Never Have I Ever

by Cluegirl

Summary

Tony Stark doesn't have a lot of 'first times' left, after the life he's lived, but it turns out that Steve Rogers is directly responsible for a surprising number of them.
If there was one indisputable fact about Colonel Nicholas Fury, it would be that he was a sadistic son of a bitch when he had a mad on.

Case in point: whenever it should happen that, in the course of fighting off evil, saving the world, and cleaning up the messes that SHIELD didn't want to dirty its hands with, the Avengers found themselves blamed for property damage, personal injury, or disturbing the goddamned peace, Colonel Fury liked to exact a particular little revenge for it. He enjoyed separating the team for their debriefing sessions, having his under-agents interrogate them each in isolation and then letting them sweat (often literally, if he didn't give them the chance to shower after the battle,) until he'd decided he was satisfied with how their stories matched up. Or, as Tony believed, until he was satisfied that his metaphorical dick was the biggest. Nobody but Bruce got to go home until Fury's little Time Out in the Sky was over with, and Bruce got out of it mainly by brute intimidation and naked threats. The rest of them had to wait.

But for the really bad mission debriefs, like, say, those with ramifications involving elected officials, the press, and/or the World Security Counsel on his personal phone line, Fury liked to call the Avengers into the debriefing room in pairs and handle the inquisition sessions in person. And when that happened, he always, always left Steve and Tony waiting till last, so they'd be good and wound up by the time he gave them their say. See above, re; sadistic son of a bitch.

"We are so not taking the heat on this one," Tony muttered, making another circuit of the waiting room. "This is on Fury. Him and his crappy intel and last minute, half-assed interventions. We could have had this if he'd just-

"It's not Fury's fault." Steve didn't turn, didn't break parade rest, didn't look away from the expanse of nothing outside the window. "And yeah, we could have had it. But we didn't."

Yep, there it was; Captain America's fucking leaden, judgey, restrained, 'I am very disappointed' voice, right on schedule. Because it didn't matter that Iron Man, Hulk, and Thor had all just spent the last four hours digging the star spangled asshole out from under that school. And it didn't matter that Clint and Natasha captured the HYDRA cell's ringleader and cleared the gunmen away from the hostages before any of them got shot. And it didn't even matter that only one -- one -- out of the six bombs in the basement actually went off. (Well. Technically two, but if Steve thought Tony was going to let Bruce take the heat for that one, he was fucking concussed.) Oh no: apparently all that mattered to Cap was that they could have done better.

"Does Jarvis have a total number yet on the injured?"

"Less than fifty," Tony gritted as he marched up to Cap's rigid back, part of his brain taking careful note of where the uniform's Kevlar was torn, seams failed, armor crimped. It was in pretty good shape for having survived a ground zero demolition charge plus a building collapse, but the asshole inside it was apparently determined to spoil the triumph. "None of them critical, so you can quit with the guilt trip right fucking now, because none of them would have even got a scratch if Fury's report had-"

"Save it," Steve sighed like he still had the building sitting on his chest, but his spine stayed locked up straight, and his reflection's blue eyes stayed locked on the sky.
"Look," Tony told him in a perfectly reasonable tone of voice, "we had no way of knowing the gamma bomb was going to trigger off of my arc reactor. We still don't know that's what actually happened. Jarvis hasn't finished the analysis. There could have been a trigger man-"

"We shouldn't have needed to know!" Steve whirled away from the window, and then the damage showed -- a deep bloom of bruise along one cheek and jaw, two running gashes where flying debris had sliced through the cowl. His hair was dark with blood along one temple, though the wound was long closed beneath the gore. "I had you on evac duty, Tony!" Steve said through those perfect white teeth that sometimes made Tony want to find out what the serum would do about it if he knocked a couple out. "You were supposed to be getting the kids out of the school while-"

"While you had Bruce with you in the steam tunnels, trying to defuse a goddamned BOMB! Doctor Bruce Banner; a physicist who has no goddamned electrical engineering experience whatsoever!" Tony threw his arms wide, leaning hard into Steve's space and not giving a damn for the accusation in those blue eyes. He was shouting now, and fucking glad to do it. "I'm the one who should have-"

"You've got the best mobility of anyone on the team, Tony," Steve yelled back, not giving an inch, "You're the only one who can scan through walls for life signs, and find the kids who were hiding, or hurt, or unconscious while there was still time to get them-"

"If you'd let me help with the bomb, we'd have had all the goddamned time in the-"

"It didn't go off until you got too close-"

"YOU WERE STANDING ON TOP OF IT!"

"Gentlemen," Hill said from the door, robot-cool and all eyebrow. "Director Fury's ready for you now."

Tony didn't give her the satisfaction of a flinch, though he did suddenly find himself wondering exactly when he'd grabbed Cap's uniform jacket, and when Cap had got such a crushing grip on his shoulder plates, and if Hill hadn't put her pointy nose in, which material would have failed first. In the interest of science, of course. The Kevlar/carbon nanotube weave was pretty damned tough, but Cap's grip strength had crushed through tougher stuff than the hinge joints of Tony's armor before.

Steve didn't let go either, though Tony could feel the pressure of his grip ease. "Thank you, Agent Hill," he said, and while he didn't break from Tony's glare, his eyes relaxed, the pupils contracting from wild anger to that chilly, martyred restraint that always made Tony want to bash him one in the head. He was gearing for what they both knew came next; Fury spending an hour kicking Steve's nuts in for everything the team did wrong, and making Tony sit there and watch while Steve just sat there and took it. "We'll be right in."

"The hell we will," Tony surprised himself with that, and was gratified to note by the flinch in Steve's eyes that he'd startled him too. "Fury's kept us hanging here for three hours," Tony said, dropping his grip on the blue jacket and whirling to take it out on the agent instead. "Three! Hours! And that's on top of the four that we just spent rescuing our Captain without any appreciable help from SHIELD-"

"Tony," Steve began.

He didn't spare a glance. "-After your botched intel set us and two hundred of Long Island's wealthiest schoolgirls up to get blown to hell by a dirty bomb that your people should have caught months before you hit the goddamned speed dial!" Tony loomed over Hill in the suit, and felt absolutely no shame in loving that fact, though it would have been nicer if she'd had the grace to
pretend to be intimidated at least a little.

"I'm sure the Director will be happy to include your feedback in his-"

And oh, that was it; that little superior cat-smile of hers, like she had a secret and couldn't wait to see him smash like a bug against it. Tony wanted nothing less than to tell her she could fuck herself with her goddamned secrets, only for all he knew she already did. So instead, he brought out the finger -- pointing, not poking, because hello, tits, and also his helmet was over there on the sofa, and Hill had a glock on her belt. "And I'm sure the Director will be happy to kiss my rosy red a--"

"That's enough!" Captain America's command voice shut it all down to ringing silence. When he turned back, Tony found Steve beside the crappy chairs, cradling Iron Man's helmet low and loose in his hands as if it weighed half a ton. "Tony's right," he said, and his voice was grey as concrete dust. "We're both too tired for a proper sitrep now. Jarvis can forward the footage and comm recordings, and the Director can come to the Tower tomorrow if he needs anything more from us. We're going home."

From the corner of his eye, Tony could just see Hill's eyebrows twitch down, and inwardly he crowed. Outwardly though, he just strode back to Steve's side and plucked his helmet out of those battered red gauntlets. "So am I calling the Avengers back to the hangar deck now, Agent Hill," he threw over his shoulder, entirely sweet, "or would you like to do the honors?"

Steve sighed before the agent could answer, and pressed two fingers to his left ear -- the only com link that had survived the damage to his cowl. "Avengers. Assemble on hangar deck…" he cast an expectant glare at Hill, who looked like someone had waved a turd under her nose, but knew better than to be coy at this stage.

"Three."

"Hangar deck three in fifteen minutes. We're leaving."

"Really?" Natasha's voice came back, puzzled.

"Fuck yes!" Clint's reply clearly had a fist punching the air behind it. "Finally!"

"With pleasure, Captain." Thor sounded like he'd been offered a puppy.

"Oh thank God." Bruce mumbled the words, barely coherent, but awake enough to make the phrase sound like a prayer.

Steve's smile was a tiny, weary thing, but Tony would have taken it over a hundred thousand toothpaste grins or knowing smirks. Then he keyed the comm back off and looked at Hill. "Are you going to tell me where my Shield is?" he asked, and while he didn't add "or am I going to have to take this Helicarrier apart finding it myself?", everyone in the room could clearly hear where those words belonged.

"Hulk found it in the wreckage," Tony answered, merciful once Hill had gone a couple of shades paler. "It's in a lead box on the Quinjet until I can check it out under a microscope. And a Geiger counter."

Cap's brows knit down at that, the gash crossing the right one cracking at the motion, and Tony tensed inside his armor, ready, just fucking ready to shove any justification Cap was preparing to spout for using the vibranium shield and himself as a blast containment unit right back down his throat. He was done, just done... but apparently Steve was done too.
He choked back on whatever he'd been ready to say, shuttered it up tight while Tony watched the fight collapse in his eyes, and then he turned on his heel and left. In the hallway, he paused long enough to toss an ironic salute to the security monitor before he put those long legs to work hauling his ass away.

Tony followed, trying to get the image out of his head; Cap standing on the shield, shoulders braced against the crumbling cornerstone of the whole damned school while the demolition charge howled its ignition alert underneath. "Go," Cap had shouted, and it didn't matter if Tony wanted to obey or not, because the Hulk was there, and the Hulk was going, and the Hulk was going to take Iron Man with him whether Iron Man wanted to go or not.

And then it all fell down, and the following four hours of crushed stone and running mascara positively trashed for all time every single fetish Tony had every had for plaid kilt skirts and white knee socks. Four hours of no sign of Steve except for strained breathing and one-word answers over the comm, and sure, he said he was fine, but they'd all have said that, wouldn't they? Not even Thor had been convinced, and Thor would believe anything if you gave it to him with a straight face.

The worst, though, was how Steve kept fucking shivering as Hawkeye flew them up to face Fury's wrath. Nothing obvious, and not a noise out of him, but a fine, tight tremor Tony could feel through the armor where the too-small seats pressed their knees and shoulders together; a sheen of sweat still popping on his battered brow after he'd wiped the blood away; the careful press of his fingers into his own thigh, just hard enough to hide any shakes as adrenaline, fickle bitch, dumped him right onto his star-spangled ass.

What a fucking disaster.

"Jarvis, we're coming in," Tony said as he clomped down the last set of stairs to the jet. "I want a complete medical scan on Rogers the minute he walks into the building, ok?"

"Of course, sir. Though my analysis of the Captain's bearing on the Helicarrier suggests that he is in no immediate-

"Complete. Medical. Scan," he repeated.

"Very good, sir," Jarvis said. Then, after a pause, added, "Shall I order in dinner for the team as usual?"

"Yeah," Tony sighed, though food was just about the last thing he wanted to think about just then. "Whatever everyone got last time is fine. Except no kimchee. Kimchee stinks, and I don't care who fucking pouts about it."

"Understood, sir," Jarvis answered, and then the line went still.

The jet's engines were warming up as he came alongside. Through the jump-hatch, Tony could see Hawkeye running through his pre-flight routine as best he could with one arm in a sling. "Hey, junior birdman," Tony said as he climbed the ramp, "You okay to fly there?"

"He's flown in worse shape," Natasha answered from shotgun. She was still holding an ice pack against her knee, but otherwise she showed no sign of having body-checked a stained glass window earlier. "We'll get there."

"Are you well, my friend?" Thor asked from his usual place beside the hatch. Even he had bandages on his arm, though Tony hadn't been there to see what had hit him hard enough to get through Asgardian armor.
"Yeah, all good," he answered, taking the seat between Cap and Bruce and reaching for the flight straps. "I just put a lot of strain on the repulsors today. I want to look them over before flying on them again." It was true, actually; he could feel the heat against his palms and footsoles even through the shielding, and if he'd flown the armor hotter in the past, none of them had to know about it, did they?

Bruce gave a sigh and slouched back into the seat as if it was something like comfortable, saying "Wake me for dinner, kay?" as the ramp's hydraulic lifts whined to life behind their heads. Tony nudged Bruce's knee with his own for answer, then turned to look at Steve.

"Far be it from me to interrupt your sulk," he murmured under the noise, "but I had Jarvis go and peek under HIPAA's skirts to get the detailed injury list." Steve's glance cut over, wary but sharp, and Tony met it with a smirk. "We got two hundred clear without a scratch. Of the rest, around thirty were released with band aids, splints or stitches. Only twenty one were admitted, and most of those wouldn't have been if their parents weren't rich and noisy." The hatch locked with a hiss. The engines changed pitch, and gravity gave a shrug as the Quinjet boosted into the air. "The worst of the lot was a compound fracture with some tendon damage, and a concussion with a set of broken ribs." He put his armored hand on Cap's knee, but the shakes from earlier had faded. "They're going to be fine."

If he hadn't been watching Cap's gaze, hadn't seen the flicker of gratitude peeking from behind the shutters, he would have bristled when Cap nodded once, settled his back to the seat as Bruce had, and closed his eyes, snatching a nap where he could like a good little soldier. But Tony hadn't missed it, nor had he missed Cap's quiet murmur as they cleared the hangar bay and made blue sky over the City haze.

"Thanks, Tony."

~* Made A Grown Avenger Cry. *~

The six of them always ended up in the media lounge on Thor's level after a mission. It wasn't a thing they discussed, really, but Tony liked to take it as a sign of his awesome building-planning skills that no matter how crappy the mission had gone, the Avengers always drifted down to the communal kitchen/game room/home theater to decompress together. Which had to be saner than the alternative of hiding in their rooms and freaking out alone, right?

After a good run, someone cooked, and they all ate at the table together. After a bad run, Jarvis ordered comfort food and they pigged out in the lounge like teenagers. The only continuity was that nobody touched the dishes or cleaned up until the next morning. No post-mission tidying was a house rule, and Tony enforced it strictly.

The takeout food was destroyed within an hour of its arrival. Styrofoam, cardboard and greasy paper, the remnants of its valiant struggle, were littered over every level surface that didn't have an Avenger actually in it. The gaming system was on, with Bruce and Natasha dueling over Tetris on one screen, while Clint and Thor played (of all things,) Animal Crossing on the other. Tony was cheerfully heckling all four of them while overseeing the diagnostic scans Jarvis and the lab-bots were running on Cap's shield. (No lingering contamination once the leather straps were replaced, and the equipment hadn't turned up any microfractures yet, but Tony wasn't convinced.) Steve, bruises fading already, was asleep in his favorite recliner and oblivious to it all.

So it could have happened to anyone, really.

Afterward, that realization kind of made Tony go shaky and put his drink aside, because fuck, talk about dodged bullets. But it was true; any of the others could have been closest when Steve made
that anguished little noise in his throat -- they all heard it, all turned to see what was wrong. It could have been Natasha and her murderous reflexes who reached out when Steve's hand groped into empty air, and caught it palm to palm. Or, God help them, Bruce.

Tony hadn't been thinking about it, really, didn't even consciously decide to do it. It was just he could hear Steve's quick breaths, each with a thread of whine behind it, could see the sweat beading on Steve's lip, the rapid flickering of his closed eyes, and Tony couldn't count how many times he'd wished that someone would reach into that fucking Afghanistan cave and lift him out of it before he woke up screaming... and so he reached.

He grabbed Steve's hand meaning to give him a shake, then rib him gently about it until things were cool again. He wasn't prepared for Steve to grab his hand back, so tight the bones creaked inside his skin, and then yank him out of the couch, across the table, and into the chair with him.

"Shit!" He yelped as a lamp smashed and the recliner went over sideways. Tony tried to flinch down tight, bundle up against the impact, but Steve was fucking wrapped around him and they were tumbling to the floor. And really, it wasn't a lot softer, smashing down into Steve's chest instead of the travertine, especially with the lamp cord still wound up around Tony's ankle and his knee bent up over the chair like that. "Fuck!"

He could feel Steve's breath, panicked and hot against his neck, could practically hear his heart thrashing as the room erupted into a pandemonium of shouts and scrambling feet. Steve's arms clamped tighter around his chest and Tony coughed, prying in vain with the one hand not pinned beneath them. "It's okay," he wheezed. "Jesus, it's okay, Steve. I'm not hurt, you can let go now."

Steve made a sound then; a ragged, horrible sound that twisted in Tony's guts, and almost, almost sounded like a word. "Yeah," Tony agreed, patting at an arm and trying gingerly to get his leg untangled enough to push, "That was lucky. Could have been worse. Wasn't. Time to let go now."

Another broken moan. One of them was shaking. Maybe both of them, given the cycle rate of Tony's reactor just then.

Natasha skidded to her knees in front of him, fiercely intent and reaching past Tony's shoulder to pry Steve's face to the light. "Wake up, Steve," she said in a voice that didn't match that ferocious face at all. "You're dreaming." Tony grunted as those fucking iron bands clenched even tighter for a second. Then, like a jolt of current flicking loose a clamp-lock, like a concussive wave of horrified self-awareness washing from Steve's skin straight into his, Tony felt Steve come online around him. It was awful.

But worse was getting dumped on the tiles in Steve's sudden scramble to get away. Super soldier reflexes, panic, disgust, or the frantic need to puke drove Steve to his feet and halfway across the room before Tony could even get himself right way up. Steve gasped like he was drowning, as if he couldn't get air even though his chest was heaving. He gulped and wheezed and stared around the room like he expected it to come in on his head, eyes not catching on anyone with recognition. Even terrified -- and Tony wasn't exactly as smug as he thought he'd be to learn what terrified looked like on Steve -- the man was poised and dangerous, backing quickly toward the door without looking behind, and still bumping nothing.

Until suddenly Thor was in his way.

"Steven," Thor said, and caught him easily when he whipped around. Ducking under the flinching haymaker Steve probably didn't even think about throwing, Thor pushed inside his guard, grabbed him around the chest, and pulled him close. Steve didn't really fight being gathered in, but he didn't exactly yield to it either, just stood rigid and trembling while Thor's arms enfolded him, and the demi-
god murmured into his ear. "Steven, my friend, it was a dream only." Thor brought one hand up to cradle the back of Steve's head. "I am sorry."

"It was a dream," Steve sobbed. There wasn't another word for that scraping, tearing noise of breath and anguish in his throat. Just like there was no word for the look that crumpled Steve's face but simply *wrecked*. He gulped in a breath, but it escaped as a groan. "A dream. Oh God." And then he just gave up the fight and cried.

A hand on his elbow made Tony flinch, but it was only Bruce, kneeling down to help him up to his feet. Natasha had retreated to the wall, her expression frozen into such fierce neutrality that she just had to be feeling something inside that flinty shell of hers. Clint stood just outside her reach, eyes flicking nervously from face to face, hands flexing like he wished he had something to shoot.

"What the fuck?" Tony mouthed the silent question at him when Clint glanced his way, but he only shrugged, baffled and appalled.

"Sergeant James Barnes," Natasha recited, low and inflectionless, not taking her eyes from the pair by the door. "Fell from an Alpine railroad bridge in November, 1943. Rogers' report put him on the scene."

"Fuck!" Tony spat, furious and quiet, because he *knew* this story. He'd heard about that mission, the one where the SSR had won Dr. Zola, the key to bringing HYDRA down, but lost Bucky Barnes, the squad's sniper and Cap's childhood friend. Howard had always said it was the one where they started to lose the Captain, too, because on the very next time out, when HYDRA was scattering like roaches and Schmidt was down to his last Hail Mary play, Steve said his goodbyes and made a suicide run to stop him... Only the ice and the ocean said "No."

"Fuck!" he said again, louder, and took a step. "Cap... Steve. Jesus, I'm so-"

Bruce tugged him to a stop, his deft, square hand tight around Tony's arm. "Don't," he warned. "Not right now. Let him get it out first."

"Yes," Thor said, quietly for Thor values of quiet, but his resonant voice still filled up the shocked hovering silence around them all. "When the storm has passed, my friend, but now is no time for words." He turned Steve, who was still shaking and silent behind his hands, into the shelter of one arm and began to lead him out. "I will keep watch and attend to our shield brother tonight," he told them all as Jarvis slid back the door to his apartment. "For I know how cruel the dreams of reaching can be."

Then they were gone, and the silence was horrible and complete until Tony scrubbed it from his face with both hands, and managed to come up almost grinning.

"Well then! Anybody else need a drink?"
*Picked Up a National Icon in a Gay Bar.*

Avengers,

I need a couple of days away to get my head right. Don't worry, I'll be just fine, it's just some things are easier without a crowd around. I have my phone. If you need me, I won't be far. Thank you for understanding this. I promise I won't be long.

Sincerely,

Steve Rogers.

P.S. I'm really sorry about last night.

P.S.S. Will someone please make sure Tony eats more than one meal per 24 hours if possible while I'm away? Preferably somewhere other than in the workshop, but do what you can.

The sign over the door said "The White Eagle" and the GPS in Tony's phone said it had to be the right place.

It should have been perfect place for Cap to hang out, really -- two national symbols that pose great together, right? Only the White Eagle wasn't quite the wholesome slice of American Pie that its name implied. The place was actually -- hilariously, -- a stealthy little gay bar masquerading as a vintage gastropub in one of the conspicuously unimpressed, gentrified indie neighborhoods of Brooklyn. It was honestly the kind of place Tony wouldn't have even considered stepping foot into, unless he happened to be following a tight little hipster in skinny jeans and a trilby, in hopes of a quick blow in the bathroom before the paparazzi caught up with him.

Not that that had happened or anything. Recently.

Still, the GPS put Cap at these coordinates and Jarvis wasn't capable of being wrong, so in Tony went. At least Steve would be easy to find in a place like this, he figured. If his hopeless clothes didn't give the man away, it should just be a matter of scanning the room for the highest concentration of besotted twinks, and looking underneath the pile. Dollars to donuts, Steve would be there, covered in glitter and blushing to death. So predictable.

Except for the way it totally wasn't. At all. Because the only guy in the room who was even close to Cap's scale was the guy behind the bar, and then the comparison only held if you were measuring by volume and including his beer-baby in the final tally. The rest of the customers were the carefully starved, artfully bored ennui-addicts Tony had expected to find staring over their black bean burgers at the billionaire in their midst. All ink and ironic eyeglasses, and not one of them was Steve Goddamned Rogers.

