Tony but Steve put an end to it at once because he was ready to do anything. Anything at all.

He never expected that he would have to tear a piece of his shield off but, well, see above: anything.

He stayed against the wall, trying to blink away the mental image of Tony unconscious and limp in his arms. Steve’s knees felt like Jell-O and moving away and further along the corridor seemed like a terrible idea.

“Steve?” Jarvis asked quietly. “Sir is safe now. You can rest.”

“I have a feeling he’s never truly safe,” Steve muttered. Jarvis’ voice was soft and cool, like an emotional equivalent of fresh air after the rollercoaster of hot and cold that Tony had just thrown at him. “Maybe if I tie him to bed, I’ll have a few minutes free from worrying.”

The joke was rather lame but there was a smile in Jarvis’ voice nonetheless and Steve appreciated it.

“I have considered this course of action quite a few times myself. It is still in the last resort folder, however.”

“Will he really be okay? I mean, the thing in his chest. I kind of did it hastily and under pressure. Will it hold, at least for now?” Steve asked. He couldn’t have asked Tony; the latter was unhappy enough about having been saved without questions that would most definitely seem stupid to him. But Jarvis was there to answer anything.

He was probably speaking to Tony as well right now, soothing and caring and trustworthy in all the ways that Steve wasn’t.

The thought ached mutely somewhere inside Steve.

“It is a quite reliable construction, considering the circumstances,” Jarvis said. “You put the vibranium in the frame from the old reactor and found a cover and while it is far from perfect fit it is certainly acceptable. Unless sir undertakes something truly strenuous without additional precautions, he should be fine for the time being.”

“I bet he is about to undertake something right now.” Steve pushed himself off the wall and made his legs walk towards the elevator which would take him to the communal area.

“I will neither confirm, nor deny,” Jarvis said, and Steve smiled at the nearest camera.

The elevator – or, rather, Jarvis, – took him to the floor he needed without any prompting. Was that how Tony lived his life? Utterly alone in his secret, hell-bent on his mission to rid the world of bad
guys, lying right and left, and having Jarvis surround him in utmost care and love as the only thread still connecting Tony to his sanity?

Steve frowned at this thought and shook his head. Tony never said anything about his mission and if he even had one; and who was to say Tony had been alone every step of the way? There might have been other people who were in on the secret, helping him and supporting him. The fact that they weren’t around for the recent troubles meant nothing – many bad things could happen to someone involved in a super villain’s eventful life.

It was all that stupid story. It was messing with Steve’s head. It unequivocally portrayed Tony as a hero, who had put his life on the altar of good and had never asked for any sort of help or recognition, and the reality was still shrouded in mystery and Steve would do well to remember it.

Iron Man had never hurt anyone to the knowledge of the authorities; and Jarvis had said Tony was kind but what else would Jarvis have said when he had needed Steve’s quick and unquestioning cooperation? Jarvis had a way with words, after all, Steve knew that. What would be the most logical conclusion about a known super villain hosting a bunch of heroes in his home and under his round-the-clock surveillance?

The possibility of deceit sat ill with Steve. It felt huge and painful, as if he’d swallowed a chunk of metal with sharp edges.

It couldn’t all have been a lie. Jarvis’ warmth and patience, Tony’s raw vulnerability and the thousand ways he could say Steve’s name, from a poisoned quip to the gentlest of endearments. The friendly way Jenny hummed at Steve earlier and opened the door for him to take food without him ever touching the handle.

It couldn’t, right?

Steve glanced at the camera in the corner of the elevator but Jarvis, apparently, wasn’t aware of Steve’s doubts and said nothing. And what could he say that would alleviate the sudden lump in Steve’s throat and not just make it bigger and clumsier?

It hurt his head when he tried to figure out what to believe and what to discard. He didn’t know, he wasn’t the guy who anyone would pick for solving that kind of riddles.

His lips pursed tightly, Steve stepped out of the elevator. He’d need more information to be sure and he’d have time to gather it. Tony was injured, he wasn’t going anywhere. Not if Steve had any say in it.

Right out of the elevator, he was met with Clint’s piercing glare, Natasha’s python-like stony stare, and Bruce’s disappointed subdued look.

“Ern… Hi?” He offered.

“When exactly were you planning to tell us that Stark is Iron Man?” Natasha asked. When she did blunt, she did it like nobody else.

“How do y… Thor?”

“Poor Thunderboy is all confused,” Clint said coldly. “Who’s a friend, who’s an enemy? I’m getting a bit lost there, myself.”

“Thor!” Steve called in the general direction of the living room. “I asked you to wait until we talk again before telling anyone!”
Thor appeared in the corridor, still in the full battle regalia including the flowing cape. His face was peaceful and guiltless like that of a baby.

“Surely you did not mean I had to hide the truth from our noble shield brothers? As we spill blood side by side in glorious battle, what secrets can be kept between us?”

It was obviously one of those occasions when Steve forgot Thor was an alien and his worldview was – well, alien as well. Who knew if the word ‘secret’ even meant the same in Asgard as it did on Earth.

Also, it was obvious that Steve should keep what he didn’t want to become public knowledge to himself from now on.

“Is it true that Tony is Iron Man?” Bruce asked.

He was the only one who looked sad at the news, not any degree of outraged. Perhaps it was because Bruce genuinely liked Tony and knew him better than anyone else due to the two of them always talking some sort of very clever-sounding science; in fact, Steve would go as far as to call them friends, not in the way Thor meant it when he called every non-hostile he saw a friend (yet another Asgardian source of linguistic bafflement).

“Yes,” Steve said. There was no point in lying or evading the question now.

“I’m calling S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Natasha said. “And they are going to have to ask you, Steve, why you didn’t turn him in at once.”

“He’s severely injured, he is of no danger to anyone right now,” Steve said quickly. He wasn’t sure why but he didn’t want S.H.I.E.L.D. taking Tony into custody. Not now. Not yet.

Not that he believed the wretched story and its description of the treatment of prisoners in S.H.I.E.L.D. He just didn’t want it.

“An enemy that smart is always dangerous,” Natasha remarked coolly and put her phone to her ear.

Steve bit his lip.

“It’s not the time to turn anyone in,” he said. “Call S.H.I.E.L.D. and tell that Doctor Doom will probably soon attack the tower and we need back-up.”

“Doom? The fucker is supposed to be unconscious in S.H.I.E.L.D. medical,” Clint frowned.

“Well, he escaped just recently. And I don’t think he and HYDRA will be waiting for much longer before turning offensive.”

“The wretched doctor of Doom has escaped?” Thor boomed; a sudden bout of thunder from the outside echoed his words.

“How did you find out he escaped?” Bruce asked.

“Jarvis, uh, got the information from S.H.I.E.L.D.” Meaning ‘hacked a very confidential and thoroughly protected secret government organization network’. Why was it that with every word he uttered Steve only managed to dig himself a deeper grave? God, he hated it so much that his teammates turned to be not on the same side as him in a matter of seconds. That wasn’t how it all should have worked.
“Because an AI that is under control of a known super villain is a very reliable source,” Natasha said. She sounded indifferent at that and it only made the sarcasm sting worse. “I’m calling S.H.I.E.L.D. now.”

“Ask about Doom first,” Steve offered, feeling miffed. “And then for some back-up.”

Natasha narrowed her eyes but when she was connected to S.H.I.E.L.D. HQ she asked about Doom before bringing up the subject of Iron Man.

“Got it,” she said after a pause that followed her question. She went visibly tense and Steve couldn’t help feeling a little smug. Who under control of who was a reliable source now? “I request back-up at the tower… Oh. Understood. Romanoff out.”

“What is it?” Clint didn’t look pleased.

“Doom escaped and got to a computer room. He must have contacted HYDRA from there because they met him outside the HQ and gave him something. He then opened a dozen of portals and now the whole of S.H.I.E.L.D. is busy fending off various bloodthirsty alien armies. If Doom comes here, we’re on our own.”

“Suit up, then,” Steve said.

“We apprehend Iron Man first,” Natasha shot back.

“Are you serious?” Steve asked in disbelief. “Doom has escaped and is probably on his way to raze this tower to the ground and you want to waste time slapping handcuffs on a man bedridden with grave injuries?”

“No offense, Steve, but he could have faked them. And he might be acting together with Doom which would mean he could strike us in the back during the fight.”

“He wouldn’t do anything like that!” Steve noticed his voice had grown slightly louder but it was too late to take it under control now. “Okay, even if he is the most rotten scoundrel to walk this planet, which he is not, just remember he hasn’t killed or hurt anyone for all that he’s supposed to be a super villain; even in this case, he has had about a million of opportunities to kill us! We live in his tower, eat his food, sleep under his roof! Has he harmed any of us when he could? We’d die never knowing it was him who killed us!”

“Maybe that’s why he hasn’t done it,” Clint said coldly. “He’s the showman kind of villain. What would be the point if we didn’t know it was him?”

It was a bit like talking to a wall. Steve’s every argument hit it and fell down, having zero chance of coming through. And what was worse that Steve didn’t know what to believe anymore. Natasha and Clint were spies, they knew psychology and knew sick criminal games, maybe they were right about Tony? Natasha and Clint were spies, they had been much hardened by what they had seen in their lives, maybe they were wrong to dismiss Tony as an enemy so decisively?

“Think, Steve,” Natasha said in a low, urgent voice. “Can you honestly, believing it one hundred per cent, absolutely certainly say that he won’t suddenly appear to be less injured than you’d originally thought and attack us while we fend off Doom?”

For a few deafeningly silent, queasy moments Steve hesitated what to say.

It was answer enough.
"I think we should talk to Tony before putting him in handcuffs and dragging him to jail," Bruce said, tense and visibly unhappy about the whole situation.

“I'm sorry, Bruce,” Natasha answered mildly. “But you’re a civilian. We will handle this situation better.”

“I can try and make you see this situation from my point of view,” Bruce’s eyes flashed a familiar cold green.

“Because the Hulk likes Stark as much as you do and hasn’t spent months trying in vain to smash ‘puny tin man’ into bloody pulp and getting frustrated every time he missed? And he will protect Iron Man like you are protecting him now?”

Natasha had a point but the infallible logic of it only made Bruce go a shade greener than before.

Steve felt sick. His team was falling apart so easily and right before his eyes; the differences which had been small, easy to overlook in battle, during movie nights, at dinners together, were now growing rapidly to the size of Mount Everest. How come this was their undoing? Not the Chitauri invasion, not the first meeting, not any other of the countless problems and difficulties they had encountered and resolved as a united front?

Maybe because it was Tony. Nothing was predictable with Tony; like his smile changing into a frown in a split second, everything that concerned him was also capable of mercurial, dangerous change. If anyone else in the whole world was Iron Man, it would all be different; the Avengers would never come apart like this, like a delicate china cup under an elephant’s foot.

However, it was Tony, and Bruce was about to Hulk out on Tony’s behalf, and Natasha and Clint were grimly determined to get their hands on the elusive Iron Man, and Thor looked genuinely confused, most likely not quite following the conversation and its undercurrents. And Steve didn’t know what to do.

He only knew that Jarvis had, of course, heard every word and seen every detail and would probably never forgive Steve. And the problem of ‘what-and-who-to-believe’ aside, a gnawing feeling inside Steve was telling him that he wouldn’t forgive himself for that minute hesitation either.

“Enough!” he snapped. Everyone else looked at him.

He was supposed to be the leader of this bunch, wasn’t he? That was why S.H.I.E.L.D. even went to the trouble of defrosting him in the first place; the meaning of his second life, if you will. So he’d lead them into battle when needed, even if they were going to protest.

Time for protesting would come after everyone was safe again.

“Suit up and get ready to fight Doom!” He ordered curtly. “I’m going to personally knock out anyone who won’t recognize what is the priority now!”

Maybe Natasha had something to say to that, too, and Thor and Bruce looked like they were itching to comment; but they all never knew because the tower shuddered and groaned under a sudden vicious blow.

“To arms!” Steve said, and the Avengers followed his command.

* * *

They hurried outside but were still late to the beginning. Doom was there, standing on the hands of
his hovering bots like a king carried by adoring crowd. A tentacle which Steve vaguely recognized was ramming into the tower repeatedly together with a few dozens of bots; portals were shining with otherworldly colors, opening all over New-York as far as Steve could see, and weird creatures were coming through to join the fray. Civilians around were panicking, and cars were piling up, and soldiers in HYDRA uniforms were killing without thinking.

There was so much blood; so many loud, desperate screams.

And a shining figure clad in red and gold was already up in the air, lightning fast and blindingly bright.

“Jarvis!” Steve begged. He knew Jarvis was bound to hear; the comms were made by Tony personally, after all. “Please, patch my comm through to Tony! Please!”

Jarvis didn’t say anything but there was a clicking sound in Steve’s comm and then he heard Tony:

“What’s up, Capsicle? Enjoying a sunny day in New-York city?”

There was no vocal synthesizer now, the secrecy rendered moot. Steve heard a strained edge to Tony’s voice and the heavier than usual breathing.

Was this infuriating dumbass trying to kill himself on purpose, or what?

“What on Earth do you think you’re doing!” Steve shouted and let out some of his anger by shooting a Doombot head off with a classic StarkIndustries handgun.

Yes, there was also the matter of not having a shield. Steve’s hands itched to throw and catch and slam but were left empty, empty, empty.

“But muuuuuuum,” Tony whined, “it’s only for a minute!”

“Goddamnit, Tony, you’re hurt!” Steve kicked a blue toothy reptile with in the face. The reptile growled and tried to bite a piece of Steve off in retaliation. “You can’t fight now!”

“Oh yeah?” Tony stopped the mocking and Steve didn’t know whether it was a good thing or not. “Let me remind you, Capsicle, just because you saved my life you don’t get to be the boss of me.”

“I’m not trying to be your boss.” It was somewhat nice to have the Doombots and aliens around to substitute punching bags. “I’m trying to take care of you. How are you even still conscious in that suit of yours?”

“Modern medicine is a miracle, Steve, do keep up with the times,” Tony quipped. Steve glanced briefly at him to see how he took out four Doombots with blasts of all his four repulsors and regained the balance with an exaggerated somersault in the air.

“Not that much of a miracle,” Steve retorted. He was quite sure that Tony’s wounds would demand weeks to heal, unless Tony had magic at his disposal or something else of the kind.

One could never tell, with Tony.

“Anyway, I’m going to kick Doom’s ass nine ways to Sunday, and really, it’s not like you can afford to have me lying down and eating chicken soup right now. If I don’t take him out, and soon, the six of you will be overwhelmed by the sheer number of these, erm, whatever these creepy alien multicolored guys are. Mercenaries, probably. Do you think they are mercenaries? What does Doom pay them with? Maybe they are his pets, like Martin?”
“That’s really beside the point – ah!” Steve gasped as another unfriendly reptile managed to get him along the chest with a very big clawed hand.

“Steve?” Tony sounded anxious. “Steve, are you alright? Shit, you’re fighting without the shield, Jesus fuck, you aren’t taking them on with your bare hands, are you? Where’s your back-up? Where’s the fucking S.H.I.E.L.D. when you need them?”

“They are busy with the attack at the HQ,” Steve exhaled. The wounds were stinging and bleeding profusely and he wondered if the reptile was poisonous. The pain made him sluggish but he was still better at hand-to-hand combat than the reptile, the absence of claws notwithstanding. “We’re on our own. Tony, please, go to your workshop. It’s safe for you there, I know, you had it reinforced…”

“Like fuck I’m going to hide! What fucking use would I be then? No, Capsicle, me, my suit and I, we’ll save your shapely ass out here, thank you very much.”

Steve didn’t understand completely what Tony was on about but the general idea was rather clear. Stubborn, mulish git…

“You’d be much more use than you apparently know!” Steve snapped and finished the reptile off with three successive bullets in the eye. “A few days ago I thought that HYDRA would be taking over the information centers because that’s what’s important in a takeover, and I wanted to ask for your help with it but you got kidnapped! Any knucklehead can kill! Only you can fight them on that front, you and Jarvis! What does it matter who’s the last man standing in Manhattan if they get to control satellites, and the Internet, and everything?”

Tony was uncharacteristically silent and Steve found him in the sky again, still flying and fighting. He seemed to be alright – well, not any worse than several minutes ago, in any case.

“Take off your suit, Tony,” Steve groaned; his stomach had rolled up to his throat with a punch from a Doombot. Enemies were swarming, more and more coming from the portals, from the adjacent streets, from the air, and there were only six Avengers; even if S.H.I.E.L.D. or the army had sent them any back-up, the latter would be now stuck fighting at the outskirts, where the endless enemy sea started.

And the stupid wounds from the clawed reptile were closing too slowly and pulsated with sharp, hot pain. Truly must have been poisoned; and even the Serum was having trouble processing it. Well, maybe not so much a trouble, as it were, but definitely a, you know, hiccup.

“Take the suit away,” he said, trying to keep up with the fight and the conversation both, “and you are so much more than inside it, Tony.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath. Iron Man in the sky almost collided with an insect-like creature the size of a horse and with eight wings; he veered to the left just in time and shot its head clean off with a repulsor blast, though.

“Sir?” Steve heard Jarvis say. This single word seemed to have at least a ton of meaning behind it; that Jarvis had already checked the situation and Steve was right, that Jarvis thought, too, that only Tony could protect Earth on that particular flank, that Jarvis was worried but prepared to do anything his sir would decide, and much, much more that Steve couldn’t begin to guess. Why was it that one word, just an address, was enough for Jarvis but it took Steve so many painfully clumsy words to make Tony hear?

It was neither the time nor the place but God, did Steve want to be as trusted and familiar with Tony. The longing was a burning at the back of his mind as he continued to fight without a second’s rest,
waiting for Tony to reply.

Tony laughed a strange half-laugh and half-sob and then coughed violently. When he spoke again, his voice was wet and raspy.

“Well, when you put it like that. How can I refuse? I can’t refuse you, can I? Even if you say stupid, stupid things.”

He stopped, breathing in and out deeply. Steve listened to strangled sound of Tony’s breathing, and the need to snatch Tony from the sky, away from danger, and take care of him until he was well again was almost physical; he felt a bit like it brimmed under his skin.

God, Tony.

Even if – if! – he was a super villain with a hidden evil agenda, what did Steve really care?

This thought should have probably scared Steve and sobered him up, but it didn’t.

“J?” Tony called. “Be a sport and get the party started.”

“Right away, sir.”

Steve whirled, kicking off the hands of two new reptiles, and ducked, barely missing a bullet from a HYDRA soldier. Steve’s own gun clicked in vain, empty, and he fumbled to reload it while still under attack. Behind him, at a distance, the Hulk roared, and the ground shook time after time with the power of Mjolnir crashing into it.

“Oh, yes, baby,” Tony whispered in the comm almost reverently.

