It's my problem if I feel the need to hide

by Enmuse (Scifiroots)

Summary

The (first?) major story in the Starring Role universe. Six months after the Battle of New York, Toni has yet to reveal Iron Man's identity to the team. Maintaining her secret identity is only one of many problems, though, as she builds new armors, struggles with developing relationships with her teammates, works on company projects, and tries to figure out why there's a group of people wearing yellow jumpsuits striking at her company. Keeping her secret identity is one of many problems, that is, until everything comes back around to that one secret.

Notes

This story began in the late summer of 2013 as I had the idea of Toni being kidnapped. I was working on the Avengers film timeline story at that point and I was running into the problem of having no context for the kidnapping. NaNoWriMo 2013 came around and I decided to
work on a major story for the Starring Role universe. I more than won the word count for the month but the story still wasn't done.

The writing process of this has been a long tale of heartache and quite a lot of discouraging feelings. I fell immediately in love with this idea of a complex Toni back when I first wrote "Girl that glitters" but there was suddenly so much about her that I had in my head that felt too overwhelming to write. I've had to sacrifice some of my headcanon and also accept that some things just won't reach the page. I've also had to take a deep breath and remind myself that unless I want to drive myself crazy, I'm not going to reach perfection in the portrayal I wish my readers to see. At this point, I just really need to get this story out there and accept that I'll probably be returning to this to possibly rewrite or add in side stories.

Also, this story went through a variety of genre changes. At one point I thought it would be more action/adventure-ish team fic with a side of romance, then I had a primarily-romance story outlined, then something like it is now, and back to something else again. What I've ended up with is a focus on Toni's identity crisis and the issue of "coming clean" to her teammates coming to a head. For a story that was intended to build up to Steve and Toni getting together (and actually have them together by the end!), that romance plot sure got pushed to the side. Characters will go their own way, I find.

**tl;dr** — This has been one hell of a writing process and I hope you enjoy. I feel very mixed emotions about it and could really use some feedback on this.

I owe a huge debt to the amazing [starlight_so_bright](https://www.tumblr.com) who worked with me for a few months in 2014 as I tried to prepare this story for the SciFi Big Bang. It didn't get completed, but she got me through some major revisions and helped me improve this story.
Chapter 1

She dreamed of reaching out in desperation.

"Don't mistake it for kindness," Toni said, voice raspy.

Obediah laughed lowly as he tightened his bare fingers around Toni's Iron Man gauntlet. "Oh, I haven't mistaken anything about you since you were a kid."

'Except you always underestimated my ability to pull through,' she thought. Toni could feel her muscles twitching in protest beneath her compromised armor, but she was determined to hold on. Obediah had tried to kill her again and again, but as much as she hated him for that and for what he had been doing to the people she cared to protect, she couldn't bear to let him simply fall to his death. Let him face the consequences of his crimes. Let him fucking rot in a jail cell, let him die there. But not by her hand. She couldn't.

"Now it's time for both of us to go," Obediah told her, teeth baring in a wide smile. His fingers pried into the loose edge of the gauntlet's palm and Toni tried to clench her fingers to keep both the metal in place and hold onto the man's hand.

Obediah only pulled harder and despite Toni's best efforts, her fingers unfurled as metal plating shifted and cut into base of her fingers.

"No!" she shouted.

As she felt Obediah's grip slide away, she stared at the man's face filling with fear and rage. He slipped out of her sight before she could attempt rolling over to maybe — just maybe — reach out to grab him.

Obediah yelled as he fell and Toni knew it would haunt her. The man she had often thought of as a father crashed into the overloaded arc reactor below and a fresh burst of uncontrolled electricity exploded outward. She felt the current jolt through her again and her already taxed body jerked momentarily before dropping her back against the sagging struts of what used to be the warehouse's skylight. Through hazy vision she watched the blur of clouds obscuring the moon overhead as her breath hitched. The sound of the arc reactor in her chest clicking oddly followed her into unconsciousness.

"Madame?"

Toni jerked upright, blinking visions of the past away from her eyes as she tried to orient herself. She flung an arm out to steady herself and winced as she slapped the workbench too hard and something clanged loudly on the floor.

"It is five minutes past midnight on November 2, 2012, Madame," JARVIS said without prompt. Toni raised trembling fingers to her sweaty face and pushed back the strands of hair tangling on her forehead. She loved her AI. Unlike anyone else who may have tried to wake her from a nightmare, he wouldn't question her or push to comfort her beyond announcing the information that would allow her to regain her bearings.
Her breathing returned to normal, Toni asked, "What is it, J?"

"Ms. Potts left instructions to remind you to get some sleep before tomorrow's meeting. In addition she said, I quote, 'In a real bed, Toni,'" JARVIS replied, including a sound clip from Pepper.

Toni leaned over her workbench and smiled wryly at its surface. There were paper sketches of armor designs under her tablet and judging by the slightly smeared ink, she probably had some pen marks on her face.

Toni continued to sit and stare at the sketches, trying to remember which armor model she had meant them for. "Madame?" JARVIS said after a few minutes.

"Yeah, J?" She looked around for a pen to mark one of the sketches.

"Do you plan to retire to your room?" he asked, and Toni could hear a hint of resignation.

Her lips twisted bitterly as she found her pen and scrawled a messy XVI on her sketch. "You know the answer. Who's still up?" Toni stood and grimaced at how weak her knees felt, a combination from the position she had been in when she fell asleep and the aftershocks of the flashback.

"Agent Barton retired to his rooms at midnight. Dr. Banner is reading in the library. Captain Rogers entered the gym fifteen minutes ago," JARVIS recited; again proving his status as Toni's favorite when he did not attempt to reprimand her for foregoing sleep.

"Fantastic. Keep monitoring the fabrication of the Mark X. Prep the Mark VIII, I need to see a soldier about a work-out."

Toni took the time to duck into the bathroom and slip out of her clothes to take a quick shower. As she made her way to the secured armor room, Toni stepped onto the dais that allowed for proper assemblage of the Mark VIII. As wonderful as the quick suit-up armor designs were, there was something that felt more secure about the process of JARVIS supervising the assembly platform.

In all, it took approximately twenty minutes for her to get cleaned up and fully suited. She took the restricted elevator up to the recreation floor and headed straight for the gym. She paused before she pushed open the doors, listening to the steady impacts of Steve's fists against reinforced punching bags she'd designed. She could even hear his huffs of exertion and guessed that she wasn't the only one looking to chase away demons.

As soon as she pushed through the door, Steve threw one last punch and stepped away from the bag to turn. His eyes widened slightly at the sight of Iron Man but the surprise was quickly followed by a warm smile.

"Heard you could use some company," Toni said.

Steve scratched at the edge of the tape covering his knuckles and smiled ruefully. "Well I like seeing you, so I'm glad you came in. It's been a while since just you and me sparred, hasn't it?"

Toni walked further into the room. "I guess it has. Thor and I have a regular schedule, you know. That's not just a special thing for him and I. You want to reserve a time, we can try and make it work."

"I have the feeling our 'appointments' would be broken more often than not," Steve replied, his smile dimming a little. "I, uh, don't mean that I hold that against you! You're busy, I know." The blond dragged a hand over his face as he chuckled; Toni was pretty sure it was in self-deprecation. "Sorry, I feel a little out of sorts tonight."
"More so than usual?" Toni prompted as she approached him.

Steve crossed his arms over his chest with a sigh. He tilted his head and stared straight at the helmet's faceplate; he often did that, like he was trying to see past the mask by pure force of will. "It's just another day where I remember everyone else has something in their lives to keep them busy."

"I'm sure if you asked the right people, they could give you something," Toni offered carefully. They had skimmed this topic on occasion when Iron Man and Cap fell into each other's company at times of clear frustration or distress outside of the battlefield.

"I know S.H.I.E.L.D. would like me for some things," Steve admitted, but his grimace expressed what he thought of that. "But I don't like not knowing all that's going on. And... I kind of like a break from what I do the rest of the time. I don't always want to be a soldier, you know?"

Toni's vision swam unexpectedly as she remembered staring out the window of a Hum-Vee as the soldier escorting her stepped out and yelled at her to stay down. She watched perfect circles blossom to life in a spray of gunfire that pierced through the soldier's body and the frame of the vehicle. Thankful that the voice modulator and restricted audio output covered her ragged breathing, Toni eventually mustered up the strength to mutter, "Not a soldier."

Steve smiled and rolled his eyes playfully. "Then you know what I mean."

Toni tried her best to shove aside the haunting memories. She asked, "What do you want to do?"

"That... I don't know." Steve sighed and rolled his shoulders in a clearly frustrated shrug. "It just needs to be... something. Productive, worthwhile. Everyone else has other jobs they fulfill. Well, not Thor, but he's so..."

"Enamored with Midgar," Toni finished, grinning to herself. "He entertains himself fairly well and keeps the agents assigned to keep an eye on him in public quite busy."

Steve snorted a laugh. "That is very true." He shrugged again and resumed his piercing stare at Iron Man. "What about you? Do you ever want to be someone else?"

Toni closed her eyes as she felt her lips pull up into a small smile. "Most days, but now I get to be that someone else."

When she opened her eyes, Toni could tell Steve was looking straight at the eye slits. She knew the external glow would keep even a hint of her face from showing, but it was still unnerving to be staring the guy straight in the eye.

"I wish you'd tell us who you are," Steve said quietly, something sad in his expression that belied the calm tone of his words.

Toni felt twitchy, as she always did when the topic of Iron Man's identity was brought up. She swallowed hard before speaking. "I have my reasons, Cap." The blond nodded, as he usually did. They had had the discussion several times over their months in close quarters; thankfully Steve had come around to accepting Iron Man's secret identity. For the most part. There were still times Cap tried to press for answers.

Hoping now would not be one of those times, Toni gestured toward the part of the gym designed to withstand the enhanced strength of Captain America, Thor, and Iron Man. "Shall we?"

Steve nodded after another long moment of staring. Toni breathed a sigh of relief. She let Steve lead
the tone of their sparring; and later she nodded when he suggested they work on some cooperative moves. They operated without Steve's shield and Toni kept the repulsors off, but there was still plenty of movement to practice. It was something of a dance, actually, and Toni stifled her laughter as she thought back to weeks forced to attend ballroom dancing.

"I know it hasn't come up yet, but knowing our luck..." Steve began, trailing off with a grin. He looked gorgeous with his face glowing from exertion and excitement, sweat sticking loose strands of hair to his forehead, chest expanding just a little farther than normal as he took deep breaths.

"What's up?" Toni remembered to ask. She determinedly pulled her gaze into focus and told herself to stop letting her eyes wander.

"You and Hawkeye sort of traverse the field by whatever method works in the spur of the moment. I've seen you let Natasha balance herself on your shoulders or grab on for a boost. But what about actually traveling with someone? Can you carry someone along, if it was necessary?"

"Bridal carry wouldn't work for you?" Toni teased.

The blond winced dramatically. "Oh, my masculinity!"

Toni reached out to pat his chest with the back of her gauntlet. "Oh, honey, no one's doubting what you're packing." Her gaze dipped as the words spilled past her lips. She grimaced at the line as soon as it was out, but thankfully no one had to see her face.

Steve chuckled a little and brought his hand up to clasp Toni's against his chest. "Maybe. But, ah..." He trailed off as Toni tilted her head to a better angle so that they were more face-to-faceplate.

Steve's pupils dilated and he licked his lips in what looked like nervousness. "But, uh, what was I...? Oh, the whole using both your arms thing isn't the best strategy for battle or balance. So, what would work best?"

Toni considered the question seriously despite how much her body was urging her thoughts in another direction. Part of her mind was laughing, bitterly amused as it noted how nothing was going to happen, she was in a suit of armor, locked tight for a reason.

She ordered her thoughts back on track and she gently extracted her hand from Steve's grasp. When she started to move, he quickly let go and took half a step back. He looked ready to apologize so Toni let him go, forcing herself to

"Oof!" Steve let out a wordless sound of startled exclamation. His hands landed on the armor's shoulders. "Ah... are you teaching me to dance?"

"Did you want to?" Toni asked. Before she got a response — because she had the feeling that Steve would actually like to learn — Toni continued, "I'm answering your question, Cap." She waved her free hand. "Get one of your feet on my boot and we'd take off just fine. Once airborne it's pretty simple: tuck in close 'til we find a landing spot. Still got an arm free to help with the balance and go on the offensive if needed. I suppose if you wanted a piggy-back ride I could do that, too," she added at the end with a laugh.

"I... guess that would work." The slight waver of Steve's voice made Toni turn her head a little more — it was uncomfortable but to see him properly she would otherwise have to use additional outside monitors. She muttered privately to JARVIS to make a note for better line of sight on future armors. "You know..." Steve began haltingly. He still had his hands on the armor although Toni had loosened her demonstrative hold on his waist. Steve's gaze kept flicking away and then back to the faceplate. "Never mind." He flashed a stilted grin and drew away. Toni let him go, forcing herself to
keep reluctance from her movement. She watched silently as Steve paced farther away.

"Madame," JARVIS' voice intoned in her ear. "your meeting is in six hours. I encourage you to get some rest."

"Can it, J," she muttered back irritably.

"I think I'm gonna call it a night," Steve said. He didn't face her fully and his false smile was in play, polite and distant. "You could probably use the sleep. Thanks for the workout it was—"

"I won't sleep," Toni interrupted, startling even herself. They stood in silence for a long moment, staring at each other. Toni swallowed down her instinct to flee and admitted, "I'll just find some other work to do on my own. I can't... I won't sleep."

Steve's false cheerfulness fell away and a tired look of understanding crossed his expression. "Nightmares?" he asked quietly.

Toni's lips twitched bitterly and she shrugged. "I know you know something about that."

"I might," Steve agreed. He looked down at his hands and scratched at where the tape had covered his skin earlier. "Would you... like a little company?"

Toni closed her eyes and released a shaky sigh she knew he couldn't hear. She debated for a minute whether she should agree. Armored or not, she hated showing weakness. But she trusted Steve and by some miracle (or perhaps a fit of insanity), the man trusted her; or Iron Man, at least. "Maybe," she finally answered.

Steve's lips hitched up on one side in a commiserating smile. "I'm going to catch a shower, but we can meet in the lounge in, say, twenty? You pick what you want to do. Bruce and Toni finally finished their chess game so the board's free."

It was strange, the feeling of assurance despite the nervous pulse rushing through her veins. Toni nodded her head, not sure what to say until Steve headed for the door. "In twenty, Cap."

Steve turned around and kept walking backward without pause; "Do you need more time? You must be uncomfortable under there."

"I'll be ready in time," she told him. She would have to do a thorough wash-up and primping before her meeting anyway. She could get away with washing her face before joining Steve in the common room. God knew she had spent longer amounts of time in the armor without issue. (Despite what JARVIS was suggesting in her ear about smelling ripe for human senses. "I'm in the armor, J. I'm the only one who can smell me, it's fine.")

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They settled in the den for several hours, starting with a game of chess and progressing to crashing on the couch to watch monster movies from the '50s. Somewhere around 5:30, Toni turned her head to look at Steve and found that the blond had fallen asleep. Steve's head rested against the back of the couch, slightly turned her way, so she was able to see a hint of perfect teeth through his parted lips. The armor's enhanced senses allowed her to see the flicker of movement below closed eyelids despite the dim lighting. She watched the play of the television's light across his face.

She hoped Steve had pleasant dreams.

"Madame, might I suggest—"
"On it." Toni stood carefully, keeping an eye on Steve to see if the shift of weight on the couch caused him to wake. The blond's nose wrinkled for a moment before his expression smoothed over. Toni huffed a laugh to herself as she stood there, staring down at the man. She curled her fingers in against her palm to resist the urge to reach out. She wouldn't be able to feel it, anyway.

"Yeah, J," she finally said as she forced herself to step away. "First up, suit off. Send meeting notes up to my room, I'll take that shower now."

"A wise decision, Madame."

"Smart-ass," Toni muttered.

Steve woke to the sound of loud crunching. He jerked upright, tired mind still trying to place the sound because he knew it wasn't dangerous but...

"Morning, Cap." Hawkeye perched on the back of the couch at Steve's side. He lifted a spoon piled high with sugar-coated cereal and chewed loudly with his mouth open. He grinned when he saw Steve's grimace of distaste. Mercifully Clint chewed the next bite normally and close-mouthed.

Steve looked at the blank screen of the television and wondered when it had been turned off. The thought made him realize the obvious: Iron Man was gone. He glanced at the empty end of the couch and wished for a moment that Iron Man had woken him up instead of slipping off silently. As he rubbed the lingering sleep from his eyes, he asked, "What time is it?"

"Something like 8:45," Clint offered. "What were you up to?"

Steve smiled slightly. "Sparring with Iron Man."

Clint looked around pointedly. "Think that usually happens in the gym. And I don't see any dents around here."

"Well, then there were some monster films."

"Aw, man, I'd have liked to get in on that." Clint pointed his spoon at Steve. "Next time, get me. We're all part of the team so bonding should happen between more than just two people, you know?"

Steve ducked his head with a grin. "Sure thing. Pretty sure you were in bed and asleep, though."

Clint shrugged. "I sleep in spurts, Cap. Doesn't bother me to interrupt it with some other distraction for a bit."

Steve promised to let Clint know next time and stood up. "Anyone else around?"

"I've got a thing at S.H.I.E.L.D. in a few hours; pretty sure 'Tasha is supposed to be there, too. Bruce has been down in the lab lately. Thor's... possibly hazing the new agents trailing him by traveling to a bizarre selection of New York sites. And Iron Man's whereabouts are anyone's guess. You saw him last." Clint scraped the bottom of his bowl.

"Thanks," Steve murmured, feeling disappointed.

He thought of his exchange with Iron Man in the early hours about wanting ways to keep busy. He had found a solution to his downtime earlier in the year as New York started rebuilding; his heavy-
lifting was appreciated and he could work alongside others at the various work-sites around the city and volunteer in any number of areas. But as the recovery progressed, more expertise was needed for the rebuilding stages and his volunteering was starting to be hindered by more people recognizing him even out of uniform. Passing through he could get by without drawing much attention, but spending too long in one area around the same people apparently meant someone would put together enough memorized images to identify him. Now he haunted the rooms of the Tower all too often, waiting for his teammates’ free moments so that he could have company.

Actually, there was one person Clint hadn't mentioned. "What about Toni?"

"Well, I overheard her arguing with JARVIS on the way to the elevator, saying that her meeting started whenever she arrived so technically she wasn't late. That was probably about a half hour ago." Clint looked down at his cereal as he poked the spoon around, a little furrow forming above his nose. "Did you know she's working on a lot of armors right now? I figured you might know if this was a Stark thing or coming from a suggestion Iron Man made. Whosever idea it was, might be good for you to chat with Iron Man so he can get her to slow down. Bruce is worried about his science buddy."

"And so are you," Steve noted.

Shrugging, Clint replied, "Can't argue that. Don't get me wrong, I love a determined lady, but she gets cranky when she gets obsessive. Fury also gets this very distinctive Stark twitch when she focuses her energy all in one place. You should've seen how quickly people cleared out of the way when Fury got updates about the Helicarrier's build progress."

"I'd heard she designed it.... It seems like a big feat for one person to take on."

With a grin, Clint warned, "Don't let her hear you say that. Now it wasn't just her, but from what I know, Stark sucks at delegating and ended up doing the majority of work assigned to her and then some. S.H.I.E.L.D. pulled from a variety of resources to get the Helicarrier up and running, but you better believe it wouldn't exist without Stark. The only time I've heard Phil come close to bitching about anything was dealing with Stark's unannounced 'tours' of the construction, which promptly led to her changing things on the spot."

Steve could feel the smile stretching across his lips and knew it looked silly, but it was so easy to imagine Toni Stark striding through incomplete corridors and snapping directions at anyone in earshot. It took a few moments for him to remember what had led to this line of discussion, but he quickly sobered when he recalled Toni's apparent obsession. "I hadn't known about the multiple armors. Iron Man didn't say anything, either. Thanks for giving me a heads-up."

"No probrelo." Clint flipped off the back of the couch, managing to keep his cereal bowl balanced as he did. As he straightened, he said, "I'm heading to HQ to show up some hotshot agents on the range." He headed for the door and called over his shoulder as he left, "Remember, if you want a nap, your bed's probably more comfortable!"

_The point was to avoid sleep and the nightmares that come with it,'_ Steve thought ruefully.

Most nights his nightmares weren't so bad, not anymore. In the past couple months, he could fall asleep again after most of his nightmares, something for which he was immensely grateful. It didn't seem that Iron Man had that experience, though. Even through the voice modulator Steve had been able to hear the dread and desperation in his teammate's confession. Steve could sympathize well with that fear of sleeping, knowing that only terrible things would come to play out in his mind. Even though he assumed Iron Man wouldn't answer, Steve was tempted to ask what the other man dreamed about. He still knew so little about the armored Avenger. When it came up again (and it
would, there was no miracle cure to solve nightmare-induced insomnia), maybe he should just bite the bullet and ask. He wouldn't press the issue, but he could at least try in the hope that it might help his friend.

Those thoughts wouldn't help him keep busy for the rest of the day, though. He determined to start with something to eat and then see if he could keep Bruce company in the lab. Steve was nearing the end of his latest sketchbook, so if he finished that one he could head out later to get a new one. Or text Thor to give the guy a chore to do; it would probably be amusing to see the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents' reactions to the demigod bursting into a craft store on a mission.

Yeah, he would send that text to Thor. Steve headed for the kitchen, smiling to himself.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the readers who've stuck with this universe and welcome to my new readers! You mean the world to me. :)

*Story title is from Marina & The Diamonds' "Are you satisfied"
Toni slipped out of her blazer as she entered the workshop. "JARVIS, what Mark is the nearest to production-ready?" she asked as she tossed the blazer over a toolbox and activated her holographic workstation.

"The design designated Mark XII is 95% ready. Final details include decision of joint coverage material and whether or not to include thrusters at the elbow joints. The next closest to production is the Mark XI at 92% readiness. Final details include—"

"Alright, let's finish up the Mark XII first. I want to get this one and XI ready for fabrication in the next twenty-four hours." Toni smiled as the tension in her shoulders released. Working on the armor was always remarkably freeing. This was exactly what she needed after five hours of back-to-back meetings, including one with the SI board.

"Madame, if I may, it has been approximately fifteen hours since you last consumed anything besides a Monster, coffee, or one of DUM-E's dubious blended drinks. It has also been forty hours since you slept for more than thirty minutes."

Toni rolled her eyes at her AI's worrying. "Noted. Let's move on, J. After I make the decisions on the Mark XII I'll grab an apple or something, okay?"

"As you wish."

Two hours later, Toni ventured out from the workshop to escape JARVIS' persistent nagging. She took a tablet with her to make notes of the final adjustments to the Mark XI. The Mark XII specs were currently being processed by the fabrication units and would soon be on its way to testing stage. She had a half dozen suits to finalize and bring to production, she wanted to get them ready as soon as possible.

Still engrossed in her tablet as she made her way to the kitchen, Toni didn't realize she had company until she reached blindly for the refrigerator handle and instead felt the warm ceramic of a mug intercept her reach. She looked up sharply and blinked in surprise at the amused expression on Bruce's face.

"JARVIS announced 'incoming' and I figured I could get you to sit down for a bit by bribing you first with coffee," Bruce said. He waited patiently as Toni's fingers curled around the cup. She trusted him to hand her things, but she still hesitated when she wasn't expecting the action. He waved her towards the breakfast counter and continued, "Sit down and I'll get you some real food to eat. I doubt you've had much in the past couple days. Have you even come up in the workshop since Wednesday?"

Toni settled onto a stool and set her tablet down in favor of cradling the aromatic coffee between two hands. "I was at meetings all morning, or did you forget I don't wear a blouse and skirt during an inventing binge?"

"Right. But was this morning the first time you surfaced?" Bruce asked with a chuckle.
"Maybe," Toni replied, shrugging. "Pepper would have called to harass me about missed meetings otherwise."

"Isn't she not your assistant now?" Bruce asked as he stirred something delicious-smelling in a large skillet.

"Sometimes we might forget that detail." Toni freed one hand to look over the Mark XI specs.

"Toni, set aside the work for a few minutes?" Bruce asked in a tone that suggested he knew very well she wouldn't be able to do it.

Smiling slightly, Toni said, "You know me too well for that, Green Bean." She scanned the detailed interweaving of wires that would carry the signals along the suit's forearm. Battle scenarios played out in her head, and she imagined the sharp jolt of reaction time that went too fast for her body to handle. Frustrated, she shook her head and took a large gulp of coffee. She muttered, "Too many details to sort out. This is important."

Bruce sighed again but only said, "I believe you. Just give me a few minutes of eye contact when you're eating, okay?"

Toni briefly glanced up to cast him a wry look. "You're a hard bargainer, Sir, but I think I can manage that." She looked back at her designs and lost herself in rearranging the algorithms for more human-bearable reaction times.

Some time later, a bowl shoved its way into her view and she looked up. Bruce stared at her expectantly until Toni rolled her eyes and cleared the screen. She pointedly shoved the tablet to the side and accepted the proffered fork. "Alright, you got me for however long it takes to eat this. What's up?"

Bruce presented a glass of water and shoved it next to her plate. "Drink something other than caffeine, too."

"God, you'd think you were my damn caretaker. Just because you're a few months older doesn't make you the big brother."

There was a mix of humor and affection in Bruce's smile as he responded, "But you play the reckless younger sibling so well."

Toni scowled at him and turned her attention to the food. Her first bite of the stir-fry over rice was delicious and she had to suppress an inappropriate moan. Snacking on dehydrated fruit and the occasional energy bar just didn't cut it after a few hours — and she'd been going for quite a bit longer than "a few" hours. Even though she knew she'd stayed silent, Bruce gave her a knowing smile as he sat on a stool to her right.

"What are you working on?" he asked.

Resisting the urge to scowl, because she knew where this was going, Toni answered, "What do you expect? Iron Man's armor, obviously."

Bruce's expression remained neutral. "Why are you working on so many suits?"

She rolled one shoulder in a shrug and made a face. "Having one armor isn't good enough when the next battle dents something important. You guys can't afford to have that sort of weakness exploited, so I need to be sure you'll have back-up. There's just a few physical tests left for Iron Man to run on the Mark X and I need to do some detail work on the joint coverings, then it'll be ready to go."
JARVIS has the Mark XII in production right now and here—" she pointed at her tablet "—is the Mark XI being finalized."

Toni went back to eating, annoyed that she was starting to feel tense with Bruce broaching the topic of what he thought of as her "obsession." He had only found out about her multiple designs a few days ago and his first reaction had been concern.

"I understand having backup," Bruce eventually said, "but you don't need to prepare so many suits all at once. You already said you're happy with the Mark VIII and if more are done and on the way, why not take a break?"

With a sigh, Toni set her fork down and turned her focused glare on her friend. "I see what it's like out there and I'll be damned if I don't provide the best. There's so much to do and there's so many contingencies that you need to think about."

"You don't need to spend all your time working on things for Iron Man. We're... oddly working as a team. We can keep each other safe," Bruce offered, as he had during their first argument on the subject. "I can't tell you not to worry, but you don't need to, to obsess about it."

"This isn't about worrying about Iron Man, this is about the team." Peripherally she was aware of someone walking through the kitchen door. "You'd think my efforts to contribute would be appreciated."

"Who says they aren't?" Clint asked. Toni glanced at him with a little frown and the archer held up a placating hand. "Hey, your equipment's OP, Toni."

"Thank you, Clint," she said.

"Though this is about the whole dozens of suits in production thing, right?" Of course the others would know about it, Toni thought to herself. "Iron Man can only wear one suit at a time, right? You can work on some other things and, you know, on occasion sleep or hang out with us mortals. And the demigod." He shrugged off Toni's sharp glare. "Just saying. You've been in your lab cave a lot lately. Even Iron Man's shown up more often for movie night."

Toni scowled and returned to eating. The problems with a secret alter-ego and living with other people varied, but she found that often balancing face time with the others as both identities topped the chart as frustrating. She didn't complain about it to Pepper anymore, the woman had enough to worry about plus she was pulling for Toni to "get over her fears of friendship and tell them already!" But it just wasn't a good idea. The Avengers treated Toni Stark and Iron Man differently, and she didn't need to upset that balance. Even after a half-year of training together and fighting as a team on missions, there were bumps and gaps that threw them for a loop. It could be dangerous to throw another wrench in the works.

"Iron Man doesn't have company commitments," she finally said. She looked over at Bruce again. His worried frown made her sigh and some of her frustrated tension released. "Okay, Green Bean. I'll spread my attention out a little more. Pep's got some projects waiting for me anyway, and I don't need her siccing the boyfriend on me."

