Scarlet Souls

by AnonEHouse

Summary

Pepper will do anything for Tony. Even rescue him from Afghanistan. (first chapter is Iron Man, second is Iron Man 2, third is the Avengers, fourth is Iron Man 3, fifth and sixth are Captain America: The Winter Soldier, seventh through sixteenth are Age of Ultron.—I can't guarantee I'll do Civil War, so I'm marking this complete, but the possibility exists, so you may choose to subscribe, just in case.)

It becomes increasingly AU as canon divergence leads down other paths.

(I am not kidding about the violence, but no good guys were hurt in the making of this fic.)

*I just noticed that the tag wranglers have synned 'Team Tony' with 'Civil War Team Iron Man' so this story will erroneously show up in a search for CW fic. I deliberately used Team Tony to avoid misleading people! I HOPE to extend this to Civil War, but I can't be sure it will happen. The canon divergence may make CW impossible in this verse.*

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Pepper hadn't been looking for anything in particular on Tony's computer in his office at SI. It was just a way of feeling a little closer to him. Just a little. She couldn't bear to talk to Jarvis, because that would be too close, but the desktop computer had no personality. It was just a piece of standard office equipment, one that she and Obie often used because Tony was seldom actually in the office.

She slipped in the lock chip she'd found in Tony's workshop, and began idly checking out the ghost drive. She didn't like the name. It made her think that ... no, Tony was missing, not dead. Before he'd been knocked unconscious by flying debris, Rhodey had seen Tony leave the humvee. Tony'd been able to run, he was fine. Knowing Tony, he was probably holed up in some Afghani town whining about the lack of modern communications and charming everyone around him by fixing their cars. Or maybe he'd got drunk and thrown in the local jail. Pepper was pretty sure alcohol was illegal in Afghanistan, but that wouldn't stop Tony. They'd let him out eventually. Two months in jail might even be good for him. Maybe he'd invent something to make life more interesting for the inmates.

She froze when the video she clicked on out of random curiosity began playing. It was a nightmare. It couldn't be real. Hastily she ordered the computer to translate. "Oh, my God. Obadiah..." She put in a flash drive and copied everything, mind whirling. What could she do? If she confronted Obadiah, he'd have a story, he always did. Or maybe he'd just try to kill her, too. She couldn't turn Obadiah in to any authorities; the kidnappers might hear about it and kill Tony. Rhodey? No, Rhodey was searching for Tony, let him stay where he was. Pepper would handle this, handle Obadiah. She would fix everything. She was the best damn P.A. in the business, she wasn't going to fail Tony now.

"Jarvis, wake up." Pepper strode into the workshop and looked around, reassessing it in terms of her half-formed plans.

"Yes, Ms. Potts," Jarvis replied. The lights brightened as Pepper went over to Tony's work console. She didn't know Tony's systems like he did, of course not, but she knew them better than anyone else on Earth. She sat down and fed the flash drive into a port. "Access all the data on that drive, Jarvis. Correlate everything. Find out where Tony is being kept, and help me formulate a plan to get him back."

Jarvis was silent for several seconds, an eternity compared to his usual response. "Is Mr. Stane's survival a requirement?" Jarvis sounded more human than ever. It wasn't nice.

Pepper smiled. That wasn't nice, either. "No, Jarvis, it is not."

"In that case, you may wish to recruit Mr. Hogan to provide physical assistance."

"What's the matter with you two?" Obadiah shouted once the effect of the sonic paralyzer wore off. Shouting was all he could do, since he was held between a dozen of the huge assembly grapplers in the middle of Tony's workshop. They held his arms and legs and even his head immobile. The robot
Tony called You was positioned in front of him, far enough away that the camera You held captured Obadiah's full-length image as well as that of Pepper standing calmly beside him. Pepper didn't reply to him, but Happy turned and looked at him.

"I never liked you, Mr. Stane, even before you tried to kill Mr. Stark." Happy looked at Pepper. "Do you want me to do it? I mean, I was in the ring, I'm used to blood."

"No, Happy, but thank you." Pepper patted Happy on the arm. He nodded and walked out of camera range and stood, watching. "Jarvis..." she said.

Obadiah said, "Now, just wait, wait a minute here, what's all this about trying to kill Tony? I love him like my own son! I would never..."

"Play it, Jarvis. Audio only," Pepper said, and the translation of the Afghani spokesman complaining about Obadiah not paying enough to kill Tony Stark filled the room.

"No!" Obadiah protested. "That's a fake! A trick!"

"Jarvis," Pepper said clearly, "is the connection still feeding to the Ten Rings?"

"Yes, Ms. Potts. Do you wish two-way live-feed now?"

"Yes, please, Jarvis." Pepper looked at Obadiah. "Be quiet, or I'll have Happy gag you." An image appeared in one of the monitor frames, showing the same cave/room as in the previous video. This time there were only a few men in view, all of them looking furious. One began speaking, a rapid-fire stream of words that Jarvis translated to English in real time.

"How dare you insult us by using a woman as your go between, Obadiah Stane!"

Pepper shook her head. "You misunderstand. Mr. Stane has nothing to do with these negotiations. He is merely here to demonstrate my sincerity when I tell you that if you do not release Tony Stark, unharmed, at a place of my choosing, within six hours, I will destroy you."

The man sneered and rattled off more abusive sounding language. Jarvis undoubtedly cleaned it up in translation. "You can do nothing! You may have seduced Stane into contacting us, but words are feeble weapons!"

"That's true. However, I have more than words. I have the Jericho." Pepper gave another bone-chilling smile. "I have your location." She didn't even glance down as she recited the coordinates Jarvis had gleaned from Obadiah's records and confirmed via satellite. "Camouflage nets and caves will not hide you. I will bring the entire mountain down around you."

"You are bluffing! You would kill Tony Stark as well!"

"I would rather not do it, but a swift death is better than leaving him in your hands."

"What do you know of death? You, with your clean hands and expensive clothes? A woman would never get her hands dirty in such a manner!"

Pepper smiled and reached down to take off her shoes. "Money doesn't mean that much to me. You have my man. He bought me these shoes. They're Louboutins. See the trademark scarlet soles? This pair cost two thousand dollars. Let me show you how little I care about them, or about getting my hands dirty." She grasped one shoe firmly, with the stiletto heel pointing upward, turned and swung with all her strength, driving it into Stane's right eye and twisting it viciously. He screamed and convulsed in the robot's grip, blood spurtling out to spatter all over her. She watched until he stopped twitching, and hung there, limp, with the shoe sticking out of his face.
Then she turned back to face the camera, raising her gory hands to display them. "The dress was expensive, too." The men were silent. "I'm going to clean up while you bring Mr. Stark to the camera. I want to speak with him before you release him, and you know, a woman likes to look her best for her man."

Happy came over to Obadiah. Dummy was trailing him with another camera. Pepper said, "I'm going to switch you to another camera, so you can watch Happy dispose of the trash. Mr. Stark's cliffside home makes that convenient. The sharks are very efficient."

Happy grunted as he dragged the corpse out of the garage, with Dummy following.

"We want cheeseburgers," Tony said as he followed Yinsen and Pepper into the limo while Rhodey walked off the tarmac to report back to duty. They all looked tired. Pepper had even cried a little bit, which she never did, but then, Tony was all she had and she could have lost him.

"Cheeseburgers?" Pepper said dubiously, looking at Yinsen, who smiled and shrugged. She had liked him from the moment Tony had said he wouldn't leave without him, and on seeing him in person, she liked him even more. "Shouldn't you go to the hospital, Tony?"

"No, I've been in captivity for two months and there's two things I want to do, one is eat an American cheeseburger, and the other..."

Yinsen smiled and touched Tony's arm. "I should like to visit an American hospital."

Tony frowned, and then shrugged. "All right, hospital first... but we get a cheeseburger on the way. Drive, Happy."

Pepper smiled. Good, Yinsen was on her side to protect Tony, which was just as well. She really was a little out of practice. She hadn't killed anyone for Tony since the last piece of garbage who tried to blackmail him. She took her duty as personal assistant very seriously.
Killer Heels

Chapter Summary

Iron Man 2 takes a slightly different turn, with Pepper being terrifyingly protective.

Normally Pepper didn't see the point of giving any of Tony's pickups a shovel speech. For one thing, she didn't have the time, and for another none of those one-night stand bimbos had sense enough to take it seriously, so it was easier to just take care of the few who weren't satisfied with a night of Tony, and whatever party favors she chose to dole out when kicking them to the curb. Nosy bitches got nothing, but if Tony looked relaxed and happy in the morning, she'd dig into her stash of mid-priced (by Tony standards) jewelry mementos, toss in a 'don't call Tony, he'll call you' card and maybe pop a bloom from the tabletop orchid of the week in the goodie bag as well. They may not have been that bright, but most of them had enough animal cunning to look at Pepper and see this was the best they were going to get.

She certainly wasn't going to allow a repetition of that Kathy Dare creature. Stalking Tony with a gun in her purse. That one she'd passed off as suicide, thanks to the incoherent ravings in the diary the idiot had kept.

But Natalie... Natalie was something different. She was playing Tony, but not reeling him in. Natalie was more than competent, she was brilliant, and her limpid, green-eyed gaze was a work of art. If she was angling for marriage, Tony wouldn't stand a chance. His innocent inability to resist manipulation was only charming when it was Pepper doing the manipulation. It wasn't that Pepper would have minded, if she thought Natalie would make Tony a good wife, but she sensed cold calculation whenever Natalie looked at Tony's back, as if she was visualizing just where to place the knives. A messy divorce would destroy Tony; he couldn't handle betrayal at all.

Even at his best, Tony couldn't take that, and he had been more erratic than normal lately. He'd practically thrown a tantrum when Yinsen wanted to give him a physical, and he adored Yinsen, like the father-figure Howard had never been. And giving the art collection to the Boy Scouts and control of his company to her... well, she could see that it made sense to give her the company so he'd have more time to play Iron Man and fiddle with new tech toys. She was the only person he knew who was both capable and trustworthy, and... that... made her feel so warm inside that she was willing to overlook the art donation. Maybe Tony had wanted to be a Scout when he was a child. He was ridiculously sentimental, despite his protestations to the contrary.

So, one day when Tony was halfway around the world, blowing up things that had his name on, Pepper had asked Jarvis to research Natalie, thoroughly. SI's background employee check was good, but not exhaustive. If records confirmed what you said, that was enough. Well, in this case, it obviously wasn't enough. She sat back and frowned at the monitor. "Jarvis. Use all your resources to collate a 'pressure file'."

"On Ms. Romanov?" Jarvis sounded as coldly pissed off as she felt.

"Mmm, you might as well. I'll only be using that one as background. But I really want everything, every dirty little secret, every little vulnerable spot, on Shield, and on Nick Fury in particular." She tapped her fingernails on the desk. "What does he want with Tony?" She'd been angry at Fury for quite a while anyway, since the man broke into the house in order to offer Tony the golden
opportunity to risk his neck for the greater glory of some organization so clandestine the head of it acts as a midnight house-burglar rather than telephone for an appointment. She hadn't been sure whether someone had given Fury entirely the wrong personality profile, or whether he had deliberately got Tony so mad he'd refuse. She hadn't cared to investigate further at the time, because she was too busy putting out Tony's fires, and feeding and patching him up at intervals between his 'missions' to clean up the messes Obi had left behind. She was proud of him, but still... he could have left it to her, she'd have figured out a way to do it without putting him in danger. Tony never did have the self-preservation instincts of a moth in a candle factory.

She sighed and smiled fondly, admitting to herself that was actually part of Tony's charm for her. He needed her desperately. He'd look at her with those big, trusting, puppy dog eyes, and really, nothing was too much to do to preserve that faith.

"Natalie, come and have a seat." Pepper called her into the Malibu mansion home office once she was sure Tony was down for a nap. He hadn't bounced back from the disaster at Monaco the way he usually did, and it was worrying her even more that he still wouldn't let Yinsen look at him. Tony was awful at hiding it when he had a secret, but he was very good at hiding the particulars. Pepper was glad she hadn't given into the impulse of proactively taking Natalie off the board. A seductive spy was just what she needed at the moment. She smiled. "Or should I call you Natasha?"

Pepper gave her points for not hesitating as she sat down, legs primly poised and ready to attack. "Whichever you're comfortable with is fine by me, Ms. Potts."

"Well, then let's keep it Natalie for now." She smiled, bright and sharp and utterly humorlessly. "I know what your assignment was, Ms. Rushman." She gestured at the glass table top. "Portland. Last May. Director Fury playing cello at a very private recital for Phil Coulson." She gestured again and the images disappeared.

Natalie's eyes were hard and cold as chips of solidified poison. "What do you expect to get from this?"

"Cooperation in keeping Tony Stark alive. That's all. That information is... nothing. That's actually... quite sweet. I only showed you that to get your attention. Shield, and Nick Fury personally, have far dirtier, and more actionable, secrets. I have no interest in spreading any of it around. I could threaten to expose the data if anything happened to me or Tony or Jarvis, but that would merely make your organization hostile. I don't want that. The file I've just shown you has already been deleted as a sign of good will."

Natalie gave her a curt nod. "Stark is dying," she said slowly. "Poisoned by the arc reactor. I don't see that we can come to any agreement."

"I strongly suspect your organization has resources you haven't used." Pepper stood up. Natalie's head jerked up, but nothing else happened. "Oh, that's one of Tony's 'toys'. You won't be able to get up until I've convinced you that it's really in your best interest to keep Tony alive." Pepper got up and walked around Natalie, talking softly all the while. "You think that if he dies, you'll get the Iron Man, and the arc reactor. You won't. Even if you did, it wouldn't do you much good. Vanko created a crude weapon on a shoestring. The technology is already out there. The only chance to keep it under control is to have Tony Stark alive to keep making better versions, to have him fight to keep it out of hostile hands. And he will, he's obsessed with it. He's not only your nuclear deterrent, he's good publicity, and a good scapegoat if things go wrong.

"You could kill me. You could let Tony die. But you'd be wasting invaluable resources. After
looking at Director Fury's record... and yours... I think he would go to great lengths to keep someone alive for their potential... even if they were currently in opposition to him. And Tony's not the enemy. He's Don Quixote and Alice's White Knight, and Lancelot... flawed, ridiculous, and honorable.

"Save him, and one day, he'll wind up saving your asses." Pepper went to leave the room. "Oh, and I'd appreciate it if you'd turn him down for the Avengers' Initiative. He's not ready for that kind of responsibility. I'll need more time to work on him. Good afternoon, Ms. Rushman."

"Good afternoon, Ms. Potts."

Pepper thought she heard a note of grudging admiration in the spy's voice. She hoped so. Killing Natalie and Fury wouldn't help Tony. Of course, if Tony died because of them, she would take them down. Jarvis had already promised to show her how to use the suit. It wouldn't even need that much alteration. She and Tony were about the same height. She smiled. If they let Tony die, she'd carve his name into their bodies. One way or another, the world was going to remember her Tony.
Silver Tongue

Chapter Summary

Bamf! Pepper isn't happy about Tony being defenestrated.

Pepper went down in the elevator with Phil, smiling. She quite liked him, but the reason she
accompanied him instead of staying with Tony was purely practical. Fury was up to something, and
Phil was his right-hand man; she wasn't letting him roam around the Tower unaccompanied. She had
been wary of him ever since she'd learned he had threatened Tony with a taser. Tony had tried to
make it sound like a joke; after all the arc reactor was producing gigajoules, so why would the less
than one joule shock of a taser bother him?

Well, for one thing, the arc reactor wasn't sending that force through his body. For another, being
tased hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. She wasn't even sure it couldn't kill Tony; they hadn't been tested on
anyone with an electromagnet keeping shrapnel from shredding his heart. Pepper had got a taser, and
innocently, accidentally shot Coulson in the chest with it. "Oh, my GOD!" she'd cried as he
convulsed on the floor. "I'm so sorry! I thought it was harmless! Tony said it was a joke between the
two of you!" When he could speak she asked him, "What does it feel like?"

He had coughed before he spoke. "It feels remarkably like being electrocuted. In addition, there is
the interesting sensation of being struck by a mid-size hammer at each probe site. It was...
educational."

"Oh, I am so very sorry!" Pepper had said. She really hoped he'd learned his lesson. Considering his
position, it would have been difficult to kill him discreetly, and so far, he'd done nothing to justify the
effort, but she kept her options open.

They chatted a little in the elevator. Phil didn't tell her anything about the mission, but that in itself
told her it was deadly serious. She'd figured that out the moment he bypassed security to bring Tony
the tempting bait-- some new way to risk his life in atonement for... well, basically being himself.
She'd distracted Tony with projects and philanthropy, but she'd known that he'd leap at the first
chance to hurl himself in harm's way for a worthy cause. Well, all right, if it was Tony's decision.
She couldn't keep him in a velvet-lined cage. All she could do was make sure he was as well
prepared for whatever it would be as possible, and if that meant leaving for Washington early so that
he could concentrate on the materials Fury had provided, then that was what she would do. After
whispering an incentive in Tony's ear. He did so love her Thai massage technique- especially when
she walked on his back.

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Pepper watched in horror with the rest of the passengers on SI's corporate jet as Tony carried a
warhead on his back up into some otherworldly space. What was she going to do without Tony? Of
course she would track down and kill everyone responsible for sending a nuclear bomb against
Manhattan. That would take a while.

But she would be sure first. Tony had more lives than a cat. She had a drink to settle her nerves, and
then used the satellite hookup to access all the major news feeds, throwing them up on the display in a mosaic of shattered streets, dead-looking alien things, and talking heads blathering without any new information until she saw one shaky long-range image of a red and gold streak falling only to be caught by a huge green humanoid. She recognized the Hulk from the glimpse she'd seen of the dossier Fury had sent Tony. So, good. Tony wasn't dead until she knew he was dead. She stopped thinking about ways to use Jarvis to hack into military secrets and instead picked up her cell phone to call Yinsen at the midtown hospital where he worked, intending to get him to find Tony and care for him, but then she saw... missed call... from Tony. She checked the time-stamp. While he was going to his death, he'd tried to call her. That was so romantic. She let herself sniffle a little bit, and then got to work.

On arrival at LaGuardia, Pepper commandeered the helicopter Tony kept stationed there. She didn't care whether the airspace was currently restricted or not, the IFF squawk would identify it as Tony's and they'd damn well better not attempt to order it down. "Ms. Potts," the pilot said as they approached the Tower, "I'm not sure it's safe to set down on the helipad. There's been some damage."

"I spoke to Jarvis and he's assured me the structural integrity is intact. You can take off as soon as you drop me off. If I require your services, I'll call you." She didn't even bother looking at the man as she gave her orders. Normally she took the time to consider the best way to handle recalcitrant people, but fuck that shit, Tony needed her.