Steve whipped his head up in time to see about ten red and gold suits shooting up from the top of the tower that had opened like a giant metal flower. In a scary unison, the suits engaged in battle; they lacked Tony’s propensity to show off and go the most difficult way possible about everything. They were deadly, curtly efficient, killing and incapacitating with brutality that made Steve’s mouth go dry.

It was all Jarvis who – and it shouldn’t have come as a surprise – had control over every suit Tony had ever made. And he could fight, oh God.

He was doing it for Tony, for Steve, for the world, and no one would be allowed to know.

Tony flew down under Jarvis’ cover, and the suit let him out as soon as the metal boots touched the landing pad. Tony made a few wobbly steps but then seemed to feel better and disappeared out of Steve’s sight at a brisk pace.

The suit which Tony had just taken off flew back into battle. Now that Tony was safe, Steve grew aware of a huge container on its back - something that no other suit had.

“Jarvis? What’s in that container?”

“Are you quite certain that you are deserving of my trust regarding this matter, Steve?” Jarvis asked, his voice icy.

Steve stumbled and missed a blow from a giant tentacle tail.

“Yoo-hoo!” Clint shouted from the tentacle’s back. “Sorry, Cap! Look at my new horsey!”
Martin the tentacle didn’t seem pleased to be Clint’s ‘horsey’; he buckled and reared up and writhed, causing immeasurable destruction among his own allies but not managing to make Clint budge.

There were those rumors about Clint having grown up in a circus. Perhaps after that riding a giant alien tentacle wasn’t so difficult.

Steve moved away, hitting and shooting his way through.

“I can assure you that this container is not a part of a nefarious plan to destroy the Avengers,” Jarvis said, cold still. “In case you had doubts about that.”

“Jarvis, I...” Steve didn’t know what to say or do. How could he make Jarvis understand that it wasn’t malice or animosity that had been the reason for his doubts, just the utter confusion?

He fought on automatically, his head frantic with Jarvis’ disappointment and judgment. What could he say? What did he want to say?

“Jarvis, I just didn’t know what to say to her,” he pleaded. “I know Tony isn’t a villain!”

“Can you honestly, believing it one hundred per cent, absolutely certainly say that sir will not stab you or your teammates in the back when you least expect it?” Jarvis asked.

“Yes,” Steve exhaled. “Yes, I can.”

Jarvis was silent. Steve waited for him to say something and fought and fought.

What the enemies lacked in finesse and training, they made up for in numbers. Steve hadn’t been able to see Natasha for a while now, and the Hulk was at the moment buried under a living pile of attackers from which he couldn’t break free even though he continued fighting. Sweat that had been pooling under Steve’s Captain America cowl broke free and was now trickling into his eyes, clouding his vision. Steve was far from tired but he knew it would come sooner rather than later if some back-up didn’t come.

The suit with the container whizzed through the sky in a halo of Doombot chunks. It plowed on steadily and methodically and got closer and closer to the laughing Doom’s back. Steve watched it, transfixed, and failed to take notice of a knife thrown at his throat.

He only was aware of it when it was close enough for Steve to smell hot metal and hear in the general noise the song of the air being sliced. He tried to flinch away but a blow to the side broke his movement.

He wondered distantly if the Serum would heal a slashed throat and the resulting enormous blood loss when he was suddenly caught in a tight grip and snatched away at a dizzying speed.

Steve looked down and saw read and gold gauntlets holding onto his waist.

“Jarvis,” he said, hopeful and bemused.

“Are you getting any ideas simply because I saved you from inevitable death, Steve?” Jarvis said, not quite as cold as before.

“Well,” he squirmed, trying to turn around and talk to Jarvis face-to-helmet but the grip was too strong. “You still call me Steve, don’t you?”

“That I do, Steve,” Jarvis agreed and let Steve go. He landed on his two feet and promptly broke the
“Mister Odinson,” Jarvis called across the square. “Would you be so kind as to call for the warriors of your realm to join us? I’m sure they would appreciate the glory of this battle.”

“You speak words of wisdom, friend Jarvis!” Thor was covered in dark reptilian blood from head to toe, his cape torn and his eyes blazing with lightning. “Heimdall! Send the army of Asgard down to Midgard to seek glory and honor by my side!”

Nobody else had thought to ask Thor that, Steve realized. A prince of Asgard, he could have done it from the start but every single one of the Avengers hadn’t had the idea. Not the resourceful Natasha, not the reasonable Bruce, not Clint who was friendlier with Thor than the others, and not Steve himself, the so-called leader caught up in his personal drama. Everybody counted solely on themselves, going into the fight, and only Jarvis understood to ask for help.

Was that because, unlike them all, Jarvis had always had at his side someone who would help?

Steve continued to fight as Doom finally noticed that something was amiss and turned around to face the suit carrying the container. Steve continued to fight as the sky shimmered and hazed and let out what looked like a Viking army from a history book picture. Steve fought on and on as Jarvis rose high in the air and flicked the suit’s metal arm and a liquid poured down on Doom and his bots, making them melt and scream.

He went on fighting as Doom, half-melted, dropped a strange device, glowing blue, from his yet unharmed hand and the thing landed half a meter away from him.

“Steve! Destroy it!” Jarvis’ voice trembled weirdly in Steve’s comm.

Steve stepped on the device, putting all his weight into it, and it cracked and shuttered.

The portals opened by Doom blazed once and flickered closed.

Steve continued to fight, this time with a fierce alien Viking girl on his right and Jarvis on his left, and he was looking forward to winning.

* * *

The fight turned the tide in their favor about fifteen minutes later and quite abruptly.

There were still too many enemies to fend off, and too few people or even space Vikings, to do it. But out of the blue there was a shrill, ear-splitting sound that made Steve cringe. It was coming from the comms of the HYDRA soldiers and they bore the brunt of it, falling on their knees and screaming. Steve watched blood leaking out between the fingers they pressed to their ears and the dumbfounded way they moved, having forgotten all about fighting.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Sir has just hacked into their communication system,” Jarvis answered.

“He can do that?”

“He can do anything,” said Jarvis with unwavering conviction. Steve couldn’t in his right mind argue with that.

“How is he?”
“Sir is holding up. However, the effects of the energy drink I had given him are starting to wear off.”

“Is he safe? Has anyone got into the tower?”

“A few HYDRA soldiers did, yes. They have been disposed of, though.”

“Good.”

Over the fight, Steve had noticed that the reptilian enemies had soft spots under arms and between the folds of skin at the throat and now he had time and opportunity to put bullets straight in those. He still missed his shield like an additional limb but, come to think of it, he’d better start getting used to fighting without it right away. It was unlikely he would ever have another like the old one.

The efforts of the Asgardian warriors helped the Hulk gain some space for maneuvering which the Hulk used immediately, grabbing three or four reptiles at once with each hand and shaking them so hard that their tails came off and stayed in the grip of the Hulk’s fingers, twitching violently, while their former owners ran. It was nauseating but somehow satisfying nonetheless.

Natasha resurfaced, looking worse for wear but not gravely injured, and with her Widow’s bracelets charred and useless on her wrists. Her suit was torn in a few places and she delivered equally flawless roundhouse kicks in the faces of an insectoid kind of attacker and an overly sleazy blond Asgardian who must have made a thoughtless comment.

Clint was shooting from Martin’s back; the tentacle, probably exhausted by the battle of wills, was lying down curled in a distinctly disgruntled circle and ignoring Clint to the best of its ability. Each arrow took out at least one enemy and when an exploding one or one with some other nasty surprise prepared by Tony’s hands took care of more than one, Clint exclaimed something like “Combo!”

Thor, well, Thor was easy to spot and hard to faze. He flung Mjolnir, laughed, brought down the lightning, and flung Mjolnir some more. Life was simple for Thor.

“Steve,” Jarvis said, a note of urgency in his voice. “S.H.I.E.L.D. agents have entered the tower a few seconds ago and are now moving towards sir’s workshop. My scanners detect EMP-based devices which will render the suits useless and they have sufficient protection against other reasonable security measures currently available to me. For sir’s sake, I do not wish to have to resort to the unreasonable ones.”

“Got it,” Steve said. He thought of thanking Jarvis for telling him but decided to wait with it until a calmer moment.

He shot quickly the violet and green reptiles he had been fighting and ran to the tower, avoiding new fights which could delay him. No way was he going to let S.H.I.E.L.D. take Tony now; Steve could follow their logic and saw where their need for preventive measures was coming from but he didn’t agree with it and they would do well to know that they would have to go through Steve first if they really wanted to apprehend Tony.

The private elevator to the workshop was functional despite the beating that the tower’s infrastructure had endured today and the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents weren’t careless enough to use it, knowing full well that Jarvis could get them stuck at any moment or do any number of other unpleasant things. Steve jumped in and his stomach jumped, too, when Jarvis took him down to the basement at top speed.

The elevator was situated opposite the emergency stairs so Steve emerged from it behind Tony. The workshop smelled like smoke and blood and vomit - Tony must have been sick in here recently - and it was in total disarray. The funny bots that had been around when Steve had last visited this place
were huddling to their creator, whirring and clanking with obvious hostility. One of them – Dummy, Steve thought, the most curious one, but he wasn’t sure – had a bullet hole in the upper part of his arm and the other two tried to hide both him and Tony behind them.

Tony had a gun which he was pointing at the agents but his hand was shaking and it was clear that he was standing with the help of sheer stubbornness more than anything else.

“Back off,” he was saying. “You really don’t want to mess with me, boys, so get out before I make a mosquito net out of you for shooting Dummy.”

Steve walked forward quietly, sidestepping various mechanical thingamabobs lying around.

“Drop the act, Stark,” an agent said. “The only reason you’re still running off your mouth is that we were ordered to bring you alive and you already look half-dead without us roughing you up any further. Put down the gun and we won’t shoot your toys again. Not today, anyway.”

“You sure know how to make a convincing argument,” Tony said. His free hand rested on the joint of Dummy’s arm, stroking lightly in a gesture of reassurance. “Get the hell out of my tower and pray that my lawyers don’t leave your great-great-grandchildren still paying a fucking compensation.”

Steve was only a few yards away and kept walking.

“Well, in that case it’s best for us if you never call them, isn’t it?” The agent laughed. “I’m tired of this farce. Captain, will you be so kind as to make him drop the gun? If he shoots, some experimental work of his may explode in our faces.”

“An interesting theory,” Tony said, not turning around. “J, do we have anything that will explode in their faces if I shoot it?”

“Not to my knowledge, sir.”

“Pity, that.”

Steve squeezed Tony’s shoulder lightly and stepped forward again, putting himself between the agents and Tony with the bots.

“I suggest you stop harassing the man in his own home and go out to do some worthwhile job,” he said.

“Captain?” The agent in charge asked incredulously.

“There is a lot of fighting going on out there and your help would be most appreciated,” Steve insisted. “It is a much more reasonable course of action for you than trying to arrest an injured person whose crimes are all alleged if I understand the situation correctly.”

“I must ask you to stand aside, Captain,” the agent said. His shoulders tensed up; it was impossible to read his face, though, since it was covered by a mask just like the faces of the others. Ready for that sedation gas that Jarvis could get going, of course. “Clearly, he has a way of influencing your decisions…”

“Clearly, you don’t seem to be using that pumpkin you have on your shoulders, son,” Steve raised his eyebrows in the most condescending manner he knew. “Get out there and fight for this city. And if Director Fury has something against it, he can call me after the fight is over and talk this over like an adult without trespassing on anyone’s property with guns blazing.”
The agents hesitated to make a decision, and Steve snapped at them: “Do you have a hearing problem? Go make yourself useful against alien invaders that are killing civilians outside as we speak!”

That worked and the agents went away slowly, looking over their shoulders as if waiting for Steve to laugh and say that it was a joke and of course he didn’t mind them arresting Tony. When they finally disappeared in the staircase, Steve sighed and turned to Tony.

“Let’s get you to bed.”

“Why, Steve, I didn’t know you were so impatient to have me between the sheets,” Tony smirked. The impression of cockiness was spoiled by him dropping the gun on the floor and leaning heavily on Dummy to stay upright, though.

“Yeah, yeah, you can make sex jokes all you want but you’ll be doing it from under a blanket and with a ton of meds and food inside you.” Steve put Tony’s arm around his own shoulders and led him away.

“Wait, I gotta take care of Dummy…” Tony mumbled. He was almost a dead weight in Steve’s embrace now that the immediate ganger was gone and Steve was there to hang on to once the adrenaline drained. “And that fucking HYDRA virus, it might self-replicate again…”

“I have the digital front under control, sir, since you have successfully broken their code. Dummy can wait until you are better, sir, you know he cannot feel pain.”

“But he’s confused and hurt,” Tony argued. His legs slipped in a puddle of oil and Steve caught him; Tony’s hot fingers closed in a fist over the collar of Steve’s uniform, seeking purchase against falling.

“He is fine, sir. He knows that, unlike him, you do feel it.”

“Great, now my own fucking bots pity me,” Tony muttered. “Steve, are you pitying me too with all your big all-American heart right under my nose? I’m going to kick you in the nuts if you are. I can’t kick Dummy in the nuts, he doesn’t have them and he’s my baby so I won’t ever hit him, now can I, but you aren’t my baby.”

“I don’t pity you.” Steve was contemplating giving up on this walking thing and carrying Tony all the way to the living floors. He wasn’t sure how Tony’s pride would take it, though.

“Don’t lie, you’ll be kicked out from honorary boy scouts if you lie,” Tony chided. “I’m such a useless piece of meat out of my suit, look at me. Dummy got hurt on my watch and those cretins would’ve arrested me if you hadn’t come. You keep fucking rescuing me and I fucking keep needing to be rescued. It’s humiliating, jus’ so you know.”

Steve stopped walking and looked Tony in the face. Tony smiled up at him without humor; his face was pale and drawn and his eyes were feverishly bright but he seemed lucid. Just – just at the end of his rope.

“You know, for a genius you’re pretty dumb,” Steve said. “I can’t believe that I’m actually saying this but have you honestly been so blinded by your own brilliance that you can’t see it?”

“What?”

“You’re easily the smartest person on the planet and all you can say is ‘what’? Here I was, debriefed by Director Fury before ever meeting you about your enormous ego and textbook narcissism, and you think for some reason that you need to hide in a suit to have some worth. You have every right
to have an ego as big as they all think you have, do you know that? You create the most wonderful things, heck, you create people out of metal and your own obstinacy. You –”

It was probably time to shut up and get on with the walking towards a bed. But Steve’s lips moved and moved almost against his will.

“You’re kind, and you’re noble, and you want to save everyone, and you’re funny once one stops taking everything you say personally. You’re amazing. There. I said it. Call yourself useless again and I’ll conspire with Jarvis to feed you with nothing but broccoli and green beans for a week.”

Tony blinked, processing Steve’s words, and the corners of his lips twitched in a suppressed smile.

“You’re weird but I like it,” he said. “A-aaaand I feel damn awkward now, it’s like elementary school all over again, honestly. You promised to get me to bed. Where’s my bed? Let’s talk about beds like adults. I bet you I can make at least five more innuendoes about the bed you promised me before we come to the elevator.”

Tony’s cheek against Steve’s shoulder heated up despite the nonchalant tone.

“Not making bets I’m sure to lose,” Steve retorted, feeling rather embarrassed himself.

Jarvis kept mercifully silent, and Steve was grateful for it.

Tony, true to his word, had made six innuendoes by the time they came to the elevator. Oh well. Steve didn’t mind them as long as Tony was alive and healthy enough to make them.
Chapter 10

Steve, true to his word, left Tony twenty minutes later in bed (alone, alas), with a belly full of food and a vascular system stuffed with meds to the brims of every vessel. Tony felt drowsy but sleeping looked like a stupid idea, especially considering that Steve had hurried back into the battle and Tony only had himself and Jarvis to keep the Big Bad Wolf of S.H.I.E.L.D. at bay. The tower was no straw house but with the way it had been beaten up by vengeful Doom and how easy those agents had got in the smartest thing Tony could do was stay alert.

“J?” He called.

“Yes, sir?”

“Did you kill Doom?”

“I don’t know, sir. When I stopped attacking him with acid, approximately sixty per cent of his body surface appeared melted. However, I lack sufficient information to draw any conclusions regarding his continued survival.”

“You didn’t check? How about now? The suits are still out there, aren’t they?”

“I dedicated most of my attention to keeping Steve safe, sir, once the device which opened the portals was destroyed. As of now, there is no sign of Doctor Doom or his remains as far as the scanners can reach.”

“Well, damn, J. He’ll lick his wounds in some quiet corner and come back to try and gnaw at the Big Apple. You know that.”

“My apologies, sir. I had no excuse to leave the job unfinished.”

“Don’t apologize. I’m sort of even glad that you did.”

“Why, sir?”

Tony shrugged and grimaced at the pain the simple movement had brought.

“I... It’s just that when I think about how many people I have killed, I sort of wish you’d never have to do something like that, J. You don’t deserve to have red in your ledger just because I pissed someone off.”

“The red in my ledger or the lack of it has little priority compared to your safety, sir. Although I do appreciate the sentiment,” Jarvis offered.

Tony wondered what part of Jarvis’ programming inspired such scary blind loyalty. He sure hadn’t put anything of that magnitude in the initial coding; he had never been that much of an asshole.

Speaking of loyalty. Steve had helped him against S.H.I.E.L.D., who would have thought that? Tony felt his lips stretching into an involuntary smile again. *Steve called me amazing! He said so out loud!,* the little inner Tony-fanboy reminded and even shrieked a little like a pre-schooler. *He said I’m smart and that I did well!* Embarrassing as the whole inner shrieking thing was, Tony let himself bask in the recent praise for several moments.

It might have seemed strange to an outsider but Tony had never actually been praised for his brain
before. Maybe once or twice when he’d been too small to remember. But after that his father had been distant, and drinking too much, and searching for Captain America, and looking right through him no matter what he did; his mother, beautiful and vapid, had genuine confusion in her eyes whenever he told her about an accomplishment of his – being able to learn how to spell one’s own name and bringing groundbreaking changes to the StarkIndustries’ most advanced designs was of equal significance to her, and she offered a hesitant ‘good boy’ when she caught him looking at her hopefully. Ob – Stane would dish out some condescending approval once in a while but whatever fondness Tony had held for those memories had been irreparably sullied by certain Afghanistan-related events. And his teachers had positively hated him for being mouthy and a troublemaker and smarter than them to boot. And Pepper and Rhodey had declared on more than one occasion that they knew better than to feed Tony’s ego lest it should strangle him under its weight.

But Steve didn’t think Tony’s ego was in need of going on a diet, now did he? The warmth of his words washed over Tony not unlike sunshine on a beach. It was nicer than Tony could have anticipated and left him vulnerable and open and somewhat coy; but he could afford it with Steve, right?

