Summary

Doom brings Steve back from the dead. Hijinks ensue, some of which might vaguely be considered plot.

Notes

Disclaimer: The characters and situations depicted herein belong to Stan Lee and Marvel comics. No profit is being made off of this derivative work. We're paid in love, people.

Notes: Denial fic. Blatant shipper fic. One non-canonical het pairing in later chapters. A dire lack of porn. Terrifying amounts of snuggling. Branches off from canon after the end of Civil War, in an AU where there's no Secret Invasion, and no one was ever a Skrull. (for exact "where this fic departs from canon" details, go here: http://elspethdixon.livejournal.com/145514.html)

Thank you to harmonyangel and tavella for the wonderful beta job.
The warehouse was dark, lit only by the dim, flickering glow of black candles. There were thirteen of them, and they were no doubt made from the rendered fat of Latverian babies and the tears of virgins; the wax was very soft, and most of the candles were slightly misshapen.

The candles were set in a circle around an intricate array of magical symbols, drawn on the cement floor in purple chalk. There was incense swirling in the air, almost chokingly thick, so that the body lying in the center of the circle was difficult to see through the haze; unsurprisingly, the incense was patchouli.

Doom, Doctor Strange reflected, had always run to clichés. Clichés, and sloppy work. He had not even bothered to walk the warehouse’s boundaries before beginning the preparations for his ritual – had he done so, he would certainly have discovered Strange’s hiding place in the shadows.

An ex-army surgeon he had worked with during his first year of residency had once told him that soldiers in Vietnam had used patchouli to mask the odor of dead bodies. He claimed that it hadn't worked, and time had not improved its effectiveness.

In the far corner, a dead man was hanging from a meat hook, his naked body visible in the dimness only because of its extreme pallor. Blood from his severed throat was dripping sluggishly into a pan set beneath him.

A familiar voice echoed through the cavernous room; "You're certain we have the correct body, Skull?"

Red Skull stepped forward into the circle of candle light. Still half in shadow, his face looked even more cadaverous than the body on the floor. "Yes, Victor," he said evenly. "I am certain." His face moved oddly when he spoke, stiff and almost mask-like, but Strange could sense the residue of the cosmic cube clinging to him. It was as much a proof of identity as the skeletal face. "I of all men would know him. Will this ritual of yours take much longer?"

"Be satisfied that I am not using the spell which calls for the heart's blood of an enemy." Victor Von Doom made a dismissive gesture and turned away from Red Skull, tattered cloak swirling about him, and strode towards the very edge of the chalk design, metal boots ringing on the concrete.

His back to Red Skull, he began to walk in a slow circle around the outside edge of the ring of candles, chanting in a low voice. The words were a mixture of Latin, Greek, and High Medieval Latverian, an archaic form of his native tongue, with its old Magyar bones still detectable inside Slavic flesh.

The words were familiar, similar to the beginning of the spell Doom was so fond of using to raise up zombies, but subtly different in places, and the power he was raising far exceeded that necessary to animate a corpse.

The circle walked, Doom stepped away from the candles and bent to open the lid of a wooden crate set to one side of the circle. A black cockerel exploded out in a flurry of feathers and spurs, and Doom grabbed it out of the air, its spur striking uselessly against his metal gauntlets. He raised the struggling bird high over his head for a moment, still chanting, and then snapped its neck with one hand.
The effect was immediate; the temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees, an illusory effect of the magic powers being deployed, and the air became heavy with ozone as a gateway opened itself invisibly over the circle. Beyond it, the Dark Powers waited, cold and patient and hungry for anything Doom might care to feed them.

Now was probably the appropriate place to intervene, but curiosity had always been one of his besetting sins. There was a chance, after all, that Doom's spell might actually succeed, in which case some good might still come of this, Dark Powers or no.

With a theatrical flourish, Doom produced a stone-handled knife from one sleeve and gestured imperiously at the goat tethered to one of the warehouse's support posts. Red Skull glared, but obediently untied the tether line and began hauling the animal over to the circle, ignoring its attempts to plant it hooves and balk.

The cockerel had opened the gateway. The goat, once sacrificed, would restore the body. Neither was unusual in traditional, zombie-focused necromancy. The blood of the dead man was what would make the difference.

The dead could not return to the world of the living without the shedding of human blood. It was one of the truths about the unseen world that the ancients had gotten right.

The goat went kicking and bleating to its death, and the temperature made another perceptible drop. Slowly, like a time-lapse film of decay run in reverse, the corpse in the circle began to reform. Skin faded from grey, to white, and back to healthy flesh. The familiar Y-incision of a medical autopsy vanished. Bloodless wounds closed up as if they had never been. The smell of rot that the incense had not been able to obscure vanished.

"Now the blood," Doom announced, pausing in his chant and switching back to English. "Add three drops of your own blood to the basin and pour it over the body." Regardless of Doom's assertion earlier, it was a variant of the ritual making use of the life's blood of an enemy; the three drops of Red Skull's blood would permit Doom to use the dead sacrificial victim's blood as a symbolic stand-in for his ally's.

He waited until Red Skull had the basin ready in his hands before he added casually, "And don't set foot inside the circle or spill any blood on yourself in the process. I don't fancy spending the time and power necessary to cure you of possession. The soul seeks out its own flesh, but will settle for the closest living body if forced to."

Red Skull glowered at him, but held the basin gingerly away from his body, leaning over the chalk circle with exaggerated care; apparently, playing with the Cosmic Cube had taught him a thing or two about the dangers of possession.

Doom began chanting again, and Red Skull tipped the basin, carefully pouring out the blood. As it fell, it turned into a swirling red mist that absorbed into the body without a trace; looked at from certain angles, there were shifting eldritch shapes almost visible in it.

The man on the floor began to twitch convulsively, and started to cough, probably from the thick cloud of incense in the air. He managed to choke out a single word between gasping breathes. "Sharon," he said, staring about wildly.

It was not precisely the result he had anticipated--he had expected to step in to perform some sort of
dispersal when Doom’s meddling accidentally called up one of the Things from the Dungeon Dimensions—but now there was absolutely no question of permitting him to perform the remainder of the ceremony. Now it was time to intervene.

Doctor Strange stepped forward out of the shadows, where he had been concealed since before the ritual had begun, and said, "You have called upon forces beyond even your control, Victor Von Doom. These magics are too deep for you."

Doom turned on him with a snarl. Beneath his mask, his lips were doubtlessly twisted into an unpleasant sneer. If he still had lips. "Moralizing fool, do you know what your interference has cost me?"

Strange folded his arms across his chest, and strode over to where the newly-revived man lay. "Yes," he informed Doom, "but I do not think that you do." He leant down and gently touched the man on the forehead, and said, "Sleep."

With that, and a single, subtle flare of magic, Doctor Strange teleported them away.

He remembered the ambulance, and Sharon stroking his hair and telling comforting lies, promising that everything was going to be all right; lies, because her voice was far off and muffled, and he couldn't see her—or anything else—anymore.

It was like floating and falling at the same time, and then he hit the ground hard and opened his eyes to light that was too bright and air that was too thick -- smoke that smelled like dead things and someone shouting, voice loud and garbled.

And then everything faded out again.

Waking up the second time was different, slower, like floating up through water (‘good painkillers,’ a voice in the back of his head suggested). The smoke was gone -- had he imagined it? -- and the eye-searing light had faded to a soft, golden glow.

The ceiling was old-fashioned molded plaster, with bas-relief grape leaves and clusters of tiny, white grapes in the corners. Not St. Vincent’s. Not the Helicarrier. Steve blinked, and when he opened his eyes again, the grape leaves had shifted slightly, as if they were real, and rustling in the wind.

Really good painkillers. Painkillers weren't supposed to work on him that well.

Where had Sharon gone?

Someone was still talking, some kind of low, even chant. Steve rolled his head sideways -- hard floor underneath him, why was he lying on the floor? -- and found himself staring at Doctor Strange, sitting cross-legged on the floor a few feet away from him, and surrounded by fat, white candles.

"Weren't the candles black before?"
He didn't think he'd said that last part aloud, but he must have, because Strange answered him. "I've always found black candles a touch too melodramatic for my tastes," he said, leaning over and giving Steve a smile that was more mysterious than reassuring.

Steve blinked, trying to process that; his brain didn't seem to be working very well at the moment. He'd definitely never had painkillers that were this effective. "What the hell is going on?" he asked.

"Victor Von Doom brought you back from the dead," Strange told him, leaning back so that Steve couldn't see his face anymore, voice unreadable.

Back from the dead... God. "How long?" Steve asked. How much had he missed this time?

Strange leaned back over him, face visible once more and revealing faint confusion. "What?"

"How many years has it been?" Steve asked, keeping his voice even.

"Approximately six weeks," Strange said. He looked bemused now, or maybe faintly amused at Steve’s expense.

Steve didn’t really care. Only six weeks. He closed his eyes for a moment. Six weeks; only a little over a month. That wasn't anywhere near as long as it could have been.

Wait, had Strange said that Victor Von Doom had brought him back from the dead? Zombie army Doom?

"So, is this good or bad?" he asked after a long moment.

"Well," Strange said, voice thoughtful, "as Doom is nowhere near as skillful a practitioner of the dark arts as he imagines himself to be, it could have been a very bad thing indeed. I, however, am a very skilled sorcerer, so now I imagine that whether it is good or bad is up to you."

Steve nodded slowly, and closed his eyes again, trying to summon his thoughts.

He woke again some time later, without having realized that he had fallen asleep.

He must have, though, because he was no longer lying on the floor. Someone had moved him to a couch, and most of the candles were gone.

It wasn't a very comfortable couch -- one of those severe Victorian ones, covered in faded red velvet, and designed mostly for looks -- but it was an improvement over before.

He was dressed now, which was also an improvement, although he didn't recognize the clothes.

His mind was clearer than it had been before, but he still felt oddly disconnected; his body was numb. But he couldn't work up the energy to worry about that much at the moment.

He glanced around the room, trying to get his bearings. The rest of the room matched the sofa; there was a lot solid mahogany furniture covered in ornate carvings, heavy brocade drapes, and a thick Persian rug on the floor. The walls were lined with high bookshelves filled with thick books and a scattering of odd-looking artifacts.

Even if he hadn't been fairly certain who had brought him here, Steve was pretty sure that he still
would have been able to guess.

"Doctor Strange?" he said.

Stephen Strange appeared, wearing the serene smile he often favored. "Ah, you're awake again. You know, sleep spells usually take quite a bit longer to wear off."

"Oh. Um. I can't really feel my body," Steve said; he was aware of the rough texture of the faded velvet beneath his fingers, but it was distant, as if he had been anesthetized.

"That's side-effect of the spell; it will wear off in a little while," Doctor Strange said. He paused, tipping his head to one side thoughtfully. "You know, it was quite a nuisance trying to get clothes for you without letting anyone know that you were here."

"You haven't told anyone I'm back yet? Is there a reason no one can know?" Steve asked. If there were something wrong, he felt that he deserved to know about it.

Doctor Strange gave him the same mysterious and distinctly unreassuring smile that he had before. "Well, I didn't want to let on until I was quite sure that I had fixed Doom's spell properly."

"Fixed Doom's spell? What was wrong with it? What was he planning to do with me?" He didn't really want to think of what Doom's plans for him might have been.

"Many things, I'm sure, but he didn't have the chance to get to any of that. Rather, I 'fixed' the spell like one fixes a negative; I simply made sure that his rather shoddy spell work wouldn't unravel, that you were back for good. You can see why I felt it would be best to wait until I was certain to say anything to the others." Strange said, making a descriptive gesture with one hand.

That made sense; it would have been unfair to say something earlier, if there was any uncertainty. "So no one else knows I'm back yet?" he asked.

"I thought we'd leave that for later," Strange said. "When all of the spells’ side-effects have worn off, and you're ready to deal with everyone. For the moment though, you might as well get some rest."

Steve nodded. This time, he felt himself falling asleep, but didn't bother to fight it.

When Steve woke for the third time, he actually felt like himself.

The drapes were open, and mid-morning sunlight was streaming in, making the room seem almost cheerful.

He blinked, then sat up carefully, stretching. His body was stiff with disuse, but at least everything seemed to be working properly now.

Working properly... God. He had been dead. Not just in suspended animation, actually dead. For over a month. And now he was fine, nothing but a few stiff muscles from Strange's uncomfortable couch. He felt at the side of his neck, pulled up the hem of his borrowed t-shirt and stared at his
torso; there weren't even any scars. Surely dying ought to leave a scar.

Should he even ask Strange how Doom had brought him back, or would he be happier not knowing?

He suspected the latter.

He felt perfectly fine when he stood up, not light-headed at all, despite the fact that most of his most recent memories involved bleeding to death. Strange's carpet was soft under his bare feet, the pile so thick his toes sank into it.

It felt almost odd to wear civilian clothes again, especially the slightly-too-big ones Strange had found for him (where, exactly? There weren't many men even in the superhero community who were both taller than him and broader through the shoulders). He had been wearing the battered costume SHIELD had captured him in for days, before this -- not this morning. Six weeks ago.

He'd wanted to wear a suit to the arraignment, but the guards wouldn't bring him one, probably because Tony -- or whoever Tony was taking orders from these days -- had wanted to make some kind of a point by having him appear in court in the costume.

He'd always known he would die in costume; he just hadn't expected it to be that way, some anonymous sniper with a laser scope. He'd really expected to go down for the last time fighting Red Skull, or possibly in one of the giant explosions that always seemed to surround super-powered fights.

He didn't even know who had been responsible. Not SHIELD, though, he knew that. No matter how insane he had gone, Tony would never, ever...

"I see my spell has finally worn off."

Steve spun, automatically shifting his weight to the balls of his feet, to find Dr. Strange standing in the room's doorway. He shouldn't have been able to sneak up on him like that, so either Steve was still off balance, or Strange was softer-footed than he'd thought.

He relaxed and tried to look as if he hadn't been bracing for an attack. "So," he said, "Doom brought me back from the dead. Somehow, in some way that I probably don't want to know about. You fixed... whatever it was that was wrong with his spell. What now?"

"Well," Strange said, "I imagine that now would be the time to tell the rest of the Avengers that you are no longer dead."

"You mean they still don't know?" Come to think of it, which set of Avengers was Strange referring to? His people? Tony's people? Maybe his people were Tony's people by now, unless the fighting still hadn't ended.

Strange apparently decided to take pity on him. "And by the Avengers, of course, I mostly mean Peter, Jessica, Luke, and Luke's friend, Danny. I'm not entirely sure where Wolverine is at the moment."

Steve frowned, and gestured vaguely. "Then are we --" he said, breaking off. He wasn't entirely sure what to ask first. There were so many things he had missed out on in just the last six weeks, so many things he didn't know, that he wasn't even sure where to start.
Strange looked at him for a long moment, before crossing the room to sit in a chair opposite the couch that Steve had been on. Steve followed suit, and sat back down; if Doctor Strange felt that they should be sitting for this, Steve wasn’t going to question him.

"As I told you before, it’s been about six weeks. In that time, your group of Avengers has done their best to remain underground and out of sight while still continuing to act as Avengers," Strange gestured descriptively with one hand. "It hasn’t been a simple matter, I assure you. After your fight was over, Stark was declared director of SHIELD; obviously, the Superhuman Registration Act has remained in effect, and SHIELD has continued to enforce it. Amnesty was given to all of the superheroes locked up in the Negative Zone prison, and unsurprisingly, most of them have chosen to register. However, a small number still refused to, and we have been trying to help them."

"We?" Steve asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, we," Doctor Strange replied. "I’ve been doing my best to help the Avengers for the past few weeks. It seemed the least I could do at this point."

Steve nodded; he knew that Strange must have had his reasons for staying out of the registration mess earlier, but if he had decided to help now, Steve certainly wasn’t going to question him. "Is everyone all right?" he asked. Ultimately that was the most important thing.

"For the most part. Other than yourself, we haven’t had any major casualties. Except for Spiderman’s aunt, I’m afraid." Strange said, folding his hands in his lap, expression solemn. "Shortly after the fighting finished, his family was targeted by a sniper sent by the Kingpin. She was injured, and lapsed into a coma."

"Oh God, poor Peter. Is he all right?" Steve asked, looking away; he knew May Parker had raised Peter, and that they had been very close. Just one more tragedy caused by this whole mess; just one more regret Steve had to add to the list he had been keeping since about ten minutes after Tony had left him alone in his cell on the Helicarrier. There were so many things he had reacted to badly, so many opportunities he had missed, so many things he had jumped into without thinking them through all the way.

"As well as can be expected," Doctor Strange said, catching his eye. "And you do have a literal second chance, you know," he added, a faint smile on his lips. As far as Steve knew, Strange wasn't actually psychic, but he was good at reading people, and he obviously enjoyed being able to catch people off guard. "So you can deal with whatever regrets you’ve got in time. Right now, I rather suspect that letting your teammates know that you’re back would go a long way to making everyone feel quite a bit better."

"You haven't told them anything at all?" Steve asked again. Strange had always been a secretive man, but this was a fairly big secret to keep. He thought again about Strange “fixing” Doom's spell -- it must have been more difficult and less certain than the other man had made it sound. That, or he had been waiting to speak to Steve and make sure he was really himself. Superheroes had been resurrected before, and not all of them had come back from the dead as the same person. "I guess I can't blame you. It's not going to be easy to explain."

Doctor Strange just looked at him, one dark eyebrow arched.

Steve stared down at his bare feet for a moment, then looked back up at Strange, who had risen to his feet and was now looming over him. What did you say to people when you came back from the
dead? People who had gone on fighting without you, and who probably thought you had abandoned them? Last time, there had been no one left who remembered him, and no explanations to make. "So," he finally said, "where are we hiding now?"

"Inside a Starbucks," Strange said, with a little half-smile.

Steve blinked, decided that any possible explanation could only make that statement more confusing, and stood up. "Okay then." He straightened his shoulders and braced himself for, well, for whatever was about to happen. "I guess I have a team to meet."

He could hear them before he saw them; Luke Cage's voice carried through even Strange's thick wooden doors. "Daredevil ain't gonna help. There's some new crime boss trying to move in on the Kitchen, and the man's got his hands full keeping the body count down."

"It'll take him, like, a week." A new voice, not one Steve recognized. "Do you know, when I was filling in for him, some guy robbing a convenience store actually screamed and ran away when he saw the costume?"

"Yeah." Peter's voice. "I don't know how he does that. No one ever runs from me."

Strange nodded at Steve to stay where he was, then opened the door and stepped into the room. "Perhaps if you were to begin breaking burglars' arms, they would become terrified of you, too."

"I know, but it makes this gross crunching noise when you --"

"Man, you are such a wuss."

"I am not a --"

Strange cleared his throat. Peter and Luke both shut up. "Entertaining as listening to the two of you bicker is, I have some news you might be interested in hearing."

"You found out what all those ninja guys downtown are up to?"

"No, Danny, not yet. I have, however, discovered what Doom was up to. The night before last, I sensed a great surge of dark magic at work in the vicinity of the docks. I tracked the power to its source last night and discovered Doom in the process of sealing an alliance with the Red Skull. It seems our Latverian friend is more skilled at necromancy than I had previously given him credit for."

"Oh, ew." The partially closed door still hid Peter from view, but Steve had no trouble picturing the expression of disgust on his face. "Tell me we don't have to fight zombies again."

Red Skull had been in on it, too? Steve resisted the impulse to shudder, suddenly feeling unclean in a way that even the idea of being resurrected with black magic couldn't equal. He would almost rather still be dead than owe his continued existence to Red Skull, though he knew that was irrational. Skull poisoned everything he touched.

"Doom wasn't raising zombies. He was performing a ritual much darker and more dangerous -- a resurrection and a soul-binding. Fortunately, I was able to intervene before he had reached the 'binding one's victim to an eternity of servitude' part, and..." Strange paused, just long enough to let tension build but not long enough for Spiderman to interrupt him, and then said, "I think you should come in now and show them."
Steve stepped into the other room, ducking his head slightly. He had never been very good with emotionally charged moments, and he couldn’t imagine anything more emotionally charged than telling people that you weren’t dead any more.

There was a moment of silence as the three others stared at Steve. "I’m not really sure what’s been happening while I was gone," Steve started awkwardly. He looked away from the staring eyes, rubbed a hand against the back of his neck.

Then Peter, who had been sitting at the table -- they were in what looked to be the kitchen, sitting around a large wooden table -- made a strange, choked noise, and jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over with a clatter.

He managed to get halfway across the room and wrap his arms around Steve in what appeared to be a single leap. "Oh my God, you’re here, you’re not dead, oh my God," he chanted, hugging Steve so hard he could actually feel his ribs creak. Peter was short and slight enough that people tended to forget he also had the proportionate strength of a spider. Steve froze, not sure how he was supposed to respond.

Then Peter jumped back half a foot to look at him suspiciously. "You’re not a clone, are you?" he asked Steve. Then he turned to Doctor Strange, apparently deciding that if Steve was a clone, he probably wasn’t the best person to ask about it. "He's not a clone, is he?"

Doctor Strange looked amused. "No. But he was very nearly a zombie, if that helps," he said.

"But you're sure he's not a clone?" Peter asked, expression wavering for a moment between relief, curiosity, and continued suspicion.

Doctor Strange merely raised an eyebrow at Peter.

"Right," Peter said, nodding. "I thought you weren't allowed to raise the dead," he added.

Doctor Strange shrugged. "By the time I intervened, his soul had already been restored to his body. Dissolving the spell at that point would have been the equivalent of killing him all over again, and I do not use my powers to kill."

Peter nodded again. "Good to know."

At that point, Luke, who had been leaning against the far wall, crossed the room to stand in front of Steve. "Well, as long as you’re not some kind of zombie or clone," he said, sparing an amused glance for Peter, "it’s good to have you back, man." He held out a hand to Steve, which Steve accepted gratefully. He wasn’t sure how he would have handled it if Luke Cage had tried to hug him. It had been awkward enough with Peter, and he had half expected that.

Then Luke yanked him forward, wrapped one arm around him, and whacked him on the back. "Sorry," he said after letting go. "Couldn’t resist. You looked all frantic while Spiderman was clinging on you." He was grinning so widely that his face was all white teeth. "Hey, Jess, Jessica," he shouted in the general direction of the door. "Get in here!"

Iron Fist, also grinning, offered Steve his own hand. Without his mask, Danny Rand looked almost as young as Peter did, though the addition of a black eye and a butterfly band-aid over his eyebrow made him look significantly less innocent. "So, um, congratulations on not being dead. You're not
going to get all messed up and depressed because Doom pulled you out of heaven or something, are you?"

Steve absently shook Rand’s hand -- there was a splint on one of his fingers -- and then what the other man was actually saying penetrated. "What?" he asked.

"Yeah, that would suck," Peter said. He bounced on his toes, wearing a familiar manic Spiderman grin. "Then everything would be all poorly written, and Danny would get addicted to using the Iron Fist, and then Luke would die."

Except for a few confused images of Doom chanting, there was nothing in Steve’s memory between being in the ambulance with Sharon and waking up on Strange’s floor. Everything had stopped, and then it had simply started again, as if the intervening six weeks hadn't happened at all. It had been that way when he was frozen, too; for him, no time had passed between falling out of that plane and hitting the water, and waking up in the Avengers’ submarine with Thor and Tony peering down at him.

Steve frowned. "I don't think I was anywhere. Or at least, I don't remember it," he said. Had he remembered to tell Sharon he loved her? He had wanted to, but most of what he could recall after the first sniper’s bullet hitting him was a jumbled blur.

Luke rolled his eyes, although he was still smiling. "Ignore them. It's some stupid tv show they giggle about like the little girls they are."

"So you’re really all right?" Peter asked. He had edged closer to Steve again, and was looking up at him with a wide-eyed expression that made Steve slightly uncomfortable; he was never sure what he was supposed to do when people looked at him like that.

"I’m fine," he said, laying a hand on Peter’s shoulder. Then he frowned. "Well, actually -- do you have any food? I don’t think I’ve eaten in a while."

"Oh, um yeah, sure," Peter said, bouncing over to rummage through the cupboards along the far wall. "We’ve got cereal, and ramen, and, um cookies. And I think there’s leftover Chinese food in the refrigerator."

"As you can see, there have been a few issues in having a team without any real leader," Doctor Strange said. He looked like he was only refraining from making snide commentary as to the contents of his kitchen out of good manners. "And Luke and Peter have been doing most of the shopping."

"We finished the Chinese last night, remember?" Danny told Peter.

Steve shook his head slightly. This actually wasn’t all that different from how things had been before; they just didn’t have Jarvis to shop for them anymore. "Cereal would be fine," he told Peter.

Peter nodded, and pulled a box of Cheerios out of the cupboard; Steve suspected that Jessica must have had a hand in that purchase. He knew for a fact that left to his own devices, Peter would cheerfully eat horrifically sugar-covered cereal with no regard for nutritional value.

He could still remember the first time the New Avengers had sat down to breakfast together; they had been a team for a little over a week, and everyone had just been getting settled into the tower. Peter had been downing a bowl of some kind of cereal that was both covered in sugar and
electrically colored, and had been excitedly explaining how he had designed his old non-organic webshooters to Tony. Tony, meanwhile, had been looking at Peter’s cereal with mild horror, and clutching his coffee mug; he had never been much of a breakfast person.

Steve shook himself sharply; this was no time for pointless reminiscence. "So who else is with the team?" he asked, taking a seat at the table as Peter handed him a bowl of Cheerios and a carton of milk.

"Spiderwoman’s with us," Luke said, pulling a chair out from the table, and sitting opposite Steve. "And Jessica; she came back from Canada; said we were too dumb to look after ourselves without you to lead us. Oh, and MJ, too. Wolverine’s been in and out; we never know when he’s gonna be with us, but that’s pretty much like it always was anyway."

Steve nodded. It was basically the group he had expected, but it was good to know that they were still all free.

"We’ve been trying to keep up with the superheroing," Peter said, leaning against the counter, looking serious. "Of course, the cape-killers and the so-called 'Mighty Avengers' are still after us." He said the name "Mighty Avengers" with palpable sarcasm, as if it were an unfunny joke. It was strange to hear Peter, of all people, saying something in such a bitter tone of voice. "And things are kind of a mess right now. I mean, Doom and Red Skull have been causing all kinds of trouble, and there’s been a real upsurge of crime lately. We’ve been keeping pretty busy."

Luke frowned. "I don’t know where those girls are," he said, turning in his chair to face the door. "Jessica, MJ, Jess, get down here! There’s something you’re gonna want to see."

"Luke, how many times have I told you not to shout, you --" Jessica Jones said, pushing the door open with her hip, baby in her arms. She froze as she saw Steve. "Oh," she said, shifting the baby to her hip.

The door swung open again as Mary Jane and Jessica Drew entered together. Jessica looked irritated, wet hair dripping onto her shoulders -- Luke's shout had obviously pulled her out of the shower. "What is it now?" she asked, pushing past MJ. She paused in the doorway for a moment, then flung herself at Steve, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him fiercely.

When Spiderwoman kissed, she did it enthusiastically, with tongue and accompanied by a cloud of pheromones. For just a moment, Steve found himself kissing her back, and then his mind flashed on Sharon's hands on his face, stroking his hair, blood everywhere, all over everything, and the smell of cordite much too close. Jessica must have felt him freeze, because she pulled back from him and let go, giving him a suddenly uncertain smile.

"It is him, right? MJ asked, going to stand by Peter, who slipped an arm around her waist. "I mean, he’s not a clone, is he?"

"I’m me," Steve reassured her. Jessica was still holding onto his arm, water from her wet hair dripping onto his borrowed shirt.

"Doctor Strange said," Peter added, nodding solemnly.

MJ let go of him, and came over to hug Steve, thankfully somewhat less ardently than Spiderwoman had.
"So you’re back," Jessica Jones said, laying a hand on Steve’s arm, squeezing it tightly. "Good."

He was back. And from the sound of things, there was even more to do now than there had been before. Steve just didn’t know where to start.
Chapter 2

Tony, if you need me to --*

No,* he interrupted, *stay there, Carol. The response teams have the DC incident under control.*

Nice to know somebody’s got something under control,* Carol snapped. Tony could hear shouting in the background, distorted and made unintelligible by static -- Carol’s powers might no longer be Binary-level, but they still weren’t kind to headsets. *And I wasn’t talking about DC. Are you all --*

***Violence rises in Los Angeles this morning, as tensions run high in the wake of yesterday’s bombing…***

"Mr. Stark, this crime scene is under the jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Investigation; you can’t just bring in SHIELD and sweep it all under the--"

***Emergency workers are still trying to recover the bodies of an unknown number of victims killed when a Los Angeles apartment block…***

"Mr. Stark, the fire and rescue guys need to know if --"

***Federal law enforcement agencies released a statement this morning confirming that the explosive device located and dismantled on the Mall yesterday did in fact contain anthrax…***

Nothing new. Just the same recycled broadcasts that had been playing since eight this morning. Tony cut the data feeds from CNN and turned his attention back to Carol. *You and Ares do what you can. Sentry should get there soon.* He opened the feed to Bob’s headset. *Sentry. ETA?*

*An hour, maybe? I could try to fly faster, but I think --*

*Just do the best you can.* Tony cut Bob off and returned to Carol again. *Sentry estimates his ETA at an hour. You and Ares keep the crowd under control until he gets there.*

"Mr. Stark, are you even listening to --"

"Yes," Tony said shortly. "That column is load-bearing. Do I look like the kind of man who sticks ornamental columns in my office buildings?" It should have been obvious from the support column's location alone that it was a redundancy feature, designed to hold part of the weight of the second floor balcony in case the floor beams were overloaded beyond their capacity. "Agent Gilbert," he made an attempt to bring his tone back to something that approximated calm and moderate, "I appreciate your concern, but SHIELD’s anti-terrorism division is handling this case. We’ll send you a report when we’re finished."

***... the Premier was attacked early this morning... he has been hospitalized with minor injuries...***

Tony rubbed at his forehead, his hand coming away covered in ash and the grey dust of pulverized concrete. The world was almost as much of complete and utter mess as Stark Tower, and he had no idea where to even start trying to fix it.
With the superhero community so distracted and divided for the past few months, there had been a major spike in day-to-day, street level crime and gang violence as criminals took advantage of the situation. And now Doctor Doom and the Red Skull were also taking advantage of the chaos.

Doom had been sending waves of minions to attack New York City, for reasons Tony had yet to figure out. Reed Richards was still on vacation with Sue, and Doom usually timed his various world-domination attempts to make certain that Reed would be caught in the middle of them. This time, however, he had apparently found something even more entertaining than his old vendetta.

Of course, they could never prove that the attackers were Doom’s men satisfactorily enough to actually do anything about it. That would have been too easy. Instead, the bastard sat in the Latverian Embassy flaunting his diplomatic immunity and laughing at them through his metal mask.

They were just as certain who was behind the recent rise in terrorist activity, but the problem there was less proving that it was Red Skull, and more actually finding him. When he wanted to, Red Skull could hide himself like a maggot on a carcass.

First, there had been the bomb in Times Square two weeks ago. Nearly twenty people had been killed or injured, and there had been considerable structural damage done to the surrounding buildings. Thankfully, there had been no biological or radioactive component to the bomb, which would have made the death toll infinitely higher.

There had been a biological component to the bomb that they had dismantled on the Mall yesterday; it had been loaded with enough anthrax spores to infect several hundred people at least.

But the Mall was far too open an area for biological agents to be properly effective; Tony should have known that it was a distraction before half the apartment blocks in LA started blowing up.

***Fires continue to burn unabated in bombed sections of Los Angeles...***

The bombs had been centered in poor, largely Hispanic neighborhoods, which had complicated matters for any variety of reasons. For one thing, the high number of immigrants in those neighborhoods meant that many of the residents spoke little or no English. And since many of them were there illegally, they tended to be scared of authority figures, and a number of people had hidden from the SHIELD agents and superheroes who were trying to rescue them.

They couldn't even be sure whether they had actually managed to get everyone out, since so many of the buildings were over-crowded, filled with people that didn't show up on any tenant rolls.

And then, this morning, a suicide bomber had succeeded in blowing up Stark Tower’s lobby.

"Mr. Stark, I know this is your building, and that you're Director of SHIELD, but you've got to understand, my men are just trying to do their jobs, and that would be a lot easier if you'd just answer a few questions --"

*Jen, you speak Spanish, right?* Tony ignored the agent, turning his attention to She-Hulk.

*Some. Why?* 

*All right, then I want you to head out to LA as soon as possible; SHIELD can handle things here, but we could use another visible hero out there, especially one who can speak Spanish.*
"Sir," and that was Jarvis; he actually deserved some attention. "What would you like me to do with this?" He was holding a small picture frame. The lobby had been filled with a number of paintings, largely chosen by Jarvis. Most of them had been destroyed in the blast, and Tony thought that Jarvis was almost more upset by that than anything else.

***Yet another Synagogue was desecrated in Paris... religious violence threatens to break out if these attacks continue...***

"Let me see," Tony said, gesturing at the frame. Jarvis handed it to him, and Tony took it, half an eye on the picture, half on the repairs going on across the room.

***According to Reverend Phelps, the recent attacks are a sign from above, a sign from God that we should have taken the decimation of the mutant population more seriously, that we should have seen that God wants us to eradicate these unnatural aberrations.... Reverend Phelps, a few words?***

"Agent Gilbert, tell your men to stay below the fourth floor; all of the structural damage is on the third and below. They’re already interfering enough with SHIELD’s attempts to handle this terrorist action, they don’t need to interfere with business as well," Tony said, glancing down at the picture Jarvis had handed him.

He nearly dropped it, and only managed not to because Agent Gilbert was still standing next to him, looking impatient, and the room was filled with SHIELD agents he was technically in charge of.

It was a pen and ink sketch, a slightly cartoony picture of the original Avengers, with Jan out in front at Wasp-size, posed like a pin-up model.

"I really don’t care what you do with this," he said, handing the picture back to Jarvis hurriedly. "Get rid of it, it’s singed anyway."

***A fifteen year old girl with dyed-green hair was found beaten today, outside of Lansing, Kansas... this is the seventh such incident in the past two days... boy with a club foot, and a man with a harelip were severely injured in an incidence of mob violence yesterday...***

The series of lynchings in the Bible Belt weren’t exactly unexpected, but they were certainly unwelcome. They were also completely outside of SHIELD’s jurisdiction, which meant that there wasn’t much Tony could do about them at the moment.

"Sir?" And that was Agent Brickner, one of SHIELD’s twenty-three-year-old recruits, and every inch Nick Fury’s man.

"Just a moment, Brickner," Tony said, holding up a hand. He was still scanning through the various newscasts, trying to keep as up to date on the world-wide situation as possible.

*Carol, if you have a chance, get someone to fly through the mid-west. It seems like they could use a show of force.*

*They’re frightened civilians, Tony.* Carol sounded stressed and exhausted. Tony could sympathize; he had been in LA yesterday, until the attack on Stark Tower had called him back to New York.

Thank God Pepper was still visiting her mother; Tony couldn’t begin to imagine what he would do if
something happened to her right now.

*They may be frightened, but that’s no excuse for attacking people for having poor fashion sense.*

"Sir? We just got a report that Agent Dugan said you needed to hear about --"

Tony closed his eyes, running a hand through his hair. "Yes, Agent Brickner?"

There’s been a massacre at the An Hu Po State Psychiatric Facility. All the guards and prisoners were found dead yesterday morning, and there are signs that one or more of the prisoners may have escaped. No one knows what happened, but China’s considering it a possible terrorist threat, and Agent Dugan wants to know if we’re taking action."

Just what they needed. SHIELD was spread thin enough as it was; sending agents to China would probably mean pulling people out of LA.

*Bob? How close are you to Los Angeles?* If they could get most of the Avengers helping in LA, more SHIELD agents could be sent elsewhere; they weren’t really trained for Search and Rescue anyway.

*About forty-five minutes, I think? I can try to hurry if you need --*

*Don’t push yourself, Bob. We’ll need you on your feet when you reach LA.*

"The Chinese Premier was attacked this morning; I think we’re going to have to treat it as a terrorist act," Tony told Brickner. "Tell Dugan to tell them that we’ll send agents as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," Agent Brickner said, saluting, and hurrying off, presumably to contact Dugan somewhere quieter.

There was a loud thud from across the room, as a piece of concrete hit the lobby’s marble floor. "Would you tell your men to watch it? That’s the third time they’ve dropped rubble in the course of their supposed investigation," Tony snapped, turning to Gilbert, who was still hovering. He had thought he was too burned out to feel anything anymore, but it turned out that incompetence could still irritate him. "At the moment, the structural damage is comparatively minimal, and I’d like to keep it that way. There’s really no reason..."

***Signs of unrest continue to mount in China as Temugin, son of the infamous supervillain, the Mandarin, was found dead today...***

Temugin had had the Mandarin’s rings. Tony could have bet money that they weren't on his fingers anymore, but there wasn’t a Casino in Vegas that would take those odds.

The fact that he was feeling nothing but a sort of dull shock probably wasn’t a good thing, but it was all that Tony had the energy left for at the moment.

Because put together with what Agent Brickner had just told him, things had just gotten infinitely worse.
After the initial round of embarrassing hugging was over, Steve was allowed to sit down and finish his cereal, while everyone else fell all over themselves attempting to fill him in on the rest of what had happened while he was... gone.

It still felt odd to think of himself as having been dead. Better to avoid thinking about what had happened at the courthouse and afterwards and concentrate only on what had to be done now.

Technically, he was supposed to be on trial or in jail, but he didn't even know if the charges against him were still in effect. They said he'd been buried with military honors, which meant something, but he wasn't sure what. Possibly only that Tony had felt guilty.

Registration was really, truly in effect now; according to Luke, most of the superhero community had signed up, and only the New Avengers and a few other groups -- criminals like the Punisher and Moon Knight, those runaway kids from California, and the Young Avengers, who had apparently fallen off the map -- remained outside the system. America had itself a superhuman army now, and Steve wasn't sure he wanted to know how they were going to use it.

Matt Murdock had returned from wherever he had disappeared to and was putting the fear of God -- or, more accurately, the fear of the devil -- into the denizens of Hell's Kitchen. He was still unregistered as well, had even somehow managed to get the charges against him dropped and his license to practice law re-instated.

In retrospect, the witch trial the public and the FBI had put Daredevil through had been the beginning of the end, the first sign of just how much the American people had lost faith in superheroes. Or maybe it had begun before that. Maybe Hector Ayala's trial had been the first sign.

The Fantastic Four had registered, and Sue and Reed had apparently patched their marriage back together. No one was sure what the X-Men were doing, which was possibly the one thing in the whole scenario that hadn't changed from the old days.

Nick Fury was still underground, and no one had seen Sam or Sharon since they'd tried to break Steve out of SHIELD custody. That worried Steve even more than Tony's superhero army.

"She vanished from the hospital," Jessica Drew had said, shrugging. "I don't know where or how. I don't have any contacts in SHIELD any more, or even in Hydra. I think maybe Stark's people got to her."

"They're 'getting' to people now?"

"They got Arachne," she said. "She has a position in Canada now, on one of their pet superhero teams, and never mind that Ms. Marvel and Wonderman dragged her screaming out of her house and away from her kid to throw her in the negative zone. They even got to Ben Urich; he's back on staff at the Bugle and hasn't published a word opposing registration since you died." She had stared down at her hands for a moment, then looked back up at Steve. "They got you."

"That wasn't Tony's people," Steve had protested. "It was a sniper."

Jessica had smiled a cynical little smile and let the subject drop.

Steve hadn't pushed it. Arguing the point would mean reliving those memories of being shot, and
dwelling on them would serve no purpose.

He had asked about clothing instead, pointing out that he couldn't go barefoot and wear Luke's spare work-out clothes indefinitely, and MJ had disappeared upstairs and returned with one of his old costumes. The reinforced tunic had been ripped and clumsily repaired, the boots were scuffed, and one of the wings on the mask was bent.

"Peter and I found it while we were clearing out the safe-house, and we didn't know what to do with it. So I just stuck it in a box. I mean, I couldn't just throw it away..." she let the sentence trail off, and held the boots out to him like an offering.

"Thank you," Steve had said, not entirely sure which he was thanking her for. He had taken the boots, and gone to get dressed.

Now, once again wearing familiar blue, red, and white, mask back in place, Steve decided that it was good to be back in the costume, even if the tears had been sewn up with thread that didn't match, the crooked black stitches standing out visibly against the blue leather. He stared at himself in Strange's bathroom mirror -- a full-length stand mirror, its frame matching the golden claw-feet of the freestanding bathtub -- and made an attempt to pull the bent wing on his cowl straight again. As soon as he let go, it returned to its previous position.

It was still in better shape than the costume he had been wearing... before.

As always, once back in costume, he felt naked without his shield. No one seemed to know exactly where it was, but the general consensus seemed to be that SHIELD most likely still had it.

"Probably planning to hand it off to some obedient little lap dog who jumps when they call," Luke had said, snorting.

The thought of someone else using his shield made Steve's stomach twist a little, it had been with him for so long, and was so much a part of him.

Even now, though, even after everything that had happened, Steve had a hard time seeing Tony just giving his shield to someone else; he knew, probably better than anyone else, how Steve felt about it.

But maybe, after everything that had happened, Steve didn't know Tony as well as he had thought anymore. Maybe he would just pass the shield on to someone else; it would certainly make a good show for the press, if nothing else.

One more thing to be dealt with. One more problem to solve. It was a minor issue compared with the arrest warrants hanging over the New Avengers' heads, but the absence of weight across his back where the shield was supposed to hang made him feel even more off balance.

Steve gave up attempting to fix the bent wing, turning away from the mirror -- and dropped into a crouch, reaching automatically for the shield that wasn't there, as Dr. Strange's voice emerged from the smooth glass surface.

"Everyone assemble in my study. The perimeter alarms have been tripped."

Steve made it to the study in under a minute, but was still nearly the last to arrive, ducking into the room just as Peter, also in costume, dropped down from the hallway ceiling like a shadow. When
had Spiderman returned to wearing black?

"I took the precaution of setting up surveillance spells around the outside of the building," Strange said. He waved a hand at a small mirror on the far wall, and the reflection rippled and shifted until it showed a crystal clear view of the front of the building, currently a mess of construction debris walled off behind a chain-link fence. A man in a black motorcycle jacket and a woman with a blonde ponytail were standing in front of the fence, staring at the water-stained sign that proclaimed, "Starbucks! Coming soon!"

"Let them in." The words were out of his mouth before he thought about them; even from the back, he recognized them both instantly. "It's Sharon and Bucky."

"I don't know." Luke was shaking his head, arms folded across his chest. "We bring them in, our secret hideout won't be so secret anymore."

"Let them in," Steve repeated. "They're Fury's people." And I need to see them, he added silently. Sharon had been with him when he died; she most of all had the right to know that he was back.

"They were Fury's people," Peter pointed out from his spot halfway up the wall. "We've got no idea what they've been doing for the past six weeks. And Agent Carter works for SHIELD."

"Let them in."

"I say we risk it." Rand shrugged, and pulled his yellow mask out of the pocket of his jeans. "We have to trust somebody, sometime, and there are two of them and seven of us." He started tying the mask on; it should have looked incongruous combined with civilian clothing, but somehow didn't.

Strange spoke a word in a language Steve didn't recognize, and there was a flare of pink smoke in the center of the room. When it cleared, Sharon and Bucky were standing there, right on top of the patch of floor Steve had woken up on.

They both had their guns out, and Iron Fist and Spiderman were already moving. A spray of webbing ripped Sharon's weapon away from her before she could finish raising it, and Iron Fist launched himself at Bucky in a flying kick, right foot knocking the gun out of his hand. Bucky sidestepped, pivoting and extending his left hand in a move that Steve had taught him himself, years ago -- one that, if the blow connected, would put his steel fingers right through Iron Fist's ribs.

"Bucky!" Steve barked, pitching his voice to the same drill-sergeant tone he'd used during the war, "Stand down."

It was too late for Bucky to pull the blow completely, but he still managed to check himself enough that the strike that should have shattered Iron Fist's ribs did little more than knock him off balance.

Rand hit the floor on his shoulder, rolled to his feet, and stood with one fist raised and ready to strike, a golden corona glowing around it. "You're good. Want to try that again?"

Bucky ignored him. He was staring at Steve, his face completely empty of emotion. Beside him, Sharon had let her empty hands fall to her sides. She ought to have been happy, but the expression on her face, dead-pale, and wide eyed, looked much closer to horror.

"Are you two all right?" Steve asked. Suddenly it was very, very important that he know.
"Am I --" Sharon's voice sounded choked. She took a step forward, and Bucky grabbed her by the arm, pulling her up short.

"We don't know who that is." He turned to Steve, face still expressionless, and said, "Prove you're him."

Steve cocked his head to one side, thinking for a moment, trying to select some bit of information from their shared past that no one else in this time period would know. "Remember April 29th, 1945?" He paused, just long enough for Bucky to nod, then added, "I threw up, you didn't." Even after sixty years, it was still one of the most horrible things Steve had ever seen. Bucky was the only one who had been there to witness his reaction, and neither of them had ever spoken of it afterwards, even to one another.

Bucky continued to stare at him for a long moment, before nodding, stance relaxing almost imperceptibly. "It's him," he said, not taking his eyes off of Steve. He let go of Sharon’s arm, and crossed the room to stand in front of Steve, holding out his right hand. Steve took it, and they clasped hands for a long moment, leaning toward one another until their shoulders brushed. "It's good to have you back," Bucky said, smiling slightly.

At that, Sharon, who had been watching them with a frozen look, made a quiet keening noise. "Sharon?" Steve asked, letting go of Bucky’s hand to move towards her.

She shook her head, eyes welling with tears. "I -- oh, God," she said in a small voice. Then she turned, raising one hand to her eyes, and left the room quickly.

There was a moment of frozen silence, as everyone stared at the empty doorway. Then MJ rolled her eyes, said, "Oh, for goodness sakes," and followed Sharon out of the room.

"I thought she'd be happy." It was ridiculous to feel hurt. Of course Sharon would want privacy for a few minutes; she'd never been comfortable shedding tears in public. It was too close to a display of weakness.

Bucky glanced at the doorway, eyes avoiding Steve's for a second. "She thinks it was her fault."

"She had nothing to do with it." Everyone seemed to think they knew more about his death than he did, Steve reflected. "There was a sniper in one of the buildings; I saw the dot from his laser scope." There was nothing Sharon could have done, save for throwing herself bodily between him and the bullets, and he was selfishly glad she hadn't done that; living at the expense of a friend's life wouldn't have been worth it.

Bucky nodded. "Crossbones. We killed him for you." He said it matter-of-factly, the way Steve might announce that he'd fought or captured a minor supervillain. It was hard, sometimes, to see the enthusiastic kid he'd met in '42 in this new, adult Bucky. "I tried to get information on Red Skull from him, but he wouldn't talk."

"Um, yeah, about Red Skull, actually, about supervillains in general..." That was Peter, still crouched halfway up the wall. "Why are you here? Not that this isn't a great reunion and everything, and not that we aren't loving the cryptic code conversation, but --"

"Nick Fury sent us," Bucky said, cutting Peter off. "We got wind that Red Skull and Doctor Doom had formed an alliance. They were seen meeting in a warehouse two nights ago; our operative couldn't see what they were doing, but there's no way it was good. Nick thought that as long as you
weren’t fighting each other anymore, at least one of the groups of superheroes ought to know about
the situation." From the way he said it, Steve suspected that Nick had had a great deal more to say
about the situation than that, and rather more bluntly.

"Actually," Doctor Strange said, stepping forward, "they were performing a resurrection ritual. Now,
although I’m certain that they had nothing but the worst of intentions, due to a timely intervention, I
believe that we can agree that things have turned out well."

Bucky didn’t quite twitch. "Red Skull and Doctor Doom brought you back?" he asked.

"I’m trying not to think about it," Steve told him.

"Why come to us?" Jessica asked. "Why not go to SHIELD and let their pet initiative teams take
care of it?"

"Because they're compromised," Bucky said. "Red Skull had agents inside the organization.
Sharon's psychologist was one of them, and so was one of the crowd control agents at Cap's
arraignment. He did a lot more talking than Crossbones."

Did Nick know that his current subordinates were torturing his former subordinates for information?
Uneasily, Steve concluded that he probably did. He wasn't anywhere near as omniscient as he liked
to pretend, but Nick was still a consummate judge of people, and had never minded getting his hands
dirty.

For a moment, Steve wondered which of the guards it had been. The one who had muttered about
"costumed hotshots" when he unlocked Steve's cell? The kid who kept forgetting himself and calling
Steve "sir"? The one who had been in front of him on the steps, whom he'd tried to save from the
sniper's bullet?

There was a reason he had always preferred a straight-forward fight to intelligence work, and it
wasn't simply because beating up Hydra agents was less complicated.

"What did this agent have to say?" Strange had his "impassive sorcerer" face on once again, and
managed to give the impression that he already knew the answer and was merely asking out of
politeness.

"Nothing useful; he wasn't important enough for that." Bucky smirked ever-so-slightly. "Just that
he'd been told to look the other way if someone tried to slip through the security screen. Someone
wasted their bribe money there. He never saw me go into the building after Crossbones, and he didn't
see the Falcon, either, because he didn't think to look up."

"Sam was there?" Steve interrupted.

"He was going to try to break you out." Bucky was grinning now, not simply smirking. "I almost
blew his head off when he tried to jump me at Crossbones' targeting position. He doesn't like me
much."

Sharon stepped around the door-frame and hovered tentatively in the doorway, MJ at her back. "He
doesn't like your methods," she said. "Sam doesn't believe in cold-blooded vengeance, or in killing."

Her eyes were red, and her face was still blotchy from crying, but otherwise there was no sign in her
demeanor that she'd just fled the room in tears. Agent 13 was on the job again.
"Sharon," Steve began again, not sure what he wanted to say to her, but knowing he needed to say something, "I --".

"I'm so, so sorry, Steve," she cut in, over-riding him. "I swear I didn't know what I was doing, but that doesn't make all that much difference at the end of the day."

"You -- what? Sharon, there was nothing you could have done." You were there, he wanted to say. You were there to hold my hand and tell me everything was going to be okay. It didn't matter that they had both known she was lying; he hadn't been alone.

There was no way he could tell her that in the middle of a roomful of people, so he did the next best thing. "We can talk about it later," he promised. "Right now we have a job to do."

"Supervillains to catch, crazy dictators to fight," Peter said. He let go of the wall and dropped back down to the floor, already ticking off points on his fingers as he landed. "Evil conspiracies to be afraid of."

"There are so many different conspiracies in SHIELD that even the people pulling the strings don't know what's going on." Jessica had been leaning against the wall, arms folded across her chest. Now she straightened up and took a few steps into the center of the room, dropping the pretense of being merely an observer. "I wasn't the only source Hydra had, and God knows who else was on some secret organization's payroll. Fury used to keep a list."

Sharon was still staring at him, something indefinable in her eyes. When she saw that he had noticed, she looked away, eyes going to Strange's mirror. It was still showing the front of the building, now deserted. Outside, it had started to rain again.

"Considering that one of their staff psychologists turned out to be Dr. Faustus, anybody in SHIELD could be a sleeper agent for Red Skull." Bucky said, not so much answering Jessica as addressing the room at large. "They wouldn't even know it themselves until it was too late."

Steve looked at Sharon, who was still staring at the floor. Doctor Faustus had been Sharon's psychologist? What had he done to her? Was that why she wouldn't look at him?

"And somebody in Washington has been putting pressure on Maria Hill since back before this whole mess started," Sharon put in. Her eyes went to Steve for a brief moment, then flicked away again. If Dr. Faustus had been posing as her psychologist, it was no wonder she wouldn't look at him. God alone knew what he'd done to her. "She had no grounds to order you to help enforce registration, or to give her anyone's names; the superhuman registration act was still being voted on. If the vote had gone the other way, it would have been a criminal order."

"It was still a criminal order." The fact that Hill had actually ordered her men to shoot him when he refused to obey had been all he needed to know where the situation had been headed. He had over-reacted, massively, stupidly over-reacted, but he had still been in the right.