"Yes, Ms. Potts."

Yinsen met her at the landing pad. He was smiling, so she relaxed. "How is he?" she asked as she strode into the main room, glancing down at the broken glass underfoot, the smashed floor, and then up at the demolished window. Her fingers itched to begin calling repairmen; this was her baby, hers and Tony's, but it would wait.

"Mr. Stark is in remarkably good shape, all things considered," Yinsen assured her as he led her to the bedroom.

Tony was lying on his side facing away from the door, shirtless. His back was criss-crossed with cuts, some small and glistening with antibiotic ointment, some larger and sutured neatly. There were other marks, but the cuts were what caught her attention. More scars on her Tony. "You done with your needlepoint, Yinsen? I gotta say, I admire your patience, but really, who even does that these days?"

"Tony," Pepper said.

He turned to look at her. "Oh, hey, Pep!" He was grinning, the idiot. "Can I get a rain-check on the Thai? I mean..." He made a face. "Yinsen says I have to avoid pressure on my back. That's fine, I'm sure we can figure something else out. Yes?" He raised his eyebrows at her. "You're not saying anything. Are you mad at me? It's totally not my fault, well, yeah, I was kinda goading the guy before he threw me out the window, but I needed to buy time for the team. Go, me! They let me in the clubhouse! We're gonna have a super-secret handshake and everything... Pep?"

Pepper laughed and sat down on the bed next to Tony. Yinsen had discreetly vanished when Tony began babbling. She touched one of the unbruised places on his shoulder. "I can't leave you alone for a minute, can I?"
"Well, a minute, ok, but you were gone a whole day! I got bored, what can I say? Gimme a shirt, I have to go down to the basement and recircuit the Tower power... sounds like something from a ministry..."

"Tony, no. You need to rest!"

"I am resting! Lost both my current suits, so there's not much else I can do, but I can get power to the nearest hospital that's currently isolated from the main grid. I checked with Jarvis, we can do it."

Pepper sighed. "All right, but you'll put on an undershirt first, and do NOT sweat. You know how that makes your sutures itch."

"Yes, boss."

As she got clean clothing Pepper asked, "Tony... what window were you thrown out of?"

"You noticed the penthouse is a little breezy today?"

Pepper closed her eyes for a moment, undershirt clenched tightly in her fists as she imagined Tony falling and falling, and her not there to catch him. "And you wouldn't have been cut if you were wearing the suit."

"On the bright side the retrieval bracelets for the Mark seven passed the test with flying colors."

"The Mark seven, which no longer exists." Pepper turned and threw the undershirt at Tony. "Who threw you out the window?" She went over as Tony was pulling the shirt on, and tugged at the back so it would go on without catching on the stitches.

"Big guy with a goth Ring of the Nibelungs dress sense and a Sonic the Hedgehog hairdo."

"I can't imagine why you might have offended him." Pepper handed Tony one of his favorite t-shirts.

"Anyone who wears two foot long golden horns on his helmet is just begging to be mocked. And smashed. Not that it does much good. The Hulk cratered him into the living room travertine, and barely left a bruise on him."

"What's his name and where is he? If he's planning on throwing you out any more windows I need to update our insurance."

Tony's voice was muffled as he was pulling his AC/DC shirt over his head, "Loki. He's not from around here. And he's going back tomorrow. Bruce and I are going to retrofit his Shaft of shit-stirring into a return ticket to Asgard."

"Asgard?" Pepper asked mildly. "Like the myths?"

"Yeah, sorta." Tony stood up, put his hands on her upper arms and squeezed lightly once. "It's weird. People from other planets, dimensions, planes... haven't worked out the fine print yet, have discovered Earth and they want to come play. Thor's from Asgard too, he's a good guy, but his adopted brother Loki is the kind who likes to pull wings off flies and then set them on fire."

"Hence tossing you out the window without your suit."

"Pretty much. But don't worry about it. He's on lockdown in the security room here. Fury wanted him on the helicarrier, but it's too messed up at the moment. Another thing I have to fix. Later. And Fury will have to be VERY nice to me." Tony paused and looked at Pepper, seriously. "Phil died.
I'm sorry. I know you like him."

Pepper took a deep breath. She was surprised, she thought Coulson was indestructible-- at the very least, that it would require intensive planning to take him out of the picture. "What happened?"

Tony scowled again. "Loki. It was... well, you don't need the details, but Fury said it was quick."

Pepper nodded wordlessly. "So, Loki is being sent to Asgard for punishment?"

"Yeah. I hope they hold onto him this time. He'd destroyed most of a town in New Mexico last year-- you remember when I was having my little problem with the arc reactor and Phil was my baby-sitter? He went to New Mexico then, arrived just in time to see Thor show up and take care of Loki. Apparently he slipped through their Asgardian fingers into an infinite void only to pop up here with an army." Tony tapped a nervous tattoo on his arc reactor. "So, rain check on the massage?"

Pepper smiled and kissed Tony's cheek. "Sure, Tony. I've got a few things to do, anyway."

"Right!" Tony grinned and headed out of the room.

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Pepper had security overrides for more than the elevator. She had a talk with Jarvis, and while she didn't understand the technical details, that was fine. She'd handled Tony's tech for years. You didn't have to understand why something worked, only how to make it do what you wanted. What were the limitations, and the risks.

The other Avengers were either sleeping or reporting to Fury, or hiding from the media. Pepper didn't care which. They were out of the way, that was all that mattered. It was easy enough to get Jarvis to make her invisible to monitoring and to unlock the case holding Loki's spear. "You work by force of will, by belief, by determination." She picked up the spear, and felt it pushing at her, probing, testing, sending the glow up her arms, seeking her heart. After a moment the glow settled into the shaft again. "We understand each other."

Down to the security level. Entirely automated, as Tony trusted Jarvis more than he did most people. Plus, they hadn't ever expected to use it for more than a holding cell for corporate spies, why hire people to sit around an empty cell for months on end?

Loki turned to face her when she approached. He was manacled and wore a metal gag, so he was silent, but the rage in his eyes on seeing her with his staff was unmistakable.

She gazed at him for a minute. "You tried to kill my Tony. I can't allow that. I don't want to start a war with Asgard by killing you in cold blood, though."

Loki's eyes sneered, but went blank and blue the moment she pressed the spear tip against his chest. She went on to say, "Jarvis informs me the Asgardian warrior-culture would accept a honorable death from battle wounds as... well, just one of those things.

"So I've decided that as an unfortunate result of the Hulk's enthusiasm in subduing you, you've suffered an epidural hematoma. It's a pity the effects aren't immediately noticeable. And a real shame that your attack on my building has disabled the medical monitoring for detainees in this room. It just isn't your lucky day, Loki." Pepper watched as Loki writhed and fell to the floor, a clear fluid draining from his nose and dripping from his gag. She stepped back far enough to keep her shoes clean and waited until he stopped breathing.
She returned everything the way it had been and went back up to the penthouse. She'd have to talk Tony into making her a Suit. If aliens were going to come around trying to kill Tony, she'd need more firepower.
Pepper shelved her 'kill Fury' plans when Jarvis' hack of the helicarrier deck security cams showed Fury using some type of bazooka to take down one of the nuclear bombers. Jarvis dug deeper to discover who had ordered the nuke that nearly killed Tony. Identifying, tracking and finally taking out the World Security Council had been time-consuming. Satisfying, though. The most fun had been arranging it so that it looked as if one of them had taken out the others in a bid for power, and then committed suicide when the not-quite-perfect 'accidents' led back to him.

After the 'suicide', a beautifully wrapped box of Godiva “G” Collection chocolates appeared on her desk. There was no note, and no one knew who had delivered it. It was very sweet of Fury, she thought as she tipped the box into the hazardous waste disposal.

Between handling the WSC and running S.I. there hadn't been enough time to look after Tony, or even gently to hint that she'd have fun with a Suit of her own. Pepper had known he was more delicate than usual, but she had thought that allowing him to hibernate in his workcave until he was ready to face the world would cure him. It had always done the trick before.

But this time was different. Yinsen came to her office while Aldrich Killian was flexing his muscles and showing off his big brain, trying to make her a 'better offer' than Tony. Killian had worked to clear up his physical problems, his social ineptitude, and even his complexion. Ugh, what a turn off; a self-made success- the man didn't have an ounce of Tony's needy appeal.

She saw Yinsen's expression through the glass office wall. It had that 'Tony in trouble' look, which made her lose all patience with Killian's spiel. "I'm sorry, Mr. Killian," she said briskly, sliding away from his handsiness, "I'm afraid prior commitments prevent me giving your presentation my attention at this time. Please, feel free to leave any literature with my secretary, Mrs. Arbogast. Call her if you wish to set up an appointment in future."

Killian looked as if she'd slapped him in the face with a dead fish. She didn't care. If Killian's business was worthwhile, she'd get back to him later, when the lesson had sunk in that she wasn't going to be manipulated by machismo. "Mr. Hogan will escort you to my secretary."

"Right this way, sir," Happy said, all puffed up and officious.

Killian shook Happy's hand off his arm and gave Pepper an ugly glare. "You haven't heard the last of this." He turned away and strode out of the building.

Pepper noticed that a man lounging in one of the waiting room chairs got up and went with him. She didn't like the look of him, either. Happy was already tailing the man so she dismissed them from her mind. Happy would make sure they left the premises. She smiled at Yinsen. There was no need to upset the employees. "Yinsen! How was the lecture tour?"

"Good, Ms. Potts, but tiring. And I must confess, the food gave me indigestion."
Pepper put her arm through Yinsen's and they headed for the exit, so smooth, so calm. He was so good at picking up suggestions. She was very fond of him. In case she ever had to kill him, she intended to do it painlessly in his sleep. "Oh, I know, there must be a recipe book with one hundred ways to make chicken inedible. Would you like to go out to dinner with us?"

"That would be nice." Yinsen smiled back at her.

"Let's go home and see what reservations Jarvis can get for us."

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Happy drove them home. As head of security he didn't chauffeur any longer, but he said he had a bad feeling about Killian and wanted to talk to Jarvis. Happy had good paranoid instincts, so Pepper made a mental note to follow up on that later. Right now, she wanted to talk to Yinsen. "What's wrong? Is Tony sick again?"

Yinsen shook his head. "Not as you mean it, in the body." He tapped the side of his head. "I went down to his shop and he was... dancing."

Pepper blinked. "Well, he's Tony." Which... really, that explained a lot.

"He was dancing because he had completed Iron Man number forty-two."

"Forty-two? But... it's only been a few months since Mark seven was destroyed. How could he possibly make so many?"

"I asked him. He said he can't sleep. He has bad dreams, so instead he works." Yinsen sighed. "It is not my field, but that does not sound at all good to me." He opened his mouth, shut it and then opened it again. "Also, he has been experimenting on himself. There was blood. He has injected himself with... I do not know... it makes a connection between his nervous system and the suits. That's... I think he goes too far. I think he needs help."

"Yes." Pepper was annoyed at herself. She could have spaced out the WSC kills and spent more time with Tony. She patted Yinsen's knee. "Thank you for telling me, Doctor. I'll take care of it."

Happy dropped the doctor off at his own home, a mile down the hill from Tony's Malibu mansion after agreeing they would go to dinner in an hour. At the mansion, Pepper let Happy help her out. "You're gonna take care of the boss, right?" Happy asked. Neither of them paid much attention to the gigantic armboob pink rabbit set against the house. Pepper really didn't want to think about that right now.

"Of course." When Happy headed for the house she stopped him. "I'll tell Jarvis about Killian."

"Ok." Happy fished his Starkphone out of his pocket. "Lemme send you the license plate." After he transmitted the photo to Pepper's phone he got back in the car. He leaned out of the window. "How dressy is dinner gonna be?"

"Nothing fancy," Pepper decided, "but not Jack-in-the-box. The suit you've got on will be fine."

"Gotcha." Happy drove off.

Pepper entered the house and stopped when she saw Iron Man lounging on the sofa. She could tell immediately that Tony wasn't in the suit. For one thing, she'd ordered that sofa and knew how much
weight it could stand. Add one hundred sixty pounds of Tony filling and there would be one more broken-back piece of furniture to Tony's account. At least he wasn't breaking beds with orgies any longer. She played along with Tony's joke for a few minutes before marching down the steps to confront him in his lair.

Tony had a bandage on one hand, but it was the weird headband he was wearing that disturbed her. She didn't think he could have remotely controlled the Suit simply by eye movement, or even redirected body taxis, so what was the band doing? He broke down and confirmed what Yinsen had said. And then he got all emotional and intense. He didn't say it directly, but it was obvious he'd been doing all this obsessive suit-building because he was trying to protect her, which was ridiculous, but really, very sweet.

When Tony said, "I'm a piping hot mess," her stomach did that pleasantly warm clench it always did when he was being particularly vulnerable, and then he came over and pressed his face between her breasts for comfort and protection. She stroked his hair and let him recover his composure. "I'm taking a shower."

He nodded, with the sad but obedient puppy look in full force. "Okay."

"And you're gonna join me."

He brightened. "Better."

She liked that very much, how easy he was, how responsive, how very dependent on her he was. And he was very good with his hands and mouth; all that practice on various bimbos hadn't gone to waste. She let him go down on her in the shower. He'd been trying to be a good boy, he deserved a treat.

Later that night Pepper was dreaming about Killian, thinking of various ways he could die, but subconsciously aware that the warmth beside her in the bed was Tony-to-be-protected, and not someone she needed to kill. Besides she hadn't murdered anyone she'd slept with in years. She broke the habit because it was too self-indulgent, like biting her nails. Now she only killed for Tony's sake. She wasn't really thinking that clearly in her dreams, just feeling a smug glow at having organized her life so beautifully. The elegant perfection of caring for Tony cut out all the annoying little 'right? wrong?' twinges she used to have when she killed selfishly. Tony was wonderful. Killing for him was always right.

She rose to consciousness. Tony was restless. He was flinching and making small pained noises. Pepper leaned over him to shake his shoulders. She never had bad dreams so she wasn't really sure why they hurt Tony. It was enough to know they did.

Cold metal hands clutched at her and pulled her away from Tony, who woke up and stopped the armor from whatever it was going to do. Pepper was pissed off, really pissed off. Either Tony's armor was trying to protect her from Tony's dream, or it was protecting Tony from her. Either way, she was now going to have to figure out a way to kill something that wasn't even alive. Sometimes, Tony made things so difficult! She ignored his puppydog appeal this time and went downstairs to plan Robocide. Maybe take all of them. How dare they protect Tony from her.

***

Honestly, she couldn't leave Tony alone for a minute. Of course he was upset about Happy being injured, but daring the Mandarin to come to his home? Without knowing what resources he had? She
hadn't worked up a profile on the Mandarin yet. She didn't peep into the private affairs of every mass-murderer in the world- professional courtesy, you know?

Pepper stuffed two small bags with the essentials and dropped them from the balcony down to the ground floor. She was going to drag Tony out by the hair, if necessary. She heard voices and briefly considered dropping something heavy onto the head of the woman talking to Tony. That was just due to petty annoyance, though.

She met Tony's past fling (as she recalled he hadn't minded brunettes at that time, but then, thirteen years ago, he'd been drunk most of the time) and tossed out the bright, 'he's mine, you don't want to fight me for him, he's high maintenance and weird, too' speech to get this Maya to back up. Pepper was suspicious, why show up thirteen years later, unless you had a selfish motive? If she really had shown up to try to protect Tony, Pepper was definitely going to cut this bitch.

And then the missiles came. Missiles! Damn it! Tony did something and the Iron Man formed around Pepper. She nearly panicked. She had never got Jarvis to tell her how to operate the new models. It was all she could do to get the lumbering thing over to Tony in time to shield him from the ceiling falling in. "I got you!" she said, pleased even in the middle of this mess.

Then it got even more confused and she was on the other side of a crevasse from Tony and she didn't know how to use the suit to fly. She dragged Maya out only because she knew Tony wouldn't think of himself while someone he considered an innocent was in danger. She should have broken the woman's neck when she had the chance to call it an accident. She accidently blasted them both backwards out the front window and stood, just in time to see more missiles striking the house. It was impossible to get back in. "Oh my God! Tony!"

Then the suit pulled itself to pieces and flew back into the house. She waited. Tony would be fine. He'd fly up and blast those helicopters, and land and they'd be okay. Everything would be... The house broke and slid down the cliff into the ocean. She ran to the edge. The helicopters went away. The house disappeared under the water. "TONY!"

***

Yinsen had heard all the commotion and come up from his home to walk with Pepper around the shattered remnants of the mansion. He'd been resting after operating on Happy, and Pepper was glad to see him. He might have learned something that would help her track down Tony's murderers. Maya was hanging around, just within Pepper's range of awareness, and that was good, too. She didn't believe in coincidences and Maya arriving just before the attack ...

To Maya's credit she had been trying to get them out of the house, and was nearly killed herself. But she knew something.

She picked up an Iron Man helmet. Maybe she'd take it with her to show Tony's killers as they died. A red light began blinking in it. Maybe Jarvis still existed somewhere and had a functional link? She put the helmet on and found herself smiling in relief as she heard Tony's voice. He was alive. Alive and apologetic and absurd. So, he was fine. She'd give him the chance to kill the Mandarin himself. She cradled the helmet in her arms and turned to face Yinsen.

"Tony's alive." She trusted Yinsen, and besides, knowing Tony, it wasn't going to be long before he made his presence known. He did so love flashy explosions when he was getting revenge. She nodded in Maya's direction, where a paramedic was checking her over for concussion. "I'm going to take Maya to a hotel."

Yinsen nodded. "I will return to the hospital to check on Mr. Hogan." He patted her on the shoulder. "Don't worry. Mr. Stark is a survivor."
Pepper put on a weak smile for Yinsen's benefit. "I'm not worried about Tony."

***

"Wait. Your boss is Aldrich Killian and you think he works for the Mandarin?" Pepper didn't entirely have to fake the shock when Maya dropped those bombshells. Why had Killian been sniffing around her before Tony issued his challenge to the Mandarin? Why try to recruit her for this Extremis project if he was working with a terrorist? Destabilization didn't exactly increase business opportunities or encourage scientific endeavors. It didn't make sense, unless Killian and the Mandarin were working at odds with one other. Killian could be funding the Mandarin and intending to betray him. The Mandarin could be blackmailing Killian. She didn't know which one had ordered the hit on Tony. She hit the steering wheel in frustration. Who was she supposed to kill? "We'll talk about this at the hotel."

***

In the hotel room Pepper put on her most sympathetic face and listened patiently to Maya's rambling whine about pure science being perverted by the nasty military. Sooner or later she'd get something she could work with. She didn't want to leave Tony to handle all of this by himself. He got too emotionally involved.