"You look lost," Papa Bear behind the bar observed in exactly the sort of dry, wry tone that people always used when they wanted to pretend they didn't know they were talking to the Tony Stark. "Need a map?"

Tony came around with his front page smile and folded away a pair of sunglasses that cost more than the monthly till. "I'm looking for a guy, actually. Blonde and blue, about 6'4, big, but fit."

The barman smirked knowingly. "Darlin' aren't we all?"
Fuck. Walked right into it. Tony forced his grimace into grin shape and took out his phone. "Well maybe, but mine's got a name, rank and serial number. And an addiction to frumpy plaid shirts and chinos. He'd stick right out in a place like this."

Papa Bear hooked a thumb over his shoulder at a hand lettered chalkboard by the entrance. 'Dress Code Strictly Enforced', it read, which in this case seemed to have more to do with obscurity of concert tee, irony of bowling shirt, and atomic weight of horn rimmed glasses than your standard 'no shirt, no shoes, no service' deal. Tony figured the dress code probably got a hundred percent more fabulous once the dance floor upstairs opened to the evening crowd, but for lunch it was definitely fabulous lite.

Tony did not tug on the hem of his extremely fabulous by any standards thank you Italian silk suit jacket. Instead, he called up Steve's ID screen on his phone. The picture was a goofy one, Steve blushing, biting his lip against a laugh so as not to encourage Clint's humor, but utterly failing, and looking precisely like an enormous dork while doing so. He turned the phone to the barman, and just knew from the way his eyes skated over the picture and away, from how he didn't even pretend to consider the question, that the next thing the big man said was going to be a lie.

"You're right. I'd have noticed that coming through. So would everyone here. But it hasn't." He finished wiping a pint glass and flopped the towel over his shoulder to level a stare that was just shy of hostile. "So can I get you something to drink, or are you gonna look for your impossible dream somewhere else?"

So Steve was definitely here then. Tony let his smirk show that he knew it. "You sure he didn't go up those stairs over there? Maybe while you were busy with your microbrews?"

Papa Bear's crinkling eyes were the only part of him that broke the careful veneer of disdain as he called Tony's bluff with a shrug. "Dance loft doesn't open till ten pm, but heck, don't let me tell you anything. Knock yourself out, Nancy Drew."

Tony sighed and made a show of mentally writing that idea off. "Well if you're not going to be helpful, then just pour me a beer," he said, turning his attention to his phone. "Something dark and not too appalling."

"Oil Change Stout, it is," Papa Bear answered, and turned to his taps while Tony considered his options and his strategy.

Steve, a good little boy scout even when his dignity was bruised, had left his phone turned on. This had made tracking him to the White Eagle fairly easy, but the building was like a hundred years old; all brick, oak beams and unshielded wiring that made it hell for Jarvis to pinpoint a signal inside it. So either against all logic, it really was possible to hide a six and a half foot tall walking anachronism right in the middle of a hipster paradise, or there was a trick to all this. Either way, Tony figured the time had come to give up on honest effort and cheat the way he knew best.

He unlocked his phone, hitched a ride on the pub's signal, and made a couple of tweets mentioning what a cool little place he'd found in Liberty Heights, then giving the White Eagle's street address and website link. Mentally, he set his countdown to five minutes, and spared a moment's pity for the poor kitchen staff and waiters. They weren't going to know what had hit them.

Then he shook it off, cracked the backdoor to Steve's phone, and made a single harmless alteration to the settings. Just one. He did not go snooping in the contacts, call log, or photo files, thank you, because he was better than that, and anyway he didn't want to give Steve too many things to forgive him for all at once. The restraint was exhausting, but the beer was surprisingly good.
As the fan club began to pour in, distracting the bartender and disgusting the regulars with their enthusiasm, Tony picked up his glass and headed discreetly to the back corner. Specifically, the table that nearly got hit every time the kitchen door swung open, but more relevant to Tony's interests, it was the table that gave him equal access to the kitchen, bathroom, and dance room doors. "Jarvis, activate parabolic sound analysis and tracking," he said as the little pub filled up with noisy trendies, and the dress code began to show some bruising around the edges.

"Very good sir," Jarvis answered in his bluetooth. "What would you like me to target?"

"This," Tony said, and hit speed dial 3.

Faintly and briefly, a thrashing metal guitar solo tinted the din. Steve picked up almost at once, but Jarvis had been quicker.

"Tony," Steve said, severe, clipped and wary. "Is there trouble?"

Tony grinned at the tall mirror next to the bathroom. The mirror which, upon closer inspection, Tony could tell was a cleverly fitted door. "Well, the GOP called for you, Cap," he said, checking to be sure the bartender was up to his ass in cash-waving new customers before slipping through the secret door and down the stairs concealed behind it. " Seems they have a bone to pick with you."

"The what now?" Steve's voice was twinned through his handset, and equal measures of annoyed and confused in both.

"Well," Tony thumbed off the call and ducked out of the low stairwell with a grin. "I mean I can't blame them for being a little threatened; here you are, a national symbol of purity and goodness, hanging out in the secret play dungeon underneath a..." But instead of a sticky-floored room full of manky couches, stained mattresses, and lumber structures of dubious intent, the basement held shelves of wartime memorabilia, vintage photographs, a few tables with chairs that definitely wouldn't stand up to shenanigans, and Steve.

"Holy shit, what are you wearing?" Tony blurted before he could stop himself.

Steve's hands curled around the bottle and glass in front of him and his brows drew down as worry gave way to pure annoyance in his gaze. "Tony..."

"No, really, this is..." He waved a hand to take the changed man in. "You're in disguise? Not that I'm complaining, because yeah, you're kind of working those jeans and please always buy your t shirts a size too small from now on, but." Tony shook his head and crossed the room to claim a chair at Steve's table, ignoring the glare all the way. "You, Captain America, are seriously here in the basement room of a gay club, and you're in disguise?" There was even a black fisherman's cap on the table, because of course Steve was too much of a gentleman to wear his hat indoors. God, the man was adorable! "Are you actually fooling anyone?"

That sigh was a soliloquy all on its own, but Steve was almost smiling as he shook his head. "Not really trying to fool anybody, Tony. They know who I am here, and Karl gets the guys to leave me alone when I come in. It's just they..." Was he blushing? He was doing that shy little head-ducking thing he usually tried when he got all pink, but the lights were vague and the windows filthy, and Tony couldn't tell for sure. Then again, Tony might have been a little distracted by the black leather vest Steve was wearing over that almost-too-small tee shirt as well -- that was entirely possible, and also reasonable, feasible, and downright biological, because leather vest, man! "The guys get enthusiastic about the dress code," Steve admitted, missing Tony's distraction as he tossed back his drink with a grimace.
"And you are kind of a fashion-vacuum," Tony chuckled, imagining a scandalized chorus of 'Oh Honey, no,' and an impromptu makeover when the regulars first got a look at Steve's habitual style. "I'm surprised they don't have you in chaps and spurs, all things considered!" It was mean, and he knew it, but also hilarious, and Tony wanted full credit for the effort it was taking him not to expound gleefully upon the theme of Queer Eye for the Capcicle. Though the Wrinkle of Disapproval didn't offer good odds on Steve being in the credit-granting mood.

A burst of crowd noise, a heavy step on the stairs, and Tony's amusement faded as Papa Bear's voice filled the room. "Steve, I'm pretty sure-"

"Tony Stark was in here looking for him," Tony finished for him, waggling his fingers in greeting. "Yeah, he knows."

The man's face hardened without a flicker of surprise, and his glare took just long enough to scrape Tony head to heel before skipping over to Steve and staying there. Dis. Missed. Every inch of the man read 'bouncer on the job', for all he held nothing but a cordless phone in his hand; 91 dialed already, thumb hovering over the 1 key.

"He bothering you?" Papa Bear rumbled, clearly unfamiliar with the poor track record of bars that tried to throw Tony Stark out.

"Probably," Tony answered again, this time with an accusing finger for Steve. "But in this particular instance, I kind owe him a bothering. He deliberately and with malice aforethought left orders for our roommates to strategically, repeatedly cockblock my well deserved sulk, while slinking off here to have his own sulk where he thought nobody could find him. Now I ask you," Tony appealed to them both with every scrap of his vestigial innocence, "How was that even fair?"

Papa Bear wasn't impressed, but at least Steve cracked a weary smile, and shaking his head, pulled himself square into the seat again. "It's ok, Karl. He's a friend."

"He's a jackass," Karl the Papa Bear snorted.

Ok, so Tony hadn't actually been called a jackass to his face yet, and given the number of things he had been called to his face, that was pretty significant. He figured it made the occasion worth recognition, so he yelped an affronted, "Hey!" and wasn't surprised when they ignored him.

"Yeah, he's that too," Steve said, and poured himself another shot of a gin so cheap and harsh that when the smell reached him, Tony had to look at the label to be sure it wasn't turpentine. "But it's fine with me if he stays."

"He drinks bourbon though, if you've got some. The more expensive the better. He's good for it."

And with that, Tony was apparently worthy of Karl's notice once more, if only so far as a glare and a raised eyebrow went. Never one to do what was expected of him, Tony replied with a front-page smile and his credit card instead of the sass the man clearly expected. "Wild Turkey's just fine," he said. "And I still owe you for the beer."

Karl just rolled his eyes, cleared the phone, and turned to snag a bottle of Maker's Mark off one of the metal shelves near the doorway. This he brought to the table and thumped down beside Tony's elbow before turning, rigid with dislike, and stomping back to his overfull pub without a second look at Tony's credit card. What was it Coulson had said about Steve's time in the apartment? 'He was the unofficial mascot for the whole neighborhood?' From Karl the Barkeep's possessive hostility and Steve's bemusement, that seemed about right.

"So I'm guessing you're a White Eagle regular then?" Tony smirked once they were alone again,
gesturing around the room and its clutter of vintage crap as the hilarity of the situation began to reassert itself. "Or are you more of a mascot? Cause I gotta tell you man, you really do not seem like the club-cruising type to me. And bear in mind, I have a long and varied history of meaningless sexual encounters, so I do know whereof I speak."

Steve leveled a considering stare at Tony for a long moment -- a weighty look with too many moving parts for Tony to read or anticipate. "You actually think that's why I'm here? Drinking gin in a basement room by myself?"

"Okay, first; that's not gin, it's liquid spite flavored with penance, and I cannot believe you're actually Catholic enough to think you have to drink garbage like that when I've got perfectly good, no, perfectly excellent gin back at the Tower. And second," Tony shucked his jacket and laid it over the empty chair beside him. "Nobody's alone when they're sharing a table with Tony Stark. Except for when I'm sharing a table with me. Then I'm alone. If you don't count Jarvis." Steve rolled his eyes -- actually rolled his eyes! Tony could have cheered. Instead, he shook his head and continued. "And no, the fact you didn't know I was coming doesn't change my point. I mean really; secret entrance, cozy tables, film noir lighting and set dressing; how do I know you weren't waiting around for someone? Just cause you blush like a virgin that doesn't mean you don't know how to, uh, you know-"

"Tony, if the next word out of your mouth is 'fondue', I'm leaving."

"Oh," Tony brightened. "Do they serve that here?"

Steve put a hand over his face and sighed. "This would be a lot less ridiculous if you'd just give up and ask," he said.

"If I do, you're only going to tell me it's none of my business," he observed, positively not making a show of getting his phone set to record just in case Steve was actually about to rupture the laws of nature by coming out to him. Not even Pepper could say it counted as Using His Powers For Evil if resisting the urge to memorialize the occasion on YouTube would end with Tony dying of frustration, after all. Of course, if Steve saw it on YouTube, it was possible Tony might die of being punched in the head instead, but Tony wasn't quite ready to write off that return on investment too easily.

"Now why would I do that?" Steve asked mildly, pouring himself another shot of turpentine and sitting back from the table in a sprawl that somehow took command of the rickety little bistro chair and turned it into a throne. "I used to come here a lot," he said, plainly daring Tony to make something of it, "before I moved uptown to the Tower with the rest of the team. I like the food."

"And you match the decor so well, too," Tony laughed because he couldn't quite help himself, and peeled the scarlet wax away from the bottle's mouth. "Somewhere there's an indie film crew just crying that they can't get at you like this."

"It's over there." Steve lifted his arm to point at the back wall. "The answer to the question you're not asking," he explained a moment later, when it became obvious that Tony didn't have a clue what the hell he was supposed to be seeing among the shelves of wireless radios, helmets, coke bottles, baseball cards and dancing shoes. "It's in the window. You're not gonna spot it from here."

Tony cut him an amused glance, then shrugged and got up to go have a look. It was like any other basement window of its time, really; arched at the top, squat and wide, set high in the wall, and looking out at ankle level on the sidewalk through a haze of soot, dust, and neglect. Tony glanced back at the table and found Steve watching him, blank faced and patient as any sphinx. This was a test then, and clearly there would be no further hints coming.
Well, he wasn't a genius for nothing. Tony turned back to the window and looked again. New glass, not wavy with age; silicon caulk holding it in the wooden frame, rubber caulk between the wood and the bricks; dingy white latex paint slapped on decades thick over the masonry... Tony blinked, raised a hand to block the light, then got out his phone to shine a little more from another direction so he could be sure what he was seeing.

_Bucky Barnes_ had been scratched deeply, awkwardly into one of the bricks that arched over the window's top. Lopsided and badly spaced, Tony could tell it was the work of a pocket knife, a little skill, and a lot of boredom. It didn't take him long after that to find the brick with Steve's name on it. Unsurprisingly, it was better done; neat letters squared to the brick's edges as if laid out with a ruler.

"This was a tavern back when I was young too," Steve said when Tony brushed reverent fingers over his name. "During prohibition, they ran a distillery down here. About five of these basements were connected, full of tanks and burners and copper tubing. The Turings would hire local kids to sit at this window and watch the corner for cops. Didn't pay much, but we'd get to eat while we were here, at least."

"How'd you know this would even _be_ here?" Tony asked, meaning the carvings, sure, but also the cellar, the tavern, the whole neighborhood, because this was New York City, and ninety years bought no guarantees. He turned from the window to find that Steve had come up, quiet as memory behind him. He smelled like bar soap, gin, and faintly, leather, and somehow Tony didn't find himself jumpy at the unexpected proximity.

"I didn't expect it to be. Andre and Vilye dragged me out here from the apartment one day because they thought I was lonely." He cut a blue glance Tony's way, and added, "I was really just bored, but they insisted, so I came along. Then once I was here, I realized I knew the place. Karl's related to Jacek Wojohowicz, the super of my old building. The family bought it from the Turing gang when the prohibition repeal starved out the distillery business, and so when I asked Karl about the basement, he brought me down and let me see it."

"So... it's kind of a time capsule then?" Tony asked, not really getting why anybody would collect this kind of memorabilia at a tavern and not use the stuff where the customers could benefit from the atmosphere.

Steve's face creased in a lopsided smile for a second, and he reached past Tony's shoulder to brush his fingers over Barnes' name. "It is now, but in the late 30's, it was an apartment with an escape tunnel." He pointed, and Tony could see, suddenly, the outlines of a stove and sink on the brickwork, lamp soot and tool hooks on the beams overhead, and how one heavy shelf was just big enough to block an exterior door under that big king-stud in the wall. "Karl said that his father and uncles closed up the basement pass-throughs so they could turn this one into a bolt hole. Just in case."

"Just in case of what?" Tony asked, intrigued despite himself.

Steve turned back to the table and sat, picking up his bottle and hooking an eyebrow in Tony's direction. "Did you really think the only folks talking about killing all the Jews back then were in Germany?"

Tony, who hadn't had much reason to think about it at all, scowled. "No. Of course I didn't." Which made Steve laugh and shake his head a little.

"Of course you did. Everyone thinks like that now; like it was all Casablanca and Citizen Kane back then; Doug Fairbanks, Rita Hayworth, Buster Keaton and no problems you couldn't sort out before the end of the second reel." He drank again, and shook his head ruefully as Tony returned to the
"Things weren't better then, just different. People weren't nicer, or more honest or decent. They went broke and got drunk and fell in love and fucked just like they do today."

Tony didn't mean to gasp, but that word on Steve's lips kind of went right through him like a tongue in the ear. "What?" he demanded when Steve shot him a glare, "You dropped an F bomb! I'm pretty sure the Pope just gasped, only he has no idea why!"

"See? That's what I mean; I don't usually swear because I don't usually want to, not because we didn't know how in the 40's. I was a soldier, for God's sake! I don't chase girls and sleep around either, but believe me, people liked sex back then just as much then as they do now. And they sure as heck had more time to get it since they weren't on the internet all the time, either! Folks probably think I'd be shocked and appalled to find out what those fellas upstairs get up to when they're alone, but believe me, between growing up around here, shooting the USO films in Hollywood, and three years in the Army, there wasn't a lot left to my imagination. Geez, I'm not a virgin just because Ingrid Bergman never took her top off onscreen."

Tony set his chin in his hand and hummed happily over his bourbon. "You do realize that this is the weirdest Birds and the Bees conversation ever known to man, don't you?" Steve fought his chuckle and lost, covering his face with one broad palm. "Don't get me wrong," Tony grinned, "I love talking about your virginity. Or Ingrid Bergman's titties, whichever one we're talking about. Say, did you ever get to see them when you were debauching Hollywood in the silver age?"

Steve shook his head, still laughing. "Okay, first, I never met Ingrid Bergman; second, I'm pretty sure she wasn't that kinda gal; and third, I prefer brunettes anyway."

Tony thought of Agent Carter and smirked. "Course you do. But who wouldn't make an exception for Ingrid Bergman's-"

"My point," Steve steamrolled over Tony's comment with a glower. "The point I was making is this: imagine if your grandkids judged your life: everything about you, everything you cared about, everything you might think or know or say or do, or even understand, by only what they knew about Twilight and The Jersey Shore."

Tony grabbed for the bourbon and swigged to cover his shudder. "You lost me at 'grandkids,' Cap," he declared after a long pull. That won him another laugh, and Tony savored it like the burn of golden booze trickling down his throat to curl smugly in his belly. He let the silence rest between them for a long moment before setting his forearms on the table and seeking Steve's gaze with his own.

"So I'm asking then;" he announced, "Hollywood assumptions aside, what are you doing here, Steve? I know you're not hiding from us. Hell, you've seen every one of the Avengers more wrecked than you were the other night. We all struggle with our ghosts, and half the time you're the one turning up with the cookies and milk to talk us down off the ledge afterwards," Steve looked down, and yeah he was blushing now. Tony didn't let it distract him. "So why the hell are you alone in the dark, drinking shitty gin that isn't gonna get you so much as buzzed, in the basement of a place with the potential to give Fury a goddamned stroke if the press spotted you here?"

Steve looked up and caught his gaze for a moment, unguarded now, but still not quite decided. Then he looked down at the glass in his hand and smiled. "You're right. This gin is really horrible. I always hated it, but... Bucky liked to drink the stuff when he could get it. Made him feel all grown up, I guess. Sometimes when my asthma kicked up hard and I couldn't shake it, he'd make me drink some just in case it might help." He knocked back the shot and grimaced.

"See, there was a time -- a long time, when the only person in the world who cared whether I was
alive or dead was Bucky. He wasn't just my best friend, he was the only one I had -- my only constant, no matter what else caught fire and burned down."

"You loved him?" Shit. Why had he asked that? What the fuck was wrong with his mouth? Tony flicked a panicked glance at the bottle beside him, but it wasn't nearly empty enough to account for drunk-mouth yet. "Sorry," he grimaced. "You don't have to-"

"I know," Steve's weary smile was all absolution. "And yeah, of course I loved him, though not in the way you're thinking. Wouldn't have mattered if I had anyway, because Bucky was all about the girls, and they were all about him, but it wasn't like that with us. He took care of me when I couldn't, and when nobody else would have bothered.

"That time I went and busted the 107th out of HYDRA's base in Italy; that first mission where your Dad dropped me behind the lines?" He glanced at Tony, who nodded, then he took up the shotglass again. "That was the first time I ever saved Bucky's life, but he'd saved mine dozens of times by then. Not just from bullies and in stupid fights, either. I mean times when I'd have just... quit breathing if he hadn't been there yelling at me, telling me he'd never forgive me if I didn't keep trying. Times when he caught me climbing the stairs to our apartment too fast, and had to catch me before I passed out and broke my neck falling. Times when I was too weak to hold a spoon, so he did it for me. Times when I couldn't get warm, and he put every blanket and coat we had on me, and wouldn't keep even one back for himself. When I got rheumatic fever, he stole money so the hospital couldn't turn me away. He never would tell me where that money came from."

Tony watched Steve turn the shot glass around and around in his fingers, and thought about Pepper, thought about Rhodey, why he'd built Dummy when he was a kid, and then Jarvis when he thought he wasn't anymore. Thought about how dying by inches had felt, how much he'd wanted them never to know, never to worry, never to be sad, never to try their best to save him when they could only fail. Then he decided to keep his mouth shut and have some more bourbon.

"When Dr. Erskine offered me the chance to get over to the war," Steve went on, "I took it for a lot of different reasons. I did want to be strong enough to do my duty, and I did want to stop what the Nazis were doing over in Europe. But a big reason, maybe the biggest one, if I'm honest, was that I wanted to repay Bucky for all the times he'd saved me." He looked at his hands and laughed, dry and mirthless. "But I don't think I got halfway through the tally before he fell."

'And I couldn't catch him.' The words hung, unspoken but obvious in the silence.

"You don't think he was keeping score, do you?" Tony asked, the bourbon's glow just enough to make him wise, but not yet insulting. It was a fine line, really, but he'd long since memorized the landmarks of Drunkselvania, and could probably navigate them concussed as well as from behind four days of sleep debt. "Because I can't imagine anybody you'd look up to like that counting coup on you."

"Him? No." Steve smiled, shook his head and damn well looked like he loved the guy 'like that' after all. "I think he just was used to protecting me. He didn't stop even after the serum, after I came into the war properly. He was my eyes behind, making sure nobody could get up into my blind spot. Even with all the serum did to me, he still found ways to take care of me... right up to the end."