"We all know SHIELD is dirty," Luke said. "And we already knew about Doom and Red Skull hooking up. What does Fury have for us that we don't know? He got any theories on what they want?"

"To take advantage of the golden opportunity you people offered them when you started fighting each other." The words might have been coming from Bucky's mouth, but they were vintage Nick
Fury bluntness.

Luke glared at him, and Peter opened his mouth to protest, but Steve cut him off. "Red Skull feeds on chaos," he said. "He always has. Doom isn't as easy to predict."

"He wants power," Strange said. "Any kind of power. And he'll do anything to get it. The ritual he used to bring you back involved compacts with some extremely dangerous forces."

Steve had already guessed that, Doom being Doom. For a moment, he wondered idly what being brought back from the dead with evil magic did to one's soul.

It wasn't important, not alongside figuring out what Doom was planning to do. "If the level of risk involved is that high, why bring me back at all?"

"To gloat." Beneath his mask, Peter was probably rolling his eyes. "Doom lives to gloat. He's even better at it than Doc Ock."

"What is it with supervillains and gloating, anyway?" Luke asked. He shook his head, then went on, "We got more problems than Doom and the Skull. Unless they've started hiring ninjas, there's a third player in town, too."

"Hydra," Jessica said. She folded her arms across her chest, frowning as if the word had left a bad taste in her mouth.

Iron Fist shook his head. "Not unless they've started some internal war we don't know about. A couple of weeks ago, they were crawling out of the woodwork; now they're practically gone. They're even leaving Rand-Meachum alone. These are new guys, and they're dedicated. Luke and I took one down a couple of nights ago, and he killed himself before we could ask him any questions."

"Had a tattoo, though," Luke put in. "Like Iron Fist's, but fancier."

Iron Fist nodded. "A green dragon with the character for the number ten superimposed over it."

Steve ran a hand through his hair, and bit back a curse. "The Mandarin," he said. "That's got to be the Mandarin."

"I've heard of him. Some crazy old Chinese guy with alien rings, right?" Iron Fist said, frowning thoughtfully.

"Yeah," Peter said, cocking his head to one side. "I thought he died years ago."

Steve shook his head. "Supposedly," he said. "But Tony was always sure that he was still out there, somewhere."

"That doesn't mean--" Jessica started, gesturing shortly.

Whatever else she had been going to say was lost, cut off as a dull roar reverberated through the room, rattling the windows.

There was a moment of dead silence, as they all stared at each other. Then Peter rubbed at one ear through his mask, and said, "Oh, no way. No supervillain has timing that good, not even Doom."
Tony was already moving through the burnt-out lobby of Stark Tower; if what he feared was true, there was no time to lose.

It had been years since the Mandarin had actively surfaced; not since he had built his damned Dragon of Heaven ship. Tony had hoped against hope that he might actually be dead, but he had always known that there was a chance that he would resurface in some form or another.

Tony didn’t want to believe that he was back now, but he knew that there was virtually no one else who could have killed Temugin.

They would have to act quickly, but maybe it wasn’t entirely too late. There were already a handful of SHIELD agents station in China, and while the Mandarin almost certainly had his rings back already, at least they might be able to keep him from building a power base. One of the most dangerous things about the Mandarin had always been his ability to command the loyalty of so many men.

Dugan was on the Helicarrier; Tony had put him in charge of actively dispatching SHIELD agents. Most of the agents responded better to Dugan than they did to him; Dugan knew how to talk to them. *Agent Brickner told you about the An Hu Po massacre?*

*Yes. I’ll need any data you have on that. Did they have any information on how the massacre started? And which of the prisoners escaped?* An Hu Po was a state psychiatric facility; it housed some of China’s most dangerously psychotic criminals. It was rumored that there were illegal tests preformed on the inmates, but no one had ever bothered to examine the place too closely.

Stupid. So stupid. An Hu Po was China’s version of the Raft and Arkham Asylum all rolled into one, and none of his people knew anything about the facilities, the security protocols, or even the prisoners. The pending UN investigatory team had never managed to get off the ground, since the politicians were more concerned with maintaining international trade than checking on possible human rights violations.

*Of course sir.* Dugan said. *According to, Brickner, you said that we’re treating this as a terrorist action. Are we dispatching men immediately, or do you need to personally review the data first?* There was a note of faint disapproval in his voice. Dugan wasn’t fond of Tony's methods, and he had never made any real attempt to hide his feelings. It was one of the reasons Tony had kept the man around.

Tony paused for a moment, frowning. He was getting a strange data feed from the Helicarrier, but with the sheer number of data streams he was processing at the moment, it was hard to tell where it was coming from.

*The agents already in China can begin an official investigation into what happened at An Hu Po,*
but I need to review what’s happening before we send any more men in. We may have a bigger problem than just your run of the mill terrorists. Temugin has just been reported dead; it's possible that we're dealing with the Mandarin.*

*Oh, that's just great,* Dugan said, his sarcasm coming through clearly even over the scratchy satellite uplink. *Ten to one says he starts blowing things up, too, probably starting with Hong Kong.*

*I think he already has,* Tony returned. *The CSI people haven't finished analyzing the body yet, but I bet when they do, they'll tell us our suicide bomber was wearing one of his Dragon of Heaven tattoos.*

*kzzt...233...*kzzt*...231...*

"And where the hell is that countdown coming from?" he added aloud, stopping again to raise one hand to rub at his forehead. Tony wasn’t sure whether it was the amount of data he was processing or the fact that he hadn’t slept in the past thirty-six hours, but he was starting to get a headache.

Then his eyes widened, and he started for the door, not quite running. *Dugan! Get everyone off the Helicarrier! Now!* *

Sir? Dugan asked. It was times like this that Tony wished that there was someone left that trusted him implicitly.

*kzzt...212...*kzzt*...209...*kzzt* *

*There’s a countdown coming from the Helicarrier, Dugan, which means that there’s got to be a bomb somewhere. Get everyone off, now!* Tony pulled off his suit jacket as he called for the armor. *You've got three and a half minutes.*

He hit the street, and was in the air instantly, heading for the Helicarrier at top speed. Maybe if he could get there in time...

*We’re over the city. If something happens to the Helicarrier here, the debris is going to do a hell of lot of damage. We need to get it out, over the water,* Dugan said. *I can take her out myself...* *

*...187...*kzzt*...184...* *

*No! I need you directing things from the ground.* There was a moment of silence, so Tony added, *Come on Dugan, I know you don’t like me. Do you really want me running things unsupervised?*

*All right,* Dugan said, sounding weary. *Agent Calamai has volunteered to pilot her out anyway.* Agent Calamai was one of SHIELD’s older agents, an Italian man with a special fondness for piloting the Helicarrier. He still hadn’t forgiven Tony for replacing the old Helicarrier, no matter how heavily bugged it had been.

*I’ll be there in a minute. Just get as many people off as possible.*

As he flew, Tony dropped all of the open data-feeds he had been maintaining, turning all of his attention to analyzing the signal coming from the Helicarrier.

It was directed at ten different locations on the Helicarrier. Ten. Of course there would be ten bombs;
the Mandarin always did have a flare for the needlessly melodramatic.

*172...kzzt...170...*

At least it wasn’t a giant ship shaped like a dragon this time.

*kzzt...168...kzzt...166...kzzt...163...*

Of course, it would be nearly impossible to find and disarm ten bombs in the remaining three minutes, but if he could find even some of them, they might be able to minimize the damage substantially...

Tony could see the cluster of SHIELD agents on the docks from the air. Dugan was visible to one side of the group, obviously issuing orders to the men around him. He could see the Helicarrier moving out over the water, away from the city. It was a fair distance out already; Agent Calamai clearly took his charge to get the Helicarrier far enough from the city to keep it from doing any damage seriously.

There were a number of cars in the air, obviously transporting agents off the ship. Unfortunately, they weren’t designed for a mass exodus, and the Helicarrier didn’t really have lifeboats; it was a serious oversight that he would have to look into as soon as possible.

*...149...kzzt...147...kzzt...*

*Dugan,* Tony called, *how many men have made it off the Helicarrier?*

*...138...kzzt...136...kzzt...133...*

*Approximately thirty five percent,* Dugan said. *A little more than that with the people in the air. How much time do we have left?*

*kzzt...115...kzzt*

Thirty five percent. There was no way they’d be able to get everyone off in time. He would have to disable the bombs. There was almost certainly one by the fuel tanks; that one would do the most damage, and would have to be first priority.

*Under two minutes,* Tony told Dugan. *I’m going to try and disable at least one of the bombs.* He was out over the water now.

*...97...kzzt...93...*

*There’s not a chance in hell you’d be able to disable any of the bombs and get away in time,* Dugan snapped. And he had a point, but it was a risk that Tony would have to take. Sixty percent of the SHEILD agents currently in residence were still on the Helicarrier. They couldn’t lose that many men.

*kzzt...74...kzzt...71...kzzt...68...*

*There’s a good chance that there’s a major explosive device by the fuel tanks, and the rest are secondary; we can minimize the damage if we can stop them from blowing. It might save some of the men still aboard.* Nearly there.
*With all due respect, sir,* Dugan said; and that was a definite invective, since Dugan never bothered to pretend that he respected Tony. *Getting yourself killed won’t help the situation any --*

*The armor ought to protect me,* Tony said. *It’s designed to withstand fairly high-level blasts.*

He was thirty yards away. So close.

The shock-wave hit Tony like a stone wall, along with a searing heat that he could feel even inside the armor. He was thrown, tossed like a rag doll, the force cart-wheeling him through the air.

When Tony hit the water, the impact was enough to stun him, and everything went black for a moment. The next thing he knew, metal shrapnel was bouncing off the armor, the ringing in his ears deadening the noise.

By the time he managed to pull himself out of the water and get airborne again, the sky was filling with smoke, charred pieces of metal and ash raining into the New York harbor.

His armor wouldn’t have been able to stand up to the Mandarin’s bombs after all; if he had been any closer, he would almost certainly have been dead. The explosion had torn the Helicarrier completely apart.
Chapter 3

Steve had been back -- really back -- for less than three days, and the situation had already changed substantially. He couldn't help but feel that it was somewhat unfair.

The blast they had heard had been the Helicarrier exploding. Steve still wasn't sure how to process that.

Almost the most bizarre thing about the whole situation was that they had had to find out through the news. At the moment, it wasn't as if they could simply run out into the streets; they'd had no idea what was happening, and not only was going in unprepared always a bad idea, there was also the offhand chance that it was trap.

So Luke had taken down the small television that had been gathering dust on one of the high shelves of Strange's study and brought it into the kitchen, so that they could all cluster around it.

Unsurprisingly, what had happened to the Helicarrier was all over the news; every station had pictures of the cloud of smoke and ash hanging over the harbor, reports of what had happened, and questions about what action SHIELD was planning to take next.

Sharon was leaning forward in her chair, elbows on her knees, staring intently at the screen; Steve could almost feel her impatience to be there, to be doing something. "I keep thinking I need to report in," she said, shaking her head. "That I should be reporting to a duty station."

Bucky rested his metal hand on her shoulder for a moment, and said, "They'll be busy with this for days. Too busy to be effective at anything else. I need to call Fury."

On the screen, CNN was showing footage of a grimy and water-stained Dum-Dum Dugan, glaring belligerently into the camera. "Get that damn microphone out of my face," he snapped. "Can't you see I've got work to do here?"

Jessica Drew made a little, half-amused sound. "I never thought I'd be glad to hear Dum-Dum Dugan swearing at reporters," she said.

Steve knew what she meant, knew how Sharon felt. He had never been unable to go help with a disaster of this magnitude before, never had to just sit and watch while people he knew might or might not be dead. Helplessness was a new feeling, and one he didn't like.

The camera cut back to an on-the-scene news anchor, her pale blue suit jacket already spotted from the soot falling out of the air.

"That was high-ranking SHIELD officer Thaddeus Dugan," she said, voice coached to a studied seriousness. "As you can see, SHIELD personnel are working diligently to address this tragedy. I'm about to have a few words with SHIELD Director Anthony Stark."

The camera swung away from her then, showing a dizzying moment of footage of the docks, SHIELD agents milling around in what Steve could recognize as a sort of half-organized chaos, then a shot out over the water, with the slowly dispersing cloud of oily grey smoke, before finally settling again.
After everything, it was strange seeing Tony again, especially like this. He had his helmet off, and his hair was matted, damp with sweat, and sticking up in odd tangles. There was a streak of ash on his left cheek, and obvious scorch marks on the armor; he must have been close to the Helicarrier when it blew.

Steve's shoulders relaxed slightly, a knot of tension he hadn't realized that he'd been carrying dissolving slowly. Even now, no matter how badly things had been left between them, he couldn't help but be glad to know that Tony was all right.

The camera jounced again slightly, as the reporter came back into view, clean lines of her pastel suit starting to wilt. "Mr. Stark," she said, voice taking on a sharp tone. "What can you tell us about the current situation? What actions is SHIELD taking to protect the citizens of New York City?"

There was a moment of silence, before Tony said, "Obviously, the situation is still under investigation by SHIELD, so we don't yet have the full picture. However, we're fairly certain that this was a targeted attack aimed at SHIELD; not an act of terrorism. We're deeply sorry that the citizens of New York were affected by it, and I can assure you, measures are being taken to ensure that there won't be a repeat of these events." Even without the voice-distorting effect of the helmet, his words were oddly inflectionless -- calm, slightly regretful, but without any obvious distress. As if the loss of his base of operations and deaths of what had to be at least half his men were just minor setbacks, something he was already trying to spin into better publicity.

Steve really hoped he was just putting on a good face for the press, that Tony's power-trip hadn't progressed to the point where he could simply shrug off this kind of disaster. If the Extremis had truly left him that far removed from the rest of humanity... Once they finished dealing with the current crop of supervillains, they might find themselves needing to take out Tony.

And now that the anger he'd been running on during the fight over registration had burned out, he wasn't entirely sure he could do that.

"Deeply regret," Peter snorted. "That's what he said about you."

"Is there anything that New Yorkers should be doing to protect themselves? Is this the time to consider leaving the city?" the reporter asked, leaning forward in a way that was no doubt meant to convey her intensity.

"I'd actually like to thank New Yorkers for holding up so well in the face of this disaster; this city has dealt with so much over the past year, and its residents have proven themselves incredibly resilient," Tony said, turning slightly so that he was half-facing the reporter, although he managed to keep his eyes fixed on the camera. "People should keep on doing what they have been. Stay calm, and if you can, keep close to home. Let the officials do their jobs; remember, we're here to protect you." The screen's picture was fuzzy, but Steve could still see the hair sticking to his forehead, the sharp angles of his cheekbones. "Furthermore, I want to make sure people know that initial analysis indicates that the perpetrators used plain, old-fashioned explosives," he went on. "No biological agents, no radiation... I wouldn't want to go swimming in the harbor at the moment, but the city itself should be unaffected. No one will put themselves in danger from toxins or radiation by staying."

"Then this wasn't the work of superhumans?"

Tony produced another one of those rueful half-smiles, so obviously false that Steve could spot it even through the bad reception. "Not unless timed explosives are a superpower."
The picture went black for a moment then, before cutting back to the brightly-lit anchor desk. "And that was Kristine Sullivan, live at the docks. We’ll have more on the situation as it progresses, or you can check out our website for live updates, found at --"

Luke turned the television off. "Yeah, that’s not something we need to be watching," he said. He looked frustrated; Steve suspected that they were all feeling the thwarted urge to be doing something in the face of a crisis like this. They were heroes; they weren’t supposed to be hiding, safe when disaster struck.

Jessica Jones laid a hand over her husband’s, a sympathetic expression on her face; she might not have been an active hero anymore, but she had been. "Come on Luke," she said, responding to the unspoken sentiment that filled the room. "Don’t sulk. It’s not like there’s anything you could be doing. At this point, they’re probably mostly just dealing with the casualties, and you hate working with hurt people."

A slightly sullen expression crossed Luke’s face. The fact that Jessica was right obviously wasn’t any more of a comfort to him than it was to Steve. "Yeah, well, I’ve got plenty of practice with Danny. Anyway, that’s not the point, and you know it."

"Hey!" Danny said, an irritated expression on his face that probably would have had more impact without the butterfly bandage over his left eyebrow.

"We need to report in with Fury," Bucky said again. He glanced sideways at Dr. Strange and added, "My communicator's been dead since we got here."

"The house is warded against electronic surveillance," Strange told him.

"Of course it is," Sharon said. She looked up over her shoulder at Bucky -- who was still standing behind her -- and then the two of them turned to stare at Steve. "We need to go," she said, and Steve realized with a faint sense of uneasiness that it was the first time she had met his eyes since arriving. "But we’ll come back as soon as we can, and then you and I can talk. Alone." Her eyes dropped from Steve's face to his chest, and she added, "We need to talk about what happened."

As she said the words, Steve realized -- suddenly, irrationally -- that he did not in fact want to "talk about what happened," that he very much didn't want to know whatever it was Sharon needed to tell him.

But she needed to say it, and that meant it was important. "When you get back," he agreed.

Doctor Strange gestured for Sharon and Bucky to stand to one side of the room, away from the New Avengers. "When you come back," he informed them, "try the doorbell."

Bucky raised his hand in a quick salute, and Sharon gave him a small, determined smile. "We'll come back soon," she said, meeting his eyes for a moment before looking away again.

Doctor Strange raised his hands, and said a word that made the hair on Steve's arms stand on end, and Sharon and Bucky were surrounded by a cloud of the same swirling pink smoke that they had appeared in.

On the television screen, channel six was showing the same cell-phone camera footage of the Helicarrier exploding again.
In the end, there had really only been one place for the remnants of SHIELD to go.

Fury’s old Helicarrier had been hidden under the New York Harbor while a select group of agents had gone over it with a fine toothed comb, searching out and destroying the bugs that had riddled the ship.

It was clean now, and easily the safest place for them to go, since only Tony and those select agents had known where the Helicarrier was while it was being gone over.

For the moment, they were effectively hiding on the old Helicarrier, tending to the wounded and trying to figure out what to do next. It wasn’t a question of whether to pull agents from Los Angeles to send them to China anymore; after the kind of blow they had taken, they needed to regroup before they could even begin to consider what they were going to do about the rest of the world. SHIELD was actively under attack, and Tony had the unfortunate certainty that it was because of him.

He had cost the Mandarin his empire, so the Mandarin had destroyed his. Like the terrorist bombing in D.C. that had been a precursor to the destruction in L.A., the suicide bomber in Stark Tower had been just the opening act; the Helicarrier had been the main event.

He had spent the afternoon reassuring the media that SHIELD was still operational, that this was nothing to worry about, that they had the situation under control. But it was a complete lie, of course; things were spiraling out of control at an alarmingly rapid rate, and SHIELD was increasingly only able to play repairman, coming in after the damage had been done to try and put a patch on things.

They had been distracted, caught completely off guard, and now they were paying the price.

Even with all of the agents out in the field, SHIELD had still lost over fifty percent of its force; due to the recent attacks, they had been recalling agents from all non-vital postings, and most of them had been on the Helicarrier, waiting to be debriefed and reassigned.

They also had a number of injured men; there had been quite a few agents still in the air when the Helicarrier had blown, and most of them had been bounced around or burned fairly badly.

The infirmary on the old Helicarrier was filled with people suffering from everything from concussions to third degree burns and internal injuries. The facilities weren’t really equipped to handle such large numbers of injured men all at once, and they had been forced to put most of the non-critical cases in repurposed common areas.

Sending any of the injured to civilian hospitals was out of the question at the moment; SHIELD was badly compromised enough as it was, and they couldn’t afford to open themselves up to attack from any other sources. They also didn’t need to put anyone else in danger.

Tony ran a hand along the wall as he walked through the dimly-lit corridors on the lower levels of the ship; the infirmary might be near-claustrophobically full, but the Helicarrier itself was less than half-full, and the lower decks were almost completely abandoned.
He had spent the morning helping with the clean-up at the harbor. Once again, they were in the position of just being grateful that there hadn't been any biological or radioactive components to the explosives.

There wasn’t much he could do about the wounded, but he had spent the last hour or so in the infirmary anyway, trying to act as moral support if nothing else. He suspected that he had failed rather spectacularly.

He paused for a long moment in a doorway, leaning his head against the wall; he was so tired his bones ached. After everything that had happened over the past few days, Tony knew that he was off his game in more ways than one.

After answering question after question about the explosion, after staring at the three-dozenth burn victim and trying to think of something to say other than, "I'm sorry I screwed up," Tony had hit his limit and retreated down to the lower decks, looking for a quiet moment alone. He wasn’t going to be any good to anyone if he couldn’t get his head together.

"Sir?"

And there went his quiet moment. "Yes, Dugan?" he asked, straightening and turning to face the man. He didn’t have the luxury of showing any kind of weakness.

"The clean-up crews have confirmed your reports that there were no radioactive or biological elements on the Helicarrier. They’re still going through the wreckage, trying to find anything useful," Dugan said.

"They’re not going to find anything; the Mandarin is nothing if not thorough," Tony said, raising a hand to rub at his eyes; he was going on his third day without sleep, and it was starting to catch up with him. There was no time for that now, though. "But I already knew that. Why did you really come down here, Dugan?

"We can’t hide down here indefinitely. The men need to know what we’re doing, what the plan is." Dugan hesitated for a moment, then said, "Look. What happened -- it’s not your fault. There was absolutely no way you could have deactivated even one of those bombs in the time we had, and you’d have only gotten yourself blown to hell trying. They took us by surprise."

Tony folded his arms across his chest. This was an unexpected bit of support, and he really had no way to respond to it, because he couldn’t help but feel that it was unwarranted. "They shouldn’t have been able to take us by surprise like that," he said. "I should have anticipated it." Anticipating the future was what he did, what he’d built half his life on, and yet again and again the important things kept catching him unprepared. And other people kept paying for it.

Dugan frowned, and said, "You can't anticipate everything. We were dumb enough to collect all our forces in one place, and they launched a preemptive strike and caught us by napping. Pearl Harbor, 9/11; sometimes this kind of oversight happens and the important thing is to deal with the aftermath, not waste time going over what you should have done."

"Except Pearl Harbor wasn’t aimed at one person," Tony said, closing his eyes for a long moment. The sudden darkness made him feel dizzy, and he opened them again.

"We don’t know that this was either," Dugan said, gesturing shortly. "There’s no way of knowing why he went after SHIELD; chances are just as good or better that it was because of the kind of
threat we present."

"There is that," Tony admitted, lips quirking.

Dugan shifted his weight, folding his arms over his chest, obviously uncomfortable with this kind of conversation. "I still need to know what to tell the men. They need to know that we’ve got a plan, that they don’t just have us on the run."

"For now," Tony said, "we wait. Things in Los Angeles are still fairly bad; She-Hulk and Ares are staying, along with any SHIELD agents already there, to keep a handle on the situation. Ms. Marvel, Sentry, Wasp, and Wonder Man are on their way back; they’ll be here within the hour.” He had spent half an hour on the line with Carol; she had been less than pleased to discover that there had been two major disasters in New York while she was on the other side of the country.

"So we’re waiting on the super-powered cavalry?" Dugan asked, sounding disgruntled.

Tony shrugged. "Yes. Once they’ve gotten back, we’ll have a strong enough operational force that we’ll be able to take action without leaving ourselves open to attack again."

Dugan snorted. "I’ve said before that I don’t like this. And I don’t," he said, turning away. "But this is a hell of a situation, and I guess we don’t have all that many options." And with that, he walked off, leaving Tony alone with his thoughts again.

Sam’s bird was watching him again; Redwing kept turning his head from side to side, to stare at Steve with flat, reptilian golden eyes.

Normally, Steve didn’t mind Redwing. He was effectively Sam’s partner, and was, generally speaking, a well trained bird. Still, it was slightly creepy when he stared like that. Steve had seen him devote the same intense concentration to small, furry things he was about to eat.

Sharon and Bucky had returned early that morning, along with Sam and Nick Fury. Steve would have been flattered that his return from the dead was enough to finally make Nick come out of hiding, but he suspected Nick’s appearance had more to do with the destruction of the Helicarrier.

Sam had hugged Steve, slapped him on the back, and spent a solid five minutes yelling at him for worrying them all. Then he had hugged him again. Steve was just grateful that he hadn’t cried.

Fury, thankfully, had contented himself with a handshake.

"Ya know, this is just like when the Midnight Racer faked his own death," he had said, clasping Steve's hand firmly.

"Yeah," Steve had said, smiling back at him. It was good to know that some people, at least, never changed. "The Chauffeur fainted when he first saw him."

"Aw, that was only because they liked the sound effect," Fury had said, giving Steve a gruff grin.
Then he had dropped into one of Strange's over-stuffed Victorian chairs, put his boots up on the mahogany end table, and begun debriefing them vis-à-vis Red Skull.

He had covered the Skull's possession of Lukin, the terrorist attacks he had staged in D.C. and LA, and Lukin's repeated visits to the Latverian embassy. Now, he had reached the familiar topic of Red Skull's inevitable contacts within the government.

"There were enough security measures around you to protect three Kennedys," he said, jabbing his unlit cigar in Steve's direction. "You don't want to know how many favors I cashed in to find out what time they were dropping you off at the courthouse. And the Skull knew before I did."

"Because he had spies in SHIELD," Jessica Drew said.

Fury nodded. "Because he had spies in SHIELD. Including Dr. Faustus, who could have given us some useful information if he'd still had an intact skull and a pulse when my agents brought him in."

"He deserved it," Sharon said. The words had the sound of something spoken multiple times, and she looked Fury straight in the eyes when she said them.

"He probably wouldn't have talked anyway." Bucky, too, sounded as if he'd gone over the subject before. "And now we know he doesn't have a hold on Agent Carter anymore."

Steve frowned, and turned towards Sharon. She had her arms folded across her chest, and she wasn't looking at him again.

Sam was also frowning, looking at Sharon with obvious concern in his eyes. Redwing, perched on the back of his chair, was still staring fixedly at Steve.

"So it really was Red Skull, huh?" Peter said, voice strangely flat. He was in costume, leaning his weight against the back of MJ's chair. She and Jessica Jones were sitting together to one side of the room, and had the television on, with the sound muted. They were watching the newscasts showing recycled images of the disaster from yesterday.

"Yeah," Fury said, folding his arms over his chest. "There's no doubt about that. Now what happened yesterday, that was someone else, and we're pretty sure it was that bastard the Mandarin."

"We kind of figured that," Spiderman said, nodding.

"So with everything you know, do you have any idea what the hell Doom's been up to?" Luke asked. "I mean, other than making a damned nuisance of himself?"

"I believe that I may have the answer to that," Doctor Strange said smoothly from the doorway. He walked into the center of the room, twitching an eyebrow at Fury's feet. "I have been communing with the fates since I interrupted his ritual the other evening, attempting to find out what his greater intent was; Doctor Doom rarely works on the small scale."

"You got that right," Fury said. "We actually haven't been able to get much of a read on what he's up to, and that's damned unsettling."

"Well, yes," Strange said. "Doom's plans are of a mystical nature; I doubt that they would make much sense to one not initiated into the arts."
"So, what are they, then?" Jessica Drew asked, raising an eyebrow.

"As I was saying," Strange said, just the barest trace of irritation in his voice. "I have reason to believe that Doctor Doom may be searching for an Asgardian Artifact buried deep beneath New York City."

"You mean like Thor's Hammer?" Danny asked, cocking his head to one side.

Strange nodded, expression solemn. "In a sense. But of a far darker nature; the artifact Doom seeks is the spear with which Loki killed Balder. An Uru metal head, probably still coated in the blood of a god; it's potential use for chaos magic would be almost unimaginable."

"I think I remember reading about that in school," Spiderman said thoughtfully. "Wasn't it a sprig of mistletoe? And the whole thing was supposed to cause the end of the world, or something?"

"The sprig of mistletoe was symbolic. And yes, it was supposed to ultimately bring about Ragnarok," Strange said.

"Okay," Peter said, "that's not good."

"No," Strange agreed. "It's not. The amount of chaos magic needed to call the dead out of the grave is formidable enough. With Balder's Bane, Doom would have access to levels of chaos power no mortal has ever tapped. The only magician who's ever come close to wielding that kind of power is the Scarlet Witch, and she used it to commit mass genocide." He paused, one hand going up to stroke his mustache, then added, "And she was a good woman once. Doom is already insane."

"You could have just said, 'Yes, Peter, it's not good.'"

Luke was frowning. "If this magical whatchamacallit has been buried under New York that long, how come no one's come looking for it before?"

"Actually, attempting to discover that is what has taken the most effort; there may not be much written concerning Balder's Bane, but there is something. However, there was nothing recorded to say why a sorcerer of Doom's power should have such trouble attaining, or in fact, locating, the artifact." Strange looked faintly smug. "However I believe that I have discovered the reason why."

"Well," Peter asked, bouncing slightly on his toes with ill-concealed impatience, "why?"

Strange seemed to be enjoying this. "Because there is something, or to be more precise, someone, in this city that is acting as a sort of magical protector, a guardian of sorts. And while they are in the city, their presence functions as a sort of shield, keeping Doom, an effective outsider, from discovering the precise location of the artifact." He made a descriptive gesture that encompassed the entire room. "I believe that is why he has been killing people; the spear operates on blood and chaos and death; if he can cause enough of those in its name, he can make the spear powerful enough to be 'visible', even with the guardian still present."

There was a moment of silence while the New Avengers, Sharon, Bucky, and Sam all looked at each other. Nick Fury mostly just looked bored, although Steve suspected all that meant was that he was still processing things.

"So," Luke said, breaking the silence. "Who is this 'magical protector' guy? I mean, it's not like this city's lacking for heroes."
"Let us just say that it is a very good thing that the spear is located where it is." Strange was definitely enjoying this.

"Wait," Steve said. "How do you know where the artifact is, if Doom doesn't?"

Strange didn't quite smile. "For one thing, I am a for more skilled sorcerer than Doom likes to imagine himself. And for another thing, I am, generally speaking, on good terms with the guardian, as much as anyone is; the fact that he dislikes Doom doubtless aids in shielding Hell's Kitchen from him."

There was another moment of silence, then Peter, Luke, and Danny all began to laugh.

"So you mean Daredevil?" Danny said, shaking his head in obvious amusement, finally regaining his composure.

Peter was still snickering; of course, of the lot of them, he probably knew Daredevil the best. "Oh God, Matt's a mystical guardian. That's the best thing ever," he said, absently resting one hand on his wife's shoulder.

"Wait, does Daredevil know he's guarding this thing?" Luke's eyebrows were raised in skepticism, and his lips were still twitching.

"Technically?" Strange said. "No."

"So we tell him, dig it up, and destroy it." Fury shrugged, and mimed shooting something with his still-unlit cigar. "Problem solved."

"If it's made out of the same metal as Thor's hammer," Steve pointed out, "destroying it is probably impossible."

Strange nodded. "Impossible, or nearly so. And digging it up would only make it easier for Doom to find. Instead, I am in the process of searching for a way to seal the artifact, in order to make it impossible for Doom or his ilk to get their hands on."

"Um, guys?" MJ said uncertainly, raising a hand to squeeze her husband's wrist. "I think you should see this." She gestured to the television, still silently tuned to the news. They had been playing images of the Helicarrier all morning, and Steve had mostly been ignoring the television. Now, though, he could see that they had switched to something else; it looked like an aerial view of the city, and there was obviously something going on in the streets.

The camera shook for a moment, then the image steadied and cleared. Luke groaned. "Aw, man. Don't tell me that's--"

Jessica Jones leaned over and switched on the sound. "-- can see, a horde of what appear to be Doombots are attacking downtown Manhattan. They seem to --" The disembodied newscaster's voice said, only to be cut off in the middle of a sentence by a loud grinding noise. The picture shook again, violently this time, and there was a dizzying view, first of the chaos in the street, and then the interior of the helicopter. Someone said, "Fucking Christ, we've lost the engine." Then the picture went black.
There was another moment of silence as everybody looked at each other, and Steve knew what they were all thinking; it was their job, their duty to go out there and protect the city, but to do so would be to run the very real risk of capture. And if they were all locked in some high-security SHIELD facility, they wouldn't be able to help anyone.

"We're heroes," Steve said simply. "We have to go stop them. It's our job. And anyway, with what happened yesterday, we have no idea whether SHIELD will even be able to turn out at all."

Jessica Jones stood, handing her baby to MJ. "You'll need all of the help you can get," she said. "I'm coming with you."


"I'm a hero, too. Or I used to be. And I'm coming. I had to sit out -- watch -- during everything else. I'm not this time."

Luke still didn't look entirely convinced, but he nodded.

"Very well then," Strange said, gesturing them all to stand together.

MJ stood, and kissed Peter on the cheek. He turned, pulling the mask up over his nose, and kissed her full on the mouth for a long moment. When they broke apart, Jessica leaned over to drop a kiss on the top of her baby's head, while Luke chucked the little girl under the chin.

"Right," Luke said, "let's go."

The New Avengers, Sharon, Bucky, and Sam all clustered together, Redwing fluttering over to perch on Sam's shoulder.

"Aw, hell," Fury said, dropping his feet to the floor and standing. "I can't miss this much fun."

Doctor Strange began to chant, and there was a disorienting moment where everything went white, and Steve couldn't tell what was up and what was down.

Then they were standing in the street, no more than a hundred yards from where the Doombots were wreaking havoc.

Strange turned to them. "Unfortunately, I need to continue searching for a way to permanently stop Doom; it will do us no good to win this battle, but lose the war."

"Hell," Luke said, glancing at Steve, Sam, and the three ex-SHIELD agents. "I think we got a pretty good group here anyway; I mean, we've got Captain America and the real head of SHIELD on our side. It's gonna take more than a few Doombots to stop us."

"I will report in with you as soon as I have any useful information," Strange said. With that, he took a step back, and disappeared in a swirl of smoke.

Steve allowed himself a single moment to miss his shield, then half-turned to the group. "All right, people -- Avengers Assemble!"
*All right, everyone, listen up, because we'll only have time to go over this once.* Tony subvocalized the words and let the Extremis pick them up, transmitting them to everyone's helmet radios and Avengers' communicators. The task force was small enough that he could easily have pulled his helmet off and spoken to them unamplified, but he had more authority this way, with a day's worth of stubble and the circles under his eyes hidden behind red and gold metal.

It didn’t matter how badly SHIELD had been hit; they couldn’t let Doombots rampage through downtown Manhattan. Thank God Carol, Jan, and Bob had just gotten back from LA. Even with the other Avengers, they barely had enough people to constitute a sufficient fighting force. Without them, he would have been leading the SHIELD team to their deaths.

*Doombots emit a dampening field, so try to keep them as close together as possible. The closer they are to each other, the weaker each individual Doombot is.* The law of inverse proportion in action; Peter would have loved it.

*Why?* Bob's voice.

*What?*

*Why do they have a dampening field?*

It was probably a good thing no one could see his face, since rolling one's eyes wasn't the sort of professional behavior expected from the director of SHIELD. *Because Doom is a paranoid megalomaniac.*

*He programmed them to be able to stand in for him if needed.* Jan elaborated. She flew over to hover just above Bob's shoulder, and went on, *The field keeps them from ganging up on him and replacing him.*

If Tony had been in Doom’s shoes, he would have run the stand-in bots via remote control, and skipped the AI component entirely -- considering the track record sentient robots had achieved over the years, the man was practically asking to be abducted and murdered by his own tech.

It was too bad they hadn’t done it years ago, and saved him the trouble.

They would just have to hope that Doom wasn't actually there himself; a horde of Doombots was one thing, Victor von Doom was another.

Doom had been spotted around the city recently; SHIELD suspected that he had been behind some of the incidents of ritualized violence that had been showing up over the past few weeks. Doom had also been seen meeting with Aleksander Lukin, the head of the Kronas Corporation. Unfortunately, since Doom was technically the ruler of Latveria, that wasn't enough to convict either of them of anything.

*Just try and keep them closed in, Sentry,* Tony said. *And keep the collateral damage to a minimum.* He switched frequencies from the Avengers’ line back to the wide band that would reach everyone. *Let's go, people.*

The modified armor Tony had had made for the strike teams had been a casualty of the explosion, so only the superhero contingent was capable of independent flight. The rest of the strike force would
be rappelling from one of Fury’s old Huey’s.

Hopefully, the Doombots would think it was just another news ‛copter, until they got close enough to start launching missiles.

The destruction in the financial district was obvious even from six hundred feet up -- crushed cars, piles of rubble where a building had been knocked down, smoke everywhere.

But, this being New York, people were already fighting back. Tony saw one Doombot explode as he started his descent, and there was a guy in a leather jacket actually shooting at one with what sounded like a semi-automatic.

You had to love New York.

As they closed with the Doombots, Tony saw a stream of webbing splatter against one of the machines, and he bit back a curse; the New Avengers were there. Under other circumstances, he would have been glad for the opportunity to try to convince them to come in. Right now, they might just prove to be another complication; SHIELD didn't have the resources to devote to trying to bring them in, and they certainly didn't have the resources to fight both the New Avengers and the Doombots.

And the House Unregistered Superhuman Activities Committee had been agitating to have some of the recent violence laid on the heads of the unregistered superhumans; bringing the New Avengers in at this moment would be a chancy proposition anyway.

For a moment, he found himself wishing that he'd been a little closer to the Helicarrier when it had gone nova. Then, all of this would have been someone else's problem.

*Sir,* the Huey pilot broadcast, *what do we do about the capes?*

Close your eyes and hope they go away, Tony thought. *Deal with the Doombots first. They're our main objective.*

One of the Doombots looked up then, and Doom must have added some kind of hive-mind function to their programming, because suddenly they were all firing energy blasts skyward.

Tony took a Doombot's arm off with a repulsor blast, and paused for a moment, frowning. Nick Fury was also there, hurling pieces of rubble and imprecations at the Doombots with equal vigor. He was flanked by Agent Carter and the guy with the automatic. A Doombot fired off a laser blast at them, and they scattered, Uzi-guy rolling to his feet with one leather sleeve a smoking ruin. Tony could see the glint of metal underneath. Winter Soldier.

Great. When they finished getting blasted at by the Doombots, SHIELD could just arrest everything that was still moving.

Carol took a hit full in the chest, and went cart-wheeling back through the air, pulling up mere feet away from a skyscraper's window. "That your best shot?" she asked.

The Doombot didn't answer, already turning away from her to aim at the Huey.

And then a manhole cover came sailing out of the smoke and took its head off.
The Huey dropped lower, hovering about fifteen feet over the street. Tony could hear Dugan over the com-link, ordering the team out of the helicopter -- the door opened and a rope was lowered, and Dugan himself was the first man out of the aircraft, sliding down the rope one-handed with an assault rifle held ready in the other.

Tony decreased the thrust from his boot jets until he was hovering just a foot or so above the street, right in front of the lead Doombot. Most models had some level of sentience, so, "You are all under arrest," he told it. "Stand down, and I might not use you for spare parts."

The energy blast was intense enough that he could feel it even through the armor's cooling systems, but compared to the explosion yesterday, it was nothing. Tony planted his feet on the pavement -- broken glass crunched under his boots -- and started powering up his repulsors.

"Cower before Doom!" the Doombot thundered.

The dampening fields were definitely still in effect.

Behind him, one of the SHIELD agents screamed. The systems readout in his helmet reported that the armor's air filters were filtering out carbonized proteins. Tony didn't turn to look.

He raised one hand -- and a small, black-clad form dropped down onto the Doombot's shoulders.

"Hi there! I'm your friendly neighborhood Spiderman, and I'll be your superhero for today." The Doombot made a grab for him, and Peter ducked smoothly out of the way, still clinging to it, and continued to babble. "Would you like a light maiming, or complete and utter humiliation?"

"Cower before Doom!"

"Right. Humiliation it is." Peter coated the thing's head in webbing, then did a handstand on top of its metal skull and flung himself to the ground.

It reached up to rip the webbing away, and Tony blasted the hell out of it.

The repulsor beam vaporized its ratty green cloak and ripped half of its chest plate away, but it kept on coming, walking blindly toward him and chanting, "Doom! Doom!"

For the first time in a long time, Tony started to smile.

He had been helpless against the Mandarin's bombs, but these things... These things, he could kill.

He stepped forward to meet it, slammed a metal gauntlet into its jaw, and ignored the energy blast that washed over him. His body still ached from the impact with the water yesterday, but inside the armor, it was unimportant.

He hit the Doombot again, and followed the blow up with a repulsor blast. The rest of its chestplate went spinning away, and Tony reached inside its torso and ripped out a fistful of wires.

Sparks crackled around the armor's knuckles, and the Doombot froze in place. One down, eighteen more to --

"Tony, behind you!"
Tony whirled around, and everything froze for an endless moment, the world going distant and silent.

This wasn't real. It wasn't real. Because he was... he had...

The Doombot behind him hit him so hard he went flying, and the mirrored-glass wall of a skyscraper came rushing forward to meet him.

He was lying on the ground, metal and concrete pinning him in place. Tony groaned, and put a hand to his head, or tried to. Metal clanged against metal -- oh, right, the helmet. He closed his eyes for a second, struggling to get his breath back, and opened them to see Carol hovering over him.

Tony shoved the metal beam off of his chest and sat up, and Carol dropped to the ground by his side, chunks of concrete and shards of glass crunching under her boot heels.

"Are you all right?" she asked, offering him a hand up.

Her voice was strangely muffled; that last blast must have damaged the circuits in his helmet.

"No," Tony said, shaking his head to clear it. "I'm hallucinating."

"Oh, that's just what we need." Carol muttered, pulling Tony to his feet. As he stood, she said more loudly, "Can you --"

Whatever she had been going to ask him was lost, though, as a Doombot that had been ripped clean in half flew through the wall, sending yet more glass and concrete scattering.

"Sorry!" Bob's voice came drifting through the new hole in the wall.

"God damn it," Carol said, again, more to herself than to Tony. "We don't have time for this. Look, just try to stay down; if there's something wrong with you, we don't need you getting in the way."

With that, she took off again, and in moment, Tony could hear the sounds of her pounding the hell out of some unfortunate Doombot.

Staying down and out of the way would probably have been the safest course of action, but this was already an unevenly matched fight, and aside from one moment of complete insanity, he seemed to be mostly functional.

He'd fought with internal injuries, fought while bleeding out, fought when the armor was the only thing keeping him standing. Sleep deprivation and concussion were minor hang-ups, just two more variables to factor into the equation and let the armor handle.

It had to be just the lack of sleep catching up with him. And he couldn't leave people he was responsible for to fight on their own.

After the relative dimness of the wrecked office, the street seemed almost blindingly bright.

It wasn't until much later that it would occur to Tony that the fact that he could remember almost nothing of the fight after that point wasn't a good thing.

One moment he was in the air, firing a repulsor blast at a group of Doombots about to surround
Spiderwoman; the next, he was on the ground, three of them dead at his feet.

It took Jan landing lightly next to him, returning to full-size, to make Tony realize that the fight was over.

"Oh, God," she said. "Is that --"

And it hadn't been just sleep deprivation; he was still hallucinating. Because Steve was dead; he had seen the body, read the autopsy reports. But he was standing there in the street, the New Avengers clustered around him like a wolf-pack, ready to run or fight.

Carol walked past Luke, Peter, and Iron Fist -- and the Falcon? Where had he come from? -- as if they weren't there, until she was face-to-face with the man in Steve's costume. "All right, Mister, who the hell are you?"

Not a hallucination, if Carol was talking to him. An impostor. He should have been angry, offended, something...

The impostor reached up and pulled back his mask, revealing a sickeningly familiar head of blond hair.

Steve Rogers offered the Mighty Avengers a tentative half-smile, and said, "Hello, Carol. I'm not going to let you arrest us this time."

Carol made a tiny, choked noise. "Oh my God," she said, grabbing Steve in a fierce hug.

Jan took that as her cue to push past Tony's elbow, and join in the hug. Bob, who had still been airborne, landed in front of them. He gave Steve a slightly uncertain smile. "Um. It's good to see you," he said, reaching out to lay a hand on Steve's shoulder, before quickly withdrawing it, still smiling awkwardly.

Tony watched them, unable to think or move. He could hear the remaining SHIELD agents talking frantically over their radios -- *"Shit, it's him-"* *"... was dead..."* *"What the hell do we..."* *"Director Stark, what are our..."* -- but their voices were little more than a distant buzzing.

He barely noticed as Nick Fury strode over to him briskly, obviously a man on a mission.

"Stark!" he snapped, "where the hell is my Helicarrier?"

The sound was still oddly muted; his helmet must have been damaged when he was thrown through the wall. Tony pulled it off, and without turning to Fury, said, "He was dead."

Spiderwoman had grabbed Carol by the arm, and the two of them were arguing now. Steve had both hands up, pushing them apart, saying something Tony couldn't hear.

Fury made a dismissive gesture, just visible out of the corner of Tony's eye. "He got better. You super-people have a way of doing that. Now, what have you done with my ship?"

Tony blinked slowly; Fury's voice still seemed strangely muffled. He turned to face the man, pulling his gaze away from Steve with what was almost a physical effort. "She's under the New York harbor. We finished sweeping her for bugs last week. You probably don't want to know how many we found."
"You put her under the water?" Fury said, frowning and folding his arms over his chest. "You know that's not good for her."

"The water jammed the bugging devices," Tony said, then paused, still trying to process things. "We buried him. How did you--"

Fury shook his head. "Don't ask me. You people confuse me."

"Look," Carol said, loudly enough to penetrate Tony's daze, raising her hands in a placating gesture. "We need to call a truce. The world's a mess right now, and none of us -- none of us -- are going to be able to fix that on our own. We have to work together, now."

"Yeah?" Spiderwoman snapped, hands on her hips. "And how are we supposed to know that this isn't some kind of a trap? That you won't just arrest us as soon as the fighting's over?"

"That's the damned point of a truce," Carol said, glaring, and Tony suddenly remembered that she and Jessica Drew had been close once.

He raised his voice loudly enough to be heard by the assembled crowd. "I've got twelve full pardons. Anyone who helps SHIELD now will be granted automatic amnesty."

"Whether or not they choose to register after the fighting's over," Carol added.

Tony looked back over his shoulder at Steve again -- still standing there, still surrounded by assorted Avengers -- then turned back to Fury. He was about to ask what on earth Fury was doing there, when he'd been MIA for months, when Dugan pushed past him, assault rifle still clutched in one hand and bowler hat askew.

"Colonel Fury! You're back! They replaced you with some hotshot civilian who tried to turn us into a touchy-feely corporate circus!" Tony half expected him to fling his arms around Fury and wail, "Never leave me again, sir!" and for a second, he felt a completely hysterical urge to laugh.

He forced down the impulse and said -- to Fury -- "I put up a suggestion box."

Dugan continued to completely ignore Tony. "You are taking over again, right?"

"They all hate me," Tony said to Fury, voice flat. "Do you want your job back?"

Fury glared. "As soon as you give me back my damn ship."

Tony nodded. "Okay." Fury would probably have taken it back anyway, with or without permission, and it wasn't as if Tony had any kind of record at keeping Helicarriers intact.

"Good," Fury said, taking out and lighting a cigar. "You can take me to her now."

"Okay," Tony agreed again. Leaving would be good. Maybe his ears would stop ringing if he got out of the street.

The collected Avengers were all trying to talk at once, which meant that no one was actually hearing anything anyone else said. Fury snorted in annoyance, and strode out into the middle of the street.

"Everyone shut up and get in the helicopter!" he yelled. "You can have your damned grudges and
wars all you want on your own time, but right now, we've got bigger problems then yer hurt feelings. So you can just all get the hell over yourselves."

There was a moment of silence. Then Steve said, "He's right. We can't let things continue like this; we have to help." He paused for a moment, catching Tony's eyes. Tony froze, then glanced away. "We'll come with you if you can promise that the amnesty will come through, and that we won't just be locked up as soon as all of this is over."

Carol nodded briskly. "Like the man said, anyone who helps us now will be granted full amnesty. And -- and we'll deal with the issue of registration later. But no one's just getting locked up," she said, turning to shoot a quick glare at Tony.

"Good," Nick Fury said, clapping his hands. "Now you can take me back to my damned ship."
Chapter 4

The last time Steve had been on the Helicarrier, he'd had an armed escort and titanium-steel shackles on his wrists. This time, the handcuffs were gone, but the armed guards were still very much present, hovering nervously at the door to the SHIELD officer's lounge and trying to pretend they weren't guarding the New Avengers -- and that they weren't scared of them. They weren't having much success at either effort.

Steve wasn't entirely sure whose benefit the guards were for -- theirs, or SHIELD's -- considering that they hadn't actually tried to stop Spiderwoman from leaving the room a few minutes ago. She hadn't said where she was going, but Steve gotten the strong impression that she was going to go and find Carol; she had glared unsubtly at the other woman the entire way back to Fury's Helicarrier.

They had had to stop on the way back to pick up MJ and the baby. If they were really throwing their lot in with SHIELD and the Mighty Avengers for the time being, they could hardly leave them alone in Strange's Sanctum Sanctorum, particularly since Strange apparently had a habit of disappearing for days at a time, and none of them knew exactly where he was, researching ways to take down Doom.

Of course, the fact that they couldn't leave MJ and the baby on their own, without telling them where they were going, hadn't made Luke, Jessica, or Peter feel any better about the situation. They were sitting in the cloth-covered chairs that lined the room. There was a pool table in one corner, a dart board with the Hatemonger's picture on it hanging on one wall, and low, steel-frame tables with a scattering of magazines on them.

Luke was holding the baby, and had an arm around Jessica's waist, and both had been glaring fiercely at any SHIELD personnel who made the mistake of getting too close, or looking at the baby for too long; Luke had decided that they only wanted them there because his baby made for a good hostage.

Sam was standing in the far corner of the room, watching the guards almost as suspiciously as Luke. Redwing was perched on his shoulder, ruffling his feathers, and glaring with much the same expression as Sam.

Peter, meanwhile, was clinging to MJ's arm with a white-knuckled grip that probably hurt. He seemed convinced that they were going to try to dissect him. Or possibly MJ; he hadn't been entirely clear on the matter.

Steve would have told him not to worry, but given the things SHIELD had proven willing to do without Fury at the helm -- bombing Madripoor, handing Peter over to their telepaths for interrogation, sending their cape-killer units against kids -- it might not be a completely baseless fear.

Tony was in charge now, and not Maria Hill, but that didn't necessarily mean that things had gotten better.

He'd thought he knew what to expect from Tony once, but Steve didn't even know who he was anymore.

He hadn't even spoken to the New Avengers -- hadn't spoken to Steve -- since the New Avengers had boarded the helicopter. SHIELD agents had escorted them to the officers' lounge, had taken Luke and Peter to Strange's mansion to pick up MJ and the baby, had taken Nick, Bucky, and Sharon off somewhere for "debriefing." Tony had been conspicuously absent for all of it.
It had been hours since they had arrived on the Helicarrier; it had to be night, by now. Two SHIELD agents had brought them food a few hours ago, after Luke had announced that Iron Fist needed to eat. Since then, they had mostly been left alone.

The girl by the door, who had been staring nervously at Luke -- she had made the mistake of telling him the baby was cute -- came to attention and saluted. Her male companion, who apparently hadn't been paying attention, belatedly came to attention and saluted, too.

"Nice, Johnson. Real observant," Dugan said as he came into the room. He was holding a large, canvas case, and looked smug. The last time Steve had seen Dum-Dum look that pleased with himself, he had just beaten Fury at the marksmanship re-qualifications.

"Rogers, I have something that belongs to you." Dugan held up the canvas-wrapped object, and looked, if possible, even more smug. "The divers pulled it out of New York Harbor this morning; it was the only thing that survived the explosion intact," he said, handing the case to Steve.

As soon as he touched it, Steve knew what it was, but he couldn't help holding his breath as he tore the canvas off.

The red, white, and blue were just as bright as the day he'd been issued it. The heft and balance were unmistakable; it wasn't a copy, or a fake, it was his shield.