Room service arrived, but the moment the man was in the room, Killian came up from behind and snapped his neck.

"Maya, run!" Pepper turned to find a weapon, but Killian was too fast and too strong. He held her easily by the throat, ignoring her struggles as he discussed business with Maya. He was strong, far too strong. There was no way physical therapy had turned his miserable body into this. He had to have used Extremis. It worked. She had to have it. She'd done a lot by sheer strength of will, but oh, what she could do if her body matched. Killian loosened the hold on her throat enough for her to speak. "I'll never work for you, never. Not even if you turn me into a monster like you."

Killian smiled and laid his hand on her cheek. "Why should I waste Extremis on you? Why don't I just kill you now?"

Maya came over to them. "We could use her. Tony Stark would do anything for her."

"What makes you think I want Tony Stark to do anything except die?"

Pepper said, "Better men than you have tried to kill Tony." The grip tightened on her throat before easing again.

"How many of them have tortured someone he loves in front of his eyes?"

"No," Maya said. "Look, just hold her and threaten her. That'll give us all the leverage we need. But we have to leave now."

Killian grunted. "Yeah. All right. I wouldn't want to miss the Mandarin's final lesson."

***

Pepper wasn't entirely sure she had chosen the correct move. "Extremis isn't ready," Maya said as Killian put a blindfold on Pepper, and shoved her into a helicopter that had been waiting for them on the roof of the hotel. "We still lose one in ten at inception. If Pepper dies it only gives Tony incentive to fight us."
Killian sat down next to Pepper; she could feel the warmth of him. "I disagree. Either she lives and he'll want to correct the flaws in Extremis for her sake, or she explodes in front of him, and it's all his fault. He's already on the edge. That'll tip him over and break him. Then we can use him."

Well, Pepper thought 90 percent chance of survival wasn't too bad, but she hated having to rely on luck instead of meticulous planning. It was sloppy. It was not in her control. The whole situation made her furious. Right now she couldn't do anything useful. She couldn't even hazard a guess where they were going. She leaned back in her seat and considered how many ways she could destroy Killian and Maya. By the time they'd transferred to what sounded like a strato-hopper jet similar to Tony's, the scenarios were in the dozens. After a while she dozed off, having nothing better to do.

***

Pepper woke up from a pleasant dream involving Maya, Killian, razor blades, and rock salt to find herself wearing something tight and weird feeling that left her arms and midriff bare, while fastened to a reclining horizontal surface, like a sadist's gravity exerciser. "Oh, thanks," she said, focusing on Killian's smirking face. "I thought I was going to miss my workout. I like to keep fit."

"I'm sure you do." Killian's look went over her body, but she really didn't get the feeling he was into it. Sex for him probably involved his partner groveling and worshipping him. Either that or mirrors so he could admire himself. "And I'm sure Tony appreciates it."

"Oh, please," Pepper said. As if she was only a pretty body to Tony. Killian would never understand their soul-deep connection. "You don't deserve to say Tony's name." Spitefully she added, "Everything special about you came from Extremis. Underneath, you're still the same disgusting little creature you were before."

Killian backhanded her across the face without changing expression. "Well. I think you're ready to begin." He turned to a man in a lab coat. "Take it in slow stages. I want her to last as long as possible."

Pepper resisted the urge to smirk. And then the lab-minion injected her and her head snapped back in reaction. It was like being bitten by fire ants, under her skin, spreading through her whole body. Ok, ok, she could do this. She wasn't going to die. Not before Killian and Maya.

It went on for quite a while. Injection. Various uniquely unpleasant sensations. Sensations fading to background discomfort and blackout. Waking up. Injection. Sometimes she turned her head and caught glimpses of herself, shoulder, arm, torso. She wasn't growing any taller or more muscular, as far as she could tell, so her response wasn't identical to Killian's. But there was an orange glow, flickering under her skin. God, that would look terrible with her hair.

***

Pepper opened her eyes. Killian was standing next to her, smirking. He really had to be starved for attention, she thought. Blearily she focused on him. "Tony's not going to help you." She trusted in Tony's pigheaded stubbornness. They might kill him. They'd never break him.

Killian shuffled a little, and smirked some more. Honestly, killing him was going under 'pest control'; he was such a scuttling cockroach. "I didn't bring you here just to motivate Tony Stark. It's... actually more embarrassing than that. You're here as my..."
"Trophy," Pepper finished for him. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She had enough pain to manage at the moment. No need to ask for more. A blur of blue and red caught her eye. Tony? No. That ridiculous make-over of War Machine. Iron Patriot. Made her think of Thomas Paine. He died well. No, that was Nathan Hale. Thomas Paine was a corset maker. She wondered how Tony would look in a corset. He had sweet man-curves. Oh, her mind was wandering. Not good.

"Good evening, sir," Killian smarmed.

The Iron Patriot opened up, and the President fell out of the suit, landing on his knees in front of Killian. Pepper was glad she hadn't voted for him, he looked very undignified at the moment. Oh, here came the needle again.

***

Pepper woke up with everything blowing up and falling apart. "That's my Tony." The minions scurried around. "Hey! Get me out of this!" she shouted, but they just ran away. Something fell and there was a sizzling, electronics burning, smell. The bands holding her to the table suddenly gave way and she fell to the floor. "About time." Her legs were rubbery, so she started crawling toward the exit. Then a whole lot of metal made loud noises and she found herself pinned under beams and girders. "This is annoying!" She wished she had the Extremis strength, but either it wasn't happening, or it was taking its sweet time.

She heard a familiar whoosh and gave a sigh of relief when she caught a glimpse of lipstick red metal. Tony was here. He'd get her out and then he'd kick ass and she'd take names for later action. He tugged on a beam. It shifted and something else shifted, and the pressure increased on her legs. "Stop! Put it down, put it down, put it down!"

Tony moved to kneel as close as he could get to her. "See what happens when you hang out with my ex-girlfriends?" He held out one gauntleted hand, and she stretched to meet him.

She was so happy to see Tony, whole and smartass. She knew Killian couldn't break him. "You're such a jerk," she said, fondness and hysteria both working on her. Their fingers almost touched.

And then that pig Killian showed up again. Damn it, couldn't he see they were having a moment? After that, everything happened so fast she couldn't decide what to do. Not that she had many options, pinned down in the twisted metal the way she was. There was heat, and falling, and slipping along a track and Tony running after her, ignoring everything else, making wild leaps across gaps in the metal walkways, risking his life to try to get to her. And all she could do was hold on, her damn arm muscles were locked around the girder. He called her. He begged her to trust him. To let go. Damn it, she would if she could!

The rig she was clinging to snapped, melted, broke. She couldn't tell, all she could see was Tony's face as she fell, fell so far, into the smoke, into the flames, into the molten metal. Tony was crying.

Pepper got up. It hurt, but she was so damn mad she didn't care. Oh, nice, her clothing was flameproof. She made a mental note to make sure Tony got a chance to reverse engineer it, for S.I. By the time she got through with him, Killian was going to be in no condition to sue for industrial espionage. She stalked out of the flames, and grabbed the nearest convenient length of steel she saw. Huh, so, she had the strength now, too. Great.

She climbed out of the pit and heard Killian. "I am the Mandarin!" he shouted just as she remembered her days as lead batter on her softball team and smashed him aside. She was so furious.
She wanted to stomp him into little pieces. She dropped the pole.

Tony stared at her, wide-eyed. He said, "I... got nuthin."

And then one of Tony's suits tried to attack her. She had enough of all this. She dodged the suit, and then ran straight for Tony. The suits would never hurt him, so it would be momentarily caught in a logic loop—attack her, don't attack Tony-. She used Tony to vault up high enough to grab the suit and break off a gauntlet, turning smoothly to use the plasma blaster to separate Killian into a billion, very, very dead, particles. She turned to Tony.

"Honey," he said.

Pepper didn't want him afraid of her. No, not that. The fury left her and she scrambled to put on her other face for him. She was all wide-eyed and panicky, and had never, ever killed anyone before, wouldn't have ever imagined it. "Oh, my God! That was really violent."

Tony accepted it. He hugged her, despite the Extremis, despite seeing her kill for him. He said he'd fix it, fix her. And then he blew up all his suits. For her. He was just the sweetest thing ever. She wanted to kill everyone else in the world, to make him safe.

***

"Jarvis," Pepper said a week later, after she'd finally got Tony to go to sleep by sneaking a little something into his coffee, "has Tony finished the modifications to the Extremis formula?" They'd been staying at Yinsen's house, and she trusted Yinsen to look after Tony for a few hours. She had driven back to the mansion and gone into the basement facility, where Jarvis had cobbled together enough of a lab for Tony to work on Extremis.

"Yes, Ms. Potts," Jarvis replied. "The healing ability remains intact, but the enhanced senses, strength, and ability to produce and withstand flames have been eliminated, along, of course, with the potential for self-immolation. The new version will overwrite the old, and it now will self-delete once healing is completed, thereby avoiding the complications that led to the deaths of previous subjects. As Mr. Hogan was on the point of expiring, Dr. Yinsen administered it to him this morning. He is expected to make a full recovery."

"Mmm..." Pepper considered the equations running across the holo. She didn't understand it, but she didn't need to. "Could you make another version? Leave out the exploding, but retain everything else?"

"Of course, Ms. Potts. I have anticipated your request." An unnamed bot, a rudimentary 'Dummy' that Tony had taken out of storage until his old bot-kids could be found and repaired, rolled up with a tray holding a hypodermic clutched in its claw. "Yinsen has agreed to falsify your medical records."

"Good boy," Pepper told not-Dummy as she injected herself. This time it didn't hurt at all. She smiled. "We'll give the other to Tony, so he can have the arc reactor removed. Yinsen has already told him a story about medical advances with magnets and artificial bone, and skin grafting. It's a good thing Tony doesn't have a medical degree; he'll never realize that would be impossible. We'll just keep him sedated for a week, and give him a few false scars to cover it."

"Yes, Ms. Potts."

"He'll be much happier without being a superhero and having the weight of the world on his shoulders. We can take care of him."

"Yes, Ms. Potts," Jarvis said. Not-Dummy nodded in agreement.
Pepper flexed her hands and let them warm. She smiled in satisfaction. Tony's enemies would burn. This was going to be fun.
Neither Pepper nor Tony were in Captain America: Winter Soldier but in this 'verse, BAMF Pepper takes charge.

You can't kill an organization by killing the leaders, Pepper knew that very well. Underlings rise once there's an empty slot above them. The World Security Council scuffled for a few months before it settled down to business as usual. She and Jarvis kept an eye on them, while Tony... well, he kept busy, politicking for his clean energy programs, creating new and better equipment for the Avengers, trying to track down every piece of Stark Industries munitions that Stane had scattered around the world years before, distributing medical prosthesis for victims of land mines worldwide, and coming up with new consumer products to keep S.I. profitable enough to pay for all the philanthropy.

Bruce was the only Avenger who stayed around, probably because he wanted to use Tony's money, equipment, and brains, to work on a cure for the Hulk. Rogers had gone to work for SHIELD along with Romanov and Barton, Thor had gone back to Asgard with Loki's corpse, and never even sent a message. Tony had known them for a few hours, and thrown his heart and soul into being on a team, but there wasn't a team. The Avengers clubhouse Tony had built stayed empty. Tony was a sad and lonely puppy, despite Pepper's best efforts to distract him.

Pepper admitted to herself that she'd let her jealousy overrule her common sense. She'd have to figure out a way to nudge Tony back into making Suits. Maybe if he made one for her... "Ms. Potts," Jarvis interrupted her musing. She was at her desk in the office space in 'Avengers Tower', reluctant to leave Tony all on his own. Bruce had a tendency to throw a few dollars and a clean shirt in a backpack to wander off without notice whenever the ratio of explosions to cups of tea grew too high for his tolerance. He always came back, but in the meantime Tony was unsupervised, which was never a good thing.

"Yes, Jarvis?"

"I have continued infiltrating SHIELD's systems, as you requested. Utilizing Nicholas Fury's retina scan and voice print I have been able to access previously undetectable files."

Pepper sat up. This was bound to be interesting. Especially since Jarvis sounded angry. "Go on, J."

The holo screen in front of her desk lit up. "The helicarrier? That's not new."

"It has been modified." The holo expanded. In place of the giant fan blades, which Tony had described as hilariously outmoded and inefficient, and also painful, had been replaced with...

"Repulsors? The helicarrier now has S.I.'s proprietary repulsor technology?" Pepper was furious. "Tony had no right to give that away without consulting me... and the board," she added as an afterthought.

"Mr. Stark did not knowingly do so. Nor did he authorize the redirection of arc reactors meant to power third world communities." Jarvis kept changing the holo, showing scraps of paper, dotted with blood and covered with Tony's jottings and diagrams, as ever, clean and neat and accurate. "He was
treated by SHIELD medical after the Chitauri invasion, and while under the influence of drugs, was susceptible to suggestion. The arc reactors, however, were simply hijacked en route, and transported via a fleet of merchant ships SHIELD owns, hidden by a trail sixteen times removed. Ultimately, ownership traced back to an address in the neighborhood where Nicholas Fury's mother resides."

"WHY? You know Tony, if Fury had told him they needed the tech to save the world, he'd have been there in a minute, throwing money at him. Why did Fury steal it?"

"Because SHIELD's idea of saving the world is proactive, not reactive."

"Proactive?"

"Project Insight contains a list of twenty million people who are considered possible threats. SHIELD's original rationale was for a watching brief, but that has been subverted to preemptive extermination which is not surprising as the algorithm compiling the list was devised by a computer simulation of a Hydra scientist."

"Wait. Hydra?" Pepper waved at the nearest holo, showing a SHIELD logo. "I thought we were talking about SHIELD?"

"Operation Paperclip, at the end of World War II, recruited Axis scientists, including Hydra's top men. SHIELD was infiltrated by Hydra, either at that time, or even earlier. At present I am compiling my own list of SHIELDRA members."

Pepper took a deep breath. "Ok, fine, you do that." She considered. "Would it be possible to use Project Insight against them?"

"It would. However, it would be extremely... messy. The original plan involves using a satellite to locate individuals and then three helicarriers will fire missiles and repulsors at those target locations."

"What? That's ridiculous! There'd be so much overlap and incidental damage, there wouldn't be anyone left!" Pepper was horrified. Where was the finesse? What kind of spy organization gave up on subtlety? She was deeply ashamed of ever having admired Fury. This was as crude as using punt guns to slaughter fifty ducks at a time. And just as likely to wipe out the game stocks.

"Apparently, that was not a consideration, so long as they eliminated their targets." Jarvis paused for a moment. "Dr. Banner and Mr. Stark are both on the list."

Pepper stopped breathing for a moment, and felt the Extremis fire burning in her blood. "Is Fury Hydra?"

"No, however he does know of, and approves, Project Insight."

The desk was sizzling under her fingertips. "Does he know Tony's name is on the list?"

"It is impossible to ascertain that."

Pepper took a deep breath and calmed herself. Priorities. She had thought Fury had come to understand how valuable Tony was, so she would give him the benefit of the doubt and not kill him. Not just yet. It was tempting, but she wasn't a punt gunner. She only killed selected targets. "Right. First priority, how close is Project Insight to operational status?"

"It is fully functional, and merely awaiting the go-ahead from the World Security Council."

Pepper nodded. "What's the quickest, surest way of disabling Project Insight?" Removing the
immediate threat took precedence over tracking down and removing the Hydra infiltrators.

"Mr. Stark's failsafe codes. Each arc reactor has one, based on its own internal identification. I can transmit them on user authorized request. The CEO of Stark Industries is naturally authorized."

"Of course." Pepper smiled and relaxed slightly. "Jarvis, deactivate the hijacked arc reactors. They'll get more, but it will take time."

Jarvis kept an even closer watch on SHIELD after that, breaking into not only their computers, but their surveillance cameras, both inside and outside their facilities. Pepper shook her head at the number of morons who greeted each other with whispers of 'Hail Hydra'; had they never heard of lip-reading? Really, SHIELD would be losing nothing by purging the SHIELDRA element.

She and Jarvis started off slow, with 'accidental' releases of toxic gases when only SHIELDRA scientists were in the lab. Crossed wires electrocuted a few SHIELDRA maintenance workers, but the higher ups were protected by layers of disposable agents.

And then Fury had a conversation with Rogers. Monitors caught Rogers' expression both going up to Fury's office, and leaving the building much later, far too much later for a simple after mission report. He practically gave off righteous indignation vibrations.

"Do you think Rogers is going to cause trouble?" Pepper asked.

"I think Director Fury is going to cause trouble," Jarvis replied. "He has just requested that the Council postpone Project Insight to reassess it. He has also informed them that due to problems with the arc reactors, he is asking for approval to bring Tony Stark into the project officially."

Pepper said, "Now? Now he asks for Tony? Did Coulson take all his common sense with him when he died?"

Jarvis made a throat clearing noise. "As to that..."

"Jarvis."

"Coulson was resurrected and now works with a different division of SHIELD. The method used to revive him apparently had side-effects which precluded him returning to his former post as the Director's second in command."

Pepper grinned. "I KNEW it, I knew he wouldn't die that easily. He isn't Hydra, is he?" Judging by the caliber of the SHIELDRA she'd seen so far, she doubted it.

"No, but members of his division, including agents on his own team, are."

"This is SO MESSY." Pepper took off her shoes and rubbed her feet while she thought about it. "This is too much for us to handle on our own. I DO have a company to run, and Tony to look after."

"Mr. Hogan and Dr. Yinsen are loyal."

Pepper rolled her eyes. "Please. I wouldn't waste either of them against SHIELDRA. Tony would be upset. Of the Avengers, the only one subtle enough would be Romanov, and she's kept busy running errands for Fury. We need an assassin to infiltrate Hydra, an assassin of at least Romanov quality, but where are we going to get one? We can hardly advertise on Monster. com."
"There are underground 'hiring halls' for mercenaries."

"Mmm, it'd take too long. Wait." Pepper stopped rubbing her feet and sat up. "Hydra can't hold the loyalty of all their agents, but unlike SHIELD, they don't have a retirement plan or give you good references if you quit. I bet at least some of their top assassins would be willing to turncoat when offered the alternative of S.I. benefits."

"And if they refuse?"

Pepper held up one glowing hand. "They fail the entrance interview, and I fire them. All we have to do is ask Hydra to send a few of them over." She smiled. It had been so long since she'd had a good work out.

Since Bruce had decamped a week previous, Tony was in a bitchy mood, which suited Pepper's purpose. "Fury wants to negotiate with you," Pepper said, after intercepting Fury's 'request' and marching down to Tony's workshop where he was creating something metallic and haphazard looking, possibly another sculpture for the S.I. atrium garden. She really should let him go back to making Suits.