"I can't say I understand," Tony admitted, wanting to chase out the haunted look that had come back up over Steve's face. "I mean, I'd like to, but I never really... see, there were a lot of people who probably saved my life when I was young and brilliant and stupid, but mostly they did it because it would have been really inconvenient for me to die in front of them." Steve's eyebrows knit, a protest rising to his lips until Tony stalled it with a hand wave and went on. "I think Pepper was the first one who ever saved me because she still wanted me around, but I was paying her salary, so I didn't
understand that for a long, long time. Almost too long, in the end. I think if I ever tried to count up all
the times she's saved me from myself, she might actually be so offended that she'd leave."

Steve cut him a sideways glance. "She wouldn't."

"Redhead," Tony scoffed into the bottle. "The rumors of temper are entirely justified."

"Nuts. She's crazy about you," Steve replied. "I've only lived in the Tower for two months and I can
tell that already. Pepper would sooner cut off an arm than ditch you."

"Bet Barnes felt the same about you," Tony dared with a grin. Then he saw the flinch in Steve's
eyes, remembered that Barnes had ditched him; he'd gone to war, leaving Steve behind until Erskine
stepped in and vetoed fate. Fuck. Tony wanted to snatch those stupid words back and choke on
them, because he definitely had drunk mouth going on now, dammit. Instead, Tony boosted his chin
and refused to look away. He figured if this conversation was going down in flames, then by God he
would ride it proudly to the ground in a trailing cloud of metal guitars and screaming tenor.

Steve declined to explode though. He held his silence for nearly long enough to make Tony's head
feel like it was going to explode, but at the scraping end of the flickering, measuring stare, just when
Tony thought he might soon begin to chug the remaining third of the bottle if someone didn't say
something, Cap gave him a sad little smile.

"I'm not here to mourn him, you know." Steve caught Tony's boosted eyebrow and shook his head.
"Did enough of that at SHIELD when they first woke me up. Didn't have anything else to do but
think, punch sandbags, and try not to sleep. Kind of got it out of my system then. Or I thought I
had." His lips gave that wry sideways quirk, then he sighed. "Anyway, tomorrow's Bucky's
birthday. Or it would have been. We used to go out together, just him and me nights before our
birthdays, because he always had a date for his, and I... I liked to go out and watch the fireworks on
mine."

Tony considered that against his own birthday traditions, then reached out and snagged the gin bottle
from Steve's elbow. It was nearly empty, but Tony's practiced eye told him it held just enough paint-
stripper for his purposes. "So we're celebrating Bucky's birthday then," he said as he poured a shot
into Steve's glass, then plucked it from his fingers and set the bottle into its place.

"Yeah," Steve sighed, taking up the bottle and sloshing the one shot remaining around the bottom as
if he could read some mystery in it. "And saying goodbye too, I guess. It's been a year and a half... for
me, I mean. I can't keep carrying that failure around on me. God knows I'll have plenty to take its
place the way things go with us."

"Because you can't save everyone all the time," Tony agreed, because it sucked beyond the telling,
but it was true for the both of them. For all of them.

Steve nodded, still lost in the bottle's shadows. "No, we can't. And I'll never forget him, but I can't
have my head full of Bucky when it comes time to save the world, so... I guess it's time I let my hero
rest." Steve sat up straight in his chair and held out his bottle for Tony to clink. "To Bucky Barnes;
best friend a guy could ask for."

Jesus, that gin was so terrible it was clogging Tony's throat at arm's length, making his eyes water
and sting. He tapped glass to bottle anyway, and turned to salute the grimy little window, and the last
trace of a guy who'd made Steve Rogers live long enough to become Captain America.

"To Bucky and Steve; Best Friends Forever," he said, and tossed the shot down his throat, where it
burned like a tiny, white sun behind his breast.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Blown My Girlfriend Off. Or Up. *~

"Shit! Ratfuck motherfelching cockswallowing sonofabitch!" Tony jammed the keys into the Jaguar's ignition and cranked it to life. "Jarvis!"

"Ah, you are alive then," came the reply from the car's speakers. "Good to hear your dulcet tones, sir. How may I assist you?"

"First, can the sarcasm, because you are not Jeeves, and this… this disaster was completely NOT my fault," Tony answered, frowning at his reflection in the rear view, then tugging down his sunglasses to scrub soot off his cheek. "It was so completely not my fault that when you order flowers -- Pepper I'm Really Horribly Sorry #8, by the way, the one with the purple orchids, -- you're going to have them billed to Dr. Reed Goddamned Richards, and you're going to send him a note that says that he's not ever allowed to borrow my tools again if he keeps modifying them before he gives them back!"

There was a burn mark in the collar of his jacket. Goddamnit. A great brown scar that matched the frizzled hair behind his ear, and was absolutely going to get him yelled at if Pepper put it together with their missed lunch date and came up with bullet holes. This was supposed to have been a matter of Tony swinging by Reed's lab, picking up the bot, and dropping it off at the Tower before meeting Pepper. Instead it had turned into Tony unarmored and getting shot at by his own machines while he was heading off Richards' accidental venture into super villainy and intergalactic conquest! "Just a few improvements," his stretchy white ass!

"And by the way, you can let Richards know I said that putting a faraday cage around his reference library is fifteen steps to the right of paranoid, even if he DOES have a best frienemy forever in Dr. Doom," he added, struggling out of the jacket and tossing it into the back seat.

"Duly noted, sir."

"That had better not be amusement I hear in your voice. I did not program you to find humor in my pain!"

"I have no sense of humor of which I am aware, sir."

"Ok, two things; first, you are never to sample Tommy Lee Jones' voice at me again, for any reason. Second, take a note; improve the EMP shielding on the next run of StarkPhones," he said as he put the Jag in gear. "Especially the goddamned battery components. How many times did Pepper call?"

"You have three voice messages from Ms. Potts, and six text messages. Shall I cue them for you, or would you prefer a summary of content?"

"No no no. No summary. You enjoy those too much. Is there anything besides what a horrible slacker I am and how she can't count on me for anything?" He backed out of the parking spot at a speed unsafe enough to settle his nerves, then whipped the car around with a squeal as soon as he had room to do so in the low, narrow garage.

"Ms. Potts did extend several suggestions which might be anatomically improbable for any save Dr. Richards, and she also seems to have taken Captain Rogers to lunch in your place," Jarvis answered
as Tony shoved his way into traffic.

"She took Steve?" Tony zipped around a double-parked truck, exchanged hand signs with a taxi, and reclaimed his lane. "Ok, that's probably fair. Lemme guess, he felt sorry watching her wait around the Tower for me and did that gentlemanly thing with his elbow, and she went all gooey."

"An accurate summary sir," Jarvis agreed. "Also, if you intend to maintain this velocity, may I suggest you take 7th? The lunch traffic at Boyds appears to be thicker than normal."

"Got it," Tony answered and banged a right. "So lunch. Are they still there? What time was the meeting set for? Three?" The dashboard clock read a spiteful two fifty at him.

"The meeting with the HoratioCorp board of directors is scheduled for three o'clock, sir," Jarvis agreed. "According to GPS data, Ms. Potts and Captain Rogers are no longer at Claire's Tea Room, but appear to be in the HoratioCorp headquarters, en route to conference room three."

"What, she's taking him to the meeting? GET OUT OF THE WAY, ASSHOLE!" He skidded around a skateboarder and hopped the curb a little getting around the next corner. "Jarvis, dial."

"Ms. Potts, or Captain-

"Place the call!" Tony gritted, forced to stop for a red light. The skateboarder gave him a finger as he cut the lane and sailed on by. The ring buzzed once. Twice. Tony could fucking SEE the HoratioCorp building from where he sat.

"I'm busy right now, Mr. Stark," Pepper said the instant the line went live, her voice all sharp angles and disappointment. "Excuses will have to-"

"Richards blew up my phone," Tony said at once. "I swear I didn't forget, Pepper!"

"What?" Steve's Captain voice cut into the line. Because of course Jarvis had added Steve in on the party line, just so Tony would have a witness for his groveling apology. Jarvis sucked like that. "Are you all right? Why did-

"Oh. Hi Cap," Tony managed not to groan. "Lab accident. No big, but it meant I couldn't get messages or call till I got back to my car. And you remember how Richards loves to hear himself talk?"

"Tony..." Pepper's warning voice. Oh, he was in so much shit.

"Pepper, I'm on my way," he rallied to the point as the light changed at last. "You don't need to take Cap to the meeting. Horatio will love him, sure, but that'll only last until the board wants him to spout off the advance figures, and-

"Relax, Stark," Steve cut him off, amused, or possibly annoyed. "I'm just here to carry Pepper's dispatches in. Not planning to stay."

"My assistant didn't show up at the print shop," Pepper added. "Steve offered to help. Do you have something other than excuses or insults to add to my day, Tony, or are we done here?"

"Three minutes. Five if I don't break any laws," Tony clipped, putting his foot down to get around an embassy car. "Come on, Pep, you can be five minutes late!"

"This is the third time we've had to reschedule this meeting," she countered, frost beginning to steam. "Horatio's never been very open to us, you know that. Their interests have always been in coal and
crude, but they're finally willing to come to the table with us on arc technology, and I am NOT going to play games with their goodwill just so you-

"Fine," Tony cut her off, "Fine. Tell them I'm on my way then. I'm not going to leave you on your own for this. Not after the last time Jerry Horatio-

"If you're just coming to defend my virtue, you can turn around and go home."

Tony grimaced, thinking of the last time he'd seen the old man; a leer making his face ugly when he watched Pepper walk by them at a cocktail party. "You're not known for your good choices lately, Stark," he'd said, "But this one's not so bad. Skinny's good. You can one-hand the skinny ones and not even drop your drink."

"No, Pep, I really can't. I'm almost there-

"Well we're here right now," she answered over the creak of a door. "And it looks like Horatio's PA didn't even wait to see us in, which should tell you how close the board is to checking out altogether. We're going in now, so you ca-" And then she gasped.

Tony was intimately familiar with every flavor of Pepper's gasps -- after all, he'd spent better than ten years causing most of them. Mortification, frustration, pleasure, dread, giddy amazement, disgust, alarm, orgasm, all these he'd heard in a hundred nuances during their time together; but he hadn't yet heard this one. Because this one was white with fear, jagged, panicked, and clipped off short under a squeak of pain.

Steve hissed through his teeth. Something clattered.

Then Pepper shrieked, "NO! STEVE, DON'T!" And Tony's heart stopped dead in his chest. He stomped on the brakes, skidded sidelong into a bus lane and killed the Jag's engine so he could listen for the end of the world.

There was breathing, taut and quick. Someone made a whimpering sound in their throat. Someone else growled a low hum of warning. Someone else laughed, high and mean.

"Pepper?" It was a tiny voice, starved and shaking thin, and Tony didn't recognize it as his own until he heard her take a breath to respond.

"Don't panic, okay?" She said, though her own voice was shaking. "Let's not have anyone panic."

"I don't care if you panic," a strange voice answered, close enough that Tony could picture the stranger's lips next to Pepper's ear, maybe a hand in her hair, and a gun -- it would have to be a gun, wouldn't it? -- against the perfect arch of her throat. "I don't care who fucking panics. Scream all you want. It won't help. I'm not leaving till he gets here. Then we're leaving together, him and me!"

"You really don't want to-" Steve began.

"SHUT UP!" the voice screamed, volume blanking out the bluetooth signal for a second. "-Ver there. Right by the door. You move, and I swear you'll be wearing her brains before you get two steps."

"He won't move." Pepper again, in that voice Tony knew from a hundred times when she'd talked him out of the grip of his baser instincts. "He won't. He doesn't want you to set the bombs off any more than I do."

Bombs. Jesus fucking Christ! Tony scrubbed at his face, feeling his brain shake off the panic like a
dog shedding water. Then he dove over the back seat for the spare tablet he'd stashed in his briefcase. "Jarvis, deploy the Suit. Then give me eyes in Horatio's conference room three. I don't care whose firewalls you have to kick down, I need to see what's happening! Steve!"

He got a barely-audible, questioning hum for response as Jarvis began punching holes in HoratioCorp's security on the tablet.

"The bombs. How many? Where are they?"

A cough. It sounded something like a muffled "three." Because of course Steve couldn't give a goddamned sitrep; not with some asshole holding a gun to Pepper's head and waiting for an excuse to-

No. Stop it. Focus.

"Jarvis, get me eyes!"

"There appears to be a virus at work in the HoratioCorp system, sir. It has disabled all security cameras on the third floor. There also appears to be a wireless signal connecting three receptor nodes to a single phone."

"Dead man's switch," Steve murmured, muffled behind his hand. It earned him a curse and another order to shut the fuck up, and it shut down Tony's hope that he could use Steve to help him figure out what to do.

"You could let the rest of the board members go, you know," Pepper suggested, smooth as milk over his panic. "You've got plenty of hostages, between me, my assistant, and those three you've got wired up over there. Nobody has to get hurt."

The bomber laughed, high and shrill -- the laugh of a man who was dead already, knew it, and was actually looking forward to getting to fall over. "Lady, you have no idea how many have already been hurt by that monster!" Tony closed his eyes, ground his teeth, and forced himself to listen in silence. "Oh, he's kept his own hands clean, hasn't he? And sure, he's polishing up his image now, all green energy and kissing babies, but where the fuck was this fake conscience when his company was killing people by the thousands? It was drinking and whoring in Washington, buying politicians and selling murder, and pretending it didn't know what his filthy blood money was made out of!"

"I'm coming," Tony ground out. "Tell him I'm coming. Tell him he can have me, I won't even fight him, just-"

"Who are you talking about?" Steve's voice cut through the gunman's rant and Tony's ramble both.

"Shut up! You know damned well who!"

"Um, I'm sorry," Christ, nobody could do puzzled idiocy like Cap could. "I really don't. I'm kind of new here, so... if I'm gonna be collateral damage, I'd like to know who it is you actually want so bad that you're willing to kill the rest of us too."

"And yourself," Pepper pointed out, still calm. "Because unless that phone you're holding has some special tricks in it, this is going to be the end for you too when those bombs go off. Shouldn't we all be sure exactly who's to blame?"

It was in Tony then to scream at them for twisting the knife. Bad enough to be listening to this, to sit by in a fucking car, close enough to see the building, but not close enough to GET THERE. Bad enough to listen to his world being destroyed, did he have to hear his name slapped into the driver's
seat too? But then the tablet in his hands gave a buzz, and Tony opened his eyes to see a patchy amalgam of the webcams in the room. Just distraction enough. Barely.

The whole HoratioCorp board of directors looked to be there. Twenty people, silent as sheep in their chairs, too terrified to lift their eyes to where the man... no... woman? The bomber was holding Pepper around the waist, phone just visible in her fist, gun just visible in the other hand.

"Who's to blame?" she growled, ugly with hatred. "Whose name is on the fucking building, you idiots?"

"Horatio," Steve said.

And Pepper echoed, "Horatio."

Not Stark. Horatio. Jerry Horatio. Who wasn't in the room with the rest of his board. Who probably hadn't even intended to show up at the meeting at all. Horatio. Not Stark. Not Stark! Tony could hardly breathe past the sudden evaporation of the weight on his chest. Relief was humming in his ears, dizzying and cold, and louder than the woman's rants about Arizona uranium mines, fly ash dumps in Tennessee and poisoned well water in West Virginia.

Tony tipped his face back to meet the roaring approach of his suit, and it was absolutely dust that was making his eyes water like that, because the New York streets were filthy, that was all. He blinked them clear, tossed the tablet into the back, and flung himself out of the car without a second glance, arms wide to welcome the tight, clanging embrace of his better self. "I'm inbound," he told Steve and Pepper, sure and strong now as the armor folded around him, impervious, implacable, and bracing. "Jarvis, can you disrupt the ignition signal before-"

"Inadvisable, sir," Jarvis came back, bringing up the HUD as Tony's faceplate snapped closed. "It appears the devices have already been armed and triggered. The cell phone appears to be a manual interrupt in the code. If I were to interrupt the signal, or alter its strength in any way, I believe detonation would be instantaneous."

Tony swore as he kicked off the street, and heard Steve echo it softly over the roar of his repulsor boots.

"Hey!" A voice hailed Tony from below. "Hey, you can't leave that there!"

A traffic cop. Great. Precisely what he needed. "Keys are in the ignition," he called back to the young man, "Just do me a favor and drive it to impound, okay? It fucks up the alignment when you boot it." Then Tony knocked the repulsors up high and blazed like an arrow toward the HoratioCorp tower block.

"Okay, so we've got to get control of that phone," he said into the open comm. "Pepper, you're closest. Could you grab it and keep her thumb down on the key?"

"Your gun," Pepper said at once, mild and easy, "it's really hurting my chin. I promise not to struggle -- look, both hands right where you can see them, but... could you please ease up just a little?"

"Steve? I'm almost there. Can you get the gun, or,"

"Look, just back off, all right?" Steve answered, projecting enough nervous fear and annoyance to cover the order meant for Tony. In the HUD, Tony watched him spread his hands on the table, just by an abandoned briefcase stacked with typical corporate tech-trash. "You're in control here, nobody's challenging you. We're waiting for Mr. Horatio, just like you said, and none of us want to see what happens when that... that weird blue stuff goes off."
Weird blue stuff. *Shit!* Tony braked his flight, then circled up high, out of sight of the windows. The grainy amalgamation of webcam feed let Tony barely make out a glow around the breast and belly of the three board members in the corners of the room, but the resolution was too shitty for him to make out any useful details.

"The blue stuff, Steve," he asked, hovering over the rooftop, "Is it white-blue like the tesseract, or green-blue like the school bombs? Which?" Steve coughed twice under the bomber's answering rant, and Tony swore. "I can't go in there until... *Shit, Steve, you have to disar-"

And then they were out of time.

One of the old men huddling along the wall broke for the door; a scramble of knees, elbows, and thousand-dollar suit that ended in a loud noise, a headshot-sprawl, and a riot of shrieks from the other hostages. Tony stopped breathing, stopped thinking, could only watch as on the grainy HUD, Pepper grabbed the bomber's phone hand in both of her own and ducked down low. The gun swung back toward her head. He couldn't watch, couldn't close his eyes, couldn't fucking *blink*. Pepper couldn't fucking die. She just couldn't. It wasn't possible. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

Then Steve's arm uncoiled from across his body, and someone's abandoned tablet flashed across the room, clipping the bomber's wrist and shattering into a mess of plastic, glass and blood. A Blackberry struck home right behind it, smashing fingers, spinning the gun loose through the air. Then Steve was on her. Apparently hitting a girl was not a thing for him, because he didn't blink twice as he put the shrieking woman on the floor with one swift punch. Pepper followed her down, clinging to her hand all the way.

Nothing exploded. Seconds ticked by under the wailing of Horatio's boardmembers, who'd finally found their goddamned voices now there wasn't any reason left to fucking panic, and still there was no earth-shattering kaboom.

Tony sobbed a breath and let the armor settle to the rooftop, blinking spots from his eyes as the executives bolted for the conference room doors like shipwreck rats. "The bombs," he managed, "the phone's signal is the trigger. Don't let the hostages get out of range until-

"On it," Steve's voice cut him off. On the HUD, he stood to intercept the two wired-up executives who had begun edging toward the doors. "Please wait ma'am, sir. We'll get those off you as soon as we can, but it's not safe for you to leave this room until we do. Jarvis, are you monitoring this call?"

"Yes, Captain Rogers," Jarvis replied, "how may I assist you?"

"Tony said the phone signal is the trigger. Is it safe for me to turn off this ear thing and switch to the hand phone so you can let him see these things, or would that risk disrupting the other phone's signal?" He knelt in front of the woman nearest the door, and Tony could see his head tilt up to offer a brief, and probably reassuring smile. "Also, please update SHIELD on what's happening here."

"I don't need Fury nosing into-" Tony began.

Jarvis cut him off. "SHIELD has been monitoring this call since Ms. Potts entered the conference room, Captain. Dispatch informs me that Agents and police are currently on their way to the scene."

"Snitch," Tony grumbled, and was summarily ignored by all.

"The signal strength of the interference phone is good, Captain," Jarvis went on, implacable and smug, "it should be stable enough. I am switching your receiver and activating your phone's video mode now." And then the grainy, shitty HUD image faded into a beautifully clear shot up Steve'
nose. Then it swiveled dizzyingly, and Tony was looking into a pair of well-dressed breasts that might have been downright decorative if not for the bomb duct taped underneath them.

"Okay," Tony said, his brain seizing on the design with drowning desperation. "Okay. We can do this. Pepper, are you okay? Can we do this?"

Pepper gasped again, and it was the most beautiful sound in the whole world, because Tony knew exactly which gasp it was; it was the 'oh my god, Tony Stark, if you don't stop talking I will step on your feet with my extremely pointy shoes' gasp. "We are okay, Tony. Now be a good boy and tell Steve how to keep us from exploding, all right?"

"Anything for you, sweetheart," he said, and meant it.

~* Climbed Over The Guy On The Wire. *~

Tony was down the hall through the conference room doors at a run the instant Steve cut the last of the wires, shoving his way through the crowd of gawkers and the half-assed perimeter that Horatio's security had established around the entrance without a second thought. He was in the Suit, after all -- what were the mall cops gonna do about it? Tony figured Horatio was lucky he bothered to run instead of flying through the goddamned doors with the repulsors incinerating everything in his wake.

When Tony crashed in, Pepper was just sitting up, rumpled, flushed and lovely; just beginning to shake the blood back into her hands. Tony dove to his knees, gold/titanium alloy skidding on the cheap industrial carpeting, and caught her into a hug that would have been a tackle if not for the stabilizers in the Suit. She folded into him with a watery squeak, rocking his weight back onto his heels as he hefted her slim body against his armored chest and just held on.

He couldn't feel her skin, or the yielding press of her breasts and arms against him; could barely register her weight in the armor, but he could smell her perfume, could hear her sobbing ramble in his ear, could kiss her hair, her cheek, her neck, her lips under the shelter of the opened facemask. And it was enough. For now, with her shaking in his arms and him shaking in his armor, it was enough, because his Pepper was warm and alive, and absolutely, positively not dead.