Barton snickered. "I think I like your CEO. Not only did she put up with you for years, she runs in heels as well as 'Tasha, and somehow she seems to have blurred Coulson's dedication to following Fury's every order."

Toni exchanged a smirk with the archer. "Better hope Pepper never decides to take up a life of crime. She'd be the unstoppable Super Villain and probably drag Agent along as the scarily competent
"Alright, this conversation just got creepy," Barton decided with an exaggerated shudder.

Toni scraped the last of the vegetables and sauce together in her bowl to finish it off. She tipped the empty bowl towards Bruce and arched her eyebrow. "How'd I do, Doc?"

"Water glass isn't empty," Bruce deadpanned.

Rolling her eyes, Toni set down the bowl and picked up the water glass to chug down the remaining half. She smacked her lips obnoxiously as she finished. "I've been a good girl. Now can I get back to work?"

Bruce's lips twitched and Toni wasn't sure if he was going to smile or frown. His expression settled into something between amused and resigned. "I can't stop you. At least you won't collapse from hunger, though."

Toni stood up and grabbed her tablet, tucking it in the crook of her arm. "Worrywart. I'm fine, I even plan on getting some sleep tonight. Freaking morning meetings are evil."

"Did you think you'd be able to escape them once you weren't CEO?" Barton teased.

"Madame, Ms. Potts is on the line," JARVIS interrupted Toni's reply.

She arched an eyebrow at Clint. "Speak of the devil. Let her through on the tablet, J."

"Toni, I need you to look over some unusual reports coming from our offices in California."

Toni sighed as she headed for the door, waving over her shoulder as she left. "What is it?" she asked. "I'm on my way down to the workshop now."

"Security's reporting some... 'bugs' in coding at several sites. We're missing some files — possibly mis-filings but... Happy's insisting on a more thorough check of employees hired in the past half year." Pepper sounded more tired than she had that morning at the meetings.

"Why am I just now hearing about this?" Toni asked as she stepped onto the elevator.

"I was only informed a few hours ago, Toni. I'm not sure you remember this, but SI has people to handle these sorts of things."

"Sounds to me like this is more than some little problem that should be handled at individual sites. JARVIS, you got the details up?"

"Awaiting your perusal, Madame."

Pepper sighed. "We're aware of the problems now, Toni. Let's just go from here. Let me know what you find."

"Yeah. Tell Happy to flag the personnel files he wants checked and I'll look them over myself."

"I was thinking it might be quicker to have JARVIS scan through the entire list," Pepper answered, a hint of amusement in her tone. "I get the sense Happy will flag more files than not."

Toni snorted quietly. "I, you know what to do. Talk to you later, Pep."

"Thanks, Toni."
"Well, my name is still on the letterhead."

Toni imagined Pepper's exasperated eye-roll. "Goodbye, Toni."

"Get the Mark XI ready for production as I work on this, J. Code Yellow for incoming calls, exceptions being Pepper, Happy, and Avengers alerts."

~

"Madame, Captain Rogers is requesting a few minutes of your time."

Toni rubbed absently at her eyes as she considered the possibility of distraction. "Did he say why?" she asked.

"He did not. However, it is 02:18 and your absence was noted at the evening meal."

"I didn't realize I had a standing appointment," she muttered with an eye-roll. Now knowing the time, Toni was aware of a twinge of hunger. She also realized she'd never gotten around to changing out of her business meeting clothes. "Tell the good Captain if he puts on a fresh pot of coffee I'll meet him in the kitchen in fifteen."

As JARVIS relayed the message, Toni stood up and stretched. A short break to change and get something to eat would be good. She could probably use a change of scenery as she puzzled out a few things about the SI problems, too.

Fifteen minutes later (give or take a few), Toni walked into the kitchen and saw Steve cleaning up supplies for what looked like a sandwich. The blond looked up and gave her a small smile, expression hesitant. Toni felt herself relaxing automatically and she offered a return smile.

"Midnight snack?" she asked as she made her way to the coffee pot.

"Little past midnight," Steve pointed out. After a pause he continued, "And I was thinking maybe you might be hungry."

Toni turned around in surprise. "You made me a sandwich." She blinked and looked down at the food item. "Just for me," she said, noting the singular sandwich.

"It's nothing fancy, it was no trouble," the blond immediately reassured. "You don't have to eat it, I was just thinking that if you hadn't eaten dinner that you might be hungry."

Toni waved a hand to cut him off before Steve started tripping over his words. "Don't let it be said I ever turn down a handsome blond offering to feed me." She fluttered her eyelashes dramatically just to see Steve flustered.

Coffee in one hand, Toni reached past Steve to grab the sandwich on her way to taking a seat at the breakfast bar. She took a big bite as she sat down. She hadn't quite finished chewing when she said, "Thanks. Tastes good." Steve stared at her, looking amused. Toni waved a hand at him. "So were you pulling me out just to feed me or was there something else on your mind?"

The answer was obvious from the way Steve raised a hand to rub the back of his neck, looking self-conscious. "I heard you're working on new armor designs."

Of course he had. Toni prompted, "So?" before taking another large bite of her sandwich.

"Well, from what Clint told me, it sounds like—"
"Wait, Clint?" Toni interrupted, surprised. "Huh. I'd have bet on Bruce putting you up to this." Toni continued without allowing Steve to pick up his train of thought, "The armor's important. The team needs the best equipment in the field. A large part of that is making sure Iron Man is outfitted appropriately."

"I can appreciate that," Steve said. "I really can, but it seems like you have a lot of projects running. You must be busy. You don't have to constantly be designing new suits."

Toni's lips tightened and she leaned toward the blond across the counter. "Yes, I do," she argued. "Maybe it seems like I run battle analytics for fun, but there's always something different in each situation. You guys are great and try to roll with the punches, but I can enable Iron Man to be the most adaptable. I can create new armors to deal with potential crises in the best way. What if there's a battle that takes you to the water? What about blizzards? Longer flights? Extreme conditions? Iron Man's one of your heavy-hitters and air support right now, but he could be much more. I'm going to make sure you get the best of my abilities."

"You already give us so much," Steve told her gently, expression sincere. "The armor upgrades for us plus our equipment. You managed to get comm units that hold up for Thor and Hulk. You devote so much to the Avengers, I'm amazed by the work you do for us when you have so much else you need to do."

Well, it was nice to know she was appreciated. "It's not enough," Toni persisted. "The conditions in the field are always changing. I'm a futurist, Rogers, and I'll damn well stay ahead of the curve to cover your collective asses."

Steve said nothing for a while, just watched her thoughtfully. Toni met his stare without flinching and continued to eat her sandwich.

Eventually Steve turned to put away the sandwich ingredients. When he finished, he sat on a stool next to Toni and said, "Okay. Tell me about them."

Toni stared at him blankly. "About what?"

The corner of Steve's lips kicked up in a suppressed smile. "The armors. Tell me about them and why it's so important to you to have multiple versions available."

Toni felt her lips part in surprise. "I thought you were here to lecture me about overworking."

Shrugging, Steve nodded at the digital clock over the stove and said, "Doesn't seem like that would do any good. So, I want to understand why this is so important to you."

"I doubt it will change your mind," she said, feeling skeptical.

With another shrug, Steve suggested, "Try me. If nothing else, you'll know I'm impressed by your genius."

"Because that's what I live for," Toni replied dryly. The blond grinned at that. Well, fine. If he would genuinely listen to what she had to say, Toni would talk his ear off. She pushed aside her dishes and directed, "JARVIS, bring up the Mark IX rendering." The surface under her fingers lit up with the requested display. She arched a challenging eyebrow at Steve. "Prepare to be wowed."

He nodded solemnly. "I expect no less."

Despite her continued skepticism, Toni grinned.
A few days later, Pepper called at the same time that a S.H.I.E.L.D. notice popped up on Toni’s monitor.

Pepper opened with, "Santa Monica had a breach." The Stark Industries facility was one of the hacking targets Toni had been looking into.

Pepper explained that security on site had noted a spike of activity just before several systems shut down. They had at least started clearing the building before a full assault by a dozen people wearing yellow jumpsuits broke through and blew away a quarter of the building's labs. There were only a minor number of casualties, but Toni hated that anyone got hurt.

The investigation had just started getting underway, so Pepper couldn’t pass along any information about what the assailants had taken. Toni ordered JARVIS to start looking into the yellow jumpsuits while Pepper gave her the rundown of how the local police were running things.

Pepper was in the middle of outlining the strategy to manage the media when JARVIS displayed a video of Coulson and Romanov in the elevator. "Looks like S.H.I.E.L.D.'s sending in the calvary," Toni said. "How much do you want to bet they have an idea of what's going on and want to take over investigation?"

Pepper's sigh of exasperation carried through clearly. "Of course they will. Should I even ask who's coming?"

"Hey, he's your boyfriend. Natasha's with him. Regardless, I'm going to head out as soon as I can. Keep me updated."

"Toni..." Pepper trailed off. "Fine. But be careful. As likely as this is about the company, you could just as well be the target."


"Right. Say hi to the handsome suit and tell him that if he stops you I'm calling off drinks on me."

"Is that literal or—"

"Goodbye, Toni!"

Pepper hung up just as Toni's company arrived. "JARVIS, detain them if they stop me from heading out," she said as she motioned to let them in.

"Understood, Madame."

Natasha and Coulson walked in, wearing twin bland expressions.

"Here to tell me what interest S.H.I.E.L.D. has in an attack on my company?" Toni asked. "I got a little pop-up notice from HQ as I was on the phone with Pepper."

"Then you've heard that the perpetrators wore bright yellow uniforms."

"A crime in and of itself."

"The uniform is associated with a group S.H.I.E.L.D. has recently been tracking," Coulson said, not missing a beat despite Toni's interruption.
Toni pulled up an image JARVIS had grabbed from external security cameras. She enlarged the image and studied the odd wedge-shaped, full-coverage hood hiding whoever was wearing the poor fashion choice. "Hmm. So what else have these beekeepers hit?"

Natasha arched an eyebrow at the nickname. Coulson answered, "They've been after energy sources."

"Then Santa Monica was a poor choice," Toni observed. "It has very minimal energy source content, it's not the facility's focus." She walked up to Coulson and pointed her finger a bare inch from his chest. "You're here to tell me to stay out of this and let S.H.I.E.L.D. take over."

Without blinking or backing away from the intrusive finger, Coulson agreed, "I am."

"Toni, S.H.I.E.L.D. has data on this organization," Natasha finally spoke. "There are numerous potential targets, and S.H.I.E.L.D. is equipped to prepare to deal with the possibilities. The Avengers are better suited to come in when the battle requires us."

Toni scoffed. "Major flaw in your reasoning: this isn't about the Avengers. This is about my company and you're not going to stop me from looking into this." She turned sharply and started closing her open diagrams around the workshop. "Did you really come in here believing I'd listen to your crap?"

"As much as S.H.I.E.L.D. would like you to stay in New York, and keep Iron Man here, it has not been unanticipated that you wouldn't agree," Coulson said.

Toni snorted as she turned to face them again, crossing her arms over her chest. "You gonna use force to keep me here?"

Coulson's lips twitched in what might have been a smile. "Rather pointless, as it would upset some rather important and dangerous people, as well as cause more damage in the long run."

"Smart move. Let me guess, you had something to do with that inspiration of common sense." Coulson tilted his head in acknowledgment, this time not trying to hide his smile. Toni rolled her eyes but grinned back. "Well, good call. I'm heading out immediately."

"By jet?" Natasha asked, tone dry.

"Oh, please," Toni muttered. She waved in the direction of the door and headed towards the armor room. "You can see yourselves out."

"You're not going to tell the rest of the team?" Coulson prompted.

Toni frowned but didn't bother looking back. "Romanov can pass along the message." She paused at the armory's control panel with biometric locks. "That's kind of your cue to take off."

"Ms. Stark."

Toni turned around with an arched eyebrow. "Agent?"

"Have you considered revealing Iron Man's identity to your teammates?" Coulson's expression gave nothing away.

Toni felt her muscles tighten in irritation. "As I understand it, that's my decision to make," she said coolly. Her gaze turned to Natasha but the redhead offered nothing. After several long moments of silence, Toni snapped, "I'm working on it."
"Check in with what you find in California," Coulson said as he turned to the door. 

"Yeah, right. S.H.I.E.L.D. will be first on my call list," Toni replied sarcastically. 

Natasha sent her a smirk as she followed Coulson. "I'll pass along your non-plan to the others. I recommend having Iron Man call Cap on your way, though."

"He doesn't need special treatment!" Toni protested. She studiously ignored the look Natasha sent her from the door. To herself she muttered, "He doesn't."

~

Chapter End Notes

**Something desperately needed ASAP - a company name.** Let me explain: Janet Van Dyne, Toni, and Pepper have partnered for a a small company that produces undergarments and clothing designed for women who have undergone mastectomies. I have agonized over a company name for literal years now and still don't have one. The best I have in notes so far are 1) Breath of Life or 2) Immortal.

Ugh. Please, give me a name, it's vital to upcoming chapters. ;_;
Iron Man and Toni had been gone for three days. The tower was hardly quiet, but Steve distinctly felt their absence. His late-night encounters usually involved Iron Man and, on occasion, Toni, both of whom seemed to keep irregular hours. With them gone, he hit the gym solo or wandered the common areas hoping for another teammate to be around. However, Steve soon realized that he had adjusted his schedule to offer the best opportunities to casually run into Iron Man.

Steve sat alone in front of the TV late on the fourth night. He'd jolted awake from a nightmare at half past two and couldn't fall back asleep. He huddled under a blanket on the couch with his hands cupped around one of Thor's giant mugs filled with steaming tea. He didn't really register what was playing on the TV, his mind drifting.

In his nightmare he'd been covered in ice, too frozen to move as he stared up into a night sky marred by the chaos of sinister shadows and explosions. Far above, directly in Steve's line of sight, a swirling vortex seemed to be spewing out monstrous forms. Iron Man darted through the chaos, armor reflecting the explosions as he headed straight toward the vortex. Time blurred and the next Steve saw of Iron Man, he was plummeting to the ground. The armor shattered on impact, leaving a dark-haired figure slumped just within Steve's line of sight.

Steve shivered and reminded himself that he'd seen a picture of Iron Man in yesterday's paper, whole and presumably healthy.

"Just... come home soon," he muttered as he huddled further into his blanket.

~

For appearances, Toni returned to New York City by jet. She had the armor secured away in a part of the jet only accessible by her biometrics. Pepper had insisted Happy come to meet her at the airport, so Toni arranged with JARVIS to test the new programming to fly the armor back to the tower. She had an entrance straight to the armory and workshop where the other Avengers wouldn't be able to interfere with his arrival.

Walking down the stairs of the jet and watching the armor fly away was bittersweet. She was proud to see the newest programming allowed JARVIS to independently maneuver the suits (it opened up fantastic possibilities for future designs), but she wanted to be up in the air herself. Although she'd thought Iron Man would play a role in her activities on the West Coast, she had needed to be present more often than not as Toni Stark. She had endless meetings with company staff, the media, construction workers, and the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents investigating the situation.

Toni was more than ready to be back in her workshop and focus on her own investigation. S.H.I.E.L.D. had finally deigned to give her the name of the organization they were examining. Apparently the uniforms belonged to a subset of a corporation called A.I.M., or Advanced Idea Mechanics. She'd also gotten her hands on some of the recovered equipment. Between the yellow jumpsuits' equipment and name, Toni felt reassured that her investigation would quickly pick up.

Happy greeted her with a wave, and he opened the door to the backseat. "Good to have you back."

"Harass any new employees?" Toni teased as she slipped into the back. She smirked as he shut her
Happy slid behind the wheel and met her gaze in the rear-view mirror. "Only the ones that deserved it, Ms. Stark."

Toni laughed and waved her hand. "I'm sure Pepper buys that excuse. Home, Jeeves."

"Not a butler, Ma'am," Happy returned as he started the engine.

"And I'm not a 'Ma'am.'" Toni leaned her elbow on the window and rested her head against her palm. She was drained from the week away. She had become attached to the others living in her home, and she'd missed New York. As wonderful as the warm weather of California greeted her, the sights of New York had become what she looked forward to seeing. She also appreciated the lack of Los Angeles smog. "Was this punishment, Hap?" she asked, a smile teasing her lips. "Too overzealous with the security consultant gig so Pepper sends you to chaperone?"

Happy looked mildly insulted. "I told Ms. Potts that I wanted to get you home. Listen, Boss, you have great new friends, but you can't forget about the rest of us. I'll always be in your corner."

"Thanks, Hap." Toni felt her lips curve into an unbidden smile. Happy had stood by her through several threats, more than even the biggest ones like post-Afghanistan and the mess when she had been dying of paladium poisoning. She decided to just respond with, "What's brought on this protectiveness all of the sudden?"

Happy frowned. "It doesn't take much to put two and two together. Someone's targeting SI, which history shows means that someone's gunning for you. I take it personally when someone goes after my friends."

"Glad to do it, Boss," he said, gaze soft when he glanced back at her.

~

"Is that a ray gun?" Bruce asked, expression skeptical as he eyed the equipment Toni laid out on the workbench.

Toni fingered the grip of the weapon in question and cast her lab buddy a wry smile. "From what I heard from reports, it is. I know, it looks like a movie prop." The gun looked like it belonged in Star Trek circa the 1960s. A boxy energy storage was welded above the grip and half the barrel was a clear cylinder showing a double helix of coiled wires.

"This looks more your forte. I'm not sure how much help I'll be." Bruce poked at a closed canister the size of a coconut.

"You'll rock this. Besides, you're better with biologicals and a wider array of chemistry. You'll save me some research time."

Bruce quickly pulled back his hands. "You're handling potential biological weapons without containment?"

"What? No!" Toni scowled. "No, it's just that some of their containers look like they should hold biological samples. That's not exactly a key area for SI so I want to know how that's supposed to play into things."

Apparently reassured, Bruce lowered his hands and went back to examining the unpacked
equipment.

On the other side of the workshop, the door to the hallway opened. Toni glanced up, wondering if Pepper had stopped by. Instead, Steve hovered in the doorway for a long moment as his gaze scanned the room. He looked slightly disappointed as he stepped further inside.

"Hi Steve," Bruce greeted.

"Hey, Cap. What do you need?" Toni smiled. She admitted to herself that she was genuinely happy to see him. She'd missed their frequent middle of the night run-ins while she was away.

"I was—" Steve cut himself off as he focused on Toni. He offered her a sheepish-looking smile.

"How was your trip?

"Aside from the fact that it was filled with arguments over jurisdiction and personal responsibility? California's weather is nice this time of year."

"I know it wasn't a vacation, sorry," Steve grimaced. "Did you get any leads?"

Toni gestured to the equipment laying on the bench. "We're looking into this now, and JARVIS has some info I coerced from S.H.I.E.L.D. to work from." She nudged a rectangular carrying case towards Bruce, momentarily moving her attention away from Steve. "That thing's not a standard make, I'm guessing customized to carry something specific."

Bruce nodded and took the case to another workbench. When Toni turned back to Steve, she saw him peering around the room again as if looking for something specific. "What are you looking for?"

Even as she asked the question, Toni realized the answer.

Steve smiled crookedly. "I was wondering if Iron Man was around," he admitted. He looked so hopeful, and it made Toni realize how comparatively dim his smile had been for her.

"Iron Man isn't available." Her words came out more clipped than she'd intended.

"Do you know when he's free?" Steve asked.

Toni shook her head, not trusting herself not to snap something sarcastic as disappointment filled her. She should be happy, really, that Steve was so eager to see Iron Man.

"When he is, let him know I'd like to see him?" Steve requested.

"Yeah, will do," Toni replied tersely. Steve sent her a disappointed look before turning to go.

As the door shut behind Steve, Bruce coughed quietly. Toni resisted the urge to look back at him and instead scowled down at the ray gun. Maybe if she ignored his subtle prodding she could avoid whatever conversation he wanted to initiate.

Her luck didn't hold for long. A few minutes after Steve's departure, Bruce cleared his throat pointedly. "So. You're jealous?"

Toni hunched her shoulders and glowered determinedly at her workspace. "I don't know what you're talking about," she muttered.

"The tone of your flirting changes with Steve," Bruce observed. "And there's a different sort of affection in your eyes."

That was absurd. Tony huffed in annoyance. She turned away from the ray gun, ready to argue, but
her protests fell away as soon as she met Bruce's knowing stare. She froze in place, suddenly aware of the heavy thrum of her pulse.

"It wasn't just Iron Man he missed," Bruce told her.

Toni released a short laugh as she ran her fingers through her hair. "Right. Playing second fiddle is supposed to make me feel better? Shit, not even second fiddle, he's—" She shook her head sharply. "I can't blame him. What a horrible, horrible idea — Captain American Ideal and the Narcissistic Socialite." She crossed her arms tightly across her chest. "I've rarely held down a relationship. Damn it, Bruce, I can't even remember my last date; pretty sure I was too wasted and the company too dull to keep it memorable. I'm a smart-ass and rarely think about how what I say is going to affect someone. I'm best at keeping people at arm's length and that's a safer place to be. I'm good at screwing around, there's a reason I have a reputation for it!"

"I haven't seen signs of that," Bruce told her gently.

Toni laughed again, the harsh sound a surprise even to her. She closed her eyes and let out a shuddery sigh. "I haven't been with anyone for fucking years," she admitted. "Before... Afghanistan. Okay?"

Bruce, bless him, didn't press for details; he let the silence be as Toni wrestled her breathing under control. When she was feeling relatively normal again, Toni opened her eyes. Bruce had moved closer but left the distance of a table between them. Toni felt thankful, she needed the space.

"Even if, and it's a damn big if, something could happen, it'd be a goddamn labyrinth filled with pitfalls," she muttered. "Like I said, a terrible, horrible, no-good, awful idea."

"Alright," Bruce responded. He nodded and slowly returned to his work space. However, once there he looked back at her and met her gaze steadily. "Just a question, Toni. Would he be worth trying for?"

Toni swallowed hard, unable to look away. Very quietly, feeling small, she admitted, "He might be."

Bruce gave her a soft smile. "Then don't give up without a fight. Give him a fair chance." He slipped his glasses on and started in on his work, still wearing that damn smile.

Toni turned slightly so that her back was to her friend as she stared blindly at her tablet. Bruce had a point, she had to admit, though she doubted his optimism. Her chest ached as her breath caught painfully in her lungs. If she wanted to have any chance of success in a potential... relationship with Steve (did she honestly believe she had a chance?), she couldn't begin with a lie. She stifled a sad chuckle. She would be starting with a lie by default.

It took a couple more minutes for Toni to focus on her work. As she dug out the tools needed to disassemble the ray gun, she was haunted by the memory of Steve's resigned expression as Iron Man declined again and again to reveal his identity.

As Iron Man or Toni Stark, she couldn't pursue something with Steve only to leave him feeling betrayed later.

~

Chapter End Notes
Thanks to Rae_Simmons for the suggestion of company name (Phoenix). It'll come up starting next chapter.

Next chapter acts as a bridge to the heart of the fic and happens to be unwritten, even a draft. So there's likely to be at least a few days before it's posted. I'll try kicking my muses into gear. The good news is that after that, chapters 5 through about 10 or 11 (I have to look it over again) are complete and will be ready to go up immediately following. It's this bridging chapter and near the end scenes that are giving me trouble.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

A bridging chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve ran into Iron Man on the second night after the bodyguard’s return from California. Steve breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing the familiar armor standing outside on the balcony. Knowing the November wind carried the sharp chill of coming winter, Steve pulled a blanket from the couch, not wanting to waste time to grab a jacket, and headed for the door.

"Hey," he greeted as he stepped outside.

Iron Man turned slightly to face him. "Good evening, Cap."

Steve smiled a little, feeling some of the tension that had clung to him since his nightmare fade away. "I was expecting to see you earlier," he said.

Iron Man seemed to hesitate, the silence in between just a little too long. "Miss my shining face that much, did you?"

"Something like that," Steve admitted with a small laugh. He situated the blanket more snugly around his shoulders as he moved closer. "Staring at anything in particular?"

Iron Man turned back around and rested an elbow on the rail. His faceplate tilted downward as he gestured expansively at the city below them. "Just taking in the view. Much clearer than Los Angeles."

"I've not been there," Steve confessed. "Well, once on the dancing monkey tour."

"We have got to get you out of the tower more." Steve couldn't be sure due to the voice modulation, but he thought Iron Man sounded somewhere between appalled and exasperated.

"I'm not sure a team road trip would work."

"I do not want to be couped up with any of you in a car for hours on end, fuck that. Stark has plenty of options. Why spend forever driving cross country when we can fly anywhere?"

Steve shook his head with a chuckle. "We don't need to do that, either. That's a little extravagant, don't you think?"

"Not really. Why not do something fun every once and a while, Cap?" Iron Man's helmet turned Steve's way and as the pause drew out, Steve knew he was expected to respond.

Shrugging a little Steve admitted, "It just feels like a little much to take advantage like that. We could figure out another way."
A burst of static that Steve associated with Iron Man's sigh broke the silence. "I can guarantee it's not a big deal. If you're that worried about it, get creative in how to ask so you'll be convinced the answer is sincere."

Steve considered the suggestion and nodded halfheartedly. "Not sure I'm in her good favor right now," he said quietly as he stared at the lights of a plane passing overhead.

It took a while for Iron Man to reply. "What makes you say that?"

Steve wondered if he shouldn't have mentioned it. He rubbed at his cold face to hide a wince. "Toni sounded pretty unhappy with me when I saw her the other day, is all. Not even sure why."

Iron Man didn't respond. Steve studied his friend from the corner of his eye, searching for a sign of what the other man was thinking. With context, he thought he did a decent job of estimating Iron Man's moods and tone.

With a small sigh, Steve murmured, "I wish I could get a sense of what you're thinking."

Iron Man's hands clenched into fists, the only visible sign of tension. Steve wondered what the man inside looked like.

"There are reasons I wear a mask," Iron Man said flatly.

Knowing he'd stepped into territory better avoided, Steve silently cursed himself for voicing his thoughts. "I know," he returned. Too late now. "I know, but that doesn't mean I'll stop wishing you felt like you could be open with me." He'd meant to refer to the team, but didn't bother to correct the pronoun. "I—"

"You can't just—" Iron Man's words cut off in a strange burst of static that Steve suspected could be a sound of frustration.

'In for a penny...' Steve thought before asking, "Is it your choice, at least?" He wondered about the awkward exchange with Toni in the workshop. She'd looked happy to see him until she knew he was looking for Iron Man. Was there something about Steve socializing with her bodyguard that she disapproved of?

"I make my own choices, Cap," Iron Man answered.

Steve believed that, but he wondered if those choices were influenced by others' pressures. He held his tongue, recognizing that he needed to back off.

"I shouldn't have said anything," he said in way of apology. "Why don't we go inside and see what Syfy's marathoning?"

Iron Man made a short gesture with his hand as if dismissing the suggestion. "I have maintenance to do before calling it a night. Enjoy your movie."

"But—" Steve had to take a step back as Iron Man rose into the air and curved around the tower towards his entrance directly into Toni's workshop.

Steve slumped over the railing and dropped his head into his hands. That had not gone as he wanted.

~

A few nights later at a charity gala, Steve wondered at his ability to have apparently alienated both
Iron Man and Toni.

Since Iron Man had flown off, Steve hadn't seen him unless other Avengers were nearby.

It was less obvious that Toni had been avoiding him. Pepper Potts had been coming and going enough in recent days for it to be clear that some important company business needed Toni's attention, so her limited appearance in the common areas seemed explainable. However, given that Toni had rather pointedly avoided looking at him during the limo ride to the gala, Steve wondered if there was another reason. The others had noticed, judging by the numerous sidelong glances and curious expressions.

In the foyer Natasha held Steve back as the others headed into the event hall.

"Something wrong?" Steve asked, frowning.

Natasha tsked quietly and reached for Steve's bow-tie. "Just a quick fix. You should learn how to tie these properly, you know," she said as she fixed whatever she thought was wrong. Steve eyed her suspiciously as Natasha smoothed the tie into place. She glanced up and offered him a brief smile. "Don't worry too much, Cap. The air will clear."

"I'm not—"

Natasha's skeptical expression halted his protest. "Any idea what you did?" she continued as she straightened Steve's jacket. "Or is this a case of Toni being Toni?"

"I don't know. It's not a big deal," Steve grumbled as he waved away her hands. He wished he knew if Toni's avoidance had to do with his conversation with Iron Man or if it was something else. He wasn't particularly good at apologies, regardless, but at least in the one case he'd have a place to start.

"Don't sulk all night, you'll depress the crowd." Natasha slipped her hand into the crook of Steve's arm and tugged lightly to lead him towards the door. With a small huff of amusement, Steve bent his arm at a better angle and let the sulking comment slide.