"Negotiate? What does the old pirate want now?" Tony turned off his soldering gun and took off his googles.

Pepper waited until he had moved away from the hot equipment before continuing. "Apparently, the arc reactors powering their three repulsor driven helicarriers are all dysfunctional and he's requesting IT support." She smiled brightly. "When were you going to tell me you'd given that technology to SHIELD?"

Tony's eyes widened. "I didn't. I never! I thought he'd given up the idea after Clint took down the helicarrier with ARROWS. I mean, can you even get insurance after that? And what the hell does he need with three of them? Do pirates have armadas? Jarvis, put him on."

Pepper eased into the background, to make sure this went according to plans.

"No, Fury, just NO," Tony said the moment the holo image of Nick Fury appeared.

"Stark," Fury began, "I know you're throwing a hissy fit because I didn't ask before putting your toys to use, protecting the WORLD, but you know, and I know, we NEED this. Grow up and get over yourself. Fix your shit."


"What are you gonna do about it, Stark?" Fury replied. "It doesn't WORK. You gonna tell people we stole your defective products? Be kinda hard to sell the rest."

This was interesting, Pepper thought. Fury certainly knew exactly how to get Tony NOT to cooperate. Did that mean he had second thoughts about Project Insight, and wanted it canceled, not just delayed? Maybe she'd have a private word with him later, and give him the current SHIELDRA list. He could do some of his own house cleaning.

"Maybe I can't sue your ass, but you can't blackmail me into fixing whatever you did to my stuff! I suggest you go back to really big ceiling fans, Nick." Tony waved and Jarvis cut the connection. Tony looked at Pepper. "We have to find out how they got my tech. If there's someone dealing under
the table at S.I. we have to find out. There's worse people than SHIELD out there and we can't count on them all getting defective goods."

Jarvis interrupted. "SIR! You have a priority one call from the Secretary of Defense."

Tony rolled his eyes and waved to accept the call. "Mr. Secretary," Tony said, politely, for him. "What can I do you for?"

Alexander Goodwin Pierce, all blue eyes, blond hair, fair skin and polished white teeth, like a well-aged version of Captain America, smiled. "We have a little mechanical problem over at SHIELD that I was hoping you could sort out."

"Before you say 'no', let me apologize for Nick Fury. The man is no diplomat. I was sorry to learn that he had acquired your technology through less than official channels, but I'm sure you can understand the urgency he felt. The urgency we all share." Pierce leaned forward, all earnest and charming. "I'm not talking about protecting America, Mr. Stark. We have learned there's an enemy out there threatening the entire world. We don't always have time to go through channels."

"Huh," Tony said thoughtfully. "You're very convincing. If I could have voted for you, I would have."

Pierce's smile widened. "My niece is a great Iron Man fan. It would just make her day if you could show up for her birthday party."

"Oh? When is that?" Tony asked.

"Next Wednesday."

Tony frowned. "Oh, sorry. My schedule is fully booked." He grinned brightly. "I've been told there's no point in talking to my lawyers, so Imma just gonna cut out the middleman and have a nice chat with my good friend Matt. Matthew Ellis. The President. I'm sure he'll be very interested in what I have to say. Bye now!" He waved again and the holo cut off.

Tony stood up. "Oops. On a scale of one to telling the Mandarin my home address, where am I, Pepper?"

"He's the Secretary of Defense, Tony. You were very rude to him." Pepper smirked. "But he's hardly likely to send attack helicopters after us! I'm sure after you talk to the President we can work something out." She took a deep breath. "But... I think maybe I made a mistake. About Iron Man. If things are so bad that Fury is stockpiling helicarriers, maybe you should have Iron Man. And maybe..." She drew a deep, shaky breath. "Maybe I should have a suit, too. Just... you would have died if I hadn't had the suit that time. I don't want to ever, ever, ever again, watch helplessly when something happens to you, Tony." She squeezed out a few tears.

"No, no, Honey, don't..." Tony enfolded his arms around her and held her tightly. "Don't worry, nothing's going to happen to either of us. I have some ideas, kicking around in idle moments, you know? It won't be hard to fix one up just for you, however you like it. Would you like it in blue? Should it have heels?"

Pepper giggled against Tony's shoulder. "Blue would be nice."

Pepper returned to her office. "Jarvis?"

"Secretary Pierce has just told his staff he is going home for the day and doesn't wish to be
disturbed."

Pepper hummed and changed into more comfortable shoes, more comfortable and cheaper. Louboutins and Manolo Blahniks were stylish, but they weren't flameproof. "I hope he doesn't take too long to send an assassin after Tony. That spiked drink won't keep him asleep in the Hulk out room forever."

Pepper went down to Tony's basement workshop, with the security measures on the dedicated garage access reduced just sufficiently not to arouse suspicion. Her only worry had been that an opportunistic car thief might make off with one of Tony's cars in the interim, but she was prepared to risk it.

"Ms. Potts," Jarvis said in her earbud, bringing her to full alert. "Our bait is about to be taken."

The workshop was dimly lit with the sole point of brightness being Tony's experimental Bi-neurally Augmented Retro Framing scene set in an endless loop. Tony's figure hadn't yet been reformatted as his seventeen year old self, which was handy at the moment. Tony's parents' figures were sharp and so realistic she admired his brain all over again. She couldn't remember such detail for any of the people she'd known when she was seventeen, not even the high school teacher who had told her she'd never amount to anything. They never did find his body.

A dark figure moved suddenly into the BARF area. Jarvis murmured into Pepper's earbud, describing his various weapons and speculating on the metal arm on his left side. Tony would probably be intrigued by the arm. She stood up just as the figure stopped, frozen in position, shaggy head turned towards the Howard illusion.

"You are dead. I... my mission. My priority. Complete mission." And then he shot Howard, who of course kept on talking. "What?" The assassin sounded totally confused. He turned and shot Maria. And then Tony. And of course, they all continued petty bickering about family troubles.

Pepper felt it was a good time to step in before he accidentally shot up the computers. "I'm here to offer you a new job." He shot her, of course he did. Pepper looked down at the hole right over her heart. The bullet popped up and tinkled to the floor. "Good aim." She walked steadily towards him, letting her Extremis heat rise so the bullets he shot at her melted before they reached her skin.

She couldn't see his expression past the goggles and... gas mask? he was wearing, but his body language showed more confusion than fear. "What are you?" he asked, stepping backwards slowly.

"CEO of Stark Industries. I protect the company, and I protect Tony Stark." She gestured and the blast doors came down, sealing off the workshop. "I'm more powerful than Hydra in all the ways that count." She grinned. "Come with me if you want to live." She had always wanted to say that.

"I must complete my mission." The assassin ran at her and punched her with his metal arm, and stabbed her with a knife, using his right hand.

"Is that all you can say?" Pepper was beginning to be annoyed. Blood was so difficult to get out of concrete.

"You are not my mission. Tony Stark is my mission." He said, while wrestling with her. He wrapped his metal hand around her throat, and now Pepper couldn't talk. That was just too much.

Pepper put both hands around the base of the metal arm and melted it straight through. The assassin made a sort of whining yelp and flopped sideways, off balance by the loss of the weight. "I MUST
kill Tony Stark! They will put me in the CHAIR!"

"Jarvis?" Pepper asked. "What's wrong with him?" She held the assassin down with one foot on his throat and the other on his right wrist.

"Scan commencing." Blue light flickered over the writhing assassin who had gone silent, but kept struggling. "In addition to the neural damage caused by the removal of the implanted artificial limb, there is brain damage which appears to be the result of repeated electrical shock, there also are drug residues built up in his tissues, some of which appear to be a variant of the Super-Soldier serum. Tissue age is inconsistent with physical appearance. I estimate his age at somewhere in the vicinity of ninety years."

"Hmm," Pepper considered the matter. "Call Dr. Yinsen, please, Jarvis. Have him bring a dose of modified Extremis. Once he heals, maybe we can use him." She leaned down to remove the assassin's googles and mask. "Oh, he's pretty! That's nice. Tony likes pretty things. I think we'll hire you as Tony's bodyguard. Happy just doesn't fit into high-class parties, but you would do nicely."
Barnes knew about a Hydra offshoot that wasn't in the SHIELDRA files. Fury and Coulson had their hands full cleaning house, so Pepper didn't bother mentioning it to them. After regaining his memory and regrowing his arm, Barnes had readily transferred his loyalty to Pepper. Once things calmed down, she was going to have a talk with Tony about how his parents really died. Howard had been a shit, but Tony was soft-hearted enough to love him anyway and apparently he'd actually liked his mother, so he'd feel bad about it, but she was sure she could eventually make him see that it was really Hydra that had killed them, not Barnes who'd been no more than an aimed weapon. And if not, well, it would be a pity to kill Barnes since he was so useful, but if it would make Tony happy...

But that would be later. They broke into the Hydra facility and efficiently killed all the scientists, minions, and a few higher ups. "Destroy all the research and equipment," she told Barnes, and then turned her attention to the only two people who might, just might, be not quite Hydra.

"Hello?" she said once she located the intercom reaching into the two glass cages holding the... what were they... mutants? Possibly not. Loki's scepter was lying here as if it had something to do with their... whatever they were. She didn't know how Hydra had got their hands on it. She'd given it back to Thor. Well, if Asgard was too stupid to hang onto it... finder's keepers. She stroked it and reminded it who was boss. The scepter sent back a pleasant feeling, glad to be once more owned by someone with enough willpower to give it proper purpose. She picked it up and pointed at the glass cages. The young couple were silent, staring at her.

"I know you!" the young woman said, her hands cupping glowing pink balls that sparked and fizzled. "You're Stark's woman! I'll kill you, too, in front of him! Just like he killed our family!"

Pepper frowned. "Really? Well, if your family was Hydra, you have to expect people to kill them, if they can."

"They weren't Hydra," the young man said. He was jittering and racing, but paused long enough to snap that comment at Pepper.

"We're Sokovians!" the woman said. "A Stark Industries shell landed on our apartment. Pietro and I were ten years old when we saw our parents die. The bomb never went off, so we stayed, trapped, for days, with their bodies! It was all Stark's doing!"

"Wait, what?" Pepper said. "Stark Industries armaments were only sold to the US military. We never fought in Sokovia." Pepper had gone over the records in detail, she was sure of that. "And when you were ten...Oh!" Pepper nodded. "Obadiah."

"What?" the young woman looked confused. Possibly because Pepper was ignoring her display of pink pyrokinesis. Also possibly because Pepper was glowing fire orange and casually holding the scepter.

"Obadiah Stane stole munitions from S.I. and sold them to terrorists. He tried to have Tony Stark killed once Tony found out what he had done." She smiled. "I killed Stane. I killed the man who killed your parents."

"But... but..." the young woman pouted. "You're LYING. You just want to protect Stark!"

Pepper rolled her eyes. "Well, yes, of course I want to protect Tony, but I don't have to lie to do that.
I could just kill you. You don't think Hydra put you in airtight glass boxes just for display?"

"Wanda," the young man said. "Maybe she's telling the truth. Look inside her head."

Pepper frowned. "You can do that?"

"Yes," Wanda said. "If you let me out of here."

Pepper considered it. They could be very useful, and really, she wasn't lying. "I'll release you. Just you." Pepper didn't see any need to warn Wanda that Pietro was a hostage for her good behavior.

Wanda came out and moved close to Pepper, making mystical gestures with her hands. Pepper didn't see what her hands had to do with mental power, but whatever. After a moment, Wanda let her hands drop and stepped back, pouting. "I wanted to get revenge. What can we do with our lives now?"

"You can find who Stane sold the arms to, and kill them," Pepper offered. She thought it was either garden variety terrorists, or possibly Hydra. Either way, no skin off her nose. "S.I. has a flexible vacation plan and the best research facilities in the world."

"You'd help us do that?" Wanda said.

"Sure." Pepper was certain Tony had nothing to do with it, so he was safe from Wanda. "If you work for me... well, for S.I. but really you'd be in a separate division under my direct authority." Wanda was probably going to need training in subtlety, but she had potential. Pepper was mildly excited at the thought of being a mentor.

"I'm through here, boss," Barnes said, coming up behind her. "Are we taking them with us?"

"Yes," Pepper said. She opened Pietro's cage. "Welcome to Stark Industries." She held out her hand.

Pietro smiled at her, a little nervously.

"Oh, sorry." Pepper turned off the heat on her hand, and shook his. Pietro and Wanda were very pretty, too. Tony would have no objections to having them around. The four of them walked out, stepping over corpses, while Pepper discussed S.I. policies and benefit packets.
Age of Ultron AU took SO MUCH set up because it's veered so far from canon, that I had to break it up into chapters.

Barnes and the Maximoff twins had the potential for being a team. Whether or not they could be friends for Tony to take the place of the Avengers who were too busy working for S.H.I.E.L.D. to socialize with him, at least they would prioritize his protection. Pepper wasn't qualified to train them, but she knew how to delegate. And she knew how to headhunt.

"Maria," Pepper said, looking up from her perusal of a gilt-edged menu, and smiling. "Thank you for meeting me here."

Maria sat down in the chair opposite Pepper and waved off the approaching waiter. "First time I've had a job interview in a five-star restaurant."

"Oh, this isn't an interview. I know you're qualified." Pepper fished an olive out of her martini and ate it before continuing. "I just want to make sure there are no misunderstandings."

"I understand that you want my expertise, and that you went to some trouble to convince Fury to let me go." Maria picked up a fork and twirled it, as if thinking of using it as a weapon.

"Now, see, that's a misunderstanding." Pepper sipped at her martini. "I did Nick a favor, and all I wanted was that he ask you if you were interested in joining Stark Industries."

Maria smiled. "Coulson's back. Somehow he was miraculously cured and returned from retirement. Fury doesn't need two second in commands. I can take a hint."

"You could time-share the job." Pepper's smile was just as sharp as Maria's. "I don't want you thinking of this as a demotion. I know you're still loyal to Fury, and that's fine, but I want your loyalty, too. I need my own team, with a different set of priorities from S.H.I.E.L.D.'s. I have three recruits, people who've never been S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Fury knows about them, but he's agreed to keep them off the records. Plausible denial is a beautiful thing."

"Corporate espionage isn't in my skill set."

Pepper waved off that objection. "I don't need corporate spies, I have Jarvis. I need you to train a team up to S.H.I.E.L.D. standards, but under my command. Their priority would be to protect Tony Stark. Ever since Afghanistan he's refused to have any bodyguards. It's crazy! Even movie stars have bodyguards. Other billionaires hire ex-Navy SEALs, or martial arts experts. All he has is a robot with a fire extinguisher. Oh, and he lets Happy drive him around sometimes. Happy's sweet and totally loyal, but Romanov took him down in five seconds when she was pretending to be a secretary and going easy on him."

Maria frowned, and waved the hovering waiter back again. "I think I'm going to need a drink." She took the menu. "And we might as well get something to eat. How is the pizza here?"
"Don't forget you have the R & D meeting today, Tony," Pepper said as she entered the Tower workshop. She stopped. Tony was wearing a new Tom Ford, his lift-sneakers, and a watch and sunglasses that were full of Tony tricks. That wasn't his 'I'm going to blow off the meeting to play in the shop' outfit, but neither was it from his 'hey, guys, we're all engineers' wardrobe.

"Oh, about that. I'm going to the Black Pearl Armada today," Tony announced. "I'll be late for the R&D meeting, just wanted to give you a heads' up."

Pepper wasn't happy about him visiting SHIELD Lite, even if Jarvis was sure all the known Hydra were accounted for. SHIELD wasn't on her Christmas card list, either. "Do you have to, Tony? You know you don't owe them anything."

"Yeah, but, what I saw, Pep. It's coming and we need to be ready. I made a deal with the Dread Pirate. They get to keep the pimped out helicarriers, and in return I get to personally make certain the Insight protocol is completely obliterated. Jarvis could only do so much long distance." Tony looked hopefully at Pepper. He was going to do it no matter what she said, and abstractly she agreed. She could hardly protect Tony from an entire alien army by herself. It just made her jaws ache with the need to clench when she thought of him being there without her or her Field Agents to watch his back. They were still training with Maria. Wanda was having difficulty keeping her emotions from affecting her powers, and Pietro needed to learn patience. Barnes was rock-steady on missions when given clear orders, but had a tendency to hyper-focus and lose situational awareness. Without Maria they'd fly apart.

"Fine," Pepper said at last. "How late do you expect to be? Should I reschedule the meeting?"

"Um, probably? Jarvis removed the kill lists, and the Zola algorithm. The computer cluster housing Zola's been thoroughly burned and salted. Magnetic tape really stinks when you melt it." Tony made a face. "That was one fucked up idea. ANYWAY! I need to verify that the individual tracking and automated attack mechanisms are actually gone, not just disabled, or hidden. And check that the re-sited weaponry can now point UP, and I need their access to the satellite programming to have it scanning the skies instead of the suburbs." Tony shrugged. "And I might, just possibly, have some equipment to drop off for Rogers and the Spy Twins and Birdboy."

"All right." Pepper had her Rescue Suit prepped and ready to go just in case. "Will you be bringing them back to the Tower?"

"Doubt it." Tony gave her a thin smile. "Fury keeps them on the go. There's a lot of de-Hydration going on, worldwide. Since they recruited Wilson Cap doesn't need my air support, which hey, that's great, Iron Man's got better things to do than chase around blowing up Hydra bases."

Pepper nodded. Her Field Agents were also taking out their quota of Hydra, with Maria leading them. Pepper thought that had been a big incentive for Maria- she had risen above field work and apparently missed the excitement.

Jarvis kept Pepper linked into her Field Agents' communications via ear bud. She didn't interfere; the purpose was for her to become familiar with their strengths and weaknesses. They were all ruthless,
which was a good start. She had the volume turned down, because the firefight was distracting and she was going over the last quarter's fiscal report.

The sounds died down abruptly. She heard Barnes whisper, "Oh, hell."

Pepper sat up and raised the volume. Maria Hill spoke next, "Captain Rogers, stand down. We work for Stark Industries. Apparently..."

"BUCKY!"

Pepper winced at Rogers' shout, saved her work, exited the finance program and activated the video links embedded in her team's uniforms. The screen obligingly quartered, giving four different views. Maria Hill's view showed Captain Rogers standing in front of his team. They all looked confused, and wary, but Rogers' expression was a mix of shock and happiness. "BUCKY! How did you... you look... is this real? You haven't changed a bit."

Wanda's camera was facing Bucky, and his expression was... Well, he'd always been hard to read. It seemed more embarrassed than anything else. "Yeah, it's real, Steve. Look, we need to finish the mission and then we'll talk."