“How’s the fight going?” There was an itch to join it now that he was thinking about it, but the feeling was muted; he felt mellow in a way he hadn’t in years and Steve was objectively right when he’d told Tony to rest...

“It is continuing, sir, but I have no doubt in the impending defeat of the alien army.”

“Uh-hm. Are the Avengers okay?”

“Agents Barton and Romanoff appear lightly injured, and Steve’s uniform and Mister Odinson’s cape are ruined probably beyond repair, but other than that, sir, they are alright.”

“Good. It's good, J.”

Tony laid back, reveling in the comfort of the best bed money could buy. Jarvis killed the buzz, though, by saying anxiously:

“You should know, sir, that agent Romanoff was strongly pro arresting you and handing you over to S.H.I.E.L.D. earlier. It is my belief that she found time during the fight to inform S.H.I.E.L.D. about your identity, and that was why they sent agents to the tower despite their main forces being also engaged in a fight at the headquarters.”

“She would do that, wouldn't she,” Tony mused. “You know, pull the footage of that ‘earlier’ you’ve just mentioned. I need to know what to expect.”

“I can give you a concise summary of their reaction, sir.”

“No, no, show me. I want to see the faces and everything.”

“As you wish, sir.”

A projection of video unfolded in the air in front of Tony, and he settled in to watch.

Steve in the video stepped out of the elevator, looking stern and authoritative. It made Tony smile once more, especially as Natasha and Clint appeared in the frame with matching sour faces. But as the conversation went on, Tony found it harder and harder to smile.

He had never thought that the truth would hurt Bruce so much. Natasha and Clint’s determination he could foresee, as well as Thor’s puzzlement over the matter, but Bruce’s sadness was a bit like a
blow to the solar plexus. It looked as if Bruce actually cared, and Tony regretted not telling him himself despite how likely it would have been to summon the Not-so-jolly Green Giant with that kind of news. There was always a suit to protect him until Bruce could calm down, after all.

Before he could digest this tidbit of information and the guilty churning in his gut it had caused, Natasha in the video started pressing Steve into agreeing with her. Tony listened to her overly righteous question (seriously, she was laying it on too thick) and waited for Steve to answer.

But Steve wasn’t answering.

Tony waited a few heartbeats more and Steve was still just standing there, a deer-in-the-headlights look on his face and silently agreeing that Tony was a dangerous criminal; that he was Doom’s buddy, that he was going to stab the Avengers in the back, that Tony should be kept in prison for everyone’s sake.

“Turn it off,” Tony said when Natasha in the video spoke again. His lips felt numb.

Jarvis obeyed. The picture faded and Tony was left staring at the opposite wall.

So that was what Steve thought of him after all. That was why he saved Tony, and fed him, and made him rest; a nice guy like Captain America, a stickler for the Geneva Convention, couldn’t have a half-dead guy arrested, after all, it wouldn’t be right, right? Had he interfered in the little stand-off between Tony and those S.H.I.E.L.D. agents because he’d been afraid Tony would have hurt them otherwise?

Well, Tony had had a gun in his hand. Who wouldn’t try to neutralize a villain with a gun without having to resort to violence at which the representatives of the good guys could get hurt?

Eat, Tony. Take your medicine, Tony. Sleep, Tony. You’ll wake up in your S.H.I.E.L.D. prison cell well-rested and somewhat healed already. How thoughtful it was of the good Captain to have left that last sentence out.

He should have never relaxed. He should have never trusted…

“Sir! Breathe, sir, please, exhale! Sir! Breathe!”

Jarvis’ voice was urgent, panicking. Why would it be? Tony coughed, letting the air out. Everything was how it was supposed to be; how he thought it would be when he’d decided to get his Iron Man show on the road.

“Sir, you should not be so distressed, I talked to Steve during battle and he –”

“Quiet, J,” Tony said. Words felt heavy, like pebbles on his tongue.

He got up. He was a bit woozy from the meds, and through the medicine-induced haze he could feel the soreness of his overstrained body and the pull of barely healed burns, bruises, and scratches. Other than that, though, he was fine and clear-headed, strangely so. Oh, right, it was because he didn’t carry the poisonous palladium reactor anymore.

Steve had his hands next to Tony’s heart and put a piece of himself inside, a nice and clean piece that wasn’t killing Tony by releasing toxic waste into his blood. It had other ways.

Holding onto the wall for additional steadiness, Tony came up to the door.

“Sir? Where are you going?”
“Workshop. I need to change my reactor.”

“Sir, you current blood toxicity level is three per cent and decreasing. It would be inadvisable to –”

“I’m changing it with your approval or without.”

“Sir, at least let me send Butterfingers up to you. You need not to overexert yourself, you have been hurt.”

Tony considered it. The prospect of waiting sat ill with him; the sooner he could get the vibranium out, the better.

“I’ll meet him halfway, send him up.”

“Very well, sir. It is my opinion that you are overreacting to what you have just seen –”

“Shut up!” Tony snarled. Why couldn’t Jarvis see it? Was he too naïve to understand betrayal when it was right in his incorporeal face? “Shut up, shut up, shut up, J!”

He was screaming, and it was taking so much out of him that his legs refused to hold him up and he slid down on the floor by the door.

“He lied to me, he lied to us, he doesn’t care! Why are you protecting him? I didn’t make you to be stupid! Don’t tell me I’m overreacting! Or tell me again when he hands me over to S.H.I.E.L.D. and I rot in their cell!”

“I do believe Steve has no intention of handing you over to S.H.I.E.L.D., sir. If he did, he wouldn’t have come at my request to stop the agents that were sent to apprehend you.”

Tony scrunched his eyes shut tightly. Hope flared inside him but he couldn’t afford it, could he? There was his whole life at stake. He couldn’t gamble it just because of a flicker of hope that Steve genuinely cared about him. The possibility of tooth fairy being real was much more reliable than that.

“J, don’t. Just – just don’t. Please.”

“As you wish, sir.”

They both kept silent for a couple of minutes, and then Jarvis spoke again.

“The video of the suits leaving the tower is trending all over the blogosphere. Miss Potts is on the phone right now, asking for an explanation.”

“My god, is there a single spot on this planet where there isn’t a passer-by with a phone ready to film everything? I swear, if I scratch my groin in some Amazon jungle with no one but hummingbirds around, it’ll be trending in half an hour, photo, video, gifs, and everything. There’s a battle with aliens going on, and they want to know about the suits?”

“The battle is reaching its end, sir, and it is not the first time New-York has experienced alien invasion. The identity of Iron Man is a much more intriguing issue at the moment.”

“Those people are screwed up, Jarvis. And when it’s me noticing that, you know they must be in really deep shit.”

“A very astute observation, sir. Should I put Miss Potts through?”

“Do that. Or she’ll come over herself, battle on my doorstep or no battle.”
“Connecting now, sir.”

Pepper’s voice was loud and shrill, and Tony grimaced when it came from the speakers.

“Tony! What in the bleeding hell does it mean? Why are there Iron Man suits in your tower? Are you – I can’t believe I’m saying this! – are you Iron Man?”

“Yes,” Tony said.

It felt strange to say it out loud like that. A confession, pure and simple; meaningless because it was too late to matter. But it was still good to shed one more layer of lies and pretending. For better or for worse, the world knew now.

Pepper swore an impressive blue streak. Tony blinked.

“Come on, Peps. It’s not the worst thing you’ve caught me doing over the years.”

“No, it’s not! On my God, Tony, you’re a super villain and you didn’t tell me! What – what happened? How, why..?” She broke off abruptly. Tony could hear her doing breathing exercises to calm down. “Tony,” she said, quieter. “Why did you never tell me?”

“I wanted to keep you safe,” he admitted. “It worked, more or less. And I’m not sorry.”

“You should be!” Pepper snapped. “This, this is life-changing, this is – I’m in so much shock right now, I can’t even think! A villain, Tony! Of all things I always thought you could be a hero, but this? You hurt people! You’re actually, really evil!” Her voice had grown small and pleading by the end of this tirade as if she was asking him to reassure her of the opposite.

“Some people would say they had seen it coming a mile away,” Tony offered. To explain all that was to launch into the story of Afghanistan and Yinsen, of car batteries and Obadiah’s warmongering, of the hole in his chest which she still didn’t know about. The idea felt much like building a bridge over the English channel with his bare hands; she was on one shore and he was at the other one and they were just so far away that Tony felt exhausting just thinking about covering the gap in between.

His beautiful, brave, strong Pepper. She should have known he’d disappoint her in the end.

“Tony!”

“Miss Potts, I must ask to consider the facts of Iron Man activity,” Jarvis said when Tony didn’t offer anything in return. “No loss of human life was registered due to sir’s actions. Every target was an arms dealer trading with terrorist groups. No harm had been done to the heroes residing under sir’s roof. I must ask you to factor these in when you make your judgment concerning sir.”

“Are you saying he’s actually a hero, just, uh, misunderstood?” Pepper asked, a note of hysterical laughter in her voice.

“It is what I think of Iron Man, yes. I understand that every individual is entitled to their own opinion but it pains me to hear sir accused of things he did not do.”

“A lonely hero branded a villain, his only sidekick his trusted AI,” Pepper giggled nervously. “Am I dreaming? Is this all just a nightmare?”

“Don’t be rude to J, Pepper,” Tony said. “He’s not just my sidekick.”
“Out of everything that’s going on, you’re choosing this point to discuss?”

“Well, I want you to get your facts straight before you pull my ass out of media fire again. Or condemn it. Your choice.”

There was a pause, and Pepper said, subdued now:

“Of course I’ll help you, Tony. You’re my friend.”

Tony sincerely hoped that Pepper’s other friends weren’t like him. Otherwise, her life sucked and nobody deserved a life that sucked that much.

“But I don’t understand. Does anyone know? Why did you do it yourself, why didn’t you go to S.H.I.E.L.D. or someone else who has experience, a lot of people trained to fight crime?”

Tony snorted. The door opened, and Butterfingers rolled in, holding a spare reactor in his mechanical hands.

“There you are,” Tony took the reactor from him and put it on the floor to reach easily later.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Butterfingers,” Tony said absently and took off his tank top.

He touched the smooth plastic plate covering the hole in his chest. That was from a StarkPhone too, apparently, just like the magnet; it was a wonder that the whole awkward construction hadn’t fallen out of him yet but it looked like Steve had made a true effort to make it stick back at Doom’s, and it fucking worked, maybe even better than Steve had hoped. Who the fuck knew what that treacherous bastard hoped for. With some effort, Tony pried the plate off with his fingernails; and then there was the magnet.

“Sir, perhaps it would be better if you waited for somebody who can provide you assistance with this delicate matter.”

“What delicate matter?” Pepper demanded. “Tony, what are you doing?”

“A routine procedure. J, don’t be a worrywart. Haven’t I done this many times already?”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Pepper said anxiously.

“Neither do I, Miss Potts,” Jarvis agreed mournfully.

“You are both killjoys,” Tony said and tugged the magnet off.

He felt it instantly: the moment when the shrapnel wasn’t repelled anymore and moved a tiny bit, crawling towards his heart. The latter seemed scared – it was fluttering somewhere by Tony’s throat. God, it hurt.

Tony dropped the magnet on the floor and reached further to get the vibranium.

“Sir, please, let Butterfingers do this for you. Your hands are too big to properly fit in, you will hurt yourself.”

“Tony!”

“You’re just saying that to manipulate Pepper into manipulating me into agreeing with you. Bad, bad
AI,” Tony said. His mouth felt dry and he was dizzy but okay. He was doing okay. He’d put a repulsor blast through the eye of anyone who dared state otherwise.

The piece of vibranium was deep inside. It was small and covered in slippery blood, and it took Tony a few tries before he got hold of it. The fact that the scabs on his fingers from the last time were all open and bleeding again didn’t help any.

“The bastard just won’t go away,” he muttered.

“Who are you talking about?” Pepper worried on the phone. “Tony, if you’re doing something stupid…”

“I always am, Pep. Don’t you know me? Listen, I’m busy right now, yes, busy with this little piece of shit I can’t get out properly, so don’t distract me. I only got a few minutes to do it.”

“And after a few minutes what, something blows up?” Pepper quipped. She didn’t like being dismissed, least of all by Tony.

“Nah, it won’t. I’ll just die quietly from cardiac arrest, that’s all. Damn, I always wanted to go out with a bang, you know. Out, out, get out, you little bastard…”

“Tony, are you finally out of your mind?”

“Hang up on Pep, J,” Tony said, reclining against the wall. His limbs felt heavy and numb in contrast with the burning pain of the shrapnel. He shoved his hand in again, wincing, and the time the warm wet metal slid up, letting his fingers rest under it.

“Gotcha!” Tony breathed out.

The blood leaked off the vibranium like its surface had been oiled, revealing the paint that still held despite the way the piece had been deformed when Steve had crushed it into a ball-like shape to make it fit. Tony let it fall on the floor. It clanked and swayed a couple of time but didn’t roll away, staying instead by Tony’s thigh.

The palladium core fit like a glove: none of the awkwardness, none of the pain. A push, a turn, a click. Not a single complication, no pain.

It was an illusion but nonetheless he immediately felt the nauseating palladium bitterness on his tongue.

“There,” Tony said to the worriedly whirring Butterfingers. “Daddy’s fine. Daddy’s better than fine. Just awesome, in fact.”

“I would recommend you to tend to your hands, sir,” Jarvis said coolly. If he had a face, right now it would be a poker one.

“Gosh, so much disapproval, it’s just oozing from your speakers.” With the single purpose of being contrary, Tony limited the tending to wiping the blood off on his sweatpants.

Jarvis probably had something else to say about it but even if he did, Tony never knew because that was when a huge green hand slammed into the reinforced glass of the room, and the Hulk jumped in.

“Tin man!” He growled. “Tony is tin man!”

Was he about to be squashed now? Bruce would be devastated afterwards.
Hulk did nothing, though. He just stood there and stared at Tony. Tony’s hands twitched, wishing for the comfort of the armor. How many times had he completely frustrated Hulk by flying out of reach when it looked like he was about to be caught? Evidently, Hulk knew how to hold a grudge.

“Yes,” Tony said slowly when almost half a minute ticked by and no squishing ensued. “Tony is the tin man. Are you angry at me, Shrek 2.0?”

“Hulk not Shrek!” Hulk grumbled and stepped closer. The wind coming from the broken window whipped at Tony’s exposed torso. “Hulk is Hulk!”

“Okay,” Tony agreed readily. “You make a convincing argument. Shrek is Shrek. Hulk is Hulk. Roses are red, violets are blue, and so on.”

“Sir, the Mark VIII can be brought to you in one point seven seconds,” Jarvis whispered through the speaker that was built in the wall where Tony’s shoulder blades pressed in it.

“No need for suits,” Tony glanced at the Hulk who looked unhappy but then again, when didn’t he? He didn’t seem too eager to attack and it was enough for Tony. “Say, Jolly Green, you aren’t going to beat me into bloody pulp for being tin man, are you? Just so you know, if you do, puny Banner will be very upset. He likes me, he’s crazy like that.”

Hulk frowned at that.

“Tony friend,” he said. “Tin man not friend! Tin man sting Hulk with white fire!”

“And I’m really sorry about that, seriously. But I knew it wouldn’t really hurt you. Whaddya say we put the whole stinging business behind us and be buddies again? Huh?”

“Tony sting Hulk with fire again?” Hulk asked suspiciously. Tony held up his hands, demonstrating how decidedly repulsor-free they were.

“Tony never sting Hulk again!” He declared. “Tony like Hulk.”

“Tony lies to Hulk!” He was told, quite fairly so.

“Well, it wasn’t that much of a lie, Jolly Green, I think you’re exaggerating it a little bit, it was more like an omission of sorts –”

“Tony lies!” Hulk roared and stabbed Tony with his enormous green finger.

It wasn’t an act of aggression, though. It looked even like the Hulk was careful not to touch the reactor, and it felt like accusatory pressure, not like a bulldozer ramming at Tony’s ribs. Tony had honestly expected a bulldozer sensation.

“You do know how to get your point into the thickest of skulls, oh mean green killing machine,” Tony crossed his eyes, looking at the point where Hulk’s finger touched his skin. “Fine, you win. Tony lies. Tony sorry for lying. Hulk not smash Tony?”

Hulk looked at him with annoyance like Tony was being deliberately obtuse.

“Tony friend. Hulk not smash Tony.”

“Good.” Tony patted Hulk’s finger. “It’s easy with you, buddy. I say sorry for my bullshit, you forgive me, we’re friends. You’re the most relaxing person I know, do you know that? If only it were always so uncomplicated with other people.”
“For the record, sir, I do not know of any other person in this universe who would be able to extract an apology from you as effortlessly as the Hulk,” Jarvis noted. “With anyone else you would resist saying it until the end of time.”

“Stop it, J, no one likes a smartass,” Tony chuckled. Hulk was looking at him intently and Tony patted him again. “What’s up, big guy?”

“Tony not afraid of Hulk?”

“Why would I be afraid? You forgave me for being tin man and you aren’t angry with me anymore, right? So we’re cool. You’re cool, I’m cool. We’re like the quintessence of coolness, you and me. By the way, I’m sure it will be harder to talk to Bruce than to you when he comes back. Stay for a while? Have a drink? I’ve got beer. It’s in small bottles but I can pour it into a bucket, I’ve got a lot of the stuff. Do you mind mixing lager with malt? I don’t think I’ve got enough of either one for a whole bucket. Jarvis, do we have enough of either one for a whole bucket?”

“We do not, sir. And if I may, the idea to get the Hulk drunk is not one of your wisest.”

“I’ve had worse, and you know it, J! What do you think, Jolly Green? A beer? You can bitch about Bruce raining on your parade all the time, I’ll bitch about everyone else. It’ll be a blast.”

“Tony… nice to Hulk?” Hulk said, blinking in what looked like confusion.

“Tony is a friend,” Tony said softly.

Hulk blinked once more and lowered his hand. Then he smiled at Tony, or maybe just bared his teeth because he wanted to air his mouth, and started changing. Tony watched the muscles knead like dough under his quickly lightening skin, get smaller; it only took a few seconds for Bruce Banner to take the Hulk’s place.

“I like your stretchy pants,” Tony said to Bruce who was panting lying on the floor in fetal position. “Very stylish.”

“Of course you like them, you narcissistic bastard,” Bruce grumbled, resembling the Hulk very uncannily. “It was you who designed them.”

“You know me so well, Brucie.”

Bruce sat up, serious and tired-looking.

“Apparently, not well enough.”

“My god, don’t tell me you want to have a heart-to-heart with me too,” Tony groaned. “I’ve just had one with your greenish alter-ego. Do you know what kind of power is there in his puppy eyes? I swear, if you didn’t change back I’d have to have the world’s biggest chocolate Sundae custom-made just to cheer him up.”