He was aware, on some level, of Steve helping the last hostages get out of their duct taped jackets, marshalling the HoratioCorp Security people away from the boardroom, and shooing the EMTs away from the pair of them. But mostly Tony's head was full of Pepper's voice, quavering and shaky and beautiful, telling him over and over and over, "It wasn't your fault. It's okay. We're okay. You saved us."

And he knew, in the pit of his guts, that he'd pick it all apart in the shaking darkness of three am; that he'd be drunk with self-blame and loathing that he hadn't been there, hadn't walked first through the door, hadn't stood between them and death, even if it would have killed him. He knew the demons of what-if would find him, as they always did, but just at that moment, with Pepper vital in his arms, with Steve bustling quietly, competently around them, Tony was content to bury his face into red-amber hair and just let himself believe that Pepper's words were true. He had saved them; him and Steve and Pepper all together.

"Hey," Steve said, close and quiet sometime later, when the shaking was easing down and the tears were becoming more like laughter. "Mind if I take this out of your way?"

Tony turned, they both did, to find the man squatting just beside the still-unconscious bomber's head, his hands already under her shoulders, waiting only for Pepper to move off the woman's legs before he dragged her free. Pepper squirmed, but Tony kept his hold and engaged the Suit to thrust them
both upright -- Pepper's stocking feet coming to rest on top of his repulsor boots as if he was teaching her the steps to a dance. Steve swept the bomber up into his arms almost before either of them had regained their balance, and if Tony hadn't caught his elbow, he would have disappeared out the door again without another word.

"Steve," he said, tugging. Then again, when no other words came through the press of thousands he wanted to say, "Steve!"

He smiled in that way he had that only tilted half his lips, but lit up all his eyes. "Good job, Tony," he said, then his eyes flicked toward Pepper, and he nodded. "Ms. Potts, well done. You're welcome to handle hostage negotiations with me anytime."

That got a laugh from Pepper, which was obviously what Steve had been after, because the smile spread out wide and made itself at home when she shook her head fiercely and said, "Not on your life, Rogers!"

"Can't blame you for that," he agreed. Then he glanced through the open door behind Tony, and his smile faded a little. "Listen, SHIELD's sending a helicopter. Agent Coulson says it'll be on the roof in a few minutes."

"Like hell," Tony said, resisting the urge to tighten his grip on Pepper. "We are so not going for a fucking debriefing after that! Fury can just kiss-"

"No debriefing, Tony," Steve cut in, calm and sure. "Straight back to Stark Tower, Phil promised. It's just too crowded to take you home by car, is all. Happy says the street is already jammed with emergency vehicles and news vans. He won't be able to get the car through till they're cleared out, and that could be hours from now. Last thing you two need to deal with right now is a crowd."

Tony sighed, and let his staying hand slip back to Pepper's waist. "You're not wrong there," he said, but Pepper's face was settling into lines that looked a lot as if she was pulling her own armor back on, getting ready to stand up and do battle.

"No, I'm… the press. I. We need to make a statement," she said, cutting an apologetic glance at Tony, as she stepped off his boots and turned to find her heels under the boardroom table. "Our shareholders will be-"

"Ms. Potts, I really think it'd be better if you made your statement from the Tower," Steve said, looking just the right amount of embarrassed when he added, "after you've had a chance to, um, freshen your makeup?"

Pepper wiped at her cheeks and was clearly horrified when her hands came away streaked with runny mascara. "Oh. Shit, you're right. But the police will need-"

"Pepper, the police have twenty other people to talk to," Tony cut in, catching her hand. "We can give our statement later. Steve, back me up here."

"It's true. I've already cleared it with the detective in charge. Once I hand her over to them, he said he's perfectly happy to call at the Tower if he needs anything from you." He gave her a guileless blue stare then, the kind that even worked on Fury, and added, "I really do think it'd be for the best."

"Come on, Pep," Tony added. "He's gonna order me to go even if you don't, and you know I won't, and then we'll have a shouting match, and the press will catch the whole thing live on camera, and SI's stock will crater because I called Captain America a dick on the eleven o clock news, and it'll be entirely your fault."
"A dick?" Steve cut him a featherweight glare, but there was a smirk underneath. "Well, I suppose an asshole would know," he said as he shrugged and carried the bomber out to the waiting cops in the hall, oblivious to the look of naked shock on Pepper's face at hearing his soldier-mouth for the first time.

"See? He's even making gay sex jokes to get us to go now!" Tony declaimed, knowing he'd won by the way Pepper finally couldn't hide her snickers. "We can't let that kind of thing get out. Think of the children! It's our duty to take Steve home so we can all eat ice cream and hide from the world, just like he says."

"For tonight," Pepper said after a long hesitation, but her stern look significantly less intimidating with mascara smudges under her eyes.

"For tonight," Tony agreed. By which he meant to say, 'For a week, a month if I can get away with it, or possibly forever,' but figured it was no time to split hairs. Pepper was a flexible girl; she'd keep up.

Steve put his head back into the room a moment later, and Tony noticed him, but decided he was a flexible sort too, and wouldn't mind waiting for their attention a little longer. Unfortunately, Pepper realized he was there only a few seconds later, and put an abrupt and half-guilty end to the kiss. Entirely unnecessary, it turned out, because Steve wasn't even blushing as they turned, just watching them both with a small, fond smile on his face. "Helicopter's here," he said as Tony stole one more kiss, "Ready to go?"

They followed him out into the hallway to find that the police and HoratioCorp's security had cleared the onlookers to well behind the bank of elevators. Tony's suspicion that was Steve's doing was born out when they didn't even see the head of Horatio's security department until they entered the elevator and found him waiting for them. He was holding down the 'door open' button with a sour look that only got worse when Steve politely but firmly demanded his keys and ordered him to get out.

"Roof access is restricted to-"

"Son, don't." Steve gave him the look that had stopped Doom Bots in their tracks. The look that said 'I really don't want to punch you in the head, but after the day I've had, it isn't off the table.' The guard took a step back, but only a small one.

"I can always fly us up to the helipad," Tony offered, all generosity. "That glass wall in the conference room would make a nice exit with just a repulsor blast or two..." And let it never be said that corporate rental cops couldn't take a hint. He preserved his dignity by refusing to hand Steve his keys though, jamming them into the elevator's console himself and punching the top button himself before stomped away.

"Idiot," Pepper observed once the doors had closed and the car began to climb. At Steve's glance, she jutted her chin and held her ground. "He is. There was a hostage situation in their headquarters! The entire board of directors, minus the CEO, was there on the cusp of being blown to hell, and that clown didn't even know about it, because he was distracted by a computer virus?" She shook her head, disgusted. "We didn't even get asked for ID when we came in, did you notice? In any of StarkIndustries' buildings, you and I would have been escorted to the meeting room by an admin and at least one security officer, just as a matter of course!"

"Can't say that would have ended better in this case, ma'am," Steve observed mildly.

Pepper sniffed, but nodded. "Well. Maybe not, no, but how in the world did that woman even get
those bombs into the building? I mean really; explosives? Right under HoratioCorp Security's noses?"

"She had expert help," Tony couldn't help the growl, "And probably a man on the inside too." The bombs had definitely been HYDRA's design, or rather, Hammer's design, based off Vanko's arc reactor designs and then sold to HYDRA, as Tony figured it had really played out. Jarvis had confirmed the specs, and that in all probability they would have gone off when Tony's arc reactor got close enough to trigger them, just as the ones in the school had earlier that month. The bomber might have been just some small town blue-collar widow with nothing left to lose by taking down Jerry Horatio in a suicide flash, (and in Tony's opinion it couldn't happen to a nicer guy,) but her suppliers had been sophisticated, well-funded, well-informed, and after some collateral damage in the form of Iron Man. Or rather, Tony Stark.

S H I E L D was going to be very interested in that woman once NYPD had finished booking her, he predicted, and he definitely wanted a few specific questions added to the interrogation list. The look in Steve's eye suggested that Tony he wasn't alone there. Horatio's week wasn't going to get better from here, no matter who got paid off.

But it was too early for that line of thinking. Tony had that whole mental agenda scheduled firmly for later that night, on the leeward side of a very expensive bottle of single malt, and hopefully a lot of comfort sex and ice cream. He was absolutely not prepared to seriously consider the machinations of his enemies until well after ice cream.

The rooftop was a riot of wind and noise, the sleek black helicopter just barely touching the tiles as it waited for them at the end of a short, hunching run. Tony wasn't actually surprised to see Coulson in the shotgun seat, his eyes either smiling-kinda, or possibly squinting against the dust as he held back the door. You could never really tell with Coulson.

Steve handed them both in, his hunched posture under the downdraft reminding Tony that they hadn't really had choppers back in his day. The Army hadn't started using helicopters until Korea, and that was at least a decade after Cap had- backed away and started heading for the access door again? The hell?

"Hey, where d'you think you're going?" Tony called after him. "Tower! Ice cream! Leaving this mess to the pros, remember?"

Steve half turned, tossing them an ironic salute. "Gonna stay and get my report over with," he shouted over the wind. "I'll come back with Happy later. Last thing you two need right now is a crowd."

"Steve, come on," Pepper leaned past him to shout, but Steve didn't turn back, and a moment later he was back through the door and disappearing down the maintenance stairs.

"That asshole," Tony mused as Coulson shut the door on the wind and cut the rotor noise in half.

"What?" Pepper turned on him with a glare that was still a little moist.

"He's lying on the goddamned wire," Tony explained as the chopper lifted into the air and away over the city, "He's lying on the wire so we can crawl over him. That son of a bitch."

"Oh," she replied, turning toward her window to watch the Horatio tower fade into the City haze. "Well I'd say that's damned nice of him, and we should think of a way to thank him." She settled back into her seat, leaning her head on the bulky thrust of Tony's shoulder armor, and sighed. "Later. After ice cream."
And lo; things begin to get Complicated. Thanks to all the folks reading, kudoing, (Is that a word?) and commenting! It really helps keep things rolling along.
Chapter Notes

Those who are reading along will note the alteration to the intended chapter total. I'd say I'm sorry for that, but I really think it's going to make the whole story that much more tasty for you all, so... la. As before though, I'm at least a little ahead of this point in my text, so you should be able to expect weekly updates. (Unless there are zombies. My contract doesn't cover zombies.)

Hope you enjoy this chapter!

~* Lost A Game Of Simon Says, *~

The phone rang only twice before the signal engaged. "Hello?"

Tony grinned, imagining the expression that just had to go with that dazed, fuzzy voice. Probably not too different from the picture Tony had on his phone, in fact. "Hey Steve. I didn’t wake you up, did I?"

There came a sigh, and a rustle of sheets. "Mm. Don't worry about it. What do you need?"

"I totally did," Tony laughed, propping his feet on his workbench next to the old prototype of Cap's shield, and tilting the desk chair back on two wheels. "What is it out there, nine o clock? I'd have thought you'd be up, run twenty eight miles, rescued ten treed kittens, and made breakfast for a soup kitchen by this time of the morning."

"Funny," Steve observed. "But not after last night. I got in late."

"Yeah, we noticed that. Your ice cream's in the freezer -- it's the carton marked 'dead mouse and cilantro flavor', but don't worry, it's actually caramel pistachio. We just wrote that to keep Thor out of it until you could get your share."

"Um… thanks?"

"Don't mention it." Tony waved a hand airily, and entertained himself with the unlikely but harmless notion that Steve had been sleeping in the nude. "No really, don't. Because if you'd turned up last night like you were supposed to, none of this subterfuge would have been necessary. So now it's explanation time. What kept you out past three this morning? Or should I say 'whom', because I'm pretty sure not even NYPD can be that slow at taking statements. Not unless you told them you were with Occupy."

Steve answered with a sigh that sounded like it had to fight its way out from behind a scrubbing hand. " Went to SHIELD HQ after," he managed in a moment. "Figured I'd give Fury the sitrep, since with HYDRA involved it's probably their bag anyhow. So I went to get things rolling over there. Took awhile before SHIELD demolitions would release one of the bombs to me so I could bring it back to the Tower though."

Tony sat upright with a lurch. "You brought me a bomb? A whole one? Of my very own? And here I thought you didn't like me!"
"You thought no such thing," Steve snorted, but Tony could hear the laughter beneath it. "Figured we needed to get ahead of that arc-reactor triggering device. Fury agreed. Jarvis let me put it in your workshop, in the shielded box behind the bots' charging stations. Surprised you haven't found it already."

He had to smirk at that. Trust the Super Soldier to hear the whir of servos and electrical hum through the phone line and add it up to four. "Well, I probably would, only I'm not in that workshop right now. Which you'd know if you hadn't ditched us to pick up another merit badge last night."

"I didn't ditch-"

"But I want you to know that Pepper and I have forgiven you."

Another sigh. "Thanks. That's real big of you."

"It is," he agreed, ignoring the sarcasm. "Mainly because we wound up ditching you when you didn't get your ass back or, you know, answer your stupid phone at a reasonable hour last night. But it's totally good, because we'll just send the jet back to La Guardia once it's done refueling, and you can-"

"Tony, what are you talking about? Where are you?"

"Malibu! Keep up, Steve! Say, do you own a speedo? Cause there's definitely going to be swimming, and maybe surfing, and if anybody's blessed with speedo-privilege it's got to be you."

"What the heck's a -- Tony, I can't run off to California!"

"Bullshit," Tony cut off the expected protest, standing to pace the length of his workbench and back. "Of course you can. The Fantastic Four can handle the heroing for a week; especially since Richards damn well owes me for that stunt he pulled with my bot yesterday."

"No, I-"

"And if something drops that's too big for SHIELD or The Four, the X Men are just upstate," he pushed on, not sounding desperate or needy in the least. "You're due for leave, soldier. Don't make me get Fury to bench you!"

"Uh huh. Good luck with that." Steve's chuckle was unexpected, and perhaps the only thing that could have stalled Tony's patter. "I can't go to California this week because Fury's sending me, Clint, and Natasha to Indiana instead."

"Indiana? What the fuck's in-"

"White supremacist groups, apparently," Steve said around a yawn. "Terrorist leanings. Looks like they've been picking up HYDRA tech, or something like it, on the black market."

Well fuck. Tony looked at the windows, and the sky that was just streaking over with pink and gold outside. "Ok, get me the coordinates. I can meet you guys there, and-"

"It's a covert op, Tony," Steve put in hastily. "Strictly intel-gathering, and under cover. You're a bit too high-profile for a job like this."

Tony snorted. "Oh yeah, and you blend, six foot four, blond and blue! Even among Aryans you're kind of conspicuous." Then, when Steve took a long, narrow breath through his nose, Tony realized what he'd said. "Shit. I didn't mean-"
"I know," he said, taut and clipped. "It's fine. And thanks for the invitation, really, but this isn't just a duty thing. Fury says there might be a link between the bomber and whoever's selling weapons to these clowns, and I want to help track it down. We don’t need more of those bombs turning up in our way next time we muster out."

And damn it, there wasn't much Tony could say to that, was there? Not with someone (whose name rhymed with 'rusting slammer,' no doubt,) doing his best to turn the world into a landmine, and Tony into a mobile detonator. He swore under his breath and let it go with a private promise that he would hack the mission report as soon as they were done with the phone call and have Jarvis ride ghost over their shoulders as far as he could. Pepper wouldn't even have to know about that, right?

Steve took his silence for acquiescence though, and continued in a warmer tone than before. "You and Pepper just take the week and relax, okay? All of this will wait till you get back, and you're not wrong about the Fantastic Four and the X Men. We'll be fine, and you two… you deserve a break after yesterday."

Tony almost hurt himself resisting the urge to roll his eyes, until he remembered that Steve couldn't see him, and just went ahead and did it. "Jesus, Rogers, if you burst into song I swear I'll puke right in your ear."

That won him a laugh. "Fine. I'm going to have a shower then. You should go back to bed before Potts realizes you're gone."

"Yes mom," Tony answered, because they both knew he wouldn't. "Keep me updated on things, ok? I mean it; I expect a call every day, or I'll start feeling left out and have to come crash your little party."

"Yes mom," Steve answered in kind, and ended the call.

Tony returned to the workbench and stared down at the plans, brushing one delicate paper corner flat with reverent fingers that half expected to come away smudged with blue ink. "Change of plans, Jarvis," he said after a moment. "We're going to start the build out here instead of New York. I don't want to risk him walking in on it before we're done."

"Sir, most of the machining utilities have been relocated to Stark Tower already. I will not be able to produce all of the necessary components using only what remains in this workshop."

"Co opt some line time from SI Malibu's plant then," he answered, closing Howard's journal and setting it back into the trunk with all the other forgotten data that SHIELD had given him back when his arc reactor had been killing him. "Or hell, spread it around to the other SI plants, if production doesn't have the slack for it here. I don't care. I want the major components ready for assembly by the end of the week."

"Very good, sir," Jarvis replied as Tony sipped at his coffee and grimaced to find it cold. "Will we be building both designs?"

"Eventually," Tony answered, and if his smile gave too much away to the grey light of morning, Tony didn't care, because Jarvis could only judge him so much. "But we're starting with this one."

He tapped a monitor and projected the scanned design into the air before him where it stained the rising dawn light with green and blue. "Yeah. This is definitely the one. But start with the frame only today. I want some time to tweak a few things before we really get going…"

~* Lost a Game of Marco Polo *~
It was probably due to the severity of the bomb scare that Tony and Pepper's 'weeklong getaway' lasted a whole four days before dissolving into work for both of them. Ninety-six hours from being unable to go five minutes without touching each other, to full immersion in separate projects in separate places and on separate schedules. It beat out their previous record (Venice, 70 hours, depending on how you wanted to count the flight time,) and set a new bar of couple-immersion.

So when Tony woke up to an empty bed instead of a cuddly redhead on Tuesday morning, he was slightly more impressed with how long they'd lasted than he was disappointed in the lack of wake-up sex. And yeah, maybe he was also a bit relieved that now he could finally disappear into the workshop and play without getting told off, too. If Pepper was going to cheat on their vacation with work, then Tony could get his genius on with the unexpected treasures he'd uncovered downstairs in the bones of his particle accelerator when visions of bloody could-have-beens refused to let him sleep.

So he let Pepper go headlong into reassuring the StarkIndustries Board of Directors and Shareholders that foiling a homegrown terrorist plot was just part of the Iron Man street cred and needn't involve the company in any terrifying way. It was the kind of thing she excelled at; convincing the sheep that the sound of wolves fighting to the death just out of sight wasn't anything to worry about. Tony was never more impressed with his genius than when he got to sit back with a drink and watch how brilliant she was at the job once he'd got out of her way and let do it properly. Athena in Jimmy Choos, all the way.

Meanwhile he got his Hephaestus on, and sat down with his tablet, his AI, and his innate genius to blow the doors off the most awesome thing his dad ever made. Or maybe that was more of an Apollo thing. Or… no, Hermes, definitely Hermes, with the flying boots and all. Apollo was totally Steve's gig. Anyway it was a match made in some kind of Heaven-like place, even if the metaphors didn't exactly line up.

It was strange to go head's down into a project without his bots around though. Tony wouldn't have admitted it under Thor's worst tickle torture, but he had really gotten used to Dummy following him around, getting helpfully underfoot, and bothering him at inopportune times with glasses of chlorophyll. Butterfingers and You also had their quirks, and they all helped to keep Tony's lab time a bit more in-body than it tended to otherwise be, especially with his orbit crossing Peppers only for a few hours each night, and a lunch meeting he couldn't get out of if he didn't want the Board to begin to believe the tabloids' assertions that he actually was dead this time.

Again, not admitting anything, but it was just possible that Tony's brain might somewhat resent the needs of his flesh when it had a smart-on and wanted some intense cerebral gratification. When Pepper was away, it turned out that the bots helped to disrupt that hyperfocus just enough that Tony could actually realize he was about to crash blood-sugar first into his welding kit before it was too late to kill the gas feed.

Not that that had happened or anything. Recently.

Luckily though, there was Steve, who was as good as his word and called Tony twice a day to report on the mission's progress, whether anything was happening or not. He didn't give names or sensitive details, but he made time to entertain Tony with his carefully censored city-bred opinions on white-supremacist American small town life, and to his surprise, Tony found himself making time to listen. Reading between those lines was just shy of hi-fucking-larious, and better yet, it gave Tony notice to get out of the workshop, grab something from the fridge, and eat it while he tried to trick Steve into actually saying the words 'ignorant pigfucker' out loud.

"There honestly aren't as many pigs around here as you seem to think," Steve was laughing over
twangy background noise that just had to be a shit-kicker bar. "And I really don't think anybody'd... um. I mean, the girls here are... um... plenty friendly."

"Oh ho," Tony crowed, twirling a 3/8 inch wrench around his fingers as his hot pocket cooled on the coffee table, "Did I not warn you that you were the flavor of choice for the Master Race crowd? You're gonna have to have Natasha pose as your beard if you don't want to be scraping the local honey off with a shovel, pal."

The best part was how he could almost hear Steve rolling his eyes from two thousand miles away. "Yeah, thought of that. It works when she's around. Mostly. We have to be careful though, the girls around here really like to fight." He sighed when Tony laughed at him again. "At least Clint's having a good time though."

"The prince of biceps is pulling the birds in Podunk Nowhere? Well there's a shock..."

"No, really," Steve insisted, laughing. "Apparently knife throwing and archery are kind of important out here. He's making much better inroads in the group than Nat or I are. We're just distracting the locals at this point."

"So if you're that redundant, I guess I'll be seeing you around the Tower when I head back to New York on Monday." It was a shameless hint, but Tony hadn't ever seen much utility in shame when it came to getting what he wanted. Which at this point, was a chance to sit down and thank Steve for saving Pepper's life, properly, privately, and at length. And maybe a chance to talk the man into modeling the star spangled speedo Tony had picked up earlier that week, just for the principle of the thing.

The pause went on just long enough for Tony to guess what was coming. "Doubt it. I think we're gonna be here at least another week. There's still a few things left to, uh, hammer out, you know?"

Steve couldn't lie for shit, and Tony's knowledge of this was the only thing that kept him from calling him out on it. "Things to do," he leered, "or things to fondue?"