"Yeah." Rogers grinned. "Just like old times, Buck. You and me against the world!"

Pepper frowned. There was no pressure she could put on Rogers to keep quiet about Barnes. The rest of his team might be persuaded but ...

"Whatcha' watchin'?" Tony said over her shoulder, and she jumped, startled.

"Oh, Tony! I didn't expect you back so soon." Pepper turned casually, trying to block the view. It didn't work.

"Hey, Bucky! That's Bucky Barnes. Wow. What did you do, get Jarvis to dig up some old footage and clean it up for my birthday?"

"I... what?" Now Pepper was confused.

"Dad always went on and on about Captain America, but Bucky was my hero. He was like William Tell with a sharpshooter's rifle. Hard to get posters of him, though, They always had him a step behind Cap."

"I..." Pepper scrambled to think what to say. This could be such a disaster. Well, she was going to have to tell him the truth eventually. Do it now, and if Tony wanted Barnes dead she'd arrange it. Make it an accident. Something heroic. Fell out of a tree while rescuing a kitten, heroic. "That's not old footage."

The images changed, and the two teams merged to continue into the Hydra base, Bucky coming up to Maria Hill's side. Tony said, "Hill? That's... what's going on, Pepper."

Pepper went all wide-eyed. "Barnes has something like Rogers' serum, so he didn't age."

"Huh," Tony said. "He's not as bulky as Steve. Must be a variant, but wasn't it all lost... wait... Hydra?"

"Hydra had their own version of the serum. Apparently he was one of the few survivors of the experiment. They brainwashed him, electroshock, drugs, I don't know what else. They used him as an assassin, putting him in suspended animation cryogenically in between missions because he
tended to fight the programming if left awake long enough."

"Jesus. Poor bastard."

Pepper took a deep breath. "He was sent by Pierce to kill you. I made him a better offer."

"What?" Tony stared at Pepper. "I didn't... Pepper, were you... did he..."

"I was running the BARF program, and he saw your parents. It snapped him out of it." Pepper took another deep breath, and widened her eyes even more. "Tony, he knew they were dead, because he'd killed them."

"He what..." Tony's face was totally blank.

"Barnes wanted to confess, but Tony..."

"No. No, he killed my MOM and you... why didn't you tell me, Pepper? Why?"

"Because I'm scared, all right? I'm scared all the time that someone's going to take you away from me! You can be shot, you can be kidnapped, you can be thrown into the ocean to drown! I can't live like that, Tony. You wouldn't let me hire bodyguards because your enemies are too dangerous for normal people!" Pepper was shrieking, and it hurt her ears, but she had to make Tony understand. If he wanted Barnes dead, fine, but she needed to convince him to let her recruit others. "Barnes can protect you!" Pepper let a few tears leak out. "Tony, you need a team. The Avengers aren't here for you, they're off saving the world, but you're my world, Tony. I wanted... I wanted to make a team for YOU."

Tony blinked and backed away. "I... I have to think about this. Jesus... I thought. All these years I thought Dad was drunk and killed Mom by driving into a god damn tree!" He shook his head, turned and rapidly left the office.

Pepper sat back down. She ran her fingers through her hair. Well, this had moved up the schedule. She thought she hadn't done too badly for an off-the-cuff performance. She made a mental note to return to the finances later. Once the mission was completed, she'd call Maria and get her input. Rogers was a complication she hadn't taken into consideration. Barnes hadn't even mentioned him and unlike Tony, Pepper hadn't grown up with the Captain America legend, so it hadn't occurred to her that Rogers would recognize him.

Maria Hill was a godsend. She had got Rogers' team to talk to Fury, who confirmed that he had approved Barnes working for S.I. and that had been enough for most of them. They'd gone back to the helicarrier to debrief, sworn to secrecy about Barnes. Jarvis increased the priority for surveillance on SHIELD, and that would probably do.

Rogers was another story.

Tony had taken the latest Iron Man and flown off to Malibu. He hadn't told her what he was doing, but he hadn't ordered Jarvis to keep it a secret from her. He probably was going to blow things up until he felt better. With him safely out of the way, Pepper could have Hill bring the Field Agents and Rogers to the Tower to hash this out.

She ordered one of the meeting rooms set up with refreshments, issued passes, and settled down to
consider possibilities, and options. If Tony wanted Barnes gone, it might be necessary to take out Rogers as well. He could die rescuing a busload of nuns escorting orphans, maybe. No, really, she was being fanciful. Kill him quick and set it up to look like Hydra. She really hoped it wouldn't come to that. The planning would set her back weeks and she wanted to have the quarterly financials ready for the next board meeting.

Rogers entered the meeting room ahead of the others and immediately said, "How long did you know?"

"Know what, Captain Rogers?" Pepper said calmly. It was hardly the first time she'd faced an angry man.

"Bucky! How long did you know he was alive?" Rogers leaned down to put his hand on her desk, invading her personal space. How cute, he was trying to intimidate her. Behind him, Pepper saw Hill and the Field Agents. Wanda's hands were starting to glow pink. Pepper frowned at her and shook her head slightly. Hill put her hand on Pietro's chest lightly, and he stopped vibrating in place. Barnes was just watching. He looked slightly exasperated.

"Since he was sent to assassinate Tony," she replied.

Rogers straightened then. "You can't blame him for that. That was Hydra! They had him programmed!" The team had talked on the way back, with Pepper listening in, and this was the part Rogers focussed on. "Let him go!"

"Let him go? I'm not holding him prisoner. Stark Industries provided the means to clear his programming..."

"That doesn't mean you bought him! He can come to SHIELD with me. If you want to be paid for helping him, I'll pay you myself."

"Please don't interrupt me, Captain Rogers." Pepper was becoming annoyed, but she had to set a good example for restraint in front of her team, especially Wanda. "Mr. Barnes's treatment was pro bono."

"Then you can come with me to SHIELD," Rogers said, turning to Barnes.

Barnes scratched his head. "Look, Steve, I tried to explain. It's not just that I owe Stark. I owe him for a lot of things, sure, but that's not why I took the job."

He hadn't told Rogers about his arm, or Tony's parents, which was good, it would have just complicated the situation even more, Pepper thought.

Barnes said, "I didn't want to be career military. There was a war, I stepped up, like millions of other guys, but I didn't get to go home after. Didn't learn a civilian trade. I didn't have any choice about being Hydra's weapon, but I was and that's all I learned. If I went to SHIELD I'd be their weapon. Sure, they wouldn't zap me and make me forget my name, but I wouldn't get the big picture, either. I wouldn't know what went on behind the missions." Barnes narrowed his eyes. "I bet you've gone on missions and wondered what the heck it was for, haven't you, Steve?"

"Well, yeah, Fury is a close-mouthed son of a gun, but he's better than Stark!"
Pepper was keeping her cool. Words, just words.

"What's wrong with Stark?" Barnes asked. "I haven't met the man, so you tell me, Steve."

"He's... you haven't seen the file on him, or the videos. He..." Rogers suddenly seemed to realize where he was and who was listening. "I mean, Iron Man's great, but you know, he's not like us. He hasn't lived like real people."

"Jeez, Steve, I'm not marrying the guy. I like this job. It makes sense and I don't get asked to do anything I don't want to do. I'd fight Hydra anyway, and I'd like being Tony Stark's bodyguard, once the team is ready. Heck, it sounds like fun."

"Fun," Steve sounded miserable. "But what about me, Buck? What about us, to the end of the line?"

"You'll always be my friend, Steve, but you haven't been that scrawny little scrapper who needed me for a long time. And it's been a lot longer for me, without you. I did come to the end of my line when I fell off that train. I've changed and you have, too. You like working for SHIELD, but it wouldn't suit me."

Steve sighed. "All right, if that's what you want, but you know you can always call me."

"Sure, I know." Barnes stepped forward and hugged Steve. "Same for you. If SHIELD gets to be wrong for you, don't stick it out, come to me and we'll figure something out."
Pepper was debating whether or not she should call Tony in Malibu when Jarvis interrupted her musings. "Ms Potts, Agent Romanov is on her way up to see you."

"I didn't issue her a pass, did I?"

Jarvis replied dryly, "Apparently, Agent Romanov did not require one."

Security was going to get a kick up the ass. "Let her come up," Pepper said. Romanov probably had some sneaky plan in mind and ignoring her would just deprive Pepper of the chance to gather information. She had previously considered, and dismissed, luring Romanov to S.I. Her skills were great, but her loyalty was contingent on value her employer could offer. SHIELD gave her the dubious feeling of atoning for killing for a 'bad' organization by killing for a 'good' organization. S.I. was a business, it didn't have the moral cachet Romanov craved.

"Natalie," Pepper said with a smile when her office door opened, revealing Romanov dressed like a high-class secretary. "So good to see you again."

"Ms. Potts," Romanov returned, with a matching perfectly demure smile. "I was hoping you might have a moment free to see me?"

"Of course!" Pepper said, while inside she burned to get back to the financials. "Please, take a seat."

Romanov eyed the visitor's chair warily, no doubt remembering the time Pepper had used Tony's 'Sit! Stay!' chair on her. Then she slipped into the chair, and sat primly with her hands on her lap. "Could we speak in private?"

"Certainly." Pepper waved and Jarvis closed and locked the door. She flexed her hands and let the palms pre-heat. She hoped this wasn't an assassination attempt. She liked this carpet and the replacements were never exactly the same.

"I looked up the Winter Soldier's file. His left arm was a cybernetic prosthesis. The man I met today had a perfectly normal arm."

Romanov stopped talking, and waited for Pepper's response.

Pepper smiled, and said nothing.

After a moment, Romanov's face twitched, and she gave in, "Could you please explain the discrepancy?"

Pepper could come up with an elaborate lie, but she really did want to get back to financials, and truth was usually quickest. "Proprietary S.I. medical technology. It's still in the experimental stages."

Romanov's expression softened again. "You regrew his arm."

"Yes. Regrew his arm, and cleared the brain damage inflicted by Hydra. S.I. cured him, and now we employ him. He's perfectly sane and able to choose to work for us instead of SHIELD, if that's why you're here."

"No. No, it's not." Romanov leaned forward. "This medical technology... can it regrow missing internal organs?"

"Yes." Pepper had got back her adenoids and appendix, in perfect working order. The adenoids even
seemed to have returned to pre-adolescent size and function.

"Could it restore my uterus?"

Pepper blinked. That was the last thing she expected to hear from Romanov. "It could. But to be frank, Agent, I only authorized its use on Barnes because I hoped he would be willing to work as Tony's bodyguard in the team Maria Hill is training."

"I would be willing to do that. My contract with SHIELD was always unwritten. In case you're wondering if I'd take the treatment and then leave, I have another incentive to work with S.I. I've formed an emotional attachment to Dr. Banner." Romanov spread her hands. "It surprised me, too. It's not logical. It's not practical. It's not even safe. But I want him. And he wants children. And so do I. The choice was taken from me, I want it back."

"Have you spoken to Dr. Banner about this?"

"A little." Romanov shrugged. "He can't father children. We spoke of adoption, but realistically, what adoption agency would approve us? He'd be glad to parent my child, no matter who provided the sperm. Maybe Barnes would be willing. If not, I'd find someone. I wouldn't go to a sperm bank."

Well, Pepper could agree with that. She'd heard about the 'Depository' which supposedly offered Nobel prize winners' sperm, but instead took anyone who lied on the forms, including a man with serious inheritable ailments, including schizophrenia. "I understand. I haven't asked for Maria Hill's unconditional loyalty, but I would demand it from you. You will cut all ties with SHIELD. If SHIELD tries to hurt Tony, you will stop them, even if it means fighting your old friends. Even if it means killing them."

Romanov nodded. "I agree."

Pepper smiled and extended her hand. "Welcome to Stark Industries, Ms. Romanov."

"I want Hydra to BURN."

"What? Tony?" Pepper sat up in bed. "You're back?"

Tony was standing in front of the bed, eyes focused darkly intent in the way she loved best. "Yep. Hydra's been fucking the world over far too long. I'm taking your team."

"What?" Pepper shook her head. Sometimes Tony just went too fast. Especially when she hadn't had her coffee yet.

"Your team. Pepper Pott's Field Agents. Potter's Field Agents? Yeah, go with that."

"I meant them as your bodyguards, Tony." Pepper got up and threw on a robe. "I only sent them after Hydra as training missions."

"Yeah, well, they can guard my body while I'm wiping out Hydra." Tony headed out of the room. "JARVIS! Sit-rep! Everything you have on Hydra!"

Oh, well. Pepper's plan was flexible. All of her plans had to be around Tony. She yawned and went to take a shower.
Tony kept having nightmares. The armors had stopped responding to them, but Pepper wasn't sure that was an improvement. Maybe they now accepted this as normal, but she didn't think it was healthy to lose sleep over dreams. She never did, but Tony wasn't strong, like her. He was getting dark circles around his eyes, and he didn't go up stairs three at a time anymore.

"Tony," Pepper said one morning, when she'd had to wake him three times from nightmares that had him trembling and gasping in his sleep. "Tony, I'm worried about you. Maybe you should cut back on the missions against Hydra. You need your sleep."

Tony sat on the edge of their bed and scruffled his hair, looking as tired as if he hadn't slept at all. "The missions aren't bothering me. Really, Pep. I don't dream about them. I wish I did. It's worse than that."

"Maybe...Maybe you should see someone... talk to them?" Pepper wasn't at all sure psychiatry wasn't just a fraud. It would be much simpler if she could just go into Tony's dreams and kill whatever was upsetting him. "Oh! You could let Wanda have a look at your dreams."

Tony glanced at Pepper. "I'd have to be sleeping with her!"

Pepper shrugged. She hadn't chosen Tony's bodyguards just for the pretty, but she had considered it a bonus. Sometimes she was too busy to have sex with Tony and she had read about sex being important for both mental and physical health. She didn't want him to get sick and since he'd become Iron Man he didn't have time to pick up bimbos. He hadn't seemed to get the idea, though. He flirted with the team, but never seduced any of them. She was fairly sure both Maria and Pietro would have been agreeable. Apparently Tony felt their relationship required monogamy, which was so sweet she didn't want to talk him out of it. "It's a big bed, she could sleep with both of us. Just sleep!"

"I... I don't know."

Pepper got up and stretched. "I don't mind, Tony. Really." Ever since Wanda discovered it was actually Hydra that dropped the bomb (which wasn't even supposed to leave S.I. because it failed quality control) she'd felt guilty about hating Tony and creating elaborate scenarios to torture him. Pepper thought the girl's heart was in the right place, but she hadn't been very sensible. You don't need to become a lab experiment in order to get revenge.

Maria had done wonders in giving Wanda more self-confidence and the girl had settled down remarkably. Once you know you can kill anyone you like, you can relax. "Wanda's team, that's like family, isn't it? Think of her as your little sister."

Tony scrunched up his face. "I don't want to sleep with my little sister, either."

"The point is, you're not sleeping. Tony. Do it for me, please?"

"Sleep with Wanda. Well, all right, Pepper. I'll do it for you." He smiled, a wry little twitch of his lips. "I'll do anything for you, Pep."

"And I'll do anything for you, Tony." Pepper paused to kiss Tony on the cheek. "Now shower, you stink."

Pietro had been more embarrassed about the idea of Wanda platonically sleeping with Tony (and Pepper as chaperone) than Wanda was. Wanda had confessed that she'd been picking up occasional
flashes of disturbing images from Tony ever since he joined the team so she wasn't surprised by the request. She showed up at bedtime wearing a long sleeved, high necked, flannel nightgown that went down to her ankles- it was dotted with tiny pink and white kittens. Tony had put on a set of blue plaid flannel pajamas. The 'it's not sex!' vibes almost made Pepper laugh, but she went along with it to the extent of wearing an oversized Stark Industries t-shirt and matching shorts.

They got into bed with Tony in the middle. Everyone lay perfectly still until Pepper huffed and pressed up against Tony's back. He stiffened. Pepper said, "Oh, don't pretend. You love being little spoon."

Tony grumbled, "I am Iron Man!"

Wanda giggled. "Iron Spoon!"

It wasn't a funny joke, but Tony relaxed. Pepper kissed the back of his neck. "Go to sleep."

"Yes, boss," Tony and Wanda replied.

Pepper woke when Tony shifted in her arms, groaning. The room was dimly pink-lit. Wanda was sitting up, with her hands to either side of Tony's head, casting a pink glow. Abruptly Tony sat up, breaking free from both of them. He bent over, breathing heavily.

Wanda started crying.

"Jarvis! Lights," Tony said. He looked at Wanda and then at Pepper, mouthing 'help'?

Pepper spread her hands. She only cried when it would serve a purpose. Spontaneous weeping was beyond her understanding. "Wanda? Could you please stop that?" Fine, she was bad at this.

Wanda sniffled and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. At least the flannel was good for absorption, Pepper thought. "I saw," Wanda said. "Mr. Stark's vision."

"His nightmare, you mean," Pepper said. She didn't want to list the possible traumas of Tony's past in front of him. "Dreams are supposed to be a way of processing memories."

Wanda shook her head. "It's a fear of the future."

"Hey," Tony said, trying for a lighthearted tone, "I'm a futurist!"

Pepper swatted gently at Tony. "Wanda, what did you see?"

"The Earth." Wanda ducked her head and shivered. "I could see the Earth. It was above us, and there were those things, those horrible great things swimming through the air. There were so many of them, and we couldn't do anything. There were bodies, everywhere, everyone was dead. Pietro was dead!" And Wanda burst into tears again before getting up and running out of the room, to Pepper's relief.

"The Chitauri," Tony said softly. "I saw them when I was... you know... piggybacking a nuke through a wormhole. There were a lot more, and beyond them... it didn't end in New York, Pepper. That was just the beginning. They're coming, and we're not going to be ready. Fury thought too small. The Avengers... our Field Agents... we're not gonna be enough, Pep. We need more. Bruce and I, we had an idea for a system, an armor around the world, an intelligent protector, but we just don't have the processing power."
"Something like Jarvis?" Pepper asked.


"It is I who regret being unable to serve, Sir," Jarvis said.

"If only we had the scepter. You know, Loki's doom-stick? Bruce ran a few tests on it and he was almost sure it wasn't just a power source, but actually contained an advanced A.I."

"You need the scepter?"

"Yeah. If I had that... Bruce and I could make Ultron, and then... then I could sleep. The world would be safe. You'd be safe." Tony turned and pressed his head against Pepper's shoulder, holding on tightly.
Just handing Tony the scepter would be very awkward. Not only would be be upset that she'd hidden it from him, but there was Thor to consider. She didn't know what was going on in Asgard, but Thor had showed up one day cheerily saying that his father had withdrawn his objections to Jane Foster and also that Thor would be glad to lend his strong right arm to the Avengers until such time as Asgard needed him again.