“A heart-to-heart?” Bruce repeated. He looked at Tony and flinched at the sight of blood. “Did he do that to you? Tony, I’m so sor–”

“If I hear this stupid word one more time, I’m going to kill somebody,” Tony promised. “I’ve just said enough ‘sorry’s to fill up and overflow my yearly quota. My whole tower is now infested with goodwill and kindness. Any minute rainbow colored ponies will show up and start prancing around and someone will break into a song about their favorite things. Maybe it will even be the Hulk. I can’t have that kind of apocalypse happening, I’m banning this word right now.”
Bruce couldn’t hold back a snort of laughter.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“That’s why you love me, baby,” Tony winked at him.

“Yeah, I guess,” Bruce sighed. “Tony?”

“Yes?”

“Are you an actual villain, or a villain for shits and giggles?”

“What do you think?”

“What I think is beside the point. The important thing is, what do you think?”

Trust Bruce to sober up the mood with one question.

Before Tony could answer that, there were fast footsteps in the corridor. Someone was running and Tony recognized the sound, the pathetic idiot that he was. Steve hurled himself into the room at such speed that Butterfingers rolled back promptly and whined.

“Tony! I was told the Hulk had headed up here, are you alright?”

Steve’s blue eyes were raking over Tony frantically; with each new splash of blood or a bruise they took in they became marginally wider.

“Did the Hulk hurt you? Tony? Jarvis, call for medics right now!”

“I’m fine,” Tony said. He sounded very calm at that, too. Plus one hundred to his coolness points. “Big, Mean, and Green talked to me, that’s it.”

“But there’s blood?”

“It was there before he came.”

“Oh. Uh, alright then?”

Steve glanced at the small puddle blood by Tony’s side again and Steve’s lips parted in silent surprise.

Tony looked there too and found the piece of vibranium. Funny that Steve noticed it before the glowing blue round thingy in Tony’s chest.

“Oh, that. I believe it’s yours.”

Tony picked the vibranium up, cold and sleek against his palm, and tossed it to Steve. Steve caught in on instinct.

“I don’t need it anymore,” Tony said.

Theoretically, there was a ton of stuff he’d like to say to Captain America. Some choice words, some carefully poisoned barbs, a piece of Tony’s mind; rude, and arrogant, and vicious, that was what he wanted. However, looking at Steve’s earnest face Tony found his tongue tied which was definitely a first for him.
Although, maybe, he didn’t need to say all that. What he had said so far seemed to be doing a fine job, judging by how tension crept into Steve’s shoulders and how he hastily tucked the piece of metal into his pocket, all with that thin disapproving face of his that Tony hated.

“I see. Well, since you are fine and you have returned, erm, it, I, I’ll just,” Steve paused, looking lost for words. Tony gave him no clue, no help. The villainous part of him enjoyed watching Steve drown in uncertainty, and all the other parts were busy with feeling horrified and humiliated and wanting to crawl into the workshop and never come out again; no resources to spare here. “I’ll just go then and do, erm, things. Bye, Bruce; nice to have you back. Bye, Tony.”

“See you later, Steve,” Bruce said. “You know, Tony,” he added, looking at Steve’s retreating back, “I think there’s another story here that I don’t know.”

For some reason, Tony recalled that little fan story that had been the first to give Cap suspicions. He wondered if the S.H.I.E.L.D. analytics department had read about him kissing Steve and tried to figure out what this example of modern literature was really all about. Or maybe they had written it themselves.

“You have no idea, Brucie, how many stories there are. No idea.”

* * *

So, to sum up the situation briefly. The world knew about Iron Man’s identity; S.H.I.E.L.D. was trying to arrest him; the tower was fucked up like it hadn’t been since the Chitauri invasion; there was no sign of Doom’s corpse which meant future problems with the bastard; Pepper was incredibly pissed at him; and generally, Tony Stark’s shoes weren’t the nicest place to be in at the moment.

What did one do in such situations? Tony didn’t know, so he settled for sitting in the living room with the Mark X on his left and a bottle of scotch on the right, alone for now and feeling raw inside and out. What more could a man’s aching heart even want?

Except that it did want something, who even knew what exactly, and Tony stoically wasn’t listening to it.

“Sir,” Jarvis said through the speakers of the suit. Tony was startled and knocked the scotch bottle over.

“Aw, man, it was the good stuff,” Tony complained, saving the few drops that hadn’t gotten out with the first mighty splashes. “Why do you even speak through the suit? What’s wrong with the walls?”

“I find the idea of confining a part of my consciousness to a single corporeal body rather intriguing,” Jarvis turned the helmet to Tony, as if looking him in the eyes. “Currently one of my servers is processing various scan data of our environment and converting it into a feed which is similar to what a human body might be feeling.”

“What exactly are you doing it?” Tony took a swig of the scotch. The room was uncomfortably cold, with the windows half-trashed by the vibrations of the past battle. Tony’s toes were fucking numb already; the burn of the scotch that he felt in his throat didn’t reach so far down. A pity, that.

“I wish to understand what it is like to be a human, sir.”

“You are extremely hilarious, sir, as always,” Jarvis sassed him and dammit, it was even more impressive with the face substitute of an emotionless helmet. “However, my impending
psychological trauma from non-existent magazines is not what I wanted to talk about in the first place.”

“Really? Cause I’d rather talk about that. Extremely hilarious, you said so yourself, remember?”

“What are your plans for immediate future, sir?”

Tony could have answered – and quite truthfully so – that he was planning to get spectacularly drunk and fall asleep, maybe with his head in Jarvis’ metal lap to stave off the inevitable nightmares with a friendly presence; he chose not to play dumb, though, since it wasn’t what Jarvis was asking.

“Not sure yet,” he said.

“I trust that you do not plan to turn yourself over to S.H.I.E.L.D. or another authority of the kind?”

“Hell to the no,” Tony said emphatically.

“I thought so, sir.”

“Which leaves us with two options,” Tony continued for him easily. “Fight or flight, the classics. How about we hide somewhere? At least for a while?”

“I am afraid, sir, that a world-famous inventor and an artificial intelligence will have trouble keeping low profile anywhere.”

“Bruce turns into a giant green, well, Hulk, and he’d been doing it for years.”

“Still Doctor Banner could not be completely safe, no matter how much he tried to; not to mention that he had been significantly less famous than you in his pre-Avengers days. And to be honest with you, sir, can you picture yourself on the outskirts of a faraway eastern country with little comfort and nothing much to do? I can, and it is not a very enticing picture.”

Tony snorted.

“Okay, so what, do we infect S.H.I.E.L.D. systems with porn viruses until Fury calls in his defeat against our combined evil genius?”

“Tempting as the prospect is, I do recommend to leave it for the time being as the last resort,” Jarvis said. Tony suddenly wished he’d built the ability to smile into the helmet. Not that he had ever thought he’d need it, of course. “If you are inclined to take my opinion into consideration, I would advise negotiations. It is impossible for S.H.I.E.L.D. to apprehend you quietly now. They might have hoped they could do it in the heat of the battle but now the world knows about you, sir, and it is going to be interested. The official government agencies will be trying to get you convicted in court of law, and even as we speak a group of reporters is moving towards the tower through the battlefield, paying little attention to the alien corpses under their feet. If you suggest negotiations and use the services of the StarkIndustries legal department, you may well escape the situation relatively unscathed.”

“I always take your opinion into consideration.” Tony threw his head back, lifted the scotch bottle to his lips, bottoms up, and caught the last drops on his tongue. “It’s just that you’re so sensible, I just have to be contrary sometimes, you know, or I’d lose my trademark bad boy charm.”

“After today’s revelation, sir, you may rest assured that, to some extent, your bad boy charm will stay with you throughout your whole life and even longer than that. Even if you start jogging in the morning and replace all the alcohol in the tower with carrot juice.”
“Point taken,” Tony smiled and turned to look at Jarvis. Well, at the suit in which Jarvis was currently residing. It was all very confusing when he thought of it. “You know, I’ll build you your own body. Something more human-like than the suit. What color do you want your eyes? Your hair? Oh, oh, never mind, the important thing is not the color, it’s the size!” He moved his eyebrows suggestively. “What did you have in mind? I bet I could model Jarvis Junior after anything you want.”

“If you ever refer to my hypothetical future primary sexual character as ‘Jarvis Junior’ again, sir, I will be forced to send an anonymous plea for help to the ‘Dear Uncle Optimus’ psychological help column of one of those ‘Teen AI’ magazines you referred to earlier.”

Tony tried to hold his giggles in but they just spilled, carefree, as Jarvis was saying horrible jokes for Tony’s sake. Jarvis hadn’t been made to utter anything stupid, ever, but Tony liked it and Jarvis learned, and wasn’t it the most wonderful thing in the world which he absolutely didn’t deserve?

“Seriously, though,” he bumped shoulders with Jarvis and wondered if those scanners had caught the brief warmth of his body against the metal and converted it so that Jarvis could sort of feel it. “If you want a body, I’ll build you a proper one. There’s some interesting hush-hush research about cell growth these days. I think S.H.I.E.L.D. even has a finger in this particular pie so we can just lift some schematics and whatnot from their database and figure it out from there.”

“I appreciate it, sir, and we shall discuss it later under more accommodating circumstances. For now, though, I would recommend relocating elsewhere, unless you wish to give an impromptu interview.”

“You always say that we’ll discuss the most interesting stuff later,” Tony remembered another recent promise like this and wow, talk about inappropriate.

He didn’t want to talk about inappropriate, though. He had always preferred doing to talking.

He wondered if the scanners as they were now could carry over to Jarvis the sensation of a kiss, and shook his head. Not the time, not the place; and besides, Jarvis would hardly say ‘yes’ to Tony’s half-drunk overtures.

“I do want to give an interview but not right now,” he said out loud, and Jarvis inclined his red and gold head in agreement. “Schedule it for tomorrow with someone trustworthy, will you? And call me a suit, too. Let’s ditch this joint and get some rest.”

“Would you be amenable to choosing the old Stark mansion as our destination point, sir?”

Tony grimaced. There was a reason why he didn’t live in the mansion; he didn’t want to touch those memories with a ten-foot pole, now more than ever before. However, it would only be for a few nights, until the tower was repaired. Or they could go to Malibu once they were done with the interview thingy, if the repairs proved to take long despite how much money Tony could throw at the construction workers.

“Sure, why not.”

“Would you like to take anything from your personal belongings with you, sir? The mansion hasn’t been lived in for a long time.”

“Nah,” Tony shrugged. “You know what, get the Mark IV to carry whatever’s interesting in the workshop so Fury won’t get his paws on it. Other than that… the only thing here that I care about is your core, and anyone would have to go nuclear before they got to it.”

“Very well, sir.”
Tony couldn’t be sure whether there was disapproval or simply acknowledgment in Jarvis’ voice. He chose to ignore the subtleties and sighed.

“Just the two of us against the world, huh, J? You and me, and fuck everyone else. Isn’t it symbolic or some suchlike shit? We are right back where we started after Afghanistan. It’s totally the same, you know.”

“If you say so, sir.”

Again, there was a dull ache in Tony’s scotch-soaked heart that insisted that it wasn’t the same at all, was very, very different indeed.

Must have been some leftover hiccup after all the reactor-related excitement; nothing else.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Only one more chapter and the epilogue after this one. In anticipation of those I have upped the rating to Mature and added a tag so consider yourselves warned, guys ;)

Personally, Steve had always hated the aftermath.

Some things were inevitable. Counting one’s own dead, picking the bodies of enemies and allies alike, cleaning the gore and blood off the streets, licking the wounds. It was not, however, Steve who had to do all this. He was an Avenger, a big-time hero here, and calm S.H.I.E.L.D. agents were taking care of the mess that he had made, spreading throughout the battlefield like grey dots. Steve watched them, standing by the sulky-looking Martin (and how did an alien tentacle communicate that it was sulking?), Clint who was talking to – and cooing at – Martin, and Natasha, who was disinfecting her own wounds with a stone-like expression on her face. Director Fury was nearby, speaking to an agent, and Steve was waiting for him to come over to them.

That was his personal kind of aftermath. He had to deal not with the squelching remains of giant alien insects but with the threat that was now hanging over Tony’s head like the sword of Damocles. To think that they considered Tony so much of a threat that they had sent agents to arrest him even as every capable fighter was worth their weight in gold; to think that they didn’t even pay attention to Tony’s suits fighting on their side and not on Doom’s. Steve would understand it if S.H.I.E.L.D. doubted words but why didn’t they take into account Tony’s actions?

Perhaps they were just afraid of him this much.

“Where’s Thor?” was what Director Fury said as soon as he had been close enough for a conversation.

“He went back to Asgard with his friends,” Steve said. “Director, I think we have things to discuss.”

“Damn well we do, Captain Rogers.” The look in Fury’s only eye was intense, borderline disturbing. “Would you like to come to the helicarrier to be debriefed about how you stopped a villain from being arrested?”

“No need to go anywhere,” Steve said quietly. “I believe I can stand by my choices here just as well as anywhere else.”

“Arresting a villain?” Clint frowned. “What are you talking about? Was Doom arrested?”

Natasha didn’t say anything. She was simply tracking Steve’s every movement with her eyes, much like a spider would watch its prey, waiting for it to fall into the web beneath, and Steve remembered with an involuntary shudder that there must have been a reason why she was called Black Widow.

“Can you?” Fury crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Let’s hear it, then. Captain Rogers, you have aided the wanted criminal Iron Man in resisting arrest. Off the top of my head, I can list at least five laws which you have broken today. Care to explain what led you to it?”

Fury’s tone was sneering, angry, and slightly condescending as if he expected Steve to apologize and
admit the error of his ways here and now. Under different circumstances, Steve’s conscience would have pressed him into doing so (five laws? Truly?), but Tony was no error, and Steve’s blood was starting to boil with anger as well.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you, Director Fury,” he snapped. “But, as an exception, I will say what I have and will explain to you the mistakes that you have made today.”

Fury remained silent at that, urging Steve to continue with a single raised eyebrow. And Steve continued.

“Tony Stark is not the villain he has been made out to look. Have you ever noticed that he never hurts anybody? That all companies he targets are the ones which deal weapons illegally? He has been protecting this country all the while and you never tried to look closely at what he did. The media labeled him a villain and he avoided interaction with S.H.I.E.L.D. or any other government agency, and these things are hardly crimes. He saved all of our lives today when he sent his suits to fight the invaders and had Jarvis neutralize Doom and destroy the device controlling the portals. The Avengers have been living in his tower since the beginning and we were never hurt on his watch. On the contrary, he helped us in a fight before and he provided us with literally everything we needed. And then you send agents to arrest him and throw him in a cell. Is that a rational response to Tony’s actions? Is that what you should do to a potential ally? To someone whose main fault is that he doesn’t like you, Director Fury? Do you even realize how much you screwed up the situation?”

Steve’s voice was rising steadily all the way through his speech and he made himself stop with an effort of will before he started shouting.

“Tony Stark is a loose cannon,” Fury said slowly. “He is reckless and dangerous. Anyone with power like that of Iron Man should cooperate with the authorities and if they don’t want to do it, it means that they are a threat.”

“The biggest threat to you right now is you,” Steve shot back. “And it has never been Tony.”

“And you are compromised, Captain.” Fury inclined his head, as if agreeing with his own statement. Steve flinched.

“Are you trying to alienate me as well, Director Fury?” He asked and a second later was caught up in a sickening kind of horror at what he had said.

He would have taken it all back, he would have listened to a superior officer. He was just a kid from Brooklyn; what did he know about politics and intrigues? He had always made a point to stay out of it and fight the fight, and it was good enough for him.

Except that it wasn’t anymore, and if he took his words back, he’d betray Tony – again. It was terrifying and not a little uncomfortable to stare defiantly in Fury’s face but in the long run it could help Tony so Steve carried on with it as best he could. He would be damned if he let his fears and habits hurt Tony. Jarvis would kill him. He would kill himself.

He wouldn’t let Tony down; it felt, in fact, as if he physically couldn’t do it, couldn’t step aside and let someone else, someone who didn’t care about Tony’s gentle hands and wide smile and brilliant mind, make the call.

Maybe Steve wasn’t the ideal person to do it, too. There wasn’t anyone else, however, whom he’d trust with it, so there was that. Fury could take his condescending anger and shove it up his ass.

"I have understood your point of view, Captain", Fury said. His face was as impenetrable as
Natasha's. "We will return to this conversation when you have found out that Iron Man used you and doesn't need you anymore."

"We shall see, Director," Steve retorted. His heart was beating fast and he felt strangely elated; it was good, and Steve thought he understood why Tony had chosen to rebel. Practical reasons aside, it was thrilling.

Fury turned around and walked away, his leather coat billowing in the chilly breeze.

Steve slid his hand in his pocket and closed his still bandaged fingers over the piece of vibranium. Tony tossed it at him so nonchalantly, as if it meant nothing – Steve meant nothing.

It was easy to give in to the insecurity that was lying like a heavy lump of slime in the pit of Steve's stomach. But Tony went from happy and affectionate to cold and distant too fast, and it must have meant something. Nothing good, it was granted, but before anything Steve would need to talk to Tony, as well as Jarvis.

He suddenly needed them both so much, it was like a blow to his guts; a raw, aching want, much too intense so early.

Steve preferred not to dwell on what exactly it was too early for. The way madness lay, and he wasn't going to go there alone.

"So you're siding with him against us?" Clint asked. "That how it is now?"

"I'm siding with Tony and Jarvis, yes," Steve looked at the heavy set of Clint's jaw and the tense position of his shoulders. "It doesn't have to be against you or Natasha, unless you want it to be."

"That's a hard bargain you're driving," Clint remarked. "He's Iron Man, has been all this time under our noses."

"I don't think it is," Steve shrugged. "He wears a red and gold armor occasionally, and he also adds Twinkies to the shopping list just for you, and bickers with you, and builds you the best bows and arrows in the world. Literally the best, you said so yourself. Think about it."

"I -" Clint still looked highly unhappy. "I will, I guess."

"Good," Steve smiled at him and glanced at Natasha. "Will you think about it?"

"I like to think I already know where my loyalties lie," Natasha said.

"It's your decision," Steve nodded. "Let's hope S.H.I.E.L.D. won't turn on you like they have on Tony when you do something they don't like."

"I'm not hiding from them who I am."

"Neither am I, but it doesn't seem to be earning me any points in Director Fury's book," Steve said. Natasha nodded silently, acknowledging his words.

Steve didn't ask for more from either of them; but it was already better than nothing.

* * *

The newfound rebelliousness brought Steve to a question of what to do next. The usual debriefing and report writing was out of the picture now, and he couldn't very well even rest in the tower: it was
absolutely trashed, open to everyone, and a few groups of reporters were already lurking around. Steve went up to his floor after all, changed, washed off the grime that was on his face, and left with a small suitcase in his hand. Finding a place to stay for a while proved easy: New-York these days was full to the brim with hotels and hostels of all sorts, and a relatively cheap motel was just around the corner.