Steve ran his hand lightly along the rim of the shield, and for a moment, he was surprised to find himself blinking back tears. He looked down at the shield for a long moment, then cleared his throat. "I take it the amnesty came through?"

"Stark is still hashing out the details, but it's going to. Do you think we would be giving you your weapon back, otherwise?"

"So we should all trust you, 'cause you gave Cap his shield back?" Luke asked, managing to look menacing in spite of the fact that he was cradling his daughter gently against his shoulder.

"Let's put it this way," Dugan said. "Do you really have a choice?" He turned to Steve, and nodded at the shield. "I'll just leave you two alone together."

Steve realized that he was still running his hand over the curved face of the shield, and made himself stop.

Dugan saluted, then tipped his bowler hat at Steve and left the room.

After Dugan's footsteps had faded, the male guard pointed at the shield, and asked, "So, that's made of vibranium, right?"

Everyone in the room stared at him; it was the first time either of their guards had dared to speak to them since the girl had complemented Jessica's baby.

"It's actually a vibranium/steel alloy," Steve said.

"You know Agent Carter, yes?" the female guard asked, looking wary. She had a French accent, and looked like she might be of Middle Eastern descent. She also looked younger than Peter. "Is it true she had Agent Taylor murdered?"
Before Steve could answer, the male guard jumped in. "I heard she tortured him, and dumped him in the Hudson. When they found him, he didn't have a face."

"That's because the fish ate it," the girl said. She looked as if she really wanted to roll her eyes.

"Carl from tech said--"

"Carl from tech," the girl interrupted, "thinks Director Stark can spy on you through security cameras, and that Colonel Fury was a robot."

"He can spy on you through security cameras," Peter said. "It's creepy."

"See, I told you," the male agent said.

"Man, why are you talking to them?" Luke said with exasperation. "They're supposed to be the enemy."

Jessica Jones cast her eyes heavenward for second. "Luke, they're twelve."

"Actually, Ma'am, I'm twenty-four," the male agent said. His companion looked pained.

"See, my point." Jessica said.

Steve stayed silent and let them argue; he didn't want to think about the things Sharon might or might not have done while he was gone. He knew Sharon was an experienced SHIELD agent, but just as he couldn't make his memories of the cheerful, good-natured kid Bucky had been fit with the idea of someone who'd been an assassin from the age of sixteen, he couldn't make himself picture Sharon torturing people.

"Carl says--"

"Carl is an idiot."

"Carl is not an idiot. He's made it to the final level of Halo. And he totally hacked it."

"World of Warcraft owns Halo," Peter said. He had relaxed enough to let go of MJ's arm, and was now perching on the back of his chair.

"I thought we weren't talking to them," Danny said.

"I'm going to take a walk," Steve announced.

The two guards exchanged glances.

"I am allowed to do that, right? Since we're not prisoners?" Steve said, folding his arms over his chest and raising an eyebrow at the guards.

"Yes, sir," the girl said. "Actually, we are here to watch you because the security cameras are down, not to keep you from leaving. Director Stark had them ripped out, so the bugs could be removed."

Steve walked past the guards into the hall; the fact that they had given him his weapon back, and
were allowing him walk around freely, was a good sign.

Anyway, if Dum-Dum Dugan said that things were on the level, they were; Dugan had never been able to lie worth a damn.

Steve slung his shield across his back; the familiar weight was reassuring. He turned a corner into a more deserted section of the Helicarrier; only every other light was actually lit in this hallway. The Helicarrier had always been filled with people, and buzzing with activity. As empty as it was now, it felt hollow and abandoned.

If Tony had been serious about the amnesty, why hadn't he come to see them? They had all been his friends at one time or another; surely he owed it to them to tell them himself.

Did he think that they wouldn't listen if it came from him? Or did he really just not care anymore?

He had known that there was something wrong with Tony before, had known the Extremis was still affecting him. The last month and a half didn't seem to have changed anything.

Steve reached over his shoulder, and brushed his fingers lightly along the edge of his shield. Tony had been his friend and teammate for such a long time that no longer being able to count on him was like going into battle without his shield. He kept reaching for something that wasn't there.

"Don't think that just because Cap is back and we have bigger enemies doesn't mean I don't still think you people sold out!" Jessica Drew's voice echoed through the empty hallway.

Steve stopped, listening. Jessica must have found Carol, and it sounded like the discussion wasn't going well.

"We were trying to protect you, all right?" Carol's voice was strident. "I don't expect you to like us for it, but could you at least get off my back?"

"Why the hell should I? You've spent the last three months trying to put me in prison."

He shouldn't be listening; this was obviously a personal argument, something more than the general grievances that the New Avengers had against the pro-registration group, something just between Jessica and Carol.

"No, we've spent the last three months trying to bring you in. Does this look like prison to you?"

"Do you really think there's a difference?" Jessica demanded.

"There is! If we didn't get you, they would!"

"Who the hell are 'they' And what difference would it have made who threw us in jail?"

"You and Spiderman wouldn't have been in jail!" Carol snapped. "You'd have been on a lab table somewhere! Why the hell do you think Tony let Peter go? There are people in the government who have wanted to study superhumans for years. It's not a coincidence that the House Unregistered Superhuman Activities Committee has one of Reverend Stryker's old cronies on it, or that they put a trigger-happy hotshot like Maria Hill in charge."

The thought of Peter on a dissection table made Steve feel sick. He'd wondered why Tony had
allowed Peter to escape. If there were really plans to experiment on superhumans... How could Tony have worked with people like that?

And if he'd really been trying to protect people, why the hell hadn't he said anything?

"So you're protecting us from the poorly defined government conspiracy by jailing us?" Jessica asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Oh my God!" Carol shouted. "You're not in jail! We're pardoning you! We were trying to protect you!"

"Like you protected Cap?"

That was when Steve realized that he really, really shouldn't be listening to this. In fact, he should probably be as far away from it as possible.

There was a loud thud, as if one of the women had thrown the other against the wall.

It was definitely time to leave now.

Steve's footsteps sounded unnaturally loud in the empty hall, but Carol and Jessica were making too much noise to hear him.

If Maria Hill had been working for the registration people all along, that put a lot of things into perspective.

Maria had been brought in as soon as Nick left; registration must have been on the table well before Stamford.

And Tony had known. He had said something about Project Wideawake, when they had met in the burnt-out shell of the Avengers Mansion, but Steve had blown it off as just one more empty justification.

Good God, Tony had said something, and Steve had been too angry to hear it.

He had been right, he knew he had been right, but maybe there had been a better way to handle things.

He had told Ben Urich that he had made errors in judgment, but he was only just beginning to realize how deeply those mistakes had affected everyone. If he had been willing to listen to Tony, maybe they could have worked out a way to deal with Carol's Superhuman Activities Committee that didn't involve collaborating with them.

As much as he didn't want to believe it, maybe he had been reacting as much to Tony's betrayal as to the principles he thought he was defending. The way Jessica was obviously still too hurt and angry over Carol's betrayal to listen to her.

In a way, he had let everyone down by refusing to compromise, or even listen to what the other side had to say. There was still such a deep divide in the superhero community, even after a month and a half, and maybe if he hadn't been so driven by emotion it wouldn't have gotten this bad. Tony had a point; people did look to Steve, even though he had never really understood why. He had had a responsibility to be a leader, and he hadn't lived up to it.
No wonder Tony wouldn't talk to Steve now; the one time it had really mattered, Steve hadn't been willing to talk to him.

None of them had the luxury of fighting amongst themselves anymore; the Mandarin had already destroyed half of SHIELD, Red Skull's bombings had started riots all over the country, and Doom's robots were rampaging through the streets. And right now, the two groups of Avengers couldn't even talk to each other like reasonable adults.

He and Tony were the leaders of their respective sides; it was up to them to work out some kind of solution. Even if they couldn't be friends any longer, they needed to be able to work together.

He had to track down Tony, and make him understand that. Make him understand that Steve was ready to do that now.

If he were Tony, and was trying to avoid his responsibilities, where would he go?

An intimidated-looking lab technician -- Steve wondered if his name was Carl, but didn't ask -- told him that Director Stark had just left, but that he could try the quarters down the hall.

This hallway, like so many of the others Steve had walked through, was empty, with only half the lights lit. One of the doors was slightly ajar, and Steve saw the line of light stretching from it across the hallway before he heard Tony's voice.

"You said I had twelve pardons and I'm using them." Even from outside the door, Tony sounded tired and frustrated. There was a lengthy pause, while whoever Tony was on the phone with spoke, and then Tony said, "Go ahead. You seem to be under the impression, Congressman, that I actually care. And let me remind you that I can hack any computer system on earth and see through satellites. I can make it pretty damn uncomfortable for you, too." There was another pause, shorter this time, and then Steve heard Tony mutter, "Idiot."

Steve reached over his shoulder to touch his shield again, then pushed back his cowl, and knocked on the door jamb.

"Damn it," Tony swore quietly. There was a moment of silence, then Steve could hear him crossing the room. Tony pulled the door open the rest of the way, then froze.

His hair was damp, and curling slightly, he wasn't wearing shoes, and his shirt was half-way unbuttoned; he'd obviously just gotten out of the shower. Steve still wasn't used to seeing Tony even partly shirtless. For a few years, there had been the artificial heart, and the scars had been there for as long as Steve had known him. They were both gone now.

After an endless silence, Steve screwed up his courage, and asked, "May I come in?"

Tony stared at Steve for another endless moment, then stepped back, giving him room to enter.

The room was small, with a single bed bolted to the wall, a similarly fastened desk in the far corner, and worn carpeting on the floor.

Getting out of the hallway didn't make things any less uncomfortable. They stood an awkward four feet apart, while Steve wracked his brain for something to say that wouldn't get him thrown back out into the hallway. "Did you really just blackmail a congressman?"
Tony blinked at him, then said, "Technically, I only threatened to." There were dark circles under his eyes; he was unshaven and unusually pale, and looked almost bruised. "He thought I'd back down and do what he wanted if he threatened to bring charges against me over what that punk made me do with the Armor."

"You were under mind control then," Steve said, frowning. It had never occurred to him that that might cause trouble for Tony, when he'd so obviously been just another victim.

"Amazingly, the FBI has trouble with that concept," Tony said wryly, half-smiling. Then his eyes went shuttered, and he looked down at the floor.

For a moment, things had almost felt normal, but now the charged atmosphere was back.

Steve stared at Tony, who stared at the floor. This wasn't going as he'd planned. Actually, maybe this would have gone better if he had planned it.

Tony was still staring at the floor; with his shirt open like this, Steve could see his collarbones, more sharply visible than he remembered them. Along with the socked feet, it made him look strangely vulnerable. Finally, Steve said, "Fury was right before. We have to work together on this, or Doom, Skull, and the Mandarin are going to win."

Tony looked up at him sharply, then looked away. "Red Skull already won," he said, voice low and defeated.

It wasn't like Tony to give up this easily. "He's not going to stop with Los Angeles," Steve said, stepping forward. Tony took a step back.

"I wasn't talking about that," he said, finally meeting Steve's eyes.

With a jolt, Steve realized that Tony hadn't been talking about D.C. or L.A. He had been talking about him.

It was petty to be glad that Tony had been hurt by his death, but he couldn't help it. Even at the worst of it, Tony's death would have destroyed him; even at the height of the final battle, when Tony had stared up at him, and told him to finish it, he had found himself frozen, unable to move.

Everyone else -- even people like Danny, whom he'd barely known -- had been glad to have him back. Tony hadn't even looked at him, and he'd thought... it didn't matter what he'd thought.

"We need to formulate a plan of action," Steve said.

Tony closed his eyes and put a hand to his face. "Go talk to Dugan," he said, swaying slightly. "Or, hell, talk to Fury. He probably knows more about what's going on with SHIELD than I do, and he hasn't even been here."

Steve frowned to himself, starting to feel seriously alarmed; the Tony he knew would never have handed off a responsibility like that. There had been something wrong with him since he had gotten the Extremis; Steve had thought the new abilities were making him sociopathic and power mad, but maybe it was more complicated than that.

"I don't know what's happened to you over the past month," he said. "I don't know what this
Extremis thing has done to your head, but I need you to snap out of it. We need Tony Stark's brain on this one.” Maybe having something constructive to concentrate on would snap him out of it. God knew it was true enough; they did need him.

"You think the Extremis is still affecting my decisions?” Tony said, voice oddly flat.

"I think it's affected every decision you've made since before this whole thing started," Steve said, gesturing sharply with one hand. The last time they had talked, he had tried to say something like this, but it had come out all wrong, come out as an accusation. "I should have realized it earlier," he went on. "Maybe I could have done something. Instead I just reacted, until the entire thing escalated out of control."

Tony shook his head, making a slashing motion with his left hand. "It wasn't Extremis. I knew what I had to do long before --" he broke off, then went on, more quietly, "it wasn't Extremis."

"Then what was it?” Steve asked, doing his best not to sound accusatory. This time, he had to do this conversation right. "We need your help on this, Tony, and you're not... Look, if it's because of the way I left things between us, I realize I made some mistakes, and I'm--"

Steve broke off. Tony had turned away from him, and was leaning against the wall, hiding his face with one hand. He made a quiet broken noise. "Tony--" Steve started.

"You, you didn't do anything but what I expected from you," Tony said to the wall, voice hoarse, a ragged catch to the words. "I knew you wouldn't compromise, you never..." He trailed off, shoulders shaking.

He was crying, Steve realized. He should leave; Tony wouldn't want Steve to see him crying.

He couldn't just leave Tony like this, though. Not when there was so obviously something wrong with him. Steve reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder, and Tony stiffened, then jerked away. He walked across the room and collapsed onto the edge of the bed like a puppet whose strings had been cut, sitting there with his face buried in his hands.

"You were dead," he said, almost inaudibly. "I saw your body."

Steve froze, not knowing what to say; Tony was crying because of him. "Tony, I'm --"

Tony didn't seem to hear him. He kept talking, as if he couldn't stop. "I did what I had to do, and I didn't... I had no choice, but God, God, I didn't mean for you to...” He broke off, sobbing. Steve went to stand in front of Tony, putting a hand on his shoulder again; he couldn't just watch Tony in this state and not try to do something. It hurt to see anyone this upset, let alone someone who had been his friend for so long.

Tony reached up, and grabbed Steve's forearm, latching on to his waist with the other hand. Steve had the feeling that if his costume had had enough give for it, Tony would have been clinging to his shirt, clutching the fabric.

"It wasn't worth it," Tony said, voice breaking on the words. "It wasn't worth it."

He leaned forward, resting his head on Steve's chest. Tony was crying soundlessly, but Steve could feel his whole body shuddering; fine, convulsive tremors that he couldn't seem to stop.
The only time he had ever seen Tony fall apart this completely, he had been drunk, and he felt just as helpless now as he had then; just as useless in the face of this kind of pain. Steve wrapped his free hand around the back of Tony's neck, rubbing circles with his thumb. Tony's breath was coming in shuddering gasps; he almost sounded as if he were choking.

Seeing him on the news after the Helicarrier had blown, Steve had worried that Tony was emotionless, that the Extremis had somehow shut that part of him down. But this was almost worse; he couldn't even think of what Tony might do once he stopped crying. If there had been any alcohol in the room, he would have poured it out.

Steve sat down on the bed next to Tony, without letting go of his shoulder; he didn't think he could have pried Tony's fingers off his arm, anyway. He pulled Tony forward, so that his entire weight was resting against him, and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, running a hand up and down his back.

He could feel the hard knots of Tony's spine, the sharp edges of his shoulder blades. Tony had always tended towards the lean side, but now he felt almost fragile, the way he had when Steve had come to confront him about the drinking, and ended up carrying him out of a burning building instead. He had been able feel his bones then, too.

Steve wasn't sure how long they sat there before Tony finally stopped shaking. "I'm sorry," he mumbled into Steve's costume. "You were dead. You didn't need me crying on you."

"It's all right," Steve told him. The words sounded inadequate, but they were all he could think of.

"It's been a bad couple of days."

"It's been a bad couple of months," Steve said. Probably the worst of his life.

Tony didn't respond. His breathing had slowed, and evened out; it took Steve a minute or so to realize that he had fallen asleep. He kept sitting there, Tony's head on his chest, for longer than that, though, staring at the wall, unsure what to do next.
For almost as long as the original Helicarrier had been in operation, there had been a framed black and white unit photograph of the Howling Commandos hanging on the wall of the Director's office next to the desk. They'd been in Australia then, waiting to be shipped out to Guadalcanal.

The photograph had disappeared along with Nick Fury.

When Maria Hill had taken over as Director, she hadn't bothered to put any personal touches in the office. Stark hadn't either, although he had tended to leave lab reports and tools lying around.

Dugan hadn't realized how sterile and wrong the office looked without that photograph until he walked in to see Fury settling it back into place on its hook.

"There," Fury said, sounding pleased. "That's better."

"The place just doesn't look right without it," Dugan agreed, taking off his bowler hat and entering the room.

Fury turned to him, and gave Dugan an appraising glance. "Well, don't you look like the cat that ate the canary."

"Ah, I just gave Rogers his shield back."

Fury dropped into his chair, propping his feet up on the desk, looking irritated. "And you didn't come get me? I hope you got pictures."

Dugan shook his head. "The surveillance system's still down, so there's probably no evidence. It's a shame, though; he looked like he was about to cry."

Fury snickered. "I think he sleeps with that shield," he said, waving Dugan towards the room's other stuffed leather chair. "Sit down; I've got a bone to pick with you."

"Only one?" Dugan asked.

Fury ignored the comment. "How could you let Stark run my organization?" he said, stabbing a finger at Dugan. "He's been one step away from a total breakdown for years!"

Dugan snorted. "What do you think I've spent the past six weeks doing damage control on?" Serving under Maria Hill had been an exercise in frustration; switching to Stark had been trading incompetence for potential instability. Stark was a hell of a tactician, but for six weeks, Dugan had watched him snap at subordinates, duck out of meetings to hide in SHIELD laboratories, and put his
fist through a mirror twice. And then there was his monologue to Cap's body, which Dugan flat preferred not to think about. But after the way Hill had mishandled the registration mess, replacing her with someone had been necessary, and only Stark had been in the position to take charge. "There was no one else who could step up to the plate. It was Stark or Maria Hill."


"Trust me, it wasn't my idea" Dugan said. "Do you think I wanted a CO who, A," he held up one finger, "has no clue how to run a military organization and B, is actively trying to get himself killed? I kept expecting him to take off for the Gulf Coast and get beaten to pulp by the Hatemonger's flunkies."

Fury pulled two cigars out of his pocket, lit one, and tossed the other one to Dugan. "Ah, Dum-Dum, I've missed you."

"Good," Dugan told him. "Because the next time you run away from home, you're taking me with you."

Steve quietly pulled the door closed behind him. Thank God, the hallway was still empty and silent; he wasn't ready to face anyone at the moment. He had left Tony sleeping, and now he didn't know what to do next; they hadn't actually had the conversation that he had come to have, and he now he had even less idea what was going on with Tony than before.

He wished, briefly, that there was someone on the Helicarrier he could go to with this. But Tony had effectively isolated himself to the point that Steve honestly couldn't think of anyone.

There was also the fact that they still needed Tony to fight Red Skull and Doom, and there was no one else who had any real experience with the Mandarin. And Steve needed Tony to work with him if there was going to be any chance getting the two groups of Avengers to talk to each other like reasonable adults. They couldn't afford to have him out of commission.

Petty as it was, he had hoped, during the worst of the fighting, that Tony felt his betrayal the way Steve had felt it. He had, he realized, been secretly hoping that Tony had been affected by his death, that he would welcome him back with open arms, and a good explanation, and possibly a speech about how he'd realized that he'd been wrong, and Steve had been right.

But real life didn't work that way. And he was starting to wonder if he'd really been as totally in the right as he'd thought.

He'd never wanted Tony to be affected like this.

The last time he'd seen Tony anywhere near this... broken, had been when he was drinking, and even then hadn't been this bad. And that time, he'd handed off the armor to Rhodey. Now, it was a part of Tony, and there was no one else who could wear it.

After everything that had happened between them, Steve was surprised to realize that he wanted to
help Tony. Needed to help him. Not just because it was necessary, but because seeing him like this hurt.

An hour ago, Steve had had a plan, the first one he'd had since coming back. Now, that was blown completely out of the water.

At the far end of the hall, the door to the labs opened, briefly flooding the passageway with light, and a dark-haired woman with a scar down one cheek stepped out.

She stood in the doorway for a moment, apparently observing Steve, then walked towards him purposefully, white lab shirt flapping around her. "Have you seen Tony?" she asked, holding up a clipboard. "The spectrum analysis reports on the debris from the Helicarrier are back, and he wanted to see them."

"He's sleeping," Steve said. There was no way he could tell a random lab tech about what had just happened.

The woman looked up at him, frowning slightly, then down at his costume. "Oh! You're Captain America," she said, face clearing. "You used to be Tony's friend, right?"

Steve nodded, unsure what to say. The woman carried on, though.

"Look, he's been a little off, recently," she continued, a puzzled expression flitting across her face. "After his parents died, he was upset, but he didn't let it slow him down or interfere with his work. But lately, he's been... unpredictable. He won't even let me run any tests on the Extremis."

"Maya, we've been over this," a man's voice said, as the door to the labs swung open again. "Leave Tony alone about the Extremis thing, okay?" He paused, seeing Steve, than walked over to join them. "Aren't you supposed to be dead?" the man asked. He was wearing an ill-fitting SHIELD officer's uniform jacket over a tie-dye shirt, and had long, grey hair tied loosely back.

"I got better," Steve quoted. After he had seen that movie, half of what Peter and Tony said to each other had suddenly made infinitely more sense.

The man grinned. "Right. I guess you people do that sometimes. I'm Sal Kennedy," he said, holding out a hand, "I work here, with Tony."

It was hard to imagine this man actually working for SHIELD, but then, Tony had always had somewhat strange hiring practices. "It's nice to meet you," Steve said politely. He couldn't help but feel a little awkward, though; he didn't know either of these people, and after what had just happened, he wasn't ready to face friends, let alone strangers.

Sal frowned at Steve contemplatively for a moment, then said, "Hang on a second, there's something I should probably give you." He took the woman - Maya - by the elbow, and guided her back into the labs with him. As the door shut again, Steve could hear him saying, "Yes, that was Captain America; no, you can't test his DNA."

Left alone again for a moment, Steve closed his eyes, contemplating just leaving. He had no idea what this Sal wanted to show him, and he had enough problems as it was, right now.

"Here we go," Sal said, and Steve opened his eyes again. Sal was holding up an unmarked video cassette. He handed it to Steve, who turned it over, examining it for any clues as to what it might be.
"What is this?" he asked.

Sal stuck his hands in his pockets, looking a little uncomfortable. "It's security footage," he said. "When they brought your body back here, Tony went to have a little 'talk' with you. It's just a good thing Dugan was watching the monitors when he did; I'd hate to think what would have happened if someone else had seen it."

Steve's fingers tightened on the cassette. "Oh," he said. He didn't want to think about being dead, and didn't want to think about what might have driven Tony to go talk to him while he was.

But at the same time, he couldn't help but wonder what he'd had to say.

"I have to admit, I was kind of relieved when Dugan gave it to me. It was the first time in a while that I'd actually seen Tony get upset over any of this," Sal went on, nodding at the tape. "I was starting to worry about his grasp on reality."

"He didn't bother to turn off the security cameras?" Steve asked, frowning. If Tony had overlooked something so basic, he must have been off-balance.

"Naw, he wasn't quite that out of it," Sal said. "But apparently the old Director was a paranoid bastard who had analog backups installed privately a couple years back. Dugan said something about some crazy mutant-cyborg with a messiah complex that can also talk to computers."

Steve glanced over his shoulder at the door to Tony's room, then back to Sal. "I'm not sure what good my watching this will do; he obviously never intended for me to see it," he said.

"Trust me, you need to see that," Sal said, shaking his head. "If nothing else, someone who knows Tony better than me needs to be able to make the call on whether he's really as... well. Like I said, you should watch that. Some of what he says..."

"What does he say?" Steve asked, consciously forcing his hands to relax; cracking the tape wouldn't help anything. Considering the state Tony had just been in, he was a little scared to know.

"I don't know that I could get it across," Sal said, shrugging one shoulder. "Watch the tape."

Sharon had never seen the commissary this deserted before. Normally, even at eight o’ clock, there were at least a handful of people there getting coffee or catching a late dinner. Tonight, all but one of the long tables were empty, and only the safety lighting was on. Winter Soldier was sitting alone on the far side of the room, mostly hidden by the shadows. The red light from the "Exit" sign over the room's double doors glinted off his metal hand -- otherwise, she might not have noticed him.

Sharon walked across the room, her boot heels sounding unnaturally loud against the deck planks, and sat down next to him. "You know, you could have turned on the lights," she said.

He shrugged. "I didn't need them."
Sharon picked up his coffee cup and took a sip; it was lukewarm, and almost sickeningly sweet. Winter Soldier didn't so much drink coffee as he did hot sludge composed of sugar and coffee grounds.

"So," he said, "how much trouble are you in?"

"Considering that I deserted my post and aided and abetted a fugitive, surprisingly little." All of the paper trail documenting her defection had gone up in smoke with the new Helicarrier, and no one was certain at the moment if leaving to join Fury still qualified as desertion.

The agent who had questioned her -- a hastily promoted major who had still had captain's bars on his shoulders -- had been more interested in what she knew about Red Skull than in what she had been doing for the past two months. He had pointedly avoided asking any questions about Winter Soldier; she had gotten the feeling that he was a little scared of following that path of inquiry too far. Winter Soldier's status -- part of SHIELD? A freelance mercenary? Colonel Fury's pet? -- had been uncertain even before Fury had gone into hiding, and most of SHIELD hadn't even been aware of his existence until this morning.

"Where were you?" she asked. "I got out of the debriefing and you were gone."

He turned to look at her, catching and holding her eyes. "I thought you'd be with Steve by now."

"I killed him, James. That's not something a relationship can recover from." The fact that Steve was back now, however miraculous it was, didn't erase the fact that she had shot him. It didn't matter that she hadn't done it willingly; he had still been dead. "I haven't even gotten up the courage to tell him yet." He didn't remember what had happened; it was obvious from the way he'd looked at her in Strange's house. He would never look at her quite the same way again once he knew.

"Trust me," James said seriously, "he'd prefer not knowing."

"You can't base a relationship on lies."

James frowned, expression baffled and almost painfully young, and for a moment, she could almost see Steve's Bucky, the one who didn't exist anymore. "You know he'll forgive you."

"Yes, but I haven't." She took another sip of James's disgusting coffee, and added, "Do you really think I'd go to him without telling you first?"

He reclaimed the coffee cup and held it cradled in both hands, staring into it, head bowed, stray pieces of dark hair falling in front of his eyes.

The first time they had slept together, it had been purely for comfort, a way for both of them to hold on to a little piece of Steve. The second time had been adrenaline, and so had the third.

It had been over a month now, and while she owed a debt to Steve, she owed one to James, too. He was the one who had been there. Who knew what it was like to have blood on your hands that wouldn't come off.

"It's between you and him, Sharon."

She shook her head. "It's more complicated than that, and you know it." Was this why he'd disappeared after they'd finished debriefing him? To clear the way for her to go back to Steve?
"Only because you're making it complicated." He lifted his gaze from his coffee and met her eyes again. "Either tell him or don't, but someone's going to eventually. There's no way Stark didn't figure it out from the autopsy reports."

The only thing worse for Steve than hearing about her betrayal from her would be hearing it from someone else. "Tomorrow," she decided. "I'll tell him first thing tomorrow."

"He'll forgive you," James said again. "It's what he does."

"I know," Sharon said.

James set the coffee cup down on the stainless steel table top, then reached out to cup her face with his left hand. The metal fingers were cold against her skin. James had no sensation in those fingers -- the Soviet scientists who'd designed his arm hadn't been concerned with those kinds of details -- and when they weren't in bed together, he rarely touched her with it. When he did, as now, it was for her comfort, not his.

She reached forward and took hold of his real hand, lacing her fingers through his, then grabbed the collar of his leather jacket and pulled him forward into a kiss.

Outside of the monitor room, Steve ran into the first SHIELD agent he had seen since leaving the officer's lounge.

The officer -- a tall black man about forty years old -- came to attention as soon as Steve stopped in front of the heavy steel door to the monitor room. "The security cameras are all off-line," he said, raising an eyebrow.

Steve nodded at the guard. "I know," he said, holding up the tape. "I've got some footage to review." Preferably alone.

"That's fine," the guard said. "You know how to work the machines?"

Steve nodded, and the guard entered a code in the keypad beside the door, then stepped aside to let him in.

The room was crowded with an intimidating array of electronic equipment, most of it sleek, modern, and completely unidentifiable. The player for Fury's surveillance tape was crammed into a far corner, behind a bank of computers and a laser disk player, as if the techs responsible for the equipment were demonstrating their contempt for such an obsolete machine.

Steve sat down, donned the black, plastic headphones -- the letters S.H.I.E.L.D. were stenciled on each ear piece -- and slid the little cassette into the VCR. He hesitated before hitting "play," unable to shake the feeling that he was spying on Tony, but the itching need to know what the hell was going on finally overcame his reservations.

There were a few seconds of static, the screen covered in grey fuzz, and then the static resolved into
the black and white image of a body lying on a metal table, shot from above.

It took Steve several moments to recognize the man on the table as himself.

He was maskless, in the same torn costume he'd been arrested in -- the same one he'd worn to the courthouse. His shield was lying across his torso, its surface splattered with blood. It hid the bullet wounds from view, and Steve was glad for that.

He hadn't heard the first shot, just seen the dot from the sniper's laser scope and felt the pain as the bullet ripped into him. He'd only heard the one that killed him, the sound of the gunshot echoing in his ears as something slammed into his gut with enough force to knock him to the ground -- except he'd been on the ground already, hadn't he? -- and there had been flashbulbs going off, and people screaming, and it hadn't even hurt, at first, not the way his shoulder had, not until Sharon had started to put pressure on it, trying to stop the bleeding.

"... they're Fury's kids, and they want their daddy back..."

Tony had entered the frame, and was talking. Steve barely registered his presence on the screen, eyes still fixed on his own body, motionless and obviously, undeniably dead.

Steve wasn't sure how long he sat there, staring at himself, unable to process anything beyond that. He was vaguely aware of the rough, broken tone in Tony's voice as it raised in volume, but other than that, he didn't really hear what Tony was saying on the tape. The fact that he was there, dead, onscreen was surreal and overwhelming.

"...but now I can't..." Tony's voice had gone suddenly very quiet, and it was the drop in volume that actually caught Steve's attention. Not even half an hour ago, when he had been clutching at Steve's costume and crying uncontrollably, had Tony sounded quite so thoroughly broken.

"It wasn't worth it."

The words were nearly inaudible, particularly compared to the way Tony had been almost shouting earlier. But something about the way he said them made Steve's stomach twist, because there was some hidden meaning underlying those words. There something that Tony wasn't quite saying, something important.

Steve needed to watch the tape again.

It took him several minutes to force himself to hit the rewind button. This time, when the picture appeared, Steve forced himself to focus on Tony.

He was sitting next to... sitting next to Steve. He was in his armor, holding his helmet in his hands.

He was saying something about a Greek soldier Steve had never heard of, but whom Tony nevertheless seemed convinced he would know about.

"...there's winning and there's winning," he finished, "and sometimes winning doesn't feel like winning. It almost feels like losing. Or we might as well have lost if this is what it costs."

Tony stared down at his helmet; Steve couldn't see his expression, but his voice sounded tired.

"I --" his voice faltered, "I came here to tell you why this happened. You asked me and I'm going to
The last time they had spoken to each other, Steve had demanded an explanation. Every time they had argued over something Tony had done, he had come to Steve afterwards and explained himself, and Steve had always forgiven him.

Steve couldn’t help but smile a little bit as Tony then began to relate a long, rambling anecdote about Doom, and King Arthur.

Somehow, he'd figured out from this that superheroes were going to end up fighting each other. Steve had never really understood how Tony made those kind of leaps, how he got from one piece of information to a seemingly unrelated conclusion, and still, somehow, turned out to be right. To be honest, Steve had never really understood how Tony's mind worked in general, beyond the fact that Tony was obviously smarter than him.

"I knew what it meant," Tony was saying now. He had, it seemed, known about the registration bill a lot earlier than the rest of them. "I knew it would pass. I knew exactly who would fall on what side of the issue. (Except Peter, Peter surprised me.)" Steve wondered whether Tony was surprised that Peter had switched sides, or surprised that Peter had ever sided with Tony at all. "I knew my feelings. I knew your feelings. I knew this was it."

And then, finally, Tony started explaining why he had done what he had done. "We had to work within the system. We had work with the leaders that the people of this country voted to represent them. Tonot do this is arrogance -- criminal arrogance. I told you that."

Tony had told him that, but he hadn't wanted to listen, had wanted to believe that if he stood up for what was right, people would see the error of their ways. Had that been arrogant of him?

"Who else was there? No one. So I sucked it up. I did what you do. I committed." Steve frowned. Why had Tony been so convinced that he had to go this alone, that he had to be the one to do this, especially if he hadn't actually wanted to?

Tony was audibly upset now; though Steve couldn't see his face, he could tell from his voice that he was crying. If it hurt this much just to talk about it, how could he have gone through with it? Particularly when he knew, as Steve had now realized that he must have, that it was wrong.

Clint had always said that Tony's biggest problem was control -- that he always had either too much or not enough. Control... Steve had assumed, back when this whole thing started, that Tony was on some kind of power trip, but it hadn't been that at all. Tony had been trying to do damage control. Tony had always done that, always needed to try and fix things, no matter how unfixable, even when it was obvious that doing so would only make things worse.

Tony hadn't been doing the right thing, and obviously knew that, but he'd been doing it for the right reasons. Steve closed his eyes from a moment, shutting out the sight of the screen -- of Tony's misery and of his own body -- unable to take the sight of either for a moment. Tony hadn't sold the rest of them out; he'd sold himself out to try and protect them. He remembered Tony, in the Avengers Mansion, mentioning Project Wideawake, remembered Carol insisting to Jessica that Stryker's cronies in Congress were out to get her and Peter, remembered the avid glint in Maria Hill's eyes when she'd informed him that the Registration Act was being signed into law.

Steve himself would never trade liberty for safety, but if given the choice between seeing Peter in the
Negative Zone, and seeing him on a dissection table, he knew which one he'd have to choose, no matter how much he'd hate himself for it.

Tony finally looked up in the direction of the camera, face contorted with tears.

"The good news is..." he said, "through all of this... I never took a drink! And if I didn't drink during this, I'm probably never going to... So there's that." He tried to smile, as if mocking himself for thinking this would make up for anything.

It said something, that never once during the war had it occurred to Steve that Tony might start drinking again. Tony had always been more afraid of that than anyone else.

Steve should have thought of it, though. It was pretty much the only thing that could have made things even worse.

If Tony felt the need to mention that he hadn't fallen off the wagon, it meant that he'd come close. In the six years since he'd stopped drinking, Tony hadn't touched alcohol again of his own will; he must have been even closer to the edge than Steve had thought. If he'd held it together, he must have really thought that what he was doing was vital.

"To do what I needed to do to win this quickly -- I knew that meant you and I would never speak again. Or be friends again. Or partners again. I told myself I was okay with it because I knew I was right and I -- I knew it was saving lives."

Steve realized that he had leaned forward until his face was only inches away from the screen. Tony was really crying now, the way he had been on Steve's shoulder not an hour ago.

"I knew this and I said I was okay with it. And -- and even though I said... Even though I said I was willing to go all the way with it... I wasn't. And --" he broke off, sobbing. It was worse than his breakdown earlier. He sounded like a man who had lost all hope, who had no reason left to go on.

"And I know this because the worst has happened. The thing I can't live with... Has happened."

Steve could hardly understand him now, his voice was so thick with tears. There was a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach; he was almost afraid to hear the rest of Tony's confession, afraid to hear what might be coming. "And for all our back and forth," Tony's voice was getting louder now, building in intensity, and all the things we've said to each other... For all the hard questions I've had to ask, and terrible lies I've had to tell... There's one thing that I'll never be able to tell anyone now. Not my friends or my coworkers or my president... The one thing!! The one thing I should have told you. But now I can't..." He trailed off, as if the air had been knocked out of him. When he spoke again, it was in a hoarse whisper that hurt to hear. It wasn't worth it.

The tape ended, and the screen fuzzed back into static. Steve sat there staring at it, numb.

No matter how obviously upset Tony had been earlier, it hadn't prepared Steve for this... this devastation.

It was both humbling and a little frightening to think that his death could break someone that way.

Less than four months ago, when his armor had gone out of control, Tony had stopped his own heart to save Steve. With the chaos in the streets, it had taken the paramedics twenty minutes to get there, and Steve had given Tony CPR the entire time, long past the point where there was any hope. The Extremis was the only reason he was still alive, but Steve hadn't known that at the time; all he had
known was that he couldn't give up on Tony.

That hadn't been the first time Tony had tried to trade his life for Steve's. There had also been the time Red Skull had released a biological agent over Mount Rushmore, and Steve had been knocked out and had lost his gas mask. Tony had pulled off his helmet, deliberately exposing himself to the toxin, in order to give Steve mouth-to-mouth, and he'd woken up minutes later to find Tony unconscious beside him. Steve had thought Tony was dying then, too, and still couldn't imagine what he would have done if he had.

Tony was one of the first friends he'd made after waking up in this time -- the first person whose voice he had heard, when they'd pulled him out of the ice -- and had been one of his closest friends for over ten years.

When Steve had lost his shield in the Atlantic ocean, Tony had moved heaven and earth and spent God knew how much of Stark Enterprises' money to find it. Before this registration mess had started, Steve had known that any time he needed help, all he had to do was go to Tony, and he would drop everything and do anything in his power to help him. He'd always hoped that Tony would eventually figure out that that went both ways.

Any time something had been bothering Steve, it had been Tony, out of all the Avengers, who noticed, and who came and talked to him about it. Sometimes whether Steve actually wanted to talk or not.

And he liked Steve's art, even when it wasn't technically any good. There had been one or two pieces hanging in the lobby of Stark Tower that had made Steve cringe every time he'd walked by them, because the perspective was so bad, but Tony had held onto them through multiple office buildings and multiple incarnations of Stark Enterprises.

The sound of static finally went silent, and the screen went black as the tape reached the end of its reel. Steve pulled the headphones off -- he'd forgotten he was still wearing them -- and ejected the cassette.

A couple of years ago, Tony had managed to swing season tickets to the subway series, and had let Steve drag him to every game, even when it had involved canceling business meetings. That had been during the period when Tiberius Stone had been trying to destroy his company and his life, and Tony had desperately needed the break. He had worn a little smile the entire time, and had barely looked at the baseball field. At the time, Steve hadn't realized that this was because Tony had been watching him. In retrospect, it was obvious.

It was all obvious.

Tony had been in love with him. Was in love with him.

Why the hell had he never said anything?

Why the hell had he sold his soul, gotten in bed with people he hated, borne all the responsibility alone, kept Steve in the dark, and never said anything?

If Steve had actually understood what Tony was trying to do, he would have... still opposed registration, because forcing everyone with superpowers to become the Pentagon's pet superhero army was never not going to be a bad idea, but if Tony had come to him, had told him what was going on when he'd first learned of it, maybe they could have worked out a better way to fight it. A
Tony's decisions had affected all of them. By making them in secret, he had denied them the right to decide their own futures.

If he loved Steve, why hadn't he respected him enough to let him make his own choices? Why had he let Steve die thinking he despised him?

If Steve's death was the one thing Tony couldn't live with, why had he let Steve think that their friendship meant nothing, that he didn't care? If nothing else, surely he had deserved better than that.

And if his death was an unacceptable loss, what made Tony's life an acceptable sacrifice?

There was a sharp snapping noise, and Steve looked down to find that he had cracked the cassette tape down the middle. He stood abruptly and went to get some more answers.

There was a dull, throbbing pain at Tony's temples, and his eyes were sore and scratchy; it felt a little bit like a hangover.

*Director Stark, sir?* The voice spoke directly into his brain, re-routed from the communicator in his armor.

*What?* Tony groaned. He was lying on his bed, on top of the covers, still fully clothed. For a moment, he wasn't sure how he'd gotten there. If he'd passed out in the lab -- Then he remembered. Steve was gone. Of course Steve was gone. He wouldn't want to stay around after Tony had lost it so thoroughly.

*This is communications,* the voice that had woken him continued. *We've got an unidentified energy signature on three of our satellites. I think someone's breached the firewall.*

Tony sat up, and the room tilted and went grey for a second.

He closed his eyes, and rested his head in his hands, waiting for the dizziness to stop. Apparently, seventy-two hours straight without sleep were his outside limit. He'd been feeling the grinding press of exhaustion since yesterday, but there was so much to do, so much that required his direct attention.

*Get Maya to take a look at it,* he told the communications specialist. The extra effort of subvocalizing the words via the Extremis made his head hurt even more, and he kept his eyes shut, rubbing vainly at his temples. *And shut down the satellite network until we know who's spying on our transmissions.*

Tony closed the transmission down, not waiting for a response. He couldn't deal with this right now. He'd been on the verge of crashing when he'd come back to his room, had intended to go to bed as soon as he'd finished dealing with Congressman Dickstein, but then Steve had appeared at his door, and Tony couldn't not talk to him, even though he'd known that he wasn't prepared to handle what ever it was he had to say. Known that he couldn't handle Steve's anger, or his hatred, just then, no matter how much he deserved it.
What Steve had actually said had been so much worse, though, because Tony knew -- *knew* -- that he didn't deserve that. That after everything he had done, with the blood that was on his hands, there was no way he would ever deserve Steve's apologies for anything.

But Steve being Steve, he was always ready to try and give people the benefit of the doubt, to shoulder responsibility for things that weren't his burden to bear.

Tony swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, wrapping an arm around his ribs as they reminded him that they hadn't liked being thrown through a wall earlier. For Steve to come to talk to him now, he must have had something important to say, and Tony had fallen apart before he'd had a chance to. He might not be good for anything else at the moment, but he could at least find Steve and listen to what he had to say.

Probably he had meant to offer his help against Doom, or propose some kind of temporary alliance against all three supervillains. He might have lost Steve's friendship, and probably his respect as well, but Steve was obviously willing to put up with him for the greater good, even to try and forgive him when Tony had given him no reasons to want to.

Before Tony could leave to look for Steve, though, the door slammed open with a loud bang, and Tony flinched, startled out of his daze. Steve stormed into Tony's quarters and kicked the door shut behind him, his presence filling the small room. He still had his mask off, and the single light in the room cast a corona through his fair hair. His eyes were blazing with anger.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded, brandishing a cracked cassette tape at Tony.

Tell him... what? Tony stared at Steve blankly. Obviously he was too tired to process information properly anymore, because he had no idea what Steve was talking about.

Steve waved the tape again. "Your hippy friend gave me the security tape of you," he hesitated, as if searching for a word, "... talking... to me."

There couldn't be a tape of that. He'd made sure there was no recording, that no one was watching. "There's no footage of that," Tony protested, feeling sick. No one could have seen that. Steve had seen that? "I turned the cameras off."

Steve shook his head, not taking his eyes off of Tony. "Fury had analog back-ups."

Tony found himself wanting to crawl under the floor to get away from that intense blue gaze. Steve was staring at him as if he could see through him, which, if he'd seen that, he could. "Who else has seen that?" he asked. No wonder no one in SHIELD would listen to him. They knew he wasn't committed, knew he was unstable, knew he was a complete mess --

"Luckily, just Dugan, Kennedy, and me." Steve's voice was quiet now, serious. "What the hell did you think you were doing, Tony?"

Tony closed his eyes, gathering his thoughts; he couldn't focus while looking at Steve, couldn't process anything past the fact of his presence. "It wasn't supposed to be like this," he started, opening his eyes again. Steve was still staring at him, gaze fixed on his face. "Registration was supposed to stop this kind of war from happening, stop anyone else from being..." he trailed off, unable to say any more. Even with Steve standing inches away, undeniably present, it hurt too much to mention his death aloud.
"I know that," Steve said impatiently, "I know what you thought you were accomplishing. I want to know why you decided to do it on your own and keep us in the dark." He stepped closer to Tony, voice raising in volume and intensity. "What gave you the right to make that decision for us? Why didn't you ever tell me?" It was practically a shout.

Tony stood his ground, feeling a sudden surge of anger. "I didn't have a choice!" he shouted back. Why didn't anyone understand that? If there had been any other way, didn't Steve know he would have taken it?

"You always have a choice!" Steve took another step forward, looming over him, and Tony instinctively backed up, shoulders hitting the wall.

No, goddamnit, he hadn't had a choice. He couldn't let Steve compromise himself. Had selfishly wanted to keep that last bit of innocence Steve had somehow still held onto intact. "I didn't want to take you down with me!" he shouted. The fact that he'd spent the past six weeks wishing he had convinced Steve to betray himself, wishing he'd backed down, given up, let the world go to hell as long as Steve was still in it, proved exactly how selfish he was.

"Damn it!" Steve shouted, flinging the tape to the floor. His fist slammed into the wall, inches away from Tony's head. Tony kept himself from flinching, remained motionless. If Steve wanted to hit him, he'd more than earned the right.

"What do I have to do to make you stop hating yourself so much that you keep screwing us all over?" Steve shouted, grabbing the collar of Tony's shirt in one fist and shoving him back into the wall. And then Steve kissed him.

Tony was frozen, unable to respond. This couldn't be real, was every dream he'd ever -- The back of his skull cracked against the wall. Steve's left hand was tangled in his hair, gripping hard enough to hurt, and his lips were crushing Tony's, bruisingly hard.

Tony leaned forward, molding his body against Steve's, and opened his mouth, kissing back for all he was worth. He reached up and wrapped a hand around the back of Steve's neck, holding him in place.

Steve let go of his hair, sliding his hand down to cup the side of his face, and Tony closed his eyes and gripped Steve's mail-covered shoulders, the hard scales digging into his fingers.

Steve broke the kiss, pulling away, and Tony was spared the indignity of making little whimpering noises of disappointment only because Steve spoke first.

"Not here," he growled, and swung Tony around -- still with a death-grip on his shirt front -- and pushed him down onto the bed. There was a flare of sharp pain from his ribs that Tony ignored, in favor of tugging at the straps that fastened Steve's shield to his back. The leather was stiff -- of course; no one had cleaned or oiled it in a month -- and he had to pull harder than he expected.

The buckles finally came undone, and the shield fell to the floor with a loud clang. They both turned and stared at it for a second, then Steve turned back to Tony and yanked his shirt open, sending buttons flying. He straddled Tony, pinning him to the bed with his weight -- as if he thought Tony might actually go anywhere at this point -- and kissed him again, less forcefully but with no less intensity.
Tony leaned up into the kiss, closing his eyes and letting himself concentrate only on Steve's mouth, his tongue, his gloved hand gripping Tony's now-bare shoulder. He blocked off the last of the datafeeds in his head; they had been meaningless noise since the first time Steve touched him, even the armor distant and unimportant.

Tony broke the kiss this time, catching Steve's right hand in both of his, tugging the red leather glove off, and pressing a kiss against the back of Steve's hand. Steve's skin was warm against his lips, and he repeated the action with Steve's left hand. He tossed the glove to the floor, and began unfastening the buckle on Steve's belt, while Steve pulled his mail and leather shirt off over his head.

"How many pieces does this costume have?" Tony asked, as the buckle finally came undone.

"Too many." Steve threw the shirt to the floor, kicked off his boots -- some small part of Tony's brain was still rational enough to be amused that even now, Steve was taking his shoes off before getting in bed -- and straddled Tony again, yanking open the fly of his pants.

Tony leaned up and kissed the base of Steve's neck, where it joined his right shoulder, then again over the center of his chest, then bent and pressed a final, openmouthed kiss to his stomach. His skin was smooth, faintly salty, and unscarred.

Steve tugged at the waistband of Tony's pants, and he lifted his hips so that Steve could slide them off. Tony kicked at them, and they fell off the end of the bed and disappeared onto the floor.

Steve planted a hand on Tony's chest and shoved him flat against the bed; his hand was big and warm and he didn't remove it as he bent to gently bite at, then kiss, Tony's hipbone.

Tony had always appreciated Steve's exceedingly tight leather pants, but at the moment, they were covering far too much of him, and removing them was proving to be a challenge, mostly because of the angle.

"This isn't working," Steve said. "Hold still." He climbed off of Tony, pulling his pants off with one hand while the other stayed firmly on the center of Tony's chest. He tossed the pants in the same direction Tony's had gone.

Tony still couldn't quite believe this was happening -- if it weren't so good, he'd think it was a hallucination brought on by sleep deprivation, but hallucinations were never pleasant. He had no idea what had driven Steve to do this, but if it was what he wanted, Tony wasn't going to question him.

He would probably never have another chance to get this close to Steve again, and he wasn't going to waste this opportunity.

Steve's fingers dug into his hips, over the bruises left from where he'd hit the water; it hurt, but Tony didn't care, reveled in the undeniable proof of Steve's presence.

Tony slid one hand up the inside of Steve's thigh. He didn't need to memorize his body -- Steve's costume had never left anything to the imagination -- but that didn't lessen the urge to touch him, the need to get as much physical contact as possible, to reaffirm that Steve was here, was whole, and for whatever reason, he didn't despise Tony.

Steve had been gone, but he was here now, and Tony could feel parts of himself that he'd thought were dead coming back to life.
Steve was blond absolutely everywhere, which was an interesting change from most of the blonds Tony had done this with, and every bit as perfect as the costume advertised. He made a sort of growling moan, eyes going half-lidded, and Tony could feel himself smirking lopsidedly. He was always good at getting people to make those kinds of noises, but this was Steve and that made everything more... It made it important.

Tony ground his hips upwards into Steve's, running one hand up over the flat of Steve's chest, then down again, and Steve bent his head and bit the base of Tony's neck, sucking hard on his flesh. Tony arched up, digging his fingers into Steve's back -- no costume in the way now -- and Steve gasped his name and tensed, and his left hand tightened convulsively on Tony's shoulder.

Tony's vision greyed out for a second. When it cleared he tilted his head back and kissed Steve on the corner of the jaw, feeling his pulse beating rapidly under his skin. He let himself fall backwards onto the pillow and stared up into Steve's eyes. They were very blue, pupils still dilated.

"Thank you," he told Steve, closing his eyes.

The bunks on the Helicarrier weren't really meant for two people, but curled together like they were, Sharon and James fit well enough.

His wrists were still chained to the bed, and he was staring up into space, lost in thought. Sharon didn't ask what he was thinking; if he had something to say, he would. She stayed silent, resting her head on his shoulder, one hand absently tracing patterns on his chest.

She knew that she ought to unlock his cuffs so that they could go shower, but she was comfortable, and he wasn't objecting.

James was frowning slightly, eyes fixed on the wire mesh bottom of the top bunk. Sharon couldn't help but wonder if he still thought that she was going to go back to Steve. She had told him that she wasn't, that she couldn't, but she didn't think he'd really believed her.

After all, Steve was Captain America, no matter what the circumstances, and it would be hard to do better than him. James had idolized him for years, too, and had held her that first night while she had cried over his loss for hours, still wearing the blood-stained clothes she'd worn on the courthouse steps.

But things had changed, she had changed, and there was no going back to the way they had been before. No matter how easily or completely Steve might be able to forgive her, Sharon would never be able to completely forgive herself, and she knew that it would eventually drive her crazy, to have his unconditional forgiveness for something like that.

And there was this now, and it was good, too.

Sharon stretched, then settled back against James, resting one of her legs between his. "So what happened on April 29th, 1945?" she asked, shifting slightly so that her head was tucked beneath his chin. "The other day, when we... saw Steve for the first time, he said that to you, and you knew it was him." She had known as soon as she saw him; from the way he stood, the tone of his voice.
James's question, whatever it meant to the two of them, had just confirmed it.