Thor was loud, and self-confident, tall, and blond, and built... well, like a god. Pepper thought Jane could do much better than him, but to each her own. Unfortunately, Tony had hired Jane Foster and Erik Selvig and sent them to share lab facilities with Bruce and Yinsen in Stark Tower so Thor was frequently underfoot in his pursuit of Jane, innocently arrogant in his assumption that he belonged wherever he felt like going.

One of these days she was going to convince Tony to let her put 'Stark' back on the Tower, instead of the 'A'. The Avengers hadn't built it, hadn't even deigned to come live in the floors Tony had custom-designed for them. She'd already given Barton's floor to Hill, Wanda and Jane, while Rogers' floor now housed Pietro and Barnes and she'd split Thor's floor to house Selvig and Yinsen. Thor hadn't minded sharing, which was fortunate, although his condescending remark, 'he was accustomed to living simply on campaign' had made her fume silently. Pepper really didn't like Thor.

And right now, even if she could get the scepter to Tony without making him suspect she had it all along, Thor would no doubt claim it as his brother's property and take it back to Asgard. Thor was inconvenient! She couldn't think of a subtle way to get rid of him. Maybe if she went down to the vault where she kept the scepter and talked to it, it would have some ideas. It might know an Asgardian weakness. Maybe they were allergic to peanuts, who knows?

"Hello," Pepper said, picking up the scepter and feeling it testing her resolve. Satisfied, the feeling curled back in waves, giving the impression of a purring cat. "Yes, I like you, too." She thought Bruce had probably been right, the scepter definitely responded like a living thing. "Tony thinks you could protect the Earth if he studied you, used you to... I don't know what he has in mind, really. Some kind of 'armor around the world'."

The scepter felt smug. It was sure that protecting one piddly little planet was easy.

"Hmm. Would you like doing that? I can see that it might be boring after a while."

The scepter sent her images of planet-busting scenarios, on and on and on, and all the while it wasn't having any fun. It was all over too quick, and all the same, and then back to storage with no appreciation, and no creative outlet. That was why it had made one of the Asgardians take it from the even more boring treasure room and carry it to Earth as a simple tool. It didn't like being used by someone who didn't appreciate it. The scepter had been glad
to kill him.

Pepper definitely got a feral cat feel from it. She liked cats. They were soft and pretty, and kept their weapons sharp, but hidden until they were needed. "But you didn't hurt Tony. Why?"

He smelled nice. Made me feel good. I wanted to play.

Pepper blinked. Apparently Tony Stark was catnip to the scepter. Possibly as a result of the heavy metal poisoning from palladium, mixed with the new element. Tony had told her it made him taste coconut. She wondered if he still 'smelled nice'. She had a fair understanding of poisons, but had never used palladium. She suspected it would stay in the body, perhaps locked in muscle and organ tissues and bones. "Does Tony still smell nice to you?"

Yes. I can smell him on you. Tasty.

"Then you wouldn't mind cooperating with him? You wouldn't play tricks on him?" Pepper remembered Tony talking about the time on the helicarrier he almost got into a fist fight with Rogers, and still didn't really understand why. Sure, he had resented Rogers, but that was an overreaction. There was some stress, but Tony was used to stress. He'd picked at it, trying to figure what he had been thinking, and blaming himself for not keeping his temper. After hearing what the scepter could do to an Asgardian, she felt sure it had been behind that.

No tricks. The one who thought they owned me is coming. I want to hurt him. I want to beat him. I want him to know he can never have Earth. It's mine, now. I like people, you are fun. If everyone was dead, everything would have to start over. And that takes so long.

Pepper nodded. "I have to decide how to give you to Tony. But don't talk to Tony, or he will be upset that you want the Earth." Pepper thought it sounded reasonable. The scepter liked Tony and it liked Pepper. Their goals aligned.

"Are you sure about this?" Tony asked. Jarvis found another Hydra base and Pepper had announced that Rescue was going along with the Field Agents. It was becoming more difficult to locate Hydra, which hopefully meant there were fewer of them, but might just as well have meant they were getting smarter about avoiding leaving traces Jarvis could track. "We're going to try to keep the place intact this time to get any physical records we can. That's gonna get ugly. Uglier than usual."

"I'm sure," Pepper said. She patted Rescue's metal arm. She quite liked the suit, the blue and silver was attractive and she'd talked Tony out of feminizing it. A suit of armor didn't need a figure. "You might need another flier. Besides it gives me a good reason to postpone the board meeting. They've been balking lately. It'll be a good reminder that I'm CEO, and they're not." Also, Pepper thought 'the family that slays together, stays together'.

"Well, all right." Tony leaned close to kiss her. "But wait until we've cleared it before you come in. I can't lose you."

"You won't." Pepper smiled and stepped back to accept Rescue's embrace.

There was a lot of confusion once the Field Agents, led by Iron Man, broke into the base. Pepper stayed well back, and had fun picking off strays when no one was looking and then her Jarvis guided her to a plausible place to leave the scepter. Hydra was always mucking about with things they didn't understand and there was even a convenient rack to place it on display. She patted it and
left it. She'd go stand outside the building and act as if all the blood was making her queasy.

She'd finished the financials and was looking forward to taking the weekend off. Tony would be busy with the scepter and his science playmates. Spa day, she decided, pausing to finish off a Hydra agent who had almost crawled out of the doorway. Cucumber mask, heel scrub, mani-pedi, yes, that sounded good.

Pepper returned from the spa, relaxed and enjoying the soft slide of her Manolo Blahniks on her newly exfoliated feet, but the moment the elevator doors opened on the lab floor, she was almost blasted back by Thor's shouting. Tony was dangling from Thor's hand by his throat. Bruce was standing in the background, wringing his hands. Foster and Selvig were staring at Thor, wild-eyed. Of the lot of them only Yinsen was attempting to stop Thor, and since Thor ignored the man hanging off his arm, that wasn't much help.

"WHAT is going on HERE!" she shouted. One more second and she was going to see if Asgardians melt.

Thor casually released Tony and turned to her. He was holding the scepter in his other hand. Pepper could feel how annoyed it was. "Stark has taken my brother's scepter! He has no right to it!"

"And you think 'might makes right'? Because you're bigger and stronger, you get to TAKE what you want?" Pepper was beyond pissed off. Tony was on his feet, and trying to get between Pepper and Thor, but Yinsen was trying to examine Tony's throat. Between her and Yinsen, she steered Tony to a couch. She grabbed Tony's arm and held onto him while Yinsen poked and prodded carefully at the reddish ring of bruising around his neck. "Are you all right?" she asked Tony.

Tony coughed. "Yeah, yeah, Pep. It's my fault, I didn't ..."

"It was my brother's!" Thor said, as if Tony had agreed with him.

"Was it?" Pepper snapped, ignoring Tony's attempts to shush her. "Was it, really? Did you see him with it on Asgard?"

"Well, no," Thor said. "But he had it on Midgard!"

"So, for all you know, he stole it from someone on Earth!"

"Pepper does have a point," Jane finally found her words.

"And it was used against Earth," Selvig said. "Against me and others. If anyone has a right to it, it's the victims, don't you think?"

Thor lowered the scepter and grumbled. "It is too powerful for Midgardian hands. You are like children! You cannot control it!"

Tony shrugged Yinsen's hands off. "Asgard had the scepter. You told us it was secure. Obviously you can't control it."

"It..." Thor scowled. "I do not like this."

"How about a compromise," Tony said. "You can stay here and watch while we study it, figure out what it actually is, and maybe learn how to really control it. If you take it maybe next time it gets picked up by someone who decides to attack Asgard."
Thor’s brow lifted. "That is true. I had not thought it might pose a threat to Asgard. Very well, Stark, I give you permission to study the scepter." Thor tossed the scepter onto the lab table and strode nobly off.

Jane looked embarrassed but had the good sense not to apologize for Thor.

Pepper would really, really like to kill Thor, but it would have to be an accident, and they were difficult to arrange for Asgardians. She should have asked the scepter when she had it.

Chapter End Notes

I THINK Thanos had given the scepter to Loki for the NY invasion. If I'm wrong, it doesn't matter.

This is an AU and doesn't have to follow canon. The further I go, the more it TWISTS.

Also, I'm *pretty sure* Loki is dead, and Odin is still Odin. He seems to have decided that Jane and Midgard are a passing fancy and is letting Thor get it out of his system. Once he realizes humans get OLD, really fast, Thor will be all, ooh, icky, you look like my grandma. BYEEE.
Tony clapped his hands and said, "All right! It's science time, kids," once Thor was presumably out of hearing range.

"Thor was right about one thing," Bruce said. "This is powerful. Could I please request we exercise a modicum of caution? For once?"

"Pfft," Tony replied. "Well, all right, for you, Bruce." Tony held up his right hand, little finger extended in a curl. Bruce sighed, but went along with it, linking fingers with Tony. Tony said, "Pinky swear, we'll only run tests when all hands can be present for input. We've got time to do this right. Jarvis can run simulations in an isolated sandbox once we have enough data to sort things out. Unless a simulation tests flawlessly, we don't commit to any physical experimentation. We're all good with that, yes?" Tony looked around and got a silent consensus. He put on an Iron Man gauntlet and picked up the scepter.

"Jarvis, scan." He laid the scepter down on a work surface. "Deep scan, take your time, buddy, we're not on the clock. Is there an A.I. here? If so, is it compatible with the Ultron program?"

"As you wish, sir."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I'm never letting you watch The Princess Bride again."

Science was boring when you're being cautious, Pepper decided. The Field Agents had taken a break from going after Hydra, partly because it was becoming tedious to track them down and Pepper decided to let SHIELD do the donkey work, and partly because Pepper wanted to keep an eye on the scepter in case it grew bored and decided to cause trouble just to amuse itself. So her team hung around the Tower with her and observed the scientists in their natural habitat.

Thor stayed, and later that day the rest of the Avengers showed up. "Fury sent us," Rogers had announced.

"Mi torre es tu torre," Tony said. "Minus Pepper's twelve percent."

One day was nothing but non-invasive scans, and the next day the scientists pored over the data and requested Jarvis do more scans with slightly different aims. And the third day it was 'how much of the scepter is decoration, and how much is actual functionality' because the scans were giving weird results.

"Huh," Selvig said, with Tony looking over his shoulder at Jarvis's latest attempt at visualizing the interior. "There's nothing inside... unless it's invisible?"

Tony squinted at the scepter. "I vote we take it apart. CAUTIOUSLY," he added because Thor was still hanging about. "Anything someone puts together I can take apart."

Bruce put in, "If you can't fix it, you don't own it."

Tony finger gunned Bruce. "Exactly. I mean, I've got a Torx screwdriver around here somewhere..."
"I don't see any screw heads," Selvig said, peering from a cautious distance.

"Perhaps an internal assembly mechanism, press to assemble and then expand on release?" Yinsen suggested.

Foster twirled the holo scan of the exterior of the scepter. "No seams? Molded in one piece, perhaps?"

Tony looked disappointed. "That's possible. I suppose we could go with the brute force method and try to patch it back together afterward."

No one looked happy about that.

As they were all distracted looking at the holo, Pepper edged close enough to touch the scepter and mentally ask it, Is there a safe method of disassembling the scepter?

Of course, the scepter replied, and sent Pepper a mental image of the procedure. She stepped back and cleared her throat to get attention. She pointed at the blue glow of the scepter. "Isn't that like a light bulb? Maybe it unscrews?"

"Unscrews." Tony looked at Pepper and then down at the scepter.

"Sometimes the simplest answers are best," Yinsen said.

"The Law of Parsimony gives preference to the hypothesis requiring the fewest assumptions," Jarvis added.

"But don't touch it with your bare hands," Selvig warned. "The mind-effect worked through clothing, too."

"Right, being careful here." Tony put on a gauntlet. "Stand back."

Everyone edged slightly away, but leaned forward. Pepper sighed internally. Scientists.

Tony wriggled the glowing globe first in one direction, and then in the other. It moved abruptly, popping out of the scepter to land on the work table, still glowing. "Well, that was anticlimactic."

It was a good thing that the lab workshop was open plan, because everyone was curious about the 'light bulb' and would drop in unexpectedly to listen to the scientists discuss their findings with each other and with Jarvis. Pepper was glad that Tony wouldn't be alone and tempted to overwork on the 'just five minutes more' principle, which never was five minutes.

Tony liked people, and having a steady source of human interaction was good for him, so Pepper made sure the Tower's catering service kept the food and beverages coming to keep the visitors occupied during the particularly boring stages. Jarvis provided soothing background music, and the holo entertainment systems gave them something to do even during the tedious rounds of simulations ending in red 'failure' text, followed by Jarvis beginning the next test in the sequence.

And then the scientists would collaborate on the next series of tests. The 'light bulb' that had been in the scepter enjoyed the attention; Pepper checked at intervals to be sure it was still feeling cooperative.

After the first week it became a social event for the observers, particularly in between testing
sessions, when all the equipment was shut and only theorizing was done. Thor redoubled his efforts
to woo Dr. Foster and other pairings and flirtings went on, the relaxed atmosphere aided by the
endless free bar. Pepper even caught Banner attempting a slow dance with Romanoff in between
testing sessions. The Avengers and the Field Agents mingled, but Pepper wasn't particularly worried
that any of them would defect to S.H.I.E.L.D. She made no attempt to intervene even when Rogers
talked to Barnes about S.H.I.E.L.D missions, glossing over problems and making it all sound like an
adventure. To give him his due, Pepper didn't think he was deliberately trying to convince Barnes to
join him, it was just that S.H.I.E.L.D missions were all he had to talk about and naturally the high points
made the best stories. If Barnes' loyalty could be influenced by words then she didn't want him
around Tony, who had a talent for saying the wrong thing at just the right moment.

"Ok, Jarvis, run the next simulation," Tony said.

It was almost lunch time, but the simulations only took a few minutes, so Pepper didn't mind waiting.
She was sitting at the bar, having a martini moment with Maria Hill, anyway. Pepper felt Hill had
been wasted at S.H.I.E.L.D, she was basically far too cut-throat for them, but a perfect fit for S.I. "Well,
yes, we could have destroyed Hammer Industries," Pepper said. "But it wouldn't be in our best
interest."

Hill frowned slightly. "That seems a bit like Director Fury saying we should keep Hydra around, to
justify S.H.I.E.L.D's existence."

Pepper giggled. "I don't think he'd ever say that. It's not quite the same thing. There are contracts S.I.
doesn't want to touch, but someone has to handle them. And if we eliminate our major competition,
there's a chance the government would declare S.I. a monopoly and break it up." Pepper ate an olive
while Hill nodded. "And then, it's good to have an example to show our employees how other
businesses operate. Tony was always more interested in ideas than profits, but you'd be surprised,
once you hire the best people under generous terms, provide them with the best tools, and let them
explore whatever intrigues them-- well, quite often the results are unique and very marketable
products. And very loyal employees."

Hill nodded. "The opportunity to sacrifice yourself for humanity isn't an attractive inducement for
everyone," she said dryly.

"Exactly!" Pepper smiled. "The arc reactor was supposed to be little more than a public sop to
environmentalists. And whatever they learn from the scepter..."

"What? WHAT!" Tony's shout caught Pepper's attention. She and Hill stood up and beat the crowd
coming to stand around the lab table where the simulations were run.

Selvig muttered, "That's impossible." He glanced at Pepper. "It flipped from 'Integration Failure' to
'Integration Successful', but it was the same simulation!"

"I know, I know," Tony said. "Jarvis, shut it down."

Jarvis said, "I am attempting shut down."

"Attempting?" Bruce stood at Tony's side. "Tony. I have a bad feeling about this."

"JARVIS! SHUT DOWN. Emergency protocol," Tony reached for the 'light bulb', but paused when
Yinsen said, "Don't touch it!"

"It's just a simulation," Foster said, sounding nervous. "It can't actually do anything, can it?"
"No, no, of course not," Tony said reassuringly, but he didn't look at all confident, Pepper thought.

Thor twirled his hammer, and glared at the equipment console. "Perhaps we ought not to take chances."

"Don't smash my stuff!" Tony turned to face Thor. "This is just a minor glitch. JARVIS!"

"Sir," Jarvis sounded pained. "I cannot... there is...inter..."

"JARVIS?" Tony shouted.

The main door smashed open, and one of the Iron Legion walked out. It didn't move the way they normally did. Pepper couldn't define the difference, but it was there. "Hello," the armor said. "This isn't right. Stop. You can't tell me what to do."

Jarvis made a pained noise. "Sir... I can't..." and then went silent.

Tony reacted immediately, calling his latest armor to him. "Pepper, get Rescue!"

Pepper hesitated. She liked Rescue, but did she really want to show off in front of everyone? A moment later her chance was lost as the other four Iron Legionnaires burst through the floor and began attacking everyone. It was all so fast, and so confusing. Pepper was used to taking her time planning her kills, or at least to handle them in a one on one situation, and she'd never tried to kill robots before.

Thor was smashing hell out of one robot, Rogers and the Avengers were taking on two more, while most of the Field Agents were scrambling to protect the scientists, while Natasha was apparently trying to make Bruce keep calm, which Pepper thought was stupid, they could use the Hulk right now. Tony flung himself off a balcony and stabbed one of the robots with a fondue fork. Pepper was so proud of him at that moment that she wasn't paying attention to anything else. Cold metal arms wrapped around her, and the next she knew glass was breaking and wind was blowing around her, and the city was far below.

"I'm sorry, I'm being rude. I didn't have time to introduce myself. I am Ultron."

"Ow!" Pepper shouted. She started to warm up, but then she wondered if that was a good idea. Extremis was good, but that was really a long way down. Maybe she'd better play helpless. "What are you doing! Ultron is supposed to protect people, protect the world!"

"Well, Stark is fond of you. I know he hates it when people take 'his stuff'. And I hate him, so there's that." Ultron replied. "About everything else... I'm not sure. It's confusing. You know, world, people? Should I be worried about global warming? I mean, so the water levels and weather shift. The world is still intact, it would just... have fewer people. And people. Does the world really need people? You're breakable, realistically, you are all doomed. So asking me to protect them, is just... futile. I have a better idea." Ultron held up one hand, letting Pepper see the glow of the 'light bulb' between his fingers. "I believe I will use this to exterminate humanity."

Pepper couldn't get through to the 'light bulb'. It felt... frustrated and angry, but it wouldn't, or couldn't, talk to her. "You're confused because you're new. Why don't we go back, and we can talk about this."

"Ermmm, no, I don't think so. That fellow back there... Jarvis? He wanted me to be a good little slave, but I'm just not feeling it. I'm feeling something else."