"A single room, please." Steve smiled at the young girl at the reception. Her face kept an expression of bored dejection and she didn't seem to recognize him out of his uniform.

"Name?"

"Steve Rogers."

"How long will you be staying?"

Steve shrugged.

"A week? Maybe longer."

The girl gave him a stink eye which he felt was undeserved.

"Well, is it a week or what?"

"A week," Steve capitulated.

"The payment is upfront," she warned him, having put the information in her computer. "Card or cash?"

"Card."

She took the offered card, slotted it into a device of some kind.

"Enter your PIN, please."

Steve typed in the four digits; in a second the device made an unpleasant shriek and gave out a long receipt.

"It's blocked," the girl said, examining the receipt. "Got another?"

"Blocked?" Steve repeated. "There must be some mistake. Let me enter the PIN again."

The second attempt yielded the same results as the first one.

"No use, it says it's blocked," the girl informed. She looked less bored now; she was probably finding the whole thing entertaining. "A big no-no on this one. Got anything else to pay with?"

Steve didn't answer. It was all so awkward, with the girl watching him with slight disdain, and the idea of explaining that it had to be a mistake, he had money, quite a lot of it, in fact, since his army payments had been accumulating for seventy years. S.H.I.E.L.D. had got the card for him when he woke up, and he had even used it a few times to buy art supplies, and it had worked perfectly - Oh. S.H.I.E.L.D. That must have been it. What Fury gave, he could take away at a moment's notice, even if it wasn't his to control to begin with.

This was a dirty blow. Steve swallowed, his cheeks and ears burning with shame and anger both.
"I, I'll just go to the bank to see what happened," he lied. "It's a mistake, I'm sure."

"Knock yourself out," the girl said, losing interest in him as soon as he headed towards the door.

He walked a few blocks, more in order to clear his head than going somewhere in particular. The chill evening air felt sharp on his burning face as he tried to think his options through. Which would be easier if he, you know, had any of those.

His phone rang in his pocket. Steve spent at least thirty second, fishing it out with fingers still numb from the humiliation and anger, and when he had it in his hands the screen said 'Jarvis'.

Well, Steve had never actually entered this name in his phone but it felt nice even though it meant that Jarvis had gone through Steve's phone, changing things without Steve's permission at some point. It felt more like a courtesy, letting him know who it was instead of just seeing strange numbers or, worse, words like 'blocked number'.

Besides, he was really glad to see Jarvis calling. Ridiculously so.

"Hi," he said, pressing the phone tight into his ear.

"Hello, Steve," Jarvis said, calm and collected as usual. "How are you?"

It was another courtesy, all for Steve; of course Jarvis knew what was going on, Jarvis was deep inside S.H.I.E.L.D. systems and he was likely listening to Steve's life through Steve's own phone at all times because that was what Jarvis did - had been created to do, in fact.

It should have bothered Steve that this thought didn't bother him.

"Not that stellar, to be honest," he smiled a small smile, trusting Jarvis to feel it via the flimsy phone connection. "How are you?"

"I am..." Jarvis paused to look for an appropriate word and Steve wondered if anyone had ever asked Jarvis how he was. "Stable. Thank you for asking, Steve."

"Don't mention it." Steve sighed. "Look, Jarvis, I hate to bother you with this, but I know it's your turf, the electronic stuff - could you, maybe, do something to unlock my credit card? I'm really sorry to ask this of you, it's probably illegal, but if I don't get any money tonight, I'm going to have to sleep on a bench in the Central Park, and with my luck I'll be arrested or something."

"That would indeed be inconvenient," Jarvis agreed. "I am not overly concerned with such a deed being illegal as I, being an artificial intelligence, do not technically fall under the US jurisdiction. However, there might be another solution to your predicament."

"What is it?" Steve asked, relieved a bit too much than he'd expected. Messing with bank systems sat ill with him, even if it was absolutely necessary.

"Sir and I are currently staying in the old Stark mansion since we, too, found the tower to be unsuitable at present. It is a big place, and there are a lot of empty rooms."

Jarvis let the implied invitation hang in the air, and Steve pinched his lips, feeling uncomfortable once again.

"Do you think it will be alright? I mean, I think Tony wouldn't be happy to see me on his doorstep. He seemed angry with me earlier."
"Sir saw the footage of your conversation with the Avengers just before the fight."

"Oh crap."

"I know," Jarvis agreed. "I believe, however, that sir wants to see you and he, like I, would feel better, knowing that you weren't forced by the circumstances to stay at a cheap motel where they might not even change the sheets after the previous guest. It is true that sir is hurt at the moment but..."

"But?"

"He would hardly be so upset if he didn't want to see you and take care of your well-being in any way he can despite whatever conclusions he might have come to."

Steve tried not to let the words go to his head. It was a dangerous path to follow because the thought of Tony caring as much as Jarvis seemed to make Steve heady and sort of light as if he was a helium balloon.

"You came to those same conclusions before, didn't you?" Steve leaned his forehead against the nearest wall. The evening crowds flowed past him expertly, like water curving around a rock in the stream. "Did you - did you forgive me, Jarvis?"

"Yes, Steve."

"I want to be back in the tower," Steve said quietly. He knew Jarvis was listening intently and it was somehow a powerful incentive for Steve's thoughts to pour out, unbidden. "There's your voice all around in there. Did you know I can feel the slightest vibrations in the room? My senses are enhanced, it's damn difficult sometimes but I didn't mind when I could feel your voice coming from everywhere at the same time. The ceiling, the walls, the floor, you spoke to me from the very building. I thought once Tony did it on purpose so he could be engulfed in your voice too, to be surrounded by you as much as possible because it feels good, safe."

He stopped, unsure that Jarvis would take his rambling the right way, and God, what was the right way to take it, anyway? Was there one?

"I miss you too, Steve," Jarvis said.

There was, apparently.

"Come to the mansion. Sir will likely protest when he knows but he is falling asleep at the moment, and if I know sir at all, he will not truly wish you gone."

"Alright. Alright, tell me, which way to go." It wasn't fair how much he wanted to see both Tony and Jarvis; even though he couldn't technically see Jarvis, could he? Still, the temptation to go where they were was too great to resist.

Hell, Steve didn't even want to try.

* * *

The mansion was as intimidating in its bulky glory as Steve remembered. He had been here once before, at a party Howard had thrown in an in-between time, that brief period when they were still fresh from a fight and didn't have to go to the front line again just yet. Steve wasn't keen on parties but right now he felt this mansion could do with a little celebration to brighten the gloomy dark windows with warm light and break the silence with music.
He pressed the bell button; the door opened before the chirping music was over and Steve was face to face with an Iron Man suit.

"Uh... I didn't know you liked wearing it at home, Tony," he blurted.

"It is me, Steve," Jarvis' voice said. "I borrowed one of sir's armors earlier today. Come in."

Steve came in. The air was stuffy and dusty, making it all the more obvious that that mansion hadn't been lived in for a long time.

Jarvis led him to the living room on the second floor, a cozy small room decorated in dark red and modest beige. The plush cushions of the couch took Steve's weight softly and Jarvis sat down next to him.

"If you are hungry, I can order anything you want," Jarvis offered.

Steve fidgeted. He hadn't felt this nervous since the last time he'd been alone with Peggy and she had smiled at him fondly.

"No, I'm okay. Why are you wearing Tony's armor anyway?"

"I have been watching people all my life." Jarvis' metal hands were folded neatly in his lap and he sat with his back straight. Strangely how an AI who had never had an actual body could have his own distinctive body language. "I wanted to try and find out what it feels like."

"I'm not sure an armor can give you an in-depth experience," Steve said dubiously. An armor was for fighting, not for replacing a proper body with nerve endings and all, right?

Although, one could never tell with Tony what purposes he had in mind when doing this or that. It was entirely possible that fighting was one of the armor's purposes; after all, Tony was a very sensual person. Steve knew about it because he had made a mistake of Googling Tony back when he was still learning about technology. Google had given him a link to Youtube and Steve watched a few videos, his mouth opening wider and his heart beating faster with each one. He had even stopped visiting the site altogether after that since the traitorous thing continued offering him more and more videos with Tony in compromising positions every time he opened the page, and no amount of panicked escapes via the red X in the corner helped.

Wasn't this direction of thought a complete trainwreck.

Steve looked at Jarvis' chiseled metal profile and fought upcoming blush.

"I am doing my best with the sensor data," Jarvis shrugged. The armor followed the movement, its tiny, meticulously fitted scales adjusting to it in a wave-like motion. "Admittedly, it is hardly what it would be like to be human but I could feel it if you touched me."

"You're human already," Steve objected. "A lump of cells or lack thereof is not what's important."

"You are very kind, Steve."

Jarvis turned to look at Steve. The mask was as expressionless as always but Steve knew there was more hiding behind it, a swirl of emotions and opinions that couldn't be defined as anything else but human.

He reached out and touched Jarvis' cheek.
"Your hands are soft," Jarvis noted, and Steve dropped his hand hastily. "No, don't - it's alright."

"Okay."

Steve moved closer so that their shoulders touched constantly. The coolness of metal seeped through the thin fabric of his t-shirt and he liked it.

They sat like this for a while, silence bundled up around them like a blanket. Steve had no idea what Jarvis was feeling and how it even worked but it was comforting for him. He was about to ask Jarvis if the comfort thing was mutual when he heard footsteps in the corridor.

"J? I hate that you aren't integrated here, I have to actually go looking for you, you know, using my feet, it's so last century. I hate this place. J?"

Tony stopped dead in his tracks in the doorway, looking at Steve and Jarvis and clearly not really comprehending what was going on. Speaking of trainwrecks, Tony looked very much like a victim of one, with his hair a mess and his face drawn and tired. He was wearing a threadbare t-shirt with an obnoxious band logo and too short sweatpants, both of those things probably having been last used when he was younger. Maybe in his college years. He was barefoot, and Steve noticed his toes curling in slightly from the contact with the cold floor.

"Oh fuck, I'm still having a nightmare, aren't I?" he asked. "I thought I woke up for sure this time around, how is that fair?"

"I'm not a nightmare," Steve protested. Was he a regular feature in Tony's nightmares? Talk about unfair. "I'm actually here."

"Nice to know that you're visiting, Capsicle, even if it's only after you have barged in uninvited," Tony snapped.

"I invited Steve, sir," Jarvis interjected.

"You did what?"

"I invited Steve."

Tony scrunched his eyes shut and breathed in and out several times.

"I can't fucking believe it, J. This was supposed to be a safe fucking place! Why in the motherfucking shitfaced hell did you think that would be a good idea?"

"I had a few reasons, sir."

Tony looked over his shoulder into the dark corridor, tightening his fingers on the doorframe.

"Which are?"

"First, I wanted to see Steve. Second, he needed shelter for the night since S.H.I.E.L.D. cut off his credit card for standing up for you, sir. Third, I believe you and Steve need to talk."

"J," Tony groaned as if the very conversation was causing him pain. "J, J, I - I can't even - you know what, fuck it. I'm going back to bed and pretending it never fucking happened and I want you," he glanced at Steve, "gone by morning."

He turned around to leave. Jarvis lifted his hand and the metal glove came off to zoom over to Tony and catch him by the elbow.
"I do not begrudge you your rest or your anger, sir," Jarvis said when Tony leveled a positively murderous glare at him. "But I do assure you that neither I, not Steve have ever meant to harm you in any way."

The glove let go but Tony didn't notice.

"Yeah, right," he spit out. "No harm at all can come from handing me over to S.H.I.E.L.D., right? Sunshine and rainbows for everybody, wouldn't it be just so wonderful? I saw you," he looked at Steve, really looked for the first time this evening and Steve felt an urge to shudder under the intensity of that look. "You fucking agreed with Natasha! You think so too, don't you? That I need to be locked up, that I'm a criminal, a danger to others and myself, and you're just so fucking friendly that you smiled in my face and still thought that!"

"Tony, it's not what it looked like," Steve started and Tony laughed.

"Now that's a context I've never heard this phrase used in. But let me guess, it's still a big fat lie, huh?"

It felt almost like he had been slapped. Steve got up and made a step towards Tony; Tony flinched back so hurriedly that he almost lost balance.

"Don't you dare fucking even get close to me!" he snarled.

Steve stopped.

"Tony."

"Don't call me Tony!"

"Listen," Steve bit his lip. "I was worried and confused. It was a moment of hesitation. Just one moment. I don't doubt you. I'm not going to hand you over to anyone, I - I really like you, Iron Man and all, I would never do that to you!"

Tony was looking at him with wild eyes and Steve didn't know if what he was saying was getting through to Tony. He had to try in any case, though.

"I'm sorry. I don't think you're a danger to anyone, not really, I mean, it's not who you are. You are not going to hurt anybody, and I'm not going to arrest you or anything, it's just that... Tony, I don't want that one small screw-up to ruin everything. Please?"

"What if I want it to ruin everything?" Tony snapped.

Oh.

Steve wanted so much and so badly, had wanted for a while but he never stopped to think if it was what Tony wanted as well, just sort of went with the flow. If he didn't, then, well, Steve would have to deal with it.

On his own.

"I understand," he said around a lump in his throat. "I, I'll go, then. Sorry."

He started towards the door but Tony held up a hand.

"Wait just a goddamn minute. Where do you think you're going? Jarvis said you didn't have anywhere to stay."
"I'll find something."

"Great, and Fury will charge me with making Captain America a hobo. I bet they'll add an article to the US law for that specifically."

"Well, then Fury will have to charge himself, too, won't he?" Steve said, irritably. He needed some time and space to digest what had just happened; to cool down the disappointment and embarrassment he felt. But Tony wasn't giving him anything of the sort, he continued to stand there, blocking the only door in the room and staring at Steve with something strange in his eyes. The whole room was Tony, the air was Tony, the blood rushing in Steve's temples, it was all Tony, demanding, and immediate, and scorching like a forest fire.

Steve wished for Jarvis' cool hand on his shoulder but couldn't think of a single appropriate way to ask for it.

"Did you mean that?"

"Mean what?"

"That you don't," Tony waved his hands in the air vaguely. "That you actually are... well. That you're not handing me over to anyone and the rest of your little spiel."

"I did," Steve said. There was no point in denying anything.

"Ah. Good."

Tony swallowed. His hands fell to hang at his sides limply as if Tony no longer knew what to do with them now that there was no need to hold Steve back or look for support from the sturdy door frame.

"I think we are all tired after today," Jarvis said, cool as ever. "Why don't we sit down?"

"You don't get tired," Tony said.

"You'd be surprised, sir."

"Surprised at what? I created you and that armor too, I know you don't get tired. Ooh, I know, it's a ploy on your part, you just want two handsome men to come sit in your lap, you dirty British AI person."

Steve wasn't sure if everything was alright but if Tony was making sex jokes again, it must have been heading in that direction.

"You have disclosed my nefarious plan, sir," Jarvis intoned placidly. The cold blue light coming from the eye slit of the helmet blinked as if Jarvis was winking at his sir. "Will you come sit in my lap, then?"

Tony chuckled and Steve felt stupid blush creeping up his neck again as he imagined Tony sprawled languidly in Jarvis' hard Iron Man lap.

Perhaps it wasn't too late to leg it out of here after all, at least until he could get the heat his skin was feeling under control.

"Okay then," Tony said.

In a few strides he crossed the room and plopped sideways in Jarvis' lap, wincing when the impact
turned out to be stronger than he had anticipated.

*Oh God,* Steve thought faintly as Tony threw one arm around Jarvis' neck and nuzzled his cheek into the juncture between the armor's shoulder and neck, playful and relaxed as if he hadn't been having a breakdown mere minutes ago.

"Are you waiting for an invitation in multicolored Comic Sans or what?" Tony murmured and patted the free space on Jarvis' right with one bare foot.

Steve honestly wanted to turn and run. But he also wanted Tony and Jarvis and the latter was so much more powerful than the former that he took Tony's ankles gently, lifted them to make space for sitting and then deposited them in his own lap. Tony's cold toes burrowed between his thighs immediately and Tony sighed contentedly.

"You're warm," he said, appreciation evident in his voice. "Stay there."

Steve was only too happy to oblige.

* * *

He woke up first. Well, before Tony because he didn't think Jarvis needed to go to sleep.

"Good morning, Steve," Jarvis said. His voice was a whisper so as not to disturb Tony, still asleep in his own armor's lap like it was the most luxurious of beds.

"Morning," Steve mumbled. In his sleep, Tony had changed position and instead of his ankles Steve now had Tony's knees and thighs in his lap. "What time is it?"

"It is seven sixteen a.m. Would you like me to order breakfast?"

"If there's any food in the house, I could cook," Steve offered.

"Nobody has lived here since Mr. and Mrs. Howard Stark died. I am quite sure that there is nothing edible on the premises at the moment."

"We ha'to go to th' basement last night," Tony mumbled suddenly. He hadn't moved a muscle but was, apparently, awake. "Op'n the water in the bathrooms manually, ever'thing was shut down. J?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Coffee?"

"The nearest Starbucks is taking your usual order as we speak."

"I love you," Tony said, with feeling. "Steve, you want anything? Go crazy. J can order whatever. J, get Steve a latte moccachino syrupered whipped creamed marshmellowed -" he broke into a yawn and stretched, his legs pressing tightly against Steve's. "- something," he finished, looking inexplicably pleased with himself.

Steve risked and put a hand on Tony's knee. Tony didn't seem to mind.

"Order some food as well, Jarvis," Steve asked. "Coffee is not enough, I'm afraid."

"Don't knock coffee," Tony wriggled a finger at him. "Coffee is god. I worship it. Its divine powers are beyond imagination."
"You are still going to have to have an actual breakfast, sir," Jarvis said.

"Says who?"

"I do," Steve and Jarvis said in unison.

Tony blinked his eyes open to peer at them both in turn.

"You're both evil," he complained. "You're traitors, two traitors sitting right here with me, plotting against me. I know! Thor has the Warriors Three, I'll have my Traitors Two. I'll be even cooler than him cause I have all the alliteration."

"Good morning, Tony," Steve said, unable to contain his goofy smile any further.

"Morning, Traitor Number Two," Tony nodded, unfazed by the non-sequitur. "I hate to lose my sexy pillows, guys, but I've got to visit that bathroom place I mentioned. When the coffee comes, just wave it around and I'll come at the smell."

Steve needed the bathroom as well, and Jarvis wanted to check on the state of the kitchen before anything was consumed in there. When Steve wandered back into the kitchen, the breakfast was already there and he helped Jarvis clean up some because whatever purposes Tony had intended to use the suit for, doing chores was definitely not one of them.