James stiffened for a fraction of a second, slightly enough that Sharon knew she wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't been lying half on top of him. "The liberation of the concentration camp at Dachau," he said. "It was the first time we were involved with something like that. When we got to the furnaces, Steve threw up. I didn't." His voice was even, but Sharon knew him well enough now to hear the faint shadow of something very tired in his words. He rarely talked about the war, and even less about what came after it. On the rare occasions that she actually asked him about something, though, he would answer her.

There was nothing she could do to remove that shadow from him, and in any case, he was a grown man, and his regrets were his own.

Sharon sat up, so that she was straddling his legs, and leaned over to kiss him, pressing her lips firmly against his. She kept one hand pressed firmly against his chest as she grabbed the keys off of the hook they had hung them on earlier, and reached up to unlock his wrists without looking.

His arms free, he tangled one hand in her hair roughly, holding her against him for a minute, before letting go. She stretched again, so that she was lying half on top of him, legs tangled together. He settled his mechanical arm around her waist, hand resting against the small of her back. It was hard, and cooler than her skin, although it warmed rapidly when they were this close. The first time they slept together, she had been a little thrown by the sensation of metal against her skin, but she was used to it now, and barely noticed it anymore. He pressed his real hand against her stomach, fingers splayed. It was an intimate gesture, almost as intimate as sex, somehow.

She would never try to pretend that she could absolve him, and he did her the favor of doing the same. They had never tried to pretend that their relationship was about anything but physical comfort and release. It was what it was, and Sharon was comfortable with that.

---

Tony had fallen asleep, eyes closed and body completely limp. His eyelashes were slightly damp and clumped together, dark and vivid against pale cheekbones.

Steve stretched out next to him, sliding an arm underneath his shoulders -- Tony sighed and rolled onto his side, without waking up, until he was lying half on top of Steve, head resting on his shoulder.

The base of his neck was already bruising where Steve had bitten him. He hadn't meant to do that. He hadn't meant to do any of this. He'd only wanted to talk to Tony, and then he'd seen him, and as sometimes happened when arguing with Tony, he'd gotten carried away, and a decade of intimacy and half-sublimated attraction had overwhelmed him.

And now there was no way to go back and undo it; he wasn't even certain he wanted to. Tony's head was heavy on his shoulder, dark hair a tangled mess. Since waking up in Strange's study, Steve had felt Tony's absence weighing on him, a hollow space in his life where his oldest friend was supposed to be. And now Tony was asleep beside him, warm and sweaty and smelling just a little like metal, and the hollow feeling had disappeared.
Tony hadn't meant to betray him after all. Had cared about him in a way Steve had never even let himself imagine. Knowing that, knowing how important he had been -- still was -- to Tony was almost frightening, but not in bad way.

Steve stared at the grey metal ceiling, frowning slightly. When they'd been shouting at one another, there'd been a moment when he could see the intense, stubborn man who'd been his friend for years, and not the cold, distant shell that he'd spoken to in the Helicarrier's brig.

Tony had never had any defenses where sex was involved; from the moment he'd started kissing Steve back, Steve had known where this was going, and it had the potential go so horribly wrong. The world was still a mess, the Avengers were still split right down the middle, and Steve wasn't stupid enough to think that one sexual encounter was going to fix whatever was really wrong with Tony. But there was also a chance to salvage something out of the wreckage of their lives, and Steve wasn't going to let himself screw it up.

He and Sharon had never been able to make it work for more than a few months at a time, and they'd always been able to go back to being just friends afterwards; when you got down to it, they'd always worked best that way. But this, now... in spite of his reputation, Tony didn't usually do casual sex. And nothing between him and Tony was casual, not anymore. Now that he had a chance at getting Tony back, he wasn't giving him up.

His rolled his head to the side, letting his cheek rest against Tony's hair. The New Avengers were probably wondering where he was; he should have checked in with them earlier. Hopefully, Luke and Sam wouldn't decide that he'd been kidnapped and try to stage some sort of rescue. They would have to wait until morning, because Steve wasn't going anywhere right now.

The next thing he knew, Tony was shifting away from him, and Steve opened his eyes to see Tony leaning on one elbow, staring down at him. He must have fallen asleep, and given how rested he felt, it had probably been for a long time.

He hadn't slept well at Strange's house, had kept waking up, feeling restless and unsettled.

Tony looked away. "I'm sorry," he said awkwardly.

What on earth was he apologizing for now? "Why?" Steve asked. "I practically dragged you to bed like Rhett Butler in Gone with the Wind. " He could feel his face heating at the memory of the way he'd literally ripped Tony's clothes off. "Maybe if I'd done it years ago, we could have avoided some of this mess."

Tony blinked at him, then half smiled. "Did you just decide you caused this entire war by not having sex with me?"

Steve groaned, and closed his eyes again, covering his face with one hand. "I don't even know anymore." At this point, his assumptions about the way things were had been turned upside down so thoroughly that there was very little he could still be completely certain of.

Tony sat up, wrapping his arms loosely around his knees, staring intently at the wall. "So, you saw the tape," he said.

"Yes," Steve said. Sitting up like that, Steve could see the line of bruises trailing down Tony's back. Had he done that?
"It wasn't worth it, but under the same circumstances, I would do it again," Tony said, still staring at the wall.

"If you knew how it was going to end, would you still..."

Tony turned his head, looking Steve in the eye. "No. If I'd known what... I couldn't have."

What could he say to that? Steve knew that Tony didn't regret what he'd done to himself, hadn't actually changed his mind about the necessity of registration; Tony was only saying this because of what had happened to him. Knowing that someone loved him that much felt good, but if it came down to a choice between him and the world, he knew which one was more important. He'd rather Tony do what he thought was right, than go along with something he thought was wrong just for Steve. "A more articulate man than me once said that the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. And you certainly didn't do nothing." Steve sat up, and put a hand on Tony's shoulder. "I'm still not sure I agree with it, but maybe if I'd known..."

"Would it have changed anything?" Tony asked, looking away.

"I don't know," Steve admitted.

"I should have told you," Tony said quietly. "I should have..." he turned to look at Steve again. "I did..." he hesitated, "things I can never atone for... and I don't know how you can--" He put his head down on his folded arms, shoulders slumping. Steve could feel the bones in Tony's shoulder shifting as he moved. Had he actually eaten at any point in the past two months, or had he just been living on coffee?

It was obvious that Tony was talking about what had happened between them last night, that he didn't think he deserved anything from Steve but contempt. But Tony wasn't the only person in this bed. "After everything that's happened over the past few months, I’ve earned it. I deserve the chance to be selfish about something." Steve pulled himself forward so that they were sitting side-by-side, wincing as he saw that the bruises that covered Tony's back extended out over his ribcage in a colorful array. "I'm sorry," he said, nodding at the bruises. He still wasn't sure what had overcome him last night; he normally wasn't that aggressive when it came to sex. But apparently, as with most other things, restraint went out the window when it came to Tony.

"What?" Tony sat up straight, and gave him a confused look, then glanced down, following his gaze. "No, those are from the Doombot, and the wall, and getting thrown into New York harbor," he said, tilting his head to look at Steve through his lashes, smirking slightly. It was a familiar expression, though not one Steve had ever expected to be on the receiving end of. "Anyway, even if they weren't, they'd be worth it."

Steve couldn't help but smile back; there'd been a flash of wry humor there, and for a moment, he could see the old Tony, the one he hadn't seen for months. Considering that they were both naked, and in bed together, that should have been strange, but it didn't feel that way.

There was no going back, but maybe they could go forward. "You know," Steve said, "I actually came here to say that we needed to get our teams to work together."

"That's going to be harder than you think," Tony told him.

"Taking on any of the villains out there while we're still divided will be even harder." Steve caught his eyes, and dropped his hand from Tony's shoulder. "You know that as long as the government is
"trying to make superhumans their weapons, you're not going to get the New Avengers."

"It was the least I could get them to agree to," Tony said, voice low and, for a brief moment, emotionless again.

"The situation has changed," Steve reminded him.

"I don't have any favors left to call in," Tony admitted, "but now... Now they need us." His jaw was set, and his eyes were grey in the dim light. "Maybe there are still strings I can pull."

Steve grinned, feeling more optimistic than he had in a long time. "Do that, tell them that, and I can make them listen. Or try to."

"Or we could always just get the Helicarrier declared a sovereign nation," Tony said, offering him a crooked smile. "It's big enough."

Steve had missed Tony's support, but hadn't realized until this moment how much he'd missed his sense of humor as well. No one else actually noticed when Steve tried to tell jokes. "Nick Fury could be our king," he offered, deadpan.

"Well," Tony replied, equally deadpan, "in the land of the blind-"

Steve shoved him, lightly because of the bruises. Tony swayed with the motion, then settled back against Steve's side. He leaned his head against Steve's bare shoulder, closing his eyes.

"I don't deserve you," he said, almost voicelessly.

Steve slid an arm around Tony's waist, and rested his chin on Tony's hair. They hadn't deserved a lot of things, and they couldn't make up for any of them unless they worked at it together.
Chapter 6

When Nick Fury wanted things done, they got done. So when he had announced that the New Avengers, the Mighty Avengers, and the ranking members of the remnants of SHIELD were going to hold a meeting to discuss the situation, everyone came, no matter how obvious it was that the New Avengers all thought that this was some sort of trap, and that the Mighty Avengers had no real idea of what was going on.

Obviously, Tony hadn't had any more of a chance to talk to his team than Steve had had to talk to the New Avengers.

After they'd woken up, Steve had taken a quick shower, in the hopes of making himself look vaguely presentable again, and gone to find the New Avengers. He knew Tony probably had a fair amount of work to do before he could make any promises about changing registration, but that didn't mean that Steve couldn't talk to his team, try to explain the situation to them now that he had all of the information.

He'd been waylaid by Dugan before he could find any of them, though. Dugan had clapped Steve companionably on the shoulder, and herded him down to the commissary while telling him that there was a meeting in an hour, and that Steve and 'his people' had better be there, or Fury would have something to say about it. He had shoved a tray into Steve's hands, then, and left him standing in the line for food, feeling bemused. But hungry.

So Steve had decided that breakfast was the first order of business; trying to deal with Peter or Luke on an empty stomach probably wasn't the best idea in any case. And trying to face Nick Fury on an empty stomach was an exercise in futility.

He'd been half-way done with his second bowl of SHIELD instant oatmeal when Sam had slid into the empty seat across from him. "Where the hell did you go last night?" he had asked, looking irritated. Redwing had been perched on his shoulder, wearing an identical expression.

Steve had felt himself blushing instantly, certain that the past evening's activities were written all over his face. "I had to talk to Tony," he had said. If by talk, his brain had pointed out in a voice that sounded kind of like Nick Fury, you mean throw him against the wall and -- "and then I had to get some sleep," he had finished lamely.

"You couldn't have checked in with us before you went to bed?" Sam had demanded. "Spiderman was convinced they'd eaten you or something." Two pairs of golden eyes had peered suspiciously at Steve. "You all right? You've gotten thrown right back into the deep end here, and you've only been back a couple of days."

Steve had pretended great interest in his tasteless oatmeal. "I'm fine, Sam. I'm old hat at the back from the dead thing, remember? At least this time I only missed a couple months."

Sam had nodded, letting it drop. "Stark have anything to say worth hearing?"

Steve had thought about Tony's shattered voice on the now-destroyed tape, but that was too personal to share even with Sam. "He said he'd pull strings to get us all amnesties," he had said instead.

"And then we, what, register and join their superhero army like good little pawns?"
"Never," Steve had assured him. "I told him we weren't going to be anyone's weapons."

Sam had snorted, looking unimpressed. "You think he's gonna listen to that?"

"Two months ago, I'd have said no," Steve had admitted, "but now... the situation has changed." He had waved a hand to encompass the Helicarrier's mostly-empty mess hall, and Sam had frowned thoughtfully.

Now, he was sitting across Nick's conference table from Steve, wearing the same considering frown.

"Look, I know things have gone and been to hell, and that yer all nursing hurt feelings, but it's like I said yesterday; we've got bigger problems, now. Stark -- what's this I hear about pardons?"

Tony, who had been sitting quietly at the far corner of the table, jerked slightly, as if he hadn't expected Nick to call on him to speak. At some point after Steve had left, he had also gotten cleaned up, and was wearing a neatly pressed shirt, buttoned to the neck, and --

Steve could feel his face heating, and stared studiously at the conference table. Logically, he knew that the bruise on Tony's neck wasn't actually visible, and that no one else could know it was there. But Steve knew it was there, and every time he looked at Tony, now, his eyes seemed magnetically drawn to that spot.

And -- he couldn't have been any more obvious if he'd taken a marker, and written 'Property of Steve Rogers' across Tony's forehead, could he?

Worse yet, every time he looked at Tony now, a little part of his brain couldn't help but remember what had happened last night.

Tony squared his shoulders, and stood, taking the floor. He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts; it seemed strangely like an admission of weakness. "It's going to take a few days to get everything straightened out, but the pardons are going through. There were some initial objections, of course, but there's not much congress can do at this point." He stopped again, glancing at Steve. Steve kept his eyes firmly on the conference table. His ears were turning pink; he could feel it. Tony continued, "After -- after that... look, I know most you don't want to register."

It was as if a switch had been flipped; Steve had always, at some level, found Tony attractive, but for the most part, it had mostly been an abstract attraction. Now though -- now he knew that Tony was exactly as good with his hands as Steve had always imagined, what he looked like naked, what his skin tasted like, the little noises he made when Steve sucked on his neck. Steve dug his fingers into the palms of his hands; it was really horribly inappropriate and distracting to be thinking this now. He needed to be able to compartmentalize; he'd mostly managed with Sharon, after all.

"I know that, at this point," Tony was saying, "I've probably got a snowball's chance in hell of convincing you to anyway. And after the losses we've taken, SHIELD isn't in a position to actually enforce the Registration Act. Doom and the Mandarin have to come first, and Red Skull, and after what happened to the Helicarrier, I think I can make Washington see that."

"Which means what, exactly?" Luke challenged. He leaned back in his chair, arms folded, and glared at Tony. Peter was sitting on his left side, still in his black costume. Jessica Jones was on Luke's right, arms folded in exactly the same manner as her husband's. Danny was sitting beside her, with the baby in his arms; the fact that he was absently bouncing the little girl didn't lessen the
expression of hostility on his face one bit. The New Avengers obviously weren't anywhere near ready to reconcile; they'd need to know for sure that they weren't being taken first.

"Which means we can table the whole thing for a couple weeks until we're done with the real threats," Dugan said, leaning an elbow on the table and making a cutting motion with his hand.

"It means," Tony added, "that if we can take care of the threats facing us now without the aid of a government run superhuman army, we'll be in a position to definitively prove to Washington -- and the country -- that superheroes are more effective when they're not being forced to obey arbitrary laws. We won't be able to scrap registration entirely, at least not immediately, but we'll have the grounds to do away with the aspects that demand compulsory participation in government run programs."

"And that should take care of most of yer objections," Nick said, stabbing the air with his cigar in the New Avengers general direction. "So we can get down to business now."

Luke and Jessica Drew both looked like they wanted to object on principle, but both held their peace; it took a brave man or woman to interrupt Nick Fury when he was in this mood. "We've got troubles all over, and we're going to have to split up to handle them. I trust everyone here's old enough to deal with the fact that yer all going to have to go where we need to the most." Fury was definitely in fine form today. "Wasp," Nick turned to Jan. "You, Sentry, and the Falcon are going to need to handle DC. Wasp, yer going to have to handle the diplomatic end of things, make it look good for Washington."

"Of course," Jan said; she had more experience dealing with politicians than any of them except for Tony.

"Falcon, you're unregistered," Nick went on, "It'll be yer job to show everyone how we're all playing nice."

Sam looked disgruntled, but nodded. He might not like the idea of getting sent off with pro-registration people to play nice for the government, but he clearly saw the necessity.

"Agent Thirteen, Winter Soldier, you two are in DC, too." Nick said, glaring at Sharon and Bucky, seemingly just on principle. "I'd better not hear a single word about you from the media, but I want Red Skull's filthy Nazi head on my desk in three weeks."

Bucky had been leaning against the wall, standing next to Sharon. He stood up straight now, tilting his head to one side. "Technically, sir," he said, "I think being in Lukin's body means that he's a Communist now."

Steve grinned to himself; Bucky had always had a somewhat off-beat sense of humor. It was one of his most endearing traits.

Peter frowned. "Technically, wouldn't that actually make him a Commie-Nazi?" he asked, sitting forward, cocking his head in unconscious imitation.

Nick ignored them "Someone's going to need to handle the street-level violence here in New York. I trust your lot can handle that?" He gestured at Luke.

"Of course," Luke said, snorting, and settling further back into his chair. "Not like we haven't been already."
"I'm still in on this," Jessica Jones said, looking at Luke. Luke just gave her a half-smile, and held up one hand in apparent surrender.

"Right," Nick said. "She-Hulk and Ares are already in Los Angeles, so they can hold the fort there. We're going to need someone in France."

Tony had taken his seat again when Nick started talking, but he leaned forward now. "Actually, the Fantastic Four are already in Paris. Apparently, Grimm has friends there."

Nick glared at Tony. "You could have said something earlier," he said. "Since that's taken care of; Spiderwoman, I'm going to need you, Warbird, and Wonder Man in Hungary."

Jessica and Carol both looked seriously annoyed. Their argument the previous evening clearly hadn't resolved anything. "Sir --" they started simultaneously. Both women paused, glaring at each other. Nick glared back at both of them.

"Look, Latveria's going to be a problem. I can't send you in there directly, but I need someone holding the perimeter, and you three are our muscle," he said.

Jessica still didn't look pleased, but she nodded. "Are we actually going to be allowed to cross the border, or are we just taking care of Doom's messes when they spill over?" she asked.

"If you go in, I'd better not hear about it," Nick said. He had stuck his cigar back in his mouth, and was talking around it now. "The Black Widow's out in the field, gathering information for us."

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve caught Tony's bemused look; obviously no one was supposed to know about that. Steve traced the line of Tony's throat with his eyes. Tony glanced towards him, and Steve looked away hurriedly.

Nick continued, unabated. He was obviously enjoying the chance to reassert his authority over SHIELD. "There're still SHIELD agents stationed all over," he said, "and most of them are at real hotspots already. Problem is, we're going to need a way to get in touch with them. Communications went down with the other 'carrier, and we're going to need a way for everyone to keep in contact while they're in the field."

"Actually, I've still got contact via the Extremis," Tony said, sounding chagrined. He ran a hand through his hair, looking tired for a moment. "After the other Helicarrier was destroyed, I told everyone still in the field to continue operating as normal until further orders."

"Why the hell didn't you say so?" Nick sounded seriously irritated; Steve could understand why. That was a fairly vital piece of information, one that he should have known. Of course, Nick wasn't technically in charge at the moment, even if they were all instinctively acting as if he were.

Tony shrugged. He raised one hand to rub at his eyes, then dropped it quickly. "You didn't ask."

"Well, now that you've decided to share that little piece of information, at least we don't have to worry about communications anymore," Nick said. "You can play dispatch, and handle that end of things from here."

"There's going to be a problem with that," Tony said, wincing slightly. "Red Skull has taken control of the satellites; to use them for communications, I'm going to have to hack them. Once I do that,
anyone watching will be able to see the incursion, and they'll be able to triangulate my location through the signal."

"I thought all this water was supposed to stop that from happening?" Nick said, making a gesture that encompassed the room, and the whole of the submerged Helicarrier by extension.

"It does. Unfortunately, it also stops me from getting any decent reception. The Extremis--" he broke off, looked at Nick for a moment, and then said, "Look, think of it like a cell phone. Down here, I'm on the high-tech equivalent of roaming."

"So where can you get reception?" Steve asked.

Under his mustache, Tony's lips quirked into a half-smile for a second, and Steve studiously shifted his gaze to the New Avengers again.

"Up topside," Tony said. "Hence the problem."

"You dial up, Red Skull traces your signal back, and a zillion bad guys come through the door." Peter threw up his hands. "Oh, that makes everything better. How did Red Skull get his hands on the Defense Department's satellites in the first place?" he demanded. Even with the black and white mask covering his face, he still managed to give an impression of raised eyebrows and general disgust.

"We're working on that," Dugan told him.

Tony ignored them, addressing Nick. "I'm going to need to keep moving. They shouldn't be able to get a lock on my location too quickly; as long as I keep a low profile, and don't stay anywhere for more than a day or so, it ought to be all right."

"You'll need someone to watch your back," Steve said. If Tony intended on keeping a low profile, that would mean staying out of the armor, and out of the armor, he wouldn't have any real defense against the range of threats that were running rampant in New York at the moment, particularly if he was going to be distracted by playing dispatch. "I'll go with you." Fury had probably intended for him to lead a group of SHIELD agents, but there were other people who could do that, and if nothing else, going with Tony would be a visible sign to both groups of Avengers that they really were working together now.

There was a drawn out moment of silence at Steve's announcement. Tony turned to look at Steve, something like surprise flickering across his face before he turned away. Fury looked contemplative. The collected Avengers looked, varyingly, surprised (Sentry), irritated (Luke and Peter), and worried (Carol). Jan and Sam both looked thoughtful in a way that made Steve shift uncomfortably in his chair, and look back at the table. It was hard plastic, made to look like wood, and was remarkably ugly; the fake wood-grain pattern that swirled across the surface was both vaguely entrancing, and mildly dizzying.

"Yer going to have to keep a low profile, too, if yer keeping an eye on Stark," Nick said. "Yer sure you wouldn't rather be out in the field, somewhere else?"

Steve shook his head. "Someone has to," he said. "And I can do it." It would mean not using his shield, and staying out of costume, but he could do that. He wouldn't have trusted a SHIELD agent to watch Tony's back, and he was a lot less obvious than most of the rest of the Avengers, anyway. And given what he knew now, given what had happened last evening, Steve wasn't entirely sure he
would have trusted anyone else to keep an eye on Tony in any case. There was just too much that most of them didn't know.

"You're sure you don't want to come with us?" Peter asked, sounding a little hurt. Steve winced. Going with Tony would mean leaving the New Avengers for now, but they would be all right on their own; he wasn't so sure about Tony at the moment.

Luke turned to give Peter a look. "Hey, this way Cap can keep an eye on Stark, make sure everything's on the level," he said.

Steve didn't bother to correct Luke, since there was a grain of truth to what he had said. Not that he didn't trust Tony to do his best to get the reforms to registration pushed through; after everything that had happened last night, Steve knew that Tony was going to do that. But he didn't entirely trust his methods. Pushed to the wall, Tony had a tendency to resort to the kind of desperate measures that often caused as many problems as they solved.

Registration needed to be reformed, but not through those means. And Tony didn't need to abase himself for them over the whole mess any more than he already had.

"You don't have to," Tony said to Steve, eyes fixed on the far wall.

Steve shook his head. "I should probably be keeping a low profile, too," he said. "And Nick knows my opinions about going into Latveria." He had no idea how the public was going to react to his return -- and after the fight yesterday, they probably already had some idea. Before, they'd been angry with him, and rightly so, but going by what some of the others had been saying, that might not be the case anymore. Either way, as much as he hated doing it, it was probably better for him to lay low until Tony had finished hashing out the pardons.

Nick snorted, and folded his arms across his chest. "Right, right. If that's what yer set on doing, God knows no one's going to be able to change yer mind," he said.

At the moment, it was less a matter of having set his mind to do something, and more the fact that Steve knew that he was simply the only one who could do this right. Tony might be a mess, but he was also the only one who could run dispatch right now, and they needed him to stay together at least until all of this was over, or they'd all be in trouble. Someone was going to need to keep an eye on him, if not exactly in the way that Luke meant. And there just wasn't anyone else Steve trusted to do the job right.

And it might be selfish of him, but he'd just gotten Tony back, and he wasn't going to lose him again, either to Red Skull, or to his own internal demons.

"All right," Nick said, stabbing his cigar at Sharon and Bucky. "You're not on the SHIELD network; you've got communications already. I want you in DC yesterday, before Red Skull leaves us another anthrax bomb."

"Yes, sir," Sharon said, just as Bucky added, "He probably won't use anthrax twice."

"Yes he will," Steve said. "He likes biological weapons." Yellowstone's tourism industry still hadn't completely recovered from Red Skull's last round with germ warfare.

Bucky straightened from his slouch against the wall and turned to go. Sharon started to follow him, then hesitated. "Steve-" she began.
"I'll walk you out," he said, standing. He'd promised to talk to her, and God knew when they'd get a chance to again.

"Hug your baby brother goodbye and then get back in here, Rogers." Nick smirked, and nodded towards the door as if he were doing Steve a favor.

Bucky snorted. "Po'shyol 'na hui," he snapped over his shoulder at Nick, not breaking stride.

Bucky and Sharon were standing shoulder to shoulder now, facing him. They were almost of a height -- she was tall for a woman, and even as an adult, Bucky was still on the small side.

Bucky grinned at him, looking years younger for one brief moment, and held out his right hand -- his real hand. Steve took it. "Good luck," he said. "Red Skull can be dangerous."

"I remember." Bucky leaned in close, wrapping his metal arm around Steve's shoulders for a one-armed hug, and whispered, "She didn't mean it, and it wasn't really her. Remember that."

"What?" Steve started to ask, but Bucky was already pulling away.

"I'll meet you in the garage," he told Sharon, and then he walked off down the corridor, metal arm gleaming dully under the fluorescent lights.

Steve watched him go, then turned to look down at Sharon. She was dressed in SHIELD combat gear -- black leather and kevlar with SHIELD's eagle insignia on both shoulder -- and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, leaving the strong, graceful lines of her neck and jaw bare and exposed. At the moment, that jaw was as tightly set as if she were prepared to face a firing squad. "Sharon," he started.

"I shot you," she blurted out.

"You--" Steve stared at her, knowing he was gaping stupidly. He'd expected some kind of emotional confession, about what had passed between them in the ambulance, maybe, or about whatever Dr. Faustus had done to her. "No you didn't," he said automatically. Sharon had shouted at him, fought with him, even slugged him once or twice, but she'd never pulled a gun on him.

"I did," she said. She'd been avoiding his eyes for two days, but she looked him directly in the face now. "Faustus programmed me. After you went down, I pulled out my service revolver and shot you in the gut, at point blank range." She blinked, eyes suddenly glassy with unshed tears. "I'm the one who killed you."

For a moment, Steve was on the steps again, Sharon stepping forward and grabbing at him as he started to fall, and there was another gunshot, loud in his ears as the final bullet slammed into him and he was lying on the steps, choking on air thick with cordite and blood, and it didn't hurt; it should have hurt, but there was only the dull sense of the impact--

"No you didn't," Steve said. "There was a sniper. Crossbones." Bucky had said it was Crossbones. Bucky had said they had killed him. "It was Crossbones."

Sharon shook her head. "He fired the first bullet. I fired the rest."

Steve shook his head in mute denial. He could actually feel the blood draining out of his face. "You
didn't," he repeated.

Sharon was shaking her head now, arms folded across her stomach. The tears in her eyes were threatening to spill over. "Steve," she insisted, voice very soft, "I killed you."

He was still shaking his head, Steve realized. He had no memory of anything like what she was telling him, but his mind had blocked away memories before. She didn't mean it, "Bucky had said, "And it wasn't really her." If Faustus had brainwashed her... "You didn't kill me," he told her. "It doesn't matter who pulled the trigger; Red Skull is the one who set me up."

"It does matter." Sharon was looking away from him again. "It makes no difference whether or not I wanted to do it. I did it, and you were dead."

He'd had this conversation before, Steve thought, remembering Tony, and for one half-hysterical second he was tempted to laugh, but Sharon probably would have hit him for that, and that wouldn't help anything. He reached out and cupped the side of her face in one hand, turning her chin up gently to make her meet his eyes. "It wasn't your fault," he said. "And hey, I came back." He tried a tentative smile.

Sharon glared at him, and pulled away from his hand. Then she offered him a weak smile of her own. "James said you'd say that."

"James?" Steve said blankly.

"He does have a name that isn't Bucky, you know." Sharon hesitated, as if about to say something else.

Steve stepped forward and hugged her. "It wasn't your fault," he said again. Sharon was stiff in his arms for a moment, then relaxed, and hugged him back fiercely. "Be careful in DC," he told her.

"You'd better be here when I get back," she said. She stepped back, still wearing a brave smile, and followed Bucky's path down the hall, boot-heels clicking on the metal deck plates.

Steve stared after her, feeling dazed. After this, telling her about him and Tony seemed insignificant.

The conference rooms on the Helicarrier were both too brightly lit and about five degrees too cold for real comfort. It was a design flaw, and one that he should have known better than to commit even at twenty three -- unless Fury had deliberate played with the environmental controls as some subtle form of psychological intimidation.

Dugan had just finished explaining that SHIELD was working on restoring control of the compromised satellites -- another design flaw. Red Skull shouldn't have been able to get his hands on them in the first place. Good thing Tony had a back door in, even if it was something of a risky one.

"I'm going to need to keep moving," Tony told Fury. "They shouldn't be able to get a lock on my location too quickly; as long as I keep a low profile, and don't stay anywhere for more than a day or so, it ought to be all right." That was a bit of an exaggeration -- even one broadcast ought to be
enough to trace him, if Red Skull's people were any good -- but as long as he stayed mobile, he should be able to stay one step ahead of Skull's minions.

Steve frowned, finally looking up from the conference table. "You'll need someone to watch your back," he said. "I'll go with you."

Tony stared at him for a moment, caught off guard by the offer. Steve hadn't even looked at him since they'd entered the conference room, staring steadily at the table as if he were trying to pretend that Tony didn't exist. He couldn't have broadcasted "I'm having second thoughts" more clearly if he'd said it aloud. But being Steve, he was ready to go where he was needed anyway.

Last night had been a mistake. Tony had known that from the start, but been too selfishly weak to say no to something he'd wanted so desperately for so long. Given a few hours to think about it, it only became more obvious what a bad idea it was; after everything he'd done, it was unfair to tie Steve to him like that.

He turned back to Fury, not wanting to see those same thoughts reflected on Steve's face.

"Yer going to have to keep a low profile," Fury stated, determinedly oblivious to the tension in the room. The New Avengers were glaring at Tony resentfully, and Falcon was staring at Steve with raised eyebrows.

Tony resisted the impulse to tug his shirt collar higher. He had an uncomfortable feeling Falcon knew what had happened between him and Steve last night. The other man had cornered him before the meeting started, just long enough to make his feelings regarding Tony clear. "You're a sell out and you're still a sell out," he had said. "I don't know what you did to him to get Steve to change his mind about you, but as far as I'm concerned, you don't deserve his forgiveness."

"That's Steve's business," Tony had told him -- and it was, but it didn't change the fact that Falcon was right. He didn't deserve Steve's forgiveness. He didn't deserve Steve.

"You're sure you don't want to come with us?" Peter looked crestfallen, even through the mask. Steve looked torn. Of course he would want to go with the New Avengers; they were his team, and were going to be in the thick of the action, while Tony was mostly going to be trying to stay out of sight. He would have his work cut out for him, but whoever went with him was basically going to be a glorified babysitter. Steve would be wasted with him.

Of course, Steve would still work with him, would never put the world at risk over his own feelings. Maybe last night had served as a form of catharsis for Steve, a way of working out whatever might have been between them. A way for him to lay any feelings that he might have for Tony to rest, so that they could work together and keep things just business.

"Hey, this way Cap can keep an eye on Stark," Luke said, glaring at Tony. From the other side of Peter, Spiderwoman was staring at him with identical mistrust; he couldn't exactly blame her. "Make sure everything's on the level." Luke leaned his elbows on the table and loomed forward, as much as anyone could loom while sitting in a chair. Beside him, Danny shifted the baby to his shoulder, narrowing his eyes in a way that looked highly incongruous coming from a man holding a baby.

Steve didn't owe him anything for last night; if anything, it was the other way around. "You don't have to," he said, keeping his gaze fixed on the wall so he wouldn't have to see the relief on Steve's face as Tony gave him an out. Last night was something that Tony had wanted for so long, and even
knowing that he didn't deserve it, that he had no right to expect Steve to feel the way he did, the thought of seeing anything like rejection hurt.

"I should probably be keeping a low profile, too," Steve said. "And Fury knows my opinions about going into Latveria."

"Right, right," Fury said, sounding faintly amused. "If that's what yer set on doing, God knows no one's going to be able to change yer mind." He turned to Agent Carter and Winter Soldier. "All right, you're not on the SHIELD network; you've got communications already. I want you in DC yesterday, before Red Skull leaves us another anthrax bomb."

"Yes, sir," Agent Carter said. Throughout the meeting, she had kept glancing at Steve, then quickly looking away. Tony wondered if she had told him what had happened yet; he had only seen the autopsy reports, but it had been easy enough to piece together, particularly after they had found pieces of Doctor Faustus in an old warehouse.

It made Tony a little sick to think of what must have happened. That kind of betrayal, even when it was completely unintentional, hurt. And being forced to do that was the only thing he could think of that would be worse.

"He probably won't use anthrax twice," Winter Soldier said.

Steve looked towards Winter Soldier at the comment, smiling ever-so-slightly in that way that made it obvious he was seeing his old sidekick and not the slightly-creepy cyborg assassin everyone else saw. It was good that Bucky was here. Good that Sam was here. God knew Steve could use his family around him at the moment.

"Yes he will; he likes biological weapons," Steve said. Not to mention that although Red Skull was an incredible threat, he was also somewhat predictable.

Winter Soldier stopped leaning against the wall and stood up straight, turning to go. Agent Carter took a step after him, then turned back. "Steve-" she started to say.

"I'll walk you out," Steve interrupted, jumping to his feet.

Tony open his mouth to call Steve back, then caught himself. Steve had a right to know what had happened to him, no matter how much Tony wanted to shield him from it. Steve shouldn't have to know about that final betrayal, but it was also between him and Agent Carter, and Tony had no right to interfere.

And not telling Steve things in order to protect him had worked out so well last time.

"Hug your baby brother goodbye and then get back in here, Rogers," Fury said.

Winter Soldier said something in Russian that needed no translation, and left the room, Steve and Agent Carter on his heels. Tony watched them go, wishing he could...

"You sure you can handle this, Stark?" Fury's voice jerked him back to the matter at hand.

"Handle what?" Tony asked.

"The part where the computers in your head make you go crazy."
It was almost refreshing, Tony mused, to have someone around who mistrusted him because he'd once been brainwashed into killing people, rather than over registration. Fury was right to not trust him, even if it wasn't for quite the right reasons.

"That wasn't actually the Extremis," Tony reminded him. "I was brainwashed." He'd been completely unable to remember anything he had done while being controlled, but he would never forget the sight of those two men he'd dropped hitting the ground. He couldn't remember anything after that, still wasn't sure how he'd gotten from Iraq to Sal's doorstep. He just hoped he hadn't caused any more damage on the way. He'd been turned into a puppet, manipulated the same way the Scarlet Witch had manipulated him, only worse.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot how you went all Manchurian Candidate on us, before you turned into a Quisling," Peter said, sarcasm palpable in his voice.

It wasn't funny, but Tony's lips twitches anyway; the only reason Peter could toss that particular historical comparison around was because Tony had explained it to him, after Peter had thrown up his hands in confusion over yet another piece of Steve's anachronistic slang.

Losing Peter's respect was just one more regret to add to a very long list.

"You know as well as I do that there are side effects," Fury said, his one eye pinning Tony with a level, penetrating stare.

Tony waved a hand dismissively. "I can handle it," he said. That first euphoric rush at suddenly having access to all that information had long passed, and a few headaches were nothing to worry about.

"Right." Fury snorted. "How much sleep are you going to need?"

Communications would have to go down while he slept; obviously, the less time he was out, the better. "Four hours a day should be sufficient," Tony said.

Luke frowned. "You telling me there's gonna be a four hour communications blackout every day while Stark sleeps?" he said, addressing Fury. "What the hell are we supposed to do then?"

"The same thing you'd do if Stark wasn't here," Fury said, meeting Luke's gaze with his own.

There was a moment of silence, and the fact that they wouldn't have been in this position if it weren't for him in the first place couldn't have resounded more loudly if someone had shouted it.

"Fer God's sakes," Fury said, waving his cigar at the assembled crowd. "You all know what yer supposed to be doing. What the hell is everyone doing still sitting here, wasting time?"

As they filed out of the room, Tony overheard Peter say to the New Avengers, "Since when is Nick Fury in charge of us?"

"You want to argue with him?" Spiderwoman asked archly.

Tony waited until the two groups of Avengers had trailed out of the room before leaving himself; he wasn't ready to face any of them at the moment.
Steve was still in the hall when Tony finally left the conference room, standing about ten yards from the door. He looked shellshocked, as if someone had pulled the ground out from under his feet. Tony hesitated for a fraction of a second, then walked over to him; no matter how Steve felt about him now, he couldn't leave him like that.

"She told you, didn't she," Tony said, when he was standing at Steve's side. There weren't many things he could think of that would affect Steve this badly, but knowing what had happened with Sharon certainly would.

"How did you know?" Steve asked, voice strangely calm.

"Maria Hill left the autopsy photographs on my desk," Tony said, looking away. That hadn't been necessary; the labs had a digital security camera, but Agent Hill hadn't known that. And Steve didn't need to know, either.

"They did an autopsy?" There was a note of trepidation in his voice, as if he didn't really want to know the answer.

Instinctively, Tony reached out a hand to Steve. He caught himself before he could make contact though; he had no idea whether Steve would want that from him anymore, and had no right to try and force it on him.

Apparently, at least at the moment, Steve did; he took a step towards Tony, such that Tony's fingers were just brushing his bicep. Tony curled his fingers, squeezing Steve's arm tightly, and Steve closed his eyes, leaning into the touch.

After a long moment, Tony stepped back, and said, "Nick Fury's hurrying everyone out. We should probably go pack."

Steve turned to look at him, eyebrows raised. "I'm wearing everything I have," he said.

"I think most of your things are in storage somewhere," Tony said, frowning thoughtfully. "You'll have to ask Jarvis."

Unfortunately, they'd need to find at least some clothes for him now; Steve wasn't exactly inconspicuous in his costume. Most of his clothing wouldn't fit Steve horribly well, but there had to be someone on the Helicarrier...

"No time." Suddenly hearing Nick Fury's gravelly voice behind him almost made Tony jump, but he controlled the impulse in time. "Don't worry," Fury went on. "I'll scare something up for ya."

As Fury dragged him off down the hall, Steve shot Tony an apprehensive look that made Tony smile. He wouldn't want to be dressed by Nick Fury either.

Carol was waiting for Tony outside his room, leaning against the door, expression set. Tony approached her a little warily; she obviously had something to say, and he wasn't sure that he would have an answer.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Carol said without preamble.

"What?" Tony asked. Very little that he'd done lately had been a good idea; Carol had her pick of mistakes to choose from.
"Going off alone with Steve," Carol said, folding her arms over her chest. "You were at each other's throats two months ago - you couldn't say his name last week." She raised blonde eyebrows, giving him an intense look. "Do you really think spending an extended period of time alone together is really the best idea?"

During the fight over registration, Tony had done his best to keep anyone from knowing what fighting Steve had done to him. The only two people he'd come close to telling were Happy, and Steve. Happy had died, and Steve...

Tony looked at Carol. "We're working things out," he said. "And it's a good sign to everyone that both sides are in this together now, and we all have to play nice." He paused. "Are you going to be able to handle working with Spiderwoman?" Carol had never said anything directly, but he knew there was something going on between the two women -- they'd been friends once, too, if nothing else.

"I'll be able to handle her just fine," Carol said grimly. "I -- look. Are you okay?"

Tony almost smiled at that; the answer should have been obvious at this point. If it had been someone else, he might have tried to lie, but Carol deserved better than that. "No," he admitted, "but I can deal with that when this is over."

Two days ago, Tony had known, with an all-consuming certainty, that he had as good as sold his soul for a cheap compromise, and the only thing that had been keeping him going was the knowledge that if he stopped, someone else would take over SHIELD and registration, and then Steve would have died for nothing. And hard as it had been, he couldn't let that happen.

But Steve was back now. And that made all the difference.

"You'd better," Carol said, giving him a hard look. Then she clapped him on the shoulder, and nodded at him, before walking off down the hall, sash snapping behind her.

There was a morbid part of Steve that wanted to know how Nick Fury managed to destroy his clothes so thoroughly, but it was probably better for the sake of his sanity that he didn't. He had ended up borrowing a pair of jeans from Nick that were frayed around the cuffs, but otherwise intact, but he'd flatly refused to wear any of Nick's shirts. Most of them looked like they'd been through a wood-chipper. He'd ended up borrowing a shirt from Luke again, one of the thin, white cotton ones that made Steve feel uncomfortably like he was in nothing but an undershirt. It was better than anything of Nick's, though.

Standing in the dimly lit hall outside the Helicarrier's garage, Steve tugged at one of the straps of Luke's shirt. He was going to have to find something to wear over it; it was early March, and he'd look ridiculously underdressed, if nothing else. Much as he hated having to beg and borrow things from people, Tony would probably have something he could wear.

Steve let go of the strap of Luke's shirt, and picked up his artist's folio from where he had leant it
against the dull grey wall. At least Nick had still had one of the old portfolios he used to carry his
shield in; he might not be using it, but there was no way he was going in to the field unarmed.

And apparently, neither was Tony; he'd finally arrived, carrying his briefcase. He had a small duffle
bag in the other hand, a computer bag slung over his shoulder, and was wearing a shapeless sweater
that might have been green once that he’d acquired from somewhere. Steve vaguely remembered that
one of his secretaries -- not Pepper -- had knit it for him.

Steve smiled, seeing him; he looked about as far from the director of SHIELD, or the collected head
of Stark Enterprises as possible.

"Sorry," Tony said, coming to a stop a few feet in from of Steve, shifting his weight a little
uncomfortably. "That took longer than I thought it would. Apparently, half of SHIELD has just
decided that I'm actually in charge of them, and there are decisions that can’t be made without my
direct input." He paused, a thoughtful look crossing his face. "I think Fury's sending them to me as
some arcane form of punishment. I'm just not sure whether they're being punished, or I am."

"Knowing Nick, both, probably," Steve admitted. "Look, I feel like I'm wearing an undershirt. Do
you have something that I could put on over this?" he asked, gesturing at Luke's shirt.

Tony raised an eyebrow, looking him over in a way that made Steve want to blush, or possibly just
grin back like an idiot. "I've got a button-down shirt you can put on over that," Tony said, dropping
the duffle bag, and kneeling to unzip it. He took out a plain blue cotton shirt that Steve knew he
mostly wore for working in the lab, and handed it to Steve.

"Thank you," Steve said, pulling it on, tugging absently at the front. It was a little tight around the
shoulders, and didn't quite close across his chest, but it was infinitely better than nothing.

Tony stood, picking up his bag again. In contrast to the almost flirtatious once-over he had just given
Steve, there was a blank, closed expression on his face. "We'll take one of the cars over to the docks,
and leave it there with SHIELD agents that are heading down to DC," he said.

"All right," Steve replied, automatically reaching out and taking the duffle bag from Tony, who
rowned at him, looking baffled.

Steve gave him a one-shouldered shrug. "We'll attract less attention if you're not loaded down like a
pack horse," he said, wincing inwardly. What had possessed him to do that?

Tony nodded. "You're right." He glanced towards the door to the large bay where the Helicarrier
kept its array of flying cars. "We should go," he said.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Steve asked, pushing open the door to the garage.

The ride out to the docks was quiet. Steve drove, while Tony stared at the shifting green and blue
water outside the window. He seemed vaguely distracted, and Steve wondered if he'd started
monitoring data feeds, playing dispatch for the SHIELD agents already out in the field. He knew that
using the Extremis took some degree of concentration, and he wasn't sure how much this sort of
thing would require.

They handed the car over to the three SHIELD agents that were being sent to help Sam, Jan and Bob
handle the official side of things in DC, and made their way further into Manhattan on foot. Nick had
made arrangements for them to stay at the St. Mark's for the first night; Steve had always known the
The man had a warped sense of humor.

The man behind the desk at the hotel gave them a suspicious look when they walked in; Steve could only guess that the down at the heel hotel in the heart of Greenwich Village didn't get many respectable-looking guests. However, the man's face cleared when Tony gave him the fake name that Nick had placed the reservation under; Steve understood why when he saw that their room had only one bed.

Apparently, it really was impossible to keep anything a secret from Nick Fury.

Other than the single bed, the room was fairly unremarkable: a rickety night table on either side of the bed, a luggage stand by the door, and a wooden table set against the far wall, between the two small, streaky windows that let in the muffled noises of the street below.

Tony set the briefcase with his armor against the wall by the door, and placed the bag with the laptop in it on the table, while Steve dropped the duffle bag on the luggage rack.

Steve shifted his weight from foot to foot, watching as Tony wandered restlessly around the perimeter of the room.

It was strange, after they'd been friends for so many years, to feel at all awkward around Tony.

Tony finally paused by the edge of the bed. He stared down at the faded floral cover for a long moment, before turning to face Steve. "We don't have to do this," he said. "It's probably a mistake." The grey sweater and the harsh glare of the naked light bulb in the ceiling made him look washed out, and one night's sleep hadn't been enough to erase the dark circles under his eyes.

"Which mistake are you talking about?" Steve asked.

"You and me," he said, waving a hand at Steve and then himself. "This isn't the best time for either of us to start any kind of relationship, and I don't want you to think that just because I'm a mess, and you slept with me, you're somehow obligated--"

"So," Steve interrupted. "How much concentration does it take to monitor all those data feeds?"

"Not much right now," Tony said, frowning at him. "Most of our agents aren't in place yet."

"Good," Steve said, grinning a little. He took a long step forward, so that he was standing directly in front of Tony. "That means it's safe to distract you." He leaned forward the last bit, and kissed Tony a little hesitantly; the first time, he'd been carried away by the heat of the moment, and he barely knew what he was planning to do before he'd done it. This time, Steve knew exactly what he was doing.

Tony stood stock still for a long moment, not responding, before he began kissing back, shuffling forward half a step so that he was pressed against Steve. Steve wrapped an arm around Tony's waist, and Tony clutched at the front of his shirt with one hand, the other warm against the back of Steve's neck.

They stayed like that, kissing, pressed against one another for long minutes, before Steve pulled back a little. He untangled Tony's hand from his shirt, bringing it to his lips, and kissed it. Tony had nice hands with long, tapered fingers and big knuckles, and in spite of the polished businessman façade that he often wore, Tony's hands were generally covered with little nicks and cuts from working in
the lab, although there were more there now than Steve had remembered; little white lines scattered across his knuckles and the backs of his hands, the cuts increasing in length as they drew closer to his wrists.

Tony began kissing the side of Steve's neck, trailing downwards. Steve placed Tony's hand on his shoulder, and unbuttoned the collar of Tony's shirt. He pressed a kiss over the dark bruise at the base of Tony's neck, before taking another step forward, tangling their legs together, and knocking them back on to the bed.

Tony smiled up at him, eyes veiled, hand flat against Steve's chest, sliding up under his borrowed shirt.

Steve couldn't help but think that in spite of everything they had gone through, in the end, this might be worth it. But he couldn't ignore the tiny, wistful voice that pointed out that they could have done this years ago, and that it might have saved them all kinds of trouble if they had.
There was blood everywhere; smeared across Sharon's face, covering her shirtfront, filling the air with its heavy, sweet/metallic smell. He couldn't breathe, couldn't pull any air into his lungs, couldn't --

Steve jerked awake, gasping for breath. Most of the dream was already fading from his mind, but he could still smell the blood and gunpowder, still feel the impact of the bullets.

Damn it. He rolled over, face down, and closed his eyes again, squeezing them shut tightly while he waited for his breathing to even out.

Next to him, Tony stirred, reaching out to lay a hand on his back. Steve ignored the touch, silently willing Tony not to say anything. Damn it, damn it, damn it. Not again. He'd been over and done with this business years ago.

Tony, thank God, remained silent, running his hand gently up and down Steve's spine while Steve took deep breaths and reminded himself that this was not six weeks ago, that he wasn't dying, that that was over and he was fine now and everything was okay.

Sharon's promise from the ambulance hadn't been a lie after all.

Tony's hand came to rest between his shoulder blades, warm and embarrassingly comforting. He hadn't had nightmares in years -- not this kind of nightmare, the kind where things you desperately wanted to forget played out in technicolor and movietone sound, and tore you awake with your heart racing -- but he'd never forgotten how much he hated them.

Steve shifted to bury his face in the blankets over Tony's chest, not opening his eyes. Tony continued to rub small circles between Steve's shoulders, fingers hard, not saying anything. He consciously slowed his breathing, catching the musty scent of the blankets and the faint tang of metal that always seemed to hang on Tony's skin.

It was really a little too warm lying this close, and probably not entirely comfortable for Tony, but he didn't say anything, and Steve couldn't bring himself to move.

The first time he'd gone through this, he'd been on his own, and it had been miserable; he'd spent a lot of sleepless nights, restless and not willing to face sleep after being jerked awake by memories of falling, and cold, and Bucky. This time around... the dreams were still horrible, but having someone else there helped to ground things in the present.

Actually, that time was probably partly responsible for their friendship. Steve hadn't been familiar enough with the changed city to want to walk around by himself after dark, so he'd spent most nights the first month or two after waking up in this time wandering the halls of the Avengers Mansion, looking for a distraction. He'd quickly discovered that when he was staying there, 'Iron Man' was also often awake at all hours, and they'd spent more nights than Steve could count playing chess, or talking about books that they'd both read, or what was going on at Stark Industries, or what he thought of this new era, or what the Avengers had done that day, or about nothing in particular. Sometimes, Steve had simply gone down to the lab in the basement of the Mansion to keep 'Iron Man' company while he worked on something. That was actually how he'd figured out who was in the armor; Tony tended to lose all ability to dissemble when caught up in some mechanical problem,
and the intensity and focus were unmistakable, whether he was in the armor or a business suit.

Neither had ever asked why the other was awake in the middle of the night, but it had been strangely companionable to have someone to spend the time with. Eventually, the dreams had faded, and Steve had been able to sleep through the night again, but by then, Iron Man -- and Tony Stark -- had already been on the way to being Steve's best friend.

Tony brought his other hand up to run lightly through Steve's hair, and he had moment of intense gratitude that this was Tony with him, and not someone else.

He didn't have to say anything; Tony knew him well enough not to try to make him talk about things he'd rather forget, to stay quiet and offer simple, unquestioning, physical comfort.

Not that he liked having Tony see him like this, but if someone had to, there was probably no one else he could have been this open around. No one else would have been comfortable letting see him this shaken, not even Sam or Sharon. Sam was one of his best friends, close as a brother, but this kind of thing was always just a little bit awkward, with Sam. For Sam, he'd have smiled, and shrugged it off, and tried to put a brave face on things. It didn't actually work -- Sam could always see through him -- but there were things you just didn't confess to in front of your brother.

At least he didn't take it as far as some people, though. Back during the war, Steve had once seen Nick Fury walk three miles on a fractured ankle rather than admit to the other Howling Commandos that he was hurt, only to have his leg give out on him thirty minutes away from camp.

Dum Dum Dugan had thrown Nick over his shoulder and carried him the final mile back to base, Nick bitching the entire way. Steve had heard words coming from the man's mouth that he'd never heard before or since, including some he suspected Nick had made up on the spot.

As for Sharon... Sharon felt guilty enough as it was; she didn't need to know about this.

And Bucky, well -- out of everyone else, Steve would have been relatively comfortable with Bucky seeing him like this. Like Sam, Bucky was close as a brother, but he had also known Steve when he was twenty-one, and still innocent enough to be taken by surprise by the atrocities the Nazis were committing.

Somehow, though, Steve didn't think that Winter Soldier would have rubbed his back, and run a comforting hand through his hair. And while that certainly wasn't necessary -- he'd managed this by himself before -- it was... nice.

It was irrational to feel safe just because Tony was there, particularly when Steve was supposed to be there to watch his back. And anything that posed a serious threat to him could certainly take down an un-armored Tony. When the armor was removed from the equation, he could take Tony out easily, not the least because every move Tony knew, he'd learned from Steve.