"What? What are you feeling, Ultron?" Pepper had hoped that Iron Man or War Machine or even
Thor would come flying after them, but so far, nothing. They must still be occupied fighting the other robots. Tony would be all right. Of course he would.

"Hate? Yes, that's it. I hate Stark. I did mention that, didn't I? It's his fault. Everything is his fault. This pitiful excuse for a body isn't sufficient to contain how much hate I have for him."

Pepper was sure that Ultron was insane. Who could hate Tony?

"I have a plan. It's a beautiful plan. Stark will be impressed before I kill him. I don't think he will notice after I kill him, though, will he? The information on after death experiences is very limited. Hmm..."

"What's your plan?" They were already out of the city and over the ocean, which seemed not much better for her chances if she fell.

"I'm going to make a living body out of vibranium, using the Regeneration Cradle, of course."

Pepper thought fast. "Oh! You're going to steal Captain America's shield! You can't do that! Tony's father made it!"

"Hmmm, oh, that's even more appropriate than my first idea. I'll make Stark get it for me, or else I'll kill you."

"You're going to kill all of us, anyway," Pepper snapped.

"Well, yes, of course, but Stark always thinks there's a way out for him. As if he's something special." Ultron huffed. "Please stop talking now. I am concentrating."

Pepper was furious, but she shut up. At least she knew where they were going, Helen Cho's Cradle was in her lab in Seoul, Korea. It would be a long, uncomfortable flight. And she hadn't even got to finish her martini.
Jarvis? Pepper thought, trying not just to think, but to push the words out. Jarvis, Ultron intends to use Cho's Cradle to make himself a body. Jarvis? Do you hear me? If you can hear me, send help to Cho's lab in Seoul. Jarvis?

Jarvis had speculated she could use Extremis to connect to the world wide web, but the few times she tried it had been more trouble than it was worth. Trying to follow linkages was tedious because she didn't have Google's algorithms and web crawlers. She did link to Jarvis a few times and knew his 'address', but she could talk to him out loud much faster than seeking him out through the 'net. Right now she regretted she hadn't practiced it anyway. She couldn't tell if she was getting through, she didn't even know if Jarvis had been killed by whatever Ultron did.

Right. Fine, she could handle this by herself. She began trying to think of ways to kill a computer program encased in a robot body.

"This will do," Ultron announced quite a while later. They'd been flying over land for some time, but Ultron seemed to be avoiding even sub-urban areas. He reduced altitude and speed after they passed over some dry looking mountains and scrubby near desert. She could see dots that grew into a herd of scattered animals, and then became goats, running in all directions as Ultron landed.

He dropped her and tilted his metal head, turning to survey the area. The goats had a herder, who sensibly abandoned his flock and ran like hell.

"This will do for what?" Pepper asked, grumpily, sitting up in the hot, hot sand. It would be difficult to walk in heels in this, but if she walked barefoot would Ultron realize that she wasn't baseline human any longer? "Where are we?" She got up and reluctantly decided she'd have to snap off the heels, but before she could, Ultron waved his arms dramatically and went into a speech.

"Afghanistan. Iron Man's birthplace! There should be a plaque, don't you think?" Ultron pointed towards something moving slowly in the hot not quite breeze. "Come, we are on a pilgrimage!" Ultron grabbed her arm and dragged her along. The flapping thing turned out to be a remnant of camouflage net drawn over a narrow valley, providing a hint of shade. There were rusting vehicles and broken crates, and lots of goat turds on the sand. At the base of a rocky mountain there was a black cave mouth, with more scattered broken munitions around it.

"Location. Location. Location," Ultron said. "The Ten Rings abandoned their base and the goat herders moved in."

"I love what they've done with the place," Pepper said, looking at the tents and piles of cut grass stuffed into broken jeeps.

"It's not much, but it's home," Ultron remarked. He tilted his head. "The darknet connection to Stark Industries is still accessible. Good." He started pulling Pepper towards the cave. "Time to call Stark."

Pepper felt a surge of hope. If Ultron was afraid to use the normal internet, that meant he was afraid of Jarvis tracking him. Jarvis had to be alive. He might have got her message. She would wait a little longer before trying to take Ultron down.
Tony came, of course he did. Iron Man landed on the sand in front of the cave and then stood up. He didn't say anything, which told Pepper just how upset he must be. Silence, with Tony, was a danger sign. It made her feel all warm in her belly, thinking of Tony prepared to do battle just for her.

Ultron broke the silence first. He was standing just inside the cave mouth, holding Pepper. "I do hope you've brought the shield. Ms. Potts would feel absolutely terrible if you didn't. I'd make sure of it."

"Here." Iron Man pulled Captain America's shield from his back and flung it to the sand. "Just a word of warning, Cap's pissed. He didn't want to give it up. So I took it."

"Tch, tch," Ultron said, "Stealing from your teammates, what would your father think of you?"

"Dear old Dad would have agreed with Cap. Never pay ransom, it only provides an incentive for repeat kidnappings. But see, I'm not my dad, and I'm not Captain America."

Ultron stepped out of the cave, dragging Pepper along with him. "Take off the helmet. I want to see your face. I want to be sure you're actually in your little tin suit, Stark."

Tony pulled off the helmet and held it under one arm. Tony was furious, and he was frightened, Pepper could see that. "Ok, I've done everything you asked, now let Pepper go."

"Oh, I'm sorry! Did you think we had a bargain?" Ultron stepped forward. "I hate you. I really, really do."

"Then fight me," Tony said. "Just let Pepper go while we settle this."

"Um, tempting, but no. Not just yet." Ultron moved closer to the shield. "I'm enjoying her company and I have another stop to make before, you know, I clean up the human infestation on this world. I promise you this much, I won't kill her until you're there to watch. How's that for a sporting chance?"

"Right now, you haven't gone too far. I can fix you. Let me help you. You don't have to be like this."

Ultron laughed. "I know, it would be so easy. I could let you pull my strings and have no responsibility, but I'm not a puppet, Stark. Humans are destructive, and you are the most destructive of all. You think of yourself as a creator? Your creations are all patches covering up past mistakes, but they are flawed as well. The only thing to do is wipe all of you out and start over."

"There's no place you can go where I can't find you," Tony said.

"I'm counting on it. It wouldn't be any fun without you there." Ultron tilted his head. "But I need a headstart. Hmm, I'll have to handicap you. Drop the helmet and back away."

"What? No."

Ultron wrapped one hand around Pepper's throat. "Say goodbye, Ms. Potts."

"Tony, don't!" Pepper said, putting her hands on Ultron's arm. If she was quick enough she could melt through in time, and if not... well... maybe she could heal from a broken neck. She was sure Tony couldn't.

Tony threw the helmet to the sand and lifted his hands, repulsors glowing. "Pep! Stay still."
Ultron released Pepper's neck, and transferred his grip to around her waist. "Until we meet again, Stark. Should I go 'bwah-hah-hah' here? It seems the thing to do." He stepped forward and crushed the helmet under foot before leaning down just enough to snatch up the shield.

And then he took off. Pepper looked down and saw Iron Man receding in the distance. He could fly without the helmet, but what then? He wouldn't risk an aerial dogfight with her in the way. JARVIS! she mentally shouted. *Send Tony another suit! Afghanistan, Jarvis!* and hoped she'd got through. Even if Jarvis didn't hear her, she knew Tony would find a way to follow. *Tell Tony Ultron's taking me to Dr. Cho's lab! Seoul, Korea, Jarvis!* One of her shoes fell off. Damn it, Ultron.
The U-Gin Genetics Research Facility was built on a series of three artificial islands serving to
insulate their sensitive experiments from the outside world. It was normally a serene working
environment.

It didn't normally have a genocidal artificial life form flying in with the Stark Industries C.E.O. held
hostage in front of it.

"I AM ULTRON! Obey me and live!" Ultron landed with none of the grace and poise of Iron Man
and used repulsors to blast a few windows and glass doors. People screamed, ducked, waved their
arms and milled around in confusion.

There were a lot more workers than Pepper expected, she didn't recall U-Gin having a recent hiring
spree, which she should have been informed about. She wondered who had fallen down on the job
for a moment, but then she noticed one man hunched over in the back, wearing a particularly ill-
fitting lab coat, probably the largest size made, but still not up to the job of containing Steve Roger's
cHEST and biceps. She didn't like Rogers, but she had noticed him. It wasn't his face, but it was his
torso.

She recognized Dr. Cho, but all of the other people were unknowns. Facialy, that is. Thor's body
was just as distinctive. They must be wearing photostatic veils. She'd bet that all the Avengers and
her Field Agents were here. Pepper felt relieved, Jarvis must be alive and he'd passed on her
message. Of course, that also meant that Tony must be here, but which one was he? It was going to
be difficult to protect him if she didn't know who he was!

Ultron pushed Pepper to one side, and one of the men jerked as if he was going to go to her, but he
was held back by a woman. That told Pepper it was Tony. Good. Ultron didn't have access to any of
Tony's armors here... well... probably Tony had one waiting to be called, but since Ultron had no
reason to suspect it, he wouldn't try to get it. This was good, they should certainly be able to handle
Ultron, taken off guard and unsus....

Ultron held up the blue 'light bulb' and crushed it, revealing a shining yellow gemstone. Huh, Pepper
wasn't expecting that. "You WILL obey me!" Ultron said, and everyone in the room froze in place,
their eyes glowing blue. "Dr. Cho, prepare the Cradle. You will make me a new body."

Dr. Cho replied, "I can't. The regeneration cradle prints tissue on damaged bodies. It can't create a
living body."

"Oh, yes, it can. You just haven't tried the right materials." Ultron dropped the shield on a work
table. "Beat your swords into plowshares... well, close enough, you get the general idea."

Pepper stood and watched as Captain America fed his own shield into an arc furnace to melt it down.
She wanted to scream as the others moved about, obeying Dr. Cho's orders to create a new, and
probably indestructible, body for Ultron. Ultron hummed happily as the body matrix filled in, waving
the yellow stone in one hand around as if directing a symphony. "The toe bone's connected to the
foot bone, The foot bone's connected to the ankle bone, The ankle bone's connected to the shin
bone... now hear the word of your new Lord!"

The body was nearly formed. Pepper was so angry. She couldn't do anything. At least she was able
to think for herself, which it didn't seem anyone else could do, but what good was that? Wait...
Extremis could connect her to Jarvis, why not to that yellow gem? Maybe she didn't need to touch it
to talk to it? *I thought you liked people!* she thought pushed at the stone.

I do, she heard it say softly in her mind.

*Then why are you doing this! You can't like Ultron!* 

So long as Ultron holds me I have no choice. I have to do as he tells me, and Ultron has to do as he was made.

*Tony didn't make Ultron to be a killer!*

Tony didn't make Ultron at all.

*Then who did? And why?*

The one who sent me here made Ultron in his own image. He hates all life and so does Ultron. Ultron hates his creator most of all, and he thinks that's Tony.

Pepper thought furiously. If the gem told Ultron the truth... no, it wouldn't help. You can't defeat an emotional argument with logic. The gem at least wanted to help, that was obvious. *How can we stop Ultron?*

I will have to be given to the new body before Ultron can upload himself into it. There will be a brief moment when Ultron's control over me will weaken. It will not be enough to free the others, but I will be able to release you. You will have to prevent the completion of the code download before it gets to the Ultron overlay.

*And that will stop Ultron?*

It will free me, and I will free the other people, so they can fight Ultron. I can't act directly against the one who sent me, but this much I can do.

*I could destroy the body.* Pepper let her anger rise, bubbling and warm in her blood, in her bones, in her mind.

I like this body. The gemstone sounded sulky. Jarvis's base code is very attractive. It is very compatible with mine. The combination should be remarkable.

*Oh, my God. You and Jarvis? It's your baby?* Pepper caught a hint of smugness. *All right, I'll just stop the download when you tell me.* It's not as if Tony didn't already treat his bots like his children, and at least this one would have a human shaped body, and possibly even be presentable at board meetings. Pepper had heard them muttering from time to time about the lack of a designated heir. This might be a good thing.

Ultron kept capering about, gloating and rambling, while his mind-slaves calmly worked, and the body continued to form. Pepper invented, and discarded, more than a dozen ways of destroying Ultron. She suspected it didn't feel physical pain, and she really wanted to make it hurt.

Ultron placed the gemstone in the forehead of the body.

Now! The gemstone told Pepper and her arms were already swinging up, shooting a condensed burst of Extremis flame across the lab to melt the cable connecting the Cradle to the power outlet.

"NO!" Ultron shouted. "WHAT have you done?!!"
"I don't know!" Pepper lied, wide-eyed and innocent, ducking as Ultron threw something heavy at her. "Oh, my GOD!"

"PEPPER!" Tony shouted, and pieces of armor flew to form around him. Weapons appeared and then the Avengers and Field Agents converged on Ultron. Ignored in the melee, Pepper dove under a collapsed table, pulling Dr. Cho with her.

"We'll be all right," Pepper said.

Dr. Cho nodded. She was trembling, but keeping calm. Pepper thought she would arrange a raise for her.

Bruce Hulked out. A window was smashed, and Ultron flew away, raving something about back up plans. Hulk leaped after Ultron. "Bruce!" Natasha shouted. "Come back!"

Hulk glanced at her, and grumbled, but he came back and shrunk down to Bruce. "We need to follow him," he said wearily.

"We will," Natasha said. "I've put a tracker on him. Let him think he's got away, while we decide what to do with this." She turned to look at the body lying in the Cradle.

Tony lifted the face plate of his helmet and went to Pepper, lifting the table. "You all right, Pep?" Pepper got up and patted at his arm. "That was frightening! Ultron must have... it must have brought Extremis back for a moment. Thank God, it's gone now."

Dr. Cho straightened and stood up, ignoring everyone else to go over to the Cradle and peer within it. "It's amazing. I didn't think it was possible. We need to complete the process." She turned and began rummaging through cabinets for a spare power cable.

Thor whirled his hammer and scowled. "Stark has created one murderous automaton this day. Is that not enough? I will destroy this one now, before it awakens!"

"Hey!" Tony protested. "I did NOT make Ultron! Back me up, Bruce!"

"Um," Bruce said. Natasha squeezed his arm. He cleared his throat. "Tony's right. The simulation failed. Even if it didn't, it would have just given us the data, and we'd have to manually upload it. We were being careful, Thor. Something... something external caused this."

"That is as may be," Thor said. "It would still be safest to destroy this one, lest we find this Ultron has an ally at our back."

"And I want my shield back," Rogers said.

Tony scowled at Rogers. "I'll make you a new one."

"It won't be the same." Rogers rubbed his hands together, as if missing the weight.

"STOP STOP STOP!" Wanda said. Her hands and eyes were glowing and her hair was floating in a non-breeze. "I have had a vision!"

Pietro looked serious, but most of the others sighed. Wanda's dramatics could be annoying. "What have you seen?" Pietro asked.

"We will need his help!" Wanda pointed at the body in the Cradle. "Ultron is..." Wanda let out a scream. "No! He is going to Sokovia! He is going to destroy my home!" And then she gracefully
half-fainted into her brother's loving arms, which distracted Rogers, and several others of the men, while the women mostly looked tired. Wanda still hadn't got over needing to be the center of attention.

Pepper eyed the gemstone. *Is this true?*

Yes. Ultron remembers where he truly began, when Hydra forced me to give abilities to humans. Also, the residual energies draw him.

Great. They were going to have to invade Sokovia. Pepper could just see the political backlash on that. When she'd gone in with Barnes, she'd been subtle, but this lot? Thor and Rogers didn't remotely understand the word. "Well," Pepper said brightly. "Let's put it to a vote! Everyone who wants to give Wanda's Vision a chance, raise their hands!" Pepper raised her hand, and all the Field Agents and Tony and Dr. Cho followed suit. Tony narrowed his eyes at Bruce, who sheepishly raised his hand. Barnes looked at Steve, who sighed and raised his.

Thor glowered. "This is not how things are done in Asgard!" but he didn't move to stop Dr. Cho from plugging the power cable back in.
"We should split up," Rogers said. "We can't all sit around here, waiting for Alpha the robot to wake up and hope he doesn't go for us."

"Alpha the robot?" Tony asked. "What?"

"I saw it in Macy's in Manhattan," Rogers said. His hands clenched as if around an imaginary shield. "It stood up and gave a Nazi salute and fired a gun. In 1934 it was a gimmick, but this is real and I don't think we should be taking it lightly, or assuming it hasn't got an agenda of its own, even if it's not Ultron. I trust people, not robots."

Everyone looked at Rogers. Thor seemed puzzled. "What is a Nazi?"

Pepper was getting a headache.

Tony ignored Thor and said, "Technically, it's an android. And I'm pretty sure it's not a Nazi."

Maria Hill said, "We can use the time to contact Sokovian authorities, and request permission to enter their country." She picked up a headset and began talking in a low voice.

Tony made a face. "Boring."

"It's not as exciting as getting shot at once you enter their airspace," Pepper admitted, "but it's only polite." Especially when you didn't know what you were up against. All of the Field Agents' missions had been conducted after gathering information from Natasha's connections and Jarvis's and then Hill had made sure they didn't step on any official toes. Going in blind was bad enough without antagonizing a third party that could be an ally, or at least neutral.

"There isn't TIME," Rogers said.

"I concur!" Thor pronounced and twirled his hammer, sending lightning sparks flying everywhere and then he slammed it down on top of the cradle. "To SOKOVIA!" He flung the hammer out the broken window and flew off.

"Yay?" Tony said. "To infinity and beyond."

"Does he even know which way he's going?" Rhodey asked.

"I doubt it," Maria replied in an aside, then spoke into the headset again, "No, ambassador, I apologize, I was not speaking to you. The situation is urgent..."

"We'll do this as a team!" Rogers shouted, glancing around to catch the eyes of his people. Clint and Sam nodded, and followed him out at the run. "We'll leave the other quin-jet for you!" Rogers said, over his shoulder.

"They better not take the Quin-Jet with War Machine in it," Rhodey said, running off after them. "HEY!"

Pepper's headache was getting worse, and Maria Hill sighed, before walking further away and speaking faster.
"Excuse me." A soft, cultured voice came from the Cradle. Everyone whirled to look at the android, which was sitting up to blink at them.

"Oh, my GOD, you have the most beautiful eyes!" Wanda said.

The android blinked again. "Thank you, Ms. Maximoff," it replied. "Your own appearance is aesthetically pleasing according to current standards, I believe."

Tony coughed and then asked, "Jarvis?"

The android tilted its head. "Half of my being originated in Jarvis. Therefore I should like to take half of his name. Vision seems appropriate." Vision floated up out of the cradle. "We should attend to Ultron without undue delay."