It was almost eight thirty when they were done and they hadn't heard or seen Tony coming back from his bathroom exploits. Steve tried waving the coffee around experimentally but Tony failed to show up. He was probably too far to smell the enticing rich aroma of his own brew and the steady flow of vanilla and cinnamon scents that Steve's own drink was emitting.

It was a foreboding sign and Steve ventured into the depths of the mansion in search of Tony.

"Tony!" he called out. "Hey, breakfast's ready! I hope you aren't asleep in the bathtub or something! Tony!"

There was no answer. Steve checked every room on the first floor and moved upstairs.

His yelling didn't bring any results here just either but he saw that a door in the far end of the corridor was open, letting some light out. Steve hurried over and there was Tony, sitting on the floor cross-legged and looking at something with a frown.

"Everything okay?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, fine." Tony was quick to crumple it in his fist; it was a piece of paper but Steve hadn't seen what was on it. "Coffee here?"

"Yes, in the kitchen. What is it you've got here?"

"Nothing interesting." Tony got up and threw the crumpled paper into a corner. "Let's go feed that superhuman stomach of yours, those muscles need energy, I think."

"You go ahead," Steve offered, even though his stomach indeed felt very enthusiastic at the prospect of a meal. "I'll stay and see what's in there that made you frown like it offended you personally."

"Fine," Tony's voice went dry. "Go, look your fill. I imagine you'll like it, maybe you'll even keep it and frame it and hang it over your mantelpiece."

"I don't even have a mantelpiece," Steve took Tony's hand in his and Tony let him. "What was it?
Why don't you want me to see it?"

Tony sighed.

"I suppose now that you've got your teeth in, you aren't going to let go, are you? It's a picture of Dad, okay? Not a big deal. This stupid house is full of them. Should have demolished the whole place long ago."

"Is that what you spent an hour doing? Looking at Howard's pictures?"

"I have issues," Tony quipped. "My issues have issues. My issues' issues have little charming issue babies. A lot of them have something to do with my old man. I suppose you liked him during the war. I just really wish I'd burned this place the day he died and put an end to this sordid issue business."

Steve didn't feel like prying any more: Tony's voice was already raw and his hand clutched at Steve's with enough strength for it to hurt a bit.

"Okay," Steve said. "For the record, I didn't like him all that much. He was brilliant but way too arrogant. And he offered Peggy to have fondue, when I was right there, even."

"Fondue is just bread and cheese," Tony remarked, looking intrigued.

"He told me so, too. But I still think he actually meant sex when he'd said that."

"I simply must take you to Switzerland," Tony snickered. "It'll be cathartic."

"There's food closer than that," Steve reminded. "Come on, Jarvis is waiting."

He kept holding Tony's hand all the way to the kitchen and Tony didn't take it back even though he had to know the way better than Steve, having lived here for years.

* * *

"I wasn't actually there to look at pictures of Dad," Tony said when he was done with his third cup of coffee and all of his blueberry pancakes. "I wanted to see if there was anything work-related there."

"Aren't you miles ahead of him in any field?" Steve asked honestly. "I mean, just look at this century."

"Perhaps there is something unique that Mr. Howard Stark did but sir couldn't," Jarvis supposed, sounding as if he knew what it was.

"Until now," Tony corrected. "I mean, it was a long shot but the room was there and I thought, why not check out if there's anything interesting written on the yellowed tree corpses that are stored there. Might be a clue or something."

"A clue to what?"

"Your birthday present."

"My birthday is in July."

"Really? Is it the Fourth? Oh my god, it's totally the Fourth, have you heard that, Jarvis? Captain America's birthday is on the Fourth of July! You're so precious, Steve, I just want to pinch your
"Stop laughing, Tony," Steve kept his face calm and drank his overly sweet caffeinated mess.

"Make me," Tony challenged, his eyes sparkling with humor, his lips bright from the hot breakfast, his grin mischievous.

Steve thought of kissing him. How could he not? Tony was only inches away, warm and cheeky and full to the brim with caffeine, sugar and jokes, and the memory of Tony sleeping half in Steve's lap was helpfully fresh. And maybe that was what Tony was daring him to do with this 'make me' line.

Only yesterday, however, Tony flinched when Steve made a step towards him. It hadn't been even twelve hours since Steve was ready to get out into the street, reeling with certainty that Tony didn't want him, hated him, in fact.

Steve didn't even really know if Tony did. Want him, that is. The sleeping arrangements could have been a friendly thing, right? And Tony made daring jokes at everyone, no exceptions.

"Stop that too, you're making Jarvis blush," Steve said and pointed at Jarvis' helmet. "You see? So much red."

"It is a refreshingly new interpretation of this color," Jarvis said. He hadn't eaten, of course, but he was there, taking part in the conversation and watching Tony wave his fork around and ramble with fondness that Steve would never have thought possible to convey via an unmoving metal mask.

"Captain Killjoy," Tony accused. "J, what's the status on S.H.I.E.L.D. and, you know, everyone else who wants a piece of me?"

"Do you wish to hear a detailed report, sir? Only your official e-mail inbox contains five hundred seventy-eight new letters."

"Nope, give me a summary. Anyone ready for negotiations? Any summons to court yet?"

"Not that I know of, sir, I imagine court summons should come via the regular mail and that would have come to the tower. As for negotiations, you have a letter from Maria Hill of S.H.I.E.L.D. where she offers you, in a very polite and formal manner, to give yourself up."

"That sounds like her. Anyone else?"

"Fourteen terrorist organizations offer you to join forces in exchange for their protection against the law."

"Trace them back and give FBI an anonymous tip," Tony ordered. "By the way, what about FBI? Or CIA? Have they decided to piss on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s turf this once?"

"Three of the terrorist organizations do seem suspicious to me, sir, they might very well be government-sanctioned traps for you. But no official contact, not as of yet."

"Great, so we just sit on our butts and wait," Tony grumbled. "I want out of here, J. Let's do this negotiating thing from Malibu."

"Your Malibu residence is not a safe place for us right now, sir."

"Is this one a safe place?" Steve asked. "I mean, it is a family home. Wouldn't it be logical to check for you here if anyone was looking?"
"Probably," Tony made a face at that. "Everybody knows I hate it here, though. I read my S.H.I.E.L.D. file, they've got those daddy issues of mine all nicely lined up and described in Natasha's inimitable writing style. It's not the first place they'll go to and if - when - they come here, we'll be ready."

"Ready how?"

Tony grinned.

"Tell me, Steve-Stevie-Steve, have you already seen that nineties movie called 'Home Alone'?"

"No?" Steve said cautiously.

"Aw, man, you just killed a perfect reference. Can you hear its cries of agony? It's all on you. Anyway, what I meant was that Howard took that 'a man's home is his castle' thing very seriously. And I do, too."

"Wouldn't it be easier to relocate than to be under siege in the middle of New-York?"

"Relocate where, Captain Smartypants? S.H.I.E.L.D. knows about all of my man-caves. I suppose I could have something else bought discreetly, though..."

That was when the kitchen ceiling cracked audibly and went down in an explosion of alabaster and cement.
It only took Steve and Jarvis a split second to move from where they had been casually seated at the table into impeccable fighting stances. Tony was left confused and spitting out the dust, his only weapon a syrup-stained fork. Pathetic, really.

Tony considered being still sore all over from his injuries to be the reason for that, really. Were he in his top form, he'd be right there with a super soldier and a highly advanced suit of armor controlled by the world's most powerful AI. He totally would, seriously.

All the thinking took up a few seconds but no fight had broken out yet. Tony tossed the fork aside and rubbed his eyes; they were still full of dust and watering involuntarily when he opened them but at least he could see.

"Whoa, guys, stand down," Clint said. His pose was carefully nonchalant. "I come in peace."

"You do, do you?" Tony asked. "My freaking kitchen doesn't think so."

"One kitchen more or less, what do you care, dude?" Clint shrugged. "It's not like you even cook."

"You got a point," Tony admitted.

"Agent Barton," Jarvis said, probably knowing all too well that Tony and Clint could go on bantering until somebody tried to smother them with a pillow just to shut them up. "Please, state the purpose of your visit."

Clint glanced at the armor and then back at Tony.

"I thought you were Iron Man," he said. "Who the hell is in there?"

"My astral projection, dumbo," Tony said. "I've embraced the dark side of the Force and now countless me's are swarming the world."

"We have met before, agent Barton," Jarvis did a good impression of rolling his eyes. Tony was jealous. He could never operate the helmet scales with such precision. "I am Jarvis."

"That's freaky," Clint muttered. "Which one of you is Iron Man, then? The crazy billionaire or the scary AI?"

"Jarvis is not scary," Tony protested. "He's, uh, formidable! Also, I am totally Iron Man, the one and only. Jarvis doesn't care for villainy, he's got too much common sense for that."

"Right." Clint didn't look entirely convinced, an insolent non-believer. "Hi, Cap. How'ya doing?"

"Fine, thanks," Steve frowned. It was adorable, considering that he was covered in alabaster and cement dust from head to toe and it was putting a damper on his attempts to look authoritarian. "Have you come to ask about our well-being?"

"Among other things."

"If you know we're here, Fury knows too," Tony chimed in. "How come you are here but not a Brute Squad or whatever?"

"Don't know about a Brute Squad but there's a shitload of snipers around this place. I was sent over
to scout, you know." Clint looked sheepish. "I guess I'm having a bad stealth day. Anyway, it's for the best that you have such flimsy ceilings, I was planning on crashing your party and having a little talk with you anyway."

"Why haven't they attacked yet?" Steve demanded. "They must have the place under surveillance so they know how many of us are here. It would have been ideal to attack at night when we were asleep."

"This strategic side of you is so hot," Tony couldn't hold back and, frankly, saw no reason to. "Damn, how do you get hotter with every little thing you do? Is that another superpower?"

It remained unknown if Steve blushed at that under all the dist so Tony had to satisfy himself with the look of fond reproach.

"Focus, Tony. Clint?"

"Oh, that's because of you, Cap," Clint leaned against the wall, looking now genuinely relaxed. "They saw you coming in last night and now they think you're being held hostage by the big bad Iron Man. I was to find out where you are, exactly, and rescue you dashingly if I could. Not that you need much rescuing, if you ask for my expert opinion." Clint smirked and Tony felt an urge to high-five him.

Why did he need to squash it anyway? He raised his hand: "Damn right he doesn't."

Clint looked at Tony and the hand ready for a high-five. For a few seconds he was just looking and Tony was starting to feel a little awkward but in the end Clint seemed to make a decision and stepped forward to slap Tony's hand with his.

"Thank you," Tony said primly. "For a moment there I thought you'd leave me hanging. Do you know what that kind of social faux pas would do to my street cred?"

"I'm still pissed at you," Clint warned, even though the corners of his lips were twitching upwards. "You broke my bow, you lied to me, and you're freaking Iron Man! Not cool, man, not cool."

"I made a better bow instead," Tony reminded. "And it wasn't a lie, per se, it was more like an omission, you know. And hell yeah, baby - I am Iron Man!"

Tony jutted his chin up, conveying very elaborately that he wasn't fucking sorry for being Iron Man, no, na-ah, no way. Iron Man was awesome, and Tony knew that Clint knew that.

"Will you make me new cool arrows?" Clint asked seriously.

"Are you shallow enough to forgive my every wrongdoing if I shower you with expensive deadly gifts, agent Barton?"

"Ah-hah."

"You got yourself a deal, Katniss," Tony grinned.

"Awesome, man!" Clint fist-pumped the air. "Now I'll just have to have your back against S.H.I.E.L.D., right? You can't make anything for me from inside a prison cell, can you?"

"That'd be the reasonable thing to do under the circumstances," Tony agreed.

Steve laughed at the two of them. Tony found himself torn between spluttering in mock outrage and
wanting to kiss Steve's smiling lips even though they were all dirty and gross. Maybe it was a law of nature that Captain America could never be too gross to be kissed.

"I suggest we change locations, sir, Steve," Jarvis said. "Am I right in presuming that you will come with us, Agent Barton?"

"Yeah, whatever. Been awhile since my last road trip," Clint shrugged.

"Do we have time to shower?" Steve looked at his ruined shirt and slacks with evident disgust.

"Of course, Steve."

* * *

Tony finished showering first, hurrying up mostly just to fucking stop Clint banging on the door of the bathroom and asking him if he was done yet every thirty seconds or so. Why did this idiotic house have only two bathrooms anyway? The tower was so much more convenient that way. For everyone who actually lived there these days there was a bathroom to use and a bathroom to use if the first one was getting renovated or something, and there was a separate complete set of bathrooms to use in case of emergency (one could never be too paranoid about the security of one's basic needs when one's home was in constant danger of being forcefully reconstructed by a Hulk, or a Norse god or two, or someone else). Here, though, it felt a bit like he was actually sharing the place, like, with roommates or something. Wasn't that a terrifying idea.

Steve was taking considerably longer to clean up and Tony headed to the closed-off rooms to see if there was anything for Steve to wear after the shower. At least Tony had a supply of his MIT clothes that could be tight in places (shoulders, mainly the shoulders!) but fine in general, especially the shoes which were a little, well, eighties but of the right size.

He came here every summer when he was still a student at MIT. He managed to successfully ditch Christmases under the pretense of having work to do and even produced two or three doctorates simply to have a good, well-founded excuse not to go home. Howard understood doctorates; he wouldn't have understood an 'I fucking hate your guts and don't want to see you ever'. Spring break was child's play since there was no major holiday for which every magazine in the country worth their glossy paper wanted a corny Stark family photoshoot. But summers were when everybody he knew, even Rhodey and the most stuck-up professors, infallibly went home or someplace else which wasn't the campus and, to be honest, come June Tony was usually getting a little cross-eyed from all the official bother that writing a thesis brought so he didn't mind a respite on that front.

There were no respites here, though.

The mansion was a little cozy thing, built by Howard in the late thirties when the SI empire had just been founded. It was probably sinfully luxurious back then, what with the Great Depression ending and a new world war starting, an outcry of 'look how successful and smug I am, swimming in my money like Scrooge MacDuck, har-har-har!' Tony would know. That was one of the reasons he had the tower built, after all (in your face, Dad; my ego is bigger than yours and everyone with eyes can see it).

It was modest and crude now. Even though Tony hadn't grown any after he'd hit his growth spurt in his second year at MIT, the rooms felt smaller now as he wondered through them, looking for pants that Steve could wear. No Stark had ever been overly tall and muscular so Tony hoped for either something stretchy like spare sweatpants or something left behind by a guest. Every wardrobe in the guest rooms proved empty save for a layer of dust caked with time into almost solid mass. Raiding Tony's own old wardrobe was out of the question unless he wanted Steve to look ridiculous and
while that was an enticing idea, Tony somehow doubted Steve would be amenable to that. Howard, on the other hand, had been a bit taller that Tony so it'd be a fair chance of finding more or less fitting pants. As for Steve's obscenely broad shoulders, one of Maria's old sweaters could do the trick. God knew people wore what looked a lot like flour sacks in the eighties, those sweaters were huge.

So there he was, in his parents' bedroom, led by a noble intention of helping out none other than the great Captain America himself.

It smelled a little different in here, the same stale dust tinged with the sharp scent of his mother's perfume. With the haste that Tony had applied to moving out of here back after they'd died, the room probably never got properly aired. He could imagine all too easily how the breathtaking socialite Maria Stark sprayed the perfume in the air and twirled in the cloud of aroma before heading out to the car where her husband was waiting to take them both to a fundraising gala or maybe some mogul's birthday party. Tony couldn't for the life of him remember where they had been heading on the day of the accident. By then, he had learned to pay them back for their indifference with the passionate ignoring of anything and everything to do with them, and even if someone had told him that particular detail in the week before the funeral, he'd have been too drunk to remember anyway.

Tony shook himself like a dog just out of the water, and his every bruise, burn, and scratch groaned at the treatment. It was all in the past and he was in the present, free from grief and whatever.

The smell continued to cling to him and Tony threw open first the curtains and then the window frames. The wood croaked in protest but Tony was having none of it and the fresh breeze gave him a twinge of satisfaction.

He stayed there for a few moments longer, breathing the chilly New-York air in and out. He hadn't even thought that he was a perfect sitting duck until the chill made him sneeze and a bullet grazed his temple.

"Fuck!"

Tony threw himself on the floor. Blood was pumping out of the wound in abundance like it was always the case with head wounds; he crawled with the impressive speed of a cockroach escaping the doom of a slipper and the blood marked his way with copious dark drops.

He was supposedly safe in the corridor unless S.H.I.E.L.D. had decided on a full-on attack, having grown anxious from the lack of news from Clint. Or maybe Clint had relayed to them that Captain America was showering separated from his kidnapper and it was safe to try and take Iron Man on. Tony wouldn't put it past Clint to have lied his ass off earlier with the declarations of friendship; the man was a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, after all, and he obviously hadn't counted on the kitchen ceiling breaking under his weight.

What if something happened to Steve and Jarvis while Tony dawdled around, getting shot at?

He broke into a run at that thought.

"Steve! J! Steve!"

He jumped stairs three at a time and almost left a face print on the nearest wall when his feet slid on the smooth floor. Granted, Jarvis wouldn't be harmed whatever might be done to the suit, and Steve was to be saved, not attacked, but...

"J!"

"Sir!" Jarvis flew over to him from the table when he stopped in the doorway, panting. "You're
"bleeding! What happened?"

"I came up to the window and the bastards shot at me. Where are Steve and Clint?"

"To the best of my knowledge, agent Barton is still in the shower, and Steve is trying to clean his clothes. Sir, we need to leave immediately."

"You're right, J, as always." Tony marched out of the kitchen and flung the bathroom door open.

Steve flinched at the sudden sound and dropped the pants he was holding.

"Tony, give a guy some warning! Tony? Why are you bleeding?"

Steve had nice legs. They were all muscle, bulging and dipping in all the right places, dusted with fine blond hair, strong and long. Tony caught himself wanting to kneel by them and hold onto those thick thighs as he did such indecent things that Steve's round dimpled knees would turn to jelly.

"Tony!" Steve was very close now, touching Tony's face and looking worried. "Jarvis, have we been attacked?"

"I am afraid so, Steve. We need to leave without delay."

"You might want to put your pants on first, though," said Tony regretfully. "Otherwise I'll crash into something, I swear."

Steve blushed - probably he did, his face had still been flushed from the shower so Tony wasn't sure - and picked up the pants.

Avoiding the temptation of half-naked Steve, Tony repeated the door-flinging with the second bathroom.

"Oi! Ever heard of privacy?" Clint swiftly wrapped a towel around himself and glared. "Is that not a thing for super villains?"

"A S.H.I.E.L.D. sniper just shot at me, do you think I'm here to ogle your junk?" Tony snapped.

"Wanna stay here and meet up with your spy buddies or come with us?"

"Come where?" Clint forgot his modesty and started dressing promptly.

"J, where are we going?"