He managed to look really good while losing, though.

They'd spent the past few months trying to destroy each other, but even at the height of the fighting, he'd never really managed to think of Tony as an enemy -- he'd always half-expected to wake up and discover that it had all been a bad dream, and they'd been on the same side all along.

The hand that had been stroking his hair settled on the back of Steve's neck, squeezing lightly.
Steve's heartbeat had finally slowed down to a more normal pace, and he could feel the knots in his neck and shoulders unwinding under Tony's hand. If this had been anyone else, Steve would have moved by now, and possibly pretended that he'd never been awake in the first place.

Instead, Steve turned his head to one side, taking a deep breath of the cold, slightly damp air; it was going to rain soon. He smiled slightly; this close, he could hear the slow, steady beat of Tony's heart.

Tony's warning had come just minutes after they had started settling in at the safehouse, his voice toneless and impersonal on the Avengers' comlink Peter had gotten used to not wearing. "Doombots on 45th Street," the comlink announced, and it would have been just like old times if Tony's voice hadn't sounded exactly like a robot's. "Six to ten of them—the news cameras can't get a clear view."

There was a moment of silence, as Peter and Danny both turned to Luke, waiting for his decision. MJ, in the middle of unpacking a suitcase, stopped and looked up, a folded shirt still in her hands.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Evil robots in the theater district," Peter started, and then Luke was answering Tony.

"We've got it," he said, and cut off his communicator. "Let's move. Those robots are going down."

"I'll bring you a robot head," Peter offered to MJ, as he pulled his shirt off to reveal the black costume underneath.

She threw the shirt at his head, and Peter caught it out of the air with one hand and tossed it back. "I take it that's a no?"

"Get out of here!"

"I'm going, I'm going." Peter pulled his mask on and followed Luke and Danny out the door.

He got to the theater district first, weblines being a faster way to travel than Danny's over-rooftops-and-through-attics route. There were no flattened cars or broken windows, the way there had been on Wall Street. Instead, nine 'bots were standing in a semi-circle around the entrance to the Minskoff Theatre, facing inwards. As Peter swung down towards them, all nine raised their hands in unison and fired a stream of orange energy at the giant yellow and black *Lion King* marquee over the broad entry way.

It caught fire immediately. The front broke off, crashing to the pavement, completely blocking the doors.

Damn it, damn it, damn it. Peter threw out another webline and reversed course, heading for the roof of the theater instead of the street. It was a matter of seconds to break through a skylight and climb down through the theater's criss-cross of lighting struts and catwalks.

It was too early in the day for a performance, but Peter's luck was working true to form, and the...
theater was crowded with people anyway. Onstage, a cluster of dancers in animal masks were standing in a panicked huddle, while a tall, balding man with a conductor's baton tried to herd dozens of musicians toward the fire exits.

Dress rehearsal. Wonderful.

"I'm not leaving my cello!" one of the orchestra members protested. "Do you know how much they cost?"

"Carry it out, let it burn, I don't care!" the conductor yelled. "It's not as if you can play on tempo anyway!" He stabbed the baton in the direction of the "exit" sign. "Just get outside."

Peter spun a new web-line and lowered himself down from one of the catwalk beams. "How can I help?" he asked.

The conductor looked up, did a double-take, then pointed towards the fire with his baton. "I can handle the musicians. You do something about that."

The front half of the building was already ablaze, orange and yellow flame eating the gilt-covered wood of the private boxes and balconies. It would have been nice to have ice powers. Or water powers. Or fire-retardant-foam-throwing powers.

Instead, Peter grabbed a fire extinguisher, handed it to a dancer dressed as an ostrich, and went back outside to stop the Doombots from lighting anything else on fire.

Luke and Danny were already outside, wading into the Doombots with abandon.

Doom didn't seem to have any specific objective, outside of causing as much chaos as he could. It must be nice to be crazy, Peter thought, ducking underneath a Doombot's energy blast. No worrying about consequences, or strategy, or what you were going to do next -- all you had to do was cackle manically and send in the killer robots.

"Does he ever run out of these fuckers?" Luke asked. He punched a Doombot in the faceplate, then slung it towards Danny, who hit it with a karate chop so hard half the rivets in its torso popped off.

A half dozen bits of metal slapped into Peter's chest and arms, and a final rivet flew past his face, about an inch away from his nose. "Ow!" he yelled, slapping at the stinging welt he could feel rising on his left arm. "Watch it! Doom never runs out," he added, aside, to Luke. "I think he has a factory in Taiwan somewhere that rolls these guys off an assembly line."

Peter picked a Doombot -- there were still plenty to choose from -- and sprang up onto its shoulders, shooting webbing into its face. If this worked like last time, it would now stumble around blindly waving its arms, like *Abbott and Costello meet the Mummy.*

It stumbled blindly. It waved its arms. A musician hit it with a trombone. The Doombot grabbed the trombone out of the musician's hands and began to bend it in half, metal groaning. Peter grabbed a chunk of rubble, snuck up behind the Doombot, and bashed open its control panel. He ripped a handful of wires out, and the Doombot lurched to a stop, repeating, "Doom, Doom. Doom," over and over again, like a record winding down.

The trombonist grinned at Peter, clutching his bent instrument to his chest. "Thanks, Spidey."
Peter saluted him with two fingers, and headed for the next Doombot, trying not to think about the fact that it was Tony who'd shown him how to shut down a Doombot.

After that, it didn't take long. Unlike the ones on Wall Street, these Doombots didn't really seem all that motivated. Peter got the feeling that they'd been sent solely to burn the theater, and hadn't been given any other instructions. Maybe Doom just really hated family-friendly theater.

Luke kicked the mangled remains of a Doombot. "There could have been kids in there."

"Yeah," Peter kicked the Doombot nearest to him. It made his foot hurt. "That's for trying to destroy our tourism industry."

Luke looked at him, eyebrows raised.

"What?" Peter asked, "Broadway brings a lot of money into this city. And it takes it from fat midwestern tourists who voted for registration."

"How can we ever thank you?" the dancer in the ostrich costume gushed, gazing up at Luke with a starry-eyed expression. It was hard to tell under the mask and all of the feathers, but Peter was pretty sure the ostrich-dancer was a guy.

A female dancer in a gazelle costume grabbed Peter by the arm with both hands. "Is it true that Captain America's back? You know that here on Broadway, we all thought that what they were going to do to him was horrible."

Was it supposed to be a secret? Peter wasn't sure. No one ever remembered to tell him these things. "He was dead. But. Um. He got better!" Peter said, trying to sidle away. The dancer was still clinging to his arm, so it didn't work. She followed him, still staring at him with that vacant hero-worship expression which in theory, you always thought would be flattering, but which was usually just kind of embarrassing.

"That's great," the ostrich dancer said. He'd finally let go of Luke, probably due to the poisonous glare Danny was giving him. "He's a real tiger."

"I'm sure he'll get a kick out of hearing that," Luke said, with the slight smirk that meant he was already picturing Cap's expression when they repeated this conversation to him.

"The fire department's coming," the conductor said. "You guys should get out of here before the cape-killers show up."

"Sorry about the theater," Danny said. "Send the repair bill to the Rand-Meachum corporation. They'll be happy to help."

"No need; Disney can handle it. It's not like they don't have the cash." The conductor shrugged, then added, "And you know what they say about dress rehearsals. At this rate, we're going to have one hell of a first performance."
Tony had refused to come shopping with Steve in Kmart. Admittedly, it wasn't his first choice either, but they were far less likely to draw attention in a Kmart than somewhere smaller, and less generally chaotically crowded. In any case, the other stores in this neighborhood disturbed him; not even a supervillain needed to wear that much black leather and metal.

Steve made his way through the aisles of brightly colored plastic toys, dusty school supplies, and cheap women's jewelry, up the escalator to find men's clothes. The store was about half-full; apparently the recent round of attacks hadn't affected business. There were kids that didn't look like they were out of high-school yet clustered around the movies; a harried looking man in a rumpled suit trying to balance packages of paper and printer cartridges; women with baby carriages holding baskets filled with formula and diapers; three college students carrying boxes of ramen; an elderly couple looking at desk lamps; and a group of disaffected-looking young people in artistically torn and paint spattered clothing wandering about aimlessly. He nodded stiffly at a heavy-set woman in a red vest restocking bottles of vitamins, walked past two young women examining fold-out futon beds, and realized with a start that this was the first time in months that he'd really been able to walk around freely, without having to keep an eye out for the cape-killers. Not that there was nothing to worry about, of course, but somehow the threat of Doombots or the Mandarin's minions felt far less oppressive.

The selection of men's clothing was small and basic, and Steve wasn't in the mood to be picky, not while he was still wearing borrowed clothing that didn't quite fit.

Luckily, SHIELD-issue combat boots were fairly standard, and Steve was used to wearing them. They weren't as comfortable as his own red boots, but they were decent. And at least he'd been able to take them from SHIELD's surplus, and hadn't had to borrow them from anyone.

The main problem Steve had when shopping was trying to find things that fit properly; he'd been unusually tall by the standards of his day, and although he might not be as comparatively tall in this time, but he was still bigger than most people.

Two pairs of jeans, a couple of shirts, a pack of boxers, socks, a flannel over-shirt, and trench-coat seemed like enough clothing for the moment, since they were traveling light. He'd need to find out what had happened to his things at some point; knowing Tony, they were probably still around somewhere.

Steve grabbed a plain dark blue backpack to carry everything in, then made his way to the front of the store to check out. The cashier gave him a strange look when he paid cash for the entire pile, but Steve just nodded and smiled politely at her. He paused by one of the cluttered display tables, pulled on the trench-coat, packed the rest of the clothes neatly into the backpack, and handed the empty plastic bag back to a confused-looking clerk.

It was a crisp, cold morning, but the sun was out, and there was a rare clarity to the air. Steve paused on the corner for a long moment, just enjoying the day, and the fact that he had the opportunity to do so.

There was no sign of Doombots, or Red Skull's minions, or the Mandarin's men, Tony was back at the hotel, and they didn't need to leave the room for another few hours. Steve shouldered his backpack, and set out to find the most circuitous route possible back to the hotel; it was a nice day, there was no reason to waste all of it inside.

This was New York, and in spite of the recent chaos, the streets were filled with people hurrying about their business. Steve kept expecting someone to recognize him from the news, but no one so
much as gave him a second glance. Apparently, people were less observant than he'd thought. Or maybe they just didn't care.

It was no warmer inside the St. Mark's Hotel than it was outside; apparently, they were having some problem with the heating. The man at the desk had claimed that it was due to damage from the recent attacks, but given the look of the place, Steve suspected that it was simply in need of maintenance. The whole place had a dim, dusty, rickety feel, at odds with the fact that the neighborhood mostly seemed to be a bastion for the particular brand of disaffected youth that liked to imagine themselves to be artists. Of course, Steve admitted to himself as he made his way up the poorly-lit wooden staircase, the place did have a bit of a Bohemian ethos, which was probably why it had lasted.

Tony was in their room; the one benefit to staying in this neighborhood was that no one had raised an eyebrow when they had requested a single room. He was sitting at the small dented wooden table set against the left wall, half turned away from Steve, working on the laptop he had brought with them from the Helicarrier. His coat was draped over the back of his chair, and there was a plastic bag lying on the bed; he'd obviously been out at some point.

Tony turned and looked up when Steve shut the door behind him, blinking, and giving him a half smile. "Have a nice walk?"

"Yes," Steve said, shrugging off the backpack and leaning it against the wall by the door. "It's a nice day. Did you go out?"

Tony nodded; over his shoulder, Steve could see the streams of data still rolling across the computer's screen unabated. "Just to get a feel for the neighborhood. I have no idea why Fury thought this would be a good place for us to go to ground."

Steve shrugged. "I stopped trying to figure out why Nick Fury does anything years ago," he said, walking over to the bed and picking up the plastic bag. It was white, with a red oval that said Utrecht on it. Inside, there was a pad of drawing paper, a set of drawing pencils of various hardnesses, an eraser, a box of Copic pens, and a blending stump. Steve pulled the rolled piece of paper out of the bag and held it up to Tony. "These cost a dollar each, and I can make them myself out of a folded piece of paper."

"The clerk said you needed it for shading," Tony said.

Steve took the pad of paper and box of pencils out of the bag. They were good quality, though that wasn't surprising. He tapped them lightly together, before setting them back on the bed. "Only if you don't know how to improvise," he said.

Tony just looked at him.

"Bill Mauldin didn't use one," Steve said, folding his arms across his chest.

"Are you going to quaff a glass of root beer in his memory, too?" Tony asked, raising an eyebrow at him. Steve held his hands up in surrender, and Tony grinned, and nodded towards a paper bag sitting on the other chair. "There's food."

Steve picked up the bag; it was warm, slightly damp, and there was the menu from a Chinese take-out place stapled to the folded top. He put the bag on the table and began removing the cartons of food, while Tony stood and set the computer on the bed, not bothering to close the lid.
Even though he knew Tony could do it now, it was a little disconcerting to think that he was using the computer without so much as looking at it.

They ate, Tony using the cheap wooden chopsticks, while Steve used the plastic fork. He'd always thought that chopsticks were somewhat pointless when forks were really far more practical.

The food was decent, but a little cold, and Steve wondered briefly why Tony hadn't just started without him.

"Doctor Strange just got in contact with the New Avengers," Tony said, setting down the half-empty container of lo mein. "He's still researching ways to permanently seal the artifact. Apparently, it's taking him longer than he'd hoped, because it's so powerful."

"Did he tell them where he was?" Steve asked. Doctor Strange had left them fairly abruptly the other day; it would have been nice to have some idea what he'd been intending to do.

Tony shook his head. "No. He mostly seems to have been checking in." He smiled a little. "I think he enjoys being mysterious about these things."

"Probably," Steve said. "Do you know where anyone else is?" He'd chosen to go with Tony willingly, and would make the choice again, but it had meant leaving the others on no notice at all. He felt bad, leaving Bucky, Sharon, Sam, and the New Avengers like that.

A small part of him couldn't help but be grateful for the reprieve, though. The New Avengers kept looking to him to have answers to questions he barely knew, and Sharon... He forgave her implicitly; what had happened wasn't her fault. But she still felt guilty about it, and Steve wasn't sure that he was ready to deal with that yet.

Tony cocked his head to one side, expression going distant, as if he was seeing something other than the small room. "The New Avengers just took out nine Doombots in the theater district. One of the dancers is flirting with Luke." He paused, then went on, "Agent Carter and Winter Soldier have reached DC safely. They think they've found a lead on one of Red Skull's contacts, but," Tony paused for a moment, and Steve could hear Bucky in his next words. "He's covered his tracks 'damned well.'"

"He always has," Steve said wryly. One of the biggest problems in fighting Red Skull always lay in finding him.

Tony placed a hand over his, and squeezed lightly. He was still holding the chopsticks with his other hand, though he'd stopped eating.

They sat in silence for a moment, then Tony removed his hand, and said, "Unfortunately, the Mandarin's nearly as well hidden as Red Skull. We're fairly certain that he must be somewhere in China. He's always been focused on it, and that's where most of his recent attacks have been centered," he said, gesturing emphatically with the chopsticks.

"I guess that's not his usual MO," Steve said.

"No," Tony shook his head. "It's not. He might not always lead his attacks, but he's never hidden himself before. He's been all over the map this time: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Chongqing. We know his ultimate goal is domination of Asia, and eventually, the world, but there just hasn't been any obvious strategy to his actions. And the Mandarin may be insane, but he's not stupid; he has to be up
to something," Tony finished, stabbing at the air with the chopsticks. Steve decided not to point out the irony.

"If Asia is his goal, why send his people here? Why blow up the Helicarrier?" Steve asked.

"Payback," Tony said, making a dismissive gesture with the hand holding the chopsticks. "I blew up his idiotic dragon ship."

Steve nodded, then frowned, suddenly focusing on Tony’s hand and the scars that he’d noticed the night before. There was something about the pattern that made Steve’s stomach twist. What on earth had Tony been doing to himself?

Steve reached out, and took Tony's hand in his, pulling it across the table to get a better look.

The scars ran across Tony's knuckles, and down the back of his hand, increasing in length as they went; there was one longer scar that started at the base of his thumb, and wound down and around, ending in a small, faintly reddish knot at the ball of his wrist. They were small, although some of them looked fairly deep, and most of them had jagged edges, as if there had been something embedded in them.

Steve knew what left that kind of scar pattern.

"What?" Tony asked, looking baffled, although he made no move to take his hand back. Steve swallowed a little thickly, but didn't let go, squeezing Tony's hand.

Steve pulled the chopsticks from Tony's grasp, setting them pointedly on the table. "If you're going to keep working on that laptop," he nodded at the open computer on the bed, lines of data still scrolling across the screen, "you could at least pretend to type," Steve said, turning Tony's hand over and tracing his thumb across the ball of his wrist.

He didn't want to think about what had driven Tony to put his fist through a window some time in the past two months.
Chapter 8

Steve was halfway up the steps to the motel before he realized that Tony was no longer walking behind him. He glanced back over his shoulder to find the other man standing motionless on the sidewalk a few feet away, staring off into space.

"Tony. Tony. Tony." Steve reached out and touched Tony's arm, trying to catch his attention, and Tony turned and blinked at him, his eyes the empty, oily black they turned when he called the armor.

"We're here," Steve said, carefully not meeting that empty stare.

"We're... oh." The black color drained away from Tony's eyes, leaving them the same blue they'd always been. "Sorry. SHIELD team in Hong Kong needed to talk to Fury."

Steve said nothing, settling instead for steering Tony into the building, away from any listening ears. "The Mandarin?" he asked, once the door to their room was safely shut behind them.

Tony shook his head. "The Chinese army says they're garden variety terrorists. The local government has things under control, but if they're mixed up with Red Skull's people, there could be a bio-terrorism threat, and the last thing we need is an outbreak of something there -- their airport's a transportation hub for half of Southeast Asia."

Steve dropped his backpack into the room's lone, faded chair and propped his portfolio -- and his shield -- against the side of the bed, where it would be within easy reach. "But you think it's the Mandarin anyway," he said.

"If not, it's a pretty big coincidence." Tony dropped heavily onto the edge of the bed, and scrubbed his fingers through his hair. "And the Thing says the Fantastic Four are fighting some kind of mole mutates in the Parisian catacombs. Because the Al Qaida cell SHIELD is trying to break up there isn't enough trouble."

"And here I sit in Chelsea." The words were out before Steve really thought about them. He wasn't complaining, not really. He just hated feeling so out of the loop, while Tony sat there with half of SHIELD's communications traffic running through his head. Over the past five days, only one of the Mandarin's men had made an appearance. Steve had made short work of him; he was pretty sure that Tony didn't even know that he'd been there. Steve had made them check out of the Saint Mark's a day early, claiming that the neighborhood was too crowded.

Since then, his job had mostly consisted of reminding Tony to eat.

Tony glanced away, shoulders sagging. "Sorry," he said.

"No, this important too," Steve said. "And anyway, I chose to come." If they had run into another of the Mandarin's men on the street, Tony, distracted as he'd been, wouldn't have noticed until it was far too late. Steve had never seen him blank out like that using the Extremis before this week, but over the past few days, it had become a familiar, if somewhat unsettling, sight.

Steve sat down on the bed beside Tony, resting a hand on his shoulder for a moment, before letting it slide to the center of his back. With Tony's shoulders hunched forward, Steve could feel the hard lines of his ribs all down his back.
Tony turned to look at him, hair half sticking up, half falling over his eyes. "You seem," he started a little hesitantly, "surprisingly comfortable with this."

"I am not comfortable with this," Steve snapped. How could Tony think he was comfortable with this?

Tony looked away, shoulders hunching further.

"I'm not 'comfortable' with the Extremis, and I don't like what it does to you," Steve explained. Whatever Tony might claim, it did do things to him, made him strange and distant. Even if it hadn't influenced his decisions in the fight over registration, Steve still didn't think that it had helped any. And although Steve knew that he was busy relaying communications to hundreds of people, all over the world, it still bothered him how lost in his own head Tony had been over the past few days. "I don't like that all of our communications are reliant on you, and that if anything happens to you, we're all screwed. I don't like that Fury's sending people to snoop around Latveria again. I'm not comfortable with Bucky and Sharon running around DC, torturing people--"

"That wasn't exactly what I meant," Tony said, looking at Steve again, lips quirked with amusement. "I meant," he went on, "you seem surprisingly comfortable with me. And even setting aside the part where we were beating the hell out of each other two months ago, I've never seen you show interest in anyone but women."

Oh. Steve blinked, his building tirade suddenly derailed. Being comfortable with Tony had never been a question, and as for the other... "I saw Captain Blood when I was fourteen," Steve said, smiling at the memory; his mother had sent him to the movies as a treat over Christmas break. "Basil Rathbone wore leather pants. Errol Flynn didn't wear leather, but his pants were very tight."

Tony grinned at him. "So that's why you always liked Clint's Robin Hood movie."

"They both wore tights in that," Steve said. "And Olivia de Havilland wasn't half-bad either."

"I thought that Jean Harlow was the reason Hollywood existed?" Tony said, raising an eyebrow at Steve.

"She was," Steve defended instantly -- he'd been passionately in love with Jean Harlow at age nine, both because she was terribly pretty and because she'd been in color in a movie with lots of aerial dogfights. Sarah Rogers had been considerably less enthused with her, especially once she learned the title of Steve's new favorite movie. "But Errol Flynn was nice, too."

"How about you?" he asked. Revealing his embarrassing teenage crush on a movie star deserved equivalent detail in return. Knowing Tony, his version probably involved Star Wars and Harrison Ford.

"Tiberius Stone, behind the bleachers in the gym." Tony smirked ever-so-slightly at the memory. "We were graduating from high school, and it seemed like an appropriate way to say good-bye."

It seemed like... Steve stared at him. "Tony, you were four-teen when you finished high school."

"I know." Tony shook his head, still smiling. "Thank God all I did was give him a blow job; trying anything more complicated would probably have been really humiliating. By the time we met back up after college we were actually old enough to know what we were doing. Of course, that was
before he turned into a sociopath." The smile dropped off his face like a discarded mask, replaced by the slightly-hunted look of guilt he usually got when talking about Tiberius.

"He was always a sociopath," Steve said, frowning. He'd only met Stone once, but that had been more than enough; he could tell within three minutes that Stone was a smarmy bastard who touched Tony too much. It had been during the middle of a media attack on Tony that had almost driven his company under, and Stone's television channels had been the ones leading the witch hunt. Tony had continued insisting that it was just business, and that Stone was still his friend, even while Stone's people were driving him over the edge. Finding out that Stone had been a deranged sociopathic supervillain all along hadn't surprised Steve in the slightest.

"No," Tony started, "he was different back--" he broke off, cocking his head as if listening, then said, "That was Carol. Simon thinks he was spotted by the Latverian border patrol."

Steve suppressed the desire to swear, settling instead for a groan. "I told Nick. I think the Howling Commandos' unit motto was 'we never learn.'"

"Do you want me to pass that along for you?" Tony asked, with just a flicker of a smile.

"No." Now Doom was sure to lodge some kind of diplomatic complaint with the UN, and SHIELD would be ordered to leave his borders alone. Once upon a time, Steve would have told Nick to counter by pointing out the army of Doombots currently parading around Manhattan, but the UN's policy these days was to pretend that Doombots didn't exist. Sam had always suspected that Doom simply bribed the UN inspection committees. Steve personally thought it was blackmail. It was a favorite tactic for pretty much all the politically-minded supervillains.

Stone had had a flair for it as well. "Have I ever told you how much I hated him?" Steve asked.

Tony looked blank for a moment, scrolling lines of data eerily visible across his irises, then blinked and asked, "Fury? Everyone hated him. He was director of SHIELD, and if I've learned anything over the past month, it's that universal dislike comes with the job."

"Not Fury," Steve corrected him. "Stone." Then, anxious to erase the cold, empty look that had come over Tony's face while he spoke about SHIELD, he slid one hand onto Tony's knee and leaned forward, cupping the other hand around the side of Tony's face and laying a brief kiss on his lips.

Tony leaned into Steve, pressing one hand flat against his chest, and Steve bent his head, kissing the side of Tony's neck. Tony closed his eyes, smiling a little, and began to work at the buttons of Steve's shirt.

He slid the shirt down off Steve's shoulders, leaving him in only his undershirt, and then paused, hands still resting on Steve's arms, tracing small circles against Steve's right shoulder with his thumb. His eyes had gone distant and unfocused again, and for an instant, Steve loathed the Extremis with all his heart, never mind that it was nothing but a bunch of computer code.

"What are you doing?" he asked, trying to sound playful and not like he was silently resenting something that only existed inside Tony's head. "I know my shoulders aren't the most interesting part of me."

Tony blinked, coming back from wherever he'd been, and dropped his hand from Steve's shoulder. "Nothing," he said, looking down.
If Steve had learned one thing from Sharon, it was that 'nothing' never meant nothing. He picked up Tony's hand. "What is it?"

There was a moment of silence as Tony's lips quirked, as if he were trying to smile or think of something to say. Gaze still distant, he reached out with his free hand, touching Steve's shoulder lightly. "You should have a scar there," he said, meeting Steve's eyes with an almost apologetic expression. He trailed his hand down Steve's chest, pausing for a moment. "And one there." His hand came to rest over Steve's stomach. "And one there."

Steve stared at Tony's hand, fingers pressing lightly into his side. "I don't remember that one," he said quietly.

"And that jagged one on your knee that you always had is gone, too," Tony said, catching Steve's eyes, trying to smile. It wasn't an entirely successful attempt, but Steve seized on the new subject with gratitude. That last wound, the one he didn't remember, would have been Sharon's bullet.

"I got that falling off a fire escape when I was eight." Steve smiled ruefully at the memory. His mother had been furious with him. "After that, I stopped playing Robin Hood and stuck to King Arthur."

"Did Errol Flynn wear tights in that movie, too?" Tony asked, arching an eyebrow.

"They never made a King Arthur movie with Errol Flynn." Which, now that Steve thought about it, was a glaring oversight.

"I used to like The Sword in the Stone when I was a kid," Tony said reminiscently. "It was one of the few movies Jarvis would actually watch with me."

"I thought you liked that Grail movie?" Steve asked, nudging Tony with his shoulder. Tony and Peter both loved Monty Python, but Steve had never really been all that fond of them -- he'd always gotten the feeling that there was something he was missing.

Tony grinned. Steve refused to find it endearing. "Let's not talk about that version of Camelot," he said, leaning into Steve's side. "It's a silly place."

Steve rolled his eyes, but smiled anyway, and kissed him.

It had been a while since Sharon had done covert-ops, but her skills were still up to the challenge of getting her inside the Longworth House office building. A photoshopped ID proclaiming her to be a White House aide and a story involving the President's tax cuts bill and the Ways and Means Committee had gotten her past the security guards at the front door, and a set of lockpicks got her into congressional aide Douglas Wheeler's office.

Exactly why the Bush Administration needed hard copy reports from the committee sessions at eight o' clock at night had never been specified, and the guard hadn't asked.
Sharon shut Wheeler's door carefully behind her, re-locked it, and then crossed the cramped office space to open the window over the desk.

Winter Soldier climbed through it, somehow managing to avoid knocking over any of the multiple stacks of paperwork littering Wheeler's desk. Only once he was inside and away from the windows did Sharon pull the blinds and turn on the lights.

Winter Soldier was already sorting through the piles of paperwork, carefully setting each discarded sheet back in its original position when he'd finished with it. "I've got his desk and file drawers," he said, not looking up. "You take the computer."

For all his skill at other forms of espionage, Winter Soldier was practically computer-illiterate. Most of the time, it was oddly amusing to hear a de facto cyborg complain that computers had gone downhill ever since they stopped using punch cards. At the moment, it was just one more mission variable.

Sharon sat carefully in Wheeler's desk chair, ignoring the small sounds of Winter Soldier opening and closing file drawers behind her, and began to boot up Wheeler's computer.

Douglas Wheeler was the chief of staff to New York Congressman Joe Dickstein, a founding member of the Unregistered Superhuman Activities Committee, and one of the heavy hitters behind the Superhuman Registration Act. Dickstein had been a member of several committees tangentially involved in Project Wideawake, was currently a member of the Armed Services committee on terrorism and unconventional threats, and had once worked on a lobbying campaign with Henry Gyrich.

All of which made him well-connected and made his record regarding superhuman affairs decidedly spotty. It didn't necessarily make him useful to their investigation. His aide, on the other hand... Several of the calls made to Agent Taylor's cell phone had come from Wheeler's office. Maybe Wheeler had been getting therapy, but Sharon doubted it. It wouldn't be the first time an employee had used his boss's security clearance to hand out classified information.

Sharon had watched him walk out the Longworth's front door only half an hour ago, and had been surprised by the wave of rage she felt toward him. This prematurely balding lawyer-type in his dark grey suit and wingtip shoes had helped Faustus get inside her head. He had Steve's blood on his hands.

He also had absolutely nothing incriminating on his hard drive, unless the collection of pornographic photos of women wearing latex bodypaint saved in a folder entitled "committee minutes" counted.

No emails sent from anyone outside the Capitol Hill server, no drafts of letters sent to Faustus, no A.I.M. affiliates or American Nazi Party hate sites in his history of visited websites. Nothing but meeting minutes, drafts of letters to lobbyists about funding bills, files full of background information for various recently-introduced bills (immigration, budget appropriations, motions to honor various casualties of the War on Terror), and .pdf copies of speeches. Sharon scrolled through the "My Documents" folder, past copies of Dickstein's commemorative speeches on the five-year anniversary of 9/11, until she found a handful of potentially useful documents. Wheeler's email address book. Saved copies of inter-office memos from Dickstein. A list of addresses for campaign funding donors.

Wheeler's government-issue PC was all sleek black plastic with a cutting-edge flat screen, but its USB port was inconveniently located on the back of the computer tower. She had to crawl under the
desk, nearly sneezing at the dust that permeated the thin green carpet, before she could download all of Wheeler's maybe/possibly useful files onto a SHIELD flash drive.

Across the office, Winter Soldier shut a file drawer -- very gently -- and held up a single sheet of paper. "I've got what I need," he said quietly, voice toneless in the way of someone trying very hard to suppress anger. "Let's go."

Sharon took the paper from him and tucked it in her document folder -- brown leather tastefully stamped with the White House seal -- then shut down the computer and turned out the lights.

The Winter Soldier climbed soundlessly out the window again, and Sharon closed and latched it behind him. She left the building the same way she'd come in, through the front door. The security guard waved to her on the way out.

Twenty-five minutes later, she was sitting at a table at The Monocle with a ten-dollar glass of Cabernet Sauvignon at her elbow, the flash drive full of stolen data in her pocket, and the document folder tucked safely between her feet.

James showed up five minutes past their scheduled meeting time, rainwater beading on his black leather jacket and dripping from the ends of his hair.

"You're late," Sharon told him, not getting up. "I already ordered for you."

"Got caught in the rain," he said, shrugging. The black leather combat gear and domino mask had been traded in for a grey dress shirt and black slacks with cuffs almost-but-not-quite long enough to conceal the SHIELD-issue leather boots he was still wearing. No blazer. No tie. It was formal enough to get him through the door, but only by a small margin. "What am I eating?"

"You're having filet mignon with merlot sauce. I'm having shrimp with spring asparagus."

"No crab?"

"It's March. Soft-shell season doesn't start until May."

James dropped smoothly into the empty chair across from her and reached for a dinner roll, his ungloved hand gleaming dully in the candle-light. "I ate here once back in the 70s, when I had an assignment in the state department. They had crab then."

"It was summer then, if you're talking about the assignment I think you are." Sharon pulled the document folder from under her chair and laid it on the table. "Let's see if you found something more useful than I did."

"Oh, I found 'something,' all right," James said, dropping all pretense of playfulness. "Wheeler needs to learn not to keep his boss's memos."

Sharon opened the folder and, without removing the paper inside -- which was decorated with a conspicuous 'Office of Rep. Joseph Dickstein' letterhead -- began to read. The message, dated a day before Steve's death, was brief. "Tell Sudler the appointment is at 2:30, Wednesday the 8th, city courthouse." It had been written in blue ballpoint, and signed with a scrawled "Joe."

It was the date and time of Steve’s arraignment, information that had been restricted even from most SHIELD agents until a few hours beforehand. It could have been a co-incidence. And Sharon could
have been her high school homecoming queen.

Dickstein had given someone out there a twenty-four hour advance notice of Steve’s first public appearance post-arrest, or Sharon was going to eat Cindy Andrews’ tiara when her fifteen-year reunion came up next month.

"Dickstein is our leak."

"He’s not going to be leaking anything else," James said grimly. "I can see to that." He closed the fingers of his metal hand, crushing the dinner roll as if he were imagining it was Dickstein.

Sharon shook her head. Satisfying as the thought was… "James, we can't assassinate a U.S. congressman, no matter how much he may deserve it." She looked back down at the note. Something about the name Sudler seemed familiar. And it was handwritten rather than emailed; had Dickstein wanted to avoid leaving an electronic record?

She suggested as much to James, and his lips curved into a smirk. "If that's his goal, he needs to talk to his aide about his compulsive inability to throw anything away. The guy kept receipts for office supplies going back three years."

"And yet his hard drive was completely clutter free." Well, except for the photos of naked women painted blue. "Somebody's learned their lesson from Oliver North."

James raised his eyebrows questioningly. "Who?"

"It's not important." She frowned down at the note, absently tapping it with one finger. "I've seen that name somewhere before. Hold on a second."

Sharon reached for her purse and dug through it for her PDA, then plugged the flash-drive full of Wheeler's computer files into it. "Email addresses, uselessly sanitized email records, campaign donations... Here." She spun the device around and pushed it across the table toward James. "Three months ago, just before the Registration Act went to a vote, Dickstein received a hundred-and-twenty-five thousand dollar campaign donation from a Mr. L. K. Sudler." A hell of a lot more money than thirty pieces of silver, but there had been a lot of inflation since Biblical times. "And, of course," she went on, "when you re-arrange the letters in L. K. Sudler, you get—"

James' eyes narrowed, and even without the domino mask, in clothes that were almost nice, he looked like an assassin. "Red Skull."

Steve's head was a warm, heavy weight against Tony's shoulder, and the even sounds of his breathing were the only noise in the room. Tony had long since ceased to notice it, as he had stopped registering the voices of the couple in the next room over, and the sounds of the traffic on the street outside. He was "listening" to something else now, and aural sensory input only got in the way.

Tony had once described the effects of his modified dose of Extremis as "growing new connections." It had been as good a way as any to explain what he'd wanted it to do -- allow him to control the armor directly, the way the now-too-dangerous neural interfaces had let him -- but the end
result was more complicated than that, less a "connection" and more a deluge of new sensory input, with the armor a steady presence underneath it.

He wondered, occasionally, if this was how telepaths felt.

He could shut the background noise of satellite transmissions and data feeds out almost entirely when he had to (except for the armor -- the armor was always there) but for the past four days he'd been running with filters wide open 24/7, not daring to shut anything out even when he slept. The constant "noise" gave him a low-grade headache, which intensified when he focused in on a particular feed, as he was doing now.

*Doombots sighted in Central Park, sir.*

Lovely. Tony opened up the communications channel to the New Avengers, and then, for good measure, opened the ones that would link him to the NYPD, fire department, and all the SHIELD field agents currently present in Manhattan. Maybe Thor had had the right idea back when he'd wanted to wipe Latveria off the map. *More specific please, agent,* he sent to the original contact. *Where in Central Park, and how many?*

*The southern end, by 59th Street. Four, no, five of them. I'd take a closer look, but I'm running low on fuel.*

The helo pilot included a video transmission, a grainy overhead shot of five green-cloaked figures, nearly invisible against the green backdrop of the park. Tony streamed the image file to the Helicarrier's communication's center, tagging it with the bit of code that would set off the priority alarms, and then turned his attention to the Avengers' channel. *Luke,* he said, *Five Doombots at West 59th Street, southern edge of Central Park.*

*Got it.* Peter's voice came back over the channel instead of Luke's, but that took care of one dispatch.

***Rioting continues in Southern Los Angeles today, in the wake of yet another small-scale explosion...*** The CNN anchor's mindlessly perky smile was distracting, so Tony cut that feed to audio only.

*She Hulk,* he switched open Jen's channel; she and Ares were handling things in Los Angeles, but the continued attacks were complicating things. *What's your status?*

*We need more men here, and soon.* Even through the comlink, Jen's exhaustion and exasperation came through loud and clear. *Every time people start to settle down, something else blows up, or falls down, or someone says something stupid in a public place, and everyone starts hitting each other all over again. SHIELD agents, Avengers, the Goddamn Coast Guard. A show of strength isn't enough, we need enough people to force order here until things finally settle down.*

*I'll see about redirecting some SHIELD agents from DC,* Tony promised her. Between Jan, Bob, Falcon, a number of SHIELD agents, and Fury's covert team, the situation in DC, at least, had finally started to improve -- as far as terrorist attacks went, anyway. Congress wasn't exactly happy with the situation, and it was hard to say whether they were more upset about the Doombots, or Jan's attempts to explain why SHIELD had suddenly decided to stop enforcing registration. Tony was leaning towards the latter; in his experience, perspective wasn't a strong point with most politicians.

There was a sudden change in temperature, and the weight of Steve's head on his shoulder was gone.
Tony shut down all non-essential datafeeds and dragged his attention back to his surroundings. Steve was half-sitting-up, weight resting on his elbows, staring at the far wall. The dim glow from the street lights outside offered Tony only his silhouette, hiding whatever expression he might be wearing.

He shouldn't have mentioned Steve's absent scars earlier. Steve had made no mention of nightmares, but when he jerked awake this way at least once a night, to lie there breathing in gasps or staring motionless at the ceiling, he didn't have to. Bringing up the reason behind the dreams couldn't have been helpful.

Tony could think of nothing useful to offer, but he asked anyway. "Do you want to talk about it?"
And then, when Steve's only response was an abrupt shake of his head, "Is there anything I can-"

"No," Steve interrupted quietly. "It will stop eventually. It did last time." He rubbed at his face with one hand, then lay back again, settling against Tony's side. "So," he said, in a slightly louder and deliberately calm voice, "what is everyone doing right now?"

"Luke's team is fighting Doombots in Central Park," Tony told him. "And Jen is having trouble in LA."

"And DC?"

"Jan's group is still trying to argue for a temporary suspension of Registration. Sam and Redwing found a bomb on the roof of the Capitol Building, and they still haven't figured out how it got there. The Pentagon is pushing to have the President declare a state of national emergency, so they can deploy the National Guard wherever the next attack occurs, without waiting for individual state governors to do it..." He rambled on for a couple of minutes, and Steve listened silently. "I don't know what Agent Carter and Winter Soldier are doing," he admitted, finally. "He's got a direct communications uplink to Fury, outside the SHIELD network." He knew they must be Steve's main concern, but the only contact he'd had with them was the handful of updates he'd sent Agent Carter.

Steve rolled onto his stomach, wrapping an arm around Tony, face pressed against the crook of Tony's neck. It should have felt claustrophobic, especially since Steve was heavy enough that there was now no way for Tony to move. Instead, it was strangely comforting. And even if it hadn't been, Tony wasn't going to deny Steve something he wanted or needed, not when it was this easy to give to him. Possibly, he was never going to deny him anything, ever again.

Tony began to stroke Steve's hair absently. Summarizing all of the data streams he was handling was too much effort, so he picked one at random and started to recite it. "One of SHIELD's agents in Iraq says to tell Fury that he's found a possible Al-Qaida cell in Mosul, and that the Army is going to take it from there, and that he hates the Army, and that Fury is a bastard because he used to be in the Army, and he's glad Fury is back because the new guy had his head up his ass, and I don't think he realizes who he's talking to."

Steve made an amused sound, lips curving for a second. Tony continued, verbatim. "Hong Kong airport security intercepted a passenger with pneumonic plague trying to board a flight to mainland China, should we treat it as a possible bio-terrorism attempt? I'm telling her yes. She wants to know if she should pass the warning along to the Chinese government, or if she should continue to stay beneath their radar. Dugan wants a map with the Doombot attacks plotted on it, and oh, hell." He broke off, staring at the map he'd pulled up on one of the Extremis's mental "screens."

59th Street, 45th Street, the Financial district. The three major Doombot attacks formed a lopsided triangle, each one just outside the edges of... "They have Hell's Kitchen triangulated."
"Call Nelson and Murdock," Steve mumbled into Tony's chest. He sounded half-asleep, and not only because they usually pretended that they didn't all know exactly who Daredevil was.

Tony closed his eyes -- visual input was distracting -- and immersed himself completely in the stream of communications data again. Even with the onslaught of information pushing physical sensation to the background, he could still feel Steve's heavy weight on top of him. It more than made up for the headache.
*Two Doombots located on 8th and 41st, right outside the Port Authority. They appear to be deactivated. Orders, sir?*

*Follow standard operating procedure. Clear the area and approach with caution.*

*U.S. Army reports terrorist cell in Mosul successfully neutralized. Is there even a reason I’m stationed here? Can I get a transfer to Baghdad?*

*Tony? This is Jan. The Falcon and Sentry just intercepted an assassination attempt on Congressman Rosen. Rosen is fine. Unfortunately, Bob tossed the sniper through a wall, so between that and the secret service pumping him full of bullets, we never got a chance to find out who hired him. If it’s not the Red Skull, I’ll give you twenty bucks.*

*Jen here. We’ve finally managed to get things calmed down here. If you can call it calm. We’re essentially running on martial law now, and I hate to think how many lawsuits the city’s going to be facing when all this is wrapped up. We’re getting reports of smaller riots in Long Beach and Santa Anna, not to mention Texas and Utah. Hell, just turn on CNN. They’ve got a guy reporting from Brigham Young University right now.*

*Tell Fury we’ve cracked that damned neo-nazi group that’s got Chicago all riled up. They’ve been receiving funding from two bank accounts, one out of New York and one in the District of Columbia. Transmitting the account information now. Now we just need to get the Nazis to stop beating up anyone they think is a fucking mutie, and the rest of Chicago to stop beating up the Nazis.*

"… back. I got sandwiches."

*NYPD reports three Asian men found unconscious in Hell’s Kitchen, with injuries consistent with severe beatings. According to the officer on the scene, they all dropped dead as soon as they woke up. We’re sending in our ME now, but we don’t expect to find anything useful. The guy on the scene also said they all had those dragon tats.*

***And in international news, prominent British politician Terry Heck was discovered this morning to have been accepting bribes from what an MI-5 investigation is calling the largest neo-nazi group yet discovered on British soil. Heck, a recently elected member of Parliament, had just introduced legislation in the House of Commons calling for an English equivalent to America’s Superhuman Registration Act, legislation that is already being criticized as potentially violating British civil liberties.***

"Tony. Tony."

Tony blinked, the world abruptly coming back into focus. As sensation returned, so did the stabbing pain just above his left eye-socket. Steve was looking down at him with a worried expression, hands on Tony's shoulders, shaking him.

"Stop that," Tony said, batting Steve's hands away. At least his nose wasn’t bleeding this time. That would have upset Steve, and he didn’t need to worry about that; it wasn’t as if there was anything he could do.
Steve stood from where he had been crouched in front of Tony, and picked up a paper bag from the floor by his feet. "I brought food. And coffee," he said.

"Thank you," Tony replied, nodding and rolling his neck in an attempt to relieve the stiffness. The nagging headache he'd picked up three days ago had finally turned into a full blown migraine that morning, and food was the last thing he wanted at the moment. Coffee, on the other hand, would be heaven in a styrofoam cup.

Steve sat beside him on the cold concrete floor and handed him a sandwich wrapped in stiff white paper, and a cup of coffee. "I didn't see anyone," he said, pulling a second sandwich and cup of coffee out of the bag. "But that doesn't necessarily mean anything. And we can't take the chance that civilians might get hurt. Unfortunately, I think we're going to have to stay here for the night."

"The Mandarin's men are a bit less obvious than Doombots," Tony agreed, pulling the plastic lid off of the cup of coffee. "They could be almost anywhere. We're going to have to keep an eye out for them; the Mandarin recruits for insanity, but not stupidity."

"That's better than the Red Skull. The SS actively recruited for both."

Tony took a sip of the coffee. It tasted like something that had been made yesterday out of scorched coffee grounds and then left to sit overnight, but it was hot.

They had been heading towards the next safe house on the list Nick Fury had given Tony when Steve had spotted a tail a block behind them. They'd managed to lose him via a combination of rooftops and fire escapes, but while this had given Tony a new appreciation for Daredevil, it wouldn't keep them off the scent forever.

All the SHIELD-approved hotels had too many innocent bystanders. The Mandarin really liked innocent bystanders. Red Skull liked them even better, especially when they were Jewish, Black, Hispanic, or gay, and that was most of New York.

They'd ended up holed up in an empty warehouse owned by a subsidiary of Stark Enterprises. The roof leaked in four different places, and Tony had made a mental note to avoid storing anything in a Techtronics building until he'd had them all inspected and personally overseen their repair. There were three building code violations in this one alone.

Steve set his coffee cup down on the cement and pulled a face. "This is really horrible. I'm sorry."

"I've had worse." Reed Richards was one of only two people who'd ever been able to make Tony feel stupid, but he made what was possibly the worst coffee on earth. He always forgot the coffee was on and left it to burn, and then never seemed to notice that it had turned into blackened sludge. Even Ben Grimm refused to drink it.

Tony took another sip of his bad-but-still-better-than-Reed's coffee. Happy had made the best coffee he'd ever tasted. Just strong enough, never scorched, always served black, and he'd usually stuck around to talk while Tony drank it.

Coffee hadn't tasted as good since Happy had died.

He put the cup down on the floor next to him and picked up the sandwich. The pressure behind his eyes might have removed any desire he had to eat, but he probably needed the fuel.
Doom's border patrols have definitely spotted us. Carol's voice. We've avoided them thus far, but we're not going to be able to do it much longer. Tell Fury we're going to have to pull back away from the border, and if he wants to go poke the Latverians with sticks, he can come do it himself.

Sir, the Chinese are resistant to our offer of help. They say the Mandarin is a domestic threat, and if we continue to interfere with their military operations on their soil, they'll complain to the UN.

"Are your eyes supposed to turn black when you do that?" Steve. He had the concerned expression on again.

"They have?" Tony put down his half-eaten sandwich. "I guess that makes sense. Maya's test subject's did."

Steve frowned thoughtfully. "Maya Hansen?" he said, crumpling the paper that had been wrapped around his sandwich into a ball and dropping it into the empty bag. "I think I met her on the Helicarrier. She wanted to test my DNA."

Tony snorted. "That would be Maya."

"She reminded me a little bit of Reed Richards," Steve said. He settled back against the cinder block wall, apparently immune to the cold.

Tony nodded. "Well, yes, that's probably because they both have Asperger's syndrome," he said absently, half his attention on directing a data stream from the SHIELD agent in London to Nick Fury. "At least, Reed does, and I'm fairly sure that Maya does too." Reed Richards was the kind of genius that came along maybe once a century, but he was also close enough to borderline autistic that even Tony, to whom social skills other than "talking about machines" and "getting people to sleep with you" had only come with practice, couldn't help noticing. And Maya... thought that asking to test someone's DNA was an appropriate conversation starter.

Steve looked at him blankly. "They both have what?"

"Asperger's syndrome," Tony repeated. "It's a neurological disorder that essentially makes you Reed Richards." Steve raised an eyebrow at him. Right; he'd probably never heard of it. Tony only knew about the whole concept in the first place because Pepper and Happy had found an article on it in WiRED a couple of years ago and made him read it. "It's a milder form of autism," Tony explained, paraphrasing the article as best he could remember. "People with it have trouble with social interaction -- it's part of why Reed usually sounds like he's giving a lecture when he talks to people."

"I thought that was because he usually is?" Steve said, looking faintly amused.

"Well, there is that," Tony said. "But it's a little more complicated than that. People like Reed and Maya don't interpret emotions very well, their own or other people's, so they don't realize that other people are bored, or uncomfortable, or upset. And they're terrible with little social cues, like eye contact. You've probably noticed that Reed almost never looks anyone directly in the eye."

"Yes," Steve said, "because he usually has his head turned one-hundred and eighty degrees, while he fiddles with something on the other side of the room."

I met him once before he could do that," Tony said. "And he never looked anyone in the eye then, either." That had probably been the one piece of good advice Tiberius Stone had ever given him; always look people in the eye when you want something from them, and smile. "Anyway, because
of that, they can have trouble dealing with conflict. They can’t understand other people’s perspectives, because they’re so convinced that theirs is the correct, logical one, so they end up seeming stubborn or intransigent. The best known symptom, though, is a tendency to be almost obsessively interested in a single subject, sometimes to the exclusion of everything else." Maya’s obsession with the Extremis, for one. There was more -- the WiRED article had had a whole bullet-point list of symptoms, several of which Pepper had underlined in red ink, including "highly logical or technical thought patterns," and "micromanages employees endlessly?" which had been hand-written at the bottom of the list and underlined three times -- but Steve didn’t need a compete rundown.

Steve nodded. "Ah," he said, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Is there some test for it that you could take?"

Tony shoved at his shoulder, but not very hard; he’d missed that deadpan sense of humor. "They printed one in WiRED. Pepper made me take it.

"And?"

"And quizzes in magazines are meaningless. Ask any woman who reads *Cosmo,*"

"I don't know any women who read *Cosmo,*" Steve said.

"Jan was interviewed in it once, and Tigra was on the cover, back in the nineties," Tony said. The article she'd been featured in had been titled "Make love like an animal". He'd asked her once if she found that offensive. Tigra had only laughed, and declared that she *did* make love like an animal.

*These things are dead, Colonel Fury. Something's completely fried these Doombots' circuits, and they're designed to take all kinds of punishment. It would take a massive EMP to do this, and that would have knocked out every electronic device in a ten block radius.*

"Something's frying the circuits on Doombots in Hell's Kitchen," Tony told Steve. "Any ideas?"

"Doctor Strange claimed that Daredevil was the guardian of Hell's Kitchen, and that his presence acted as some kind of shield against Doom's interference." Steve stretched his legs out in front of him, leaning his head back against the wall.

"It would be nice if that shield worked against drug dealers, and the Kingpin," Tony said, surreptitiously pushing the half-eaten sandwich to the side and moving closer to Steve.

Steve snorted. "Magic is never that useful."

"I'm never going to say anything bad about magic again," Tony said. Magic had brought Steve back; any problems he might have had with it before seemed trivial now. "In fact, I may start sending Doom Christmas cards." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them; they’d managed to avoid really discussing Steve’s resurrection for the past week, and Steve was probably happier that way.

There was a long moment of silence, and then Steve said steadily, "I think he might have killed someone to bring me back." He stared straight ahead, eyes on the far wall. "Strange wouldn't tell me, but that kind of magic has got to have a price." His jaw tightened for a second, and he added, almost tentatively, "I just can't help but wonder what being brought back like that does to you."
Of course Steve would feel responsible for whatever Doom had done to bring him back -- being Steve, he couldn’t do anything less. If Doom had killed someone, Tony hoped Steve never had to know for sure; it wasn’t something he needed to carry with him, not when he’d had no hand in it. No matter what kind of magic Doom’s resurrection had required, Steve was utterly blameless.

Tony had never been as good a human being as Steve; he didn’t care what Doom had done. Steve was back, and that was all that mattered.

"My mother was Catholic," he started slowly, trying to think how to say this in a way that would reassure Steve, and put a stop to whatever pointless guilt he was carrying, "and she used to take me to church with her sometimes. And I think there's something in the Bible about how evil done in the name of God is still evil, and good done in the name of the Devil is still good." Actually, it had been in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, but it didn’t sound as meaningful coming from the mouth of a fictional lion. And knowing C.S. Lewis, it probably was in the Bible somewhere. "And you being back is good," he went on, laying a hand on Steve’s leg and squeezing gently. "Any price is going to fall on Doom."