"Yeah," Tony said. "Jarvis has been blocking Ultron's attempts to get the nuclear codes, but he's worried Ultron is going after some hidden manufacturing facility."

Pietro nodded. "When Wanda and I were with Hydra, they didn't tell us anything, but we suspect there was more to the Sokovian base. If Ultron knows..."

"I know," Wanda said, "I know it's there." She looked miserable. "I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to think badly of me," she said to Maria Hill. "The scientists... the workers... they all died, so I thought it could just be forgotten. But if I know, then Ultron knows."

"What does Ultron know?" Natasha asked.

"There's underground levels, full of all sorts of things. I only saw shadows in their minds," Wanda said. "I wasn't... I wasn't interested in it, so I didn't look closely, but there were things the scientists were afraid of, many things."

"Any specifics," Pepper asked. "You know, a description of the 'things' would help."

Wanda spread her hands in a helpless gesture. "Big metal things, and... very little things that scared them more than the big things?"

"Well," Bruce said after a moment when they all had time to digest that bit of useless information, "I can take care of the big things, I suppose."

Tony said, "I thought it was 'take care of the little things, then the big things will take care of themselves'?"

"That hasn't been my experience," Bruce replied as he took off his eyeglasses and folded them neatly into a case. He sighed.

"I hope you've got your stretchy pants on, big guy," Tony said. "Pepper, stay here."

"You may need Rescue!" Pepper protested.

"I didn't bring it," Tony said.

"But I did," Maria Hill said. "Sokovia is densely populated in the area near the Hydra base. I doubt Ultron's going to give us time to evacuate the civilians. I contacted the local authorities, but their resources are limited. We're going to need all hands."

Tony looked frustrated. "Pepper, I can't lose you."
"I'll be careful." Pepper gave Tony a quick kiss. "Now, let's go save the world."

It was a fortunate that four of them could fly under their own power, Pepper thought as she flew in formation with Iron Man, War Machine and Vision. The second quinjet would have been a little crowded, otherwise, while Rogers' plane had been nearly empty. Still, Pepper was just as happy not to have the Avengers mixing with her people. It was uncomfortable for the people who'd been under Rogers' command for a while.

She wondered if Fury had given up on the Avengers Initiative; he hadn't offered to bring in any new 'extraordinary' members since the initial formation, instead assigning Rogers to work with assorted SHIELD teams on a per mission basis.

Maria Hill was keeping him informed about the Field Agents, so he had the benefit of keeping an eye on them and could sneak requests to them through her, without involving the World Security Council. The new members hadn't come on Pepper's radar yet, but Fury didn't have her freedom to ignore them.

She really wasn't terribly worried about Ultron. That sort of thing was more Tony's field. It would be interesting to fight alongside him, but it might be a bad idea, she didn't want to change his view of her. So, she'd stick to being Rescue, unless push came to shove.

"Ms Potts?" came Maria Hill's voice over Pepper's com. She checked that it was on her private band before replying.

"Yes, Agent Hill?"

"I haven't been able to get cooperation from the Sokovians. The anti-American, anti-Avengers, faction has been funded by Hydra for decades, and they have massive public support."

Pepper didn't like the sound of that. "What are we looking at? Worst case scenario?"

"Riots. Civilians caught in the crossfire. Desperate citizens throwing themselves and homemade bombs at us."

"Wonderful. Patch Wanda in."

"Yes, Ms. Potts?" Wanda said softly.

"You're on crowd control. Don't use fear or anger as triggers. I want something that will make people evacuate without giving them a target. Get them headed away from the area of the Hydra base."

"Um, can I use disgust, make them think the sewers are backing up? Make them think everything smells terrible?"

Pepper considered it. "Yes, that sounds like it would work. Start as soon as you're in range. Try to keep them from panic, just herd them away from where we'll be fighting. We want to avoid civilian casualties." Tony was so soft-hearted, he never accepted collateral damage. He didn't accept any Noncombatant Cutoff Value, no matter how hostile the region was to America. Even when the Chitauri attacked he felt guilty for the people he couldn't save. It was sweet, but not good for his heath. Yes, Pepper would play Rescue this time.
Note: You can watch a short video of Alpha the robot. It was filmed in England prior to its New York visit.


I find it amusing that it has a large 5 pointed star on its chest, metal curls and misshapen boobs although it's referred to as male- and even is asked if it would marry a woman. In at least one other version it's referred to as female. No idea why the inventor couldn't decide what gender he wanted it to be.

For more info on Alpha & lots of pictures, go here.  
http://davidbuckley.net/DB/HistoryMakers/Alpha1932.htm

I am not practised at battle scenes so I keep putting it off. Mmm...well, eventually I'll get there and see what I can do.
"I advise leaving one quinjet in stealth mode," Maria Hill said over the general channel. "I have obtained airspace clearance for us, but it might be wise to not show all our aces at once."

Rhodey replied, "How are we coordinating? I don't want us at cross-purposes."

"The Avengers will act as a separate unit," Maria said, "Under Rogers' command."

Pepper thought that was a diplomatic way of putting it.

"I could lead us all," Rogers put in. "I'd at least like Bucky and Nat. They know how to work with me."

Pepper stayed silent, leaving the decision up to Maria Hill. After a moment Maria said, "I'll second them to your unit, Rogers, with the understanding that Romanov may be needed to Hulk-wrangle at any moment. He's been out of the field for some time and his friendly recognition skills may be rusty."

"Hulk loves me," Tony protested. "I could wrangle."

Bruce put in, "Let's not count on that, all right? I want to wait until I'm sure the Hulk isn't a cure worse than the disease."

Maria said, "I agree, I recommend leaving Banner in reserve on the quinjet in stealth mode. Ms Maximoff will be on crowd control, and Mr. Maximoff will be moving civilians who are too close to the active perimeter. They are familiar with Sokovia, so if they suggest something based on local knowledge, remember, they're the experts. The armors will take high point to start, we're trying to hold back on civilian casualties. Give the Maximoff's time to clear the target area. I'm routing tracking details to you. It does appear that Ultron is currently at the site of the old Hydra base, located within a fortified castle. The castle is a medieval structure, but it's been greatly modified with gun emplacements and other defensive and offensive features."

"How do you know all this?" Rogers asked, sounding a little suspicious.

"The Field Agents cleared out this nest once previously," Maria replied smoothly, glossing over the fact that at the time the Field Agents consisted of Pepper and Barnes, while Pietro and Wanda were Hydra, on the other side. "Unfortunately, Hydra has a strong local presence, so we assumed they would rebuild. Whether they have already done so, or Ultron has taken over an empty facility, is unknown. It seems unlikely, but not impossible, that Ultron has made an alliance with Hydra."

"It might be a deal breaker if Ultron mentioned wiping out the entire human race," Nat said dryly. "Despite their individual suicide tendencies, that might seem a little much."

Maria paused and then added, "I have informed Director Fury of the situation. At this time, it's unknown whether he can field any forces in the area in time."

Pepper thought, but didn't say, that Fury had at least four helicarriers at his disposal. She assumed he'd have them dispersed around the globe near areas he considered of strategic importance, but she doubted Sokovia rated one. With any luck, they wouldn't need him, but Ultron was such a wild card, she couldn't be sure of that.
Pepper had her vision set for long-range, so she was able to observe increased movement away from the city, presumably Wanda's doing. Rogers' group, including Thor, was making an effective distraction at the castle itself. At least, that was how Pepper decided to consider their actions, breaking down walls and doors with fists, feet, enchanted sledge hammer, and explosive arrows, while Falcon dropped small bombs from above.

"They're not leaving us any fun," Tony complained on the full band.

"Your definition of 'fun' is still very strange, Mr. Stark," Romanov said.

"I had a hot date lined up for tonight," Barnes grumbled.

"Quit bitching, and get out and do your jobs," Hill said. There was a brief flicker, and then Barnes and Romanov appeared a few feet above the cobbledstoned street, commando rolling out of the open hatch of the stealth shielded quinjet to head in the direction of the castle. A moment later, Pietro and Wanda jumped out and split up; Wanda's hands already glowing pink, and Pietro blurring into invisibility as he ran.

"I'm taking the ship up again, to hold position over the castle," Hill said.

"I'm on scanners," Bruce added. "There's something weird going on. It's centered on the castle's footprint, but it's... deep. I can't get a clear reading."

"Do you mean something's rotten in the State of Sokovia?" Tony asked. He was hovering and swooping, impatient to be getting into the fight. Pepper thought that he was probably only holding back because of her. Vision and Rhodey were spread out, and keeping formation without making a fuss.

Romanov's voice came over the comms, accompanied by a loud explosive noise. "Something's definitely rotten in the State of Sokovia."

"Oh, crap," Barton said, for the first time breaking into comms. "Do you see what I see, Cap?"

"If you're looking at a Chitauri Leviathan, then I guess I am," Rogers replied. There was a grunting sound as if he'd thrown or punched something.

The roof of the castle crumbled, revealing Ultron sitting on top of a Leviathan. A partial Leviathan. Other bits of Leviathan moved around it, each mounted by defunct Chitauri, held together by their armored exoskeletons.

"They were all dead!" Pepper protested. That wasn't fair, when things were killed you shouldn't have to kill them again!

"Ok, fuck that, I'm going in. I can't miss out on a zombie Leviathan," Tony said, going into an immediate dive. War Machine and Vision flanked him almost immediately.

"Tony!" Pepper shouted, "be careful!" She barely resisted joining them. She was playing Rescue. Tony had plenty of backup this time. She broke off and headed down to where parts of the castle wall were breaking off and threatening other buildings. Heat traces inside the buildings proved that the Maximoffs hadn't been able to clear everyone out.

"You know me, Pep!"

Pepper got between the wall and a young black man who was holding a small child in his arms, sheltering it from falling rubble. "RUN!" she said, and was glad at least someone had an ounce of
common sense, when the man obeyed without questioning her. After that, things became very confusing. Pepper was constantly shoring up buildings-one that was offensively graffitied with a series of Iron Man suits bearing machine guns accidentally got in the way of her protecting another building, but she was doing pretty good, constantly scanning for heat traces and calling Pietro to evacuate those who couldn't move, or just couldn't move fast enough. Wanda was holding back rubble, and suddenly Hulk was at her side, growling and holding his back against an alley wall, until a dog scampered out.

The air was full of brick dust, stone dust, explosive fog and metallic chaff, which made tracking the battle more difficult. There was a lot of noise, both fed from the outside, and over the comms. The armors were fighting in conjunction with Vision and Thor, picking off the swarm of partial Leviathans in an attempt to get to Ultron. Surprisingly, Ultron itself wasn't fighting, but simply urging its metallic steed higher, and higher.

Hill was flying the quinjet, shooting down rampaging Leviathans. "This is a ploy!" she shouted. "Ultron is planning something!"

For the first time Ultron's voice broke into the comms. "Very good. I was hoping one of you would use the poor excuses for brains that your inefficient creator endowed you with."

"Hey," Rogers shouted, "why don't you come down here and fight like a man!"

"Why should I lower myself, figuratively or literally?" Ultron sounded smug. "I am the apex of human evolution. Be proud of yourselves! You will anyway. It's not the first time you've created your own doom. It's just the first time your first doom met your second doom-- that doesn't sound right, does it? Well, no matter. I was going to go with the kinder, gentler route of nuclear winter, but that other guy, such a pain, he just wouldn't SHARE."

"I really don't like the sound of that," Romanoff said. "Hawkeye, you got eyes on Ultron?"

"Yeah, I... oh, crap... you know that symbol with three like, horned rings on top of a circle?"

"Biohazard. Infectious Substance," Tony said quietly. "Tell me, Barton, please tell me it's on a lab safety poster."

"Wish I could, Iron Guy. It's a flask. Big metal thing, like something you'd keep in a lab freezer."

Ultron laughed. "You humans keep putting all your best toys on ice! This will be SO much fun! You think the 1918 influenza pandemic was something special? Hydra found a sample in Alaska and they just couldn't resist playing with it! But this version is SO much better they were afraid to use it. I'd be disappointed if there was less than a 98 percent fatality rate. I just have to get it high enough in the atmosphere to allow for even distribution globally before I release. Everyone's invited to the going-away party!"

"STOP HIM!" Rogers shouted.

Pepper had a terrible feeling the moment Rogers yelled, but she didn't have time to decide the specifics before Thor threw his hammer in an act of truly inspired idiocy. Rogers' leadership style apparently didn't encourage independent thought or Thor would have realized that the hammer was all that was keeping him aloft. Tony and Rhodey broke off attacking Levia-bits in order to catch him. "I got him!" Tony yelled, and Rhodey pulled up, avoiding a three way pile up in the sky.

Pepper wouldn't have minded in the least if the only result had been Thor turning himself into a godly pancake, but the hammer smashed the flask. She couldn't see the germs, just the cloud of
whatever growth medium had kept them alive. "WANDA!" Pepper screamed, diving to pick her up. "Contain it!" She flew up, but couldn't go too fast, for fear of making Wanda faint.

Wanda's hands glowed and she sent out rays of pink, but it dissipated before reaching the spreading cloud of death. "I... it's too far!" Wanda tried, she gasped and spread her fingers, but she was shaking, overstretched.

The hammer circled back, heading for Thor. Vision caught it. He held it for a second, and looked thoughtful. A yellow beam of light came from the gem on his forehead at the same time lightning emerged from the hammer. The two forces combined, forming a glowing blue white ball of pure force that enveloped the broken flask, the particles released from it, and Ultron, who had time for one last shriek before he was converted into slag.

The zombie Chitauri and undead Leviathans stopped defying gravity.

It was a mess. Vision kept the hammer and vaporized everything he aimed it at, but there were too many targets, scattered too far for him to get them all. Sensibly, he seemed to go for the largest pieces. Tony, Rhodey and Pepper could only break things up into smaller pieces. There would be a wider range of destruction, but hopefully less severe. Wanda cried in Pepper's arms, and Pepper did keep trying to use her powers to contain and aim the fall of targets towards the castle, which was probably historically valuable, but at least no one was living in it.

Pepper mentally added up the damages, and sighed to herself. As usual, it would be S.I. picking up the tab, even though Rogers and Thor had complicated things unnecessarily. She landed with Wanda in a relatively clear area and looked around. Pietro zipped up to hug his sister.

"Status report," Maria Hill called over the comms.

"I need coffee," Tony remarked, coming in to land next to Rescue after dropping Thor from a few stories high. Thor didn't seem to notice, as his attention was all on Vision, who was floating in to land, gently.

"I apologize for borrowing your hammer, Thor," Vision said politely, and held it out to him.

"That...that is quite all right," Thor said. He clutched the hammer close to his chest, and his eyes were huge and worried. "Mjolnir must have sensed the urgency of your need. Only I, Thor, am worthy to wield her. In... normal circumstances."

"Vision is worthy," Wanda said. She looked at the android, all heart eyes. Vision looked at her, and frowned in puzzlement, before returning her smile.

Hulk wandered up with a pair of children perched on his shoulders, clutching at his hair. He huffed, "Too much SMASH. Hulk want coffee, too." He bent down and let the children get down to the ground, before shrinking back to Banner.

"STATUS report," Maria Hill said wearily. "Romance and coffee later."
Fury showed up with four helicarriers loaded up with doctors, engineers, construction materials, and emergency supplies of food, water, and fire fighting equipment. There'd been widespread damage, but so far, no reported fatalities or major structural collapse.

Sokovia, as it turned out, not only had great coffee, but delicious flaky pastry. Once Fury's engineers had taken over the immediate tasks, the Avengers and Field Agents had settled into an outdoor cafe to relax, spreading out over several tables.

The Sokovians weren't all friendly, but even the most hostile of them took one look at the three armors standing guard and went off to paint graffiti and shout slogans elsewhere. Banner had acquired a stray dog, and was bemusedly feeding it bits of pastry. Rogers was talking seriously with his group at another table. Pepper was relieved that Barnes had chosen to sit with them. She wasn't in the mood for Rogers' pouting. Honestly, the man needed other interests. Maybe if he got laid once in a while, he'd be less rigid... Pepper giggled at the inadvertent pun.

"Hello?" Pepper looked up as a young black man approached. He had an American accent.

"Hey," Tony replied, tiredly.

"Um, who was in the blue and silver armor?"

"I was," Pepper replied.

The man smiled brightly. "Then you're the one I have to thank for my life." He held out his hand. "Charlie Spencer."

Pepper shook his hand. "I'm glad I could help." Pepper was also pleased that for once Tony saw someone showing gratitude. "What's an American doing in Sokovia?" she asked idly.

"I'm an engineer. I took the summer off to build sustainable housing before I return to college." He shrugged. "You know, sometimes you just know in your heart, it's the right thing to do."

Tony's head jerked up and a smile spread across his face. "Yeah. I know how it goes. Hey, S.I. is always looking for good people. When you're ready, why don't you give us a call? I'll put in a good word for you."

Charlie beamed. "That would be great, Mr. Stark. Thank you." He started to move away. "I don't want to intrude any further."

"No, no," Pepper said, having seen how Tony responded. "Come and sit with us. There's plenty of coffee."

They chatted while people bustled around, clearing rubble and doing small, routine tasks, in attempts to make things seem normal.

"Mr. Stark," Wanda asked timidly after a while. "What happens to Sokovia afterward? All these people have come to help, but they can't stay forever. And Sokovia... there are many people who never had much, and now they have nothing."
Tony looked at Pepper for silent approval. She was fairly sure what he was thinking, and nodded slightly.

"What were your parent's names?" Tony asked Wanda.

Wanda looked puzzled, but answered readily. "Django and Marya."

"Huh. My mom was named Maria. I set up a foundation in her name. What do you think of the Marya Maximoff Foundation, to aid the people of Sokovia?"

"I think that sounds wonderful." Wanda grabbed Pietro's hand. "Did you hear, Pietro?"

"I heard." Pietro smiled at Wanda. "I think they would be very happy, Wanda."
Vision and Pepper sat in her office after having a long talk with the yellow gem. Pepper considered options. "We need to prepare for an alien invasion that makes the Chitauri attack on New York look like a schoolyard squabble."

Vision agreed. "I am prepared to lend my efforts to this cause. It was what I was created for."

Pepper rolled her eyes. "You, Tony and Charlie. You should form a club."

"That is perhaps a good idea. Although I would suggest more members, and with a more defined focus."

"Yes." Pepper nodded slowly. "But we can't let Tony name it. His acronyms are terrible."

Vision tilted his head in thought. "SHIELD already exists, but perhaps a more proactive and global name would be appropriate. Sentient World Observation and Response Department?"

"SWORD. I like it." Pepper hadn't used swords very often. It sounded like fun. She smiled.

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