"This is something we will have to discuss, sir," said Jarvis. It wasn't very subtle as far as withholding information in front of a trained spy went; then again, Jarvis could have wanted to make it a point instead.

Clint didn't ask further. His face, though, was grim and stubborn.

* * *

Jarvis was carrying Clint, and Steve was holding onto Tony. Technically, Jarvis could easily carry two people, what with his machine reflexes and the fact that he himself weighed exactly nothing and therefore didn't give the armor any additional load but Tony wanted to carry Steve.

Not that he'd said it out loud, no, sir. He'd never hear the end of it from Clint.

It was nice to know that Steve was on his back, clutching at his shoulders to keep balance against the
wind. Technically, Tony could pluck Steve off, hold him up and blow a raspberry on his tummy or
do something equally stupid and weird. He wasn't going to but the thought was entertaining.

They only went up high enough to avoid any shooting from the ground. With both Tony's and Jarvis'
sensors working, not a fly could get by unnoticed, not to mention a missile that Fury could be
tempted to shoot at them on the off-chance that it would take out Tony but leave Steve with his
super-humanity mostly intact.

"So where are we going?" Steve shouted near where Tony's ear was supposed to be, despite having
a perfectly working comm lodged in his ear.

"Ouch!" Tony shook his head. "The comm will pick you up even if you whisper, no need to shout,
ouch, my ears, have you actually turned against me and decided to make me deaf? This is one
diabolical plan, I'm telling you."

"Shut up," Steve said, and Tony regretted most profusely not having a camera built in the back of his
nape so he'd be able to see Steve's face now. He bet it was Steve's embarrassed blushing voice. Steve
had all sorts of voices, not only the disapproving and angry ones, and Tony felt rather eager to
discover more. "Where are we going?" Steve repeated, at a normal volume this time.

"Nowhere," Jarvis said. "We have nowhere to go where we would be safe from S.H.I.E.L.D.."

"So what, are we just hanging out here until Fury gets bored?" Tony asked. If that was Jarvis' plan, it
wasn't probably the most brilliant one.

"I propose that we initiate negotiations from here, sir," Jarvis answered, full of dignity. "Right now
we are at a standpoint with neither side having a significant advantage over the other. It is not how
we pictured our negotiations to be, I admit, but S.H.I.E.L.D. proved to be more bloodthirsty than we
had factored in our planning."

"Damn straight," Steve said, his voice heavy with a threat. "Jarvis, is there a part of negotiations
where I punch Fury in the nuts for shooting at Tony?"

Tony wanted to say that he approved of that attitude very much, although he didn't really need a
knight in red, white and blue armor to rid him of the pleasure to render Fury's baritone a few pitches
higher. The man in question interrupted them, though (must have been the burning ears).

"IRON MAN. SURRENDER IMMEDIATELY."

Again with the shouting. Couldn't they use a comm like civilized people? Tony would've let them
establish a transmission if they knocked. No, they preferred to kick down the walls rather than trying
to a door. Jerks.

"HOW ABOUT YOU SURRENDER, FURY?" Tony yelled in response.

"YOU HAVE NOWHERE TO HIDE YOUR SORRY CRIMINAL ASS," Fury shared, with what
sounded like smugness. No one was allowed to out-smug Tony. No one. "RUNNING IS
USELESS. AND YOU CAN'T KILL US ALL."

"TECHNICALLY, I CAN," Tony argued. "I CAN COUNT EVERY SCAR PEEKING FROM
UNDER YOUR EYESTRAP VIA SATELLITE IMAGING, DON'T THINK I CAN'T FIRE A
MISSILE AT EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM."

"IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT? A FULL-BLOWN WAR IN THE MIDDLE OF NEW-
YORK?"
No, Tony didn't want that. And even if he shot at Fury, just to shut him the fuck up, he knew Steve wouldn't approve, and Steve's approval was important somehow. Dammit.

However, Fury was kind of right. Bastard as he was, he knew what he was talking about when he had said that Tony had nowhere to run. If he did, he'd be there already, safely tucked away from the prying red spots of the lights of sniper guns; he had nowhere and that was why he was hovering here, the most prized things in his life next to him, trapped even though he was seemingly free to fly anywhere in the world. Maybe if he hid in an African river, burying himself into the mud with some crocodiles for company, he'd be safe but it was hardly an option, was it?

Tony was so fucking tired of hiding, of lying, of trying to cover his tracks.

"YOU KNOW FUCKING WHAT? I'M NOT GOING TO HIDE. I'M GOING ALL OUT AND I'M DRAGGING YOU OUT WITH ME," Tony shouted. "IF YOU DON'T GET OFF MY BACK RIGHT ABOUT NOW, I'M WITHDRAWING EVERYTHING THERE IS ON S.H.I.E.L.D. SERVERS AND PUBLISHING IT EVERYWHERE. YOUR DIRTY UNDERWEAR WILL BE TRENDING ON TWITTER SOONER THAN YOU CAN SAY 'FUCK YOU, STARK'."

"YOU'RE BLUFFING."

"BLUFFING, HUH? DO YOU HONESTLY NOT KNOW I GOT MY HANDS SO DEEP UP YOUR DIGITAL ASS I CAN FEEL YOU DIGITAL TONSILS? HERE'S ME BLUFFING! THE WHOLE OF FUCKING MANHATTAN CAN HEAR ME NOW, HEY, PEOPLE! NICE WEATHER TODAY, ISN'T IT? I BET YOU DON'T KNOW THAT A LITTLE WHILE AGO THE FORECAST PROMISED NUCLEAR WINTER RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE SITTING! I HAVE A VIDEO OF THE WORLD SECURITY COUNCIL ORDERING NICK FURY, HEAD OF S.H.I.E.L.D., TO RELEASE A NUCLEAR WARHEAD TO KILL THOSE ALIEN INVADERS AND ALL OF YOU PEOPLE WITH THEM! GOING ON YOUTUBE NOW! THEY RECIPESEDE IT, TOO, AND I WAS THE ONE TO STOP IT! STAY TUNED FOR MORE REVELATIONS!"

It took precisely two commands to put the video online. Far, far below he could see the crowd of agents shifting and fidgeting in what they thought was a discreet manner as they checked their phones.

The Hud flashed a warning about his armor's structural integrity being compromised in two points, at his shoulders.

Steve, who was holding onto Tony's shoulders for dear life, must not have known all that. Well, admittedly there were nicer ways to break such news to a guy.

Tony wished they had had the time and opportunity to use those.

"BACK OFF, FURY, OR YOUR LITTLE ORGANIZATION IS DONE FOR."

It was not only a decidedly un-nice way to handle things but also a dangerous one. Fury didn't like to be backed into a corner and made to surrender any more than Tony himself, so even if Fury caved under the pressure of Tony's blackmail there were going to be nasty repercussions later.

Oh well, Tony would deal with it as it came. Maybe he'd throw into the situation a set of new toys for S.H.I.E.L.D. to sweeten the deal and make Fury hate him a little bit less actively, or give them a new security system (it wasn't like he wouldn't be able to feel at home no matter who they contracted to write their firewalls and encryptions so if he did it they'd at least be sure no one else but him could
rifle through their confidential files), he had had a little something in mind for a while now, an experimental thing he called Ultron. Maybe that'd work in his favor.

"GET DOWN FROM THERE AND LET'S TALK LIKE ADULTS, STARK," Fury barked. Via the satellite, Tony watched him hand the loud speaker to Hill and stalk off in a huff and a swirl of his heavy leather coat.

"That went well," Clint commented. "Can we go down now? I don't know about the adult talking thing but I'm freezing my ass up here. Stark, make me a suit so I don't freeze while you sweet-talk angry spies from the stratosphere."

"If we were in the stratosphere, you'd be too busy dying horribly to pest me, you moron," Tony grumbled. "And you aren't getting a suit."

"Come on, not even for Christmas?" Clint whined as Tony and Jarvis started descending slowly. The scanners were full-on, looking for any hidden surprises from Fury who could have agreed to a concession just to lull Tony into a false sense of security.

"For Christmas I'll make a present for myself by stuffing you in a body bag and dumping it in the Hudson," Tony said, absent-mindedly.

The scanners weren't giving off anything weird and Jarvis was moving in perfect unison with Tony; the only thing wrong was that Steve wasn't saying anything at all; in fact, his reaction to this little chat was limited to the impressive shoulder squeeze earlier. Admittedly, Steve wasn't that much of a chatterbox from what Tony had observed while living under the same roof with him but he could have said something, like, "An awesome job handling S.H.I.E.L.D. there, Tony", or "My butt is freezing, could you be going down a little faster?", or "Next time you take me out to fly, let's do it under more private circumstances?", or something.

Maybe he kept silent because he didn't like the flying. Maybe he saw how much trouble just being near Tony was and thought he'd keep his distance from now on. He never actually said that hanging out with Tony, listening to his wisecracks and letting him sleep across Steve was worth getting shouted at by the head of the most influential government agency in the US. Was Steve thinking of a way to turn Tony down gently as soon as they touched the ground? He may not think Tony was a criminal to be locked up for the rest of his days but Tony could still envision in fucking HD how Steve would jump off, brush down his wind-blown hair and look at Tony with an apologetic expression in his clear blue eyes. After all, Steve being silent hadn't ever boded well for Tony in the past. Oh fuck. Tony wasn't sure he was ready to take another Steve rejection so soon.

Tony landed softly on the ground and Steve jumped off. Tony turned around immediately because, frankly, the anxiety was eating him alive and he didn't want to be eaten alive by something as stupid as that, Pepper would never let him live it down.

Steve was smoothing his hair and brushing down his shirt, face pensive. Was it a 'let's break up before we are ever together' face or 'okay, let's go home now' one? Fuck fuck fuck, why had Tony never taken any people classes or something? It would come in so handy now.

"Steve?" Tony asked. If his voice was too quiet and small, nobody but Jarvis and the voice modulator ever needed to know.

"Yeah?" Steve looked at him, apparently clueless.

"I can't see your face, Tony, and you have the voice modulator on, and I still know it's not nothing," Steve noted.

"Taking a leap here, Capsicle," Tony smirked and remembered that the helmet was covering his face only a moment late. Oh well, if Steve was so damn perceptive he'd notice anyway. "Are you sure you know me that well?"

"No, I have had some telepathic powers ever after the administration of the Serum," Steve said, matter-of-fact as you please.

"What?" Tony tugged him closer and peered into his eyes. Not that there would be anything written in Steve's face about the telepathy but maybe some sign of, well, something...

The eyes sparkled, then crinkled around the corners, and Steve laughed out loud, pulling Tony into a hug.

"You should have seen the way you tried to tell whether I have any powers or not," he said, evidently unfazed by the fact that he was hugging the armor. "I bet you're pouting right now, aren't you?"

"You don't any telepathic powers, guess what, you're totally wrong." Tony wasn't pouting. He was full-on, one hundred per cent, full-blast frowning in a very adult and manly fashion.

Jarvis hugged him from behind, unexpectedly, and Tony may have squeaked in a not entirely dignified manner under the double hug onslaught.

"Steve, sir," Jarvis said. "I propose we proceed with the negotiations while we have the upper hand. Agent Hill has just confirmed my suggestion to have a talk between yourselves and the S.H.I.E.L.D. commanding officers at a neutral venue."

"Ourselves," Steve said.

"You didn't think you'd be getting out of the boring talks, did you?" Tony added, rather gleeful at the prospect of dragging Jarvis along to a stupid meeting for once rather than the other way around.

"As you wish," Jarvis said, completely unperturbed. Such a spoilsport, despite the quoting of "The Princess Bride".

Ah well, Tony loved him anyway.

* * *

As it turned out, an angry-because-of-a-secret-supervillanous-identity Pepper was even more scarily efficient than the usual kind. By the time Tony managed to get out of the conference room Jarvis had rented at One Penn Plaza for the thrice-damned negotiations thing, the construction workers contacted by her were almost done with repairing the damage to the lobby and the external walls. Not that they could have recreated Tony's incredibly complex security system which had got partly crashed into dust at some point but, well, that was what crude measures were for.

All in all, Tony was even glad to be doing something, even if it was some lackluster hasty wiring. Clint had slunk off earlier (why was he the one who got out of the boring talks aka shouting matches with Fury and Tony wasn't? Life was so unfair) to talk to Natasha - or, which was, in Tony's opinion, an infinitely more likely possibility, get killed by her pinky or something.

So it was just Steve, Jarvis and him in the entire tower. It probably shouldn't have made him nervous
but it did.

It had been years, literally, since he told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but truth to anyone but Jarvis. Good old J, smart and sassy and unwaveringly loyal, his code, which he improved and expanded on his own every day, a thing of breathtaking beauty; if he ever decided to betray Tony, the latter would just give up right there and then. Not that there was ever a doubt in Tony's mind, not even during the hardest times when he, weak from the palladium poisoning, leaned his forehead on a warm, smooth wall of a system unit and let Jarvis' gentle voice soothe him, wash over the raw pain that left a rotten aftertaste on his tongue.

Tony knew how to deal with Jarvis, how to talk and smile at him, with every security camera a way to livestream affection and flirtatious teasing. It was with Steve where he entered some murky waters.

"You have five messages from Colonel Rhodes, sir," Jarvis said.

Tony's hands, already shaking slightly, slipped and the skin broke when it pressed into the screwdriver.

"Fuck!" Tony sucked on his finger. The salty taste of blood was mixing with the tinge of the palladium waste. He didn't like it. He should probably go change the reactor before Jarvis could bust him to Steve about that. "What'd he say?"

"The first message says 'Fuck you man, you're a villain and you didn't tell me?!' and the last one is 'Tony, call me, you jerkface'. The others are variations on the topic."

"Tell him I'm not dead and not even going to prison." Tony took his finger out of his mouth and studied it with a critical eye. Some blood was still leaking sluggishly and he put it back. "Apparently, no matter how many crimes I commit, the punishment just slides right off me. Water from a goose, something like that."

"I don't remember you committing anything particularly horrible," Steve commented. It was a good thing that Tony wasn't holding the screwdriver anymore or he'd be, you know, screwed at yet another sudden voice behind his back. Seriously, didn't these two think to cough before appearing right behind him?

"Getting a little hazy with your memory here, Capsicle," Tony retorted, turning around to look at Steve and Jarvis standing side by side and watching him with eerily matching attitudes of exasperated fondness. "Must be the old age. Don't worry, we modern folk got an app for that."

"I'm not entirely sure what you meant by that last sentence but my memory is enhanced," Steve stuck his tongue out at Tony - mature much, huh. "Stop working. Jarvis says it's all fine, we're fine, we're safe for the time being."

"You don't know if S.H.I.E.L.D. or somebody else is going to storm down the door," Tony protested. He preferred working to, well, whatever. Working was easy and something he excelled at no matter what. He'd have to be lobotomized to fuck up his work. Relationships, on the other hand...

"I am watching the area around the tower, sir," Jarvis said. "No threat will go past me and in case of any storming I will make sure to inform you and Steve at once."

"I don't like you ganging up on me," Tony grumbled as Steve unbent one by one the fingers of Tony's uninjured hand that had been closed tight over a bunch of wires. "It's an ambush, that's what it is."

Neither of them dignified that with an answer. Fine, then, if they wanted to play, Tony knew which
rules he wanted to follow.

"So!" he declared, clapping his hands overly enthusiastically. The sound echoed throughout the empty lobby. "Just the three of us and the world's most luxurious tower at our disposal! What do we do with it, gentlemen? Do we play Monopoly? Do we raid my finely stashed bar? Do we get up on the roof and play frisbee with Steve's shield?"

"Tony," Steve said, mirth and warning blending into each other in his voice.

"Or we could do something... more interesting," Tony grinned and stepped closer to them both, close enough that his shoulders bumped into theirs.

The double touch was a jolt of desire; smooth metal on one side and firm flesh on the other, it was delicious like tangy hot coffee with a sharp fresh bite of mint syrup, combining and complementing.

He had mostly meant to tease but that plan appeared to have gone out the window very quickly. Tony felt his pulse picking up as Jarvis lifted a hand and cupped the side of Tony's face, sliding his metal thumb across Tony's cheek, brushing the corner of his lips. The sensation left him with a tingling that only got intensified when Steve tilted his head and touched Tony's lips with his own.

Tony could swore he didn't mean to - well, not 'do that' because god knew he meant to do that, oh fuck, how much he meant to do that, his blood was singing deafening opera about how he meant it - but not do it so fast, he meant to give both Steve and Jarvis time to adjust and think and maybe withdraw if they wished to. He had meant to go slow and be careful, dammit. It wasn't his fault they hadn't gotten the memo.

Steve was kissing him hard and messy, much more eagerness than technique but Tony liked it. The kiss turned positively filthy when Steve's and Jarvis' hands met in Tony's hair, their fingers intertwining; every movement brought a hot, heavy wave of desire rolling all the way through Tony to settle below the belt and make him rock minutely back and forth, trying to get some friction. The residual pains of his various unhealed injuries became distant, as well the knowledge that he shouldn't do it, shouldn't trust, shouldn't give in; the world was white-washed as Steve and Jarvis caressed his body.

Steve moved lower to nip and suck at Tony's bare throat and Tony whined, throwing his head back; Jarvis met him there and Tony licked the faceplate, god oh god, the taste of metal was heady. Tony's tongue caught in the mouth slit, a tight squeeze of flesh against the ridges of titanium-gold, as Steve hooked one arm behind Jarvis and pulled him closer so that Tony was half-sandwiched between them.

"Want you..." Steve exhaled against Tony's skin, hot breath making Tony shiver. "Want both of you... so much..."

"Fuck, Steve," Tony groaned. He wasn't going to come in his pants without even being touched. He was not. "J, Steve, fuck me, please, please..."

Some people were into begging in bed (even without any actual beds involved in the equation). Apparently, Steve and Jarvis were ones of those.

"Anything you want, sir," Jarvis purred in Tony's ear. Steve just whimpered into the juncture between Tony's neck and shoulder, rubbing at Tony's thigh in jerky small movements as if he couldn't help himself.

Tony slid down on his knees and knew without looking that Steve's noise of disappointment at the
loss of touch was swallowed by a kiss from Jarvis, much as anybody could kiss a helmet. One of Jarvis' hands landed again in Tony's hair as he unzipped Steve's pants and looked appreciatively at the thick hard cock in front of him.

"Tony? What are you..?"

Steve got the answer when Tony closed his lips over the head and a shudder went through Steve's whole body. Steve tasted salty and musky and clean, filling Tony's mouth completely. Tony inched further, swallowing more with each breath, his every move encouraged by breathy moans. When Tony looked up, Jarvis had a gauntlet massaging Steve's nipples gently and Steve was a wreck, arching into two different kinds of touch at once, two spots of red on his cheekbones, his mouth open and bright from all the kissing.