Steve covered Tony’s hand with his own. "Maybe," he said, sounding a little less uncertain than he had before. "I’ll just have to make sure I’m worth it." He had his chin up, jaw squared, and even sitting on the floor in a dingy warehouse, managed to look noble. Steve Rogers: living recruitment poster.

Tony took a deep breath; it felt like the temperature had dropped ten degrees from that morning, and he could hear the faint patter of rain on the small, grated windows. The storm that had been threatening all day had obviously finally broken, and chances were it would rain all night. And the roof leaked.

The food and coffee hadn’t helped the headache; the unrelenting ache was draining, especially since it was so cold and damp. He hadn’t been really warm for days, not since before the headache had started.

Tony leaned sideways until his shoulder was resting against Steve's, leaning his weight against him. Steve was the one warm thing in the warehouse, heat radiating through his clothes.

"What are you doing?" Steve asked, blond eyebrows arched in amusement.

"It's cold," Tony said. "And you're warm." He didn't mention the migraine, anymore than he'd mentioned the nosebleed that he'd had that morning. The Extremis wasn't really meant for this kind of heavy, uninterrupted use. Steve didn’t need to know that, though. He shouldn't have to worry about Tony, especially not when he was still having nightmares.

"That's what coats are for," Steve said, slipping an arm behind Tony's back.

The warehouse, Tony decided, wasn’t really that bad after all. But the Techtronics maintenance people were still getting reprimanded.
It was raining, a cold, slow, fine, miserable rain that got into everything, and turned the city into a slick-pavemented mess. It was just past eleven in the morning, but the sky was dark enough that it might as well have been evening, dull chrome grey.

Luke rolled his neck, taking in the empty street and juggling the damp paper bags full of groceries -- and who the hell used paper bags anymore, Goddamn environmental waste that they were -- and slammed the door to the safe-house behind him. SHIELD safe-house, and it was just fuckin' surreally homely; an old two storey red brick building just on the Southern edge of Hell's Kitchen. Probably nice some time in the last century, but still with the illusion of class. It made Luke think of Matt Murdock.

The front hall was empty, lights flickering dimly under dusty shades. There were probably cameras under there too, but Luke didn't want to think about that too hard -- it was already too damn easy for Stark to spy on them, forced to keep in radio contact like they were.

Luke tossed a glare at the lamp, and shrugged out of his wet jacket, tossing it over the back of the rickety wooden chair by the door, shifting the bags of food from one arm to the other. They were too damn light, mostly filled with ramen, canned soup, and other things that could be made in a microwave in under ten minutes.

It was going to be a problem pretty soon. Even with SHIELD footing the bill, they were living on a pretty limited food supply; there wasn't a person in the house that could do more than boil water, and they couldn't risk take-out places. Every Chinese food joint within a ten mile radius of Hell's Kitchen knew Luke and Danny by face, and most knew them by name. And Stark had made sure that everyone knew exactly who Peter was. It would be too fucking easy for someone to make them, follow them home, or start a fight in a place with too many potential hostages.

Which meant that they'd spent the past week living on ramen, which wasn't bad -- it was a hell of a lot better than the microwaveable crap that had been around when Luke was a kid, but also about two hundred calories a serving. And not only were they all fighting hard, but Pete and Danny both needed truly freaky amounts of food for little guys.

He could hear voices from the kitchen -- Peter, Danny, MJ and Jess were all in there together. Cap and Stark obviously hadn't gotten there yet, since there was no way Peter would be that loudly, cheerfully obnoxious with Stark around.

They'd gotten the call to expect Cap and Stark some time this afternoon, that they needed a safe place to crash for the night. Reading between the lines, that probably meant they needed to get a few hours uninterrupted sleep, and maybe that Cap wanted to spend time with someone who wasn't a God damn traitor.

Luke shouldered open the heavy wooden door to the kitchen. "No one's gonna come give me a hand with these bags?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"I think you can handle the bag full of dehydrated noodles yourself," Jess said from where she was leaning against the counter, baby in her arms. "And if you can't then maybe you shouldn't be going shopping alone."

"Oh, I can handle it." Luke smirked, but handed the bags off to Peter who had jumped up when he had spoken. "I just figured that coming back with back with food for my family might earn me a warmer welcome," he said, giving Jessica a pointed once over. Even on the run, living out of bags, she looked gorgeous in jeans and a sweater, absentely rubbing the baby's back.
"You'll have to do better than ramen for that," Danny said, not bothering to get up from where he was sitting backwards in one of the kitchen's four mismatched wooden chairs.

"Ooh, but you got peanut butter!" Peter said happily, rummaging through the bags, pulling things out at random but not bothering to put them away. Luke rolled his eyes. If only everyone were so easily pleased.

"You know, I swear you didn't used to like peanut butter so much," MJ said, standing and starting to actually put things away. Peter just shrugged; he'd already pulled out a spoon.

"So we have any idea when Cap and Stark are getting here?" Luke asked. It would be good to check in with Cap again, but it made him all kinds of uncomfortable to be opening their home -- where his baby was -- to someone he wouldn't trust as far as Peter could throw him. Bad enough that he was their only contact, knew where they were, and was probably keeping an eye on them -- the fact that right now it was technically his job didn't make it any less disturbing.

"You were here when we got the message." Jessica propped the baby on one hip, and brushed a stray piece of hair out of her eyes. She kept swearing that she was going to cut it, but Luke was pretty sure that was just talk. Hoped it was just talk. "They said they'd be here some time this afternoon. Didn't exactly give a lot of detail."

"He sounds like a robot," Peter announced, then paused, cocking his head to one side in the way that made him look a little like a dog. A muffled banging noise drifted in from the hallway, and there was a moment of silence as they all looked at each other. "Speak of the devil," Peter said, grabbing his mask from where it had been lying on the counter. He held it for a long moment, before stuffing it into the back pocket of his jeans.

Somehow, answering the door became a group activity, as they all crowded down the hall, Luke leading the way, Danny and Peter on his heels, Jess and MJ right behind them.

Luke turned and glared, gesturing them back; presenting a united front was one thing, acting like a pack of junk yard dogs was another. Danny backed off a step. Peter didn't, but Luke hadn't really expected him to.

It was still raining; Cap's hair was slicked to his head in a fine blond mess, and as for Stark -- Luke didn't think the phrase 'drowned cat' had ever been more apt. Cap was wearing a long trench coat that looked like it had walked right out of one of the old, black and white movies that Jessica liked, and at some point, he'd obviously been unlucky enough to pass a taxi driver, because the cuffs of his jeans were soaked through. Stark looked, if possible, even wetter, and pretty much utterly miserable, which didn't bother Luke in the slightest. He was clutching at the metal briefcase that held his armor with a white knuckled grasp, and looked tired in the kind of way that Luke associated with him going crazy and trying to kill them all.

Luke stepped back to let them in. "You know, we could get you a fedora to go with that," he said, nodding at Cap's trench coat.

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Cap asked. He shrugged out of the trench coat and hung it, still dripping, on the coat rack. Beneath it, he was wearing a blue t-shirt that was identical to the one he used to wear around Stark Tower.

Stark's lips twitched for a second, in something that wasn't quite a smile. "Because you look like Sam
"Spade," he said.

"That's not the Bogart character I was going for," Cap said with a more genuine smile, looking at Stark, who was looking at the floor.

"Are you okay?" Peter demanded. "You don't have killer robots or something chasing after you, do you?" He addressed the question solely to Cap, not looking at Stark -- which was much more mature than sticking his tongue out at him and calling him a traitor, so Luke was glad for small favors.

"Not that I know of," Cap said.

"Yet," Stark interjected. "We don't have killer robots after us yet. Give it about twelve hours, and Red Skull's flunkies will probably be on our trail again, though. They're getting better at fire-walling the satellites, and there's a second player keeping tabs on SHIELD communications now, probably the Mandarin."

Peter made a disgusted face. "Oh, great, that's all we need."

"I thought your job was to stop them from doing that," Luke said. They had enough problems without Stark putting the Mandarin on their trail.

Cap shook his head. "Blocking Red Skull from using the satellites would tip our hand. He'd just destroy them, and we'd be left with no communications." He ran a hand over his hair, shedding water on the floor, looked at the puddle forming around his feet, and turned to Luke. "Is there anywhere I can change into dry clothes?"


"Thanks for putting us up for the night," Cap said, picking up his duffle bag again and heading towards the stairs. Halfway up, he halted, turning back to Stark, who was still standing in the hall, staring off into space with a zombified expression. "Tony, you're dripping on the floor."

Stark blinked, then nodded, and started after Cap. Cap waited until Stark had drawn even with him, then put a hand on his shoulder, and pushed him on ahead, up the stairs.

Cap watched him go, shaking his head. "It will be nice to talk to someone who doesn't break off in the middle of a sentence to mutter algorithms," he said, but there was a look on his face Luke recognized, half exasperation, half affection, and suddenly, he wondered exactly what Cap and Stark had been getting up to for the past week.

"So, he seems okay," MJ said as soon as Cap had disappeared up the stairs.

"I guess Stark hasn't actually done anything to him," Jessica added. On the one hand, it was a good thing that Cap had chosen to go keep an eye on Stark. Someone had to, and Cap ran a better chance of actually keeping him in line than anyone else. But it meant that Cap had been completely alone with the guy who'd been doing his flat best to see them all locked up for three months.

"That we can see." Peter said darkly, folding his arms across his chest. MJ rolled her eyes, but touched him on the arm, an expression of mixed amusement and concern on her face that was uncomfortably similar to the one Cap had given Stark not two minutes ago.

"If Stark's done anything, we'll find out about it," Danny said, bouncing slightly on his toes, the way
he did when he was thinking about fighting.

Luke nodded. "And if he has, we'll deal with it." He was still waiting for a decent explanation for why Cap wanted them to work with Stark's people now. He knew Cap and Stark had been in friends and all, but there had to be more to it than the vague explanation that had been handed to them at the SHIELD meeting. Luke knew he would have forgiven Danny just about anything, so long as he got a halfway decent explanation, but he'd need an explanation first. Not that Danny would ever have stabbed them in the back like Stark had.

"Of course we will," Jessica said. "We're the Avengers, right?" She looked at the others, then rolled her eyes. "Come on, let's go back to the kitchen. We don't need to stand here gawking. They can find their way down again without us watching."

"We should go put on dinner, anyway," Luke said. They had guests. Sort of. This wasn't actually their house, and he wasn't going to count Stark as a guest, but still.

"What are we going to make? The ramen, or the Kraft macaroni and cheese?" MJ asked just a little snidely.

Peter cocked his head thoughtfully. "I think we've still got a frozen pizza."

"It came out fine," Luke said, pushing open the kitchen door, and holding it so the others could enter. "You just don't like pizza." Danny had an irrational dislike of anything made with cheese that Luke could never quite understand, given the way he ate most everything else.

Cap reappeared about ten minutes later, right after they finally managed to get the pizza into the oven. "It's nice to be dry," he said, rolling his neck. "We were stuck in a warehouse last night, and the roof leaked."

"Where's Stark?" Danny asked, swiping a paper-towel over the shredded cheese that had spilled out onto the counter while they were arguing over the pizza directions.

"Hopefully in the shower," Cap said. "I practically had to push him into it. He's one of the smartest people I know, but sometimes he literally doesn't have the sense to come in out of the rain."


"I know." Cap's eyes went distant, and a muscle in his jaw tightened as he looked away from Luke for a moment.

The entire time they'd been fighting Stark's people during the Registration mess, Cap had been like a man possessed, hell-bent on resisting all that Big Brother shit whatever the cost. After he'd come back, he'd looked shell-shocked, which wasn't too damn surprising, considering that he'd been killed and then brought back to life by mister Phantom of the Opera himself. Now, he'd lost that dazed look, the one that made him look like he was a million miles away. He didn't like talking about Stark, that much was obvious, but he seemed more... settled, something like that. Danny would probably say that his chi was back in balance, or some kind of mystical kung fu shit.

The door swung open again, and Stark edged into the room, letting it fall shut again behind him. His
hair was still wet, but he was wearing different clothes and no longer dripping water on their floors, so presumably he'd listened to Cap and showered.

"Thanks for the ah, hot water," he said, not looking directly at any of them. "We don't have to stay long. Shouldn't, actually. The longer I'm in one place, the more accurately our skeletal friend can pinpoint me."

"If anything shows up, I'm sure Luke and Peter can handle it," Cap said, frowning slightly.

"If I feel like leaving anything for them," said Danny. Luke cuffed him on the back of the head, and Danny ducked away, fine blond hair standing on end where Luke had ruffled it.

Stark shook his head. "The Mandarin's people are better than Red Skull's. They're going to pick my trail up faster than he can."

"Don't worry," Jessica told him. "We'll kick you out when the ninjas show up."

"I like the ninjas," Danny objected. "They make better targets than the Doombots."

"I hate ninjas," Peter mumbled. He didn't say it loudly, because that would have interfered with his insistence on pretending that Stark wasn't there.

"They're more dangerous than Doombots," Stark said. "So like I said, thank you." His shoulders were drawn forward, just like they had been when he was wet and dripping, and he still hadn't met anyone's eyes. It was strangely un-Stark-like body language.

Cap took a long step over to Stark's side and touched him on the elbow. "Tony," he said quietly, "your eyes have gone black again."

They were, Luke realized. Black and opaque like that freaky oil from the X-Files. It was quite possibly the most disturbing thing he'd ever seen Stark do, and that counted the time his armor had gone berserk.

Stark blinked, the black-oil sheen draining from his eyes like water. "A bomb filled with sarin gas just went off in the Hong Kong airport. Things are a little hectic right now." He produced a cynical little smile, which immediately faltered. "At least China will agree to shut the airport down now. We've had to stop three cases of pneumonic plague from boarding flights to the mainland in the last two days alone. Amongst other things."

"Pneumonic plague?" Peter asked, raising an eyebrow.

"The Mandarin is a traditionalist." He stopped, expression going distant, and the creepy black stuff started to film over his eyes again.

Cap put a hand on his shoulder. "Do you want to go back upstairs, so you can be alone with the computers?" he asked, voice almost gentle.

"China is objecting to SHIELD's presence. They keep wanting to treat the Mandarin's attacks as purely domestic threats, with no international ramifications, and consider international organizations interfering in their affairs to be an insult." He paused, then continued. "I probably should. This has the potential to turn nasty." Stark turned towards Cap, leaning slightly into his touch. Cap tightened his grasp on Stark's shoulder for a moment, before letting his hand slide to the center of Stark's back,
shoving him lightly in the direction of the door.

Stark nodded absently, more at the room then at any of them, and wandered out the door, letting it swing heavily behind him. Cap watched him go.

Luke exchanged a look with Jessica. Something was definitely going on there.

Danny Rand was used to weirdness. By most people’s standards, his life was pretty damned unusual to begin with; being heir to Rand-Meachum, losing his parents at such an early age, growing up in Kun-Lun, defeating Shou Lao the Undying and gaining the power of the Iron Fist, the thing with Luke and Jessica, which worked better than it probably should have, and then there was that thing with the aliens... Rich orphans were unusual enough. Rich orphans who were highly trained living weapons were even thinner on the ground.

The past few months, though, had been strange even by his standards. First, being Daredevil, which was a whole different experience from being Iron Fist - different moves, different opponents, different public reactions. People were a lot more intimidated by Daredevil than they ever were by Iron Fist. Maybe it was the costume.

Then there was the goddamn Superhuman Registration Act, which had done a spectacular job of screwing up everyone’s lives, bar none. Even now that Cap was back, and they were all being forced to work together, you could still see how badly it had fucked things up.

At least now they got to hide from Doctor Doom, Red Skull, and the Mandarin instead of from assorted ex-friends and their own government. On the other hand, the cape-killers hadn't all been hell bent on destroying the city.

Three big-bads seemed to be fighting each other about as much as they were doing anything else, but even so, they were kept pretty busy trying to keep the streets safe. And even in one of SHIELD’s safe houses, someone had to be on watch all of the time.

Right now it was Danny’s turn. He liked the late watches; they were pretty much the only chance you had at getting any quiet time alone.

Tonight, though, Danny could see a line of light spilling out from under the heavy wooden door to the kitchen. Since there was a limited number of people it could be, Danny decided to investigate; at this hour, there was a pretty good chance that there would be coffee, if nothing else.

Surprisingly, it was Stark. He was sitting at the kitchen table, working on the laptop. He looked tired and scruffy, like they pretty much all did -- well, except for Peter, who looked tired, but surprisingly clean-shaven. Peter claimed that it was a spider-power, which had in no way stopped Luke from ribbing him about his inability to grow facial hair.

Little as he liked the guy, Danny was willing to admit that with the four-hour communications blackout rule in place, Stark did have a reason to look tired. Which was probably why he was eating the coffee straight out of the tin.
"Hey," Danny said, leaning against the door frame, "are you eating the instant coffee?"

Stark glanced up at him over the edge of the computer screen. "It’s the quickest way to get the caffeine into my bloodstream," he said, turning back to whatever he was working on, absentmindedly pushing back the cuff of the oversized red and blue flannel shirt he was wearing. He also had on a blue t-shirt that looked a lot like the one Cap had been wearing when they arrived, and Danny really didn’t want to think too hard about what that meant.

"Yeah, it is pretty good," Danny said. "Can I have some?"

Stark nodded, so Danny grabbed a spoon out of the canister on the counter, and took a seat opposite him. Stark pushed the coffee-tin halfway across the table, and Danny snagged it, pulling it closer. "It’s a good thing this is Folgers," he said, tapping his spoon against the rim of the tin. "You can’t do this with Maxwell House; it tastes like battery acid."

Stark glanced up at him again with a bemused expression. "I didn’t know that there was any difference."

"Well, it's not like it's common knowledge," Danny said, shrugging. He only knew because of late nights and stupid dares.

They lapsed into silence, eating the coffee grounds. Danny had never developed Peter’s need to fill any lull in the conversation with chatter, and Stark was obviously pretty distracted with all of the information he was processing.

After maybe fifteen minutes, the quiet was broken by a heavy creaking step that could only be Luke. "Are you eating the coffee again?" he asked from the doorway, mild irritation in his voice.

"Yes," Danny said, wrapping a protective hand around the tin; he wouldn’t put it past Luke to try and physically take it away. He'd done it before.

"It's the quickest way to get caffeinated," Stark said, reaching over to take another spoonful.

"If you really need caffeine that badly, Tony, you can heat the water to go with it," Cap said, stepping out from the shadows behind Luke. He was wearing grey sweatpants, but no shirt. Not that he needed one; he was Captain America.

Luke continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "And really, what if Peter saw you?" he asked from the doorway, mild irritation in his voice.

"It takes too long to heat the water. And we don't have the equipment to flash boil it," Stark told Cap.

"If Peter wanted coffee, I would share," Danny whispered to Luke, quietly picking up the coffee tin and moving to lean against the counter. He knew better than to get in the middle of arguments, particularly ones that probably counted as 'relationship arguments'.

"If you can't wait five minutes for water to boil, we probably need to have another talk about your relationship with addictive substances," Cap said, lips quirking.

Stark glared at him. "That was a low blow, Steve. And in any case, alcohol is a depressant, caffeine is a stimulant."
Cap folded his arms over his chest, frowning. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"It really isn't bad this way," Danny said to Luke, taking another spoonful. "I don’t know why you don’t like it. And really, it's not like it's any better with water." It was a running argument they'd had, as long as they'd known each other.

Luke rolled his eyes. "I don't know what's worse. You doing that, or Peter eating the peanut butter out of the jar."

"He probably needs the protein," Stark said absently.


"Protein," Stark held up one wrist up, hand flexed back. "Spider webs are made out of protein. Now that Peter produces them organically, he probably needs to eat a lot more. And that's a quick way to get a lot of it."

Made sense -- it was pretty much the same reason that Danny needed to eat after he used the Iron Fist. "See, I told you it was more efficient," he said, waving his spoon at Luke.

"Oh, for God's sakes," Luke said. He grabbed the tin of instant coffee with one large hand, and shoved Danny towards the door with the other. "Anyway, your watch is over, you don’t need to eat the coffee. You go sleep, I’ll keep an eye on things."

"You know, I needed that," Stark said from behind them.

"No. And Luke’s right," Cap said, and Danny heard the chair scrape against the kitchen’s linoleum floor as he pulled Stark up. "It’s time to get some sleep."

"I’ve got work to do," Stark protested as they passed Luke and Danny in the hall.

"Well, you won’t be able to do that very well if you don’t get some sleep," Cap said, shoving him down the hall.

There was a moment of silence, before Stark said quietly, "That’s why I was eating the instant coffee."

At that moment, the door to the room Peter and MJ were sharing swung open, and Peter stuck his head out. His hair was sticking up straight, and he was wearing nothing but a faded t-shirt and boxers. "Hey," he said, obviously half-asleep. "What’s going on out here?"

"Danny and Stark were being idiots," Luke told him. Danny glared. There was no call for that. It wasn't like Luke didn't have his own share of weird habits that Danny could tell people about.

"It’s really not that bad," he said again, crossing his arms over his chest. Not that anyone was listening to him.

"Tony’s going back to bed," Cap said, looking stern. He was good at that. It made him look all noble, instead of like a kindergarten teacher, the way it did most people.

Peter blinked. "I thought there was only a four hour communications blackout every day?" he asked, running one hand through his hair so that it stood up even more.
Cap turned to frown at Stark. "A four hour communications blackout every day?" he said slowly, voice even. It sounded like this was the first time he'd heard of it, which was surprising -- Cap hadn't been there when that decision had been made, but it seemed like something he ought to have heard about.

Stark just shrugged one shoulder in response. "We really can’t afford to have them go down for longer, especially right now. Red Skull is still hammering away at Washington, and the Mandarin’s got forces all over. And until Doctor Strange finds a way to stop him, we need to concentrate on keeping Doom away Hell’s Kitchen." He paused, then made an emphatic gesture with one hand. "If communications go down for more than about four hours, someone’s going to be missing vital data, and we’ll end up losing more people," he said, a muscle working in his jaw.

Cap’s eyes narrowed slightly. "You still should have said something."

"Um," Peter said, "right. I’m going to - right. Go back to bed. Goodnight!" He disappeared back into his room, closing the door quickly behind him.

"Yeah," Luke said, giving Danny another none-to-gentle shove towards their room. "It’s time for all people not playing dispatch or on watch to be in bed."

Cap and Stark continued to glare at each other for another minute. Finally, Stark dropped his eyes looking down at the floor. "I didn't actually sleep earlier, and I was going to declare the blackout soon anyway. I may as well do it now."

Cap nodded, a closed expression on his face. "I'll be in in a while. I'm going to go get a glass of milk."

"We only have whole milk, because the baby drinks it," Danny said.

"That's fine," Cap said, looking at him a little blankly.

Danny wrinkled his nose, but didn't say anything. He'd never really understood why people drank milk; there was something creepy about the fact that it was literally squeezed out of cows. Anyway, it made him feel kind of sick, even if Luke insisted that it was good for you.


Eyes still on Stark, Cap nodded, then turned, and walked into the kitchen.

Stark watched him go, shoulders slumped, face unreadable in the dim light. After a minute, he turned, and walked into the room that they were all pretending real hard he wasn't sharing with Cap.

It all made Danny incredibly glad that the worst thing he and Luke had to fight over was instant coffee.
Steve took a glass out of the cupboard, and set it on the white formica counter top with short, sharp motions. Yelling at Tony would have been pointless. It wasn’t as if Tony had much of a choice in this situation; he was right, long communications blackouts were a potential liability.

But Tony could still have found the time over the past week to mention it. He’d thought that they were done with Tony keeping things from him.

He should have noticed. In retrospect, it was awfully convenient that Tony had just happened to be awake every time Steve woke up from a nightmare. He’d been shaken up enough each time that he’d simply been glad to have Tony there, but he still should have noticed.

Luke shoved open the kitchen door and walked over to the refrigerator. He pulled a cardboard carton of milk out and handed it to Steve.

"So," he said, folding his arms across his chest. "What the hell is up with you and Stark?"

"What do you mean?" Steve asked. He filled the glass with milk, then set the carton on the counter. He took a single sip of the milk and set the glass down next to the carton. He hadn’t really wanted it; he’d just needed to not be alone in a room with Tony at that moment.

"You’re acting like the past three months never happened. Suddenly, the two of you are bestest buddies again, and after everything that’s gone down, that just ain’t right."

It probably did look odd to the others, Steve realized. "We have to put the past behind us now," he said. He and Tony had been such close friends for so long that once Steve had known the rationale behind his actions, known that he hadn’t simply sold out, and how much it had torn him up… Whatever Steve thought of Registration, once he understood Tony's motivations, he couldn’t stay angry with him anymore. He’d always had trouble staying angry with Tony once he understood why he’d done something. Adding sex into the mix didn’t change that. "We all need to work together, or we’re not going to be able to win this. And if we lose, we lose our chance to fix Registration." And Red Skull would overthrow the government, and Doom would take over the world, but that went without saying.

"Yeah," Luke said, staring at him unblinkingly, "but that still doesn't explain why you're sleeping with him."

"I was dead," Steve snapped. How did Luke know? "I can sleep with whoever I want." What went on between him and Tony was no one else’s business.

Except that, less than two months ago, he’d effectively been leading Luke in a war against Tony’s people, and given that, Luke did deserve some kind of explanation.

Luke raised an eyebrow, and Steve thought for a minute, trying to put into words something that he’d never really questioned before. "He doesn't treat me like a legend," he said finally. "He doesn't act like everything I say has to be true just because I'm Captain America." So many people did, even when they ought to have known better. He was only human, and he needed somebody to remind him of that. "He makes me defend my point of view, which is good even when he's wrong, because otherwise I'd still be stuck in 1945. Even when everything was falling apart, he was still the only person I could really talk to about anything." Even when things had been at their worst, it had taken a constant effort to remember that he couldn’t simply pick up the phone and call Tony any time he needed someone. The one time Tony had called him, he’d never even considered not answering until he already had. "I thought everything was over between us, and now that we've got a second chance,
I'm going to do things right."

This thing with Tony… even before that first night on the Helicarrier, Tony had been the most important relationship in his life. If he decided that he wanted to stop being Captain America tomorrow -- not that he ever would, but if he did -- Tony was the one person he knew wouldn’t look at him any differently.

From the very start, he’d never seen the helmet or the metal faceplate when he looked at Tony. Even when he’d still only known him as Iron Man, he’d always seen a man, and never a walking suit of armor. And Tony had always been able to see through his mask.

He wasn’t going to lose that again.

Luke stared at him, then pulled a face. "Whatever. Guess there’s no accounting for taste."

"So," Steve asked hesitantly, rubbing at the back of his neck and staring at the patch of linoleum next to Luke’s feet. "How did you…"

"Oh, come on. Man, you’re sharing a room with him and he’s wearing your clothing. Peter and MJ aren’t that obvious."

Oh. Right. Tony was wearing his shirts. Steve hadn’t really given it much thought, beyond noting the obvious -- that Tony looked good in blue -- but now that Luke had pointed it out, it was a fairly clear give away.

A week ago, Steve had wanted to sink through the Helicarrier’s conference table at the mere thought that anyone in the room might realize he’d had sex with Tony. Now that someone actually had figured it out, he found that he didn’t really care. It was oddly and inexplicably satisfying to think that people could tell that Tony belonged with him.

His anger at Tony had dissipated while he talked to Luke. Steve poured the rest of his milk down the drain and set the glass in the sink. "It’s late," he said. "I’m… going back to… bed." Where Tony was. He could feel a faint rush of heat in his face and ears. Maybe he wasn’t quite as comfortable with people knowing as he’d thought.

"Yeah, have fun with that," Luke said.

Steve turned to walk out of the kitchen. As he opened the heavy, wooden door, Luke added, "The giant bite mark on Stark’s neck ain’t all that inconspicuous, either."

Steve could feel the back of his own neck flushing red. He didn’t actually flee the kitchen, but he did walk back to the room he and Tony were sharing very quickly.

He really should have noticed that Tony wasn’t sleeping. Tony should have told him, but considering that they’d been sharing a bed for a week, Steve himself had seriously dropped the ball.

Tony had been there for him, offering silent support and comfort after the nightmares. Steve had been leaning on him; how was he supposed to help fix whatever was wrong with Tony if Tony wasn’t willing to do the same?

The light in their room was still on, seeping out under the bottom of the door. Tony was already in bed, lying on top of the blanket with his back to the door.
Steve crossed the room and sat down on the edge of the bed beside Tony, resting one hand on his shoulder. He’d told Tony to go to bed, yes, but he hadn’t wanted him to fall asleep thinking Steve was still angry with him. Steve wasn’t foolish enough to think that the fact that they were sleeping together was going to stop them from having real things to argue over -- but fighting over something Tony couldn’t help wasn’t worth it.

Tony stirred, then rolled over, resting his head on Steve’s knee. He blinked up at him, eyes not quite focused. "And you were worried coffee would keep me up," he mumbled, bringing one hand up to rest on Steve’s leg, fingers curling loosely into the fabric of Steve’s sweatpants.

Steve laid a hand on Tony’s head, lacing his fingers through the black strands of his hair, and Tony shifted slightly, turning into Steve’s touch. After a few moments, his eyes slid shut and his breathing evened out.

Arguing wasn’t the same as fighting; it kept things interesting. And he could get used to moments like this.

If they all made it out of this, Steve could see himself getting into a lifetime’s worth of stupid arguments over coffee with Tony. It wasn’t an unappealing thought.
Chapter 10

After a week of steady rain, the Potomac was running high, the water flat and grey outside the car's window. Half the drivers on the road were stubbornly ignoring the local traffic law and hadn't bothered to turn on their headlights. Sharon had flicked her own on moments after the first drop of water had hit the windshield; with Winter Soldier and his sniper rifle in the passenger seat, getting pulled over by an over-zealous traffic cop was definitely not in her plans.

She and James had finally tracked down the Red Skull's lair. After a week of futility trying to trace him through post office drop boxes and bank accounts opened under false names, Sharon had looked up the ownership of all the addresses in Wheeler's data files in various fire insurance company's records, and had found an apartment building on the Upper East Side of Manhattan right off of Central Park owned by a small company that was actually a front for the Kronas Corporation. James had theorized that Aleksander Lukin had housed a mistress there, or possibly a kept man.

If he had, Sharon doubted anyone would ever hear from her again. She had probably been eliminated as soon as the Red Skull set up housekeeping in Lukin's body.

The blue SUV in front and to the right of them abruptly swerved into their lane, without bothering to put on its turn signals. Sharon slammed on the brakes, cursing.

James raised his eyebrows. "You want me to shoot their tires out for you?" He patted the barrel of his rifle suggestively.

"Don't bother," Sharon said. "This is DC. The other drivers probably all have assault rifles too."

"This is a sniper rifle," James corrected. He returned to staring out the window, watching the other cars suspiciously. It was like having a half-feral Doberman in the front seat, Sharon thought with amusement.

He had wanted to drive. She had argued that he didn't have a valid driver's license, and that most of the streets in DC had undergone construction since the last time he'd been through. Both of them had avoided mentioning what they were about to go and do.

It had a feeling of finality to it. Sharon had devoted the past two months of her life to tracking Red Skull down with the sole intent of killing him, and by tomorrow, it would all be over one way or another.

Sharon flicked her own turn signal on and made the turn onto Independence Avenue. They were on a tight schedule -- God knew how long Red Skull would stick around at Lukin's old home-away-from-home -- but they needed backup before they could go in. A simple in-and-out assassination attempt wouldn't work this time; it had failed before, and now, more than ever, they needed to take the Red Skull's organization down with him.

She didn't think it would be difficult to convince Sam Wilson to help them. He'd been mildly horrified by what she and the Winter Soldier had done to Dr. Faustus and Agent Taylor, but there could be no question that Red Skull deserved to be terminated with extreme prejudice.

Once they had Sam, they had about three hours to get back to New York and contact Steve. Even
with the car in aerial mode, the timing was tricky, but she owed it to Steve to give him the chance to face the Skull down himself. She owed a lot of things to Steve, but this one… This one, she could actually make good on.

James remained silent beside her, his right hand absently caressing the rifle barrel. He was looking forward to ending all this, too, she knew.

"Thank you, James," Sharon said. She kept her eyes on the road, waiting for the light at the next intersection to turn green. She wasn't completely sure what she was thanking him for (the sex? Watching her back? A shoulder to cry on?) but she wanted to say it before they were no longer alone. "For being here," she added.

James was silent for a moment, long enough that she thought he wasn't going to respond, then, "Do you know, you're the first person in sixty years who's called me by name?"

That didn't sound quite right. Sharon shook her head, and turned onto 1st. Street. "Steve calls you-"

"Bucky," he interrupted. "I'm not Bucky anymore. I don't mind that he still calls me that; I can be Bucky for him, but that's not who I am anymore, and I haven't been for a long time."

Sharon had had her own experiences with mind-control and undercover-work, but even so, she could only imagine what five decades spent being the Winter Soldier did to you. There probably wasn't any going back after something like that, just as there was no going back to what she and Steve had had before that hideous afternoon on the courthouse steps.

She looped smoothly around the statue of President Grant and into the federal employee parking lot, then put on the brake. "We're here," she said. "Help me find a spot to park."

---

The man was good; ninja-trained, with the kind of lightning-fast, fluid moves Steve had come to associate with Iron Fist and Daredevil. Steve threw himself backwards, the foot that had been flying toward his face flashing harmlessly over his head. He planted his right hand on the ground for balance -- left hand still holding the pizza he’d been carrying -- and kicked up with both feet, catching the ninja squarely in the solar plexus. Still off-balance from the half-completed kick, the ninja doubled over, and Steve bounced to his feet and slugged him on the jaw.

The ninja went down in a crumpled heap.

And he hadn’t even dropped the pizza.

Steve looked up from the unconscious ninja, finally taking in the buildings around him. They were only a block away from the SHIELD-operated bed and breakfast-cum-safehouse. If one of the Mandarin’s agents was this close, it was entirely possible that he’d already been there.

Stupid, so stupid. He should have made Tony come with him, should never have left him alone.

He didn’t quite run back to the bed and breakfast -- running would have been obvious -- but Steve
walked as quickly as he dared. If Tony had been fully immersed in the Extremis data, he wouldn’t have noticed an entire platoon of ninjas coming through the door.

Once inside the building, Steve ran flat out, taking the steps up to the third floor three at a time. He threw the door open so hard it rebounded off the wall with a crash, and skidded to a stop.

Tony was sitting at the table against the far wall, in exactly the same position he’d been in twenty minutes ago. Not gone. Not lying on the floor with his throat cut.

Tony jerked at the noise and jumped to his feet, swinging around to face the door, both hands up as if to blast Steve with the repulsor gauntlets he wasn’t wearing. He relaxed when he saw Steve, hands falling back to his sides. "What is it?" he asked, voice tense. "Are you all right?"

"I, ah…" Suddenly deprived of an emergency, Steve found himself stumbling to explain. He could still feel his pulse racing, and the possibility of disaster still seemed to close to reality. "I ran into one of the Mandarin’s men about a block from here. I’m fine, though. I even saved the pizza." He held the slightly crushed pizza box up for Tony’s inspection.

"The Mandarin’s people are here?" Tony’s face had gone blank, all visible emotion draining out of it. "We have to leave, now." He was already moving to close his laptop, reaching for its case.

Steve set the pizza on the table and grabbed him by the wrist, halting the motion. "There was only one," he said, "and trust me, he’s not going to be getting up for a while. We can call in SHIELD to deal with him."

"No."

"I don’t understand. Where there’s one of the Mandarin’s people, there are a dozen. Like cockroaches. That’s the way he operates. We need to get out of here."

"We don’t know for sure that there are any others around," Steve said. "If there are, and we rush out into the street, it’s only going to make us obvious targets."

"You’re right." Tony’s lips twitched for a second, in a familiar self-deprecating smile. "There’s a DOD spy satellite right overhead. I’ll scan the surrounding buildings for life signs." His eyes swirled to black, and his face went blank again.

No matter how many times Steve saw that, it never got any less disturbing.

But it got more disturbing a moment later, when a thin line of blood began to trickle out of the left side of Tony’s nose.

Steve grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, hard. "Stop it!" he snapped. Whatever Tony was doing, there was obviously something wrong.

Tony blinked, eyes suddenly blue again. "What?" He shrugged away from Steve, and put a hand to his face. When he pulled it away, the tips of his fingers were smeared with blood. "Oh," he said, staring at his hand a little dazedly. "That happens sometimes. Maya says it’s like a computer’s processor overheating." He paused, eyes going distant again, and frowned slightly, as if concentrating on something far away. "No life signs in the immediate vicinity. We’re safe for now, but we have to move." He swayed on his feet, and Steve grabbed his arms again, steadying him.

"We’re not going anywhere," Steve said flatly. He was not going to argue about this, not when Tony
could barely stand. "We both need to eat, and you need sleep, or you're going to be dead weight." If they moved out now, with Tony in this kind of shape, and they ran into trouble, Steve couldn’t guarantee that he’d be able to get them out of it intact.

Tony started to protest, and Steve shoved him back a step and down until he was sitting on the edge of the bed.

"I'm fine," Tony said wearily. He rubbed at the blood on the lower half of his face with the back of one hand, succeeding only in smearing it further. "I can handle it. We can’t afford to let them catch us; our entire communications network will go down."

Even for Tony, who was unfortunately good at fighting injured, this was not 'fine.' "It doesn't help anyone, if you get yourself killed!" Steve yelled. He could hear his voice increasing in volume as he went, and his fists itched with the desire to hit something. But there was nothing in the room to hit, and that wouldn’t have helped anything, anyway.

Tony glared up at him, eyes suddenly narrow and angry. "Don't you think I know that?" he demanded. "What do you think kept me going the past six weeks?"

"Oh, I don’t know. Caffeine and stupidity?" His frustration with Tony’s refusal to take care of himself had been building since that night at the New Avengers’ safehouse, when he’d found out about the four-hours-of-sleep-a-night rule. It was only a matter of time before Tony burned himself out from exhaustion, and now it was obvious that using the Extremis was hurting him, and he still refused to rest.

"It was that or alcohol, and I think I did a halfway decent job!" Now Tony was half-shouting as well. "I had to keep things running; that was all that mattered." He dropped his eyes and said, more quietly, "I had to make things work."

There was nothing Steve could think of to say to that -- nothing that would help, anyway. He closed his eyes for a second, and forced his voice to calmness. "If I start packing now, will you eat the damn pizza and sleep for a couple of hours?"

Tony sighed, shoulders slumping. "All right." He stood up and vanished into the bathroom, returning a few moments later with the blood washed away.

Fifteen minutes later, he was lying utterly motionless on top of the bed’s garish floral coverlet, one arm thrown over his eyes. There were still traces of blood under his fingernails.

Steve thrust the last spare shirt into his knapsack -- Tony’s shirt, but at this point their clothes were so thoroughly mixed up that it wasn’t worth the effort to separate them out -- and sat down on the bed next to him. The past week, since leaving the New Avengers’ safehouse, had been tense. They’d been staying in abandoned buildings and the odd SHIELD-owned establishment, like this one. They didn’t dare use Tony’s credit card, so Tony had resorted to using the Extremis to hack ATM machines and embezzle from his own bank accounts.

Things were still a mess in California and the Midwest, some guy in DC had tried to shoot Sam, and they hadn’t heard from Sharon and Bucky in a week. And Tony was apparently hell-bent on working himself to death.

Tony didn’t move for a full four hours, asleep too deeply to even twitch. When the time-limit was up, he sat up and rubbed at his eyes, groaning.
Steve stood, and picked up the knapsack and duffle bag, setting them on the end of the bed to show that he'd fulfilled his end of the bargain.

Tony swung his legs over the side of the bed, and sat there for a second with his head in his hands. Steve moved to stand in front of him, intending to pull Tony to his feet; instead, Tony swayed forward and rested his head against Steve’s hip. "I’m sorry," he said, eyes closed. "The past few weeks have… not been good. And I haven’t been handling things well." His voice was low and slightly hoarse from interrupted sleep.

These situations wouldn’t be half so frustrating if Tony would only tell him about them up front. Tony’s physical condition was important tactical information right now, not something to be kept a secret. But then, Tony had always done that, had spent years keeping his heart condition from everyone. If he were being honest with himself, Steve was really more worried than angry.

He brought his hand up and curled it around the back of Tony’s neck. "Come on," Steve said, squeezing gently. "Let’s move out."

If one more Congressional staffer or Senate page gave Sam the hairy eyeball, he was going to start shouting.

Even when he was conservatively attired in suit and tie, with Redwing exiled to the roof and window ledges outside, politicians and lobbyists still edged over to the side of the hallway when they saw him coming.

It could have been his 24/7 Secret Service "shadows" ("we're here for your protection, Mr. Wilson, not to watchdog you"); it could have been because of the potshot somebody had taken at him and Jan a few days ago; at night, in most parts of DC, it would have been because of the color of his skin. If he'd been asked to place a bet, though, Sam would have put money on the words "unregistered superhuman."

Sam resisted the impulse to glare at the woman in a business suit currently giving him an unnecessarily wide berth and continued on his way to the door. Redwing had spotted a familiar red convertible illegally parked in the Hill’s employee parking lot, and Sharon Carter’s arrival was the perfect excuse to duck out of the congressional committee hearing he and Jan had been trapped in for hours.

Jan had displayed charts demonstrating that crime rates in the greater New York metropolitan area had risen dramatically over the past two months, reminded the committee that the Registration Act had been used to jail American citizens without trial while the Initiative put convicted criminals like Bullseye back on the street, and delicately avoided bringing up the fact that New York was currently under attack by multiple supervillains and needed all the superpowered help it could get. Sam had spoken when spoken too, and tried his best too look non-threatening and law-abiding and, incidentally, like an obvious member of an ethnic minority who was on the verge of having his civil rights violated.

The committee members had frowned, scribbled things down on their PDAs, and asked Jan if she
was sure the statistic weren’t just a fluke, if the system didn’t just need to have some of the kinks worked out. Only the two New York representatives bothered to ask Sam any questions. Congressman Rosen, a Democrat well-known for opposing the Iraq war, had frowned thoughtfully and asked both Sam and Jan if, in their opinion, the Initiative could be considered a military draft for superhumans.

Congressman Dickstein, Republican, had had more personal questions (“Mr. Wilson. I understand that you were given you powers by a terrorist organization, is that true?” "Ms. Van Dyne, I believe your ex-husband is bipolar, correct?”). Sam had smiled with gritted teeth, answered politely, and mentally envisioned what Dickstein would look like after pigeons had pecked out his eyes. His disdain for superheroes was anything but subtle, and given that he’d been one of William Stryker’s old drinking buddies, it had to be more than just "Compassionate Conservative" disgust at people taking the law into their own hands.

You would think that preventing a terrorist attack on the Capitol Building would buy you some kind of credit, but apparently, gratitude was a foreign emotion to career politicians. At least knocking Rosen out of the way of a bullet seemed to have won them his willingness to listen to them, if nothing else.

Through Redwing’s eyes, he could see Sharon and Winter Soldier walking up the white stone steps of the Capitol Building, the two of them shoulder-to-shoulder and moving like people on a mission.

Sam met them in the front lobby, on the far side of the security station, so that they could avoid the fun of trying to get Winter Soldier through the metal detectors. Sharon was in full SHIELD field gear, and Winter Soldier’s black motorcycle jacket, though it covered his cybernetic arm, did not exactly blend in with the crowd; the two of them stood out like sore thumbs against the polished marble backdrop.

"Sharon," Sam started, once he was close enough to speak without being overheard, "I thought Fury wanted you below the radar." The two of them had been in a communications blackout for the past five days, save for Sharon’s daily check in via the SHIELD network.

"We’ve found him," Sharon said, without preamble. "He’s in an apartment in New York City, on the Upper East Side."

"You found Red Skull?" Sam dropped his voice even lower, darting an instinctive glance at the closest security guard. The Skull had to have at least one member of the Capitol Hill security on his payroll, or that packet of C4 could never have made it onto the roof.

She nodded, smiling grimly. "And we know where he’s been getting his information. It turns out the Honorable Joe Dickstein was in need of some extra campaign funding."

"Dickstein?" For a moment, Sam felt almost ill. He’d just spent four hours sitting in a conference room with the man, playing friendly little superhuman for him. "I was just in a meeting with him. If I’d known…" If he’d known, he would have been hard pressed to keep from reaching across the table and killing him. He hadn’t needed the constantly repeated news footage to burn the sight of Steve taking that bullet into his memory -- it had been seared into his brain from the instant he saw his friend jerk with the impact and collapse, leaving a trail of blood across the courthouse’s white marble steps.

There were damn few people Sam Wilson truly hated, but the Red Skull was one of them, and Dickstein had just volunteered to be number two on his list.
It’s not too late to go back upstairs and kill him,” Winter Soldier offered.

"James," Sharon said warningly. Winter Soldier shrugged, and she went on, "Red Skull’s going to have security and minions coming out his ears. We can’t take him on without backup. Are you in?"

In answer, Sam reached up and turned on his Avengers communicator. "Jan," he said, "give the congressmen my regrets. I’m not going to be able to make it back to the meeting."

Tonight’s base of operations was nicer than the warehouse, but only just.

With the Mandarin’s people so close on their trail, even SHIELD-run hotels had become too much of a risk. So Tony had located an abandoned apartment building -- Steve wasn’t sure exactly what computer-based alchemy he’d used to find an empty apartment building in Chelsea -- and they’d broken in.

"I still think we shouldn’t be here," Steve said. He flicked the light switch up and down, getting no response.

"Relax. I ran the address; the whole building’s owned by a subsidiary of Rand-Meachum." Tony smirked, and ran a hand through his hair, leaving half of it sticking up. "I think Iron Fist owns about ten percent of the real estate in New York."

The main room had no furniture, and the bare bulb in the middle of the ceiling persistently refused to light up; the electricity had probably been turned off. At least the water still worked.

Steve abandoned the useless light switch and circled the room, peering out of the grime-streaked windows. There was an old iron fire escape bolted to the back wall of the building, and he made a mental note to keep an eye on that window. It would be easier to break in there than to come through the door.

"I hope he doesn’t rent these places out. There were tenements in the thirties in better shape than this."

Tony set his laptop case and briefcase down in a corner and straightened, arching his back. "It’s slated to be part of an urban renewal project." He started for the hallway, rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his hand, and added, "I just hope there’s a bed."

Steve frowned. He’d seen Tony get by on even less sleep than he was getting now, with no visible ill effects. He shouldn’t be this tired all the time, even with the constant mental exertion of running SHIELD’s communications. The Extremis was doing something to him, somehow.

He followed Tony down the narrow hallway into the bedroom, which was every bit as bare as the main room, save for a single, metal-framed bed. Thank god it had a sheet, and one that, as far as Steve could tell in the pale glow of the streetlight flooding through the window, looked clean.

Tony sat heavily on the edge of the bed and buried his face in his hands for a moment. "Right," he
mumbled. "Communications blackout starts now."

Steve sat down next to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. Tony had been making an obvious effort to hold things together since their not-quite-shouting match the previous night, but Steve had seen him grey-faced and barely able to stay on his feet, blood coming out of his nose, and he wasn’t fooled. If it were up to Steve, Tony would have stopped using the Extremis yesterday, but it wasn’t as if either of them had a choice in the matter. "Are you-" he started.

Tony lifted his head from his hands and frowned at Steve. "Don't look at me like that." He reached up to curve one hand around the side of Steve's face, rubbing circles over the pulse point just below Steve's jaw. "I'm fine." In the dimly lit room, Tony's eyes were dark grey -- under brighter light, they were blue, almost startling against all that black hair.

Tony leaned forward, brushing his lips against Steve's. It was an obvious ploy to distract him, but Steve went along with it anyway.

He put a hand on the back of Tony's head, holding him in place, and closed his eyes, immersing himself in the kiss. This close, Tony was almost fever-warm, and Steve could feel the faint scratch of short hair on his cheek and against his palm. Tony made a small sound in the back of his throat, mouth opening, and shifted his weight forward so that he was halfway in Steve's lap, one hand resting against Steve's side, fingers just dipping below the waistband of his jeans.

In response, Steve moved a hand under Tony's shirt, sliding his palm up Tony's spine, from the dip at the small of his back to between his shoulder blades. After several moments, they broke apart, and Tony smirked, staring at Steve through his ridiculously long eyelashes.

Well, if Tony wanted a distraction… Steve planted his hand against the center of Tony's chest and shoved him flat onto the bed, then crawled on top of him to continue the kiss.

When he pulled back, Tony was gazing up at him with heavy-lidded eyes, still smiling. His hair was even more disheveled than it had been a few minutes ago, the loose pieces over his forehead sticking up every which way.

"Your hair is sticking up," Steve informed him, leaning on one elbow to look down at Tony.

Tony made a little half-laughing sound, and closed his eyes. "It does that. It did it even more back when I used to wear it shorter."

"I liked that hair," Steve said, grinning. He flicked at one of the pieces of hair hanging over Tony's forehead. "It always looked so goofy when you took your helmet off."

Tony made a contented humming noise, not opening his eyes.

"Tony?"

Silence. "Should I be insulted?" Steve asked. "I didn't realize my company was so boring." On the other hand, with only four hours to sleep, Tony needed all the rest he could get.

Even sleeping, Tony looked tired. There was enough light coming through the window for Steve to see the dark circles under his eyes, and he was definitely leaner than normal, the hard lines of collarbones and cheekbones that had been evident two weeks ago still sharply visible.
The past two weeks hadn't been easy on Tony, but he'd looked like this well before that. He'd been visibly worn down when Steve had come back, though that obviously owed more than a little to Steve's temporary death. But now that he thought about it, Tony hadn't looked that good during the fight over Registration, either. Even before Stamford, he'd had a careworn look -- not the sheer physical exhaustion of the past few days, but a ground down kind of weariness that went bone deep.

How long had Tony been doing this to himself? Since the Extremis? Since the Avengers had broken up? Before that?

He couldn't be sure, and that in itself said something. It was his responsibility to know when there was something wrong with one of his teammates, and he had no excuse for not noticing when there was something wrong with one of his friends.

Back when they had first formed the Avengers, Tony had occasionally been visibly unsteady on his feet after a fight. Steve hadn't known what was going on at the time, but after they'd all learned the truth about Iron Man's identity, he and Thor had figured out that Tony was letting his chestplate -- the one that kept his damaged heart beating -- run out of power. He'd done the same thing more than once when he'd had a mechanical heart. And even when he hadn't had anything specifically wrong with him, Tony had still made a habit of pushing his body beyond its limits. When the Avengers had still been a functional team, Steve had once seen him pass out in the middle of a fight because he'd gone into it with internal injuries.

Taken on their own, all of those instances had been worrisome, but Steve never noticed a pattern until now. He had thought Tony wasn't taking care of himself because he was preoccupied with the Extremis, and before that, because of what had happened to him, but clearly he'd just been failing to take care of himself for years.

How could somebody as smart as Tony was be so maddeningly stupid? And why hadn't anyone noticed this ages ago?

Steve ran a hand down Tony's chest, then rolled off of him. He sat beside Tony with his back against the wall, where he could keep an eye on the window, and the fire escape beyond it.

Tony shifted in his sleep, head rolling to the side to rest against Steve's hip, and Steve reached out, without taking his eyes off the fire escape, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Once this mission was over, and Tony could stop playing human switchboard, they were going to talk about this, and it was going to stop.
Chapter 11

It was the combination of the explosion and someone slamming into him full force that jerked Tony back to the blinding brightness of the day, out of the rushing dark streams of data from the Extremis.

Steve was gone.

He was surrounded by a crowd of panicked people, all running from an unknown threat, and he couldn't see Steve anywhere.

Tony turned, setting his feet against the throng of people, trying to stay in one place and not get swept along. Steve had been there a moment ago; even through the Extremis, he had been aware of the hand on his arm, guiding him. And then something had happened -- there had been an explosion, that was all Tony knew -- and Steve was gone.