The weary sigh he got in response weighed more than the core of the earth, and was also total bullshit, because he could hear Steve's smile when he answered. "It's all about the cheese with you, isn't it, Stark?"

"Hey, let's not undersell the importance of bread here. I'm a big fan of the bread."

That actually won a proper laugh, and Tony put that right into his 'win' column. "Speaking of which, how's Pepper doing?" Steve asked through his grudging amusement.

Tony poked at his hot pocket suspiciously, wondering if it was safe to bite into it yet. "Fine, I think. That is, she looked fine in the press conference yesterday, and I'm pretty sure I'd be hearing a lot more from her if she wasn't fine. I usually do."

There was a moment of shocked silence, then, "But isn't she still in Malibu with-"

"Oh yeah, it's just... well, she's got her things to do, and I've got mine, you know? Only so much vacationing two workaholics like us can handle before someone gets an eye put out." And that seemed like a good time to put something into his mouth to stop the words coming out, so that's what Tony did. And then immediately wished he'd waited, because ow fuck; his nutrition was suddenly trying to murder him. Smoothies were so much safer!

He stifled the whimpers in deference to Steve's whole protecting people thing, and chewed his mouthful of scalding pizza sauce and underdone crust as rapidly as he dared. "I think she's giving
another interview right now," he added when he could manage words again. "Then after that probably more calls to the shareholders, but if you want to check up on her yourself, I can text and have her call you when she's got a minute."

"Or you could just tell her I said hi when you see her next?" Did he sound hopeful there? Weird.

"Rogers, are you crushing on my Pepper?" Tony challenged, "Because I'm totally not gonna pass love letters under the desk for you two. If you want to hit that, you're gonna have to do your own footwork."

"It's a greeting, not a come-on," Steve answered, the wry curl of his voice just exactly perfect. "I told you Pepper's secrets were safe from me."

"Nope, not buying it. I've seen that poster boy smile in action," Tony answered, not ready to dare another bite of molten doom-pizza. "Panties drop spontaneously at the first flash of those teeth! I swear you'd be one dimple away from world domination if you had even a single evil bone in your body."

"Right, so my burger's here now, Tony," Steve said over the rowdy din, and it was fucking adorable how Tony could practically hear him blushing. "I'm gonna hang up on your plans for world domination and eat it in peace, Ok? Bye."

"Don't get none on ya!" Tony managed to get in before the call ended.

~* Lost a Game of Hide And Seek *~

"Yeap," Tony mumbled around his quarter inch socket as Jarvis connected the call.

"Hey, Tony," Bruce's voice answered, sounding as always, drowsy and faintly puzzled. "Where are you?"

Tony sat up, put the screwdriver and wrench down so he could spit the socket out. "Working on something. Top secret, eyes only; you know the deal. Why, having trouble with the mass spectrometer again?" Bruce's constant, low level radiation emissions could be hell on sensitive lab equipment, as they'd both learned.

Adding in the otherworldly elements they were now finding in things like HYDRA guns and boardroom bombs, Tony was having to carve out time to argue with Bruce's equipment on a fairly regular basis. Not that he resented playtime spent with Bruce, of course, but between dissecting the arc trigger, negotiating with Bruce's equipment, figuring out alien elements without blowing anything up, coping with (and retaliating to) the prank duel Barton had started on him when Operation Pigfucker finally released them back to New York, and updating the bomb countermeasure equipment at his SI plants and corporate properties, Tony hardly had time for his own pet project at all.

"No, it's working fine," Bruce replied. "The last set of analyses for the HYDRA explosive compounds should be coming off in half an hour or so, in fact, if you wanted to see them."

"Sure," Tony allowed, picking the socket wrench up and sliding down onto his dolly again. "Call me back when they're done, and I'll-"

"I actually called," Bruce cut in politely, which for anybody else would be just impossible, but for Bruce was pretty much normal, "because Clint told me to make you come to movie night tonight, and I figured that'd be easiest to do if I cooked dinner."
Tony sat up, instantly suspicious. "Barton told you to get me to come?" Because Bruce wasn't allowed to take sides. Dr. Banner's neutrality was a given constant, and fucking with that was totally against the Geneva Convention, House rules, Queensbury rules, and every single law of decency and sportsmanship on any books anywhere.

"Yeah. He said to tell you that Steve will definitely be there tonight," Bruce said, pretending not to be smug.

"Steve? Steve Rogers?" Tony challenged, not even believing this. "Big guy, rocks a vibranium shield and spangly jumpsuits while fighting evil? Inspires patriotism in kittens and small children? Steve Rogers who allegedly lives in Stark Tower, not that you could prove that from this past month or anything, because he hasn't shown his big dumb face at breakfast, poker night, movie night, or leftover night in a month? That's the Steve we're talking about?" Dummy rolled up on him, a glass full of murky green slurry in his claw. Tony looked at it warily and inched away.

"That's the guy," Bruce agreed cheerfully. "Although I think it's only fair to remind you that other people sometimes get busy too. It happens a lot, actually."

Tony scoffed. "Yeah, only there's 'busy', and then there's 'up to something', and given the amount of time our good Captain has been spending on Fury's turf, I don't think those odds are even. If I didn't know Cap better, I'd say he was pulling evasive maneuvers on- damn it, Dummy, quit poking me." He waved the bot away and returned his attention to tightening the cam-bolts again. "Anyway. Movie night. He'll be there. You sure it's not a trap?"

Bruce chuckled. "Honestly Tony, why would Clint set a trap for you on movie night using Steve as bait when he knows we're all going to be there?"

'Because he sees too goddamned much for anybody's good,' Tony studiously did not say, nor did he add, 'And he probably thinks it's all fucking hilarious. Oh no. Instead, Tony waved Dummy and his glass of highly suspect murky green stuff away again and said, "Oh, I don't know, maybe because he's a fucking sadist who thinks cayenne and seaweed smoothies are high comedy?"

"Yeah, as funny as that epic spit take was, it still ruined twenty of my samples, and if you'll remember, I have made my position on being involved on your and Clint's little dick-slapping party well known," the answer returned, sounding fond but stern in that way that Bruce must have learned from Steve in Captain mode. "So I don't think Clint would be involving me and my cooking if it was a trap."

And so Tony breathed, relaxed a bit, and set the socket aside once more. "No, you're right, it's probably not a trap. Unless you've secretly taken his side and are plotting with my enemy, that is."

"You're ridiculous," Bruce laughed again. "Dinner. Six o'clock. Do not make me send Thor down to get you again." Then he cut the call before Tony could protest the threat. Thor's idea of fetching Tony to dinner had been an exercise in humiliation -- who knew that a guy who wore a cape in public would be so picky about grease stains on Tony's clothes at an informal team meal?

Dummy made a pleading sort of whir, distracting Tony from the unwelcome memory of being scrubbed and dressed like a doll while the Asgardian Prince lectured him on respect for his hearthkeeper's efforts. He rolled at Tony with the glass of green stuff again, but froze when Tony turned and pinned him with a savage glare.

"Dummy. Did Barton give you that for me?"

The bot hesitated, then boosted the cup with a ding, as if it was some kind of peace offering. Or a
Tony glared even harder. "And after what happened the last time he 'helped you' make me a drink, you actually brought it anyway?"

The hesitation was longer this time, the ding more hopeful.

Tony traded the wrench for a bigger one. "Do you know what would happen to you if I were to use Babelfish to translate your primary systems code into Estonian and back?" he growled.

Dummy froze, whirred for a second, and then gave one quavering beep and began to roll slowly backward.

"Neither do I," Tony said, and leapt to his feet as Dummy dropped the glass and made a break for the door.

~* Lost a Game of Truth or Dare *

After dinner, for some reason that made sense only in his own funny little brain, Barton made them all watch *Casablanca*.

"Didn't you get enough of the Nazi vibe last month?" Tony had to ask, not that he was really against the movie, but more because how the hell was he supposed to sit there next to Steve and watch *Ingrid Fucking Bergman* for a whole hour and a half without making a single virginity joke?

Clint made a scoffing noise and threw a pretzel at Tony's head. "Pfft. Please, Nazi-lite at best. Even Steve thought they were a joke." From the look on his face, Steve hadn't thought it was a funny one, but since he didn't object openly, Clint took that for agreement and carried his point on proudly.

"Anyway, I've spent the last month in the company of assholes who think that something they were born with is the greatest achievement of their lives, and if I want a little actual heroism to wash the taste of that garbage out of my brain, then I don't want to hear any bitching about it, all right?"

"All right," Bruce answered as he came in from the kitchen with his arms full of popcorn. "I always liked this movie. And it's better than your second choice, Clint."

"Indeed," Thor put in as Bruce took the seat next to him. "For a tale of heroism would suit me well this night, and I like better the sound of this 'Casablanca' than of," he made a stink-face, then spoiled it with a handful of popcorn, "'Pee-Wee's Big Adventure'"

"Good call," Natasha put in, fixing Tony with The Stare. Tony obligingly hid behind Steve's shoulder and won an almost-amused eyeroll for his troubles. "Peter Lorre's one of my favorites," she explained, which, no, that wasn't the least bit creepy, was it?

"Chair calls Rogers to vote," Tony said, turning to put his back against the sofa arm and his feet across Steve's lap.

"I vote for a bigger couch," Steve grumbled, and a little of the careful poise he'd been flying since dinner evaporated as he wedged a bowl of popcorn between Tony's shin and his own side. That move left him nowhere for his elbow but Tony's bent knees, which relaxed his artificial stillness just that much more as his arm settled, weighty and warm into place.

"Yeah, well we've all got to make sacrifices during this trying recliner shortage," Tony quipped, then he held up his tablet. "And this way you slackers don't get to complain that my brilliant work is disrupting your cinematic appreciation of Ingrid Bergman's..." wait for it... "singularly spectacular and justifiably famous ti..." there went Rogers' warning glance, with just a tickle of smile lurking
underneath it. Tony tipped him a wink and finished, "- timeless leading role."

Steve huffed a grudging laugh, and Natasha, who was the one actually in control of the remote, pressed play to shut them up. It worked, mostly through the fact that Tony was more absorbed in the new chemical sniffer designs on his tablet, (and in watching Steve watch the movie,) than he was in heckling Humphrey Bogart.

There was something... off about Steve. Tony had been afraid of something like that when it began to seem like Steve's return from the wilds of Indiana had been hypothetical rather than actual. Not that he really thought everything was about him, but when he couldn't even corner Steve long enough to say 'thank you for not letting my girlfriend get blown up,' well... as emotionally stable and secure in his self-worth as Tony was, he had a hard time not reading something into that.

But he couldn't think of anything he'd done that would have pissed Steve off, or even disappointed him, really. And Steve didn't seem annoyed now either, as his tolerance of Tony's lap-invasion proved. He didn't seem depressed, or withdrawn, or even particularly tired, which Tony would actually have expected, given Jarvis' reports on the hours Steve had been keeping. But there was a quiet about him that went beyond Steve's usual reserve; something held in close to his chest, guarded even here, where they all had gotten used to letting such shields down.

It was in the way his arm rested with not-quite its full weight across Tony's legs, and the way he didn't flinch when Tony's fingers brushed his side in their quest for popcorn, even though they all knew he was kind of ticklish on his ribs. It was in the way he didn't bother to hide it when the movie made him tear up at all the expected places, but just wiped his eyes clear with his off hand and kept watching the screen. It was in how he never once turned his head and busted Tony staring at him, even though Tony wasn't being anything like subtle about it.

He just couldn't figure out what it was. What could be sticking in Steve's craw to bring this careful, quiet... shyness down around him. Had something happened in Indiana? Was it something Fury had him investigating? Something personal and painful that he didn't feel he could reveal to them? To him? But that was ridiculous, of course. It made no sense, which was why Tony couldn't just shrug it off and let it go. It bugged him like a corn hull between the teeth, and he worried at it ferociously. But he was no closer to dislodging it when he fell asleep halfway through the movie.

Nor when he woke up again to the sound of Steve's voice sliding into the quiet conversation around him sometime later. "Just never seemed worth it to me," he was saying, and Tony, his knees leaning heavily into Steve's chest could feel tension running like a live current beneath the muscle. "Not if you don't really care."

"So it's true love or nothing at all?" Barton said, somehow wry without mockery. "Someday my prince will come kind of thing?" A part of Tony really wanted to watch Steve's face, as much to read the answer coming, as to see if he got the reference at all. But it was only a small part of him. The rest of him was caught up in the feel of Steve's arm draped around his thighs, and his big, square hand curling gently over Tony's hip as though it had been designed and built to fit exactly there.

"Midgard does not seem to have many princes," Thor observed. "Accepting no lover less than royalty seems a lonely plan, my friend."

"Not a real prince, Thor, he means-" Bruce started to explain.

Barton cut him off. "Thank you for making my point, Alien God-Prince," he crowed. "See, romance works fine for the fairy tales, but do you really-"
"I like the idea of romantic love a lot better than the idea of sex without it, if that's what you want to hear," came the answer, vibrating through Steve's ribs with something that might have been annoyance, or possibly just resignation. "But it's not like I'm a monk or anything; I've known what to do about being horny since I was a kid -- that doesn't take anybody but me to sort out."

"Well, if you want something done right, I guess you have to do it yourself." Bruce deadpanned. Tony only just managed to stifle his laugh by stealing a glance through his lashes to be sure that Steve was, in fact, blushing while he discussed masturbation with his teammates. Which he was. Charmingly.

He was also not at all ready to yield his point, however. "I guess it's like cussing," he went on as Bruce turned to try and explain 'horny' to Thor. "If you do it when you don't really mean it, then it kind of makes it shallower when you do really mean it." He offered a shrug with the shoulder Tony's knees weren't pinning down. "I just haven't ever wanted physical relief badly enough to risk making love shallow."

Barton, who had apparently spent the entire evening perched behind Nat on the second sofa, shook his head in despair. "Dude, I think you're seriously confusing sex with love here. Not everything is about forever after."

"No I'm not. I'm just saying that sex by itself doesn't interest me."

"Then it's probably safe to say you've been doing it wrong," Barton replied. Then he glanced Tony's way, and flicked a pretzel across the room. "Stark, back me up here!" he called as it bounced off Tony's forehead and completely blew his cuddle-cover in one salty thunk.

Tony showed Barton his favorite finger, but roused himself to the rallying cry all the same. Kind of. "My girlfriend has informed me that I can neither confirm nor deny the awesomeness of hookup sex," he said, setting his tablet aside as his one concession to decorum, but otherwise refusing to relinquish an inch of the Steve territory he'd claimed during his nap. "However I'm told that monogamy is nothing to be ashamed of in our enlightened age, Barton, so you shouldn't tease the Capsicle about his romantic ideals." Tony patted Steve's hand back down in place over his hip before it could be drawn away. "And you also shouldn't throw food at someone who pays your laundry service bills."

Barton showed a finger of his own, but Bruce put his hand up to speak before gesture could become words. "Can I just say that I'm on Cap's side of this debate?" he asked the room. "And for the record, monogamy is a valid lifestyle choice, and you shouldn't discriminate against its adherents if any of you want me to make brownies for you ever again." That announcement got everyone to sit up a little straighter, because Bruce's brownies were no laughing matter -- even the 100% legal ones.

"Ok, yes on the brownies, Doc," Clint soothed, raising spread hands in surrender. "This is me not judging your monogamy, and not just because I've met your amazingly hot girlfriend, either. Except seriously, have you all missed the part where we risk our lives on a regular basis, and that makes us all kind of shitty as life-partner material goes?"

Steve shook his head, then freed his hand and dumped Tony's feet off his lap. "Getting close to anybody's a risk if you think like that," he said over Tony's yelp of protest. "I'd rather know the risk was worth it. Wait for the right time and the right partner instead of just dancing with whoever's got an itch. I don't want to be somebody's choice just because I'm convenient."

"Just because-" Clint gaped, then shook his head. "Stark, does this guy not have any mirrors in his place? Cause from where I'm sitting, his dance card should be full just for the hinting."
While he could definitely see and second that point, one glance at Steve's jaw had Tony thinking better of admitting it, so instead he sat up straight and shook his head. "I see your ploy, Barton, and no, I am not going to diss the ideal of romantic love and thereby set myself up as the Tool here," he said, stretching to pop his back. "Nor am I going to cop to knowing anything about what the inside of Steve's quarters look like, because that would be awkward and creepy and he's close enough to punch me in the head. Ow." It wasn't a punch, but the brisk up-smack was bad enough.

"And why would I want to go with anybody who just wanted me for what the serum made of me?" Steve asked the room while Tony smoothed his hair back down. "I didn't want to be a dancing monkey during the war, and I sure as heck don't want to have to be one in bed."

Thor weighed in then, arms braced to his knees as if addressing a war council across an open fire. "I do not understand why the courtship of monkeys should matter, but Steven's words have merit, I think."

"You do?" Tony asked, surprised despite himself. "'Cause no offense, but on Earth, princes aren't usually known for their carnal restraint."

Steve hummed annoyance, but Thor's chuckle rolled it flat. "Nor is it so upon Asgard, I promise you," he said, his eyes blue and knowing. "Though between the carnal ease of comrades, and sporting play for the slaking of lust, there are significant differences. Still more different are the acts of lovemaking that I often enjoy with my -"

"Whoa there, thunder god," Tony said over the sudden hail of objections. "Remember how we talked about oversharing? 'Cause I'm pretty sure Dr. Foster really would rather your teammates didn't know all about her many acts of lovemaking."

"I don't know," Natasha countered, "I could stand to hear more." Thor shot her a suspicious glare and she shrugged. "What? Jane's hot. You've got good taste."

Clint made a coughing noise that sounded suspiciously like "That's what she said."

Natasha ignored him though, and uncurled from her corner of the sofa to take the pretzels away from him. "Steve's right though," she said, taking a very deliberate care with choosing which morsel she wanted from the bowl. "Once intimacy becomes a tool, you never really get it back the way it was. It's just… spoiled. Not even falling in love with someone better can really fix it, because how can you trust yourself? You could be pretending again, lying to yourself and not even realizing it."

She chose her victim, bit it delicately in half, and chewed into the appalled silence that stretched out thin as glass between them.

"Right," Clint said after a moment. "And this is where I safeword us all right out of this conversation. Jarvis! Cue up Ren and Stimpy season one while Thor and I go get out the ice cream, ok?"

"With pleasure, Mr. Barton."
Tony woke again to silence and a stiff back sometime later. Somewhere between the cartoon slapstick and the toilet humor, he'd apparently dozed off again. Worse yet, he'd managed to sleep right through the team sneaking off to their various ends for the night. Weird.

The media lounge was quiet; lights dimmed and screen dark, though the snack bowls and cups still marked where each Avenger had been. Someone had taken Tony's tablet off his chest, set it on the end table, and covered him with one of those knitted blanket things that Steve kept bringing home from his volunteer gigs at retirement homes. If it weren't for the awkward angle of his neck, Tony might have gone right back to sleep and stayed there all night. Instead, he sat up and hailed Jarvis for the time.

"It is eleven fifteen, sir. You have slept approximately three hours."

"What did Barton do to me while I was asleep?" he asked, checking the living room for sharpies, because if he'd been Clint, not even threat of the Hulk could have made him pass up such a golden opportunity.

"You remain unscathed, sir," Jarvis assured him mildly. "Although I do believe Agent Barton had a plan involving tomorrow's breakfast. Shall I dispose of the communal food and order replacements?"

"Nah, let him run nuts," Tony yawned, standing and scratching. "I plan to sleep through it anyhow." Steve would lose his shit over wasted food anyway, so this might just wind up ending the prank war in his favor, if he was lucky. "Gimmie a headcount," he said, picking up his tablet and heading for the elevator.

"Agent Romanov is in her suite alone," Jarvis answered, lighting the tablet with a simple map and six red dots. "Thor and Agent Barton appear to be making use of the target range, Doctor Banner is in the sauna, and Captain Rogers is on the rooftop terrace. Ms. Potts' plane will land in Washington DC in approximately two hours, and according to SHIELD records, Agent Coulson is on leave for the week. His GPS puts him somewhere in the Baltimore area."

Tony huffed a laugh as the elevator arrived. "Fury actually got him away from desk for a whole week? Bet that involved either blackmail or a taser." Phil worked the kind of hours that typically got Tony in trouble, and always seemed to get away with it too, the efficient little bastard. Tony wouldn't admit it in a thousand years, but he was occasionally just slightly envious thinking of all he could accomplish if he could just learn the agent's secret.

Unfortunately, several weeks of running at full multitasking capacity seemed to have caught up with Tony. That was really the only excuse for him drifting off twice, with his prank-nemesis right there in the same room. Of course, the fact that Tony had been practically sleeping on Steve's lap might excuse his lack of vigilance. Come to that, it might actually explain the lack of sharpie-attack as well, if he thought about it, because not even Clint was a determined enough shithead to try and get past Steve's… He stopped and blinked. Steve. Who was sitting on his darkened terrace alone, lit softly in amber and red against the late October night.
"Jarvis, kill the lights," Tony snapped as the elevator closed and the penthouse began to brighten around him. The room sank back into shadow and Tony lifted a hand to his arc reactor, blotting out its glow while his eyes softened to the gloom. Steve sat at the far rail of the terrace, sketchbook on one knee and his face half-turned to the city below. The tower's aircraft lights played glints of white and scarlet over his hair as the wind tousled the strands out of order, but for once, Steve didn't seem concerned at being untidy. Tony prowled closer to the glass wall for a better look at his face, and stopped in confusion -- who could he be talking to out there?

He was on the point of asking Jarvis when Tony heard the music through the thick glass and realized with a slow welling of surprise that Steve wasn't talking at all; he was singing. The tune was slow, strange, and sweet, as if the woman sang from one end of time, and in an artless Irish tenor, Steve sang with her from the other.

"Why did I not know this about you?" Tony murmured, transfixed. He rested his forehead against the glass so the twinned voices rang just a little louder in his head. As much as Tony had wanted a chance to get Steve alone to talk in the past weeks, he found himself just as tempted now to stay hidden, watch, and listen. "Jarvis, what's that he's singing?"

"The song is La Vie en Rose, recorded by Edith Piaf in nineteen thirty-" 

Steve's head turned, sharp focus in every line of him, and Tony knew all at once he'd been made. The far off woman sang alone now, and Steve sat where he was, quiet, intent; making no move to get up and leave.