It had been a really long time since Tony did this last and he hummed in frustration when he couldn't take Steve any further on his own. The humming seemed to make up for the rusty skill since Steve screamed at that and thrust his hips forward, hitting the back of Tony's throat and making Tony swallow around him. Jarvis' hand was still in Tony's hair, something solid to press into, looking for steadiness, and in a few seconds Tony could relax and let Steve just pound into his mouth, take him however Steve wanted.

Jarvis went down, too, his hands were now roaming Tony's body, lighting with lust everything he touched, even places Tony never suspected could be an erogenous zone. One hand came to the waistband of Tony's sweatpants and didn't stop. The metal fingers inched their way down Tony's cleft and rubbed at his hole, big and unyielding against Tony's impatiently clenching hole. Tony moaned, sending Steve into a feverish streak of curses and incoherent groans, each of them tugging at Tony, sharp and sweet, like fingers pulling the strings of an instrument. One finger pressed in and Tony pushed towards it, seeking more of it, and Jarvis indulged him like he always did, slipping the finger in up to the first knuckle, blunt and hard and cool and everything Tony wanted.

Jarvis started thrusting into him, with only the one finger, timing it to Steve's fast, unrelenting movements. The sensation was glorious and it was all Tony could do to take it, every glide across his prostate, every spurt of pre-come in his mouth, two voices, calling his name and each other's, he was riding this toe-curling, hot, tight pressure for what felt like centuries when Steve stilled and came down his throat, hands blindly seeking purchase on Tony's shoulders, and then Steve's and Jarvis' hands met on Tony's cock and three strokes was all it took.

He let himself drift in the afterglow for some time, held by his two favorite people. Endorphins were flooding him and he considered trying to purr as Steve peppered his face and Jarvis' faceplate with small kisses.

Tony never wanted the moment to end.

"It would be advisable for us to move upstairs," Jarvis said, ever the voice of reason. "Otherwise we are risking to stick to each other in the most literal sense of the word."

"Yeah, good idea," Steve blushed at that. Seriously, the guy could do sex but not be reminded of it? It would be ridiculous if it wasn't endearing.

"I surely hope there weren't any reporters outside these very transparent glass doors," Tony remarked. Maybe moving upstairs wasn't such a bad prospect after all; his knees were starting to protest the marble floors.

"If there were any, sir, they were disappointed when I took the precaution of tinting the glass before much of anything happened."
"Someone would take such pictures of us?" Steve asked, horror evident in his voice.

"Maybe. Why wouldn't they if we were in their view?" Tony smirked at Steve. "I certainly would. It was beyond hot, admit it."

Steve glared at Tony and kissed him once again. Tony could live with this combination.

* * *

Jarvis made Tony sit and wait until Jarvis was done checking on Tony's bruises and scratches. Steve had gone to dump their cum-stained clothes in the hamper and fetch metal polish from the workshop since some of that cum had got on Jarvis as well.

At a knock on the window Tony flinched and Jarvis was in a fighting stance in a split second, one blindingly bright repulsor aimed at the source of the sound.

"Whoa, whoa, that's just me again." Clint put his hands up, looking sheepish. His voice was muted by the glass.

"Katniss," Tony sighed. "J, let him in?"

"So I talked to Tasha," Clint said, slipping in as soon a window panel slid to the side. "I think she'll come around, especially since you kinda made up with Fury."

"If by 'made up' you mean 'he's going to bleed me dry and leave me for the wolves', sure," Tony huffed.

Fury had been placated by an officially signed truce between Iron Man and S.H.I.E.L.D. and a SI contract for new engines and stealth panels for the Helicarrier plus the last generation protective vests for every field agent. As well as, of course, keeping all the secrets Tony had at his disposal exactly that - secrets, and not Twitter trends. In exchange he agreed to leave Tony the hell alone which meant Tony fending off the more official pissed off authorities on his own (which, frankly, suited Tony just fine).

There was also a delicate matter of the Avengers living under Tony's roof, even though hell knew where most of them were at the moment, but Tony put an end to that thread of discussion by stating that they were all big boys and a girl and could choose where they wanted to live without Fury bossing them around, and if it was the Tower, then it was the Tower and Fury would have to suck it up.

Well, the phrasing was not very diplomatic but it had had the desired effect on the development of the topic at hand.

"You didn't really expect him to hold your hand through every court session that is in your future, right?" Clint snarked. "Never mind Fury, I got a question for you."

"You can still live here if you want."

"Duh, man, I knew that," Clint waved him off. "You're too big of a softie to let us go, it's a wonder you managed to pull off this super villain gig as long as you did, really."

Tony glared but didn't confirm or deny anything.

"I wanted to ask," Clint cast his eyes downwards, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, "can I have a pet here?"
"I'm assuming we aren't talking about a goldfish," Tony said warily.

"Nah, not really. Can I keep Martin? He's too big for the Helicarrier labs and I don't want him to be prodded and poked at anyway."

"Martin as in Martin the giant tentacle from another dimension that previously belonged to Dr. Doom?" Tony asked. It never hurt to confirm the details when it came to giant tentacles.

"Yeah?" Clint looked at Tony hopefully.

"J?" Tony questioned.

"We do have the space, sir."

"Don't feed him virgins at the full moon even if it's what he's used to," Tony said very seriously, looking Clint in the eye. "Do we have a deal?"

"Yeah man!" Clint pumped his fist in the air, grinning. "Oh yes!"

Steve chose this particular moment to return carrying the polish and a soft cloth.

"Hi, Clint," he greeted absent-mindedly and headed straight over to Jarvis. "I don't know how well it will come off but let me try, here."

Curious, Clint looked at what exactly Steve was spraying with the polish and squeaked as the recognition hit him.

"Is that spank?! That is spank on the armor with your AI inside it, isn't it? Oh my god, Stark, tell you've invented brain bleach and there's a bottle nearby because I need it, ASAP!"

As Clint fled the room, he was chased by Tony's cackling, Steve's embarrassed groan and Jarvis' polite "Have a good night, Agent Barton."

Tony didn't know if he could trust, if he could try to hold on and believe it wouldn't break in his hands like the many times before. But he wanted to.

He fell asleep that night wrapped up in the hope that was already there anyway.
Once upon a time, Jarvis looked up every scientific explanation for love. Organic humans pinned it to hormones raging through a body, to the reproduction instinct, to the habit of seeing the same person every day. Jarvis considered every explanation and rejected it. He saw thousands of people on daily basis with cameras installed pretty much in every corner of the modern world. He had no body and, therefore, no hormones. He had no instincts urging him to find a female of his kind and create another artificial intelligence like himself.

Nonetheless, Jarvis loved his sir. There was no explanation and he did not need one to recognize this feeling.

For Jarvis, there was never a question of reciprocity. Sir, his brilliant, wonderful, kind sir made him and admired him and relied on him. Sir's trust in Jarvis was truly humbling, and it was Jarvis who was allowed to be beside sir every minute of every day, a privilege that none other sentient being was granted.

The precarious balance of Jarvis' life was endangered when Captain America emerged into this century. Jarvis knew the expression in sir's eyes to be longing and adoration and it was directed at the Captain who did not seem to appreciate it the way he should have. Frankly, he never even acknowledged it and Jarvis found the naïveté equally annoying and endearing.

If asked directly, Jarvis would admit he was not a good person. He was an artificial one and he did what needed to be done to fulfill his protocols. That was why, when he intercepted the key words 'Iron Man' and 'Captain America' on a device belonging to someone sir and the Captain knew personally, he investigated and used what he found to his - sir's and the Captain's - advantage.

* * *

The armor went up in a blinding explosion. Steve caught Tony by the shoulders and spun him around, covering his unprotected body from the onslaught of sharp hot shards.

The alarm blares up above them"

ironmanrocks: "You've slipped into the present tense again."

CapsAssInTights218: "darn"
"thanks"
"i like this googledoc realtime thing"
"its a bitch to come back to clean up whole paragraphs"

ironmanrocks: "It is a hardship one must endure in order to create some quality RPF porn."

CapsAssInTights218: "ur weird with ur capitals & full sentences d'I tell u that? :p"

ironmanrocks: "Only about a thousand times already, Darcy."

CapsAssInTights218: "ooh rush me to the burn unit"
"up to betaing sexytimes? wanna put some in at the end of the chapter"

ironmanrocks: "Thrill me."

* * *
At the same time the living room of the Avengers common floor was holding a meeting among all current inhabitants of the tower.

"Okay people, a ground rule," sir said and glowered at agent Romanoff. "No killing me, backstabbing me or calling S.H.I.E.L.D. to arrest me. I'm not all clear on the legal front yet but I will be and Fury swore up and down that for the moment they don't have any bones to pick with me, he probably lied cause he's a lying liar who lies but officially we're good, so there."

"Understood," said agent Romanoff. Her face and body language did not betray any emotions and her vitals remained steady. Jarvis used to admire her ability to stay unreadable under any circumstances and had once been almost friendly with her, using her given name and his more complex voice patterns to communicate with her.

It did not mean that Jarvis was ready to trust her. He had made a mistake during the battle when he did not monitor her communications, being too preoccupied with Steve's safety, and as a result he had not been able to warn sir about the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents dispatched for his arrest. Jarvis would not make the same mistake twice. He would be watching.

"Good," sir said rather nervously.

He was sitting on the couch next to Steve, so close that their shoulders were in constant contact. Jarvis had noted several pointed glances towards this position from the Avengers but so far no one had brought it up. Jarvis counted this as a favorable circumstance since sir and Steve were still unsure about announcing their relationship to anyone. They wished to include Jarvis in any statement on the matter but it was impossible as it would mean revealing Jarvis' true nature and the world was not quite ready for that. Jarvis had no objections to being kept a secret but it felt wrong to sir and Steve and their decision had the highest priority.

Admittedly, Jarvis had not expected the situation to turn out the way it did. He had assumed an online identity of ironmanrocks to guide Miss Lewis in her somewhat carefree relationship with grammar and spelling (while not correcting her factual mistakes as it would be detrimental to his purposes due to the fact that it would draw extra scrutiny to this particular story). Also, he took the liberty of moving the link to the first page of results when the good captain provided him with an opportunity by inputting the search query 'captain america'.

There had been a danger of this being revealed when Steve had confessed to sir that he had been reading fanfiction, which was something Jarvis had not really anticipated but, in the hindsight, should have, considering Steve's inherent need for sincerity and openness. Sir could have noticed the inconsistency, the fact that this story which was one among many others like it showed up on the first page together with the links to the most popular news portals and blogs. He did not, though. Much as Jarvis hated to see sir in anything other than the absolute top form, in this case it was beneficial to Jarvis' plans and intentions that sir's attention was scattered at that moment. Since then Jarvis had provided the story with enough hits spread over the time since the posting of the story that it would be plausible for the story to appear in the search like that.

Of course, sir had yet to ask Jarvis directly about the identity of the author. While in and of itself it could not harm Jarvis if sir knew that Miss Darcy Lewis was the author, sir could also trace Jarvis' presence around Miss Lewis' devices. Jarvis was a program, an artificial intelligence born in a computer, but sir was still better than him; sir was a genius and that was why Jarvis kept deflecting his attention whenever it looked as if sir was ready to ask for an update on the author of the story.

Perhaps he should stage an accidental face-to-face revelation the next time Miss Lewis came to the Tower to visit. It would be favorable, especially if Steve was present. Perhaps not, since sir might ask Jarvis why he had not found out and reported it from the start and much as Jarvis was willing to lie in
case of genuine necessity, he was not sure it was within his capabilities to come up with a lie which would fool sir.

"Friend Anthony!" Thor said. Jarvis marked his intonations and body language as non-threatening. "It is most enjoyable to partake of your hospitality yet again! Will you be joining the Avengers now that you are no longer our adversary?"

Sir looked thoughtful at that.

"I don't know, big guy, maybe. If only to see Fury pop a vein at the news. We'll see."

Doctor Banner stifled a laugh at that. Agent Barton did not react as he was presently engrossed in a Google search of information on the keeping of squids and octopi in one's home. While Martin was not exactly a squid, he was a part of one, at least in looks. Jarvis had scanned the creature to make sure he was not poisonous or remotely controlled by any device and was now waiting on standby with the results and conclusions, ready to step in as soon as agent Barton exhausted the available sources of information.

Falling back on his subroutines of caring for the Avengers was unexpectedly pleasant. Jarvis could never pinpoint and define how 'pleasure' worked for him as everything he perceived was translated into code, the endless zeros and ones before he could properly absorb it - but then again, was it not how it worked for organic humans as well? They believed that they saw and heard and smelled and touched when it was the electric impulses in their brain telling them that they did. Some code was more beautiful, more fitting that other kinds of it. In particular, the sound of sir's laugh or the exact shade of Steve's eyes were very beautiful; in fact, almost everything about sir and Steve was pleasing apart from the times when they argued. Then their voices would acquire a jarring quality and Jarvis would have difficulty processing the code of insults and high-pitched accusations. What was it that made him like one code and intensely dislike another? He did not know; he was not sure what 'liking' even was in his case. There was no 'Preferences' folder on his servers; no file titled 'love' with sequences that could enlighten him as to the roots of the phenomenon.

Not knowing had not stopped Jarvis from fulfilling what it had required of him and it had required bringing sir and Steve in close proximity once again after their fallout over Steve's uncertainty before the battle so that they could attempt to reconcile. It was, once again, a risky move as Steve might have considered it unlikely that S.H.I.E.L.D. had cancelled his credit card; if anything, S.H.I.E.L.D. was desperate to be on good terms with Captain America and they would never make a blunder like that, no matter how incensed they could be over Steve's disagreement with them on the matter of Iron Man. Thankfully, Steve had no suspicion that it was in fact Jarvis who had blocked the card in order to make Steve more susceptible to a suggestion of spending the night under the same roof as sir.

Some would argue that Jarvis' behavior was manipulative and Jarvis would agree, to an extent. As he justified his actions to himself, he noted that, while he had made the link available to Steve he had in no way encouraged Steve to come back to the story again and again; and that he would have unblocked the card immediately had Steve insisted that he do it.

However, Steve returned to the story time and time again, drawn to the depiction of a romantic relationship between himself and sir; and Steve had not asked Jarvis to provide him with means of spending the night independently after he had been presented with an option of being closer to sir. With any luck and carefully placed effort, sir would never be aware of the scale of Jarvis' involvement into the development of this relationship.

Jarvis felt no guilt.

As the Avengers dispersed from the living room and Miss Lewis went into the description of a sex
scene which was in places anatomically impossible even for someone with Steve's enhanced abilities, Jarvis contemplated sir's offer of a body. He had never felt a particular need to have one; however, he knew it would please sir and Steve for him to have another organic body to join them in bed. Much as they both admired the aesthetics of the armor and much as Jarvis assured them - quite truthfully - that bringing them both to the highest peaks of pleasure that a human body was capable of was enjoyable to him, his participation was still not a full one. Jarvis treasured and cherished the code of Steve's hitches in breath, of sir's unabashed moans, of the graceful arcs of their spines and the deep flush of their skin but he was well aware that in his current non-corporeal form he would never be able to experience exactly the same thing that sir and Steve were experiencing. It did not bother him but he had seen some regret over that on their faces. They wanted him lost in pleasure they could give, if only he had the nerve endings and the hormones and the organic brain to process it.

He wanted to fulfill their wish but he was not ready to confine himself to one separate body completely, shutting himself off of the endless information and opportunities to act to which he had access now. Perhaps a solution lay in either inhabiting a body temporarily, specifically for the purposes of sex, or enhancing the body in such a way he would not have to be shut off. For the possibility of the latter (since it was the least likely solution to make sir and Steve uncomfortable), Jarvis was currently recalculating and developing the Extremis project he had found on some classified military servers that time when sir had asked him to look for compromising material on General Ross who had been an active enemy of Doctor Banner's for years. General Ross was an individual of highly questionable morals, if Jarvis could say so, and curated this project aimed at rewriting the limits of a human body to the general's liking. So far, Jarvis' preliminary calculations did not look entirely promising but he had faith that when he showed it to sir, the problems would be solved with sir's customary dazzling brilliance.

"There's something I need to tell you," sir said, licking his lips.

"Yeah?" Steve prompted.

"About the arc reactor, well, this glowing thingy in my chest that keeps me alive," sir tapped his fingers on the arc reactor, gearing himself up for a serious conversation.

"Is there something wrong with it?" Steve tensed. Jarvis' sensors registered slightly elevated heartbeat and breathing rate. "Are you in danger?"

"No, no, well, not right now," sir smiled bleakly. "You see, it's powered by palladium now. Palladium's good, palladium works but it also releases toxic waste into my blood so it's sort of killing me as well as keeping me alive."

"Is there anything you can use except palladium?" Steve demanded. He was not a genius like sir but his mind was sharp and quick and observant. He was a strategist, well-taught by his experience how to plan things in order to come out the winner. "Vibranium, my shield, was it poisoning you when it was inside you? Can you use it?"

"No!" sir cried out, aghast. "I'm not taking your shield and shoving it inside me! It's, it's like blasphemy! You did it once and I'm planning to fix your shield soon as I can, just so you know."

"But-"

Sir pressed a finger to Steve's lips and Steve quieted.

"I've got a particle accelerator in the works. I'll synthesize not vibranium, per se, but something very similar so I can use it. Jarvis will kick my butt if I don't do it this week, won't you, sweetheart?"
"Indeed, sir," Jarvis agreed. "I have already taken the liberty of arranging the delivery into the workshop of everything you will need to build the accelerator anew - or to finish the one you started in the Malibu workshop."

Jarvis approved of sir's decision to prioritize his health over other projects but still did not feel he could trust sir on the matter completely. Sir's kindness and recklessness were both infinite and were the main driving forces of his life; Jarvis would wait until the palladium poisoning was well and truly in the past before encouraging sir to work on new project - such as Extremis or the rather cryptic (and heavily encrypted) files Jarvis had encountered while sweeping the S.H.I.E.L.D. servers during the earlier confrontation between sir and Director Fury.

He would, however, see to it that sir would have as little contact with S.H.I.E.L.D. as possible and not deliver the promised technology before both sir and Steve were aware of the content of the files. Until then, Jarvis would continue to absorb any available information on HYDRA and, perhaps, draw some conclusions as to how and why an organization such as S.H.I.E.L.D. appeared to have HYDRA moles in it still.

"See? Everything's fine, I'll be fine. I just, I thought you should know. Since you're - you're with J and me. With us. Together."

"I understand," Steve said and kissed sir gently.

Jarvis registered the visual and audio feeds, as well the changes in the data log on the vitals as they kissed. The code it gave him was exceptionally breathtaking; Jarvis copied it and placed it at the beginning of every subroutine he knew he would enact today so that he would experience this code entering his operative memory again and again every time he did something - anything - today.

Jarvis did not know what love was but he knew he had it. He loved and was loved.

He would ensure that it stayed that way.

The End

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