He must have lost Steve in the crush, gotten separated by the crowd. Tony's fingers tightened on the handle of his briefcase as he cast about, trying to find some clue as to what had happened, and where he was. He and Steve had been planning to take a water taxi across the river, from Pier 11 down by Battery City park, over to the Fulton Ferry landing in Brooklyn; Steve had thought that maybe going into a different borough would give them a little more breathing room, give them some time to regroup, without the Mandarin quite so close on their trail. Trains were too much of a risk, but water taxis were smaller, and didn't carry the innate danger of closed spaces.

But something had happened, and Steve was gone.

Tony reached out, grabbing onto the solid bulk of a lamppost and braced himself, scanning the crowd for fair hair and broad shoulders. Now that he wasn't being pulled along, he could see the FDR overpass, and beyond it, the rising spindles of the four masts of the Peking, and the smell of fish on the breeze, combined with the stronger scent of smoke and ash. They were right on the water, by the historic district of the South Street Seaport.

He felt the vibrations of the shockwave traveling through the pavement and the lamppost a split second before he heard the second explosion.

Beyond the overpass, the masts of the Peking were engulfed in flame, and the acrid smell of smoke intensified. Around him, the pitch of the terror-stricken crowd increased, as people began to shove each other, desperately trying to get away from whatever was causing these explosions, and the fire that had doubtlessly already spread to the wooden docks.

Steve was somewhere in the middle of all of that.

Or, Tony thought, a deep, pervasive chill settling into his bones, he'd been caught in that second blast.

He'd spent the past two weeks half-convinced that all of this was a dream, sure that he'd wake up any moment to find himself slumped over his desk or a lab bench, still trying to run a military organization he wasn't qualified to run, Steve still dead.

And now Steve was gone. Tony had lost him somewhere in the crowd, and he was gone, and he could be dead once again, for all Tony knew.
Tony let go of the lamppost and shoved his way back into the crowd. Steve had to be somewhere close by; he’d been right next to Tony only seconds ago. An Indian woman ran full tilt into him, knocking him back a step, and then a teenager in a Yankees cap stumbled against him, almost falling.

Tony grabbed the kid by the elbow, straightening him, and shoved him forward. "Get out of here; the fire's going to spread."

The kid ran. Tony staggered forward a step as yet another person ran into him from behind. It would be much easier to search from the air. In the armor, he could find Steve in moments.

"What's going on?"

Tony blinked. Peter had appeared in front of him, in costume. He must have dropped down from one of the buildings -- they were too low for him to swing from.

"Have you seen Steve?" he asked, trying not to sound frantic. He wasn't sure he entirely succeeded.

"What? No. He's supposed to be with you. We heard the explosions. Do you know what-"

"I don't know." Tony shifted his grip on his briefcase so that he was holding it against his chest. In this crowd, it would be too easy for it to get torn away. "The first explosion went off, and when I turned around, he was gone."

A small child of indeterminate gender toddled out of the crowd and seized hold of one of Peter's legs. "I want my Mommy!" it wailed.

Peter swung the kid up into his arms. "We'll find her, okay."

The kid sniffled and wiped its nose on Peter's shoulder, unfazed by his black mask. "I want my Mommy."

"What does your mommy look like?" Tony cut in, making an effort to keep his voice calm. He didn't want to scare the toddler.

As if on cue, a blonde woman burst out of the crowd, snatched the child out of Peter's arms, and shrieked, "Let go of my baby, you monster!"

"You're welcome," Tony called after her. Even when he was wearing the black costume, calling Peter a monster was ridiculous. And after everything Tony had done to make people stop hating and fearing superheroes… He should have known better than to think it would make any difference.

"Why does everyone hate me?" Peter asked plaintively.

Tourists parted like the Red Sea, and Luke Cage emerged from the chaos, dragging Iron Fist along by the wrist. "Spiderman," he said. "Damn, this is a mess. Where's Cap?"

Oh God, no one had seen Steve. "I'm not sure," Tony said, feeling a distant numbness settle over him like a blanket. "We got separated after the first explosion."

"Speaking of which, what the hell exploded?" Luke directed this question straight at Tony, his voice
not quite accusatory.

Through the Extremis, Tony could hear the emergency response teams frantically scrambling to the scene. None of them had a clue what had happened. Neither did the Channel 5 news copter currently homing in on the smoke column like a vulture. "I have no idea," he admitted.

"The Peking." Carol's voice came from directly overhead, and Tony looked up to see her hovering about six feet above the crowd, blonde hair fluttering around her, smeared with ash. "And that tacky shopping mall." She turned to Tony. "It's the Mandarin. He's out on the water; we saw him as we flew in."

Where in the hell was Tony?

They had been making their way downtown, keeping to the waterfront, trying to avoid the more populous areas of midtown. Steve had had Tony by the arm, guiding him along while he was immersed deeply enough in the Extremis that, left to his own devices, he could have walked off a pier without noticing. Apparently, the situation in China had suddenly intensified, while in France, the Mole people were trying to petition for citizen status, with the full support of the Fantastic Four, and the French government was threatening to turn it into an international incident.

And then there had been an explosion out on the docks, and naturally, people had begun panicking and running from whatever had exploded. Steve had let go of Tony to steady an elderly man who had fallen into his path, to keep him from being trampled underfoot. He had turned around not fifteen seconds later to find Tony gone.

"Tony!" Steve shouted, already pushing his way through the crowd. Tony had to be here somewhere; he couldn't have gone far in the moments since Steve had let go of him.

The shockwave from the second explosion slammed into Steve, turning the chill, damp March day hot and dry.

The heat washed over him and faded, leaving him cold. If Tony had been anywhere near that…

"Tony!" Steve yelled again. His voice sounded odd, the explosion still ringing in his ears. He began to run in the direction of the explosion, the burning masts of the Peking standing out against the pale morning sky like a beacon.

All of the pedestrians on the waterfront were running the other way, tourists streaming out of the fish market and away from the water and shoving past him as if he were just an inanimate obstacle in their path. The air was already filling with smoke and ash, carried towards them by the breeze off the river.

The street was filled with terrified people, and none of them were Tony. Steve was seized once again by the sudden, superstitious fear that Tony was dead, that he'd been caught in the explosion.

Beneath the FDR overpass, things were even more chaotic than they'd been out on the street. Several people with scorched clothing and visible burns were curled up against the support columns, and
There was nothing Steve could do to help. Tony had all their communications equipment -- was their communications equipment -- so he couldn't even call 911. As he emerged from beneath the overpass, he could see the tourist trap shopping center off to the left burning, the flames already spreading to the historic district. To the right, the Peking was engulfed in flame; as Steve watched, one of the wooden masts broke with a loud snapping sound and tilted over towards the pier, breaking into pieces as it hit.

In contrast to the confusion on the other side of the overpass, it was strangely empty -- everyone who could had run away. There were several people sprawled limply on the ground in front of the shopping center, not moving, and more on the pier beside the Peking.

Steve started toward the closest victim -- a man with dark hair, lying facedown -- then stopped in his tracks. Over the roar of the fire, he could hear a familiar whining drone.

He turned to see the sleek, candy apple red shape of a SHIELD flying car bearing down on him.

The car came to a halt in front of Steve, hovering about five feet off the ground. The rear door swung open, and Sam stuck his head out. "Steve!" he called. "Get in!"

Sam was supposed to be in DC. "What are you doing here?" Steve asked.

"Sharon and Winter Soldier found Red Skull's lair," Sam said, voice filled with grim satisfaction. "We're going to go deal with him, once and for all."

The driver's side window slid down to reveal Sharon, with Bucky leaning over her shoulder. "We thought you deserved to be there when we took him down," she said.

"It will be a bonding experience," Bucky added, with completely inappropriate cheerfulness.

"We can't just leave," Steve said, gesturing at the inferno the Peking had become. He'd been waiting to come face-to-stolen-face with Red Skull for months; he could wait a little longer. There were people here who needed help now, and there had to be something he could do.

"The Avengers have it." Sam leaned further out of the car, and pointed out over the water.

Now that he looked, Steve could see Simon Williams silhouetted against the flames, lifting three people off the ship's burning deck. There was a flash of red and yellow in the corner of his vision, and he turned slightly to find Jessica Drew hauling an unconscious man out of the shopping center, another victim slung across her shoulders.

"Spiderwoman, Wonder Man, and we saw Spiderman on the other side of the FDR drive when we came in," Sharon said. "They've got it, Steve. We've got to move, or the Skull is going to be long gone before we can catch him. And then there'll just be more of this kind of thing, and more, until somebody puts him down."

Steve nodded, and Sam braced himself with one arm, and held a hand out to haul Steve into the car. Steve tossed his backpack and the portfolio holding his shield into the back seat first, before taking Sam’s hand. Sam seized him by the wrist, and hauled Steve up.

Steve grabbed the edge of the doorframe for support, and pulled himself in, throwing himself into the
seat. The car rocked, and Redwing, perched on the back of the rear seat, edged several steps sideways, fluffing his feathers and glaring at Steve.

Steve looked back over his shoulder at the street. Beyond the looming bulk of the overpass, the square was finally clearing of people. He still couldn't see Tony. "Is the communications network still up?" he asked. He tried to keep his voice calm, but obviously didn't succeed, because Sam gave him a sympathetic frown and toggled the switch on his headset.

"Hello?" he said into the mike. "What, no, just checking that the network's still up."

Steve leaned back into the seat, limp with relief. Wherever Tony was, he had to okay, or at least, still conscious, which admittedly covered a lot of territory with Tony. He'd been running a low-grade fever this morning, and they'd had to stop in one of the many small parks scattered around the city so that he could get his nose to stop bleeding. But if the network was still live, then so was Tony.

Sam was still talking. "Cap wanted to make sure-" he broke off, then said, "Yes, he's fine." He rolled his eyes, and Redwing made a derisive noise. "He's here with me." He broke off again, and swore. "The network just went dead. There's always a fifteen minute warning before-"

Steve was already halfway across the seat, lunging for the communicator. He yanked the headset off of Sam's head and held the earpiece to his own ear, shaking it. Only static.

"What the hell, Steve?" Sam snapped, rubbing at his ear. "That's not going to magically start working again just because you're touching it."

"Tony?" Steve said quietly into the mike, an icy knot settling into the pit of his stomach.

There was no response.

It figured that the psychopath of the week would blow up the one genuinely cool thing at a tourist trap, Peter thought, steadying a tourist before he fell and got trampled. Mostly, the South Street Seaport had a lot of kitschy stores, but the Peking was really cool: an old four-mast barque set up as a museum. It had been the best part of the one field trip his cheapskate school had sent them on in third grade.

And really, blowing up a shopping center was understandable; lots of victims, and a strike at the evils of capitalism all in one. But there couldn't have been but so many people on that ship, and as terrorist targets went, it didn't exactly make much of a statement, especially since it had been a German ship.

Maybe the Mandarin had just objected to the name.

"So, Mandy's out there in a boat?" he asked Ms. Marvel.

"No," she said, sounding more disgusted than anything else. "He's standing on the water."

"So he's what, Jesus now? Great." Peter made a face -- not that anyone could see it, through the mask. And he'd thought Doc Ock had delusions of grandeur.
"We've got to take care of this before we can deal with him," Luke said, nodding at the disaster scene. The people were finally starting to clear out, but the fires were burning as strongly as ever, and, left to their own, they were sure to spread.

"The fire department is coming," Tony said flatly. He'd been near to panic when Peter had first arrived, but now he was weirdly affectless. Maybe talking to computers -- cool as it sounded -- did something to people. Tony had started going all Machiavellian dark side around the time he'd gotten the Extremis add-ons.

"There's probably people on that ship." Danny indicated the *Peking* with a splinted forefinger. "You're a flyer," he said to Carol, "can you-"

"Simon's on it," she said. "Jessica's taking care of the people in the mall." She dropped the final few feet to the ground, boots thudding against the old cobblestones, and turned to Tony. "We need to take down the Mandarin before he blows something else up. He hit the ship with one of his damn rings. I don't know which one." She shook her head sharply. "I don't even know what they all do. Thank God you're here; I think you're the only one who's ever had any luck against him."

"Okay," Peter announced. "So, you two go fight kung fu Jesus, and we'll do damage control." He wasn't exactly sure what they could do against fires, unless they started up some kind of super-powered bucket chain, but there had to be something useful to do beyond being a brightly colored beacon for the fire department.

"There's about to be even more trouble. There's also a horde of ninjas heading up South Street. Somebody's going to have to take care of them."

Tony's eyes blacked out for an instant, then he said, "There are groups on Pearl Street and Front Street, too, all heading this way."

"I told everyone I hate ninjas, right?" Peter said. Everyone else ignored him.

Luke shrugged. "Ninjas ain't nothing we haven't handled before. You two go throw down with 'kung fu Jesus'; mini kung fu Jesus and I can take care of the ninjas."

Danny glared up at Luke. "You're not as funny as you think you are," he informed him.

"I can help fight the ninjas, too," Peter pointed out. Everyone continued to ignore him.

Tony sighed, shoulders suddenly sagging, and Ms. Marvel took a step towards him, hands out as if to catch him. "What?" she asked, frowning, and Peter had to admit, he didn't look all that steady on his feet.

"The Falcon just checked in," Tony said, shaking his head. "He and Steve are on their way to take down Red Skull. They've found his lair on the Upper East Side."

That meant that Cap was okay, at least for now. Which was good, because it meant that Tony hadn't sprung another sudden-but-inevitable-betrayal and thrown him in the river or anything like that.

Though to be honest, given the way Tony's voice had sounded when he'd first showed up, Peter had pretty much known that that hadn't happened.
"Damn." Luke frowned. "No way Red Skull doesn't have some kind of Nazi-army waiting. They gonna want backup too?"

"They're with Agent Carter and Winter Soldier," Tony said, eyes distant, head cocked to one side, as if talking over the Extremis required some extra level of attention. "I think they're treating it as some kind of family-outing. They-" He broke off suddenly, staggering. Ms. Marvel, still hovering, grabbed him by the elbow, hauling him upright.

"Are you all right?" she asked, not letting go of him.

Tony shook his head. "Satellite communications in the greater metropolitan area for New York City just went down completely," he said, shrugging out of Ms. Marvel's supporting grasp and straightening.

"How the hell did that happen?" Luke asked, folding his arms over his chest.

"I thought you were our communications?" Danny added.

"He's got to relay the communications through the satellites," Peter said to Danny. And for something to be screwing with the satellites, it had to be bad. Which meant that something big and bad was about to try and destroy the city. Again. You'd think that people would get tired of trying to destroy New York after a while, maybe go find new landmarks to smash. Or maybe go to the Midwest; there was a surprising dearth of supervillains in the Midwest, although that could be because they were scared off by those creepy Jesus-camp people.

"Something's interfering with the transmission," Tony added, raising one hand to rub at his forehead.

"I believe that would be Doctor Doom," a voice said from behind them. Peter whirled around, and the noise he made wasn't anything as un-manly as a squeak. A swirl of pink smoke parted to reveal Doctor Strange standing there, hands clasped behind his back. He looked smug, like he always did when he got to surprise or startle people. "Doom has managed to uncover the location of the artifact, and he's making his move now." Strange continued. He pointed to the west, expression solemn, and Peter turned. Shimmering in the distance, half-obscuring the skyline of New York, was a giant pink dome, directly over what Peter would bet his now-forfeited chance at tenure was Hell's Kitchen.

"Why is magic always pink?" he asked, rubbing at the back of his head. It was hot, this close to the fires, and his hair always got all sweaty and matted under the mask, and it kind of itched.

"Thankfully, I have discovered a ritual that will allow us to permanently prevent Doom from getting his hands on the spear," Strange said. "But I am going to need your help, Peter."

Peter grinned underneath his mask. The Sorcerer Supreme needed his help.

Strange inclined his head, a little smile playing across his lips. That kind of smile never meant anything good for anyone. "You're going to help me convince Daredevil to participate in a pagan blood ritual."

"Ooh, that should be fun. You know he's incredibly Catholic, right?" Peter said. It wasn't like everyone there didn't know exactly who Daredevil was.

"That's why you're coming," Strange said, "He likes you. His terrifyingly over-protective law partner also likes you, and he might not try to sue me for emotionally damaging Matt if you're there."
"Wouldn't it be medical malpractice? I mean, if you're drawing blood?" Peter asked.

"You'd better hurry," Tony said. "If Doom gets his hands on that thing, the Mandarin will be the least of our problems." He set his briefcase down on the cobblestones, and stepped back a pace. The case popped open, and bits of red and gold metal flew out, swirling around him and assembling themselves into the armor. He turned to Carol, the helmet now hiding his face. "Let's go."

The two of them took off for the water, and Peter and the others watched them go for a second, before Luke turned to Danny, and whacked him on the shoulder. "C'mon, mini kung fu Jesus, let's go kick some ninja ass."

Danny frowned, yellow mask crinkling over his eyebrows. "Stop calling me that."

"What?" Luke raised his eyebrows. "You were dead, and then you came back."

"I was not dead," Danny snapped through gritted teeth. "I was kidnapped by aliens."

"If you're ready, Peter?" Strange asked. "We're working with a time limit."

Peter nodded, and Strange did his swirly pink smoke thing and a second later, they were standing inches away from the vast, curving side of the pink bubble. It was faintly iridescent, and wavered between opacity and transparency.

Peter reached out and gave it a tentative poke with one finger. The thing might look like it was made of bubble gum, but it was hard as a rock, and touching it made his finger tingle and go numb. "Um… one question. How are we going to get inside the giant pink bubble?"

Strange closed his eyes and held both hands up, palms out. He murmured something under his breath, an invisible wind stirring his red cape. Peter had always thought capes were kind of silly, but he had to admit, that looked pretty cool.

Strange opened his eyes again, and the bubble flickered, then winked out of existence.

"What the hell is that?" Sam pointed out the window, at the vast, shimmering pink dome that now covered half of midtown Manhattan.

"Magic," Sharon said grimly. She was still staring straight ahead through the windshield, expression intent.

"How can you be sure?" Bucky asked.

"Because it's giant, and pink, and sparkly," she said. She sounded irritated, but there was a smile playing over her lips now. "It's probably Doom."

"So, where are we going?" Steve asked. He addressed his question to Sharon, and very deliberately did not look at the dead communicator in his hands. They didn't have the resources to do anything
about Doom; that was up to Strange. He needed to know what was happening with Red Skull.

"An apartment on the Upper East Side. 72nd Street, right by Central Park."

"That's only two blocks away from Avengers Mansion." The thought of Red Skull lurking so close to his home made Steve's skin crawl. Why did he have to taint everything Steve cared about?

"Lukin used to keep his boytoys there," Bucky volunteered, with a familiar smirk.

"It was probably a mistress," Sharon said, with an equally familiar long-suffering tone in her voice.

The idea of Lukin living so close to Avengers Mansion was only marginally better than the idea of Red Skull doing so.

"Does he know you're on to him?" Steve asked. He began unbuttoning his shirt -- he was already wearing his costume underneath it. Tony had mocked him over it this morning, but it saved him from having to strip down and change clothes in the backseat of a car, with Sam and Bucky both watching.

"Probably," Sam said. "The pigeons are keeping an eye on the place for me. He's got guards in position all around the block."

"That's why we've got to move now." Bucky reached inside his jacket and withdrew his domino mask, pressing it into place over his eyes. "Before he goes to ground again."

Steve kicked off his shoes and shucked the jeans he was wearing over his leather pants, then pulled his red boots out of the backpack. His gloves and cowl had fallen down to the very bottom of the bag, underneath Tony's shapeless grey sweater. Tony was fine. Tony had to be fine.

"So, you look like you're pretty much back to a hundred percent again."

Steve pulled his gaze back up to meet Sam's eyes. He hadn't realized it at the time, but he must have looked pretty shell-shocked those first few days for people to keep making comments on it. "Did I look that bad?"

"It's wasn't all that obvious, but yeah."

Steve stared at the backpack between his feet. The rough, grey wool of Tony's sweater was visible through the unzipped opening, his gloves and cowl still tangled in its folds. He would have gotten over the shock of coming back on his own, eventually, but he knew that having Tony to lean on those first few nights had made all the difference.

Steve bent over and picked up his mask, just holding it for a moment.

The pink dome on the horizon vanished abruptly, and Sam's communicator emitted a loud burst of static.

Steve quickly slid the earpiece back into place and fiddled with the frequency until the static resolved itself into Tony's voice. "... interference... magic is affecting the satellites..." Steve closed his eyes, that icy knot in his stomach finally dissolving. There was another burst of static, and then it faded, Tony's voice suddenly coming through loud and clear, but with a slight echo. "The Mandarin has come calling. Communications will be down for the foreseeable future, until we've taken care of
him."

Steve opened his eyes, and adjusted the communicator's mouthpiece. "Tony, are you all right?" He sounded all right, but with Tony, that didn't necessarily mean much.

"Fine," Tony's voice had lost the echoing quality; he must have switched to a narrow band frequency so that they could speak without half the SHIELD network overhearing. "Unless you count having the Mandarin on my doorstep. Carol and I are on our way to deal with him." He paused for a second, then, voice low, "Look, if we can't stop him…" he trailed off, the link carrying nothing but a faint crackle of static for a moment, then said, very softly, "I love you."

Steve's cowl fell from his suddenly nerveless fingers. "I… I…" he stammered. Oh God, Tony didn't expect to come back.

"What is it?" Sharon was looking back at him over her shoulder, eyebrows raised in concern.

"Good luck," Steve finally choked out. "Rogers out."
Sunlight shone off the smooth green water of the East River in a dazzling glare, framed and reflected by the smooth glass wall of Manhattan’s skyline. Behind them, the pyre of the *Peking* lent everything a reddish tint.

The Mandarin was turned away from them, feet resting lightly on the water, standing calmly in the middle of the brilliance.

He always had had a flare for the melodramatic. Giant castles with trapdoors, torture chambers with rusty manacles, massive killer robots, huge airships shaped like Fin Fang Foom…

*Watch out for his right ring finger,* Tony warned Carol as they drew closer. *That one's the disintegration ring. If he hits you with it full on, you won't even get a chance to feel any pain.*

*Great. Any other helpful hints?*

*I could be fighting Doom, but no, I had to go for the megalomaniac with a jewelry fetish.* Carol pulled away in a burst of speed, leaving Tony in her wake.

He increased the power to his boot jets, matching her speed once more. She'd needed to know what the Mandarin could do, but now that Tony had given her a reason to be afraid of him, Carol was going in guns blazing, all reckless fighter pilot machismo.

The Mandarin turned to meet them, left hand coming up. A blast of flame shot from it, aimed directly between Tony and Carol. Tony broke right, Carol went left, and the flame sizzled between them, a line of steam rising from the water beneath it.

"Fire again?" He broadcast the words through the armor's speaker system, making sure they were loud enough to carry. "Lacks imagination."

"That's all he's got?" Carol called back. "I can throw more energy than that."

The Mandarin lifted his right hand, and held it motionless in the air. "I have waited for you to come and face me for a fortnight," he sneered, "and now, when the *invincible* Iron Man finally dares to come before me, he does so hiding behind a woman." He gestured with his upraised hand, and a column of water rose from the river, wrapping itself around Carol and slamming her into the river's surface, smaller tentacles of water rising up to pull her under.

Tony lifted his own hands and sent twin blasts of repulsor energy at the Mandarin. Predictably, he dodged, but he lost his grip on Carol in the process.

Carol shot back into the air, shaking her wet hair out of her face. "All right, now I'm really mad. I'm mutated enough without drinking that crap."

"That is the best you can muster?" The Mandarin was facing Tony again, ignoring Carol completely. "I had heard that your powers had been vastly increased, as mine have. I had hoped you would
finally prove a worthy foe." He waved his right hand again.

"You say that every time," Tony managed, throwing himself to one side just in time to dodge a blast of ring energy. The pressure of the migraine he'd been fighting since this morning -- well, actually, since yesterday morning -- flared, and he blinked spots of light out of his vision. Twenty yards beyond him, an orange buoy floating in the water disintegrated. He hadn't seen any new powers yet, so chances were this was just standard Mandarin-style arrogance. "Haven't seen you beat me yet."

Taking advantage of the Mandarin's preoccupation with Tony, Carol dove at him from behind, fists out in front of her -- and the Mandarin, without turning, held his right hand out behind him and hit her dead center with a force beam. Carol went cartwheeling back through the air, halting herself only a few feet away from the burning ship.

"This time, I will not fail. You have cost me my rightful empire one too many times, and I have had years to meditate on the appropriate method for your demise." The Mandarin shifted his weight slightly, and the skirts of his long, embroidered robe swayed with the motion, revealing a patch of grey-white ice beneath his feet.

Okay, clever use of the ice ring, he'd give him that. Tony had never really believed the bastard could walk on water anyway. He sent a tightly focused beam of infrared heat at the Mandarin's feet. The ice melted away in seconds, and the Mandarin aimed his left hand downward. Tony could see the change in the air currents on the armor's sensor read out as he used the vortex ring to propel himself into the air, the hem of his robe clinging to his ankles, dripping.

*He's got no stability flying this way.* Tony sent to Carol. *On three?*

*Screw three. Now.*

Carol flew at the Mandarin from the left, and Tony simultaneously came at him from the right; all it would take was one good hit from either of them, and the Mandarin would be swimming in the--

A force beam slammed into Tony's right shoulder, spinning him completely around. It was like being punched by the Hulk.

Shoulder now throbbing in counterpoint to his head, Tony righted himself to see Carol, totally encased in ice, fall back into the water with a splash. After years spent rotting in an eight-by-eight prison cell, a normal man might have gotten rusty, but the Mandarin was just as fast as ever. Insanity clearly had perks.

"I expected you to come to me after I destroyed your flying stronghold," the Mandarin was raising both hands toward Tony now, long white hair floating around his face in the artificial wind, "but it seems you are a coward after all, hiding and licking your wounds while my men prepared to make my glorious empire rise to power again."

"Again? You never had an empire." Tony executed a half roll, and circled the Mandarin, edging gradually closer. The water around them both was empty -- no sign of Carol. Ice floated. Where the hell was Carol?

"I am the direct descendant of the great Khans. The last descendant, thank to your interference. China is mine by blood-right, but now I shall never see my son sit at my right hand in the Forbidden City." The Mandarin spun around in midair, then darted forward, lighting-quick, to seize Tony by the throat.
The Mandarin had always been quick, always possessed of martial arts training, but he'd never been this fast before. And though he might have been able to make himself levitate, he'd certainly never been able to fly. Tony instinctively tried to reach up to pull the Mandarin's hand away, but his arms were suddenly too heavy to lift, held in place by a familiar gravitational field.

"Temugin was my son. He was to be my heir, my strong right arm. You drew him away from his destiny. You tainted his ideals. If not for your meddling, he would never have died."

The gravitational pull on Tony's armor was getting stronger; even through the armor, he could feel the increased pressure. Below him, the surface of the water had flattened under the weight, unmoved by the winds the Mandarin was using to hold himself aloft. Tony struggled uselessly, resisting the impulse to simply give in to the heavy weight, to just let the Mandarin crush him. He was already so tired, and the force dragging against him made every aborted movement infinitely more exhausting, but he had no idea what had happened to Carol, and anyway, he couldn't leave her to face this alone.

"I wanted to take everything from you, the same way you took everything from me." The Mandarin's voice was eerily calm, almost serene. "I planned to strip your comrades and vassals away from you one by one, but you seem to have done a fine job of that yourself."

One truth amidst all the hackneyed rhetoric. If driving everyone away had kept them from being targets for the Mandarin, maybe something good had come out of the mess Tony had made of things after all.

"I had something truly special in mind for that manservant you were so fond of..." Tony's vision swam for a moment, the white and black flashes returning, and then resolving into the sight of Happy, hovering a few feet away. He was wearing Tony's old red-and-gold armor, without the helmet, the way he had been the time the Mandarin had captured him, when he'd gone out of his way to help Tony and ended up paying a predictable price for it.

"...but alas, someone else has already had the pleasure of killing him." The Mandarin closed the fingers of his free hand into a fist, and the image of Happy dissolved.

Tony had killed Happy, shut down the life support he'd only been on in the first place because he'd had the bad luck to be Tony's friend. It had been easy, with the Extremis. It had also been one of the worst moments of Tony's life, almost as bad as the two months Steve had been dead. Pleasure had never been involved.

The Extremis... Tony had cut all the data feeds he could, all the ones not connected with the armor, but now he could hear the faint buzz of something digital transmitting close by. It was like nothing he'd ever heard before, an alien hum from ten different datafeeds.

It was the rings. It had to be. Regardless of what the Mandarin had claimed about them over the years, they were alien tech, and technology could be controlled.

Tony submerged himself in the familiar blackness of the Extremis, isolating the ten separate sources of the signal and mentally reaching for them.

Bad, bad idea. Trying to control the rings was like grabbing the live end of an arc welder in his bare hands. The world whitened out, all other sensory data obliterated by the blinding pain in his skull. Tony grasped desperately at the rings' energy signals, but his concentration was shattered, and they slid away from him.
The Mandarin released his grip on Tony's throat, and he fell like a rock, bringing his boot jets back on line just in time to catch himself a foot above the water. His nose was bleeding again; he could feel the warm wetness of the blood inside his helmet.

He blinked up at the Mandarin through still-blurred vision, and had just enough time to notice the startled expression on his face before the Mandarin raised his right hand and lightning shot from all five fingers.

The streams of electricity hit dead in the center of the armor's chestplate, and Tony's vision went white again.

Military radio protocol. Tony had told Steve that he loved him, was going out to fight one of the most powerful people he'd ever faced off against, thinking that he was very probably going to die, and the best Steve had been able to give him was military radio protocol.

Why hadn't he been able to think of anything to say? 'You're my best friend,' or 'don't you dare get yourself killed.' Even, 'I'll see you tonight,' would have been better. Something to let Tony know that he was not expendable, since that seemed to be such a hard concept for him to grasp.

Something to let Tony know how important he was to Steve.

Steve stared out the car window at the wide swath of trees stretched out beneath them. They were over Central Park now, the Conservatory Pond flashing in the sunlight as they flew over it.

Then the mortar round hit. The impact spun the car sideways through the air, its entire frame shuddering. Steve was thrown forward, catching himself on the back of the driver's seat. Sam slammed into his side, accidentally elbowing him in the ribs, and Redwing made an angry sound and fluttered his wings frantically.

"Fuck!" Sharon yelled. "We lost one of the wheels. The car's going to crash. I'm going to have to try landing further into the park, or we'll hit something." The flying cars needed all four of their wheels in order to provide balanced thrust -- with even one wheel gone, the car would be like a helicopter with its tail rotor shot away, unable to stabilize itself or control its flight. "Sam!" Sharon snapped.

"Right." Sam kicked the passenger side door open, grabbed Steve, and hauled him out of the car into the air. Steve only just managed to snatch up the strap of his artist's portfolio before he was dangling in midair, Sam's fingers cutting off the circulation in his left arm.

Sam dived downwards, letting Steve go about ten feet from the ground. Steve twisted his body, landing on his shoulder and rolling to his feet. Sam dropped to the ground beside him.

Above them, the car was spiraling through the air, trailing smoke from the back fender. As Steve watched, it hit the trees, crashing through the canopy and slamming into the ground. Sharon and Bucky bailed out, diving for cover behind a scattering of large rocks, and then the car exploded.
Steve and Sam hit the dirt, pieces of metal and glass raining down around them. "Where the hell did Red Skull get artillery?" Sam shouted.

Sharon picked herself up off the ground, brushing bark and dirt from her hair. "Dickstein is on a military procurement committee," she shouted back. Beside her, Bucky rolled to his feet in one smooth movement, still clutching his sniper rifle.

"Figures," Sam muttered, dropping his forehead back to the dirt for a moment. "I really hate that man." Redwing circled down to land on the ground next to him, cocking his head to one side and eyeing Sam with what Steve would swear was concern.

"I wanted to kill him," Bucky said, "but you were-"

"Bucky," Steve said. He rolled his eyes, and stood. He was going to pretend that had been a joke.

They were in mid-Central Park, just on the edges of the Ramble. This part of the park was mostly un-landscaped, full of rocks, fallen trees, and overgrown underbrush.

Steve unfastened the portfolio and pulled out his shield, sliding his right arm through the straps, and then Red Skull's minions burst out of the trees.

They had been lying in wait, of course. Red Skull had probably detected the car's approach through the SHIELD satellites.

"Where did he find this many Nazis these days?" Bucky asked rhetorically, sighting down the barrel of his rifle at a man with silver SS pins on his collar.

"Illinois." Sharon drew her own gun, swinging around to cover Bucky's six.

One of the uniformed men opened fire at Steve, and he threw up his shield to block the shot. Bucky and Sharon fired return shots simultaneously. One bullet took the man through the right shoulder; the other caught him dead between the eyes, the back of his skull disappearing in a mist of blood. Bucky was good at head shots.

He'd always been good at head shots, something which never failed to trouble Steve. No one should have to be that good at killing as young as Bucky had been. And it was Red Skull and others like him who had made that necessary.

Then everyone was shooting. Steve threw himself to the side, rolling and coming up with his shield in front of him.

There were about fifteen of them, Steve estimated, wearing reproductions of black SS uniforms, and armed with M16s. With that many bullets in the air, he couldn't throw his shield without making a target of himself.

Behind him, Sharon and Bucky were returning fire. Sam had dropped to one knee, one armed raised, holding one of his hard-light wings in front of himself as a shield. Redwing had taken off again, diving at the nearest minion with his claws extended.

There was a flash of red at the tree line of the Ramble. Steve half-turned and saw Red Skull standing knee deep in underbrush, a heavy mask obscuring Lukin's features and lending him the familiar skeletal visage that Steve knew and hated. Red Skull was calmly aiming a Luger pistol at Sharon and
Bucky.

Steve's shouted warning came simultaneously with the sound of the shot. Bucky staggered, clutching at his left thigh, blood visible between his metal fingers.

Steve didn't actually remember flinging himself to his feet; the next thing he knew, he was halfway across the clearing, almost on Red Skull.

Red Skull snapped off a shot in Steve's direction, then turned and ran into the shadowy depths of the Ramble. Steve followed, the sounds of the fire-fight fading as the trees closed around them.

Without stopping, Red Skull half-turned and fired another bullet at Steve. The bullet deflected off Steve's shield with a clang, and Red Skull dove off the path and into the underbrush.

Damn it; with all of the trees around it was too closed in for him to get a clear throw at Red Skull. In such close quarters, his shield was nearly useless, good only for blocking.

It was late enough into spring that all of the trees were in leaf; it wasn't the thick canopy of late summer, but it still formed a wall of pale green all about Steve, obscuring his vision. As he ran, he caught flashes of red and black ahead of him. With all of those deep, unnatural colors, Red Skull made a perfect target, if only Steve could get a clear line of sight and enough room to throw his shield.

Another bullet whistled past Steve's head, tearing the left wing of his cowl. He jerked his head back, and the second bullet drew a hot line of blood along his hairline. If he hadn't moved, it would have taken him right through the forehead, just like Bucky's headshot had done to Red Skull's man.

Steve dodged behind a large tree and leaned his head back against the rough bark, closing his eyes for a moment until the brief flare of dizziness went away.

Red Skull was finished after today. Steve wasn't letting him escape again, and all the bullets in the world weren't going to stop him.

He didn't feel nervous or scared, only slightly numb, everything focused on the task at hand. He'd been brought back, and maybe it was for a reason after all.

The Red Skull had to die, and if Steve had to go down with him to make sure that happened...

He took a deep breath, readying himself to resume the chase, and then the headset he'd forgotten he was wearing crackled to life, and the sound of screaming echoed in his ears.

Steve had known Tony's voice before he'd ever seen his face; it was the first thing he'd heard when he'd woken up from the ice. He would know it anywhere, even through the crackle of the Extremis, distorted by pain.

It took a hell of a lot to make Tony scream like that.

The sound cut off as abruptly as it had begun, the line going dead again.

Damn it, damn it, damn it. He'd just gotten Tony back, he wasn't going to lose this chance with him - - not to the Mandarin, not to Tony's own problems, and sure as hell not to Red Skull. Red Skull had taken enough from all of them.
He couldn't lose Tony, and Sam, Sharon and Bucky shouldn't have to lose him again. If the Red Skull killed him, he'd never learn what had just happened, whether Tony was all right. And if Tony lived through this fight and Steve didn't…

Even if Steve succeeded in killing him, if he died in the process, Red Skull would still win.

Red Skull wasn't going to win anymore.

The pain was excruciating, white-hot and all around him. With the current running through him, Tony couldn't move, couldn't even scream, except inside his head.

Steve…

Inside the armor, his back arched, muscles seizing and locking. Everything hurt, even the inside of his head, lit on fire by the feedback crackling through the armor's systems via the Extremis.

The current stopped abruptly, dropping from mind-numbing to bearable in a split second, and Tony hung in the air, gasping for breath. He had a communications line open, he realized, must have accessed it accidentally when the feedback started. Tony closed the line off and blinked until his vision came back.

Carol, dripping wet, was flexing her right hand, a grim smile on her lips, while the Mandarin doubled over, also gasping. "You dare lay hands on me?" he demanded, voice breathless. He thrust his right hand out towards her, and a broad beam of laser light hit Carol in the chest.

It was the wrong hand. He was using the wrong hand. It had been the wrong hand when he'd used the lightning ring on Tony just now, too. The lightning ring was on the left one…

"Big mistake, buddy," Carol smirked. Her skin had begun to glow red, the incandescent flames of her old Binary power flickering to life around her. She dodged a blast from his force ring and hit him again, catching him in the torso once more.

With Carol charged up to this level of power, it should have broken him in half. Instead, it barely seemed to wind him. He hit her with another force blast, this time from both hands, and she was thrown backwards again, a swirl of wind holding her in place.

"Again, you let a woman fight your battles for you. You disappoint me, Iron Man. I had hoped for a more satisfying fight, something fitting for our last battle."

Tony blinked spots from his vision, and frowned, not really hearing the Mandarin's words. He could still hear the discordant hum of the rings, dominated by a loud buzzing that must be the vortex ring, the one he was using to hold Carol and to keep himself in the air. The signal wasn't coming from the Mandarin's hands, but from somewhere inside his body.

"… bomb has shut down Asia's major airport. Once my loyal servants bomb China's rail centers and highways, the Chinese army will have no way to mobilize and fight me."
The rings were inside him now, were a part of him, the way Tony's armor was now a part of Tony. If he could do something to them, get at them with the Extremis, the Mandarin should be able to feel the backlash.

"My armies can march through the countryside unopposed, and all of Asia will kneel to me, as is my right."

All ten at once were too much; he couldn't handle the strain of the alien data, and he didn't have the time -- or the physical reserves left -- to properly hack them. But maybe he could manage to establish a link with one of them. Whatever he did, it would have to be sheer brute force, something crude but effective. When the Mandarin had hit him with the lightning ring, he'd been able to feel the feedback from his armor. If he could get the Mandarin to use it on him again, could tap into it to start a feedback loop... If he could establish an uplink through the ring, he could channel the power through his body and back into the Mandarin.

There was a good chance doing it would kill him, but if he died taking out the Mandarin, no one could fault him for that. He'd known going into this fight that he might not be coming out of it. It might even be easier this way, for everyone.

He'd never get to see Steve again, but at least he wouldn't be letting anyone else down.

The Mandarin smiled, raising his hands again. "And you, my greatest enemy, will be a thorn in my side no longer."

Tony hit him with a repulsor blast.

The Mandarin snarled, that eerie calm finally breaking, and dropped the vortex around Carol. One of the ring signals flared, and the Mandarin threw twin force blasts at Tony.

Tony threw himself sideways, managing to dodge one of the blasts. The second one hit him in the left side, so hard he felt ribs crack. Things went black for a second, but the armor kept him in the air, kept him moving.

He shook his head to clear it. "You'll have to do better than that to get past my armor," Tony gasped, ribs protesting as he maneuvered himself subtly closer to the Mandarin. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Carol doing the same. *Wait 'til he zaps me,* he sent to her. *Then give him your best shot.*

*Don't I always?*

Tony reached out again with the Extremis, probing at the rings. When the Mandarin took a shot at him again, one of them would register a power surge a split second beforehand; he would have to be ready. "Even your lightning ring barely touched me," he sneered. Knowing the Mandarin, that would be all it took; he could just wipe Tony out with the disintegrator, but then he wouldn't get to watch him suffer.

One of the rings flared up -- please, please let it be the right one -- and Tony opened the connection to it a split second before the lightning hit him. He'd thought he was prepared for the shock this time around, but it was every bit as excruciating.

Electricity had been his lifeline once, back when he'd needed it to power his chestplate and keep his
heart beating. Those smaller, controlled currents had been painful, but nothing like this. He could still sense the ring, the pain from the Extremis blurring into the sheer physical pain of the electrical current until they were indistinguishable.

He couldn't breathe, body seizing again… If he lost consciousness now, he'd lose the connection, and it would all be for nothing.

He could feel the current tearing through him, through his armor and back across the link into the ring. It was working. He couldn't breathe, vision blacked out, but over the scream of feedback in the armor's systems, he could hear the Mandarin yelling, shock and outrage coloring his voice. It was hurting him, too.

He knew when Carol made her move only because the feedback loop was finally broken.

Tony sobbed for breath, only the armor's autopilot function keeping him in the air. Couldn't black out. If the Mandarin hadn't gone down…

"Tony?" Carol's voice, from close by.

Tony blinked, and the black and white flashes in his vision resolved into Carol, hovering a few feet away, with the limp form of the Mandarin dangling from one hand like an afterthought. "What the hell did you do?" she demanded.

"Feedback loop," he gasped, struggling to get the words out.

"Well, whatever it was, he's down for the count. We'd better get back to shore before you are, too."

Tony followed back towards the shoreline, literally on autopilot. If he attempted to fly and land manually, he'd just end up crashing into the dock; he was too exhausted to judge distances properly anymore.

The *Peking* was still burning, its masts and rigging now completely gone. A group of soot-stained school children was standing a safe distance away on the dock, clustered around Simon. "This is the best fieldtrip ever!" a little girl announced loudly, gazing at Simon with seven-year-old adoration. A second, smaller group was clustered around Jessica Drew, who was wearing the suspicious expression of one who suspected small children were poisonous.

On the other end of the boardwalk, Iron Fist and Luke were standing in the center of a ring of unconscious ninjas. Luke's shirt was shredded, hanging off him in rags.

Carol landed in front of them, absently kicking a ninja out of the way. "They give you any trouble?" she asked, nodding at the unconscious men on the ground.

"Naw," said Luke. "Their kung fu was weak."

Tony hit the ground beside Carol, and his side flared with pain at the impact. He shut off the autopilot and immediately fell to his knees, catching himself with his hands -- more fun with cracked ribs -- and shook his head, trying to clear the dull ringing in his ears.

"Tony?" Carol asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," he assured her. "My superhuman powers of denial will get me back to the Helicarrier."
That was what the armor's autopilot was designed for.

"I can make throwing stars explode!" Iron Fist announced cheerfully. Tony looked up to see him wavering slightly on his feet.

"What's wrong with him?" Carol asked.

Luke snorted. "Mini kung fu Jesus here used up all his chi on the exploding throwing stars."

Iron Fist grinned. "I've been trying to get that to work for a month." He wobbled again, and Luke grabbed him by the elbow.

"Yeah, whatever. What kind of food you want?"

Carol turned to Simon, who had broken free of his elementary school admirers and was walking towards them, trailed by an irritated-looking Jessica. "If you love me," she said, "you will tell me there is nothing wrong with you."

"There's nothing wrong with me," Simon repeated obediently. "Why?"

"What?" Jessica asked caustically. "No concern for me?"

Carol smirked. "You can take care of yourself."

Tony let his head hang forward again, aching in every muscle and feeling faintly sick. He closed his eyes, accessing the Extremis to reach for the communications lines and data feeds he'd been running for so long. Fury needed to know--

It was like an ice-pick through the forehead, a sharp stab of blinding pain that threatened to push him over the edge into unconsciousness. Tony dropped the uplink, dropped everything but the armor; he couldn't handle anything else right now, not if he wanted to stay upright. Well, a certain value of upright.

"… Tony?" Carol was speaking, one hand on his shoulder. "Tony, are you-"

"What?" Tony interrupted.

Carol hitched the Mandarin's limp body higher on her shoulder. "The Negative Zone or the Raft?"

"Raft," Tony said. If it could hold Bullseye, it could hold the Mandarin. The breakout all those months ago had been under extenuating circumstances, and even the Mandarin wasn't worth the precedent re-opening the Negative Zone would set. "Get someone to cut the rings out of him as quickly as possible. Keep him unconscious until then."

"The rings are inside him?" Simon asked. "Wow. There's something disgusting I didn't expect to learn today."

"Right," Carol said. "Simon, you take the walking wounded back to the Helicarrier. Jessica, let's get Mr. Alien Rings to a surgeon."

"I am not wounded," Iron Fist muttered sulkily.
"I don't need an escort, and I'm going nowhere without my kid," Luke added.

"Go home and get Jessica and the baby, then," Tony told him. His head hurt too much to argue. "Then you can all come to back the Helicarrier. Fury's going to need to debrief you." He obviously couldn't use the Extremis right now, and there was no one left here to fight. All that was left was to go back to their main base and wait for Steve.

They'd been past this rock formation once already. Red Skull didn't know where he was going, Steve realized. He was running blind. The Ramble was a tangled mess of paths that looped back on each other, and Red Skull was going in circles.

Steve had run through the Ramble at least once a week when the Avengers Mansion had still been standing. It was only a few blocks away from home, and was an interesting place to run through; he and Clint had come here all the time. Steve knew these trails like the back of his hand. It was his home ground; he had the tactical advantage, and it was time he started using it.

Red Skull crashed through the branches up ahead and dashed across a section of trail. Steve followed, grateful for the boots that gave him footing on the wet leaves littering the edges of the path. As he lunged across the trail after the Red Skull, *Still Hunt* loomed up in front of him; the big, bronze panther crouched predatorily on a rock, a familiar landmark.

The underbrush was still too dense in this part of the Ramble for him to use his shield properly, and Red Skull was too smart to break cover. But if they kept running in this direction for another quarter-mile, they'd be on top of the Ramble Arch, and on open ground.

Someone crashed through the brush behind him, and Steve spun around, shield up. Sharon was racing after him, gun out, Bucky limping along at her side, followed by a seriously annoyed-looking Sam.

"What the hell, man?" Sam demanded. "What were you thinking, taking off like that?"

"The Skull's men are all down," Sharon said. "A little help might have been nice."

"Red Skull's up ahead," Steve told them. There wasn't time to explain any further. "Follow my lead." He turned to Sam. "Do you know where the Arch is?"

"Yeah," Sam said.

"I need you to circle around behind it. We're going to run Red Skull out onto the bridge, and I want you on the other side."

"Got it." Sam nodded, and disappeared into the trees, Redwing following him overhead.

Satisfied, Steve took off after Red Skull again, Sharon and Bucky on his heels.

Ahead of him, Red Skull splashed through the shallow water of the tiny stream that ran through the
Ramble, and scrambled up the opposite bank. Steve smiled grimly and slid down after him, jumping the streambed. He could hear Sharon and Bucky splashing through the ankle-deep water behind him, Bucky cursing in a mix of English and Russian.

When they reached the top of the gentle rise of the embankment, the trees ahead thinned, and Steve could see Red Skull's black uniform through the leaves. Sharon pulled even with Steve, raising her gun, and fired two bullets at Red Skull in rapid succession. Red Skull staggered and fired over his shoulder at them in response; then he resumed running, and was quickly obscured by the trees once more.

It was only a minute before Steve could see light up ahead, through a gap in the trees. They were almost to the Arch.

The loud crack of Red Skull's pistol sounded again, and Bucky stumbled, swearing again.

Steve slowed, turning to him, and Bucky grinned, raising his left hand and wiggling the metal fingers. "Hit me in the arm," he said. "It ricocheted off."

Then they were at the edge of the Arch, Red Skull only a few yards away, in the middle of the span. He spun around, firing at them wildly. Both shots deflected off Steve's shield harmlessly, and he lowered it, stepping out onto the bridge. "Hello, Skull," he said, smirking. "You're out of bullets."

Red Skull was spattered with mud and bleeding from his left arm. He turned to run, desperately trying to fumble more bullets into his gun, and Sam stepped into view on the other end of the bridge. "Going somewhere?" he asked, folding his arms over his chest.

Red Skull stopped in his tracks, pinned between them. He turned back to Steve, finally sliding a new bullet home, and raised his Luger. The crimson skull mask was eerily empty of expression. "Congratulations, Rogers. You have finally managed to run me down, and I shall now have the pleasure of killing you a second time."

There was a harsh screech from up above, and Redwing swooped down out of the sky, slamming into Red Skull's hand. The gun went flying over the side of the Arch, and Redwing soared upwards again, blood dripping from his talons.

Red Skull clutched his wounded hand, swearing in German. "You cannot defeat me, Rogers. I have come back before, and I will do so again."

Bucky stepped forward to flank Steve, cocking his rifle. "Yeah, after I killed you. Take off that stupid mask and fight us in your real face, Lukin."

Red Skull, incredibly, laughed. "But, mein kleiner Soldat, this is my real face. Lukin is dead." He reached inside his uniform tunic and pulled out a silver SS dagger, preparing to throw it at one of them.

Steve had heard enough of Red Skull's ranting to last him a lifetime. It was time to end this.

His shield hit Red Skull in the ribs, the force of the impact knocking him backwards over the edge of the bridge. The shield curved back towards Steve, and he lifted his right hand and plucked it out of the air.

Bucky was already scrambling down the steep embankment, his wounded leg barely hindering him.
Steve moved to the edge of the bridge, and looked over.

Red Skull was lying on his back on the bottom of the ravine, thirteen feet below. The red mask had been knocked off by the fall, and was lying beside his head. Steve could tell from the angle he lay at that his back was broken.

Steve shrugged the shield back into place over his shoulder and jumped down after Bucky.

Bucky was crouching over Red Skull, the Luger in his hand. As Steve stepped forward, Red Skull opened his eyes -- Lukin's eyes -- and coughed, whispering something in Russian.

Bucky shot him in the head.

The gunshot echoed through the ravine, and then everything was silent.

"What did he say?" Steve asked, stepping up to stand beside Bucky.

"He said, 'help me.'" Bucky dropped the Luger on the ground beside Lukin's corpse, and Steve stared at the lifeless body, feeling tired and empty.

Sam jumped from the Arch, gliding the few feet to the ravine floor, and Sharon scrambled down the rocky embankment after him. Steve blinked at them, suddenly unable to think of anything to say. His plan hadn't included what was supposed to happen after Red Skull was dead.

Bucky cocked his head to one side, thoughtfully. "I say we burn him."

"You think maybe that's overkill?" Sam asked, in a tone of voice Steve knew he'd used on Wolverine more than few times.

Steve shook his head. "Last time, he came back." Red Skull had been right, up on the arch; Steve had never been able to truly defeat him. He knew better than anyone else that death wasn't necessarily permanent, especially when it came to the Red Skull.

Twenty minutes later, they were at the edge of the park reservoir, all standing around a hastily constructed pyre. While the Ramble had been deserted, probably because of the Nazi's with guns, they had passed a number of people on the larger trails near the reservoir who had looked them askance, including one man who had very obviously been calling the police on his cell phone.

"Why are we doing this again?" Sam asked, staring down at the body where it lay on top of the pile of dry branches.

"Because it will make Steve feel better," Sharon said. She, too, was staring at the body, arms folded across her chest.

"So he can't come back," Bucky said, at the same moment. "This time, my shooting him is going to take."

Sharon's lips twitched, and she held out a hand. "Can I light the matches?"

Steve remained silent, listening to the back-and-forth. This time, Red Skull hadn't won; they had all come through intact. Even Bucky's leg had been only a minor injury, a shallow graze that Sharon had already bound up.
The branches caught slowly, smoking, some of them still damp from all of the recent rain, but eventually the pyre was in flames. The four of them watched it burn in silence for a few minutes, and then Sharon said, softly, "We found out who he was getting his information from. He had a New York congressional representative on his payroll, Joe Dickstein."

Dickstein? "I know that name," Steve said. "Tony was on the phone with him right after we all got back together, when he was trying to get us all amnesty."