"Yeah, good, thanks," Tony cut in to avoid Jarvis' impending Wikipedia dump. Then he took a breath and met his own reflected eyes for a moment in the glass, and told himself to man the fuck up.

"It looks cold out there," he said. "Bring up the space heaters and keep the tunes coming -- stuff from his day. Nothing too fast. And hold both our calls for awhile."

Then, before he could talk himself out of it, because he was many things, and maybe sometimes a coward was one of them, but Tony Stark was not goddamned shy, he slipped through the door and out into the night. Steve closed his book before Tony was halfway across the terrace, but his face relaxed into an easy smile as Tony drew near, offered his hand and an 'I dare you' smile and asked, "Hey, Soldier, wanna dance?"

Which was, of course, when the damned song stopped.

Steve suppressed his snicker at the timing, but only just. Tony held his ground, hand out and waiting, and in the fastness of his own mind imagined reprogramming Jarvis with a goddamned crowbar. A swell of brass came to his rescue just before the whole scene lost its grip on suave and went skidding straight into ridiculous. Then Steve's smile came back again, real and warm and a little bit shy in his eyes as he set his sketchbook aside and took Tony's hand. "Sure. Why not?"

They had a moment of confusion about leading, but Steve still being taller, they sorted it out pretty quickly. Tony settled his hand over Steve's shoulder and let himself be led, realizing as the clarinet came in over the horns, that he actually knew the tune. By way of an invitation, he hummed along, which made Steve blush just a little and hide a smile. But he didn't join in when the singer began.

"Feeling nostalgic?" Tony asked after a few measures, not wanting the silence too heavy between them.

Steve cut a glance out across the night, and nodded. "A little, yeah. The movie and all." He turned their frame as they neared the rail, and didn't object as Tony used the turn to close in a little tighter to his warmth as the wind cut briskly between them. "Figured I'd come up here and get it out of my
system where it wouldn't bother anybody."

Tony had to laugh at that. "Dude, if nobody's bothered by Bruce's Chinese Opera or Thor's Ancient Aliens addiction, I don't think we'll begrudge you a little Benny Goodman." He laughed as Steve's startled glance revealed that he'd guessed the band right. "Hey, I do occasionally listen to lesser musical styles, you know; I can pick that clarinet out of a lineup any day."

"Mmhmm." The skeptical eyebrow made reappearance, but Tony figured since he actually was bullshitting, he wouldn't object to Steve's doubt.

"I didn't recognize that other song though," he admitted hopefully. "The one you were singing before. Old favorite of yours, or just something you learned to charm all the ladies?"

Steve smiled in that mild, wry way he had, but his eyes remained sad and far away. "Neither, really" he said, "just one I remembered hearing a lot in France. Dames usually liked Sinatra better anyhow."

"Even your dame?" Tony asked, feeling his way around the shape of something unspoken in the space between them; something he'd begun to glimpse obliquely in the negative spaces of the past, evasive month.

The smile stayed exactly where it was on Steve's face, as if it had been carved of wax. "Probably so, if she liked music at all. Peggy was pretty serious about her work. Had to be, to hold her own in the army back then."

"But she liked your singing though," Tony urged, careful as a soldering tip to circuitry glass. Cap grimaced, almost as though it surprised him to do so, but then he shook his head. Tony pretended not to notice, aware that this was chemistry; volatile compounds, unknown interactions and all, but helpless as always in the face of his urge to understand. There was data missing; the equations weren't conclusive, and he could not leave it alone, no matter what might explode. Or burst into flames.

Not that that had happened. Today. Yet.

Tony let a few measures pass before casually asking, "Did you even let her hear you sing back then? Or anyone at all?"

Steve frowned, but then snorted a mirthless laugh and shook his head. "I was a boy soprano in a Catholic orphanage. Got my first black eye over being picked to sing Libera Me for Easter Mass, and it didn't get much better from there. That kind of took the shine off it for me." He glanced at Tony's face then, and his own softened at whatever he saw there. "Used to sing with my ma though, when I was little."

"You never talk about her." Tony ventured to stop himself devolving into nervous babble about how Steve definitely should sing more often now, because yes, dammit, Tony could occasionally be more socially adept than a twelve year old. The singing was a sparkly detail, but not a big enough variable to warrant letting himself get distracted. "Agent Carter, I mean, not your mom."

"Peggy?" Steve looked at him with genuine surprise as the solid press of his hand over Tony's spine steered him away from the glass wall. "I guess not. Don't know what I'd tell about her."

It wasn't that Tony couldn't hear the gentle warning-off behind Steve's evasion; it was just that he didn't bother to heed the warning. "Everyone casts her as your great tragic love story," he pressed, gripping Steve's shoulder a little tighter as the hand at his back twitched away. "Missing your first date and all, but I don't think I've ever heard you bring her up with anybody."
The surprise settled into a thoughtful frown, and Tony could see Steve thinking back over the past year. "Don't really have much I could say," he admitted at last. "We were both officers, but... the army came down pretty hard on fraternization then, and she'd worked pretty damn hard to get where she had. I didn't want to risk costing her the career she loved." He shook his head, and Tony was glad to see regret in his eyes. He didn't think he could have resisted the urge to pick on him if the man hadn't at least been a little aware of what a bullshit decision that had been.

"Anyway," Steve went on, "Howard knew Peggy better than I did. Made me pretty jealous back then, though it didn't mean anything, really." He shrugged, the muscles flexing easily under Tony's hand. "We worked together, I was sweet on her. She was the first pretty girl who ever looked twice at me without laughing."

"And then she shot at you." Another of Howard's favorite stories.

Steve chuckled. "Yeah. Pretty sure she was sweet on me too. We talked a little, sort of, about getting together. After." Steve had more than his fair share of befores and afters, Tony realized: before the serum: before Bucky: before the crash: before Loki: phasic changes as distinct and discrete as anthracite, graphite, carbon, and diamond.

"Hence the famous date," he prompted, and Steve gave a nod.

"Yeah. Hence the date."

Tony could only let the silence lie only so long. "But..."

Steve's lips thinned just a bit. "But what?"

He gripped Steve's hand tighter for just a second, gathering his nerve. "But you didn't love her."

Steve stopped dancing, scanned Tony's face with wary, half-angry eyes. Tony forced himself to meet that gaze without flinching, holding to Steve's hand and shoulder while he waited for their dance to resume, or to end. Or to explode.

Steve recovered after a moment, convinced himself of something, found the beat, and slipped them back into it only a little stiffer than before. "... I could have," he said after a few moments, during which Tony imagined and countered a hundred thousand evasions. "Was almost there by that last mission, but..." a tiny smile, fragile as ice. "No, I guess I probably didn't though."

Tony breathed again as the numbers began to tally. He couldn't help a little, internal leap of eagerness as he saw the data points beginning to line neatly up toward an elegantly simple conclusion. "Not like you loved him."

No need to explain which him Tony meant. Steve's sudden, lurching stop was proof they both knew. "No, I told you, we were just."

"No, don't front," Tony said, following close as Steve pulled free and backed away. "You did love Barnes, and it was 'like that'. Even if you didn't ever let him see it, you wanted him more than anyone in the world." He caught Steve's tense arm and tugged to stop the retreat. "It's all over you, even now."

Steve showed his teeth, voice taut and rough as he growled. "What the hell does any of that matter now? It doesn't matter whether I loved him, or Peggy, or both, or neither. They're gone, I'm still here, and you're dragging this out of its grave to prove what, exactly?"

"A hypothesis," Tony replied, level, calm as he eased closer.
"Damn it," Steve spat, and Tony could feel the muscles in his wrist binding up to jerk free.

Tony lurched forward first, caught his shoulder under his cupped palm, and said, "Proving that you love me too." Then, when Steve turned to stone under his hands, Tony leaned up close and pressed a kiss to his open, unresisting lips.

They were as soft as he'd thought they'd be, salty under his tongue, yielding and slack until Tony tilted his head and licked deeper inside. Then before he knew it, Steve's arms were around him, crushing him close as all trace of that rigid reserve shattered into tongue and teeth and groaning hunger.

Oh, thank fuck he was right! Giddy with relief and triumph, Tony wound his arms up around Steve's neck and let himself be devoured. The rush of it was enormous, lighting his skin with adrenaline like a headlong dive from 30,000 feet, and Tony leaned into it without a shiver, keening in his throat as he felt Steve's hips press hard against his own. Hard, hard, sweet Christ, so hard it hurt, but he didn't want to end the kiss yet, didn't want to let go of what he'd finally caught, not even to grab for more. Steve's hands wrapped tight around his hips though, ground Tony's cock harder against his own, and the dragging, snagging press of their flies sparked the building haze of lust with just the right amount of pain.

"Like that," Tony gasped as Steve's lips skated down his jaw to his throat where he felt the warning graze of teeth, "Just like that."

Steve made a thick, desperate noise, caught Tony's head in his hands and put him back a step, as though he couldn't trust his lips to stop kissing without the space between them. He looked wild; eyes blown to the darkness, blood standing high and hectic in his cheeks, hair a riot of orange and gold, lips swollen and wet as he panted clouds of rarified want into the air between them. He swallowed, closing his eyes and drawing a breath so deep it shook the ribs under Tony's hands. Then he whispered, "Yeah. Like that," and gathered Tony into another kiss.

Tony, still high on wish fulfillment and the taste of Super Soldier on his tongue, leaned back in the circle of Steve's arms and let him run the show. Being a control-freak was all well and good in the lab or the boardroom, but it was apparently Christmas, Easter, and all his birthdays at once, and Tony found himself eager to take what he had coming to him, so long as Steve meant to give it.

It was slower this time, not cautious nor remotely timid, but careful, intent, and devastatingly thorough. A kiss Tony felt in the press of a thigh between his own; in the firm sweep of hands mapping the curves of his skull, his ribs, his spine, his ass; in the rapid flex of the chest that pressed against his, matching him breath for breath as their tongues knotted and slid in a silent, hidden language. This was no virgin's kiss, nor a practiced, deliberate seduction like the ones Tony had come to know from years on the make; this was a cartographer's kiss, memorizing him in meticulous, exhaustive detail, possessing him on a level he'd never experienced before. This was a learning kiss with an arclight focus he wasn't sure he could survive, but knew he never wanted to give up again.

Steve gasped free with a curse when Tony got a hand between them and his fingers around the bulge that ridged Steve's fly out hard and tight. He tipped his face to the sky and then cursed again as Tony lunged for his throat. Soap, sweat, sunlight, Steve: the tastes burst over Tony's tongue as he mapped the lines of sinew and muscle, scraped along a faint trace of stubble until he found the echo of a heartbeat beneath Steve's ear and gently bit. "Christ, me too," he said as Steve's cock lurched in his grip. "You should have said." He fumbled between them, unbuckling, unbuttoning and unzipping with an efficiency born of blinding lust and years of practice. "It's okay now, you know that, right? You don't have to hide it, and nobody's-"

"Tony, stop," Steve groaned as Tony wrapped both their cocks together in his grip. "Please stop
"Sorry, Cap," he grinned and took another bite just where Steve's collar might possibly cover the mark, "Don't know how. Maybe you could shut me- mph!"

Oh. Fuck. Yes. Being hoisted by his ass and slammed against the wall while his mouth was stuffed full of tongue was definitely one of the things Tony had hoped might be involved in fucking the Super Soldier. Wall sex was absolutely going to be a regular menu feature if Tony got his way, which, let's be honest, he usually did. He wrapped his legs around Steve's hips for leverage, rutted into the sweaty grip of his hands, and groaned his approval of the arrangement. Tony wasn't going to last much longer, but he was looking forward to finding out whether the super serum's inevitable sexual side effect would lie in endurance or recovery. Either one had some decidedly awesome potential.

Steve's hips jerked against him, sliding that big cock against his own like a bar of steel. Tony could feel precome slicking down his fingers in the heated press of their skin, could feel Steve's hands gripping, digging at his ass like they might tear right through the denim any moment, and fuck with that strength they just might. Tony's shoulders were scraping the wall, probably fucking ruining his shirt, which was going to be covered in come any minute, so it totally didn't even matter. Tony could feel his balls drawing up tight and hard against the metal bite of his zipper, could feel the hot, bright coil inside him, the itch-tickle of any second now, the narrowing of focus as all the whirling activity of his brain; all the equations, designs, ideas and attitudes fell silent underneath the train-chugging, surging, pounding inevitability that he was going to pump them all right out his cock. Any. Fucking. Second…

"Tony. Tony, God!" Steve ripped his mouth away, skidded the words along Tony's cheek as his punishing rhythm faltered and fell apart into pulses of liquid heat. Lost to words, Tony followed a heartbeat after him, whining into the curve of Steve's throat as a year's worth of tension drained out of him in helpless shivers. Steve didn’t let him go, not even when the aftershocks rattled them both breathless. Grateful, if not surprised, Tony clung to him and let the helpless laughter welling from under his arc reactor out into the night, where it hung like tiny bursts of flak in the air around their heads.

"God, you weren't gonna say anything at all, were you?" he panted, winding his fingers into Steve's hair once he'd wiped them clean on his shirt. "You were just gonna bottle it up, be my friend, fight with me," he slipped the accusations between light, salty kisses along Steve's jaw and cheek, "save my life, boss me around, and never-" he stopped to kiss Steve's ear and win a shivering growl for his trouble. "And never let on that you wanted me too. Why the hell would you do that?" he asked as Steve's grip on his ass eased at last and let his legs slide down to take on his own weight. Tony didn't let go, didn't let Steve's heat fade back into the chilly wind. "Why would you let me think it was just me?"

"Tony," Steve sighed, and leaned down to steal a kiss before tucking first Tony's, then his own cock away from the cold. "You're a genius. You can figure it out." And he was smiling, Tony could feel it in the lips brushing his skin, but there was a weird sort of mournfulness to his voice that didn't add up.

He pulled back then, wanting to see what he was dealing with, to read Steve's signs in blush, stammer, glance and flinch, and figure out what, exactly, he had missed. "Hey," he said, watching closely, "It's okay. This is-

Steve's head turned away suddenly, and for a second before the fiercely intent Captain visage pulled down over his features, Tony thought he saw something bruised and bleeding there. "Jarvis, stop the
music," he ordered, and abruptly the swelling harmonies of the Andrews Sisters cut dead into keening wind and the far off noise of traffic. And the rising throb of quinjet engines warming for takeoff.

"God damn it Jarvis," Tony ground, letting Cap go and fumbling for his bracelets. "You know I didn't mean to block Avengers' calls too!"

"I'm sorry sir, the only incoming call came from the SHIELD network and went directly to Agents Barton and Romanov," Jarvis answered as Steve turned and ran to the balcony railing, tracking the craft as it lifted off the roof and angled uptown.

"Oh… Okay then." Tony gave his hands another wipe, glad of his dark shirt as he sauntered over to Cap's side to see what his chances were. "So it looks like this is a SHIELD only dance," he said, his shoulder just touching Steve's as he leaned on the rail with a smirk. "I don't think we're invited."

Steve cut him a glance that was just short of furious. "We should be," he growled, and pointed down at the bright slash of Times Square, where smoke and tongues of acid green flame were just beginning to rise over wheeling flashes of scarlet and blue. "Those are emergency flashers, and I can hear helicopters coming in. Jarvis, what's happening down there?"

"With what limited data I have collected, it seems that Times Square is being occupied by non-terrestrial sentients of a visual similarity to the creatures known as 'dwarves' in fantasy literature," Jarvis answered, unflappable. "SHIELD and the NYPD appear to be massing an offensive to suppress them before they can reach the subway tunnels."

"Why the hell would Fury-" Tony began, then realized as Cap spun away from the rail and charged into the house, that he really didn't care. "Get Bruce and Thor up," he said, racing for his own armor, "It looks like we're assembling after all."

~* Been Cockblocked by Tolkein. *~

"So. Dark elves, huh?" Tony observed as the SHIELD agents, thoroughly cowed under the stern gazes of Thor and Captain America, ushered the short, sturdy refugees into the waiting fleet of trucks. "They sure look like dwarves to me. Any idea why the NYPD started randomly shooting at them?"

Clint looked up grinning from where he was crouching and poking at the row of caged… ferret-dog-monkey things that had started out the evening as some of New York's Finest, and would, ostensibly return to their previous food-chain status only when Thor had negotiated the matter out with the dark elves' village mage. "Since when does the Mayor's private standing army need a reason to shoot people or beat them up?"

Behind him, Natasha made an effort to toe the party line. "According to the radio chatter, the insurgents refused to comply with orders, and a weapon was drawn. The officer's partner is claiming they shot first."

"Okay, first; innocent people who've been yanked out of their village and dumped in an alien city are not 'insurgents,' and second; of course he is," Tony answered with an eyeroll none of them saw, but all of them could surely hear. "Hey Jarvis, I saw a lot of people out here with camera phones when we first came in. Why don't you see what's showing up on YouTube?" It was entirely possible that the eager undertone to his AI's agreement was not imaginary at all. Tony liked to think so.

He looked over to where Bruce, un-Hulked and clearly relieved to be so, was helping the medics load the last of the injured dark elves into evac-choppers. Behind him, Agent Sitwell was explaining
into his cell phone with the desperate air of a man whose pants were on fire, and the only guy he knew with an extinguisher was on forced leave in Baltimore for the weekend. After the disaster that had been the Avenger's last mustering out at the girls' school, Tony wasn't at all reluctant to indulge in a little schadenfreude now that the egg was on SHIELD and the NYPD's faces.

Nor, from the feral gleam in his eye as he strode over to join the group, was Cap. "Where will Fury be now?" he asked Natasha without preamble, "I want a word with him."

She did that eyebrow thing of hers, but Tony was beginning to be able to tell the difference between the 'I might need to kill you with my thighs' eyebrow, and the 'your funny little brain confuses me' eyebrow. Both of which are different from the 'I'm doing this so I won't actually smile' eyebrow, which was what she was doing right at that moment. She looked over at the last helicopter as it lifted off, then at the trucks pulling away, then back to Cap, having clearly made a decision. "For this he'd want proximity rather than aspect," she said, and nodded toward the Midtown HQ, about three blocks over and five up. "Helicarrier has the better medical facilities, but fewer prisoner brigs. He won't want potential hostiles up there after last year."

"Right," Steve clipped as Thor and Bruce came to join the rest of them team. "We're handling this now. All of us, as a team." He swept them with a hard blue gaze, and Tony figured he must have liked what he saw, because his lips curled out of their hard slash just enough to be menacing. "Debriefing in ten, Avengers," he said. "Assemble in Director Fury's office."

Then he turned on his heel and marched away, clearly intending to either release steam on the walk, or to build it. Thor was right on his heels, cape billowing in the autumn wind, hammer sparking fits of suppressed temper along the sidewalk behind him. Clint got to his feet with a whistle of awed admiration, while Natasha busied herself with an impromptu and irrelevant weapons check, and beside Tony, Bruce started to chuckle.

"I don't think I've ever seen him like this," his voice was quiet, but hardly cowed. "What did you say to get him that wound up, Tony?"

"Hey! Who says this is about me?" Tony asked, credibly innocent through the suit's vocal filters. "Cap's got a thing for defending little guys from bullies, as I think we all well know. And these guys are littler than usual."

"Yeah," Clint replied with a grin that held no conflicted loyalties at all, "but I've never seen him threaten to punch a cop before. You sure you didn't piss him off?"

"Positive," Tony grinned at the sense memory of big hands and a crushing kiss. "This is all Cap. And frankly, we all know that Fury's had a piece of this coming to him for awhile now, between treating us as his attack dogs when he wants something beaten down, and using us as his whipping boys when he's taking heat."

"Stark," Natasha warned.

Tony wasn't having any. "You know damned well he does. He can't control us through obligation, protections, or finances, and he's too smart to think he can control us through force, so he's been counting on guilt, bad press, Stockholm syndrome and Cap's respect for chain of command to keep this team where he wants us to be." He poked an armored finger at the badge over her chest. "And you know it, Widow, even if you don't like admitting it. Our working relationship with SHIELD is overdue for an overhaul, and it's going to happen tonight."

"He's not wrong," Clint said, sympathy in his eyes now. "We're not the agents we were before Loki, Tash, and we're not doing the job we were then, either. The stakes are higher now. Much higher, and
the Director can't keep reading us on a scale of asset to liability."

She gave them all a narrow, sweeping look, and sighed. "If the only thing we had to worry about was the Director himself, I'd be agreeing with you," she said, hands on her hips. "But there are people higher upstream than he is, with resources outside his control and agendas he doesn't get a say over." And yeah, they were all remembering the nuke that some Council of morons aimed at Manhattan the previous year; none of them needed to say it. "If those people decide that the Avengers are a threat to them, or to the world, then Fury's restrictions are going to seem like a game of pattycake by comparison."

"That may be," Bruce answered her with a sober look around the ruined square, some spots of pavement still burning green despite the fire department's efforts, "But I'm not here for SHIELD's benefit, and I don't think most of the rest of us are either. Without this team, I'm just another hunted fugitive in the world, waiting for people like the ones you're describing to figure out how to get me on the dissecting table. So I think when it comes right down to it, standing with the Avengers is the best place for me, even if the evil we're fighting is our own kind." Then he turned a nod to Tony and Clint, and headed toward the jet.

"He's right," Clint said, the words sounding almost like an apology as he turned to follow Bruce.

Tony watched her face as she glared after them, wondering if it was Barton's eyes, or his years' knowledge of the woman that allowed him to read the tempest that had to be going on underneath the Widow's implacable game face. Either way, Tony knew she was too smart to make half a lunge, or to hedge a bet when only full-in could carry it. If this cost her a bit of idealism -- or maybe it was her cultured jadedness at stake, -- then Tony figured she was good for it: this was a learning game for all of them. And it was Fury's turn to get schooled.

"You riding with them, or does Iron Man get to make his entrance with a stunning redhead on his arm?" Tony asked, half-reaching for her waist and pretty sure the suit would prevent her from snapping his neck with her thighs.

Her glare focused on him with near-physical intensity for a second, and Tony almost pulled his hand back. But then she smirked, hopped delicately onto his repulsor boot, and grabbed his shoulder in a sturdy grip. "Sure," she said, "sounds like fun."