"You're the perfect arm candy," Natasha murmured as they stepped inside the hall and a number of heads turned their way. Steve manfully resisted the urge to roll his eyes but smiled in response to her smirk.

~

As the night wore on, Steve found himself surrounded by a small group of local politicians and their spouses vying for his attention. He had little interest in following what any of them were saying. He kept his expression politely blank as he took the occasional sip of his wine and eyed his surroundings for an acceptable excuse to get away.

Thankfully Natasha appeared and eased her way through the group with a sweet smile. She reached Steve's side and leaned close as she fluttered her lashes and explained, "I need to borrow Captain Rogers. Please excuse us." No one protested their departure.

Steve felt himself relax as soon as they'd stepped away from the group. Natasha gently extracted the wine glass from Steve's hand. "Let me take that." She set the glass on the tray of a passing waitstaff as she led him across the hall. Steve saw the dance floor and grimaced when he realized their destination. "Don't make that face at me," Natasha chided with a laugh.

"I really don't dance..." he tried.
"I don't expect to enter any competitions, don't worry." She paused at the edge of the cleared area and cast Steve a warm, reassuring look. "Even Bruce is giving it a try."

Steve did see Bruce somewhere just outside the middle of the dancers. It looked like Toni was leading him, her grin lighting up her expression as she said something. Bruce shook his head, a reluctant smile crossing his lips as he glanced down at their feet.

Natasha tugged at Steve's arm. "Come on, Cap. Take a girl around the floor?"

He gave in and stepped forward despite his nerves. As he offered his hands to Natasha, she smirked at him and adjusted his stance. "Don't worry, just a couple of songs and I'll release you back to your adoring audience."

"Suddenly dancing sounds like the best idea you've ever had," Steve joked. Natasha rolled her eyes. It was awkward, Steve having only done a bit of practice dancing alone or as a joke with his teammates — Howling Commandos and Avengers both. Thankfully Natasha adjusted well enough and gave him tips quietly as they moved. Steve was so focused on getting into the right movement that he was caught off guard as Natasha started to slow their steps.

She leaned close, murmuring, "I may have failed to mention an ulterior motive. I need your assistance to cut in on another dance."

Before Steve could clarify what she meant, Natasha had guided him to a stop. He looked up and realized they stood next to Bruce and Toni, both looking a little surprised.

"Having a ball?" Toni asked drolly after a beat, gaze flicking to Steve but lingering on Natasha.

"The Captain needed a daring rescue," Natasha answered. She withdrew her hands from Steve's. "However, I believe it's time for a change of partners." She offered a hand to Bruce, her expression softening as he looked uncertainly at the invitation.

Toni sighed noisily and shoved playfully at her partner's shoulder. "Go. You can't cling to me like a life preserver or hide in the shadows all evening."

"I wasn't—"

"Ignore her," Natasha advised. Her smile brightened as Bruce hesitantly took her hand. "Care if I lead?"

"Please, do."

Steve and Toni watched the two take the first shaky steps before seeming to adjust to their arrangement. Toni shook her head slightly, smile on her lips as Natasha led Bruce out of view behind other dancers.

Not giving himself time to talk himself out of it, Steve offered his hands and asked, "Grant me a dance?"

Toni looked up at him with a caught expression. Steve felt sure she'd say no, but Toni placed her hand in his in silent acceptance.

They moved silently for a while, their steps somewhat stilted by the tension from earlier in the evening. They didn't look directly at each other and it began to feel like Steve was dancing with a reluctant stranger.
Eventually the silence became too much and Steve blurted, "I'm sorry."

Toni's next step faltered and Steve had to pause as she regained her footing. "What?" Toni muttered as she tugged at his hand to indicate they resume dancing.

"For... whatever it is that offended you."

"Not easily offended," Toni countered.

Steve resisted the urge to sigh in frustration. "Then I apologize for making you mad."

She didn't respond right away and Steve started running their recent interactions through his mind, trying to figure out what it was that had upset her. Toni cut into his thoughts with a quiet sigh. "Steve... I'm not mad." She held his gaze when he glanced down. "There's not— You don't need to apologize." Her gaze shifted over his shoulder but her posture had relaxed a little.

"That's a little hard to believe," Steve told her, feeling at a loss. "You're not offended and not mad, but you're upset about something."

"Don't overthink it," Toni said, sounding weary.

She didn't say anything else though Steve let the lull in conversation draw out for a while to give her a chance.

"So you're not going to tell me?" he eventually asked.

"Let me sort it out for myself." Toni stopped moving, bringing Steve up short. As she slipped her hand off his shoulder, Steve realized the other dancers had stopped as well as the music. Steve let Toni go and took a step back. "Really, Steve. No apology necessary." Toni stared up at him with a determined expression, likely seeing the disbelief on his face.

"Can you at least tell me when you 'sort it out'?" he asked.

Toni's smile looked crooked as she muttered, "Sure."

Steve might have pressed the point, but Toni's attention was captured by someone calling her name. The brunette's expression opened and her smile brightened as she raised an arm to welcome the hug of a woman dressed in gold. It wasn't until the women parted that Steve recognized Janet van Dyne, who had been at the Tower a few times.

"Hello, Steve." Jan's eyes were bright with excitement and she still had one hand on Toni's arm as she greeted Steve. "Would love to hear all about the Avenging thing — did you really wrestle a giant squirrel last month? — but I'm afraid it's business before pleasure." Her attention focused back on Toni. "I've had the best idea and a new design you have to see. You can slip away now, right?"

Toni looked amused as Jan led her away. Briefly, Toni turned back and offered, "Don't wait up."

Steve watched them go, regretting that they'd lost the chance to talk.

~

Chapter End Notes
This gave me such trouble! (If you look at all the weeks that passed between the last update and this one, yeesh.) A million and one thanks to espionne for taking a look at this (almost two weeks ago, now) and giving me a push in the right direction. I was able to cobble together the missing pieces this evening.

Note: Jan is played by Morena Baccarin in my headcanon.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The collection of scenes that started this whole adventure. (Four? revisions later...)

Chapter Notes

Longer chapter here, ~4700 words. Hope it tides you over for the week!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Toni woke slowly, feeling groggy and achy all over. Jan's driver was either horrible at his job and had gotten into an accident, or he had been on someone else's payroll. If Toni cared to make a bet, she would go with the latter.

Her head throbbed in a way that indicated she had probably been drugged. It took a lot of effort to string her thoughts together. She forewent opening her eyes at first and instead focused on what she could feel. Her arms were pressed between her back and the hard slats of a chair. Something thin and tight bit into her wrists and ankles. Slowly Toni moved her head and opened her eyes. Her bound ankles appeared in her line of sight where her legs extended in front of her. She frowned at the shoe that had slipped mostly off her foot due to a few broken straps. The hemline of her dress also looked a little worse for wear.

Toni managed to shift a little despite the increased throbbing in her head she got for her trouble. Someone had gotten overzealous with the zip-ties; she was pretty sure the circulation was being cut off in one hand. It felt like one tie bound her wrists together and a second connected the hand quickly losing feeling to the chair back.

Her condition more or less ascertained, Toni turned her attention to her surroundings. A lone, yellowish tube light overhead poorly lit the room. The floor was concrete and a rusty drain sat in the floor a few feet to her right. The wall in front of her was roughly fifteen feet and contained a metal door. Metal beams crossed the ceiling. Basement, she concluded. Likely someplace industrial.

She closed her eyes as she put her thoughts in order. The end of the gala was unfortunately blurry. She remembered dragging Bruce onto the dance floor at one point and feeling triumphant when she turned him over to a new dance partner. She recalled the awkward tension that followed any time Steve caught her eye. She remembered leaving with Jan for a nightcap and an informal business meeting to talk about new designs for Phoenix. Jan's driver was supposed to take Toni home. Obviously that hadn't turned out well.

Toni muttered, "I suppose it's too much to ask for this to be a simple random kidnapping." Hazards of being perceived as a superhero's friend, she thought wryly.

She eyed the room again, but saw no sign of any little lights or suspicious wires that would indicate surveillance. That seemed a little odd, but then again, if her kidnappers had an ounce of sense, they would realize Toni could turn anything electronic to her advantage given enough time.
She tried flexing her hands and grimaced at the odd feeling of her right hand. She still felt groggy and was irritated by the slow processing of her thoughts. She shifted a bit and found a vaguely comfortable position so she could rest her head. She'd wait a bit for her head to clear and give her kidnappers a chance to show. She'd think of something. Even though she had nothing else to work with than what was currently in the room, she had picked up a number of things from Natasha, including how to secure a couple weapons on her person. It was rare that someone (particularly a man) would bother to check a woman in a pretty dress to see if she carried anything.

Toni settled in to wait, running possible plans through her mind and wondering about the response time of the Avengers once they realized something had happened. She resisted the urge to sigh and forced herself to run her gaze over every inch of the bare room, looking for clues and inspiration.

~

Steve was the first awake, which was only unusual in that he was the only one awake for most of the morning. It seemed that the others were getting a late start. Steve had time for a long run, shower, plus time to sort through the books he had recently been stacking up in his room. He sorted through those and returned what he'd read to the tower's library.

Eventually JARVIS informed him that the others had begun to show signs of life and Steve decided to make brunch.

"You'll make a wonderful housewife someday," Clint said as he came through the door. A moment later he yelped and Steve looked over in concern.

Natasha stepped around Clint as the archer rubbed at his bicep with a frown. "Getting flabby," she commented on her way to the coffee machine.

"No need to be cruel," Clint pouted, suddenly poking at his arms thoughtfully. "Fine, I'm sorry about the wife comment."

"Wife comment?" Natasha asked blandly.

Both of his teammates were in pajamas, Steve realized. Clint's pants didn't seem to fit, though — they were short, hitting above his ankles and covered in some cartoon character pattern. Clint's shirt, on the other hand, was clearly his own; it was one of those souvenirs Thor had found during his city excursions. The shirt portrayed an illustrated rendition of Hawkeye wearing a purple-highlighted uniform and notching an arrow to shoot at something off the wearer's shoulder. Natasha's sleep shirt rode up as she reached for a mug and Steve quickly averted his eyes when the hem rose high enough to expose her brightly striped purple underwear.

"Coffee?" Bruce grunted as he shuffled into the room. He usually preferred tea at any other time of day, but it seemed like he needed a cup of coffee to jump-start the morning.

"Here." Natasha pressed a full mug into Bruce's hands. "Get some before Thor comes in."

At that suggestion, Clint stopped examining his arms and hurried over to the coffee pot. Steve grinned to himself as he returned his focus to flipping pancakes.

"A glorious morning!" Thor boomed as he stepped into the kitchen. "I smelled the welcome aroma of a breakfast feast from down the hall." He beamed at Steve. "My thanks, friend. Is there coffee?" he asked eagerly.

"Putting on a new pot all for you, Big Guy," Clint assured as he tucked his mug close to his chest. Thor looked a little put-out but nodded his acceptance.
Steve waved a spatula at the group, nearly hitting the groggy Bruce in the face. "Now can you all move out of the way so I have room to work?" he asked.

"Aye, aye, Captain!" Clint agreed with a salute. He steered Bruce toward the table, then joined the other two in grabbing dishes and silverware. Steve felt himself relaxing as banter filled the room and he let their good company soak in.

The sound of the elevator down the hall made Steve tense. He was surprised Toni would join them for breakfast, both because she rarely did so and because how she'd acted the night before. However, it wasn't Toni who walked into the kitchen.

Pepper Potts' pretty face was drawn tight with what looked like irritation as her gaze darted around the room. She held a tablet tucked against her chest and her fingers tapped against the back of it as her frown made a full appearance.

"Good morning, Miss Potts," Steve greeted politely. He flipped out the finished pancake and added new batter to the pan.

For once the woman didn't bother to correct Steve's formal address. With a sigh, she asked the room at large, "Is it too much to ask if anyone's seen Toni?"

Steve glanced towards the table and saw everyone shaking their heads. Pepper raised a questioning eyebrow at him; Steve quickly answered, "Not since the gala."

"Damn it," Pepper muttered, looking down at her tablet and tapping rapidly. "I already checked the workshop and JARVIS cleared the suite. I was hoping she had him covering for her here."

"Is there cause for concern?" Steve asked carefully, telling himself there was no reason for the sinking sensation in his stomach.

Pepper smiled tightly, still looking at her tablet. "It isn't unusual for her to avoid meetings she finds boring and full of dullards. However, she didn't pick up when I called about the SI security breach — that, she's interested in."

Bruce, looking slightly more awake despite his rumpled bed-head, said, "She left with Jan last night. Maybe she crashed there. Toni's had a lot of late nights in the workshop recently."

With a sigh, Pepper glanced up from her tablet to cast Bruce a wry look. "I think 'recently' might cover months' worth of time." She slipped the tablet under her arm and pulled out a cell phone. "I'll try Jan. Would one of you please try Toni? It's possible she's just ducking my calls."

"I will," Natasha volunteered, already holding a phone she'd pulled from who knew where.

Steve half-heartedly flipped the pancake but kept an eye on both women. Bruce's expression had smoothed to blankness. Thor toyed with his silverware, frowning thoughtfully as he watched Natasha. Clint had an intense look on his face as he stared steadily at both women.

"Jan? Hi, is Toni there?" Pepper's expression clouded as she listened to the response. "You haven't heard from her since she left?"

At the table, Natasha shook her head and set her phone on the table.

"I don't know," Pepper sighed. "I'll talk to you later.... Yes, I'm hoping that's the case.... Thanks. Bye, Jan." Pepper hung up, lips curved down in a tense frown. She looked at Natasha's phone and shook her head. "Did she mention any other plans last night?"
"It just sounded like she was meeting with Jan regarding a project," Steve said.

Natasha pushed back from the table and grabbed her phone. "It went straight to voice-mail. I'm getting dressed."

Clint stood as well, looking carefully at the redhead. "Where do we start?"

"JARVIS, we'll need the location of Toni's cell," Natasha directed.

"I have been examining the data I have regarding Madame's whereabouts since last night," JARVIS replied immediately. "It appears that the phone was turned off at 1:33 this AM but remained in motion for another forty minutes. It has since remained stationary at coordinates that are within the bounds of a limousine service company."

Natasha and Clint shared a telling look before striding out of the room. Pepper took a deep breath, visibly collecting herself. "Not that I want to incite panic, but at this point I hardly imagine this leads to anything good."

Thor got to his feet and bowed formally. "We will pursue Lady Stark's whereabouts and return her."

Pepper's smile was ruined by the pinched expression she wore. "Thank you," she said quietly. "I hate to do this, but I have to head back downstairs. Let me know immediately if you find anything."

"Of course," Bruce assured.

Steve remained silent as he watched Pepper walk swiftly out the door. His chest felt tight as he continued to stare numbly at the empty doorway. He swallowed hard, that earlier sinking feeling tangling up into a tight ball of worry.

"Natasha and Clint will get us a lead," Bruce assured gently.

"Yeah..." The smell of burning pancakes abruptly reminded Steve of what he'd been doing prior Pepper's arrival. "Damn it," he muttered, turning to hit the controls on the stove.

"We'll figure this out, Steven," Thor reassured.

Steve shook his head. "We know this isn't good." He frowned sharply and looked up to address JARVIS, "Where's Iron Man?"

"I am unable to disclose that information, Captain," the AI intoned.

"He's Toni's bodyguard, he needs to know about this situation."

"I shall endeavor to make contact with Iron Man, Captain."

Steve looked over at the others and met Bruce's skeptical gaze. "He's not in contact?" Bruce checked.

"I am unable to discuss the situation with you, please do not inquire further."

Bruce frowned and Steve shook his head in frustration. "Contact him, JARVIS. No excuses." Steve didn't know where the hell Iron Man was, but he needed to be updated on the situation as soon as possible.

~
"Antonia! My apologies for the plebeian accommodations." The suit was cheaper and his slicked-back hair had grown out a bit, but that smarmy voice remained the same.

"Justin," Toni spat, lip curling in disgust as Hammer swept into the room.

"It's delightful to see you again, sweetheart." Hammer smirked at her. "Excuse me a moment as we get set up in here." He turned to face the open doorway and waved in a group of three familiar yellow jumpsuits. Toni's jaw tightened at the sight of them. If Hammer was working with this group, that would certainly explain the attacks on Stark Industries.

It took her a minute to realize that the flunkies were setting up lights and a camera tripod. A sense of dread flooded over her. Toni was struck hard with the memory of lights blinding her as someone pulled a dusty hood from her head. Harsh words spoken in an unfamiliar language echoed in her ears as she squinted at the camera. No one would be coming for her. The dark, chill air of the cave seemed to close in on her and she choked on her next breath, sparking an awful pain in her chest—

"—embarrassingly easy. Then again, I suppose you can't be everywhere at once." Hammer's voice broke through the flashback, and Toni decided that would be the only time she'd be grateful to him.

Toni steadied her breathing and turned her focus to Hammer rather than the recording equipment. With a disdainful curl of her lip, she asked, "What rock did you drag yourself out from under?"

"I expect you know that 'rock' rather well, seeing as you put me there," Hammer replied with a sharp smile. "Not that my stay was long, mind you, but I don't appreciate being buried away with human garbage." He gave an exaggerated look of pity as he shrugged. "I'm afraid you pushed me to this, sweetheart."

"Come closer and call me that again," Toni dared.

"Did you know," Hammer began, tilting his head thoughtfully, "there was a time I might have taken you up on such an offer? But no, God forbid Antonia Stark ever take notice of her peers with anything but disdain."

"I don't know what delusions you have that would put you at the same level as me. You're a third-rate dick with delusions of grandeur. You've always been a useless prick clawing for attention because you failed to accomplish anything worthwhile on your own." Toni smirked at the flush of anger creeping across Hammer's face.

The man's hands fist ed at his sides as his cheeks reddened in anger. Toni upped the intensity of her smirk, daring him to lose control. Hammer let out an explosive breath and rolled his shoulders back. His chin lifted and he gave her a sharp glare as he bit out, "I don't know why anyone finds you charming."

Hammer snapped his fingers at the jumpsuited trio behind him. They promptly switched on the bright floodlights and moved back to the door in a recognizable guard stance. Toni squinted against the lights as Hammer moved towards the camera tripod.

"Lights!" he announced, his teeth shining white in the light glinting off his wide grin. "Camera!" Through the glare of light Toni could see the red dot of the camera's recording signal. "Now, when I call action, you're going to be a good little girl and invite your boyfriend for a little chat. Got it, sweetheart?"

Toni retorted, "First, not dating and not interested. Second, come face the camera yourself to make your no doubt predictable villainous demands on your own."
Hammer clucked his tongue chidingly. "Behave, sweetheart, or my new friends might start taking you apart and send pieces of you back to your bodyguard." He tipped his head thoughtfully. "Not much of a bodyguard, is he? It was so easy to get you here. Is Iron Man spending all his time hanging out with the A-team or is there a lover's spat?"

Toni wished Hammer would move into range so that she could kick him in the balls. She grit her teeth and resisted the urge to get into an argument about her relationship with her alter-ego.

Hammer smirked when she didn't say anything. "Tell Iron Man you're fine, for now, and that he has four hours from the delivery of the message to come to the enclosed location and negotiate the terms of your safe return."

"Right, because that doesn't sound like an obvious trap," Toni said dryly. "You sure you don't just want to send a little love note? Say 'check yes if you love-slash-hate me, too'?"

Hammer's shadowed silhouette straightened with tension. "Do what I tell you!" he snapped. "Or we can add some blood to your recording."

A gunshot rang out and Toni flinched instinctively. Sharp, rough bits of concrete hit her foot from the impact of the bullet bare inches from her toes. She traced the shot back to one of the jumpsuits. Damn it. It was probably time to play along, at least a little, to buy herself some time.

"Let's try this again," Hammer said. "And... action!"

Toni looked straight at the camera with a rigid smile. "Hello viewers at home. Welcome to the 'kidnap Toni Stark' hour. I'm alright 'for now'—" she twitched her fingers in quotations behind her back."—and I'm here to pass along an embarrassingly simplistic request. A weaselly old acquaintance — don't protest, Justin dear, it's more flattering than you deserve. As I was saying, Mr. Smarmy and some beekeeper friends cordially invite Iron Man to come around for a chat. Yeah, I laughed too. This all goes down four hours following the arrival of this message. I don't get the full details, but presumably they're not so brain-dead as to leave you guessing where. Don't count on my release, pretty sure ass-hat is intent on keeping me under thumb. I suggest—"

"Enough!" The red light cut off. Hammer came around the equipment to loom over Toni. She projected a bored air as she tilted her head back.

"Wasn't that what you asked me to say?" she asked sweetly.

Hammer's backhand came as a surprise. Toni grimaced as she tasted a hint of blood; a sharp sting inside her mouth told her she'd bitten her cheek. "Take a good look at where you're sitting, sweetheart. You can put on a show, but you are not in control."

Snorting quietly, Toni retorted, "It's pathetic you think that you are. I know you try hard, but you are so below even the casual criminal the Avengers face on a slow day."

Hammer gave her a tight grin and there was something dark in his look that gave Toni pause. "I have friends too, Toni." He patted her cheek with enough force to be a light slap. "They're quite interested in seeing what makes your man tick. Me? Iron Man's just a sweet bonus. You're the one I'm looking forward to seeing fall." He shoved her shoulder and Toni felt her stomach lurch as she fell backwards with the chair. Her head hit concrete and a hiss of pain slipped between her teeth before she could stop it. She heard Hammer laugh and direct the others to gather up the camera. The door shut with a clang and the sound of a lock and bolt engaging.

As the pain in her head subsided to a dull throb, Toni wriggled to get a sense of the tightness of her
bonds. Hammer had actually done her a favor, saving her the time of having to knock herself to the floor. From here she could brace her feet against the chair's seat and work on leveraging the slat she was tied to out of place. The position was hardly comfortable and she could do with a little more strength than she had at her disposal, but Toni set herself in place and prepared to push.

She took a deep breath and on the exhale she pushed with her legs and yanked at the slat; she felt it shift. Toni relaxed, taking several calming breaths as she readjusted her grip. "Alright. This time," she muttered to herself. "Come on, Natasha would've been out of this ten minutes ago and choking Hammer with his tie." The thought made her smirk.

Time to brace again. Once she was free of the chair, Toni was confident she could access the small, flat blade Natasha had taught her to hide along the side of her dress.

The next push resulted in the slat lurching out of its set position. Momentum still going, Toni scraped her shoulders against the concrete floor. She grimaced in distaste and rolled aside. "Progress," she noted aloud. She squinted towards the door, cast in shadow behind the lights that had been left in place. A plan started coming together in her mind and she smiled. Time to get a move on.

~

The Avengers gathered in the den when JARVIS announced Natasha and Clint's return. Clint looked irritated and Natasha was blank-faced as they came in.

"Coulson's got the driver under questioning," Clint said curtly before anyone had the chance to question. "Phil wouldn't let us stay." Natasha snorted quietly, obviously agreeing with Clint's irritation.

Steve crossed his arms to keep from fidgeting. He itched to do something. He hated waiting. "Do we know what happened yet?"

Natasha reported, "We know she was taken after leaving Jan's. Who or why is what Coulson's pursuing. The car had traces of an airborne sedative and we found a dispenser tucked into the backseat. Without knowing the who, we don't have a lead as to where she might have been taken."

"I am running through the footage of all cameras along the streets leading from the Van Dyne residence," JARVIS provided.

Bruce asked, "Has someone updated Pepper yet?"

"Coulson'll do that," Clint said. "Though what we have right now isn't much. He should be here as soon as he's finished. It won't be long, the driver's obviously someone's dupe."

JARVIS interrupted, "Agent Coulson is already in the building."

"That's probably bad news," Bruce muttered, frowning.

Steve grimaced, fully understanding the scientist's skepticism. Coulson's presence so soon following their team members' return likely meant there hadn't been much to get from the driver.

In less than five minutes Coulson joined them, phone to his ear as he stepped off the elevator. 'I'll be in contact, I promise.' His expression softened just slightly, signaling that he was talking to Pepper. "We'll get her back. Alright, bye."

As soon as he hung up, Coulson quickened his stride into the room and nodded at the others. "Driver was of little use. He was paid a hefty sum to deploy a gas in the backseat in order to subdue Ms.
Stark and Ms. Van Dyne, if necessary. He didn't ask questions about who wanted her or why." He met everyone's gaze steadily in turn. "Given the recent attacks on Stark Industries, it is possible that the AIM subgroup SHIELD and Stark have been investigating is responsible."

"Where are these villains hiding?" Thor asked, his voice sounding like a growl. "Let us show these fools what folly it is to anger the Avengers."

Clint's lips twitched into a small smile. "Don't have that intel yet, Big Guy. Plus they're likely to be holed up somewhere besides their HQ."

"Do we have ideas as to why Stark properties have been under attack?" Bruce asked, fidgeting with his glasses.

"Looking into it," Coulson said briefly. "Ms. Stark has had JARVIS run the information SHIELD has in addition to what she's pursued on her own."

Steve's fingers clenched into fists. So far he heard nothing that would allow him to take action and that grated. "What about Iron Man?" he demanded. "He's not in the tower and JARVIS won't elaborate as to his whereabouts." The AI didn't comment, Steve had already had another near argument with the AI.

"To my knowledge, Iron Man is on a covert mission," Coulson said. "Tracking the attackers at SI in California."

"And he's not in communication?" Steve asked irritably. "He should be here. He's supposed to be Toni's bodyguard!"

Natasha's gaze slid sideways and the glance she exchanged with Coulson was so brief that Steve doubted anyone else had noticed; had he blinked he would have missed it. It made something in his gut tighten. He was sick of secrets.

Before he could call them on it, JARVIS announced, "A courier has arrived with a package for Iron Man."

They all exchanged glances. Coulson turned to Natasha and nodded; she strode to the elevator.

~

'Maybe, 'Toni thought as she lost her knife, 'it would have been better to wait.' But she had never been good at waiting around, certainly not for some rescue, and she had come up with a plan. She'd thought it out rather quickly, but it had been thorough, it was good.

Except she wasn't at her best and it was possible that she'd put a little too much stock in her captors' arrogance equating stupidity.

Blinding her captors with the flood lights they'd left behind had given Toni a starting advantage. She took down three jumpsuits before she ran into any real trouble. A fourth jumpsuit, having missed the light blinding, managed a swift kick to her wrist; the sharp pain caught her off-guard and she stumbled, dropping her knife. She collected herself in time to dodge a punch and ducked past her attacker to slam her elbow into his kidney.

She was preparing to knee the guy in the groin for good measure when something slammed into the side of her head. Toni's entire body gave out at the blow and she dropped to the ground as her vision filled with black spots.
She couldn't have been out long because when she groggily blinked, she saw Hammer in the process of crouching next to her. He scowled and reached for her face. Toni flinched away but Hammer continued the movement and wiped at her eyebrow. His fingers came away red. Fuzzily, Toni realized she was bleeding.

"You just made things worse for yourself," Hammer told her. He looked up at someone beyond her field of vision. "We're moving her."

Toni tried turning her head to look around but even the smallest movement made her stomach roll. What the hell had she been hit with? She hoped it hadn't been Hammer, it would be embarrassing if he'd gotten the drop on her.

Hammer stood and nudged Toni's injured wrist with the toe of his shoe. "You and you, get her up," he barked at someone. Under his breath, Toni could just make out some swearing and, "Shouldn't underestimate the harpy."

Toni faded in and out as she was lifted and dragged down the hall. Her head spun and her stomach lurched. She gagged on the urge to vomit as she was jostled. At some point she must have passed out. One moment she was being dragged through the hallway, and the next she was lying on concrete, anonymous hands moving over her body.

She jerked away from the grasping hands, the rush of adrenaline overriding her nausea. Her vision remained gray and blurry, but she could hear voices as the hands around her coordinated to hold her still and cut away her clothing.

"Should have done this first thing. Bitch is resourceful."

"God forbid we allow a little modes— What the hell?"

"What happened to her chest?"

"Is that thing in her chest?"

Toni knew it was too late to hide, but she struggled against their hold, desperately trying to shove away the hands she could sense hovering (too close!) above the arc reactor.

"Hammer, what is this?"

'Hammer. Not Ten Rings. Not Obediah.'

"That, gentlemen, is an arc reactor..." Hammer's voice was almost reverent, which made the sick feeling in Toni's stomach curdle. "Well, well, well... Just what have you been hiding, my dear?"

Sounding businesslike again, Hammer ordered, "Lock her down and keep a close eye on her. This may change things." She heard footsteps retreat. "Don't touch it."

Toni was only half-aware as she was hauled upright. She lost consciousness as they tied her hands above her head.