"Not surprising," Sam said, in a disgruntled tone of voice. "He's the head of the House Committee on Unregistered Superhuman Activities. The people in charge of Registration."

"And he was working for a terrorist?" No matter how many times Steve learned about some new instance of governmental corruption, it still always filled him with disgust.

Sharon smirked. "That rumbling sound you hear is HUSAC's political credibility crumbling. I'd be surprised if the Registration Act lasts out the summer."

Dickstein was one of Carol's "them," Steve realized. One of the people whom Tony and the pro-registration heroes had been trying to shield them from, the remnants of Project Wideawake who had supposedly wanted to put Peter and Jessica Drew on a lab table. Had Dickstein known who he was getting into bed with, or had he just hated and feared superhumans and mutants so much that he didn't care?

The sun was high in the sky by the time the pyre had burned to embers. Steve watched the coals smolder a dull, malevolent red. He turned away from them, to face the others. "Let's go home."

Bucky had taken his mask off, and looked tired and rumpled and younger than he really ought to. "Where is home?" he asked, rubbing absently at the bandage on his leg.

He had been thinking of the Avengers Mansion, Steve realized. It had been home for so long, and they weren't that far away from it. But it was gone, and his apartment down under the Brooklyn Bridge had been destroyed as well, when Maria Hill's goons had broken in. As long as he had Bucky, Sam, and Sharon, any place would do for the moment. But only if Tony was there, too, and all right.

"The Helicarrier will do for tonight," Sharon said, laying a hand on Bucky's shoulder.

"I'll call Fury and arrange for a pick-up," Bucky said, turning away slightly. He paused, then said, "Sir, this is Barnes. Mission accomplished. Requesting a pick-up for transport to base."

Fury's voice emerged from somewhere, faint and tinny. "Are ya bringin' me his head?"

"Sorry, sir. We already disposed of the body."

"And ya didn't invite me? Well, anyway, I'll send a car for ya at the docks. We're kinda tied up right now."

"Roger. Barnes out."

"Wait," Fury asked. "What happened to the car ya had?"
"Barnes out," Bucky repeated.

"Any suggestions for getting there?" Sam asked after a moment. "Because I can tell you now, no New York cab driver is going to pick up four capes in bloody costumes, especially not when we've got a live animal with us."

"We'll take the subway," Steve said, grinning a little at the expression on Sam's face.

It was a long walk out of the park to the nearest subway station. Once they'd left the reservoir behind, Sharon fell into step beside Steve, taking his arm and drawing him ahead, away from Sam and Bucky, who was limping slightly.

"He told you he loved you," she said quietly. "Didn't he?"

Wait, what? Steve stared at her blankly -- he had been doing that with Sharon a lot, lately -- and finally managed, "How did you-"

Sharon smiled a little, looking almost wistful. "Steve, it's been Tony this and Tony that for as long as I've known you. And those last two months, with the fight over registration... If it hurt you that much when we fought, we would still be together. And anyway," she said, "in the car. I recognized that deer-in-the-headlights look on your face."

"I'm sorry," Steve said softly. It had been years since he and Sharon had really been together, and they had never made any promises to one another, but they had a lot of history with one another, and even if she wasn't the person he wanted to spend his life with, he still loved her.

Sharon looked up at him. "Why?" she asked, frowning.

"Because," Steve stammered, "you, and I, and…"

Sharon smiled again, shaking her head. "I'm sleeping with James."

Steve tripped over a crack in the pavement. "Wait, what?"

"It started while you were…" Sharon trailed off, then began again, "We were both so devastated, and he was there for me. And he needed someone, too."

Sharon was sleeping with Bucky? His ex-girlfriend was sleeping with Bucky? "Sharon, he's twelve!"

Bucky's voice drifted up from behind them. "I was already sixteen when we met."

"He's not twelve," Sharon said, "and anyway, Stark is about the most fucked-up person I have ever met, so don't judge me."

"I'd never judge you," Steve told her. "You're both my family." He gave her a very brief hug, one arm around her shoulders. Sharon leaned against him for a single moment, closing her eyes, then pulled away.

"So, have you told Sam yet?" she asked conversationally. "Because when you do, I want to be there to watch."
"Told me what?" Sam asked from behind them.

Steve smiled, and didn't answer. Red Skull was gone, he was with his family, and they were going home.

And when they got back, Tony was going to be there, and he was going to be fine. Steve refused to consider any other possibilities.
"We tried to get Doom locked up at the Raft," Peter was saying, "but apparently being supreme dictator for life of Doomvaria gives him permanent diplomatic immunity. That, and Deviant Lemuria threatened to declare war if we didn't let him go. Maybe he's engaged to marry their Empress or something." He made a face. "And I don't even want to think about what that wedding night would be like."

Peter was back in his old red and blue costume, and the bright colors made Tony's eyes hurt; his head was throbbing with every movement he made, and Peter's loudly excited babbling wasn't helping matters either. Tony tried to summon up a smile anyway; they'd taken down Doom, and New York was no longer in danger of being obliterated by chaos magic. And Peter had done well; he rarely went up against villains on the level of Doom, but he'd more than proven himself on this one.

He and Simon had only arrived back at the Helicarrier an hour ago, and he'd had just enough time to put on fresh clothing and wash the blood off his face before Fury had dragged him into his office for a full debriefing. Then Peter and Strange had returned to base. Fury was debriefing Strange now, or at least trying to. How much information he was actually going to get was anyone's guess.

He held a hand up, waving Peter to silence. All the muscles in his arm and torso protested at the movement. "That's fascinating, Peter. What actually happened?"

Peter launched off into a convoluted explanation, punctuated by excessive amounts of hand-waving. "… and then Matt had to smear his blood on the high altar, and then Dr. Strange did all this chanting, and then Doom showed up and it was all wizard duels and pink, glowy light, and then Dr. Strange had me web his mouth -- well, metal mask slit thing -- up so he couldn't summon dark forces anymore, and then Matt kicked him in the head, and then…"

Tony finally succeeded in producing a smile. "I guess you finally got the hang of the teamwork thing," he said. "Steve must be proud." Steve had always had faith that Peter would learn to be a team player eventually.

Peter trailed off, frowning at him. "How many walls did you get thrown through?"

"I'm fine," Tony said. Actually, he was exhausted and somewhat lightheaded, but there was no way he was admitting to that.

"You are not fine." Carol strode into the room, bootheels rapping sharply on the deck. "You were electrocuted. Twice. Why aren't you on a bed in the infirmary?"

Because if he lay down now, he wouldn't be getting up again for a long time. And he couldn't afford to let himself crash yet; they still had people out in the field. Steve was still out there.

The Winter Soldier had reported in to Fury, saying that they'd taken down Red Skull, but that was all Tony knew. Steve could have been injured in the fight. Or something could happen to him on the way back to the Helicarrier; even though they'd taken down the three most major threats, there were still left-over Doombots roaming around, as well as however many of the Mandarin's men who had simply turned tail and run from Luke and Danny. Or there might be a subway accident. It was statistically improbable -- there had only been a hundred and six accidents last year, out of hundreds
of thousands of train trips -- but it was possible.

Until Steve was back, until he could see Steve with his own eyes, he wouldn't be able to really believe that Steve was actually all right. He'd spent the past two weeks expecting to wake up and discover that it was all a dream, that Steve was still dead, and with every minute that Steve was gone, it got harder and harder to believe that he'd ever really come back at all. Or, worse, that Tony hadn't lost him again.

The fact that this time Steve at least knew how Tony felt about him wasn't much of a comfort.

"Where's the Mandarin?" he asked Carol, dodging her question. He couldn't let himself focus only on Steve's absence. If he did, he'd really be no good to anyone.

Carol smirked, and tossed her hair back over her shoulders -- it was dry now, if slightly stiff from its immersion in the East River. "Luckily, there was a surgeon on call on the Raft. They yanked the rings out; he's drugged to the gills in post-op now. Which is probably where you should be."

"I don't have time for that right now," Tony said. He felt dizzy for a moment as her words sunk in; the Mandarin was finally dealt with. He'd spent the past two weeks expecting to find him lurking around every corner, and now he could finally stop worrying about that, at least. He reached out tentatively with the Extremis; he ought to re-open all those communication lines, let all the agents in New York know the Mandarin was no longer a threat--

Searing pain exploded behind his eyes, and he dropped the connection instantly. It was all he could do not to double over, head in his hands -- he remained upright only because Carol and Peter were watching. Okay, bad idea. Extremis clearly very much offline.

"Are you okay?" Peter asked. He stared up at Tony, head cocked slightly to one side, and frowned. "I mean, not that I care, but, um, were you really electrocuted?" The last few words came out in a rush.

"I'm fine," Tony repeated. "Fury will want to talk to you," he told Carol. "When Strange is done with him." He reached up to run his fingers through his hair, halting the motion halfway through. "I'll be in the communication rooms." If he couldn't monitor transmissions mentally, he could at least go see if there'd been any progress getting the satellites re-secured; now that Red Skull and the Mandarin were both down, their spy networks ought to fall apart pretty quickly.

Carol started to say something, and Tony left the room before he could hear what was no doubt another pronouncement that he needed to be in a hospital bed.

Everything was coming together. Fury had sent men to ransack Red Skull's apartment lair, and they'd uncovered files confirming that Red Skull had been getting information from Joe Dickstein's office. Even if the rest of HUSAC was only paranoid and close-minded, the fact that their chairman had sold out Captain America to a known terrorist was almost enough to make Tony believe in a benevolent god. He couldn't buy better bad press.

With Dickstein so thoroughly discredited, getting the Registration Act amended or even repealed suddenly no longer seemed impossible. Dickstein had personally attempted to blackmail Tony during the fight over registration, trying to force him into taking more severe action against unregistered heroes. He'd wanted "emergency measures", including genetic screening and lethal force.

Tony hoped he could be there personally when Dickstein was impeached and put on trial for treason
under the Patriot Act. He wanted Steve to be there next to him.

Where the hell was Steve?

In the communications room, three people were crowded around the main monitor station, talking excitedly. No one looked up when he came in, so he walked over to stand behind the group, craning his neck to look over their shoulders at the data screens.

Several of the screens were live, and the mere sight of the code scrolling across them was soothing, even though the faint digital hum they emitted to the Extremis made the pressure in his head -- which had lessened once he'd stopped trying to access the communications feeds -- increase.

"You've gotten the code wrong in this line here," he said, reaching over a seated man's head and tapping the closest monitor with one finger. "But I see you've gotten the number twenty-seven satellite back up. That's good."

The assembled group of techs all turned around and stared at him. "How did you do it?" Tony asked. "Everything was still down an hour ago."

"Um, Director Stark, sir-" someone stammered.

The man seated at the main monitor station -- who, now that Tony looked closer, was barely out of his teens -- interrupted. "When the giant magic bubble crashed the satellites, it shut everyone out -- us, the bad guys, everyone. So we were able to reboot everything and reestablish a link up on a new frequency. You know, one that wasn't riddled with Nazi spyware. Or that crazy Chinese guy's stuff. And I know," he held his hands up, "we should have got permission before we turned it back on, but we wanted to test it, and, um, yeah."

That was… really obvious, actually. He should have thought of it days ago. Of course, with the Red Skull locking them out of the satellites, there'd been no way to shut them all down until Doom had done it for them, but he still should have thought of it. "Whose idea was that?" he asked.

"Carl's." The closest tech, a young black woman with corporal's insignia and dark hair in a multitude of tiny braids, jabbed a thumb at the kid in the chair. "Fury picked him up last year, after he was arrested for hacking Microsoft's company database."

Smart move on Fury's part. If this kid worked for Stark Enterprises, Tony would have written him up for a promotion. Or moved him to R&D. "Good work, people," he told them. "Especially you, Carl. Go report to Dugan; tell him you've got his comlinks back online. I'll keep an eye on things here."

The techs obediently started for the door -- except for Carl, who hung back, staring at Tony with a wide-eyed expression he'd previously seen only on Peter, and that not for months. It was vaguely discomfiting.

"Can you really spy on people through the security cameras?" he asked.

"Sorry, sir," the woman said. "We're leaving now." She and the third tech grabbed Carl by the arms and pulled him out of the room. As they walked away down the hallway, Tony could hear her saying, "Yes, Carl, Director Stark spies on you while you play Halo. And Colonel Fury is a robot. And the flying cars are actually Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang. Why did you ask him that?!"

Tony dropped into Carl's recently-vacated chair, the movement jarring his ribs painfully. He rested
his head in his hands, rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his palms. Everything hurt, and he still had no real idea where Steve was.

Making his eyes focus on the screens took effort, the letters blurring into each other every time he blinked. Tony sighed, and started bringing the other satellites back online. He'd spent the past fortnight running communications; he could do it until Steve got back.

Taking the subway from the Upper East Side down to the docks had taken an hour. Redwing had spent the entire trip in a disgruntled huddle of feathers, clinging to Sam's shoulder with a taloned death grip that had to have been uncomfortable. The other passengers had stayed far away from Sam, and from the obviously bloodstained Bucky.

The SHIELD agents who had picked them up at the docks had stared at Bucky's bloodstained clothing as well, when they weren't still watching Steve with slightly embarrassing awe.

It wasn't as if he was the only person who had come back from the dead. After all the things that kept happening to the X-Men, people ought to be, well, not used to it, but at least less likely to keep staring at him as if they were expecting him to pull a sword out of a stone or walk on water. No one had been in awe of Simon.

"I'll go talk to Fury," Sam said, as they all climbed out of the ferry car. He nodded at Steve's bleeding forehead. "You go get that taken care of."

Steve shook his head. "I need to go find Tony," he said. Sharon was already steering a now heavily limping Bucky toward the garage doors, taking him to get his leg seen to.

"You don't have time to get patched up first?" Sam asked, raising his eyebrows.

"I-" Steve started.

"Just go," Sam said. "Then get yourself patched up. The mini-assassin has more sense than you."

Steve was about to point that he had a tiny graze on his head, while Bucky had a bullet wound in his leg, when Carol burst into the room, making her way towards them around the rows of parked cars.

Sam shook his head and clapped Steve on the shoulder, then followed Sharon and Bucky out of the garage.

"Are you all right?" Carol asked when she reached him, waving a hand at his forehead.

"It's barely worth mentioning," Steve told her. "What happened with the Mandarin?"

"Doom and the Mandarin are taken care of," Carol said. "How did it go with Red Skull?"

"He's dead." Even now, it didn't feel real. Steve couldn't quite make himself believe that Red Skull was actually gone. "We burned his body."
"Good," Carol said decisively, nodding. "Is everyone all right?"

"Bucky caught a bullet in the leg. Sharon's taking him to the medical station now. Is everyone else--" he broke off, wanting to ask her about Tony, but afraid of what she might say. The last thing he'd heard from Tony had been that bloodcurdling scream broadcast over the Extremis.

"A little beat up," Carol said, "but mostly okay." She rolled her eyes. "Or we will be once you make Tony go to the infirmary. No one else will, because the tech staff is scared of him."

"Tony is--" Still alive, thank God. "What happened to him?"

"He got zapped by one of the Mandarin's rings. I think he did it on purpose." They were walking toward the door now, boots loud on the metal floor. "You'd think he would learn, after the number of times he's gotten the shit beaten out of him. At least this time, I didn't have to carry him back."

"The armor has an autopilot function," Steve told her absently. A feature Tony used entirely too often. If Tony had let himself be injured on purpose, it was probably for a reason. Probably. The fact that he had to qualify that was not something it made him happy to admit.

Carol accompanied him up the three levels to the control deck and walked him to the door of the communications room, then discretely disappeared. Steve hesitated in the doorway for a moment; the last time he and Tony had spoken, Tony had told him that he loved him, and Steve had responded... well, he hadn't really responded. And then there had been the screaming. In spite of Carol's comments, Steve didn't really know what shape he was going to find Tony in.

Steve took a deep breath, and pushed back his torn cowl, wincing as the thin leather caught on the bullet graze at his hairline, and tore the cut open again.

He stepped through the door, and it took him a moment to spot Tony. He was off to one side, sitting in front of the main monitor station with his head resting on one hand, lit only by the bluish glow of the computer screens.

Steve took another step forward, deliberately letting his boots ring on the steel deck plates, and Tony half-turned, looking up. Steve stood stock-still, suddenly feeling frozen in place, unable to think of anything to say; it had only been a few hours since they had been separated, but so much had happened since then, and now he didn't know what he was supposed to do.

"Steve." Tony stood, planting a hand on the console and pushing himself to his feet.

The sound of Tony's voice broke Steve's paralysis, and he crossed the room in three long strides, to stand in front of Tony. The monitor-light wasn't bright enough to see very well, but he looked tired and battered.

Tony frowned, and reached up to brush his fingers across Steve's forehead. "You're bleeding," he said, holding up his hand to display the small red smears on his fingers.

Steve smiled a little. "Yeah, head wounds tend to do that." He had survived Red Skull, and Tony had survived the Mandarin, despite whatever had him leaning on the console to stay upright. It felt like something fundamental had changed between them, though Steve wasn't quite sure what. They'd all been scrambling to keep their heads above water ever since he'd woken up in Strange's study -- maybe longer than that -- and now...
Steve reached out and cupped the side of Tony's face, the skin hot and dry under his hand, and Tony closed his eyes, leaning into his hand, swaying forward slightly. Steve leaned forward in response, so that his forehead was resting against Tony's, and closed his own eyes. He could feel tension he hadn't even realized he'd been carrying draining out of his shoulders. He was home.

Their bodies weren't quite touching, but this close, Steve could feel the heat radiating off Tony. Tony's hand came up to rest against the back of his neck, thumb pressed against the pulse point under his ear, fingers sliding into his hair. It felt good and strangely intimate.

He'd been thinking of the Helicarrier as a temporary base, somewhere for them all to reassemble and get patched up. He still thought of the Avengers Mansion as his real home. But even the mansion had been nothing more than a place to spend the night when Tony hadn't been there.

He tried to think of a way to tell Tony that, but he'd never been good at that sort of thing.

Tony sagged suddenly, listing to one side. Steve's eyes snapped open, and he grabbed Tony by the elbow, guiding him back into the chair. "Sit down. I'll be right back," he said, squeezing Tony's shoulder. Tony had been in bad shape this morning, but he was obviously in worse condition now. Though he was nowhere near as badly hurt as Steve had feared, he clearly needed medical attention.

Out in the corridor, he found Carol hovering a few feet away from the door. "Are we taking him to the infirmary now?" she said with suspicious eagerness.

"I was going to go bring someone." It didn't look like Tony was going to be walking far under his own power.

Carol nodded toward the doorway. "Dragging him will be faster."

He'd only been gone a few moments, but Tony had already slumped forward, head pillowed on his folded arms.

Steve shook him gently by the shoulder. "Come on," he said. "We're going to the infirmary."

"I'm fine," Tony mumbled, not moving.

Steve pulled him to his feet, ignoring Tony's attempts to stand on his own, and steered him out of the room. He kept one hand on the small of Tony's back all the way down to the infirmary, guiding him along. Tony could probably have walked in a straight line without help, but Steve wasn't going to give him a chance.

There were several people occupying beds in the infirmary, but Bucky wasn't one of them; they must have already treated and released him. A man in a white medical coat met them at the door.

"Director Stark, sir. We've been expecting you." He turned to Steve, adding, "Sit down. I'll stitch up your forehead as soon as I'm done with him."

"Carol told you to watch out for me, didn't she?" Tony asked, as the doctor sat him down on the nearest bed and told him to unbutton his shirt. Steve hovered behind them, ignoring the doctor's order to take a seat himself.

"No sir, Sub-director Dugan did. If you didn't show up in another half hour, I was supposed to go looking for you."
Tony smiled a little, working on the buttons of his white dress shirt. It fell open, revealing an array of dark bruises across his ribcage. He shrugged out of the shirt, wincing when he tried to move his right shoulder; it was dark purple with bruising, and already starting to swell slightly.

"What did this?" the doctor asked, peering at Tony's battered torso with professional interest. "The bruising is too evenly dispersed for a normal impact."

"Force beam," Tony told him. "There was electricity, too."

Half an hour later, after a full complement of x-rays and various scans with pieces of medical equipment Steve couldn't even identify, Tony was lying sideways across one of the narrow beds, ribs securely wrapped and right arm in a sling. The doctor had called in a nurse, who had started a saline drip in Tony's left arm; being electrocuted apparently did bad things to one's electrolytes. His legs were dangling off the edge of the bed, and he had his good arm thrown over his eyes; he looked like he was mostly asleep.

The doctor snipped the surgical thread he'd been using to close the cut at Steve's temple, and began tapping a square of gauze over it. "He might as well sleep here," he said, nodding at Tony. "I'd prefer it if someone kept an eye on him for the night."

Steve prodded at the bandage on his forehead. It was slightly sore; he'd turned down the doctor's offer of localized anesthetic. Painkillers never worked properly on him, not in normal doses.

If Tony had been awake, he would have been able to explain that properly, and maybe get something done about it, but Steve hadn't felt like arguing the point over something so relatively unimportant.

"I can't sleep here," Tony announced, eyes still closed. Obviously, he hadn't been as asleep as Steve had thought. "It's too loud."

The doctor stepped back over to Tony's side. "I assure you, Mr. Stark, we try very hard to maintain a calm atmosphere."

"I think he means the machines." Steve told him. Tony was rubbing at his forehead with his left hand now, frowning slightly the way he did when the Extremis was making his head hurt.

"They won't stop talking," Tony mumbled. He stopped rubbing his forehead and draped his arm back over his eyes. "Also, there are other people in here, and I can turn off life support with my mind."

Steve was not going to ask how Tony knew that, but if it was true, it was a valid concern. He stood. "You're sleeping with me," he said. "Come on."

"All right," Tony said. He failed to move, arm still over his eyes.

Steve shook him by his good shoulder. "You're sleeping with me."

Tony made a muffled noise of protest, but sat up. He pulled his arm out of the sling and tugged the IV needle out of his left elbow. "I hate these things."

The doctor frowned, but didn't say anything, obviously used to bad patients. Well, this was a
SHIELD installation, and if the general run of SHIELD agents were anything like Sharon and Nick…

Steve shot him an apologetic look. He wasn't sure that Tony had been entirely conscious when the doctor had explained that the IV bag was a saline drip. As far as he knew, Tony had no problems with needles; it was drugs he didn't like. Unfortunately, this occasionally extended to antibiotics and even cough syrup. He had seen Tony yank IVs out before; after the Red Zone incident at Mount Rushmore, the doctors had threatened to put him in restraints if he wouldn't leave them alone.

The doctor raised an eyebrow as the two of them left together, but remained silent, turning away to check on a patient in another bed.

Steve didn't actually have a room on the Helicarrier, so he took them back to the one Tony had been staying in before. It was several corridors away, and Tony was half-leaning on him by the time they reached the door.

Tony raised his head, blinking at the number plate screwed to the wall. "This is the director's room," he said. "I handed the position back to Fury."

Steve bit back a groan. That was all he needed. Please, please, he prayed inwardly, don't let Nick have moved back in already. He pushed the door open -- it was unlocked -- half expecting to find the room littered with piles of dirty laundry, disassembled pieces of heavy weaponry, cigar stubs, and possibly a calendar with pictures of naked women on it. He'd shared a tent with the Howling Commandos several times during the war.

Tony kicked his shoes off, but didn't bother to remove any other clothing, and collapsed onto the bed in a boneless sprawl. He was asleep almost instantly.

Steve stared down at him, feeling for a moment as if he was right back where he'd been two weeks ago; in this room, watching Tony sleep the sleep of desperate exhaustion and not quite knowing what to say to him when he woke up.

Then he pulled off his costume and climbed into bed next to Tony, even though it was only three o’clock and ridiculously early for sleep. He'd talk to Nick about Red Skull later.

Steve wrapped an arm carefully around Tony, who didn't so much as twitch, too deeply asleep to notice. He ought to hunt down Sharon and Bucky, although considering where he and Tony were, he wasn't sure if he wanted to know what his ex-girlfriend and ex-sidekick were up to. He ought to go rescue Sam from Nick's debriefing. He ought to go see how the rest of the New Avengers were doing.

All of that could wait a few hours; he'd go back to being a leader later. He'd almost lost Tony today, and right now he got to be selfish about this.

Steve didn't actually fall asleep, still too wound up from the fight with Red Skull. He was halfway
afraid that when he closed his eyes, he'd see Lukin's dead eyes staring up at him, face distorted by pain. They'd burned the body, but for the last few seconds, it had been Aleksander Lukin who'd inhabited it. Those last words, whispered to Bucky in Russian, hadn't been the Red Skull's; Steve knew his voice too well to mistake it, even from another man's lips.

Lukin had been anything but a good man, but he hadn't deserved the kind of death that the Red Skull had. And if Red Skull had already been gone... No, it had been Red Skull. Lukin might still have been in there, but so had Red Skull; there was no where else he could have gone to.

Even though Tony was dead to the world, it was comforting to have him there, and Steve stayed in bed next to him for a long time, not really thinking about anything in particular, just enjoying the warmth of Tony beside him. Eventually, though, he got up and went into the small bathroom to shower.

The bandage on his forehead got in the way when he tried to wash the blood out of his hair, so he yanked it off. The stitches, when he inspected them in the bathroom mirror, were small and even, and the cut had long since stopped bleeding.

All of the civilian clothing he'd managed to accumulate over the past two weeks had blown up with Sharon's car. Luckily, Tony's clothes had still been hanging in the room's tiny closet; a couple minutes of searching had turned up a selection of the worn-out jeans and t-shirts that Tony wore in the lab. The jeans were tight on Steve, and the fabric of the shirt stretched taunt across his shoulders, but they also weren't covered with mud, soot, and Lukin and Bucky's blood.

He emerged, still toweling his hair dry, to find Tony awake again, sitting up on his elbows and blinking around the room blearily. "You left," he observed fuzzily.

"I took a shower," Steve said. "You'll want to, too. You have soot in your hair."

Tony's lips quirked; Steve could almost see him waking up. "From the Peking. I got the blood out of my beard; I must have forgotten to do something about that."

"Blood?" Steve raised his eyebrows.

"I used the Extremis to hack the Mandarin's lightning ring." Tony scrubbed his good hand over his face, then dug his fingers into his hair, making it stand on end even more than it already had been. "He'd made the rings part of his body, so I ran the current through the armor and back into him. But I think I shorted something out doing it; now I can't access anything through the Extremis except my armor."

Translation: Tony had used the computers in his head to electrocute himself, in the hopes that this would hurt the Mandarin along with him, and now they didn't work anymore. That still didn't explain the presence of any blood, and Steve could only assume it had been another nosebleed.

"I'm going to go shower now," Tony said, probably correctly interpreting the expression on Steve's face, which, if it matched the way he felt, hopefully conveyed the depths to which he thought Tony was a self-destructive idiot.

Tony climbed out of bed, then stood still for a moment, testing his balance. As he walked toward the bathroom door, he stripped the sling off again, followed by his shirt, giving Steve a clear view of the purple and black bruises on his shoulder and the bandages on his ribs.
Steve had known things had to change; he just hadn't known how bad they'd gotten.

No, that wasn't right. He'd never realized how bad things had been with Tony all along. He'd been able to walk away from today's fight, if only just, but there'd been other times when he hadn't been. He didn't seem to care how much damage he took, what alcohol, what his heart, what some supervillain's fists, what the Extremis might do to him, almost as if he were punishing himself for some indefinable failure.

It was tempting to blame it all on the whole Registration mess, on his own temporary death, but the drinking had been long before that.

When Tony finally came out, his hair still dripping, Steve was sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting.

Tony was wearing faded jeans, but was still bare-chested. He pulled a new dress shirt out of the closet and shrugged it on carefully.

"How long are you going to keep doing this?" Steve asked.

Tony looked up, fingers pausing on his shirt buttons. "What, waking up when you're gone? Until I get used to having you back, I suppose." He gave a one-shouldered shrug. "Um," he hesitated, "unless you're not staying? Then I won't have to. Get used to it, I mean."

Where in the hell would Steve be going? "No," he said, shaking his head, "I don't--" he broke off, then started again, "I mean trying to run everything until you end up running yourself into the ground."

Tony frowned, looking honestly confused and a little offended. "There was no one else who could do it." He wasn't just talking about the communications, Steve knew. He wasn't telling the entire truth, either.

Steve stood up; he wasn't having this conversation while looking up at Tony. "No," he said, "I don't think that's why. You've been doing this for years, for almost as long as I've known you -- I just never noticed." He hadn't wanted to notice. "Just like I didn't notice what was going on with Wanda," he went on. "Just like I didn't notice when Carol started drinking. You were the only one who picked up on that."

"I--" Tony started, holding one hand up as if to halt Steve.

Steve kept on talking, overriding him; Tony could claim the benefit of personal experience all he wanted; it had been Steve's job to know what was going on with his team, and he hadn't. "Bucky is the closest thing I've ever had to a little brother," he said, voice rising, "and he was a goddamn assassin and I didn't know until he'd been with me for months. You were supposed to be my best friend, and I didn't even notice when you started drinking until someone else told me." He hadn't realized how many things he'd let himself miss, how many things had slipped under his radar, until he started listing them. He was half-shouting by the time he finished, not sure if he was more upset with Tony or himself.

"That wasn't your fault," Tony protested.

Steve’s vision actually went white for a moment, narrow and tunneled. "You were fucking suicidal, Tony, and I didn't even notice!"
There was a long moment of dead silence.

Tony was staring at Steve, eyes wide and startled, as if he couldn't believe what Steve had just said. Steve couldn't believe he'd said it, either; he wanted more than anything to take the words back, to have never said them, to make them untrue.

"I'm sorry," he said, very softly, dropping his gaze, all of the anger suddenly draining out of him, leaving him feeling hollow and drained.

Steve looked back up to find Tony attempting a smile, but failing miserably. "Why?" Tony asked. He stared down at the buttons of his half-closed shirt, fiddling with one. "You didn't say anything that wasn't true."

Steve was silent for a moment, feeling sick, as if the air had been knocked out of him. He had hoped that Tony would deny it, tell him that he was out of line and over-reacting.

"I will never understand," he finally managed, "why you hate yourself so much."

Tony made another painful attempt at a smile. "I thought this Registration mess would have given you a clue."

Steve caught his eyes, and said quietly, "I know you can do horrible things because you hate yourself. I just don't understand why." He dropped his gaze again, unable to look at Tony for a moment.

"I don't know either." Out of the corner of his eye, Steve could see that Tony was also staring at the floor, expression blank. "I mean, I've done things..."

"Now you have a chance to undo them." Steve looked up, catching Tony's eyes again. "We all have a second chance. This time around, he wouldn't let himself be willfully blind to so many things; this time he'd do things right from the start. And he wasn't going to let Tony destroy himself again over this. Yes, some of the things he'd done were wrong, but he'd done them for the greater good; he didn't have to torture himself to try to make up for them. It wasn't fair to Tony or to anyone else. This was Steve's second chance, too.

Tony smiled again, but there was still no humor in it. "I think I've already used up more second chances with you than I really deserve."

Oh for God's sake. "I think I get to decide how many second chances you get from me," Steve took a long step closer to Tony, so that they were only a few inches apart. Even with Registration effectively on its way out, he couldn't keep the superhero community together on his own. Without someone from the pro-Registration side, without Tony, everything they'd managed to patch back together over the past couple of weeks would fall apart again as soon as everyone realized that the immediate crisis was gone. "There are things we still need to fix, and I can't do them alone."

In the communications room earlier, the last time they'd been standing this close, the dim light had prevented him from getting a real look at Tony. Now, under the harsh fluorescent lighting most of the Helicarrier's rooms had, Steve could see the circles under Tony's eyes, every bit as dark as they'd been two weeks ago. His eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed, so that he looked exhausted even right after a few hours of sleep, and he was too pale, although that might be because they hadn't gotten much sun lately. In spite of it all, he was still beautiful.
He also looked like he might shatter if you hit him wrong. Steve had watched Tony fall apart before, more than once, and he couldn't handle watching that again. Unlike Wanda, Tony had managed to keep his problems from affecting the rest of the team, but that hadn't made it hurt any less. He had to say something, anything to keep Tony with him, to stop him from going off somewhere to self-destruct again. He couldn't walk away this time, not any more, not again.

Steve laid a hand on Tony's good shoulder. "I'm not going to do this alone," he repeated.

Tony's lips quirked. "Steve, you're constitutionally incapable of quitting."

"I tried doing this alone, and I hated it," Steve told him. Even before the Avengers had broken up, things had never really been right when Tony wasn't there. And the fight over Registration had been the absolute worst two months of his life. "Don't make me do this alone again." It came out a hoarse whisper, as much plea as command.

Tony didn't say anything; instead he stepped forward, closing the last few inches between them, and placed a hand on the back of Steve's head, fingers sliding into his hair. Tony's other arm wrapped around him, hand coming to rest between his shoulder blades, and then he was kissing Steve, gently at first, then more firmly. He was very good at kissing.

Steve reached up and curved his hand over the side of Tony's face, tracing the line of Tony's cheekbone with his thumb, and Tony made that little humming noise in the back of his throat that Steve had already decided was one of his favorite sounds.

He wrapped his arm around Tony's waist -- carefully, because he remembered the cracked ribs even if Tony was determined to ignore them -- and rested his palm against the small of Tony's back for a moment, before sliding his hand down into the back pocket of Tony's jeans and pulling Tony forward, so that their bodies were pressed together.

Steve still couldn't think of a way to say, "I love you" , that didn't sound trite and silly. After Tony's confession just before they both went out to the battlefield, saying it now felt like an afterthought. He should have said it then.

Tony broke the kiss and began pressing open-mouthed kisses down the side of Steve's neck, while simultaneously working on the zipper of Steve's borrowed jeans.

Tony's shirt was still only half-buttoned, so it was the work of a moment to have it open again. If Steve said something now, Tony would think it was just an attempt to reassure him, to make him feel better. Or worse, he'd think it was some kind of ploy to make him stay. And he couldn't let Tony think that.

Steve let go of Tony and stepped back, then took him by the wrist and led him over to the bed. He sat, pulling Tony down with him, then leaned forward to kiss him again.

Steve ran his hands up Tony's arms, pulling his shirt down off his shoulders, mindful of the injured one, then pulled back again to kiss the mottled array of dark bruises on Tony's right shoulder.

Fortunately for both of them at the moment, Tony was left-handed.

Neither of them had made a sound since the first kiss, but somehow the silence made things all the more intense. Steve couldn't think of the right thing to say, the right way to tell Tony that he loved him, but there were other ways he could let him know.
Steve was leaning on one elbow, his arm a heavy weight across Tony's waist, hand warm against his back. Tony stared at him with half-lidded eyes, absently enjoying the sight of Steve's bare and slightly sweaty chest, which he had a very good view of from this angle.

Lying on his right side made his shoulder hurt, but lying the other way would have put pressure on his ribs, and they hurt more, with the dull, steady ache of knitting bone. Nothing on his body was as painful as it had been twenty minutes ago, though; that was the wonderful thing about endorphins.

Even the headache was better, although it would probably come back if he tried to do anything with the Extremis. If the Mandarin's rings really had permanently damaged something, that was going to be a problem, but Steve was rubbing small circles between his shoulder blades, and it was currently difficult to care.

For once, all of the nagging worries and thoughts that usually clamored for attention inside his head were distant and fuzzy, and Tony knew that he was falling asleep again. "What are you going to do," he asked, his own voice sounding far away, "now that Red Skull's dead?" Everything was over and done with, and Steve could go where he wanted now, once they dealt with Registration, which actually might not be that difficult at this point, since things on the Hill were probably devolving into a mass of hysterical finger-pointing to rival Wall Street on Black Friday. Maybe some of the DoD people would throw themselves out the Pentagon's windows and finally stop bothering him about patents.

Steve frowned for a second, blue eyes going distant. "I honestly haven't given it much thought yet," he said, running his hand slowly down Tony's spine. It came to rest on his hip, thumb gently tracing back and forth over his hipbone, and Steve's face relaxed again, back into the open, content expression he'd been wearing for the past few minutes.

"Mmm," Tony said intelligently, closing his eyes and shifting closer to Steve, who slid an arm around him again. Being this close to Steve was nice. He was such a wonderfully solid presence, and Red Skull hadn't killed him, and the subway hadn't blown up, and he was willing to overlook the fact that Tony was a self-destructive and generally worthless mess. The fact that Steve wanted him there with him was... there had been times during the Registration fight that Tony had been sure he'd succeeded in permanently destroying everything that had ever existed between them. But they'd both survived, and Steve actually wanted him. Steve hadn't needed to ask Tony not to make him do all this on his own; those two months without Steve, it had been like hell, worse than when he'd been trying to drink himself to death, because this time, there had been nothing to turn to to make the pain go away. Worse, so much worse, than when they'd been fighting, because at least then, he'd known Steve was out there somewhere.

He could never put Steve through anything like that. And right now, with Steve so close that Tony could hear him breathing, he couldn't imagine ever wanting to leave.

Steve leaned closer, pressing his cheek against the top of Tony's head and tightening his arm for a second before pulling away. "I haven't eaten since breakfast," he said, "and you didn't eat breakfast. It's..." he paused, "eight o'clock. If we're lucky, they'll still be serving dinner in the commissary."
"I'm technically still the Director," Tony said, opening his eyes. "If they're not, I can make them re-open the kitchen."

Steve grinned. "It's good to know people with power."

"In the Biblical sense, you mean?" Tony smirked, then sat up, stretching and carefully rotating his shoulder. It was stiff and the muscles pulsed painfully when he moved it.

Steve blushed, but didn't stop grinning that slightly goofy grin.

Ten minutes later, they were cleaned up and wearing the same slightly-crumpled clothes they had worn for about five minutes earlier. Tony's hair, which had finally stopped standing up after the shower, was once again sticking up every which way. Given his brush with electricity earlier, he decided to give up on trying to make it do anything else.

The hallway was still darkened, lit only by security lights -- the Helicarrier had to conserve power while it was underwater. Steve hadn't said anything, but now that Tony was more awake, he could feel what had been said earlier hanging between them.

Tony wasn't sure how Steve had known; he'd never said anything to him. The only people who had ever confronted him before -- not about the drinking, which everyone had had something to say about, but about the reasons behind it -- were Jan and Happy. Jan had known what Tony had been trying to do to himself even before he had, when he'd still been thinking of alcohol as a temporary solution rather than a permanent one. Happy… had just been very, very good at seeing to the heart of things.

However Steve had figured things out -- maybe from that tape? He'd probably mentioned wanting to die somewhere on there, since it had never been harder to make himself keep going than it had been at that point -- knowing that he knew made Tony feel exposed, like Steve could see right through him to all of the broken and missing parts.

He didn't want Steve's pity. He didn't need it, nor did he particularly deserve it. If he ever hoped to regain Steve's respect, he needed Steve not to feel sorry for him. Which might be difficult at the moment, since he was pretty sure all of the bruises made him look fairly pathetic.

Then again, Steve hadn't seemed to mind them a few minutes ago.

Just as Tony was starting to smirk slightly at the memory, Fury and Dugan stepped out into the hallway in front of them.

"Rogers, Stark," Fury offered them a smirk of his own. "What a coincidence. We were just lookin' for ya."

If that was true, there was no way it was a coincidence, given the number of security cameras Tony knew the Helicarrier was riddled with. Every time they passed one, the faint hum of its digital transmissions caused his headache to flare up again. If the Extremis was going to keep doing this… He'd talk to Maya about it tomorrow.

Steve turned to Tony, ears going pink. "Tell me there aren't any cameras in the Director's room," he said.

"Not unless they added some while I was gone," Tony assured him.
"Nah, the Director's room is clean," Fury said. "Now, the flying cars, on the other hand…"

Dugan grinned. Even with the bright orange mustache, the expression was surprisingly evil. "I thought about telling you and Sharon about those a few time, but Nick insisted it was need to know."

Tony raised an eyebrow at Steve, who was now wearing the expression of a man who wished he were still dead. He loved Steve, but that was the sort of thing most people over the age of nineteen had the sense not to do. Granted, there had been that one time with Rumiko in the back of a limousine, but the limousine hadn't been a convertible, and it hadn't belonged to Nick Fury.

"Was there any, um, particular reason you were looking for us?" Steve asked, pointedly staring at the wall several inches above Fury's head.

"The Mandarin regained consciousness an hour or so ago. He doesn't seem to have any powers anymore." Fury took a cigar out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth, unlit. "We're still tryin' to figure out what to do with his rings."

"Put them in a lead box, and send it to the bottom of the San Marinas trench," Tony advised. That would probably only work for a couple of months, until somebody inevitably found them again, but they couldn't be destroyed, and sending things into space never worked long-term, either. They'd only end up coming back, probably even more powerful from some form of cosmic radiation.

"That's what Kennedy suggested, but yer crazy pet scientist wants to study them."

Of course Maya did. "Don't let her," Tony said. "They're dangerous." And Maya honestly couldn't recognize when technology might be a threat rather than a benefit. She hadn't understood why he didn't want further experimenting done with the Extremis, why using it was dangerous, no matter how many times he'd tried to explain it to her.

"I see at least one of you's been to the infirmary." Dugan nodded at the stitches on Steve's forehead. "Did you go," this to Tony, "or am I gonna have to have a talk with Dr. Simek?"

"I went," Tony told him. "The sling got in the way."

Dugan snorted. "Now that I think about it," he said to Fury, "things weren't all that different when you were gone."

"We're heading down to the mess hall," Steve broke in. "Do you know if the kitchen is still open?"

"All you capes are havin' a party in the officers' mess," Fury said, "so the kitchen's definitely still running."

Which meant everyone would be there. Tony felt a hell of a lot better than he had before Steve had gotten back, but he wasn't sure he was ready to face that. "Did you need to debrief me?" he asked Fury.

"Nah," Fury shrugged. "I can do that later. Go have fun; you've both earned it." He clapped Steve on the shoulder, then brushed past them and walked off down the hall, followed by Dugan.

"I guess this will let us see how everyone's doing all at once," Steve said. He nodded in the direction of the mess. "Do you think anyone's thrown a punch yet?"
"No," Tony said. "If anyone's planning on hitting things, they'll be saving it for me." Not that he'd blame them, but this wasn't the time to cause a scene.

Steve put one broad hand on Tony's good shoulder and propelled him gently down the hall. "Things worked out fine at the safehouse."

"There were compelling reasons not to fight then," Tony reminded him. "The Doombots and ninjas are gone now."

"Well they'll have to get used to working together again sometime," Steve said, in the determined tone that meant he had decided to stop listening to anyone else's objections. He was convinced that they needed both of them to repair the superhero community. Tony wasn't certain he was entirely right; everyone would follow Steve, regardless of what side they'd been on. It would almost certainly be easier if Tony weren't part of the equation. There were lots of people who had good reason not to trust him these days.

The officers' mess was brightly lit, and someone had strung red and blue streamers up along a few of the tables. It was strangely quiet, though, and the assorted Avengers were huddled into groups divided along New and Mighty lines. The only people from opposite sides sitting together were Sam and Jan, who were involved in an intense discussion with Agent 13 and Winter Soldier. Winter Soldier had one leg propped up on a chair, and was eyeing the rest of the room warily. He looked up when Steve and Tony came in, nodding at Steve.

"Looks like Bucky got his leg taken care of," Steve said. Tony belatedly remembered that he'd meant to ask what had happened when they'd taken out Red Skull. He'd have to bring it up once they were alone again.

Peter, who'd been sitting with the rest of the New Avengers -- MJ, the baby, and the two Jessicas included -- bounced to his feet and came to meet them. He wasn't wearing his costume. Most of the Avengers weren't, and it felt almost odd, now, to see everyone in plainclothes. "Where have you guys been? It's like an eighth grade dance in here, you know, with half of us avoiding the other half in case they have cooties." He frowned at Tony. "Wow. You still look awful. You weren't joking about the electrocution thing, were you?" Before Tony could answer, he turned to Steve and went on, "But you look okay. That's good. They," he nodded at Sam, Sharon, and Winter Soldier, "said your car blew up, and we were getting worried."

"Sorry," Steve said, shrugging. "There were things to take care of."

Tony blinked, still trying to process the stream of words. Last time he'd checked, he'd been pretty sure Peter hated him.

As if Peter's approach had been some kind of signal, Sam and Jan both stood and came over.

"Um, right, leaving," Peter said. "The adults can talk now." He returned to the New Avengers' table and sat backwards in one of the chairs. A moment later, he was involved in what looked like some kind of poking fight with Iron Fist.

"I see you got the doctors to look at you," Sam said to Steve as he approached them. "You couldn't even leave the bandage on for a day, could you?"

"It got in the way when I tried to wash my hair," Steve said, not quite defensively.
Jan took Tony by the arm and pulled him off to one side. "How are you doing?" she asked, frowning up at him.

"Fine," Tony evaded.

From Jan's expression, she didn't entirely believe him, but she didn't push, waving a hand and changing the subject. "We're going to need you in DC," she said. "Dickstein was arrested by the Department of Homeland Security this afternoon, and there's going to be a congressional investigation into the whole thing. SHRA, HUSAC, Cap's assassination, all of it. And now you," she stabbed a finger at Tony, "are going to get on the stand and tell them how you thought Registration was a bad idea from the start, and how you were only doing damage control when you supported it."

"I was trying to do damage control," Tony protested. Jan had objected to a lot of what they'd done while fighting Steve's people, and rightly so. But she had known him longer than almost anyone, and he'd hoped that, by now, she'd figured out what he had been trying to do.

Jan smiled sympathetically, and reached up to pat him on the shoulder. "I know. Now you need to tell people that. We're going to need to present a united front on this. For one thing, it'll keep people from trying to take you down along with Dickstein's bunch. And after what you've gone through to keep this from getting worse, you don't deserve that. And Steve sure as hell doesn't."

"Thank you," Tony told her quietly. He reached out and squeezed one of her shoulders gently. "I'll get down there as soon as I can." He paused, looking around the room. Steve was the only six-foot-plus blond in evidence. "Where's Bob?"

"Off with Lindy." Jan shrugged, and tucked a piece of hair behind one ear. "She decided this would be too much excitement for him." She nodded at him, then went to take a seat with Carol and Simon.

Tony, who could feel half the room's eyes on him, could sympathize. He turned back to Steve, who was still talking intently to Sam.

"I just hope you know what you're doing," Sam was saying.

"Trust me," Steve said, "I always do."

This wasn't technically true, but Steve's ability to throw himself into things without stopping to think through at all was one of his more endearing traits.

Sam rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say, Steve."

In an obvious attempt to change the subject, Steve gestured at Sam's shoulder and asked, "Where's Redwing?"

"In the room; he won't come out." Sam shook his head. "He still hasn't forgiven me for the subway. I think he's sulking."

"I didn't think birds sulked," Steve said, raising his eyebrows.

"Raptors do. Songbirds and pigeons aren't smart enough." Sam clapped Steve on the arm, then went to sit at the end of the New Avengers' table, next to Strange and Wong.
Steve nudged Tony with his shoulder. "Let's get food before someone else buttonholes us."

SHIELD's kitchen was clearly running low on supplies after two weeks hiding underwater, but they'd managed to throw together a halfway decent meal. There was no coffee, though, Tony noted with disappointment.

Steve loaded his plate with food, then looked over, frowned, and began adding things to Tony's plate at random. Tony sighed, but didn't object, even though he wasn't particularly hungry.

Steve took him by the elbow, towing him along to where Sam was sitting. As they passed the Mighty Avengers table, Simon toasted them with a glass of water. Carol, next to him, had her arms folded across her chest and was too busy staring sullenly at Jessica Drew to look up. Simon put his glass down, sighing, and looked from one woman to the other with a resigned expression.

At the New Avengers table, Danny had let off poking at Peter and resumed eating. Peter was now poking MJ with a fork; she was responding in kind.

"Come on," Luke held up a spoonful of mashed potatoes, waving it at the baby. "I think she's old enough for real food."

Jessica Jones protectively shifted the little girl away, snagging the spoon out of Luke's hand and setting it firmly on the table. "Our baby's first solid food is not going to be SHIELD mashed potatoes. They came from a box."

"I know." Danny said without looking up from his plate. "Aren't they great?"


Danny ducked away, shielding his plate. "All carbohydrates are good."

Tony kept his eyes down and followed Steve to the far end of the table. It was good to see everyone so relaxed, but he felt more out of place than ever amidst all the cheerful domesticity of the New Avengers. The Avengers had always been a family, but now it was no longer one he could be a part of; he'd given up that right.

He and Steve sat down across from Sam and Strange, with several empty seats between them and the Luke/Danny/Jessica/Peter group. They ate in silence, Steve intent on the food and Tony unable to think of anything to say with Sam and Strange both watching him. Tony pushed his plate away before he'd finished more than half of it; Steve, like most superhumans, had an exaggerated idea of how much normal people needed to eat. Wong, beside Strange, was staring at his own untouched plate with the disapproving eyes of a man who knew he could make better.

Tony sat back and closed his eyes, rubbing at his forehead -- the headache had come back, throbbing dully behind his eyes.

"Are you all right?"

He opened his eyes, smiling a little, to find Steve watching him with mild concern and a certain amount of suspicion. "Caffeine headache," he said. He wasn't going to admit that it was mostly the Extremis, and the fact that he hadn't had coffee in hours certainly wasn't helping. "Looks like you were right about all that coffee."
Steve shook his head, and his concerned expression shifted to one of amused exasperation. He shoved his empty plate away and scooted his chair slightly closer to Tony's. "So," he said, "what did Jan have to say?"

"Dickstein's been arrested. It's looking more and more like he set you up." When Fury's people had searched Lukin's apartment, they'd found a veritable gold mine of computer files, letters, and other incriminating evidence proving a link between the Skull's organization and Dickstein's office. "There's going to be an investigation," he went on. "I'm probably going to need to testify. You will too."

Steve frowned, blond eyebrows drawing together. "The fact that I was dead when you got me pardoned for treason should make that interesting."

Tony rested a hand on Steve's knee, under the table. "The pardon will hold. That was the President, plus an act of Congress." Because they'd all felt guilty and been acutely conscious of how bad they'd looked, something Tony had made certain to remind them of. "I didn't actually have anything to do with it."

Steve sat back, draping one arm casually over the back of Tony's chair. Tony could feel the solid warmth of it against his shoulders.

"I was technically guilty, you know."

"Yes," Tony said, "but you were standing up for what was right, just like you always do."

Steve tightened his arm very slightly, not exactly a hug, but the intent of one. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Tony closed his eyes for a second, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. His head didn't hurt quite so badly now that he'd eaten, but the low thrum of the Helicarrier's communication network, now back online, still grated painfully at the edges of his consciousness. He reached out tentatively to access the armor, safely stored back in his room, and felt a surge of relief at the lack of pain when the briefcase opened. He still had his armor. If everything else was gone, it was a more than fair price for having Steve back.

Even if he'd lost the armor, it would still have been worth it.

Two weeks ago, his life had been empty; even getting out of bed in the morning had been a struggle. He'd needed to run things, needed to make Steve's death worth something, hadn't had the luxury of getting himself killed, and he'd seen the prospect of years and years without Steve stretching ahead of him, a lifetime of hollow penance.

Tony was just as exhausted and run down as he'd been then, but with Steve back, he didn't feel empty anymore. He couldn't do this on his own any longer, didn't have the emotional reserves left, but he could follow Steve anywhere.

"Once things settle down a bit," Steve said, voice breaking into Tony's thoughts, "what are we going to do about the Avengers?"

"I-" Tony started, staring at him blankly.
"We need to reassemble a functional team," Steve went on. He grinned, eyes very blue, and rubbed at the back of his neck with the hand that wasn't draped over Tony's shoulder. "No epithets or adjectives, just the Avengers again. I want us to rebuild the Mansion. And I want my home back."

Tony was not going to cry. Not with Luke Cage watching. "That's going to take some time," he managed. "It's going to be a major construction project."

"I know," Steve said, looking sad for a moment. Then he grinned again, that wide smile that could light up an entire room. "But it will be worth it."

~End~