"Trust me, Widow," Tony corrected as he kicked off the street, "This is gonna be awesome!"

~* Eaten Just One *~

"That was fun!" Tony grinned as the elevator closed out Bruce's floor and lifted them upward alone. "That beat down was epic, awesome and might actually be the hottest damn thing I have ever seen you do, Cap! And considering what you were up to on the roof a couple hours ago, I think that's saying something."

Steve rolled his eyes, but chuckled as if he couldn't quite help it. "Felt good," he admitted.

"Yeah it did," Tony purred with a leer, "But I was actually talking about later, when you dressed down Fury like a recruit late for muster."

Goddamn, but Steve was adorable when he went over all pink. Even more so when he rubbed his neck and deliberately overlooked Tony's oh so subtle come-on. "Yeah, well he'll probably make me pay for that in spades later on," he muttered.

"The way I see it, Cap, you've paid for it in advance some twenty times over, the number of times..."
you must have wanted to knock him over his desk this past year," Tony said as the elevator opened and the penthouse lights came up around them. "And besides, not one thing you said was anything but true. The dark elves told Thor that they've had people randomly disappearing for months now, right? So why did it take an entire village of them getting ambushed in Times Square for us to even find out that this is happening at all?"

Steve sighed, stripping off his gauntlets as he followed Tony to the bar. "Worse yet, what's happened to all those other svartálfar that went missing?" he worried. Then he glanced up at Tony's amused expression and frowned. "What? It's what they call themselves!"

"Yeah, but only you would remember how to pronounce it," Tony grinned, pouring himself a drink and getting out a coke for Steve. "That's the thing though; Fury's been treating us like explosive mushrooms, keeping us in the dark and feeding us bullshit, and then kicking our asses, by which I actually mean to say your ass, for our mistakes when he gives us any light. This thing with the smardlefars should have been on our briefing list long before anybody got guns out and started shooting. Just like HYDRA's dirty bomb under the school, and the arc-trigger that Hammer Industries managed to sneak up on us last month. He should have told us those were in the wind, not set us up to trip over them blind."

He got a long, considering stare, then Steve cracked the Coke open. "You're operating under the presumption that he was aware of them, and withholding on us."

Tony flexed his jaw, thinking of how far gone he'd been to the palladium poisoning before Fury had stepped in to give him the data that he had used to save his own life. "Let's just say it would not be the first time he played that kind of power game on me, and it's actually come pretty close to costing me everything in the past." Something warmed in Tony's chest to see how those words brought Steve's banked anger blazing back into his eyes, and how he had to visibly still his hand when the can crinkled warningly under the pressure of his grip. He had to wonder, with no little chagrin, just how long the signs had been there, and how long Tony'd been completely missing them.

He came around the bar to lean at Steve's side, ankles crossed, weight braced on his elbows behind him, a breathable, but bridgeable distance between them. "It's probably a knee-jerk thing with him anyway. I mean, knowledge is power, right? And SHIELD is in the business of knowledge and power, and not really all that generous with either if we're being honest."

Steve nodded, the anger in his eyes burning down to a simmer once more. "They're still the best resource we have for getting ahead of any of the threats we face. We can't afford to be on hostile terms with them."

Tony nodded, smirking at the raised eyebrow that won him. "You're right. But that means we need to be able to trust SHIELD, and Fury, and not have to constantly second guess the gaps they might be leaving in our intel every time we assemble. And that means Fury needs to earn our trust, and not just keep leveraging the team's faith in you, and your respect for chain of command." Steve scowled, but Tony jostled their shoulders together before he could frame whatever bullshit denial he was clearly cooking up. "Point is, Cap, something like this was bound to happen sooner or later. Coulson's really good at getting us what we need, but if not even he's getting the goods, then it was only a matter of time before something exploded." He took a blazing golden sip and shrugged. "The way I see it, Fury got that wakeup call a hell of a lot cheaper than it could have cost him if it had been Bruce's buttons, or mine that got pushed down there tonight instead of yours and Thor's."

Steve turned his head, considered Tony thoughtfully for a long enough moment that it was something of a temptation to either mug or preen under that blue regard. Then he cocked his head just a little and asked, "So other than hurting Pepper, your buttons would be…?"
Tony huffed a laugh. "Fury wouldn't dare. He relies on her to keep me from turning to the dark side. But he'd sure as hell misuse my tech if he thought I wouldn't blow his Helicarrier out of the sky for it," Tony cut a glance at Steve, tracing with his eyes the elegant plane of the temple bone beneath his golden hair, and remembering how it had been thick and awful with blood after they'd dug him out of darkness and stone. "And he's already proven he's more than ready to get you hurt."

The temptation to stroke his fingers through those short, fine strands was nearly overwhelming, and so after a moment, Tony stopped resisting it. Steve flinched from the first brush of touch, then when Tony hummed reproachfully and followed the movement, he stilled and allowed the caress for a heartbeat or two. "That serum's healing factor has saved Fury's ass from my repulsor boot more than a few times lately," Tony murmured, turning to follow the path of his fingers with lips.

"Tony…" Steve turned toward him, snagging the kiss on the bone of his brow and pressing in for a moment. Then he sat back before Tony could get an arm around him, took a drink of his Coke, and stood up. "Be right back," he said with a glance that was more apologetic than Tony was even comfortable with. "Left something outside."

Suddenly worried, Tony watched Cap stride to the glass wall, but for once his gaze was locked on those broad, straight shoulders instead of the flex and roll of blue-clad ass. But whatever weight was resting there, whatever Steve was braced up so hard against, Tony could neither see it nor guess what it was about. And no, that wasn't in the least bit nerve-wracking, thank you very much! He worried a thumb as Steve hesitated outside the glass wall, looked up and spoke in the way that people always seemed to do when addressing Jarvis.

There was a pause long enough for an answer, then Steve gave that tiny, painfully courteous smile that always seemed to come out when he didn't feel like smiling, but didn't want to be rude. Tony felt like his arc reactor had just bounced off his boots. He didn't pretend to smile as Jarvis opened the glass again and Steve swirled in on a gust of cold October.

"Steve, what are you doing?" he demanded, perversely pleased to see that false expression fall to pieces between one step and the next. "What the hell is going on here?"

"You remember before," Steve answered, coming back to the same stool he left, reclaiming it without once twitching away from touching Tony's arm or hip, "when you asked me why I wouldn't say anything about…"

"About being as in love with me as I am with you?" Tony supplied, just to watch him flinch.

"You remember before," Steve answered, coming back to the same stool he left, reclaiming it without once twitching away from touching Tony's arm or hip, "when you asked me why I wouldn't say anything about…"

"Tony," Steve murmured. "Just look at it."
So he did, and found him surprised neither by Steve's skill, nor really, by the scene he'd chosen to draw. It was him in the Iron Man armor, rocked back on his knees with the repulsor gauntlets coming up to catch Pepper, her frantic lunge so newly stopped against his chest that her hair still floated around her head. Neither Tony's nor Pepper's faces were visible, yet somehow Steve had caught that aching, heart-crashing moment in shape, color, and movement alone.

He traced a curve of stray pencil along the outside edge of the frame and swallowed hard against the remembered weight of panic and relief in his throat. "It's." He had to swallow again, not really able to look away. "Is it because of Pepper?"

A rustle. In the corner of his eye, Tony could see Steve turn to face him, but he kept his gaze on the glinting red-amber he'd used for Pepper's hair. "No," Steve said after a moment when his stare felt heavy enough to bruise Tony's skin. "It's because of you and her, together. What you have is... it's perfect."

Spell abruptly shattered, Tony had to stifle a giggle. "You think that's a-"

Steve's face, sober, open, and so earnest as to give lesser men a cramp, stopped the laughter in his throat. "It's what I always imagined when I thought what it might be like to love someone you're meant to keep forever," he explained. "Someone you'd sooner die than let go of, someone you'd never want to hurt for any reason. Tony, if you could see what I see..." Steve looked at the picture and God help him but that sad, brave little smile he aimed at the page made his face a tragic beauty. "What I saw when you came crashing into that boardroom like a panzer -- you couldn't breathe until you knew she was okay, and she couldn't think of anything else but you once she saw your face. It was beautiful," he finished. "It was perfect."

"That was," Tony caught his shoulder, gave it a little shake to bring those blue eyes up to reason. "Steve, man, we'd just-"

Steve nodded, smile firmly in place now; genuine, if wistful. "I know, Tony. It was a crisis. You were both terrified for each other. I understand that. But the thing is, you look at each other like that all the time when you're together." He reached for Tony's shoulder in turn, their twined arms now locking the space between them. "It's like you have a language that nobody else will speak but you, and there's a whole world of you and her that can't be described without it. You take care of each other; you watch for each other; you touch all the time without even thinking about it," He shook Tony's shoulder as if any of that needed driving home, as if any of it weren't something Tony completely and totally knew. "And it's... it's perfect."

"And that has what to do with you, exactly?" Tony couldn't help the waspish bite in his words, and honestly he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to try. Steve had been running from him for weeks -- weeks! Making Tony wonder and worry and all but fucking chase him down, and it was all over this? "What does that have to do with your tongue down my throat and your come all over my Scorpions shirt and the price of tea in goddamned China?"

Steve closed his eyes, took a breath and held it, like he'd seen the hit coming and had just refused to duck it. He didn't let go of Tony's shoulder, even when Tony let his own grip drop.

"It has... very little to do with that," he admitted. "That was selfish of me, and I should have known better."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Tony lunged, caught his fists in the tight, tough fabric of Cap's undershirt, and shook. "We were both there, you idiot! I enjoyed it, and I wanted it just as much as you did -- more, probably, seeing as how I'm not trying to friendzone you out of some squeamish fucking guilt complex!"
Steve's hands came up inside his, breaking his grip with humiliating ease as he thrust angrily to his feet. "Damn it, Tony, it's not guilt! Don't you think this kind of thing happened in the war? Fellas wanting comfort, needing to prove they're still alive, still human after they washed the blood off their faces? Wanting to feel safe and real and maybe almost sane when things are crazy all around them?" He paced away a few steps, scraping his fingers through the half-tamed mess the cowl always made of his hair.

"It was just something that happened. Something guys did to get through, and if a fella's girl at home didn't know about it, then it didn't hurt her, because," and here Steve turned back again, his face openly pleading for Tony to understand, "because it wasn't gonna happen at home. It wasn't gonna come between them, or come anywhere close enough to hurt her. Sure, it was deceit, but if it kept her man sane enough to make it home to her, then who had the right to say it was wrong?"

"And is that what this was to you, Rogers?" Tony asked, folding his arms tight over his arc reactor. "Comfort? Reassurance?"

A little of the hope melted out of Steve's expression then. "Not just that. You know it wasn't. But that doesn't make it right."

"Then tell me what makes it so fucking wrong!"

Two long strides, and Steve was on him, Tony's shoulders caught in his hands, squared to that terrible earnestness and unable to duck away. "Nothing," he said as if he needed to believe it. "Nothing. It's just…" One of those hands slid up Tony's shoulder to curl around his neck just below his ear, the thumb brushing tentatively along the line of his jaw as if the touch could smudge the hard clench to something softer. "Do you know what the toughest thing to learn is in painting?" he pleaded, eyes so blue that Tony couldn't help giving a tiny headshake in reply, even knowing he was going to get that goddamned sad smile along with the most arcane, antiquated, Steve-brained bullshit answer ever.

"It's knowing when to stop painting," he whispered. "It's learning to see that moment when it's perfect, absolutely perfect, and anything else you could add -- even a single line, -- would only ruin it."

Goddamn it! Tony closed his eyes, took a deep, shuddering breath through his nose, then forced the words out through his teeth. "You wouldn't ruin anything."

"Tony..." Steve leaned close and pressed their foreheads together to murmur, "Thank you. But no."

"God damn it!" This time the snarl made it out of his throat, startling Steve nearly as much as the shove that rocked Tony out of his grip. "You think you know us? You watch Pepper and me a month or two, get a few vicarious jollies out of it and then you think you have the right to make decisions about what's best for us?" He panted furious, humiliated, wishing he still had a drink in his hand just so he could smash the crystal against the wall. Or Steve. "You do not get to make our choices!"

"I'm not." It was Captain America who replied, clipped, stern, and shielded in a glare that wouldn't show the blood Tony's words had drawn until later. If he let it show at all. Tony had a ridiculous urge to look behind him for the shattered pieces of the line they'd just crossed.

"I'm not making any choice about you. I'm making a decision about me, and what I'm not willing to be responsible for." He straightened to the words, clearly halfway out the door in his own mind, though his feet stayed planted and his shoulders squared to deliver his lines unflinching. "I never felt it was worth having something if I had to steal it."
Then he turned away, and it was Tony lurching after to catch him to a stop, somehow just not able to let him go at that. Something in Tony's gut told him with absolute certainty that if he gave those last words to Steve, they'd never manage to get around them later on. "Steve," he pleaded, digging his heels in, gripping hard as he could at arms like stone. "Damn it, do you have to be such a fucking martyr about everything?"

Steve let himself be stopped, but shrugged out of Tony's grip like it burned him. Still, he half turned, and paid a bitter glance to reply instead of speaking to the far wall. "I'm the one who has to look myself in the eye anytime I pass a mirror, Tony. I'm the one who has to live with what I do, with who I let myself become."

Who made you Sir fucking Galahad?

But no. Those words would have been twenty times worse, because Tony absolutely did not want even the distant ghost of Howard entering into this train wreck, thanks everso much. He took a deep breath and eased close again, careful and tentative, and sure that if he could just be allowed to touch again, Steve would understand. He gave a shiver when Tony managed to settle his forehead to the swell above Steve's shoulder blades, and a flinch when his hands came to rest at Steve's hips, but although he didn't soften to the touch, he didn't lurch away either.

"This is stupid," Tony moaned, pressing close to the memory as the smell of Steve's sweat unfurled in his gut. Even Pepper knocking him back after Stane's death hadn't hurt quite this much. He felt Steve's shoulders flex with a breath, and the waiting silence coiled taut under his brow before he blew it back out.

Then Steve was turning, eel quick and close in his grasp, curling around Tony as if he couldn't help trying to shield him from blows that had already fallen. "This is my choice, and I'm the one who gets to make it," he murmured, lips ruffling the hair at Tony's temple. "Can you live with that? Can you respect it, and me, and find a way to keep on being my friend without pushing this on me? Or do we have a much bigger problem here?"

"Fuck..." Tony sighed. The thing that sucked about that question was that Tony knew Steve had every right, every reason to ask it. Anybody who spent a week around Tony Stark could figure out just how well he took 'no' for an answer. Miserable, guilty, and greedy, Tony tilted his face up and leaned. "Kiss me again, goddamnit."

Steve craned away. "Answer me first."

"Yes, all right, fine," Tony said, and would have thrown up his hands, only Steve didn't actually let him go enough to manage that. "I'm a spoiled brat and a diva and I suck at not getting what I want, but I'll try and work with this. With you. For you. Because I..." he let the pointless, rambling rant fall to pieces on his tongue then. It wasn't what he wanted there anyhow. "Just give me a real taste of you first, okay?" he pleaded, hating himself for a pathetic mess, "If it's the last time you'll kiss me, then fucking make it count."

It was a cruel little pleasure for Tony to watch Steve steel himself, to track the flex of fine muscles under golden skin as he swallowed; to see his own ache echoed in the blue eyes that flickered over him like there was some kind of answer in the architecture, eureka encoded into the ratio of brow to nose to chin to parted lip. But after a moment, he closed his eyes in defeat, drawing in a breath so large it shook. 'Welcome to the rest of our lives, pal,' Tony thought as Steve's hands curled around his skull, thumbs under his ears, fingers threading his hair.

"Every one counted," he murmured, tilting Tony's face just so, "Every. Single. One." He punctuated each word with his lips until Tony snarled and lunged up to catch the bastard close and do it right;
force met with force this time, leading as much as he followed. He battled Steve for control of the aching, bleeding thing between them, and put every ounce of his will into making sure that Rogers couldn't help but know exactly what he was walking away from.

It wasn't long before they were both shaking though; clutching at each other with brutal hands, clinging with lips pressed open and anguish gusting back and forth like smoke between them. It wasn't a kiss anymore, not even close to it, but it was better than nothing, and almost, almost better than having to be the one to let go and face what would happen next.

But as usual, Steve was the brave one. He stepped back, tipped his face to the ceiling for a long moment before he could speak. Tony took advantage, scrubbed the despair from his face and turned to the bar, because of course Steve was going to be a weeper, and if he had to see tears standing in those blue eyes, Tony was just going to lose it.

"I'll... I'll see you tomorrow then," Steve managed after an excruciating moment.

"Tomorrow…" Tony echoed, wondering numbly which God he could possibly have pissed off to deserve this. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow... something about a petty pace, and every goddamned day creeping by, and yeah. It was about like that, wasn't it? Fucking Shakespeare. He rubbed his face again and manufactured a smile before reaching for his glass and raising an ironic salute. "Sure."

Steve's smile looked just as hollow, but because there wasn't anything better or worse for either of them to say, he only nodded in reply, then turned on his heel and walked to the elevator.

And Tony stood right where he was and watched him go.

Chapter End Notes

It is possible that I might be evil. That's okay though, because I have an invulnerable fortress, and ten more chapters to make things worse. I mean fix stuff. Also, plot. If it makes anyone feel better to threaten me, bring it on; I've been practicing my evil laugh. It's downright chilling, the cats tell me.

In all seriousness, this was where the initial plotline shook apart and came back together again twice as long. I'm afraid some of the chapters from here on out will be longish, and I will try my best to maintain the weekly posting schedule, but if I need to err on the side of quality fiction over prompt updating, I'm just evil enough to declare that I will. Because I know you all will forgive me.

Just like you'll forgive me for having promised you a story series, and then delivered a goddamned novel as the +1. I'd say I was sorry, but I don't think anyone will believe me, so I'll just say that I'd love to hear your comments to keep me rolling along and invested. That would be awesome!
Tony woke to the soft swell of music; feminine voices in elegant, wistful harmony over the rustle of wings and far off traffic. There was sunlight on his face, watery and thin with autumn, and smelling just a little bit of ozone and bacon. There was also a gentle, trilling noise extremely close to his face, and Tony figured that although he was extraordinarily comfortable at the moment, he probably ought to work up some anxiety about what could be making it.

But he was really quite comfortable; not hung over, nor even particularly stiff or chilled from a night spent on a pool-lounger in the ass end of October. He thought he might be content to lie there without conscience or memory for a little while longer and trust Jarvis to let him know if he was needed anywhere. Then there came a rustling, gusting noise, like someone was flapping a musty rag just a few inches from his face.

"Ugh," Tony flinched, opening his eyes to a point blank, frankly curious orange stare. A pigeon was standing on his arc reactor cover, looking at him. The tableau held for all of a second before Tony casually shooed the bird away in what was absolutely, categorically, and in no way similar to a flailing spasm of panicky girl-screams. He got to his feet (gracefully, dammit!) after it flew off, kicked the toppled pool lounger out of his way, and inspected himself for lingering traces of pestilence the sky-rat might have left behind.

"Aw hell, where's my shirt? How drunk was I? Dammit, Jarvis, this is why you're not supposed to let me sleep outside!" When no reply came, Tony looked around in worry -- bad as it was being woken up by vermin after spending a half-naked night on the roof, it would be awkward and infinitely harder to explain if he wasn't even on his own roof. But a quick look around the terrace reassured him. He was home, and just through the glass walls was a penthouse with dozens of more comfortable, safer, and pigeon-free places to sleep... and an AI butler who was giving him the silent treatment this morning too, apparently.

Tony scrubbed a gritty hand over his face and headed for the door. "Dude, Jarvis, did I piss you off last night, or just mute you?"

"Yes, Sir, you did." The door slid aside, and Jarvis didn't specify which. So he'd done both, then. Awesome.

"And since when do your override protocols not include defending me from plague vectors?" Tony griped, "Or at least warning me that one was sitting on my goddamned life support mechanism and wondering if I was tasty?"

"My apologies, sir, I'll add pigeons to the 'deadly threats' list at once," Jarvis answered, not sounding sorry in the least as he pointedly opened the doors to bedroom, bathroom, and shower stall with corresponding lighting cues. "Captain Rogers has asked me to invite you to join the team in the assembly lounge on floor 71 once you were awake," he said. "However, given your current state, may I recommend a shower and change of clothes before you go?"

"Right, as if I'd go anywhere without washing off the bird-germs first... Wait, the whole team's there?" Tony stopped short, his stomach diving as his nasty little imagination immediately supplied
several horrible reasons why they’d all be meeting without him. And then a few more about why Steve would call him down after they’d had a chance to talk. No. No way. That kind of ambush might have been Obie's style, but it just wasn’t Steve's. Cap might be judgey, interfering, in-your-face-with-your-shortcomings, but he wasn’t that kind of a coward.

Tony swallowed. "Are we assembling?" And no, his voice did not waver one damn bit, thank you.

"In a manner of speaking, sir," Jarvis replied. "As per the Captain’s request, Director Fury has released certain intelligence files to the Avengers. The Captain had called the team together to review their contents this morning."

"And you didn’t wake me because…?"

"I was muted in the penthouse, sir.” Not a trace of contrition there, damn him, even though they both knew that Avengers business was absolutely on the command override list. Tony really needed to program Jarvis with something resembling shame one of these days. "However, when I let it be known that you were sleeping, the team unanimously decided that you should remain undisturbed until we encountered something particularly requiring your expertise. At least until such time as the initial collation and review had been done."

"Oh. So you spared me the boring gruntwork. That's cool," Tony huffed and grudgingly relinquished some of his hurt feelings as he stripped off, dropping jeans, shorts and socks like breadcrumbs as he went. "Prepare a summary and project it to the shower wall, then start me some coffee. Oh, and hey," he added as the water began to fall, "where'd my shirt wind up last night?" He resisted the urge to scratch at the scars around his arc reactor because, bird feet, ew!

"I couldn't say, sir. You threw it off the east end of the roof, and the air currents and traffic have taken it beyond the range of my sensory capabilities."