~

Chapter End Notes
NaNoWriMo 2015 begins in exactly 4 hours from when I type this. It was my original hope to have this story completed and posted before NaNo hit, but that wasn't meant to be. So here's the plan:

I will have a new chapter out weekly in November. I'll aim to update on the weekends. I only need to do an extra proofread to the next several chapters so that shouldn't interfere with my November schedule.
Someone kept tapping her face. Toni sluggishly moved her head away from the persistent fingertips. Her entire body seemed to protest the movement, but at least the tapping stopped. She slitted her eyes open. A stranger stood in front of her, a bald man about her height who wore a white lab coat over a now familiar yellow jumpsuit.

"Back with us? Good." The stranger looked over his shoulder. "Did you have to hit her so hard, Hammer?" he asked with audible irritation.

Toni's words slurred as she provided an answer, "He's wanted to do it for years." She dragged on a shit-eating grin as the bald man returned his attention to her. "No other way he could pull one over on me."

Baldy sniffed dismissively. "How long has the reactor been installed?" Toni dropped her grin and gave him a blank look. Did he seriously expect she would answer? The man scowled at her and raised his hand. Toni couldn't hide the full-body flinch as he ran his fingers along the arc reactor's edge. "The body's had enough time to recover from traumatic surgery. What's used to power it? Known elements would surely poison the body."

Toni twisted to dislodge the unwanted touch even though it made her body ache in protest. The man's fingers touched skin for a moment before he dropped his hand. Toni glared at the stranger through the tangle of hair that fell into her face.

"She's not going to just tell you everything." Hammer sounded exasperated as he stepped into view. "She's stubborn. Might as well take the damn thing out."

Toni's gut lurched and she was pretty sure her graying vision was the result of panic rather than concussion. Too clearly she remembered laying frozen beneath a man who had been like a father to her. She could see the extraction device coming closer to her chest. She wondered if it would have felt any worse if Obie — Obediah — ripped her heart out with his bare hands.

"—think you struck a nerve," the bald man's voice registered through the whooshing sound in Toni's ears. "No, we'll hold off on that. I don't want to accidentally kill her. I want to see how it's interfacing with the human body."

Rough fingers grabbed Toni's chin and tilted her head to meet Hammer's self-satisfied expression. "Underneath all that bravado you're just a little girl." His gaze dropped pointedly to her heavily-scarred chest and he added disdainfully, "And not much of one at that."

Toni spat in his face and snarled, "Go fuck yourself."

Hammer let go of her chin to wipe at his red face. He addressed his companion curtly, "Your conversation could use some leverage."

"I need her moved to a fully-equipped facility," Baldy said with a frown. "I hadn't anticipated conducting any complicated analysis here."

Hammer rolled his eyes before turning towards his companion. "Fine. We'll pack up and—" his words halted abruptly as the lights went out. The blue glow from the uncovered reactor provided the
only source of light in the small room.

"Get her down immediately!" Baldy ordered. He stretched to scrabble at Toni's bound wrists, but he was too short to get a good angle.

"Your stupid swarm of yellow jackets," Hammer hissed as he reached up.

Toni held still and concentrated on breathing steadily. She shifted her bare feet, preparing for the moment she could push forward. Lights going out meant they had been found, and she had no doubt either the Avengers or S.H.I.E.L.D. (or both) would be clearing the corridors in short order. Her head pounded like a drum performance and she knew her arms would be weak from poor circulation, but she wanted to get away now rather than wait around for rescue.

Hammer finished untangling Toni's hands and let her arms drop. Toni gave herself a second to wince at the pain of sharply returning sensation; a moment later she bent her knees and charged the bald man. She caught him by surprise and knocked him off-balance. She let Hammer reach for her and catch her shoulder before she yanked away and used his forward momentum against him. She kicked the back of his knee and stomped on the hand he used to catch himself when he fell. She aimed an elbow at Baldy's gut on her way to the door.

She ran through the darkened doorway and stumbled against the wall as she kept moving. She was counting on a stairwell being at the end of the corridor where she could either make her way up or hide herself in a corner until the coast was clear. She made her way by a combination of feeling the wall and using the arc reactor's glow.

The fourth doorway lit by her reactor wasn't filled by a door and taking a step inside revealed stairs. Toni exhaled sharply and leaned against the wall for a moment, trying to listen for sounds of pursuit. Were those voices?

She staggered as she stepped away from the wall, not a good sign when she was hoping to use the stairs. She raised a hand to press against her pounding temple and winced as she encountered a sizable lump and drying blood.

There were definitely angry voices echoing in the hall. "Fuck." She was in no condition to outrun them. She moved closer to the stairs and followed the outside edge in order to duck below the steps. She bent her knees and fell forward as her balance shifted. She landed hard on her knees and hands. Her injured wrist flared sharply with fresh pain and she bit her lip to keep from making a sound. She crawled further under the stairs one-handed, keeping the other tucked against the arc reactor to help mute the light.

Hurried footsteps sounded in the hallway and Toni tensed. She was in no condition to fight or outrun anyone. She curled down towards her knees, hoping she could fully cover the glow emitting from her chest. 'Don't think about why,' she told herself, taking a steadying breath.

Along with the footsteps came the sound of an argument.

"She must just be—"

"I'm not going to get dragged out by the goddamn Hulk!"

Hammer's and Baldy's voices were getting closer.

"They haven't gotten this far yet. We have ti—"

"Yeah. Don't think so." Hawkeye's voice was followed by the distinct sounds of two bodies hitting
Toni stayed where she was for a long moment, head throbbing and pulse pounding rapidly at her throat. Finally she exhaled a shaky breath of relief and began to turn around in order to crawl out. As soon as she unfolded herself, the blue glow of the reactor highlighted her bare legs. Toni hesitated, reminded abruptly that she was stripped down to nothing but her panties. Swallowing hard, she forced herself to crawl forward to the edge of her cover. She shifted around as she sat and hugged her knees to her chest.

"Barton?" she called.

"Stark!" Barton's voice coincided with a flashlight beam darting across the doorway.

"About time you showed up!" she taunted halfheartedly.

"Got her. Hammer and some other dude are ready for pick-up on the hall floor," Barton said, presumably reporting to the rest of the team via comms. Hawkeye appeared in the doorway and swept his flashlight around the space. "Well I don't know yet," he said. "Someone decided we should go in with the lights out. Makes it a little more challenging to exam—"

The lights flickered on and even though the stairwell's lighting was dim, it took a few moments for Toni to adjust. She didn't realize how close Barton had gotten until she heard his subdued request, "Hey, can I get a jacket or something down here?"

Toni grit her teeth and tried to pull her knees closer. She glared at him challengingly. "I'm fucking fine. Just too resourceful, apparently."

He met her gaze and nodded shortly. He crouched down and tapped a finger against his own temple. "Nasty bump and a lot of blood. How're you feeling?"

"About what you'd expect from a concussion," she quipped. "Don't frown at me, Hawk-ass."

Clint rolled his eyes at the nickname.

"Hawkeye?" Cap's voice came from down the hallway.

"Stairwell, end of the hall!" Barton called back. To Toni, he said, "There's another set of stairs at the opposite end. They were clearing things out up top, S.H.I.E.L.D. sent some people with us. Not much of a challenge, though. This place wasn't exactly fortified."

"I don't think this was supposed to be much of a base of operations," Toni replied.

"Wasn't the intended meeting point, either," Clint explained. "But JARVIS works wonders with a bit of digital input."

Toni smirked at that.

"Hawkeye?" Captain America came through the doorway with Thor just behind. Toni tried to curl further in on herself, highly aware of the quickly crowding space and how she had nothing but her position to hide her chest.

Clint turned his head to Thor and held out a hand. "Thor, can I borrow your cape?"

The demigod stared blankly at the outstretched hand for a moment. "Aye..." he said slowly, moving to unclasp the fabric. He looked away from the hand and his gaze froze on Toni. "Oh! Please, my
cape is yours, Lady Stark."

Toni huffed a sigh against her knees and muttered, "I am too fucking tired for this."

"Hey," Clint caught her attention, holding out the cape in silent question. Toni nodded briefly and let him drape Thor's surprisingly soft cape over her shoulders. She immediately grabbed tight to the edges and pulled the fabric into a bunch over the arc reactor.

"We... ah. I mean, are you alright?" Steve asked hesitantly. Toni turned to look at him, taking note of how he managed to look pale while wearing a faint flush.

Feeling a little more secure with a barrier of fabric, she told him, "Peachy, Cap. Embarrassed to be caught out by an idiot like Hammer." She shifted the cape as she slowly got her legs under her. Thor and Steve hadn't made any further moves into the room and Clint had retreated a couple feet away again after placing the cape.

"Your face..." Steve trailed off as Toni stood on wobbly legs; he stepped forward, an expression of distress crossing his features. Clint was closer, though, and he caught Toni's elbow to steady her.

Toni started to wave a hand dismissively, then realized it tugged at the fabric of the cape and she thought better of the movement. "I've had worse."

"It looks pretty bad," Steve murmured.

"Let us escort you to the healers," Thor offered, expression earnest.

Toni's fingers tightened in the fabric over her chest. "Locals or S.H.I.E.L.D.?" she asked warily, though in the end it wouldn't matter; there were only very particular people she'd allow to see her.

Frowning, Steve started, "S.H.I.E.L.D. alerted the authorities that—"

"Nope. Take me back to the Tower," Toni interrupted.

"Seriously?" Barton looked at her askance. "Gotta admit, I'm impressed you're even standing with that lump."

'Probably not for much longer,' she admitted to herself. Still, she gave him a toothy grin. "I'm Toni fucking Stark." That scored her a snort of laughter from the archer.

Thor still looked concerned and Steve seemed to be gearing up for an argument. Thankfully, Natasha appeared over the stair railing and assessed the situation in a glance. "How bad?" she asked, gaze skimming over Toni.

"I suppose you'll insist on checking the head wound now?" Toni asked. "Fine, but get me home."

Natasha moved forward to Toni's side and Clint moved aside to let her take his place. "We'll get you to the Quinjet. I'll look at your head on the way to the Tower."

Thor bowed slightly as he moved aside to give free access to the stairs.

"Black Widow, I think Toni should get immediate medical attention," Cap argued as Natasha steered Toni out from under the stairs.

Toni wanted to argue with him, especially as he was talking as if she wasn't there, but her vision had started to gray again and she could feel her legs wanting to give out on her as the adrenaline rush faded.
"Captain, I assure you that I have Stark's best interests in mind," Romanov replied coolly. "Hulk is on his way to becoming Bruce again and we'll be able to leave shortly."

"That's not going to cut it," Steve answered sharply.

Toni's eyelids felt too heavy to keep open and she could feel her legs shaking as she took a step forward. Natasha uttered some foul Russian under her breath as Toni collapsed into her side and the sound of her own pulse accompanied her into unconsciousness.

~

Steve heard Toni exhale sharply and then suddenly she was falling against Natasha's side. Automatically he took a step forward, reaching out even as the redhead wrapped her arms around Toni's torso and guided her gently to the floor.

Romanov knelt beside Toni while still supporting the other woman's head. Clint stopped behind Natasha's shoulder, eyebrows arching high as he asked, "What's that?" It was immediately apparent what he was referring to as Steve moved closer.

Natasha quickly folded the fabric of Thor's cape more thickly over Toni's chest where a strange blue light had been glowing. Natasha's expression was blank, though her eyes were hard and there was something telling about the way she didn't look up. "Hawkeye, where's your flashlight?"

"Nat..." Clint warned even as he held out the requested item.

Wordlessly, she shifted so that Toni's head rested against her thigh. She busied herself checking Toni's eyes and Steve could see the uneven dilation. Natasha turned Toni's head and prodded at the blood-stained temple. Steve sucked in a sharp breath at the clearly illuminated lump and swelling that had spread onto Toni's cheek.

"What was that glowing?" Clint asked again. Steve glanced up and saw the archer's suspicious stare focused on Romanov.

When it seemed that she would ignore the question entirely, Steve ordered, "What's going on, Widow?"

She finally looked up and her expression was carefully schooled. "Let's focus on getting back to the tower, Captain."

"Oh come on, Nat," Clint said in exasperation, leaning forward. Before Steve could stop him, Natasha's hand shot out and gripped Barton's wrist; judging by his wince, the grip was tight.

"Leave it alone, Barton," Natasha told him lowly. Still staring coldly at Clint, she said, "Captain, it is not my place to disclose this information."

"Does this interfere with her health?" Steve asked. He didn't like dropping the matter, there were questions here that needed answering, but the more important issue was making sure Toni was alright.

Romanov seemed to hesitate before replying. She said, "It's a good sign."

"What's that mean?" Clint muttered, glaring unhappily at her as she released his wrist. Natasha ignored him.

Thor drew near and crouched beside Natasha. "I will carry Lady Stark," he offered. When she shot him a hard look, he held up a hand and promised, "I shall not invade the Lady's privacy."

For a long moment Natasha continued to stare at him. Eventually she nodded. Thor smiled and lifted Toni with gentle grace, easily accommodating Natasha's efforts to keep the cape from slipping. Once they were standing, she tugged the fabric into cooperation and fitted it more securely in a wrap.

Now that he was looking for it, Steve could see the muted glow of some sort of light — it had to be bright to penetrate the multiple layers — emitting from what would be the center of Toni's chest. A sick sense of foreboding made him feel uneasy as he stepped aside to let Thor take the lead up the stairs. An unnerving suspicion teased at the edge of his mind, not quite fully forming, as he trailed after the demigod and listened to the hushed argument taking place between Clint and Natasha.

~

Chapter End Notes

Thank you. I can't say this enough. Your kudos and comments delight me, I'm so happy that people are enjoying this! The series is one of my favorite things I've written, which makes it even more challenging to write because I struggle with the reality of my writing versus my high expectations.
Toni woke slowly, mind hazy with no coherent sense of what had come before. Her head hurt like hell and her body ached all over, especially her left wrist. She guessed a fight. Thankfully she recognized her own room, laying on a soft mattress and surrounded by familiar scents. The light beyond her eyelids didn’t seem too bright, so she slowly opened her eyes. She lay partially on her side, curved around a pillow she must have tugged down in her sleep. She heard movement behind her and slowly rolled over, aware that her head would protest any sudden movements; even that careful roll made the throbbing pick up.

The sight of Natasha and a sudden flare of pain at her temple united Toni’s hazy memories. "Fuck," she muttered, closing her eyes again. "What the fuck did I get hit with?"

"A heavy blunt object," Romanov replied blandly.

Toni groaned quietly at the unhelpful response. The details of her kidnapping filtered back and she recalled her ill-formed plan to break out. She’d failed and then there had been hands...

Her eyes flew open and she scrambled at her chest, yanking aside the bedsheets to feel the reactor beneath the fabric of a loose cotton shirt. She couldn't hide the shakiness of her breath as she exhaled in relief. Toni clenched her fingers into fists over her malformed breasts as she took a few moments to steady her breathing.

"You've been in and out since we reached the tower," Natasha said. "Do you remember any of that?"

Toni thought better of shaking her head and verbally replied, "No. How long?"

Natasha met Toni's weary gaze calmly. "Approximately fifteen hours. We returned yesterday evening."

"And you've been here how long?" Toni asked skeptically, having a hard time imagining Natasha at her bedside for such a prolonged period of time.

"A couple hours here and there," the redhead replied with a small shrug. "Pepper and Happy took most of the night."

Toni could imagine that; those two had spent quite some time at her bedside over the years for any number of reasons.

"I remember the lights going out..." she mused aloud. Hawkeye had been the one to find her. She remembered Thor's cape and arguing with Cap about returning to the Tower. Natasha had backed her up, but... "How did you convince them to avoid Medical after I passed out?"

"I have my methods," Natasha offered unhelpfully. Toni focused an irritated glare on the redhead, who remained unmoved. "Your doctor met us here to do an exam in private. Concussion, a sprained wrist, areas of extensive bruising, and some scrapes. Nothing life-threatening," she reported.

"I have my methods," Natasha offered unhelpfully. Toni focused an irritated glare on the redhead, who remained unmoved. "Your doctor met us here to do an exam in private. Concussion, a sprained wrist, areas of extensive bruising, and some scrapes. Nothing life-threatening," she reported.

Toni eyed her wrist wrapped neatly in sports bandages, not having noticed it during her panic over the reactor. "Some bastard kicked it," she said. "I dropped my knife."

"Toni." Natasha waited for Toni to meet her gaze before continuing. "The others saw the glow from the reactor." Toni closed her eyes and raised a hand to rub at the less painful side of her face.
Natasha continued, "There were questions. I told them it was your business."

"Shit," Toni muttered under her breath. This had never been factored into her seventy-some odd plans as to how to confess to the others. "What time is it? Where is everyone?"

JARVIS answered, "It is a quarter to nine, Madame. Ms. Potts is in your study, attending to Stark Industries business. Agent Coulson is with her, preparing the incident report. Dr. Banner is attempting to teach Agent Barton to cook, and Master Odinson is with them. Captain Rogers is in the gym."

Toni smiled wryly as she acknowledged the rarity of having everyone close together at this time of day. "Did anyone get sleep?" she wondered aloud. Natasha didn't answer.

Toni slowly pushed herself upright and moved to rest her back against the headboard. She ran her fingers through her hair and glanced down to see what she was wearing. She tugged on the Ramones shirt to cover the slip of skin exposed between its hem and her sweatpants. Without the usual cover and padding, the arc reactor's light shone through the fabric.

Without looking up, Toni said, "Hey, J? Let Pep and Agent know I'm up. Tell them to give me twenty minutes and I'll be over to meet with them." Frowning, she added for both her AI's benefit and Natasha's, "And don't tell the others yet."

As Toni moved to the edge of the bed, Natasha asked, "Do you need help?"

"I'm fine." Toni stood up and waited a few moments for the vertigo to subside. "Would like some privacy, though."

Natasha nodded as she stood. "I'll be down the hall. Let me know when you head up to see the others."

Toni grimaced at the thought of her upcoming encounter. It made her feel abruptly all the more drained, grubby, and bare. She waved her uninjured hand toward the door. "Yeah, got it." Natasha walked away, silently leaving Toni alone.

With a shuddery sigh, she started toward the bathroom, mentally looking through her closet for something to wear. Armor didn't have to be made of gold-titanium alloy.

~

"Toni!" Pepper greeted her at the door of the study, hardly allowing Toni to take two steps before she was engulfed in a warm embrace. "God, you gave me such a scare. I hate when this happens — why has this happened more than once?" she demanded.

"Just people jealous of my charming company," Toni joked. She briefly returned the embrace before stepping away. Pepper let her go. Her sharp gaze took in Toni's face and she winced in sympathy. "Yeah, no one's going to be interested in my pretty face for a while," Toni muttered, self-consciously raising a hand to her swollen cheek and tender temple.

"Oh hush," Pepper admonished, sniffing lightly. She gently moved Toni's hand away. "It just makes you ruggedly good-looking."

Toni rolled her eyes tolerantly and walked further into the study. "Agent. How's S.H.I.E.L.D. dealing with cleanup?"

Coulson stood with his hands folded in front of him. Even though his expression was hard to read,
Toni recognized concern in his gaze carefully roaming over her. "Ten 'beekeepers' — thank you ever so much for that nickname, by the way," he said dryly, "were rounded up on site along with Justin Hammer and a Dr. Andrew Forson. They have been detained, with Hammer and Dr. Forson separated from all others."

Toni nodded and took a seat at her desk. She could tell by the tablet and windows opened on the computer that Pepper had been working from there. Toni leaned back and crossed her legs. "I'm surprised you're here and not at the interrogation."

"There are other members of S.H.I.E.L.D.," Coulson reminded with a wry twitch of his lips. "And it may surprise you to know that there were other priorities than asking secured prisoners questions after the fact."

Toni didn't meet the man's gaze, having a hard time accepting the idea that concern about her had trumped actual work.

"I assume there's something you wanted to talk about," Pepper said as she sat on the couch. Coulson settled on the couch arm next to her.

With their expectant gazes now resting on her, Toni felt less certain about facing them. She wanted to hole up in her workshop. She wanted to be working on the newest model of the armors and have JARVIS lock down the lab. She wanted peace and quiet, solitude and security. 'But that's the thing, isn't it?' she thought reluctantly. 'I have to face this."

Toni folded her hands carefully over her crossed legs, telling herself she had no need to reach for the reactor to feel that it was still in place. "I needed to let you know that during the... situation, my arc reactor was revealed." She kept her head up, defiant even though she knew that was more telling about her state of mind than if she had left herself relax her posture. Coulson actually looked grim, and Pepper looked worried. "Hammer, his bald friend, and at least two guards. I think. I'd already be knocked on the head." Toni dropped her gaze and frowned at her hands. The wrap around her wrist poked out from under the cuff of her jacket.

"There's a chance that information will get out," Pepper said quietly.

Toni huffed a humorless chuckle. "Definitely. Knowing Hammer, likely an attempt at blackmail. S.H.I.E.L.D. will only hold these guys so long before they slither out from under thumb again."

Coulson didn't counter, solidifying her assessment.

"We need to get in front of this," Pepper determined. "Alright. Did you have an idea?"

Toni unlocked her hands to give a wide shrug. She finally met their gazes and offered her publicity smile. "What do I need to cover? What do we think they'll try to hit me with?"

"What you say is up to you," Coulson told her simply. "S.H.I.E.L.D. will back you if you need something."

Toni knew there was more and gave the agent a shrewd look. "But...?"

"S.H.I.E.L.D. discourages the disclosure of Iron Man's identity."

She laughed at that, not sure if it was entirely in amusement. "Do you guys seriously think I'm going to spill all my secrets because some dickheads stripped me naked?" She ignored the haunted look that passed over Pepper's expression. "You can tell Fury that little tidbit is mine."

"I just needed to pass along the official line," Coulson said with a slight smile.
"Won't Hammer and those goons put two and two together?" Pepper asked, frown tight with worry.

That prompted Toni to grin. "Only to make five. They're more interested in the technology—" and that gave her far more chills than her identity being discovered could have done "—and Hammer's too much of a chauvinistic pig to ever think a woman's behind the mask."

"That's S.H.I.E.L.D.’s read on the situation as well, though we'll investigate the possibility that someone's worked it out," Coulson contributed.

Pepper asked, "So that still leaves the possible leak of what, exactly?"

Toni's grin faded and she reached for the padding covering her arc reactor. She pressed her palm between the false breasts beneath her shirt and fought to keep a cool smile on her face. "My health condition," she tried to maintain a breezy tone, "probably over-exaggerated."

"What about the reactor?" Pepper asked, expression tense.

"That I doubt would be shared beyond their hive society," Toni replied.

While Pepper looked uncertain, Coulson nodded. "That information would be best kept to themselves if they wish to exploit it." Toni swallowed hard and felt her fingers clench as Coulson continued; "While we're still not aware of the specific project or projects AIM is preparing, it's been clear from their patterns of action that they are seeking power sources." It went without saying that there was a severe shortage of advanced arc reactor tech.

Toni was tempted to get up and walk out. Her desire to run down to the lab and check over the current reactor and her backups was so strong that she had uncrossed her legs and slid forward in her chair before she finished the conscious thought.

Pepper cleared her throat and her steady voice kept Toni in place. "Then it seems to me our main concern about information getting out is in regards to Toni's health. I think we can work with that."

Toni leaned back in her chair again. "What's your thought?"

"The amount of detail can be up to you, but I think you should work with the truth," Pepper said. "There was a lot of speculation after Afghanistan. Injury and trauma are personal matters, so even though years have passed, having kept an injury secret wouldn't be unexpected. It also adds to public understanding of why SI pursued new directions." She paused, looking thoughtful. "What if we frame a release of information with your investment in Phoenix?"

"What?" Toni asked, surprised. "I'm a private partner, that's Jan's project," she argued with a frown.

"You don't have to be a silent partner," Pepper countered. "Jan's been wanting us to speak up. We're already gearing up for major publicity of Phoenix and if you come forward, admitting to some personal interest, the attention wouldn't necessarily all be on you. You make it part of a press release, everyone involved in the project shares a bit about their interest. We make the larger story about Phoenix, not Toni Stark."

The idea was a good one. Toni's injuries, the aftereffects of Afghanistan, were just about the last thing she wanted to move from the realm of privacy, but she knew that sooner or later ignoring the fact that enemies had seen the reactor and her scars would bite her in the ass. If she was having her hand forced, she would much prefer to be a sidebar than the headliner.

"Toni? How does that sound?" Pepper prompted, catching Toni's eye.
Slowly nodding, Toni said, "I could live with that. We need to call Jan."

"I'll fill her in this afternoon." Pepper glanced at her watch and winced. "I have to be downstairs for a meeting in ten minutes."

"Go, be productive." Toni waved her hand at the door. "I'm sure you'll rope me into a PR meeting soon enough."

Pepper stood and gathered her tablet. "Stay out of trouble, at least for the day, okay? I need some breathing space," she chided, stopping long enough to drop a kiss on Toni's forehead. "And rest, for god's sake. You have a concussion and your creations often end up terrifying me when you work like this."

"Whatever," Toni muttered as Pepper hurried for the door. She smiled cheekily at the exasperated glare Pepper threw her.

When the door closed again, Coulson quietly cleared his throat. He waited for Toni to look over before he spoke. "I believe your public statements can wait for planning. However, there are worried teammates whose suspicions have been raised in light of recent events."

Toni looked away. "This wasn't how it was supposed to go," she said quietly.

"Unfortunately this is the way it is," he replied. Although the words were bland, Toni could sense he was not without sympathy. "Putting it off any longer will make things worse. If you'd like, I can accompany you."

Toni's smile felt brittle. She forced herself to her feet and smoothed the lines of her dress jacket and slacks. "No, thank you, Agent. This needs to be me and the Avengers."

Running out of clothing imperfections she could pretend to fix, she inhaled deeply and faced the door. "JARVIS, call the team to the lounge."

"Call if you need anything," Coulson told her. "If it's alright, I still have work that I could finish here."

Toni nodded and gestured at the desk. "Knock yourself out." She recognized the show of solidarity but didn't know how else to acknowledge it.

"Agent Romanov is waiting for you at the elevator, Madame. The other Avengers are gathering."

'Show time,' Toni thought as she opened the door.

Natasha met Toni by the elevator.

"I don't need you to hold my hand," Toni said as the doors opened and they stepped into the car.

"You think I would?" Natasha returned.

Toni flashed a brief smile. "I suppose not."

The trip was all too short, and Toni felt herself tensing again. The doors opened for her to step through, yet she remained in place. Natasha stayed at her side, also unmoving. The redhead said nothing, her stare focused beyond the door, not on Toni.

Eventually, Toni asked quietly, "How do you think they'll take it?"
Natasha replied bluntly, "Surprised. Hurt." She turned her head then and Toni forced herself to meet the other woman's gaze. "They will understand in part the logic, but the emotional will affect their reactions."

Toni felt like the word 'betrayal' hung in the air. She dreaded the reactions to come and could only be grateful that Natasha, knowing all she did, wouldn't change her opinion when Toni came clean.

Natasha faced the doors again, asking, "Are you ready?"

Toni carefully tried to compose her expression and remove the traces of her anxiety. She rolled her shoulders back as she replied, "You know I'm not, but this is the best I'm going to get."

She stepped out of the elevator first, Natasha following two steps behind. Toni was rather impressed that no one had rushed out to investigate why they were taking so long. Toni saw no sign of their teammates until they reached the open double doors that led into the lounge. She noted their positions and how no one was fully settled.

"Lady Stark," Thor greeted, stepping away from the wall where he had looked far too posed to be relaxed. He peered at her face with a frown. "Are you in much pain?" he asked in concern.

The worry was touching and Toni smiled faintly. "It's bearable," she assured. She looked at the others. Barton was perched on the back of the couch, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. He was frowning at her, a pinched look between his eyebrows. Bruce sat at the edge of one of the couch cushions and gave her a relieved smile when their gazes met. Steve stood in the middle of the room, looking torn between rushing forward and tucking himself in a corner.

"Hey, guys," Toni greeted the room at large.

"Glad to see you're up and about," Bruce told her.

Natasha passed Toni and took a seat on the couch next to Clint's knees. Toni made her way around the huge sectional couch and motioned towards the extra space still available. "Take a seat, guys," she encouraged Steve and Thor. Steve's eyes darted to Clint and the men exchanged a look Toni decided she didn't want to bother deciphering at the moment.

"You should sit as well," Thor encouraged as he moved to one end of the couch.

"Uh, yeah." Toni glanced around, deciding to move one of the lightly cushioned chairs that were usually ignored and off to the side of the room. Before she ended up making a spectacle of herself by dragging it over, Thor appeared at her elbow and took over. "Thanks, Big Guy," she said.

"It is no hardship," Thor assured as he settled the chair where she directed. He returned to his seat and of the expectant faces turned Toni's way, his seemed the friendliest.

Toni sat and found herself obsessing over the lines of her dress slacks. She cleared her throat but wasn't sure how to start.

Barton saved her the trouble of figuring it out. "Okay, 'Tasha's been keeping her mouth shut and we've been patient, but it's about time you explain what the blue glowy thing was that you had going on last night." He waved at Toni and she could tell his stare was focused on her chest.

Self-conscious and slightly unnerved despite knowing this would likely be a reaction, Toni pressed a hand over the padding. Her fingers curled into the fabric of her shirt and even though she knew she was only drawing more attention to the area, she couldn't force herself to let go. The idea of exposing the spot made her mouth go dry and her breath catch.
"Wait..." Bruce looked like he was putting pieces of information together. Toni waited and watched him, wondering what he'd figured out. He glanced at her hand over her chest, then looked up. His eyes expressed sympathy and understanding. "The pacemaker."

"What?" Clint asked, echoed quietly by Steve.

Bruce kept his focus on Toni. "When we first started working together, you told me about a modified pacemaker needed after your injuries in Afghanistan."

"Good memory," Toni said, feeling the corner of his lips kick up in a small smile.

"That isn't in your file," Clint protested. He shot Natasha a sharp look. "But you knew." Natasha met his glare with a raised eyebrow without saying anything.

Steve leaned forward, his eyebrows furrowing together in what looked like a mixture of frustration and worry. "Why do you need it? Why didn't the rest of us know?"

"I didn't want you to," Toni replied to the second question immediately. She still couldn't lower her hand. She took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh before addressing the first question. "You all know I was in Afghanistan for a weapons demonstration?"

She hadn't expected anyone to counter that, but Thor looked confused as he said, "I do not know this tale."

She hadn't planned to do much more than add a few key details missing from her S.H.I.E.L.D. file, but apparently she had to backtrack. "Okay. So, ah, for Thor's benefit: I went to Afghanistan in 2008 to present the SI Jericho weapon for the American military's consideration." She could remember the heat of the desert sun, the vibration of the explosion and the wind that had whipped past her and blown the hats off officers' heads as she grinned proudly. She felt sick to her stomach. "While traveling in a convoy, we were attacked. I tried to find cover and instead—"

She paused, her jaw tightening as she remembered that moment when she heard an all too familiar beeping and looked over to see an explosive with her name on it. She had thought, until that last moment before it went off, that it was something from the convoy's materials. Then she had flown back from the explosion and as blood seeped through her blouse and suit, she realized that the bomb had to have been launched by one of the attackers.

Shaking her head sharply to brush off the details of the memory, Toni summarized quickly, "An explosive, Stark made, went off next to me. There's shrapnel in my chest, clawing its way towards my heart. Thus, the 'pacemaker.'" She made a gesture with her free hand meant to indicate that was the last of it.

She made herself look at the expressions on her teammates' faces. Natasha's was blank, and Bruce remained calm and sympathetic. Thor looked concerned and seemed to be studying her for further signs of injury. Clint didn't seem satisfied, if his frown was any indication. Steve looked like someone had sucker-punched him and he hadn't decided yet how to respond.

"Call me old-fashioned," Clint began dryly, "but pacemakers are internal and wouldn't do a damn bit of good keeping shrapnel from the heart."

Toni conceded the point and while she didn't want to get into details, she had known from the start that it was doubtful a general outline would be accepted. "Fair enough." She flexed her hand over her chest, enough that she could feel the brief increase of pressure to know everything was still in place. "It's a highly modified, unique pacemaker." She fixed her gaze on a picture hanging on the
"Wall without seeing it, just needing to avoid meeting any of the gazes she felt weighing on her. "Under the conditions, there was no hope of getting the shrapnel out." She felt a bitter smile cross her lips. "Well, the doctor later told me they... they called the victims the 'walking dead' because inevitably the bomb did its job."

"Toni," Bruce said gently.

She didn't let him interrupt. "First edition of this baby was little more than a scraped together emergency electromagnet." Before the memory of the car battery's weight could settle on her like a physical thing, Toni continued, "But I was able to upgrade it with some help. Modified it even more once I was stateside."

A quick glance at Barton revealed that he seemed to be satisfied with those details.

Steve stared at his clasped hands where they hung between his knees. He had hunched forward and Toni was under no illusion that he wasn't upset; she just wasn't sure what emotions contributed to that.

"You should have told us," Steve said quietly. "This sort of thing has complications. What if you needed help? What were we supposed to do?"

Toni ran her free hand over her hair. "Despite appearances, I happen to like my privacy, Captain," she told him wearily. "And there are people who know, who have the details for what to do if there's an unlikely emergency. JARVIS is at the ready if I'm unable to direct." She knew her words weren't helping when Steve looked up at her with pained eyes and a pinched expression.

"What sort of emergency?" he asked tightly. "Replacement battery?"

Toni couldn't help it — she laughed. She covered her eyes with one hand as she felt the laughter bubble into something unwelcome and heat pricked her eyes. Fuck, she refused to cry. She knew the others had to be watching her with a range of concern and confusion. When she was able to catch her breath and tears no longer threatened, she pasted on a smile and shook her head. "Oh, honey, it's self-powered. No more replacements."

She watched them try to process the information and saw the moment that Bruce fit more pieces together. His eyes narrowed in concentration as he observed, "The blue light they told me about... You told me once that the pacemaker was related to your Iron Man designs." His eyes widened in horror and he stared at her in shock. "You have an arc reactor. In your chest?"

"Yes," she managed to say before her throat closed up and she knew she couldn't speak for the moment. Her hand fist against her chest and she suddenly longed to take a closer look, see with her eyes that everything was in place despite the sensation of its absence. It was hard to breathe, every inhale a taxing effort made all the more difficult by her determination to present a calm front to her teammates.

"Oh god," Bruce whispered, still looking stricken. The others looked at him, giving Toni a few moments' reprieve to try and collect herself.

"What is it that affects you so?" Thor asked.

"Christ. Have you ever taken a look at arc reactor technology?" Bruce ran a shaky hand over his face. "Never mind. Look, it was designed to be something huge, placed in a warehouse to generate energy. Recently Toni shrunk the design, but a reactor is not tiny." His gaze fell on Toni again. "How big?" he asked her.
Toni swallowed hard and forced her voice back into working order. "Fist-sized, thereabouts."

Even Natasha looked stunned as that information sunk in. Well, seemed like even the super-spy in their midst wasn't privy to all the details.

"You said... in your chest?" Steve asked faintly, looking as pale as Bruce.

Toni unclenched her fingers so that she could pat her sternum to indicate its placement.

"Your technology can indeed achieve great magic," Thor said, looking at Toni with something akin to respect and awe.

"Christ, Stark," Barton muttered. "How the hell do you breathe with that thing in there?"

Bruce shook his head slowly, realization dawning. "Not very well, sometimes. God. Toni, I wish you'd..." he trailed off and caught her gaze with a wealth of emotion brimming in his eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"My weaponry," she told him softly with a shrug.

"You didn't deserve it," Steve snapped, clearly upset by her casual dismissal. Toni decided not to get into an argument about it.

Natasha finally spoke and Toni wished she had kept her silence. "Meatball surgery to insert something large into you chest. How much damage?"

Those words finally got Toni’s hand to move as her arms came up to cross defensively over her chest (over the padding covering the reactor, over her custom bra and its false breasts). Toni knew her voice gave too much away, too high, too tight, as she replied, "That is personal."

No one pressed her, but Bruce paled further and looked depressed, so he probably guessed. Natasha's quick glance at Toni’s chest suggested she also suspected. Actually, Barton had gone suspiciously silent and still, so that left Steve and Thor. Toni didn't care to clue them in.

Clearing her throat, Toni asked, "We done discussing my bad ticker?"

"Another question, if it is permitted," Thor said. He waited for her cautious nod before continuing. "Is the Man of Iron aware of your condition?"

Well, that took care of the segue into that issue. Toni closed her eyes and bowed her head. "I thought you might already know why Iron Man isn't here," she said quietly. She lowered her arms from their defensive position and raised her head. She looked at her teammates and saw that at least half of them already suspected, though it was obvious no one had let it fully sink in yet. She had no idea where to look so her gaze flickered between her teammates.

"I am Iron Man."

She recalled that day on the stage, staring out at a sea of reporters and how she had wanted to throw out Coulson's cards and say those words. She remembered seeing Pepper, Jan, and Happy at the back of the room and knowing she would put them in danger with the confession. Now Toni wondered what her life would have been like had she followed that impulse to reveal the truth from the beginning. 'Probably,' she thought, 'I wouldn't be at the center of betrayed stares.'

Toni stood abruptly, ignoring the minor dizziness accompanying the actions. "Now you know. So. I have work to do," she announced curtly, turning towards the doorway. She was almost jogging a
moment later, passing through to the hall despite the minor commotion behind her she didn't care to make out.

"J, just me. Workshop," she almost begged. The elevator doors had parted just enough for her to slip through by the time she hit the end of the hall. She braced herself against the car's rail until she heard the doors close and felt the car start to move. She turned around and sagged against the wall. She ran a shaky hand over her face, grimacing as she pressed too hard on the injured side.

That could have gone better. She probably shouldn't have run away like that at the end, but she couldn't bear the thought of sitting there and dealing with the no-doubt betrayed glares.

She hugged her arms around herself and closed her eyes.

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Steve knew that there was suddenly a clamor of voices around him, but he didn't take the time to identify who was speaking or what they were saying. He continued to stare at the chair Toni had just vacated and ran the revelations back in his mind. He thought about how her hand had stayed over her sternum, knuckles white from the grip she tightened in the fabric of her shirt. He thought about the bruise covering a good third of her face, a dark mottled purple circle at her temple and blossoming out into obvious swelling and less vivid bruising against her cheek and forehead.

He remembered the glow he'd seen the evening before, a blue that had been familiar, now that he let himself think about it. A pacemaker, an electromagnet, an arc reactor. Something tightened in his chest as he thought about Bruce's horrified expression and his paleness as he spoke of the reactor. Obviously he had figured out the details, what it meant for Toni to have such a thing embedded in her body.

'Into her chest.'

Steve blinked and realized that the voices had quieted somewhat. Looking around the room, he saw that Thor was frowning pensively at his hands; Bruce had walked off to the side and was rubbing his face, shoulders tense; Natasha sat where she had been, but Clint stood in front of her with his hands on his hips.

"You knew," Clint accused.

Natasha didn't blink, meeting the archer's glare calmly.

"You knew and said nothing to us! Never even hinted."

"Why should I?" she returned mildly. "I had information pertinent to my assignment to evaluate Stark and the Iron Man for the Initiative. After that, it was not my priority." Her lips tightened slightly, hinting at a reprimand as she continued, "And it was not my call to make."

Clint threw his hands up in obvious frustration and turned to Steve. "Tell me this doesn't bother you. 'Tash knew about this crap and didn't share what was pretty damn important information with the rest of us!"

Steve hadn't found his voice yet. He still felt too overwhelmed and surprisingly numb; he knew it was a coping mechanism as he tried to process what had just been revealed. He simply turned his head to stare at Natasha. She turned to face him.

"I won't apologize, Captain," she told him.

"You shouldn't have to," Bruce said quietly. He had turned around and slumped against the wall as if it was the only thing keeping him standing. He was still pale and drawn-looking. "We... we all
deserve some privacy. Even if we can't always have it."

"It's selfish," Clint argued. "We didn't choose to expose ourselves." He gestured sharply around the room. "Loki came in and shattered that privacy, for all of us except Iron Man, except Stark. She couldn't bother to tell us the truth?" He glared again at Natasha. "You couldn't bother to share? We're teammates!"

Steve caught on Clint's words, agreeing that he had fair points. Steve could feel irritation simmering beneath his haze of numbness. Neither Toni nor Iron Man had trusted him with the truth with her condition or identity.

"You know it's more complicated than that," Bruce chided, frowning. "Telling us about this, it's more than about an alter-ego."

Clint's jaw visibly clenched as his gaze darted to Bruce and back to Natasha. "What else is it but a matter of trust?"

Next to Steve, Natasha's posture tensed and the look on her face made it seem as if she wanted to speak but was holding back. Before Steve could ask, Bruce replied, "Vulnerability." The scientist crossed his arms over his chest as he ducked his head and frowned at the floor. "You still don't get it. Removing a cluster of shrapnel from the chest, so near to the lungs and heart, would be extremely difficult even in the best of circumstances. Attempting surgery to insert some... some crazy notion of an electromagnet to keep the damage from killing her—" He sucked in a sharp breath and closed his eyes. Natasha rose smoothly and brushed past Clint. She leaned against the wall at Bruce's side, their shoulders touching. "It's unheard of. Christ, I don't know how she managed to survive."

"They wanted her to build weapons," Clint said, tone flat and eyes still fixed on Natasha. "They would have made sure she stayed alive."

"Well they sure as hell didn't bring her to a state-of-the-art medical facility!" Bruce snapped, gaze darting up, tinged with green. Natasha moved her hand to Bruce's shoulder and as his gaze went to her, the green faded. His voice was dull as he continued, "It would have been in a cave, generators used to power equipment that was probably outdated by at least a decade. There would have been little time and little care to do anything but find a solution as quick as possible." This time when Bruce looked a little green, Steve had the sense that it was due to a sense of nausea; he felt a little sick himself.

Natasha raised a hand to her sternum as she looked at the men around the couch. "We're talking about a complicated operation in the field that involved installing a foreign object approximately the size of a baseball into her chest. Not externally, into." She curled her hand into the size she described and pressed it against her chest. Steve stared as the fabric of her shirt shifted as her breasts moved to accommodate her loose fist.

Clint cursed lowly, turning his head away.

Steve swallowed back the bile threatening to rise in his throat as he thought of the damage he had seen in the War when soldiers around him had been hit with flying debris in the wake of bombs. He'd visited amputee recovery wards, seen the pain and bitterness in so many men's eyes.

Thor stood abruptly, gaze distant; Steve wondered if the demigod had even been aware of Natasha's quiet demonstration. Thor murmured, "There is much to consider. I must think on this." He turned sharply on his heel and strode for the door.

"Thor—"
"No," Thor cut off Bruce's attempt to protest. He paused but didn't turn around. "I must consider Lady Stark's words."

No one spoke until Thor had disappeared down the hall.

"He has a right to be angry," Clint said lowly, scowling at Natasha. Steve wasn't sure that the demigod was actually angry, though. "Just because she was hurt doesn't mean she gets to hide things from the team!"

"Iron Man could've been compromised in the field and we wouldn't know what to do," Steve said faintly, his mind's eye all too eager to replay the flickering light of the arc reactor as Iron Man lay limply in the rubble-strewn street where Hulk had laid him—her.

"Tell me," Bruce said, weary but tone firm with obvious frustration, "when has Toni, on or off the field, ever let you down? She has always had our backs."

Clint crossed his arms, jaw set stubbornly. "You gotta be able to trust the people at your back." Natasha's lips tightened but she remained silent as she met his challenging glare. It was quickly becoming clear the archer's qualms had more to do with his longtime partner than Toni's confessions.

Bruce shook his head. "I'm not saying you shouldn't be upset. I'm not saying you don't have the right to feel hurt. But anger seems like an awful waste of energy."

Clint snorted dismissively. "Then that's your damn opinion. Screw this." He stormed off and no one moved to stop him.

"He needs some time," Natasha murmured when he'd gone.

In the silence that followed, Steve realized that his teammates' gazes fell on him. He frowned sharply at them, resenting that he was suddenly at the center of their attention. "Do you have some specialized lecture saved just for me?" he asked curtly.

Natasha's hand on Bruce's arm stopped whatever the scientist had been about to say; he looked at her sidelong with brows furrowed in question. "Steve, if you can't see that she struggled with keeping the truth from you, you're a blind fool."

Steve stood, hands fisting at his sides as he held back the spiral of strong emotions vying for dominance. Without thinking the words through, Steve said tightly, "There's been plenty of appropriate opportunities to come clean before her hand was forced."

"Some confessions expose us more than we'd like to admit," Natasha replied.

Steve held up a hand to stall any other words. He didn't need the others pressing him with their assumptions of his reaction. How could they know what he was thinking when he still hadn't decided? "I don't need to hear any of this from you."

"Give yourself some time and let Toni have her space," Bruce said, still sounding drained although there was an element of pleading in his tone. "Don't go talk to her in this mood."

"What mood?" Steve demanded. "You don't know what I'm feeling. Maybe you need the space, but don't tell me how to react." Steve glared at them in frustration, then turned for the door and, like Clint and Thor before him, stalked from the room.

His feet took him to the elevator and he stood in the car a long moment, uncertain where he wanted to go. He closed his eyes, focusing on releasing some of the tension that had pulled his muscles taunt.
Huffing a sigh to himself, he keyed in the number to bring him to the floor with Toni's workshop.

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Toni wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting in the lab before she became aware of her surroundings again. DUM-E beeped at her, lifting his claw from where it had been resting on her knee. She absently patted his strut as she glanced around. Butterfingers and U hovered around the couch, camera heads tilting as they chirped inquisitively. She smiled crookedly and assured, "I'm fine." DUM-E's whistle sounded skeptical. "Worry-wart," she accused without heat.

"Are you with us, Madame?"

Toni nudged DUM-E away. "Present and accounted for, J. DUM-E, find me some other shoes — no slippers!" she called as the bot eagerly zoomed off to search the workshop. She stood and left her heels by the couch as she moved to a workbench. She only swayed once, which she counted as a win.

"Madame, if I may, you would benefit from more rest."

"I'm not going to lay around, J. You know the dangers of my boredom," she said, trying to keep her tone light. She sank onto her stool with a quiet groan. Her body ached and she probably could use the rest, but she needed distraction. "Did Pepper send me anything?"

"Yes, Ms. Potts has provided the profiles of recommended public relations personnel. I have marked the files of those who assisted during Stark Industries' transition from weapon production."

Toni nodded in approval as JARVIS displayed Pepper's messages. Besides the personnel profiles, Toni saw summaries from the Phoenix meetings she'd missed. She opened the first file with a grimace of distaste. "JARVIS, pull up the schematics for Mark XVI and start running simulations."

"I believe Ms. Po—"

"Isn't here. This is what I do. Multitask. I don't know why you'd even try to stop me."

"Neither do I, Madame." Toni smiled to herself at the AI's exasperation.

She'd barely started reading the summary notes when JARVIS interrupted. "Madame, Captain Rogers is approaching the workshop."

Toni flinched and shot a quick glance out the windows lining the wall along the hallway. Steve walked at a brisk pace and her brief look didn't allow her to interpret his expression. She turned back to her work and straightened her aching body.

"Let him in," she said quietly.

"As you wish." JARVIS' voice coincided with the sound of the opening door.

Toni didn't turn immediately, instead pretending to be engaged in the files displayed in front of her. She knew Steve must see through her pretense of being preoccupied; she felt too tense for it not to show.

"Are you going to look at me?" Steve asked, voice low and taunt with restrained emotion.

Swallowing hard, Toni tried, "I have things I—"

"Toni."
Toni closed her eyes with a sigh. What was the use of putting off the confrontation? Slowly she turned on her stool to face Steve. She briefly made eye contact before her gaze slid to a point over his shoulder. She wouldn't look down, but she couldn't hold his gaze, either.

"So, we're face to face," she said.

"You ran out," Toni tilted her head in silent acknowledgment. "So your plan was to... what? Drop that on us and run?"

"I thought the team could use the time to process," Toni replied quietly. She noted Steve's frown in her peripheral vision.

"We deserve to have a conversation."

Toni spread her arms wide, ignoring the tug of sore muscles near her sprained wrist. She met his eyes for a moment, eyebrow arching in challenge. "Well here we are."

Steve crossed his arms and looked down, frown deepening. Toni dropped her arms and resisted the urge to slump forward. "You lied to me," he muttered.

Licking her lips, Toni countered, "Not outright."

"You couldn't trust me?" Steve asked, tone thick with emotion Toni wasn't sure how to read. She looked aside, not wanting to risk having to meet his stare.

"It's not that simple," she mumbled.

A few long moments passed in silence. Eventually Steve said, "Seems like at some point you could have said, 'By the way, I'm Toni Stark'." Toni's lips twitched at the phrasing, though she wasn't sure if she wanted to smile or frown. "Or if not that, then... I don't know, said *something* about a heart condition!"

"JARVIS monitors everything, it would have been taken care of if anything came up," Toni countered.

"That's not—" Steve sighed noisily. "You didn't want us to know."

Toni shrugged slightly. "I don't like to advertise either aspect."

"But we're not the public. We're not just some..." Steve trailed off and left the sentence unfinished for a long moment. "I thought Iron Man, you, trusted me."

"I do," Toni murmured, closing her eyes at the admission.

"Then why?" Steve demanded, voice rising abruptly. Toni looked up at him sharply. "Why lie to me and pretend? What made lying much more important than trusting me?"

"I wasn't ready!" Toni leaned forward on her stool, bracing her feet on the floor. She sucked in a deep breath. She hated admitting fear. Judging by the furrow of Steve's brows, he didn't understand.

"You knew how I... how I felt about Iron Man." His voice shook slightly.

Toni covered a flinch by looking away. "I was... trying to pull back. I knew you needed the truth before... Well, before whatever."

"And when were you going to tell me?" Steve asked, sounding weary. "Iron Man always said 'not
yet' and you never gave me a sign that you were willing to open up. If this hadn't happened, if you hadn't been caught out, how long would it have taken?"

Toni felt her shoulders slump in defeat as she answered truthfully, "I don't know." She knew that wasn't what he wanted to hear. "I thought of plan after plan. Pepper kept telling me I should come clean. Natasha would drop hints about coming forward. But I couldn't do it, I kept backing down."

"So it was never going to be voluntary," Steve said, voice dull.

"I don't know," Toni admitted. She clenched her hands in her lap and let out a shaky sigh. "I wanted to."

"I'm not sure what you want," Steve muttered. When Toni glanced over she saw him frowning tightly at the floor, arms crossed over his chest. "I don't know what the hell you expect to happen now."

"I don't know what to expect," Toni answered.

They remained silent for a long time. Toni could hear DUM-E moving around the workshop off to the side. U and Butterfingers beeped quietly to each other.

"There's a lot to think about," Steve started, his tone reminiscent of his Captain voice. "You need time to recover, so Iron Man's benched for now."

"Excuse me?" Toni asked faintly, stunned. She stared at him, wide-eyed as something in her chest tightened painfully.

Steve met her gaze and shook his head, expression shuttered. "You have a concussion and just went through an ordeal. I'm sure you have some other things you need to be focusing on right now. Take a break."

"Cap—" Toni cut herself off, trying to process what he was saying. Suspicious, she asked, "What do you think I'd prioritize over Avengers business?"

"Look, you're hurt and your identity might have been compromised. It's a good idea to lay low. Just take some time—"

"Hammer's too much of a chauvinistic pig to think a woman would pilot the suit," she interrupted. "He's still hung up on the idea that Iron Man's my lover. That's not an issue. As for being hurt, this is hardly the first time, there's no reason to bench me."

"You need to get some rest," Steve argued.

Toni's lips tightened as she glared at him. "You didn't have a problem with Iron Man getting back into the field after an injury. You've always trusted Iron Man to take care of himself. So, what? Now that you know who's wearing the suit it's different? You think I can't take care of myself?" she demanded.

"Damn it, that's not—" Steve cut himself off and ran a hand over his hair. "Don't put words in my mouth." He let his arms drop to his sides. "Fine, it's not just about you getting some rest. We all need a little time to get our heads around this."

Toni snorted and started turning back to her work. "Yeah, 'this.' Fine, whatever. I'm not going to hold your hand as you figure this out. I have shit to do, but you're a goddamn idiot if you think I'm sitting out when something comes up. I can fly solo just fine, Cap."
"Toni..." Steve trailed off warningly. Toni waved dismissively without turning to face him. "God damn it, would it kill you to take a break?" he asked, clearly frustrated.

"Might, you never know," she shot back. "You know where the door is."

"Fine. Take some time to heal and learn how to listen!"

"Don't tell me what to do and maybe I'd consider it!" Toni retorted as she heard Steve turn on his heel. He muttered something but Toni didn't hear what he said. She glared blindly at the armor schematics floating mid-air until she heard the door open and close as Steve left.

Toni slumped forward, closing her eyes and dropping her head into her hands. "Black out, J," she said faintly. She was suddenly aware of all of her body's aches and pains. She was so damn **exhausted** but sleep came with the likelihood of flashbacks and nightmares.

"Please let me know how I may be of assistance," JARVIS said. Toni nodded, accepting her AI's concern.

DUM-E chirped behind her and bumped against her legs. Toni sat up, preparing to scold the bot until she looked down and saw what he'd dropped at her feet. Reluctantly she let out a chuckle and patted his strut.

"You idiot, these don't match." She stared down at the mismatched shoes he'd brought: one limited edition Chucks with a repetitive print of Captain America's shield and one custom leather Mary Jane with Iron Man's faceplate decorating the toe. She laughed again and hated how it sounded wet. "Those don't go together, dummy," she muttered.

DUM-E whined quietly and tilted his arm close to Toni. She gave in and leaned her forehead against his strut as she exhaled and tried to gather herself together.

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"Another missive from Miss Potts," JARVIS announced.

Toni shook her head, indicating that like the previous three calls, JARVIS was to send it directly to voicemail. She was probably imagining the sigh that resonated faintly throughout the workshop.

DUM-E whistled inquisitively as Toni threw a crumpled up file overhand towards the waste basket.

"No, we're not playing fetch," she snapped at the bot when she saw him moving forward out of the corner of her eye. DUM-E beeped sadly and his arm drooped. "Jesus. Go take a nap or play with your brothers." Sometimes her first bot had just a little too much personality.

"Madame, there are now four messages from Miss Potts, two recorded messages from Dr. Banner from his five attempted calls, Ms. Van Dyne has attempted to threaten me but declines to leave a message, and there are a dozen text messages waiting your perusal."

Toni did not glance at the display JARVIS provided. She glared at the meeting notes in front of her but couldn't concentrate as her AI tried to get her to pay attention to the things she very much wanted to ignore: namely, people. She turned her attention instead to the Mark XVI simulations and enlarged the section of coding that had turned red from errors. She hummed softly to herself as she considered the numbers, noting that once again she was finding clashes between the speed she wanted and her body's ability to handle the forces.

"Madame, Miss Potts announces that she is contemplating utilizing her override codes if you do not respond to her calls within the next ten minutes."

Gritting her teeth, Toni glared sidelong at the list of waiting messages. "We're in lock down Code Orange until I say otherwise, JARVIS."

"Program initiated. Be that as it may, Madame," the AI said after a pause, "Miss Potts will most likely begin trying all methods to access the workshop. I would suggest you attempt to speak with her."

Frustrated, tired, and in pain, Toni swiped aside all of the holographic projects around her and slapped an open palm on the bench. "Fine! Audio only, bring it up," she snapped.

Almost immediately Pepper's voice filled the lab. "Toni, what is going on?"

"I'm working, Pepper," Toni managed to say between clenched teeth. She leaned her forehead in her palm and glared blankly at the surface of her work bench.

"It's been hours, Toni. You need to take a break and get some rest." Pepper's tone managed to balance frustration and concern. Toni wasn't sure which one irked her more at the moment.

"Blackmail to get in front of, remember?"

"We don't have to do everything within the next twenty-four hours," Pepper said with a sigh. "Look, I'm worried about you. I assume the team didn't take things well. Believe me, I'm thirty seconds away from kicking their asses for being idiots. We do not need you going into recluse mode."
Toni snorted softly and hated how her stomach knotted itself tighter, all the stress and tension vying for her full attention. "There's work to do. Being away from not so trusting faces right now is just a perk."

"Do not bullshit me, Ms. Stark. I'm just as happy to kick your ass right after I'm done with the others."

Weariness threatened to overwhelm Toni and she had to take a careful breath before speaking. "Pep. Give it time." Thankfully Pepper remained silent. Toni closed her eyes and promised, "I'll grab something to eat down here, drink plenty of water, maybe even take a damn nap on the couch." Quietly, hating that her emotions leaked into her voice, she finished, "Just let me work down here."

Toni expected a fight and despite her bone-deep weariness she reached for her frustration to fuel her argument.

Unexpectedly, Pepper conceded, "I want you to have JARVIS keep me updated on your status. I will not let you work yourself into passing out. You eat, you drink — avoiding that alcohol I know you still keep in there — and you take more than an hour at a time to sleep."

Toni smiled reluctantly to herself. "Yes, ma'am," she murmured. "You hear me, Toni? I am not above teaming up with my boyfriend to bring in the big guns."

The smile gave way to a grimace. "Let's avoid that. I'm pretty sure that will end up with the workshop needing reconstruction."

Pepper sounded satisfied. "Then we understand each other."

"Yeah." Toni sat up and addressed JARVIS. "Okay, J, you're allowed to give Pepper updates regarding my food and fluid intake when she inquires."

"Sleep, Toni," Pepper prompted in a tone of long-suffering.

"Right. And if I don't lay down for more than thirty minutes, she'll want to know."

Toni was sure she would get an argument on the wording, but Pepper stayed suspiciously silent. Toni felt something in her chest clench as she realized it was another sign of how well Pepper knew her. Sleep was a problem on the best of days and today — hell, this week — had been far from good.

"Acknowledged, Madame. Miss Potts, please ask for updates at any time."

Under her breath, Toni muttered, "Suck up."

"Thank you, JARVIS," Pepper said. Her tone gentling, she added, "And thank you, Toni."

"Will that be all, Miss Potts?" Toni asked tiredly.

"For now," Pepper agreed. "Take care of yourself."

~

Toni took the stairs at a brisk pace as she headed for the living room. She saw the piano across the room, noted the ocean beyond the long curving window. There was something wrong, she knew. Part of it was that she last remembered being in New York. As much as she loved this ocean view, it felt lonely, empty. The lights were a little too dim and a swift glance around showed that the usual
indicators that JARVIS was active and aware were all off.

Immediately her body tensed and she walked further into the room with her feet firmly placed to keep balance in case she was ambushed. She wanted to call out but she already knew JARVIS was offline. She would be alone here. This wasn’t New York. No multiple floors of friends, of teammates. The best she had would be the bots downstairs and to reach them she either needed to run back down or have JARVIS online.

The high-pitched whine caught her off guard. She had a painful sense of déjà vu as her muscles abruptly tensed and locked up. She fell to the floor hard enough to bounce on the rug. Her eyelids froze open and her vision locked straight ahead. It felt like a seizure frozen in time. Oh god, she knew this feeling. She knew the weapon. It was Obediah, it was happening again. He was going to rip her heart out as he plucked the arc reactor from her chest.

Toni stared blankly at the ugly white shag carpeting that blocked most of her vision, though from her position on the floor she knew she wouldn’t see much. The whine of the paralytic weapon continued in her ears. She didn’t understand why Obediah hadn’t already hauled her onto the couch.

The whine began to fade and she heard sounds of movement. Footsteps moved steadily across the hardwood before the sound dampened as the person moved onto the carpet. She knew as soon as she heard the steps that it wasn’t Obediah, she had always been aware of how the man walked: heavily and with self-assurance that he should have the world at his feet. He had always been easy to hear, except for when he had gotten to her, the time he tore her open. These footsteps belonged to someone else.

The first thing she saw was a black leather-clad leg as the person knelt near her face. She could barely manage to swallow. Her eyes burned from not blinking but her body wouldn’t cooperate, it was a miracle she could breathe.

She startled badly, though she couldn’t jerk in response, when hands came from behind her and locked around her shoulders. The person in front of her grabbed her hips and the two moved her upright. She felt dizzy with horror and nausea when she saw the person in front of her. She wanted to scream a demand as she stared into the grim face of Clint Barton.

What are you doing? she demanded silently. Why?

"Up you go," Barton said quietly, almost gentle. His grip changed to her knees as whoever was behind her lifted beneath her armpits. They moved her to the couch. Her limbs were arranged so that she lay mostly flat, staring up at her plain white ceiling.

Barton leaned into view again and as he stared down at her, he shook his head before pulling back. He said nothing else.

"How does it work?" a voice that should be reassuring, a voice that belonged to a man she felt close kinship for, caused a spike of fear. Bruce leaned into view but he didn’t even look at her face. He frowned thoughtfully and didn’t hesitate to unbutton her shirt with steady hands. Toni felt sick to her stomach. Bruce easily plucked away the padding covering the arc reactor though she knew it was better secured.

This was not real. It wasn’t. It couldn’t be.

"I would never have thought this could be something from Earth," Bruce murmured, the blue light reflecting disturbingly off the lenses of his glasses.
Toni didn't see him, but there was no misidentifying Thor's rumbling voice. "It does look like something from a realm beyond Midgar."

Why, why, why? Toni stared helplessly up at Bruce, who was still staring at her chest. Almost more terrifying than being unable to move was her realization that she wouldn't be able to feel it if he began touching the area lightly. Between the reactor itself and the damage caused by the surgery, she had limited feeling. Please stop. What are you doing?

"It reminds me of the Tesseract," a low voice contributed. The only sound Toni could manage was a little gasp as a red gloved hand appeared on the couch back just in her range of view. Steve's fingers clenched over the cushion, tight enough that she knew his knuckles must be white inside the gloves. "What is this thing, really?"

Natasha coolly provided, "Stark claims 'arc reactor' and that she used Palladium and then synthesized Vibranium for the core."

"Seems like a stretch," Steve said.

"We haven't had another scientist's input before," Romanov responded. "Doctor?"

Bruce leaned closer and Toni could feel the pressure of his touch. Her breath caught painfully and she felt like she was choking; she needed to cough but her body wouldn't let her.

"Relax," Bruce said, his voice anything but soothing.

Just when she thought she would be deprived of oxygen forever, her body spasmed and great, wracking coughs tore through her throat. Toni's eyes closed and she felt involuntary tears streaming down her cheeks as she coughed and gasped. The paralysis was fading but she hurt so badly, like every muscle had cramped as an aftereffect, and she couldn't coordinate her movements.

As the coughs reduced to heavy gasping, she slumped sideways against the couch back and began blinking away tears. Before she could get a good look at the people surrounding her, unyielding arms locked around her torso and pinned her arms to her sides. Toni tried kicking but Thor was suddenly there, holding her ankles down. Toni kept trying to move, jerking uselessly against their hold. She kept fighting until she looked down and realized the arms around her were metal. Hot rod red and brilliant gold.

"Oh my god," she breathed, staring in confusion and growing horror at the extremely familiar armor holding her in place. "How—?"

"Would you stay quiet? I'd like some answers and you haven't been helpful." Toni turned her head sharply and stared at Steve, dressed in full Captain America regalia, but his face was unfamiliar, distant and cold. "If you stay still this will be over quickly."

"Depends on your definition of 'quickly'," Bruce countered, perching next to Toni's hip as he loomed in.

Toni tried to scramble back but the Iron Man armor didn't yield at her back. "No, no, Bruce, Green Bean, buddy," Toni gasped, every word scraping over her dry, raw throat. "Let it be, stop it, what are you doing? Bruce—"

She didn't see it this time, but god she felt it. She heard the twist and felt the tug, then a sharp yank that made her scream because there was no way that it was just the reactor that had come out. No, this was her ribs being split open and the rest of her sternum giving way. This was her lungs shoved aside and her heart being squeezed and pulled, pulled as the organ tried desperately to stay
Toni had screamed herself hoarse by the time she became aware that she was hunched over on the floor of her workshop. The bots wheeled back and forth frantically just far enough away that they couldn't run over her. She sobbed, tears running unchecked down her cheeks. She was aware of a small pool of sour-smelling vomit, mostly the water and juice she drank earlier, puddled between her braced arms. She rolled away when she felt she could control her limbs and desperately grabbed for her shirt. She yanked up the hem and clawed at the bra and padding until she could see the blue glow and run her fingers over the casing. Again and again she ran her fingertips around its edge and felt the ragged, ugly scars. Even after she was sure that things were in place, she clasped her hands over the reactor and curled onto her side so that she was as compact as possible. She shuddered and knew she was still crying even though the tears were drying on her cheeks. She said something to JARVIS and the bots, trying to offer them some calm, but she didn't know what to say.

Thankfully, whatever she did manage, it was enough that JARVIS kept the workshop on lock down and she was able to be alone.

~

Steve received a text message from Bruce that simply read: "Lab. ASAP."

He didn't wait for the elevator and instead took the stairs, jumping down several at a time as he hurried down four floors to the hallway. The elevator usually would have been fast enough, but he noticed the timing was off when he had been on it earlier in the morning, and JARVIS was being... well, the only word he could come up with was reticent.

Steve forced himself to slow his hectic pace as he pulled open the door to the correct hallway. He took a few calming breaths before stepping into the hall, pace still fast but more controlled. He glanced at the windows to Bruce's lab, but the clear windows of Toni's workshop caught his attention. He felt his gut clench in concern and frustration, a familiar mix after the few days following Toni's revelation. He picked up speed again when he saw Bruce hovering in the workshop's doorway, expression pinched as he watched something further inside.

Steve opened his mouth to ask what was going on, but before he could even reach the door he heard the arguing taking place inside. Bruce turned his head to glance at Steve; that was all the acknowledgment he received before the scientist's gaze returned to the scene. Steve moved so that he could see.

"—and she went without even Happy. I am not impressed and I am fed up with doing damage control that you helped cause!" Pepper's hands lay flat on one of the work tables as she leaned forward with an angry scowl, glaring at Natasha who stood across from her. The agent's expression was passive.

A quick scan of the room showed no signs of Toni. Two bots were in their charging station while DUM-E rolled around the lab, looking despondent as his arm drooped. He seemed to halfheartedly wave a short-handled broom at the occasional piece of dropped mechanical components.

"Are you willing to let me see to her security?" Natasha asked steadily, bringing Steve's attention back to the confrontation and trying to puzzle out what exactly had happened.

Pepper's lips tightened as she met Natasha's steady stare. "I don't know that I should."
The elevator sounded down the hall and Steve spared a brief glance to note Thor and Clint walking out with matching curious frowns.

"Despite what you may think, I have Ms. Stark's best interests in mind," Natasha replied calmly.

Steve felt his breath catch. Where the hell was Toni? What had happened? He might be upset with her — still too confused and caught in a twisted set of emotions — but he worried about her and that didn't negate how much he cared for her.

Apparently something in Natasha's reply set something off for Pepper. The CEO of Stark Industries straightened up and replied in a clipped tone, "That will be all, Ms. Rushman. I am sure someone appreciates your concern, but I believe you have a place here with the Avengers." Pepper finally looked away from Natasha and her eyes narrowed before her expression smoothed into an unsettling coolness. "I see the rest of the team is here. Stop crowding the door." She turned away and strode to a different workbench where there were holograms hovering midair. With sharp movements, Pepper closed down the projects one by one.

"What's going on?" Clint directed at Natasha.

Natasha's expression was tight with disapproval as she glanced at her long time partner. "Notice something missing?" she asked coolly.

Bruce closed his eyes as he grimaced. "Where did she go?" he asked quietly.

Without turning to look at them, Pepper answered curtly, "Since I'm sure you'd start digging into things to satisfy your curiosity, Ms. Stark is currently working from the Malibu residence." The final hologram closed and then Pepper began shuffling a mess of papers together and sorting through tools that were spread along the top of one of the benches.

"She didn't need to do that," Steve murmured, knowing he was treading on dangerous ground even as he opened his mouth, "this is her—"

Pepper slammed a toolbox onto the table and her cool expression was at odds with the fierce glare she fixed on Steve. "It's your home, too." She ran her gaze over the rest of the team. "Few of you have other places to retreat, so," she continued, a note of sarcasm or disbelief in her voice, "Toni decided to 'give you some space' and 'work away from distractions'."

Natasha added to the explanation as Pepper turned back to what looked like organizing or, though Steve hated to think of it, packing important materials. "Toni left sometime last night in the armor."

"No one's with her?" Clint asked, expression shuttered.

"Phil is making arrangements," Pepper replied. She looked over at DUM-E and frowned. "Stop moping, you're going."

Steve's fingers curled into his palms as he thought somewhat wildly that this sounded like a potentially more permanent relocation. He could admit that some space was probably a good idea — tensions were high as the team sorted through emotions, but he doubted anyone wanted a long-term separation.

Thor crossed his arms and bowed his head, frowning at the floor. "When will she return?"

The anger was still in the tense lines of Pepper's posture, but her expression looked closer to resigned. "She hasn't made those plans." She glanced behind her and shook her head before moving to the next table.
As Pepper continued to organize and pack, it looked like she was going to speak several times but kept holding back before she made a sound. The Avengers continued to stand there, watching in silence.

When she had reached the table next to Natasha again, Pepper finally dropped her hands to her sides and turned to the group. Her expression was determined and unflinching as she took the time to meet everyone's gaze. "I know that trust is important. I even happen to believe you should have known about Iron Man months ago. But while you're miserable and feeling betrayed together, you had better think about how you've betrayed her in return." Her expression dared anyone to challenge her. Wisely, no one did. She nodded sharply and then motioned toward the door. "You can show yourselves out. The workshop will be locked while Toni's in Malibu." With that obvious dismissal, Pepper turned her back on them.

Steve wanted more information and was almost tempted to press his luck by asking, but he had the feeling that Pepper knew little more. As he made his way out the door with the team following behind, it occurred to him that Toni must have left in a hurry if her projects had still been open and on display.

~

Two weeks after her return (okay, she could admit to herself that it was more of a retreat) to Malibu, Toni found herself arguing with Jan and Pepper.

"We aren't moving the operation out of New York just for you, Toni," Pepper said with clear exasperation.

"So no, the interview and photo-shoot will not happen in Los Angeles," Jan contributed.

They had insisted on a video conference, threatening not to discuss things otherwise, thus Toni spent part of her attention on giving as limited a view of herself as possible. It was just delaying the inevitable, but she knew she looked a mess. She had been living almost exclusively in the workshop, emerging only to restock on food and to take the Iron Man armors out.

"Toni," Pepper sighed, "quit squirming and look at me. You're not fooling anyone."

"I need to see what sort of damage control makeup needs to do before the shoot," Jan added.

Reluctantly Toni conceded defeat and turned toward the camera as she grumbled, "I never wanted my damn picture taken."

Jan's eyes widened as she got a full view of Toni. "God, Toni. You look half dead." Next to her image on the screen, Pepper's expression was pinched.

Toni shoved away from her workbench and stalked away to grab a bottle of water. "Then obviously I shouldn't be part of the shoot," she snapped.

"We talked about this," Jan said, voice gentle.

"We're not having this argument again," Pepper sighed.

"I know." Toni scrubbed a hand over her face. "Fine. Three days, I'll be back in New York for the interview photo shoot thing. I know you, you'll have some brilliant and discreet stylist on call to handle things. Don't worry about it."

Jan rolled her eyes. "Yeah, we'll manage that," she agreed with clear exasperation. "But I'm worried
"about you, damn it! You obviously aren't taking care of yourself."

"I'm eating, I'm drinking — minimal alcohol," she added before the question could rise. She really had been cutting back on drinking outside of social engagements.

Pepper muttered, "Probably not enough," which Toni assumed referred to her eating habits. Whatever. She might be snacking more than sitting down for an actual meal, but she knew her diet wasn't the problem. Besides, she was obviously taking care of herself well enough that Agent hadn't reported anything worrying enough to cause Pepper to fly out.

"Look, makeup can do wonders but I would rather we not require miracles here. It's going to be a long day, so even if we do get you ready and radiant, exhaustion's going to catch up with you before we're done. Try to get more rest in the next few days," Jane said.

Toni's jaw tightened and she leaned against the half-kitchen's counter, glaring down at her fists. "I am sleeping," she said gruffly. Not well, but she slept. Or tried to. It wasn't her fault that every attempt resulted in nightmares.

"Right," Jan replied, clearly disbelieving.

"Please, Toni?"

"Yeah. I'll try," Toni muttered in response to Pepper. "That all?"

"I'll see you in a few days," Jan said. "You're welcome to stay with me if you need," she offered before signing off.

Toni turned to face Pepper's image, bracing herself for a possible lecture.

"I know why you went out there. I wouldn't blame you for it, except you do not need to be alone right now. Your friends are on the other side of the country, Toni. Come back to us even if there are some people you don't want to see."

Toni considered just ending the call, they'd already had this conversation. Instead she replied, "It was more than obvious that I needed to be out of sight for a while. That wasn't going to happen in New York."

"There are other places to stay than the tower," Pepper reminded, though her tone suggested she knew that wouldn't have worked.

"You know it would've pissed me off to be told to stay put and not roll out when Avengers business came up," Toni said, thinking bitterly of how Steve had benched Iron Man. "And then I'd piss everyone else off when I ignored the order."

Pepper's lips quirked into a smile. "I suppose, but when has that stopped you before?"

Toni waited for anything else, perhaps another protest, but Pepper seemed to have said her peace. "So. Stop looking like a dead thing and be in New York in three days?" she asked.

Pepper looked resigned. "If that's what I can get you to agree to, I guess that'll have to be our start."

"That's it," Toni returned with a fake, toothy smile.

"I know." Pepper's gaze trailed over Toni's face. "Take care of yourself."

Toni waved a hand in acknowledgment. "Bye."
The connection ended and Toni walked back over to her workspace. She slumped onto the stool and poked halfheartedly at the components laying on the bench. As much as she hated the idea of going back to New York and rubbing elbows with the Avengers again, she knew it was ridiculous to keep hiding on the other side of the country. One way or another they had to move on. The team had to decide if they wanted past secrets to cut her out completely, and she had to have her nightmarish worst-case-scenarios countered by reality.

'Easier said than done,' she thought as she laid her head on her crossed arms. She closed her eyes and began making a mental list of what she wanted to have done before the publicity event.

Chapter End Notes

I'm feeling a little "meh" about the scene with Pepper at the team. It never really underwent revisions while the original scenes with reactions to Toni's reveal did. Several times. I guess it still works, and I wanted to be sure I get this posted today before work, but I still feel a little iffy.

One more chapter is completed, so there will for sure be an update next weekend. I have the story off to espionne so see what I can do about the rest of it. ;)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Updating a day early. For those of you who celebrate Thanksgiving, I hope you had a good one! (I cooked for one this year and have so much food I'll have leftovers for a week.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve hung back in the shadow provided by the roof door for an extra minute after Iron Man landed. He wouldn't put it past Toni to take off again as soon as she saw him, so he hoped surprising her could give him just enough time to convince her to stay put.

"Are you just going to lurk there?" The question squashed Steve's plans. Iron Man stood a few meters away, faceplate turned in Steve's directions. "I assume someone spilled the beans?"

Steve stuck his hands in his jacket pockets and moved forward, stopping a few feet in front of Toni. It was the first time he looked Iron Man in the face and knew who was behind it. "Ms. Potts left a note," he admitted.

"Judas." The vocalizer made the mutter louder than it had probably been meant, and Steve imagined how Toni would scowl as she said it.

"It was good to get a sign you hadn't just moved out to Malibu," Steve said, trying for lighthearted but hearing disappointment in his own voice.

The mask gave nothing away. "I'm here for business," she eventually said.

Steve nodded with a frown. "Yeah, that was in the note."

A static-filled sigh passed through the vocalizer. "So I have work to do. What do you want, Captain?"

Staring at the emotionless faceplate, Steve felt a spike of frustration and longing. He hadn't seen Toni for weeks and he'd missed her. "Take the helmet off, I want to talk."

"Helmet stays on," Toni countered. "You never had a problem with it before."

"Because I didn't know who was behind it and I respected his privacy," Steve answered in frustration.

"Funny." Toni's voice came out particularly flat. "You didn't seem particularly understanding when you found out."

Grimacing - he deserved that, he knew - Steve bowed his head and hunched his shoulders against the wind. "I was surprised and upset," he said quietly. "I needed time."

Iron Man's arms lifted in a wide spread. "And you've got that, space, and the commiseration of similarly wronged people."
Steve felt his frown turn sharp as he looked up again, fixing his stare on the eye slits. "The other side of the country?" he asked incredulously. "Like it or not, we're a team and we needed to deal with this together."

It took a few moments for Steve to realize the harsh, short noises the armor emitted was laughter; mostly it was movement of the shoulders that clued him in. He felt his eyes widen in surprise, quickly coming to the conclusion that it was something humorless and bitter. "It was made clear that I wasn't included in the club, Captain."

"I wasn't—"

"Make up your mind." Toni stepped around him and started for the door.

"We're not done!" Steve called, turning around but holding himself back from reaching out.

Without looking back, Toni said, "I have an important appointment, it's why I'm here."

"You were injured, you just needed to sit out for a few days," Steve blurted with the sinking sensation that Toni wasn't going to give him a chance to explain.

Iron Man's hand raised and she shook her head sharply. "Not discussing this right now."

"Then later," Steve said firmly. "When you're done with your... thing. Let's talk. Without the armor."

Iron Man paused at the door and the helmet turned enough that Steve could see the faceplate again. "We'll see if I can make the time."

Toni went inside and although Steve wanted to follow, his feet felt leaden and the realistic part of himself understood that pursuing her right now would only lead to another (potentially explosive) argument. Disappointed, Steve dragged a hand over his face and sighed. He spent a while longer on the roof, staring out over the city and letting the wind whip around him.

~

Pepper had made Toni swear to stay in New York for the night. (She'd said something along the lines of: "You're not flying across the country when you're so tired you look punch drunk.") Toni had given in because she was exhausted, emotionally and physically, after a long day of struggling to maintain her usual public persona when the PR was in part about lowering those walls. She had managed to get through it all, though. Jan and Pepper had been alongside her, being key members during the interview. The other women involved in the photo-shoot had been amazing and inspirational. Toni had met some of them before but had never just talked. They had gotten her to laugh a few times and at those moments, Toni could ignore the flash of camera bulbs as the photography team coordinated around the staged area.

Another thing Pepper had pressed her to do was to see Bruce. Toni had read his messages in the past couple weeks but never listened to his initial voice messages. She had half-composed replies to a couple of the messages but never sent them. He hadn't been pushing her, not after those first few days though she knew it had been unfair to disappear without a word. She was nervous about actually seeking him out and the inevitable talk that would follow, but she knew she owed it to him. She loved the guy, he was still her best friend on the team and she didn't want to jeopardize that.

She asked JARVIS about locations and he promised her that Bruce was working alone in his lab. She stopped by her rooms, taking a quick shower to get rid of the makeup and sweat from the long day. She twisted her hair up into a messy bun, she dried off, and when she went to the dresser to pull out some casual clothes, she surprised herself when she reached for a camisole to wear beneath
instead of the usual custom bra and padding. She didn't allow herself to dwell on the decision, just took a deep breath and dressed, following her instinct.

Dressed in a loose Madonna shirt (and really? She still had one of those?) from the '80s and a pair of her softest lounge pants, she slipped into a pair of flats and headed to the lab. At the door she paused and peered through the window, just observing. Bruce was looking into a microscope while he jotted down notes in a journal at the side.

"Hey, JARV, give him a heads-up?" she asked. She waited at the door, watching as Bruce gave a little jump and quickly swung around. He smiled crookedly and waved her inside.

"Hey Green Bean," Toni greeted quietly as she walked into the lab. She shoved her hands in her pockets as she shuffled closer. "Not interrupting anything, am I?"

Bruce gave her a look of fond exasperation. "Nothing life-altering. It's just busy work." His crooked smile turned more genuine. "Heard you were in town. Glad you came by to see me."

Toni hung her head and sighed. "Just so you know, I have like a half-dozen drafts of messages that just never... got finished. So I guess I had to come see you in person since my prose sucks."

"It's better to see you face to face anyway," Bruce said. "Are you... passing through? Or can you sit a while?"

Glancing up at him to judge his mood, Toni noted the look of hope lurking behind a forced expression of patience. She snorted softly and rolled her eyes. "I've been running around most of the day, I could use a seat."

Bruce's expression lit up and Toni felt a twinge of guilt for having waited so long to connect with him. She followed him over to the far end of the lab. There was a table with a small stack of notebooks and a cup filled with pens, plus a few little office gadgets Toni had forced upon him over the months. She smiled a little as she sat on a stool next to a little wind-up green dragon. Bruce moved a stool to sit across from her.

They sat in companionable silence for a bit as Toni played with the desktop toys. Bruce watched her hands with a tolerant smile. Eventually she had explored everything but the notebooks, so Toni stilled her hands and clasped them on the desktop in front of her.

"So..." she trailed off, not sure where the hell to start. "What's cookin', good lookin'?" she tried.

Bruce chuckled softly and shook his head. He ran a hand over his hair and averted his gaze. "You threw me for a loop," he admitted quietly.

"I shouldn't have just left like that, huh?" Toni asked balefully.

"It... hurt that you seemed to feel the need to outrun all of us," Bruce said. His gaze was serious and weary when he turned it back to her. "I thought we could talk. I know there's a lot of things you've kept from the others but shared with me before. But also?" He smiled wryly. "I got it. I kind of knew, in the back of my mind, that you'd need to retreat. I knew you were afraid of the reactions and well, I know we didn't react the best." His lips tightened in a frown as he looked away again.

"I betrayed the team's trust," Toni said simply, even though she hated to admit it. "The only way you wouldn't have seen it that way was if we started off on day one with that knowledge out in the open."

"You shouldn't have to feel that way," Bruce said. "You have a right to privacy, we all have a right
to some secrets." He looked at her again with an expression of sympathy. "You talked to me the first
day we met about defying expectations. You confided in me as soon as I told you about being
exposed. I didn't get the chance to hide my secret, a hulking green beast isn't exactly subtle." His
mouth crooked in another wry smile. "But if I could, I'd keep that close."

Toni ducked her head, needing to break that unnerving, too understanding gaze. She swallowed
reflexively before attempting to speak. "I know you would. It wasn't fair to just—"

"Toni. I'm telling you I understand. You did confide in me. You told me about the arc reactor that
day, I just didn't realize it then." Bruce's fingers came into view as he reached out and laid his hand
palm-up in invitation. "I wish I'd known more about it sooner but, I get it. I wish you could have
come to us in your time and not been forced into it."

Chuckling shakily, Toni gave in to the urge to reach for his hand and laid her fingers over his. "I
think you're the only one thinking that way."

"Then screw them," Bruce told her, no heat in his voice, just simple fact.

Surprised, Toni laughed incredulously and raised her gaze. He was serious. "I'm not sure that's fair."

"Wasn't fair to you, either," Bruce said with a shrug. His expression was determined as he continued,
"The team is going to face a lot more than attempts to maintain some privacy. While we can spare a
little time for getting upset, we also have to let things go if any of this is going to work. What use are
we if we can't make amends between ourselves?"

Toni shook her head slightly, disbelieving. "You're something else, Brucey," she murmured. "Why
are you letting me off the hook? I may have hinted about the... arc reactor but I never said anything
about Iron Man."

Bruce replied, "Honestly? I don't care much. The Other Guy has always spent more time with Iron
Man. We've had our moments, but I didn't think of 'him' as someone I really worked with as myself.
Knowing that it's you under there is honestly... comforting. It's not a stranger, you're in there and
you've got our backs. You've always supported me regardless of the guise you've worn." He smiled
a little and glanced down at her shirt briefly. His gaze returned to hers and he nodded a little. "You're
not even putting up a front right now and I bet I'm one of the few who you've ever trusted with that.
How can I be angry about that, Toni?"

To her embarrassment, Toni found herself blinking quickly against the flush of heat she felt
threatening behind her eyes. She curled her fingers in, away from Bruce's touch and carefully
pressed her palm against the arc reactor whose glow was only slightly muted by her shirts without
the usual padding. "You, uh, seemed to... understand," she said haltingly. She averted her gaze
again, having a hard enough time speaking without looking into his eyes. "And given that I just did
an interview and a photoshoot..." She trailed off and took a deep breath. It was sinking in, the
realization that she was in a sense "coming out" with what she had done today. "Shit. It's going to be
out there now. What the hell was I thinking?"

Bruce's hand captured the one she still had on the table. His fingers gently curved around her fist and
he waited for her gaze to turn his way before speaking. His eyes were sad. "I talked to Jan and
Pepper a little, they told me about the project. You made a difficult decision but you have a group of
amazing women right there with you."

Toni moved her hand from her chest, down to her side where she curled shaking fingers into the
fabric of her shirt and pulled. She felt a sense of désir déjà vu, remembering how she had stood in a
hospital gown half a world away and looked in a mirror for the first time. She watched Bruce's face,
how his gaze dropped to her chest. His hand tightened over hers and his eyes and lips took on a pinched look. No hint of disgust, only sadness and sympathy. She felt like she was frozen in place and couldn't breathe as she waited.

Finally Bruce closed his eyes and bowed his head slightly. His grip drew Toni's hand to his lips and he gently kissed her knuckles. "You never have to hide from me again, okay?" he said quietly.

Toni nodded jerkily, a lump in her throat preventing any words. Even though his eyes were still closed, Bruce seemed to sense her reply. He cupped Toni's hand in both of his and sighed shakily. "Could you... tell me about it?" he asked hesitantly. He opened his eyes and caught her gaze. "The reactor, how it helps you. What to do if there's an emergency?"

It would be hard to talk about, Toni knew, but for once she found that she wanted to. Pepper, Rhodey, JARVIS, and her doctors knew how the reactor sat in her chest and what connections were required, but that knowledge had been shared out of necessity and events largely beyond her control. She stared at Bruce and saw his longing to understand and his resignation with the assumption that she wouldn't tell him.

Licking her lips, Toni loosened her grip on her shirt and began talking. "It was made to keep the shrapnel at bay. But at some point early on we realized my heart had already been damaged. So it also keeps that going..."

She explained in fits and starts, finding the recitation of technical facts easiest to get through. She confessed the palladium poisoning and how the incident related to meeting Natasha. Throughout, Bruce quietly held her hand and never once looked away.

~

Toni felt emotionally drained after her retelling of detailed history. Bruce let her recoup a bit before he broke the silence and started talking. He talked about his current projects and didn't ask any further about her arc reactor or the injuries she had suffered. He finally let her hand go and went to retrieve his tablet to show Toni his recent projects. They fell into a familiar rhythm of dissecting the scientific process and making plans for moving forward.

It was nice. It was normal.

Bruce glanced at his watch and chuckled a little. "Sometimes I'm as bad as you at lurking down here," he said. "Come on, let's get something to eat."

Toni hesitated, not wanting to run into anyone else at the moment.

Bruce said, "I'll cook. JARVIS, anyone in the kitchen?"

"The kitchen is free of occupants. The other Avengers have already eaten," the AI responded smoothly.

"Alright. Just because I missed your cooking," Toni relented. Bruce grinned and followed her to the elevator.

They went back to chatting about inconsequential things as Toni sat at the breakfast bar and Bruce puttered around the kitchen, gathering ingredients for a simple meal of spaghetti and sauce. The appetizing aroma made Toni's hunger perk up in interest. She was pretty sure Bruce heard her stomach's grumbling because he sent an amused look her way.

As they finished eating, Bruce finally steered their conversation back to a more serious topic. "I
know you've needed some time and distance, but staying on the other side of the country isn't going to resolve things," he told her gently.

Toni used her fork to swirl the remains of her sauce into designs on her plate. "I know," she said. "I do have projects to finish up on-location, though. But I'll try to wrap up relatively quickly."

"You can haunt the lab floor all you want here as long as I can drop in," Bruce said.

"A club house within a club house?" Toni asked with a small chuckle. "I'll let you know if I need to take you up on that. I'm pretty sure someone on the PR team is going to drag me out, though." Her amusement dimmed. "We're putting out a notice declining to answer further inquiries in addition to putting my 'story' amongst the Phoenix reveal. That's not going to stop the media, though."

Bruce asked, "When's the story breaking?"

"A couple days. I think *Time* wanted to push a special edition, but the photographers were putting their foot down for enough time to edit the pictures." She knew her smile looked off.

"Will you call me if you need anything?" Toni shrugged. Bruce didn't look bothered by that. "How about I call you when I see it out. I'll tell you about the next run of experiment results."

"If you want," Toni deferred, silently grateful that she could be guaranteed a distraction when the requests for the "inside scoop" came pouring in.

Bruce took their plates to the sink and began rinsing them for the dishwasher. Toni watched him silently and considered how he had never shown her anger in the wake of her confessions. Even weeks ago he had been more fixated on shock and concern for her health. She shook her head and muttered, "How'd I end up with a friend like you?"

Bruce set the dishes aside and turned back to her with a soft smile. "I recall someone introducing herself with the information that she was enamored with my scientific work and was a fan of how I 'turned into a giant green rage monster'," he quoted at her with an arched eyebrow.

"I don't know, Dr. Banner, seems like you should have avoided her," Toni replied with a grin.

The scientist shrugged. "I wasn't sure what to make of it. But then she kept prodding me — literally and figuratively, might I add — and somehow ended up taking me home." He shook his head. "I think I just cast myself as a stray dog."

"Wayward scientist," Toni corrected. She stood up and stretched, somewhat surprised at the way her shirt moved over her skin until she remembered that she had forgone the usual undergarments. She was momentarily self-conscious but then she looked at Bruce who seemed to be lost in thought even though he was looking in her direction. He had limited his staring, even when she had been describing the arc reactor and the damage her chest had suffered. Her tense muscles relaxed as she assured herself that she was in safe company.

"Thanks, Toni," Bruce said into the silence.

Baffled, Toni asked, "What on earth for?"

"For making me stick around." Bruce gave her a rueful smile as he added, "For teaching me to trust again."

The statement was almost ludicrous, given how she had kept things secret for as long as she had, but the laugh she released was genuinely amused and without bitterness. "You..." She shook her head in
disbelief. "No. Okay. Thanks for sticking with my idiotic ass."

Bruce smiled at her fondly. He pushed away from the counter and hooked a thumb towards the door. "I have one more project to run before I turn in, so I need to head downstairs. You could use some rest, though, so I don't want to see you down in the workshop." His determined stare kept Toni from voicing her protest. "No offense, Toni, but you look a little like the walking dead."

Toni made a face and touched her cheek, remembering that she had removed the makeup artist's miraculous handiwork before seeking Bruce out. That might have been a mistake. "I'm fine," she countered warily.

"Not buying it," Bruce told her frankly. "Take a bath, read a novel... something not related to work. Get some rest." He looked at her expectantly.

Well, unlike Pepper or Jan, he had amazingly left out "sleep" from his list. And actually... a hot bath sounded good. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had one. Still refusing to give in easily, she crossed her arms and lifted her chin stubbornly. "You can't lock me out of my own workshop."

Bruce looked amused. "I have the feeling JARVIS might conspire with me on this one."

"It is beneficial to your health to rest, Madame," the AI contributed.

"What have you been doing to bribe my AI?" Toni muttered. She waved Bruce towards the door. "Go. I'll try this 'rest' thing you speak of."

"You do that. You might like it," Bruce teased as he left.

Toni dragged a hand down her face and admitted to herself that she was indeed tired. However, she felt too tense and worried about nightmares for her to believe she would manage anything but restless sleep. Well, she could at least try the bath.

She walked out into the hall and came to an abrupt halt at the sight of Barton leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets. He met her gaze and she saw none of the tension she remembered from when she'd last seen him.

"Hey," she greeted warily.

"Hey," Clint returned. He straightened up from the wall and turned to face her more fully. "Got a minute?"

"I have the feeling I'd need to make one even if I didn't." Toni crossed her arms and was unnerved by the reminder that the reactor's glow was unblocked and despite the loose shirt, it was still obvious that her breasts were mis-formed.

"I'm sorry," Clint said. His shoulders tensed for a moment before he let out a long sigh and tilted his head back. Gaze fixed on the ceiling he continued, "Didn't mean to chase you off."

Toni muttered, "You didn't."

Still looking at the ceiling, Clint snorted quietly. "Sudden longing for sunny skies?"

"It is warmer." Toni turned her head aside. "I knew it would piss you off."

From the corner of her eye she saw Barton shrug. "Doesn't mean we can't get through it."

"You didn't need to apologize." Toni felt the weight of his stare.
"No," Clint said quietly, "I think I did. Besides, it was more about 'Tash than you."

Toni looked at him sharply. "Why—"

"Accept it and move on, okay Stark?" Clint rolled his eyes but there was nothing malicious in his expression. "You showed your hand, I had my processing time, you've had your distance — don't you think it's time to come back?"

Toni appreciated the familiar brusqueness, but... "You're only one member of the team."

Clint arched an eyebrow. "I'll yell to be heard over any protests," he offered. As Toni felt herself smiling reluctantly, she saw an answering smile on his face. "Besides, we both know Natasha and Bruce were the ones trying to get everyone to cool their heels from the start."

Toni's smile vanished as she thought of who that left. "I still have some projects to finish in California."

Clint gave a scrutinizing stare but eventually nodded. He looked toward the kitchen and said, "I was gonna make some popcorn—"

"No, thanks," Toni answered. She felt a twinge at the flash of disappointment that crossed his expression. She explained, "Doctor's orders, I'm supposed to turn in."

Clint gave her a wry smile, showing how much he believed that was going to happen. "Right. Good night."

"Night."

They had to pass each other to get to their destinations; as they passed, Clint bumped his arm against hers. When she glanced at him curiously, he said, "It's good to see you, y'know. You should come ba— home, soon."

The term was telling and it made Toni somehow relax and tense at the same time. She couldn't think of anything to say but nodded in acknowledgment before walking on.

~

Toni never sought him out. Steve wanted to find her and headed for the stairway and elevator several times before forcing himself to stop. Reluctantly he turned around every time. Toni didn't come to him because she still didn't want to see him. He needed to respect her space. He could do that, right? She was probably doing something else important anyway. Maybe talking to Natasha or Bruce. He needed to let them have some time.

Even though he reasoned away his lack of follow-through to confront Toni, Steve barely slept, startling awake on vivid dreams any time he slipped towards a deeper sleep. Eventually he got out of bed and went for a run as the sun rose. The brisk air of early winter helped to clear away the remains of his dreams. He returned to the Tower an hour later and grabbed a water bottle and went out onto the common area balcony.

He didn't know when Toni would leave, but he hadn't expected to hear the repulsors of Iron Man's boots from above. The armor briefly hovered in the air a few floors up from the balcony where Steve stood, the faceplate tilted his way. Steve felt his breath catch, hoping, praying she would come down. Instead, Iron Man's boots kicked in with a boost and the armor lifted smoothly into the air.

Steve watched the familiar formation of red and gold arc into the sky and head west. His throat ached
and his chest felt tight. Disappointed, he leaned against the balcony railing and hunched in on himself.

"She has left?" Thor's voice rumbled from behind him. Steve glanced back, a little surprised that he hadn't heard the demigod's approach.

"Just saw the armor," he confirmed. Steve turned back to the impressive view of the city with a frown.

Thor came to the railing and rested his hands on it. He stood at Steve's side silently for a minute before saying, "It is a difficult thing to reconcile." Steve turned his gaze to his companion, getting the sense that Thor was finally going to share some of what had been on his mind in the past weeks. The demigod had been unnervingly quiet and moody in the wake of Toni's confession. "I have too much familiarity with duplicity," he confessed, expression grim. "I thought my brother's lies were limited to fun and games, or for our enemies. It then was revealed to me that he was deceiving me most of all." Thor frowned, gaze distant. "I do not believe deception is acceptable."

"I prefer an honest fight," Steve agreed quietly. "I hate that SHIELD tends to keep us in the dark. But then... Toni fills us in with the rest."

"I questioned why she would lie to us. We are shield-mates and we must be able to trust the ones at our backs." Thor let out a heavy sigh. "Yet I have considered the counsel of the Black Widow and the good doctor. It is always difficult for the strong to admit vulnerability. Had we known..." he trailed off musingly.

Steve let silence fall between them for long moments as Thor seemed to gather his thoughts.

Eventually the demigod tilted his head back and his gaze turned to the cloudy November sky. "Do you recall the stories of battle the Man of Iron has shared?"

Throat tight with emotion, Steve nodded wordlessly. He had started to combine what he knew about Toni Stark and Iron Man, trying to reconcile the identities as one person. He particularly remembered one late night confession when he had explained to Iron Man his nightmares about Hydra labs and searching for Bucky. In response, the armored Avenger had admitted that he (she) had been tortured for weeks in Afghanistan.

Toni suffered nightmares that made her leery of sleep. Toni had been tortured, built the armor, and rescued herself.

"In times past, I relied on my brother for counsel." Thor's voice startled Steve from his thoughts. "I regret the length of time I required to reconcile Lady Stark's revelation. However, I believe this distance does us little good. I wish to know..." he paused, expression thoughtful. "I wish to know the Iron Lady," he finished with a smile.

Steve felt his lips stretch into a smile at the name. He wondered what Toni would make of the title. "I do, too, Thor." He stared in the direction where Iron Man had disappeared. "I miss... them."

Thor clapped a hand on Steve's shoulder. When Steve looked over, he saw a glint of humor at odds with Thor's previous solemn expression. "You must look on the good news, my friend," he said with a playful tone. "The ones who captured your heart are one in the same."

Steve ducked his head as he chuckled at himself. "Yeah, I suppose there's that."
Timing of next update is to be determined. Coming down to the final chapters! In total it'll be 13-15, depending on how writing the missing scenes go.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Toni surfaced from the lab mid-afternoon in order to appease JARVIS' nagging about eating something substantial. "It has been three days since Dr. Banner prepared a meal for you, Madame." Additionally, she wanted to check in with Coulson on PR plans from the S.H.I.E.L.D. side of things.

She prepared a sandwich and wandered onto the patio to eat. The ocean shone a bright aquamarine near the cliffs and then shaded darker towards the horizon. It was a beautiful day, not unbearably warm, clear of fog, and lit with a clear sun. She thought about New York and the flurries JARVIS said were currently falling. She didn't miss the weather, but she couldn't help the twinge of homesickness.

Toni finished her sandwich quickly but instead of going back inside, she went to lean against the low wall bordering the patio. She took as deep a breath as she could, glad for the dry warmth of the air. She knew she should enjoy it while she could; she couldn't stay away from New York forever. The Avengers had reached out to her, she knew it was time to go back and start working on teamwork again. Time to prove her nightmares wrong.

"Ms. Stark," Coulson's voice carried through the doorway, "JARVIS says his external systems cut out after trying to analyze an anomalous reading."

Toni didn't know what was happening at first. One moment she was turning around with a frown of confusion on her face (JARVIS always knew what was going on), the next, her world exploded. Between one breath and the next the solid wall at her back fractured along with a large chunk of cliff-face beneath. She fell sideways and hit the suddenly tilting ground. When she looked up at Coulson, she saw him stumble and barely keep his feet. Then she couldn't see him anymore, and she knew she had to move. She pushed herself up, awkwardly managing some semblance of upright as she tilted toward the ocean with half her patio.

She thought she heard Coulson shouting, but it was unclear due to the creaking of overtaxed support struts and the high-pitched whines she finally realized were missiles. They were still coming, but either the attackers were poor shots or they were purposefully avoiding hitting her directly. Debris tumbled down the sharp incline of damaged patio. She grimaced as a baseball-sized chunk of concrete hit her bicep. She struggled to find handholds or something solid for her feet to get higher, beyond the ragged edge of the section of patio before it fully gave way.

Toni could see the still solid portion of the patio and the blown-out windows leading into the house. "Hand!" Coulson's voice carried one clear word through the chaos. Toni fixed her gaze determinedly on his outstretched arm. He was so close, if she could just get enough stability to jump, they'd connect. She planted one hand firmly on the swiftly-becoming-vertical ground and braced her feet as best she could. Her world narrowed to focus on Coulson's tense expression and his waiting hand.

The familiar drone of an incoming missile made her blood run cold. Coulson's arm remained in view, his determined eyes locked on her until the last second when his gaze shifted up. The missile hit — too close, much too close — and Toni was thrown into the air along with shards of concrete. Her ears rang with the all too familiar aftershocks. The sun blinded her and as she flew through the air, the grit kicked up by the explosion hit her with the memory of a desert far away.

Her vision cleared enough for her to see her listing house with its shattered windows and smoking,
craggy edges. Was Coulson in that wreck somewhere? She could hear the crash of waves below her as the ringing in her ears began to fade. She closed her eyes tightly, not wanting to see the ocean — or worse, the jagged rocks — rushing to meet her. Fuck, this wasn't how she had imagined going out. Not another fall, not when there was no one to catch her. Not when she hadn't made amends. She wanted to laugh but her breath caught in her throat.

Suddenly a smooth and unforgiving solid grip wrapped around her forearm. A moment later she felt the same grasp on her other arm, and though she was still falling, she had the support of something familiar and trusted to ease the descent. She could hear debris clanging off metal plating and opened her eyes. Despite the glare of the sun she could see the blue glow of the armor's eyes.

JARVIS swooped them further out over the ocean, clear of the falling debris, and freed one hand to wrap that arm around her back. "Knight in shining armor, J," she croaked, followed quickly by a dust-filled cough. The Mark XXI hadn't been test-flown yet and the armor's plating was incomplete, wires and circuits showing through large gaps. Toni thanked any god that might be listening that she had installed a temporary power source into the damned thing.

"For you, Madame, anything," JARVIS intoned as he turned the armor back towards solid ground. Toni winced at the wobbly flight path and rough jolt she received as a ride-along when the armor climbed higher.

"Do you see Coulson?" she asked, clenching her teeth as the armor swerved sharply to one side as another missile whined nearby.

"Without proper calibration of other systems, I am relying on heat signatures."

"Which are fucked," Toni concluded as she looked at the smoke billowing along the edges of her ruined house. She knew it wouldn't be safe, but with grim determination she directed, "Get me back in there, J."

"Madame, this armor's weaponry is untested, I do not trust in my ability to protect you while you search for Agent Coulson."

"I need to get in there and grab a different suit, then," Toni argued. She hadn't needed to, though. JARVIS had already aimed towards the most stable-looking section of empty window frame and flew them inside. Toni kept one hand on the armor as she regained her feet and began looking around the room. The smoke made her wrecked living room hard to see, not helped by the fact that her eyes began watering. "Damn it, I need sit-rep, JARVIS."

"My in-home system is significantly damaged. My external sensors have been disabled—"

"Fine, I get it! Sitting ducks. Find Coulson, I'll get—" another suit died on her lips as something pierced her shoulder with enough force to knock her away from JARVIS. Already unsteady on the debris-strewn floor, Toni slipped and fell hard onto her back.

"Madame!" JARVIS' voice carried above the whine of a weak repulsor blast. "Are you alright? Three single-manned craft have separated from the approaching jet."

Toni groaned and forced herself to roll over. "I'm fine," she hissed even as she stared down at the blood dripping from her shoulder. Sniper shot, god damn it. She used her good arm to push herself upright and moved on unsteady feet further into the house. She had to make it downstairs to the armors before those bastards landed.

"Colonel Rhodes' response time is approximately twenty-five minutes," JARVIS announced.
"Good, yeah, that'll help," Toni muttered to herself as she stumbled across the room. Her shoulder throbbed in time to the pulse she could feel at her throat. She was so focused on reaching the stairs that she didn't hear JARVIS firing up what should have been the armor's unibeam attack. She saw the aftermath, as the suit flew backwards through the staircase leading upstairs. The ceiling started to crack and Toni had to raise her good arm to shield her head. "Damn it, J!" she shouted, fear jolting through her as calculations of how much damage attempting that attack on the limited power core would do to the armor and her AI's connection to it.

Before she could make a move for JARVIS or her own suit, another bullet pierced her thigh and she crumpled forward with a cry. Toni instinctively grasped at the new wound, attempting to apply pressure as blood flowed freely.

"Hold her," a filtered voice ordered.

Two fully-geared yellow beekeepers closed in on Toni. Despite the pain of moving, she grabbed a sharp chunk of fallen ceiling and swung at the nearest foot. The guy sidestepped her attack and put a stop to her next swing by kicking her injured shoulder. She bit back a scream of pain but curled protectively around the wound.

"Hurry up!"

Her shoulder was kicked again but when she tried to curl tighter, strong hands closed around her arm and yanked her onto her back. Someone sat on her legs, aggravating the thigh wound, and a new set of hands locked around her injured arm. Pinned against the rough floor, Toni squinted through the pain and tried to see past the reflective surface of the helmet leaning over her. Her sluggish brain didn't put together the realization of what they were doing until the guy above her tugged her shirt up. A yell of denial ripped past her lips and she began to struggle.

She couldn't feel much, the pain of her wounds numbing as her world narrowed to a tunnel of panic and the overwhelming need to get away. She felt, rather than heard, the click of the arc reactor turning in its casing, and the pressure in her chest changed. She saw the blue glow reflect in the helmet face and stared in blind horror as the image brightened — the reactor lifted free of its casing. She choked on a gasp and felt the sharp tug of the connection suddenly breaking.

"Got it, clear out!" The two jumpsuits holding her arms drew back first. Toni tried to lift her hand, barely managing a few inches before it fell back to the ground. She felt her lips moving with the words of protest forming in her mind, but she couldn't hear her voice.

"What about the workshop?" someone asked.
"We have what we came for," the guy above her protested. "Iron Man's around, better to get out now."

"If we get yelled at, it's your fault."

Toni couldn't make out the response, distracted by the sudden sharp spasm in her chest. Through graying vision she watched the glow of the arc reactor pull away.

Seconds or maybe an eternity later, she felt another explosion rock the house.

~

The team gathered in the kitchen, lured in by the smell of spices that signaled Bruce putting forth his best efforts. Steve lingered in the doorway a moment, smile tugging at his lips as he watched the others. Bruce smiled over his shoulder at Natasha as she swatted Clint with an oven mitt to keep the
archer away from taste-testing. Thor reached into the upper cabinets to pull down the over-sized
glassware he favored. Clint backed off from the steaming pots on the stove and retreated to the
silverware drawer. Natasha kept a careful eye on him as she leaned against the counter next to Bruce.

Steve wondered how Toni would have fit, where she would be and what she would be doing. She
had often been scarce during these events and Iron Man had never joined meals. Steve had always
rather missed their company, but he was feeling it more sharply now.

Deciding to push those maudlin thoughts aside for the time being, Steve joined the others in the
kitchen and took out plates and bowls to set the table. As he rounded the counter to place the dishes,
Clint sidled up to him with silverware and muttered, "Distract 'Tasha for me and I'll swipe something
for you, too."

Steve shot him an amused look. "You think I'd tempt her wrath?"

"I know what you're scheming, Barton," Natasha called. She had a dish towel twirled into a rather
threatening looking rope between her hands. The archer's shoulders slumped in a clear sign of
resignation.

"You don't have to wait long," Bruce said with a chuckle.

"Make him wait til last," Natasha said.

Thor plunked the heavy glassware down on the table and grinned broadly. "My friends, what is your
beverage of choice?"

Any response was interrupted by the stove-top and oven abruptly shutting off with a sharp beep and
JARVIS' voice announcing in a crisp, firm tone, "Avengers alert Priority One. Quinjet systems are
preparing now, please assemble as quickly as possible."

"JARVIS—"

"Tracking beacon has been engaged on arc reactor number zero zero three. Direction is heading
northwest over the Pacific and requires immediate pursuit. Colonel Rhodes is en route to Malibu via
War Machine and will make landing in approximately twenty minutes."

Steve's heart thudded heavily against his ribs and a peripheral part of his mind wondered if the others
could hear it. They were all moving, but almost slowly, together as if not wanting to separate. "What
is going on?" Steve demanded firmly. They needed intel before they could act.

JARVIS' voice was clipped, clearly worried, and that the AI could express that made Steve's
stomach churn with fear. "The Malibu estate was attacked approximately fifteen minutes ago by
unidentified crafts I was unable to detect prior to the deployment of missiles. My systems have been
compromised and I am unable to re-establish a connection. However, the engagement of the tracking
beacon means that Madame's arc reactor has been removed involuntarily."

Steve stumbled to a halt, feeling like his world was tilting at a sharp angle. He hadn't realized how he
had reacted physically until he felt Thor's strong hands clamping down on his shoulders and holding
him still; Steve had been swaying on his feet.

"We have to— there must be a way to get to her," he managed to say as he tried to move forward.
Bruce was looking pale and green-tinged a few steps away.

"No," JARVIS said sharply. "War Machine is en route and will be capable of seeing to Madame's
safety in the most timely manner. The Avengers must track the arc reactor technology, it must not be
allowed to fall into other hands. The tracer will last indefinitely but could be disabled when investigation into the technology begins."

"Got it, JARVIS," Natasha replied. She looked sharply at the men around her. "Wheels up in five. If you're not on it, if you can't handle this, do not get on the jet." She wasted no further time and disappeared, presumably to gear up.

Somehow Steve found himself boarding the Quinjet three minutes and forty seconds later, shield strapped to his back over his upper armor with the rest of his costume tucked under one arm. Barton's gear was on the floor by his feet as he leaned toward a still pale-looking Bruce, talking in a low, serious tone. Thor came up behind Steve and nodded solemnly. As the two blonds moved towards the seats, the ramp sealed and Natasha glanced back at the team.

"Wheels up," Steve confirmed as he lowered himself to a bench seat. Natasha nodded sharply and took them out.

Chapter End Notes

So... I didn't post this months ago because one of my largest problems with wrapping this fic is that I can't seem to even get a draft written for the "Avengers go after the arc reactor" scene. How badly do you need to see it? I'm lousy at writing action. Are you even here for the action? Can I.... can I just skip it? would that be okay?

I've legitimately been stressing over this missing scene for over a year. It's the biggest deterrent. I mean, I could really use someone's eyes and opinions on other scenes from the last couple chapters, but there's material there to revise. I'm so close to having this finished!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Almost the entirety of the AIM scene was written by AduialOakenshield with adjustments made by me. I had all of six rough sentences when I was gifted with an awesome scene! So HUGE thanks with inserting some actual action into this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As the quinjet passed over the Pacific Ocean, Maria Hill hailed the team to let them know that she was mobilizing SHIELD resources. Steve let Natasha handle the call as he tried to reach the pre-mission calm his team sorely needed. But try as he might, he couldn't shake the image of Toni from his mind. This wasn't an in and out op that he could simply walk away from once the fight was done. This was personal.

Aside from the back and forth mobilization talk between Hill and Natasha, the quinjet was silent as each team member focused on the fight ahead.

Whatever false sense of calm the team tried to exude fell away with each mile that brought them closer to AIM. Clint meticulously counted each and every arrow and arrowhead in his arsenal. Thor fidgeted and tried to keep the growing black clouds and gusts of wind from hampering their progress. Bruce's clearly forced deep breathing didn't keep the green from spreading across his skin. Even Natasha could not disguise the tense set of her shoulders. Steve didn't bother to hide his restlessness, pacing in short controlled bursts across the back of the jet. Each step had Steve counting — counting steps, minutes, miles — until they reached AIM with a steady mantra of 'Neutralize AIM, get the reactor, get to Toni' playing on repeat in his head.

Natasha announced their approach. Images of a steel and concrete compound flickered to life on the jet's screens. Clint stood up and cocked an eyebrow at Steve. "What's the plan, Cap?"

Finally bringing his pacing to a stop, Steve looked at the team. He eyed each of them in turn and thought back to a time not long ago when Romanov had sat in the cockpit, a demi-god in the back with Steve, and a man in a suit of armor sassing him.

He felt his mouth tick into a small, tight smile as thunder rumbled and Banner's eyes turned toxic green.

"We attack."

The Avengers hit the AIM stronghold hard and fast.

Steve had opened the doors before the jet even landed, launching himself on yellow-suited agents as Thor and Hulk followed behind with loud roars. He sent his shield flying into their assailants as lightening struck and Hulk unleashed his fury with a flurry of massive fists. Soon a barrage of bullets and arrows joined the mix, signaling the completion of the team. (He tried not to focus on the lack of repulsor fire and modulated voice in his ear as he dodged hits and bursts of gunfire.)
More agents poured from the building as alarms blared. Most of their fire concentrated on the heavy hitters, leaving Clint and Natasha room to strike and disappear at a moment's notice.

Steve had little patience to spare admiring his team's prowess as he delivered punches, jabs, kicks, and shield throws at the enemy. Each time he looked into his assailant's helmet he wondered, *Is this the one who destroyed her home? Is that the one who fired the missiles? Is he the one who ripped the reactor from her chest?*

Steve lost himself in the fury of the fight, dodging blows and the occasional AIM soldier sent flying by either Thor or the Hulk. At a particularly persistent barrage of machine gun fire, he dove behind a pile of ruined concrete wall.

"Hill, what's your ETA?" he called through the comms.

"*Give us two minutes, Cap,*" she responded promptly.

"Think you could speed that up?"

"*Working on it. Tell Thor to lighten up on the potential hurricane, and I'll see what I can do on my end.*"

Natasha's voice cut in. "*Could use some cover on the east entrance, boys.*"

"Copy that," Steve acknowledged, bring up his shield as he moved towards the edge of his cover.

"*Got it,*" Clint called. "*Take out trigger happy. I'll get her clear.*"

Steve's shield deflected the bullets as he rushed forward, low as he could get. He rammed the gunner off balance and brought his fist down in a sharp blow before the agent could recover.

With his opponent down, Steve looked for Natasha. She was sprinting from the building, bent nearly double with an arm curled close to her chest. It wasn't until she vaulted across a smoking vehicle that he saw what she held so possessively; when he did, his heart leapt into his throat. Clutched to her chest in a gross parody of the Iron Man armor was Toni's reactor, bright and glowing blue against the dark black of Romanov's suit.

After Natasha's recovery of the reactor and the arrival of SHIELD reinforcements, the Avengers started to make their way back to the quinjet. Clint focused on getting the Hulk to calm down while Natasha tried to reach Rhodes.

Steve hadn't quite realized how tense he'd been until he heard Rhodes' voice through the jet's speakers, assuring them that Toni was with her medical team and the prognosis was good.

"*We'll be there as soon as we can,*" Natasha assured.

~

Steve hit the ramp controls before Hawkeye had fully landed the Quinjet. As soon as he had enough space, Steve slipped out and strode across the landing strip. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents took one look at him and shifted aside.

When he reached the medical area, the first person he saw was Colonel Rhodes. "*Captain,*" the man greeted, inclining his head slightly. "*Heard you were headed this way.*"
"Where is she?" Steve asked, stepping forward to move past even as he asked.

"Whoa, hold on a sec." Rhodes placed a firm hand against Steve's shoulder and fixed him with a stern look. Reluctantly, Steve took a step back to meet Rhodes' gaze. "She's stable but unconscious. Rushing in isn't going to do anything."

"Neither is standing around. Your point?" Steve looked past the colonel and eyed the room doors, wondering which one held Toni.

Rhodes sighed. "I'm not going to keep your attention like this, am I? Fine, we can go in if you promise to listen to me after you see she's okay." Steve nodded his agreement without hesitation. Rhodes shook his head, a small smile on his lips, and turned to lead the way.

"Go on," Rhodes invited as he opened the room two doors down.

Once inside, Steve ignored Rhodes in favor of crossing to Toni's bedside. He stopped at the foot of the bed and looked her over carefully, searching for signs of the extent of her injuries. She looked too pale, the impression not helped by the dark circles under her eyes and the yellowish bruise still decorating her temple. A blood bag hung at one side of the bed while a clear IV connected into her opposite arm.

"A bullet went clear through her right shoulder," Rhodes said, stepping up to Steve's side. "They had to remove another bullet from her thigh. Nothing major hit, but she bled for a while so that's why the —" he made a motion at the blood bag. "She'll be sore and bitch about the PT, but she'll bounce back fine."

Steve swallowed hard as his gaze dropped to the glow of the arc reactor he could see through the scrub top Toni wore. "What about her heart?"

"You found out about the reactor recently, right?" At Steve's nod, Rhodes continued. "The reactor's kept the shrapnel at bay for years, plus keeps her heart beating regularly. When they..." He paused, swallowing audibly. "When they took it out, her heartbeat stuttered. I got there just in time for her to scare the shit out of me when she went into cardiac arrest."

Rhodes shook his head, and he seemed to brace himself with a hand curving over the foot of the hospital bed. "Got it going again and had enough time to yank a temporary replacement from one of the suits on-site. Pepper was ready with a current reactor by the time we landed and the docs rushed to take Toni in.

"Her heart hasn't stopped since, and the rhythm's been holding steady for about two hours now. Doctor's saying the prognosis is good, but they'll want to keep a very close eye on things for a while. JARVIS already knows, but he'll need all the help he can get." The corner of Rhodes' lips kicked up in a fond-looking smile. "She's a handful."

"She's going to be okay?" Steve asked softly.

Rhodes leaned forward a bit to catch Steve's gaze. The colonel nodded and confirmed, "She's going to be alright. And in case you're wondering, Agent Coulson got out pretty clean. Lucky bastard, given what a wreck the Malibu place is." Rhodes' gaze darted to the side and his expression darkened for a moment. "Anyway, he got in a little while ago, Pepper's sitting with him in the next room. Scrapes and burns, but only a couple stitches needed. Biggest thing is a broken arm and a mild concussion, but he'll be walking out of here today."

"What about Toni?"
Snorting quietly, Rhodes said, "All depends on how long she's hazy enough to be complacent. From experience, she'll be forcing her way out of here sooner than recommended." He turned to fully face Steve. "So Captain, I have to ask if she'll be in good hands when she checks out."

Steve turned his attention to Toni's friend and met the challenging stare steadily. "Toni will be surrounded by friends who care for her. I promise to make sure she doesn't shrug off the doctor's orders and help JARVIS—"

"Corral her into eating three square meals a day and getting loads of rest?" Rhodes finished with a grin. "Alright, sounds like you've got the idea." His gaze drifted to Toni again and his expression became hard to read. "I heard bits and pieces about what's happened recently, you know." He held up a hand before Steve could say anything. "You don't have to explain yourself," Rhodes said, gaze returning to Steve. "That was what you were about to do, right? Seriously, it doesn't matter to me. I learned a long time ago that Toni's worst enemy is Toni Stark. She assumes the worst about herself and for all that bravado she parades, she thinks everyone finds her lacking."

"I think that's part of why she kept quiet about Iron Man," Rhodes explained. "Think about that before you apologize. I can't tell you what she thought was going on, but I can tell you she has a skewed view of things."

Steve nodded to show he understood. "She's given us a lot of time." He looked over at Toni and watched her breathe for a few moments in silence. "I've missed her."

"Not Iron Man?" Rhodes challenged quietly.

"I've missed them," Steve amended. "I admit, it's taken some getting used to... but it's a good thing. She's..." He trailed off, haunted by the memory of the misjudged accusations he'd cast at her during their first meeting. "She's so much more than I thought she'd be when I read her file."

Rhodes laughed and Steve looked over in surprise. Grinning, the colonel clapped Steve on the shoulder. "Lord help the person attempting to summarize Toni Stark in a damn file. I've seen my share of profiles over the years and fielded some crazy-ass questions from military big-wigs because I'm friends with her. No one has a damn clue until she starts letting you in. Plus, you know she screws around with those files, right?"

Steve rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. "Well I figured that out later..."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Rogers. You've stuck around — you and the team — and you're alright in my book." He fixed Steve with a firm look. "I'm trusting you to keep sticking with her and keep fighting for her trust. The Avengers aren't going to disappoint me, are they?"

"No, Sir," Steve replied sincerely, but with a small smile. "I won't let her go."

Rhodes seemed to size Steve up, his stare piercing. After a while, he nodded decisively and took a step back. "Good luck. Now if you don't mind sitting with Tones for a bit, I need to give a bit more of an explanation to my superiors as to why I flew off from instructional duties." He grimaced.

"You could always say The Avengers needed your help," Steve offered.

"I'll consider dropping Captain America's name," Rhodes said, chuckling. "Nothing like the good ol' red, white, and blue to catch top brass' attention. I'll let you know if I need you to call in my excused absence."

"I'd be happy to help." Before Rhodes left the room, Steve told him, "I know you were on your way before we even knew what was happening, but thanks. Thank you for getting to Toni in time and
taking care of her.

Rhodes glanced over his shoulder with a tired smile. "She needs a lot of looking after." Steve nodded solemnly, suppressing a grin. "If she wakes up, make sure she knows she's someplace safe and not alone."

"Of course," Steve promised. As Rhodes exited, Steve pulled a chair close to the bedside and sat. He slipped his shield off his back and leaned it against his legs. He glanced down at his hands and took off his gloves, setting them aside before leaning forward. He place a hand over Toni's, briefly skimming a thumb over her wrist.

~

Toni's vision swam as she slowly blinked awake. Her eyelids felt like they weighed a metric ton, and she struggled to keep them open to get a sense of her surroundings.

"Hey there, Sleeping Beauty," a welcome voice greeted.

"Wrong fairytale, Jolly Green," she mumbled. Blinking a few more times, she could make out Bruce's smile as he leaned into view. "Did I fall off the beanstalk?"

"Would you have traded for 'magic beans' in the first place?"

Toni closed her eyes and sighed. "This metaphor's going too long."

"How are you feeling?" Toni's eyes flew open and she sought out Rhodey. She smiled at him, hovering behind Bruce with a small frown on his lips.

She considered the question seriously as she noted the medical equipment around her. "Drugged," she confessed. She remembered being shot and could feel those pains, but for the moment they were distant.

Absently she dragged a hand to rub at her aching chest, only to stop abruptly in realization. His gaze flew to Rhodey and she couldn't hold the fear she knew showed on her face. "It wasn't a nightmare."

Bruce gently lay a hand over the one Toni still had resting on the bed as Rhodey took a seat on the edge of the mattress. "It was real," Rhodey confirmed. "But I got you, and JARVIS sent the team off to get the reactor."

"Did you get it? Where is it?" she asked Bruce. Remembering she hadn't been alone, her attention quickly shifted to Rhodey. "Did you find Coulson?"

"We got it," Bruce assured.

"Handed it off to Pepper as soon as they got back. And Coulson's already been released from medical. He's banged up but there's nothing lasting," Rhodey told her, resting his hand gently on her blanket-covered knee.

Toni relaxed a little. "Lucky bastard," she muttered with relief. She pressed the heel of her hand against the edge of the reactor's casing, grimacing at the tight feeling in her chest. Rhodey squeezed her knee briefly, and Toni glanced up to see his strained smile. "Bad?" she asked.

"Sucked," he confirmed.

Bruce patted Toni's hand as he stood up. "I'll go hold back your horde of well-wishers; wouldn't
"So..." she started when she was left with Rhodey. He raised an eyebrow at her when she trailed off. Toni shrugged, uncertain what to say. She hadn't seen him in a while.

Movement in her peripheral vision drew her eyes to the door, and she was surprised to see Steve.

Rhodey pushed off the bed and announced, "Pepper asked me to call when you were up. I'll go do that and find out when we can caffeinate you before you start bitching about coffee."

Toni narrowed her eyes at her friend. "You better bring a cup back!" she told his back as Rhodey slid past Steve in the doorway. Toni sighed and let her head fall back against the pillows. "Unsubtle bastard," she muttered.

"Your heart stopped," Steve blurted. Toni lifted her head, and looking at him, she could tell he hadn't planned on saying that. Steve looked embarrassed, gaze darting to the side and away from where he'd been staring at her hand over the reactor.

Feeling wrong-footed, Toni eventually said, "I suppose Rhodey flew in like a knight in shining armor. He'll never let me live this down."

Steve gave her a tight smile as he stepped further into the room. "Pretty sure he's just happy you lived." He hesitated at Bruce's abandoned chair, staring at it blankly for a moment. She eyed him warily as Steve finally sat, hands clasped tight between his knees.

"I'm probably lousy company right now, you know. Not exactly the life of the party."

Steve looked up quickly, expression guileless as he shook his head. "I'd like to stay. Don't kick me out."

"I'm in no condition to do that," she replied. At his uncertain look, she added, "Even if I'd want to." Toni tried to wave her hand dismissively, but her coordination was lousy and it was more of a flopping motion against the bed. She averted her gaze to the IV drip as she spoke, "So... I suppose you'd like an apology for taking off without talking with you."

"That's okay," he said quietly.

"Yeah, well..." Toni trailed off and frowned at her heart monitor. "I'm kind of a captive audience right now. You know, if you wanted that talk."

Steve huffed a quiet laugh, not sounding entirely amused. "I wish it didn't feel like torture."

She glanced at him and saw Steve's bitter-tinged smile. Grimacing to herself, Toni said, "I didn't mean it like that. Cut me some slack, Cap, I'm doped up."

"I thought that lowered inhibitions," he returned, raising his eyes to meet her stare. Neither of them turned away, and Steve let out a shaky sigh. "JARVIS told us the arc reactor had been taken and he'd lost contact with the house. We were on the other side of the country, and I couldn't do anything!"

One hand moved towards the bed, then Steve abruptly froze. Before he could retreat, Toni stretched a little to grasp his fingers; she ignored the tug at sore muscles. Steve's surprised expression was worth it.

"Did JARVIS connect you with Rhodey?" Steve nodded. "And did you follow the reactor when you knew Rhodey was coming to get me?" Steve nodded again, frowning slightly. Toni tugged on Steve's fingers and told him, "Then you did plenty. I can't let it fall into anyone else's hands. There's
no one I trust it with." She frowned thoughtfully and slowly shook her head. Pepper, yes, and maybe... maybe Bruce."

"I couldn't get to you in time." Steve's face scrunched up in obvious distress, and Toni was pretty sure the tightness she felt in her chest was unrelated to her ordeal. "The others could have taken care of AIM, or we could have dealt with it later. But you were..." His eyes closed, and he inhaled sharply. He squeezed Toni's hand, and she tried to return the gesture. "I missed you."

Toni watched Steve's face carefully as she prompted, "You mean Iron Man?"

He opened his eyes with a frown. When he caught her gaze, his expression eased and a hint of a smile curved his lips. "I miss you, give or take the armor."

"Bold statement," Toni muttered, feeling her eyelids begin to droop. "Damn, I'm tired. Drugs..."

"It's fine, you can sleep." Steve told her, voice calming. He moved their clasped hands to the mattress and squeezed gently before relinquishing his hold. Toni blinked her eyes open with a frown. Steve met her confused stare, expression uncertain.

"You let go," she mumbled.

An expression of pain flashed over Steve's face before it smoothed away with a gentle smile. The weight of his hand covered Toni's again, and she closed her eyes, reassured. "Didn't want to presume," Steve told her quietly.

"That's just silly." Toni wasn't sure how clear her words were as she began to drift off. "'S good you're here... Missed you, too."

~

Chapter End Notes

Completed story will be 13 or 14 chapters - depending on if I end up writing a couple noted but unwritten scenes and how I split up the remaining bits. We are very near the end, though.

Your comments have been amazing. Thank you to everyone who's read - whether you're a silent reader, left kudos, bookmarked, commented, whatever! - it means the world to me that you care for this 'verse. I love Toni dearly and just wish I could get the words right for what I want to convey. I hope I at least partially succeed.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Wrapping up loose ends.

Chapter Notes

Taking a deep breath here. Whew. This is a shortened and what I consider "unpolished" wrap-up to the story. I have made you wait so long that I decided to bite the bullet and post this. I hope that this satisfies despite the long wait and its brevity.

I cannot thank you enough for the love, support, and encouragement I have received for this series. It means more than I can ever fully express.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve glared at the monitor that displayed Romanov and Hammer. Hammer had been allowed to stew in solitude for the better part of a day in the room, wrists cuffed together and attached to the table. Natasha had gone in just minutes ago, barely acknowledging Hammer as she leaned back in the chair across from him and examined her Widow's Bite. Hammer eyed her wearily but remained silent.

Next to Steve stood Clint and behind them were a few S.H.I.E.L.D. agents manning computers that Steve didn't know the purpose of. Fury likely was monitoring the situation from his office. Toni had wanted to confront Hammer whenever S.H.I.E.L.D. brought him up, but Fury had regulated the knowledge of Hammer's arrival, including an explicit warning to keep Stark out of it. Steve hadn't exactly been a permanent fixture around Medical, but Clint had rolled his eyes and told Steve it was a near thing. Since he hadn't been willing to distract Toni, Colonel Rhodes was visiting. Steve hoped she didn't realize what was going on.

The smack of Natasha's chair legs hitting the floor jolted Steve's attention to the present. He smiled a little when he saw Hammer jump. Natasha's bland stare fixed on the man as she crossed her hands on the table.

"Any more tricks up your sleeve, Justin?" Natasha's voice came out deceptively soft.

Hammer gave her a smug look. "Didn't expect the last one I pulled, did you? Why would I ruin potential surprises?"

Natasha looked bored. "Your tip-off to your friends didn't work out for them. You might want to consider yourself off their friends' list."

Hammer's expression darkened for a moment before he smirked. "Don't discount what resources and information can buy you." He leaned forward, grin widening. "Without me they'd still have no idea about Iron Man's identity." He laughed. "God, that clever girl, covering with a 'man' in armor. I guess little girls never grow out of their dreams of knights."
Clint snorted softly. "Idiot."

Natasha cocked her head to the side. "Do you really think they know? It took you this long to put it together."

Hammer's smile was sharp and all teeth. "What can I say? Stark can be successfully deceptive when she wants to be. She's never had a reputation for putting herself out there."

Steve frowned, thinking of any number of examples that countered Hammer's statement.

"Tell me," Hammer said, leaning forward just slightly with a conspiratorial air, "how's she holding up? Those idiots must have failed to kill her or I wouldn't be afforded such 'comfort'."

Natasha's expression didn't appear to change, but Steve could imagine the dangerous spark in her eye.

Hammer pressed, "They managed something, though. Do share, I need something to entertain me for the duration of my stay."

The door to the interrogation room opened behind Hammer, and Steve let out a resigned groan as Toni walked into the room. Her steps were a little stiff, she'd only had a few days of recovery so far, but she did a good job of masking her injuries. She moved into Hammer's view with a smile in place.

"Oh Justin, I'm afraid you'll need much more to keep you entertained," she purred as she sat on the edge of the table. Natasha stayed put, glancing at Toni almost lazily. "I think that rock you were under last time was too comfortable. This time you'll be stuck in a deep, dark pit you have no hope of worming out of." She shrugged. "No friends to buy your way out."

"You can't bury me," Hammer spat with a sneer contorting his expression. "If I disappear, important people will go after you!"

"Yeah. That threat has me shaking," she deadpanned. "But I think I'll take my chances. See, this time you've been detained by S.H.I.E.L.D. personally, and you can never be sure what these shadowy agencies will decide to do." She glanced at Natasha. "Do you have any ideas, Agent?"

A knife appeared in Natasha's hand from somewhere, and she toyed with it idly as she arched an eyebrow at Toni's question. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

Hammer scoffed. Toni crossed her arms and leaned towards him with a chilly smile. "I thought dramatics were to your liking."

"I'm not done!" Hammer stood abruptly, chains clinking as his bound wrists kept him from moving far. Toni leaned back slightly so that their faces didn't collide, her expression closed off. "You act like you're above everyone else. As if you haven't bought and screwed your way through life. Which one got you into your precious Avengers?"

Natasha moved so quick Steve almost missed it. One moment she'd been in her chair, the next she stood over Hammer's twitching body with the Widow's Bite at his neck. Toni took a step back from the table, expression stunned as she stared at the twitching body sagging against the table. Natasha let loose another charge before stepping back.

"So..." Toni's gaze darted to Natasha.

The redhead flicked her hair from her face and rolled one shoulder in a shrug. "He bored me."
"Right." Toni moved forward and toed the unconscious man's leg. Wrinkling her nose she said, "I think he pissed himself. You have people who take out the trash, right?"

"The cleaning staff pass a rigorous security check," Natasha replied. She stepped around Hammer and moved to Toni's side. "Let's go."

"I'm not going back to that stupid bed for invalids," Toni scowled.

Clint nudged Steve with his elbow. "C'mon, Cap, I think we've got someone to bring home."

"Should she really—"

"You gonna try and stop her?" Clint asked with a smirk.

Shaking his head, Steve said, "Nah. Guess we'll just have to keep an eye out."

As they walked out to meet up with the women, Clint muttered under his breath, "I'm sure you'll find that a hardship." Steve decided to let the comment go unremarked.

~

"Ms. Stark!"

Toni was tempted to pick up her pace to get away from Coulson. Between Natasha slowing beside her and her own aching body's protests, Toni simply gave it and stopped.

"Come on, what the hell could be so important you have to keep me here?" she complained as she turned.

Coulson looked surprisingly composed given his recent injuries and that he had one arm in a sling. "Ten minutes' of your time once we sit down," he promised. He nodded to an open office door nearby.

"Fine," Toni huffed. As she followed Coulson, she was treated to the amusing sight of the agent firmly booting the office's occupant out the door. The young man looked completely flustered as they filed in. Toni resisted the urge to sigh happily as she sank into a chair. "Get talking, agent man."

Coulson took a seat behind the desk and set the tablet he was carrying on the desk. However, he didn't speak and looked towards the door. With a frown, Toni turned to look, just in time to see Clint and Steve crowd the doorway.

"Come in," Natasha said, accompanying the order with a tug on Clint's arm.

Once the door closed, Coulson cleared his throat and focused on Toni. "I'll be brief. As I'm sure you've considered, your identity as Iron Man has been compromised. It is time to decide how to get ahead of potential fallout."

"Is it time for a coming out of the closet joke?" Clint asked.

Toni gave him an exasperated look. "I was never in the closet, bird brain."

"Nah, just a suit of iron."

Coulson waited out the tangent before continuing. "S.H.I.E.L.D. has plans prepared over the years as circumstances changed. We'll need to make additional adjustments, but the groundwork is ready."
Toni could argue. Coulson didn't show it, but she imagined he had prepared himself for her to argue. He probably even consulted with Pepper — their conspiring was going to be a problem some day — to get ready for this conversation.

So, since she was tired of all the twists her life had recently taken, Toni sat back and said, "Go ahead. Send me the ideas."

The only indication of Coulson's surprise was his slow blink and the way his fingers twitched on the desk. Toni stood up and turned to the door. "I think that wraps things up here. Let's get going, guys!"

Clint squinted at her suspiciously as she passed him. Steve opened the door, expression puzzled as he looked to Coulson and back to Toni. Toni rolled her eyes and looked to Natasha for some sanity. The redhead wore her typical poker face.

"Men are so suspicious," Toni remarked, earning a small grin from Natasha.

~

Two days back home did wonders for Toni's mood, even though everyone (including JARVIS) blocked her from the workshop. No one was stupid enough to keep her from working, but she set up in the lounge or occasionally at the dining table. More often than not the team managed to distract her into doing something else — theoretical physics debates with Bruce, Borderlands 2 with Clint and Natasha, painting Thor's nails for the hell of it, and card games with Steve. Each activity was a thinly veiled attempt to get her to relax and show her that she was part of the team, Toni knew, and she didn't mind. The company was welcome after her weeks in self-imposed exile and her night terrors. She still had nightmares, filled with explosions and unwanted hands grasping for her heart, but no longer did her friends' faces hover above her.

On the third day home, JARVIS informed her at lunch that the PR packet S.H.I.E.L.D. compiled had arrived in her inbox. She read through the summary and began reading through the lengthy details while the team chatted around her.

"Hey Toni, are you going to finish that?" She looked up to see Clint eying her plate. She glanced down, barely remembering she'd been eating.

"Go for it, bird brain," she said, pushing the plate toward him. Her gaze returned to the open file on her tablet.

"You do not look pleased," Thor noted.

"Hmm?" Toni glanced at the demigod and smiled at his expression of concern. "Nothing major, Big Guy. These people just lack pizazz."

"I'm uncertain what that is."

"She means she wants to have 'dramatic flair'," Clint explained between bites.

Toni pursed her lips. "Classy is fine. Bad-ass is better. This?" She wrinkled her nose in disgust as she lifted the tablet. "This is boring, stodgy, and far too humble. I'd never say this, how the hell would anyone believe me?"

Bruce gently extracted the tablet from her hand. "I can't imagine you'll let anyone stop you from personalizing it," he said with a grin.

"You know me so well." Toni pushed back from the table and stood. "Gimme that, I need to look
over the rest before I send a snappy reply," she said, holding her hand out. Bruce narrowed his eyes slightly, looking suspicious. He returned the tablet, though, and Toni gave the team a little wave on her way out the door. "If Fury storms in here later, I'm out testing the new suit, got it?"

Instead of heading for the workshop, she directed JARVIS to the penthouse and settled at the desk in her rarely used study. She leaned back and skimmed through the documents, feeling her frown deepening the more she read.

Eventually, she set the tablet aside. "Hey, J?"

"Yes, Madame?"

"Pull up a list of news outlets — large and small."

"If it is your wish to proceed with this course of action..."

Toni laughed and stood up. "Yep. Let's do it. Don't spoil the surprise, darling."

~

Almost simultaneously four ringtones went off. Steve exchanged a startled look with Bruce as Clint and Natasha immediately picked up their phones. Cautiously, Steve accepted his call as Bruce did the same across the room.

"Hello?"

"Did no one try to tell her to wait?" Rhodes' exasperated voice carried across the line.

Nonplussed, Steve asked, "What? Who's—alright, what's Toni doing?"

"I should have guessed." Steve heard an exasperated sigh. "You'll want to get down to the conference hall on the first floor. Tell Toni I stood next to her last time, this time I'm on my way to cover her ass when this hits the air. Have fun, Cap!"

"Wait, what? Colonel?" Steve heard the call disconnect, and he pulled the phone from his ear.

"Of course she did," Bruce was saying with a sigh. Clint was laughing and leaning against Natasha for support.

The redhead rolled her eyes and told the person she was talking to, "Yes, that's Barton. We're on it." She hung up and smacked the back of Clint's head. "Come on, we have a press event to attend."

It finally clicked. "Toni's making the announcement now?"

Thor chuckled and Bruce muttered a goodbye into his phone. Clint stopped laughing long enough to say, "Hill tried to tell me we're supposed to stop her!" He side-eyed Natasha. "Fury tell you the same?"

"What he said is irrelevant." Natasha headed for the elevator.

"We're never going to stop her now," Bruce warned as he followed with the others.

"Not going to try," she returned.

The elevator doors stood open for them. The car immediately started its descent once they were in.
"JARVIS, when's it starting?" Steve asked.

"In just under three minutes, Captain."

Clint stared incredulously at the ceiling for a moment, then started laughing again. "You're kidding. How the hell did we only just get the call?"

"I am not at liberty to discuss that information," JARVIS intoned.

They arrived at the back of the Tower's conference hall to find Toni already standing on a raised platform behind a podium. She was engaged in a conversation with a couple of the people standing at the front, but the microphones weren't on yet and the conversation didn't carry. Steve looked around and saw Pepper trying to slip her way around the edge of the crowd.

"I'm surprised it took this long to reach this point." Coulson's voice came unexpectedly from Steve's side. The blond looked over sharply to see the man's wry smile. He glanced at Steve before returning his gaze to the front. "She stuck to the cards the first time around. I'm not sure why we even tried this time."

Steve tried to think of the press conference Coulson was referring to. He knew which one it was, but honestly didn't remember watching it all — it had never seemed particularly important.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen." Toni adjusted the microphone as she stepped to the side of the podium. She wore a sharp black pantsuit with a red blouse the same color as Iron Man's armor. Golden jewelry accented her outfit. The occasional flash went off as the group waited. Pepper had reached the front of the room but stood off to the side, gaze watchful.

"Thank you all for coming on short notice, though trust me, I'm well aware of your push to the PR department for interviews." She held up a hand to stall the stir of questions that started. For a moment she looked to the back of the room and ran her gaze over the team. Her eyes lingered on Steve and she winked.

"Ms. Stark, why have you refused further questions following the Time spread?" someone shouted above the others.

Toni's attention turned to the reporter. "It may seem strange, but I consider it private. However, I'm willing to let those of you gathered here spread the news of a different secret you've been hounding me about for years." The tension ratcheted up several notches, and the reporters leaned in eagerly, clearly catching on to her meaning.

"You're saying that you're prepared to release the identity of Iron Man?"

"Who wears the suit?"

"Where is Iron Man?"

"Why reveal now?"

The questions layered over one another, and Toni waited them out. In his peripheral vision, Steve saw Bruce pinch the bridge of his nose. Clint leaned against Natasha's shoulder, grinning.

Finally the questions died down as the reporters realized Toni wasn't going to say anything until she had everyone's attention.
'Several years ago the media dubbed Iron Man. That name makes some erroneous assumptions, only one of which I'm guessing will keep your interest." She smirked at her crowd as the camera flashes increased.

"You're saying a woman wears the suit?" a female voice exclaimed excitedly from near the front.

Toni nodded, grinning at whoever had spoken. "The truth is..." Her gaze flashed again to the team at the back of the room.

"I am Iron Man."

Cameras continued to flash but silence filled the room for long moments. When it broke, the voices formed a cacophony of sound that made Steve's ears ring. Pepper stepped up onto the platform at Toni's side. Steve was aware that Natasha and Clint were moving with Coulson to take up positions around the crowd of reporters that looked ready to surge forward. Disbelief and excitement mixed together and through it all, Toni offered a little wave and a smile.

"Cat's out of the bag," Bruce murmured.

"Shall we join the Lady of Iron?" Thor inquired, looking proud of the proceedings.

"She still hasn't heard that name, has she," Steve asked, grinning to himself. He found the name charming but knew Toni would scowl. "Think she'd really want us up there?" He kept watching the front, waiting for some signal.

Bruce snorted quietly. "She's been giving us very unsubtle looks, come on." He nudged Steve's side and stepped forward as Thor led the way.

Steve kept most of his attention on Toni, enjoying the amusement dancing in her eyes as she smirked at the cameras. Toni's gaze swept over the crowd, pausing on the trio of Avengers heading to the front. Her smirk eased into something more personable, a warm expression that sparked a fluttering sensation in Steve's stomach. He returned her grin.

~Fin~

Chapter End Notes

Annnnnnd that's a wrap! Writing this story, as I've mentioned often, has been like pulling teeth. I'm embarrassed how long it took me just to get this out to you. I wrote the conversation with Coulson and the last bit of the press conference today, but the chapter was otherwise finished. It's not quite what I wanted, but you've waited so long and I'm not sure I'll ever find a right moment to post.

There's the vague possibility of rewriting and adding things to this entire story in the future. At this point it's been about three and a half years in the making. As for the series as a whole, I don't know when I'll return to it. I've been flitting away from Marvel for a while, and when I'm involved I've been hitting up the Bucky/Tony side of things a lot. So that throws a wrench in the works of how this series has always been planned in my mind.
Thank you again! The comments and kudos notifications I get have been so helpful during some really tough times in recent months. Readers, you mean the world to me. Thanks for sticking with me.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!