Tony blinked under the sudden sense memory of his hips pressed to the chilly brass railing, whirling the come-stained fabric over his head like a rodeo cowboy before… "Shit," he sighed. "I really liked that shirt."

"So you said at the time, sir," Jarvis agreed as Tony stepped under the spray and began to scrub, "my condolences."

~* Set Up Basecamp In the Friendzone *~

"Right," Tony said to himself over the shaving basin as he sculpted his beard out of the foam. "Big Boy pants on today, Stark. You're not gonna go down there and turn this important strategy meeting into an episode of Mean Girls." He craned his chin upward, mumbling as he scraped his neck clean. "And you're not gonna sulk, and you're not gonna moon, and you're not gonna do that stupid asshole eccentric genius act either; you are a goddamned Avenger!"

He slashed the razor through the cloudy, gritty puddle in the basin, then pointed it at his reflection like the Finger of Admonition. "You will not be awkward. That’s Rogers' bag, and you’re gonna let him carry it, because you, my friend, are the Ace of Awesome, the Champ of Charm, and you have a fucking blackbelt in smooth!"

He wiped the last traces of soap from his face with a towel, tossed the razor into the sink, and straightened defiantly to his reflection's regard. "Friends," he practiced saying the word without smirking, without sneering, without rolling his eyes. Because if they were going to be friends, then Tony was going to fucking own it. He was going to rock, roll, and ride that goddamned friendzone right into the sunset, and leave all his pathetic fuckbuddy daydreams panting in his dust!
"Friends." He pulled on his t shirt (Queensryche; for insight, thank you,) and chose a pair of comfortable linen pants to cover his ass, since it looked like he wasn't going to get much time in the workshop today. And also since with Pepper gone and Steve 'not interested,' there wasn't going to be anybody checking out his denim-hugged ass or anything. Because they were all friends and teammates and taking this shit totally seriously, and if not then Natasha could just knock their heads together until they straightened up or passed out, right? Right.

"Jarvis," Tony called, billowing out of the bathroom with the steam, "where the hell's my coffee?"

"Here," Steve answered from his sofa, holding up one of the good mugs -- the ones that Pepper kept trying to insist were meant for soup. "I know you're not usually one for breakfast," he added with a tentative smile as Tony stopped dead in his tracks, mouth dropped elegantly open as his leaden stomach clanging off his toes. "but I brought some up anyway, seeing as how it's after two."

Fuck, Steve, right there, how long, had he heard, in the bathroom, fucking hell, Jarvis was so fucking dead, and why would he- No. Friends. They were friends, and friends could fucking bring each other coffee, goddammit.

"Hey now, no aspersions," Tony cut back primly, the jittery, awkward shock evaporating into warmth as he took the coffee from his friend's hand and came around the sofa. "I've been reliably informed that you guys voted me off the island of menial datastacking this morning, so I'm not going to take any oh my God, those are sausage rolls, aren't they?"

Steve nodded, and slid grinning out of the way as Tony lunged for the plate. "Mrs. Sloane made a few too many this morning, and I couldn't finish them all. She said you were partial, so I brought the extras home to share, but I got tired of defending yours from Thor and Natasha, so I thought I'd bring them up myself."

Tony found himself strangely warmed, both by Sloane's gesture, and by Steve's, especially coming so closely on the heels of last night's Olympic freestyle fucking-up qualification round. It felt good, actually, that Steve would make even a little effort to show Tony that when he said 'friends', he meant something a lot more… normal than Tony's understanding, which in its current context, ran a lot closer to 'bitter exes who will chew each other bloody out of resentment and obligation.'

It made living up to the promises Tony'd made himself in the mirror just a little bit easier. And also, holy mother of chrome, Sloane's goddamned sausage rolls! Still, if they were aiming for normal, there were standards to maintain...

"Why the hell was Sloane cooking you breakfast?" Tony asked with his mouth full, spraying crumbs and not even caring. "You're not conspiring with her now, are you? Plotting my demise and planning to feed me to her damned pigeons? I mean tomatoes?"

Steve laughed and rolled his eyes. "You caught me. I am. She asked me last week if I'd stop in at the mansion to help her take down the Halloween decorations, and plan your murder today. But you should know we're not going to put you in the tomato plot. Not with that perfectly intact Vita-Ray machine that nobody ever looks at still in the study…" Tony stopped chewing, realizing suddenly that Hitchcock would have loved that idea, and fuck if that wasn't actually more than a little creepy, all things considered.

Steve's vaudeville villain leer faltered into a snicker, then a laugh, and Tony answered it with a superior smirk and his favorite finger.

"Dude, you have got to work on that evil laugh. You sound like Scooby Doo." As expected, that got him a baffled look, but Tony's phone beeped a text alert at him before he could offer an impromptu
lecture on his unified theory of meddling kids, mythic archetypography, and the five-victim horror trope. He checked the screen, startled to find it was from Pepper, who by his reckoning, shouldn't have had anything Tony Stark related on her agenda for at least three more days.

*Heading to the airport now,* it read, *ETA 6:30. DON'T do anything stupid until I get there!*

Tony swallowed, glanced at Steve, and then guiltily checked his call log, hoping against hope that he hadn't fucking drunk-dialed Pepper last night. Because there was a special kind of class involved in calling to emo-puke all over your girlfriend because your crush doesn't want to boogie, and the class in question generally required its students to wear padded helmets. But no, it looked like his call log was clear. Whatever stupid things Tony had done last night after Steve had left, interrupting Pepper hadn't been among them. Unless...

"Jarvis, did you tattle on me?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, sir," Jarvis replied transparently.

"Pepper was supposed to be in Baltimore for another three days, but this says she'll be home tonight." It wasn't Tony's imagination, how Steve's expression froze up at that, but he kept the tiny, meanly justified glow at his friend's expression to himself.

"Ah. I believe that might have something to do with Agent Coulson's return, sir," Jarvis answered after a moment. "He and Ms. Potts are both logged as passengers in the StarkIndustries jet's flight plan this afternoon. I surmise that Director Fury will have canceled his leave, given the nature of the files he has authorized released to the Avengers today, and that is most likely the reason for his return."

Not actually an improvement, all things considered. Pepper was going to be so pissed!

Steve cleared his throat and cut a glance at Tony's near-empty plate. "If you're about finished with that, we could use you downstairs. Bruce says he's found something in the SHIELD geoscience department's files."

"Geofience?" Tony mumbled around the last of the sausage rolls as he dusted his hands and stood. "Whadda fuck dof FIELD neef wif a geofience deparfmenf?"

He got a shrug in response as Steve stood and turned toward the elevator doors. "Makes about as much sense to me as SHIELD needing an astrophysics department, but Dr. Selvig and Dr. Foster don't seem out of place. Anyway, there's been something weird going on with the local seismic activity since August, and they've been tracking it."

"There's been seismic activity?" Tony was honestly baffled. New York City didn't get earthquakes, and when it did, even small ones, it was pretty big news. Plus he'd have expected to hear at least something about that kind of thing from Jarvis, just as part of the building security protocols. Standing orders were to inform Tony of anything at all that could prove compromising to Stark Tower, and earthquakes definitely counted in that list.

Cap shrugged and shook his head as the elevator dropped. "I guess so. None of us had heard anything about it, but apparently SHIELD has linked several ruptured gas-line fires and building collapses to something they're calling 'micro-shifts'. Utilities and the city engineer have been pretty baffled, so I guess that's why SHIELD started tracking it. Anyway, Bruce got all het up over something he found in the reports and told Jarvis to wake you, then he ran off to his lab."

The door opened then, allowing what Tony had come to think of as Bruce's 'lab squee' voice in. "-
the dates of the 'collapse events' that SHIELD has been tracking so far. Oh, hi Tony. Steve," he smiled a distracted welcome as they entered the lounge where Clint, Thor, and Natasha sprawled in a mess of paper files and holographic projections. The video screen behind him was lit with six red dots over a two month grid, and Bruce flicked another file from his tablet up to overlay that data with a much more crowded calendar.

"This is a record of random energy and radiation spikes picked up in the city by SHIELD's passive monitoring net," he said as he began picking out all the blips that didn't correspond to the first set, which was most of the small ones. When he was done, every one of the six red blips had a matching blue blip in its grid too.

Tony sat forward with a whistle. "That's a hell of a coincidence for scientists to miss," he said.

"Not if one department doesn't talk to another," Steve observed darkly, "Scientists love their secrets. Always have." He moved a box of files so he could take the seat next to Thor instead of the spot on Tony's left, where he normally sat, and which the others had conspicuously left open for him. Tony ignored Natasha's querying glance, and tried not to resent Steve's right to sit wherever the hell he damn well wanted to as Bruce went on.

"The data on these spikes isn't very clear," he said, consulting his tablet again, "because they haven't been sustained long enough to get a reading on the energy patterns, but there are a few signals in the records, here and here." He pulled up a graphic, spiky and jagged on a bar of black, overlaying two more that were nearly identical over the top. "These are all from the passive net records since August. Now here is the energy signal Tony and I pulled off an unknown component on the HoratioCorp hostage bomb Steve got from SHIELD." He put up another jagged line just under the first, and even Thor took a stunned breath at how well they lined up.

"Wait," Bruce said to forestall the murmurs. "There's more. This is the energy pattern SHIELD picked up when Thor first came to earth." He put up another line, far less similar, though there were sections that did match nicely. "And this is the pattern Jarvis recorded from the portal Loki opened on the tower last year." A final graphic came up, not identical to the first reading, but damned close.

"Shit," Tony observed, tapping at his arc reactor as the synchronicities made themselves horribly, unmistakably clear, "Someone's trying to weaponize Loki's portal tech."

"Weaponize?" Clint laughed, too shrill, too loud in the hush. "Because it wasn't dangerous enough already?"

"Not if there isn't an army waiting on the other side," Natasha observed, neutral and cool, except for the way she couldn't stop fiddling with the pen in her hand.

"No, Tony's right," Steve said, his face set and grim. "Some of us can stand up to incredible amounts of damage, others are extremely hard to hit at all. An enemy wouldn't have to waste time figuring out how to kill us if they could just send us somewhere so far away we could never make it back." He rubbed the fingers of one hand together, as if remembering some vanished pain there.

"The undiscovered country." Natasha's fiddling stilled, and she set the pen aside.

Thor startled them all with a spitting noise. "This is a coward's way, but villains are often such." He pointed at the third line, measured where the rest were haphazard, yet still too eerily similar. "Yet why would the opening of such a door cause these buildings to fall and burn so? The Bifrost causes no such damage when it touches the Nine Realms."

Clint made a noise, thin and anxious in his throat, then shared a loaded glance with Natasha before
"When the Tesseract portal first opened last year," she explained over the sound of his rummaging in the fridge, "it destabilized and destroyed a SHIELD base in New Mexico. Left a crater two miles wide."

Thor looked appalled, but beside him, Steve didn't look surprised at all. "So that would account for our collapse events," he said, "but there was also... " he glanced to Bruce for permission, then got up and reached for discarded blips from the second calendar. He touched one of them gingerly, as if he expected it to sting him, then flicked it back to its place. It settled like a baleful firefly over the last square of the October calendar. "The svartálfar didn't know how they got to Times Square last night. So if this is the same energy signal as the others,--"

"It looks like it," Bruce put in, examining his tablet.

Steve nodded, serious as a heart attack. "Then it means they've gotten it to work."

A bang from the kitchen startled them all, and they turned to find Clint, beer in hand, scowling beside the fridge. "That's bullshit," he growled into the silence. "Thor said the dark elves weren't complicit. They didn't know what the hell was happening."

"This is as their mage priest told me," Thor agreed, "But-"

"Then what kind of fucking moron would bring thirty goddamned alien civilians through his little portal on Halloween night, then leave them where they couldn't help attracting the cops' notice? Especially if this is being done from here, and not there."

"What part of the ACME supergenius handbook covers that kind of fucking pointless, stupid waste of time and resources?"

Tony was old friends with the furious, brittle look on Hawkeye's face as he stalked back into the room trying to pretend he wasn't strung tighter than his bow. He saw it in his own eyes when the ghosts of bloody sand, ozone and water leapt cackling out of the innocent cracks in his life; when a hand fell too hard on his shoulder from behind; when a shrill noise too close to his ear made his neck seize up and his breath stop cold; when the taste of palladium haunted every drop he could drink. He knew the urge to draw blood and set the ghosts onto someone else, just like he knew how pity only sharpened the meanness inside.

But the question was a fair one, and relevant, so Tony answered it at face value. "It's in the chapter on appeasing the laws of thermodynamics," he said, getting out of the too-empty sofa to pace as the equations began to unspool, elegant and awful in his head. "If mass goes one way through space, then something equally heavy or energetic needs to go the other way too, or else--"

"Or else you wind up with a two mile crater where a SHIELD base used to be," Bruce agreed, sweeping their data to a jumble on the side of the video screen and pulling out his tablet pen to scribble.

"Right. Hence the iridium," Tony said, leaning in to add a line below Bruce's. "Its atomic weight acts as a ballast to offset the force of--"

"Only these guys can't possibly be getting iridium. It's too rare, too controlled. They must be-"

A shrill whistle cut them off, and they both whipped around to stare at Cap, still standing by the discarded energy signatures on the other vid screen. He returned a look loaded with silent meaning, then cut a glance past where Clint huddled, white-lipped in Natasha's shadow, to Thor. "Can we use
this time for information we can all follow please?" he asked, polite and just a little pleading. "I don't
know if all this math and physics confuses Thor, but it's a little above my head."

"I am not confused, my friends," Thor said, his voice low and ominous, "I am angry. And I wish to
know if the svartálfar alone have suffered these abductions, or if other denizens of Yggdrasil's nine
realms have been thrust from their homes by this... weapon."

Steve nodded, clearly relieved at the change of direction. "Well, that's definitely the kind of thing that
SHIELD tracks. Natasha, your clearance is the highest on this team; can you get us access to-
"

She shook her head leaning subtly into Clint's side as if the rigid set of his arm could be comfortable.
"Sorry, Cap. I'm a field agent; my clearance doesn't include access to metahuman tracking files
unless directly related to a mission."

"So not a problem," Tony answered, not bothering to hide his eagerness at the chance. "Jarvis, can
you have a look in SHIELD's toybox and find me-"

"Coulson's got the clearance." Clint's tone was leaden, and heavy enough to cut right through Tony's
instructions. He swallowed when they all looked around at him, and his next words managed a
lighter tone. "He's a level 9. He can get us whatever we need to know on other metahumans.
Whatever SHIELD has, except maybe Ms. Marvel's home phone number. He keeps telling me he
can't get me that."

"No, he keeps telling you he won't get you that," Natasha answered, settling in a little closer as he
lifted his arm from beneath her and dropped it around her shoulders. "It really is different."

"Jarvis said Coulson's inbound now. He and Ms. Potts should be here around…" Steve trailed off,
his attention clearly caught by something on his video screen again as Jarvis stepped up to fill the
hesitation with data.

"Correcting for predicted traffic, I expect them to arrive not later than 6:15. Presuming that this
meeting will be ongoing at that time, Sir, would you like me to order in dinner?"

"Sure," Tony answered, distracted. "Ask Pep what she wants, and we'll order from there. Whatcha
got, Cap?"

"There was a spike on September twenty-ninth," he answered, pinning a blip with his finger and
separating it from the others. "That was the board meeting at HoratioCorp, but there shouldn't have
been anything on that day."

Bruce looked up over his glasses and pointed to his neat row of jagged lines. "Remember, this
second energy signal came from one of those bombs, so."

"But those bombs didn't go off," Cap insisted, flicking it back into its place on the calendar. "There
wasn't a collapse event, and there wasn't a portal opened, so where did this signal come from?"

"Reed Richards' lab," Tony said, snapping his fingers. "That's why I was late, remember? He had
some kind of equipment the Four picked up on a mission, and he was testing it out for function. Set it
off while I was trying to figure out what he'd done to the ROV I'd loaned him, and it shorted the hell
out of my phone."

"Then he'll have data we need on this," Steve said with a crisp nod, and a warning glance when both
Tony and Bruce groaned. "This device gets perfected, it's gonna be everybody's problem. We don't
have the luxury of treating it like a secret; it's already too far along."
"Fuck secrecy, Cap, I just don't want to deal with Richards," Tony griped. "Guy's got an ego so dense it has its own gravity well, and I hope you realize that I say that with full knowledge of Natasha's opinions of me as expressed in my SHIELD profile. And he's got no damned respect for proprietary robotics design either, even when it's on loan. I swear, the only reason I didn't punch him in the head that day was because I didn't want to get my damn hand stuck in it."

Steve's brows knit down, the Wrinkle of Disapproval holding center stage as he turned his expectant look on Bruce and got nowhere.

"I really don't think I'm the best person to be liaising with Mr. Fantastic, Steve," Bruce said, spreading his hands and backing away from the silent request.

"Don't look at me," Natasha spoke up proactively, "He's pretty much the reason the Director declined to recruit the Fantastic Four as the core group of the Avengers. Doctor Richards knows I'm the one who wrote his profile too, and you could say he didn't appreciate my insights."

"Who does?" Tony flashed her a hollow grin. "Anyway. Steve, we have plenty of other resources to get us started; We've got all these passive sensor readings, we've got Dr. Foster and Dr. Selvig, not to mention that Bruce just figured out what that last component on the hostage bomb had to be, so we can start making sense of it now. And you guys haven't even finished going through the meaningless data yet. Can we wait to borrow more aggravation until we know we need it?"

"I'll do it." Clint gave a defiant stare back to the stunned silence, then grinned like the unrepentant bastard they all knew him to be. "I kind of have an in with Sue Richards and her brother. Give me a few hours and money to cover the bar tab, and I can probably get us all kinds of goodies without ever having to look His Fantasticness in the eye."

Natasha craned around to give him a look packed tight with query, to which he answered with a grin that was dripping smug. It was so fucking cute Tony just wanted to bang their heads right together.

He was saved from this self-destructive urge by Cap, as usual, who actually started rolling up his shirtsleeves as he returned to the file boxes waiting on the lounge tables. "Natasha, what kind of files does SHIELD have on Mr. Horatio?" he asked, turning the box lid and checking a list taped inside.

She blinked, then cocked her head. "Which one? There are three; father and two sons."

"The one the bomber wanted," he said, voice grim and eye fierce, "The one who never showed up to his own scheduled board meeting, even though another CEO was supposed to meet him there. The one who didn't show his face at his corporate headquarters even though the police and the press were crawling all over it."

Then it was Tony's turn to blink. "Fuck me, Cap's right." He weathered a surge of disgust, realizing that between his initial fear that Pepper and Steve would be blown to shreds at that meeting, and the following relief that they were safe, he hadn't even thought to ask why the hell Jerry Horatio hadn't shown his smug fucking face. He'd just taken Pepper to hide in Malibu for a week, and trusted the cops to sort it out while he spent October chasing Steve around and playing with his dad's blueprints. Jesus fuck, they were right -- love DID make you stupid!

A similar anger was dawning across Natasha's face though, and the deadly calm in her voice as she spoke shook Tony briskly out of his spiraling mental tantrum. "I'll have them sent over," she said, reaching for her tablet with pale, precise hands. "And I think I'll schedule a visit with that bomber as well. She's had a month inside now. She might have remembered some more details about who supplied her ordinance."
"Think you can have it scheduled by tonight?"

She gave that tart little smile of hers in reply. "Depending on which prison they've got her in now, Captain, I just might have you a transcript, list of contacts, and a signed confession by then."

~* Killed My Darling *~

If anybody had asked Tony what he wanted his assignment to be for the afternoon, he would have said he wanted to go with Clint instead of down to the lab with Bruce. No disrespect to Tony’s Science Buddy and Drop Dead Intellectually Gorgeous Brainmate or anything, but a) drinking with Johnny Storm, and b) schmoozing with Sue Richards? Come on!

What he would probably not have included in that explanation would have been any hint that, burdened as he was by a new and extremely awkward set of memories from the night before, he found the idea of being alone in the lab with Bruce and his possibly-more-accurate-than-Natasha's profiling skills for the afternoon making him feel about as vulnerable as if he was welding without any pants on.

Not that he'd done that or anything. Recently.

But Tony wasn't going to say or do anything about it, because Bruce was a bro, a pal, and a stand up guy who knew how and when to keep his ideas to himself. After all, Bruce knew his way around a few of his own painful secrets, between the hot, brainy, explosive-tempered girlfriend he almost never talked about, and all the family history Tony found buried in his SHIELD dossier. Bruce was discreet, was what. Guy couldn't hide from General Ross for five years without a healthy dollop of discretion and minding-your-own in him, and Bruce, had more than his fair share; carefully cultivated and honed in backwater shantytowns the world over. Bruce was cool. Totally cool.

Bruce wouldn't dig too much if Tony was kind of a spaz. This was important, because as they'd left the gravity well of Cap's little war room in the lounge area, Tony had been able to feel himself starting to fray. Too much had changed for so little to have changed. Too many elements were just different now, and there was no way it could all revert back into old patterns just because Steve called him his friend and threw fascinating data at his head.

You just couldn't go from unrequited, mutual lust to handjobs to just friends with nothing more than a night in the bottle and a favorite shirt sacrificed to the Gods of Really Bad Plans to settle things, could you? Could you? Tony really didn't know, but he felt at least reasonably sure that he could figure some of it out while the other 3/4ths of his brain was occupied with physics, geometry, mathematics, and not blowing himself up.

And Bruce, good man that he was, would be totally down with that. Bruce never much minded when Tony went over all socially dysfunctional in the lab, so long as nothing blew up. (For a chemist, Tony thought Bruce had a sadly underdeveloped appreciation for explosions, but usually he kept that opinion to himself.) So Tony didn't spend too much time debating whether to lead Bruce down to the basement lab he'd been haunting for the past four weeks. Tony had taken the unknown bomb component down for safer testing when they'd first realized it had an energy signature all of its own, and also to have it close when he needed a break from working on The Other Thing.

But The Other Thing didn't matter, and they had work to do, so Tony was not going to let himself worry about it.

"I'd wondered," was all Bruce had to say as the elevator brought them down to the guts of the Tower's sub-basements. Though, because Bruce liked rocking that inscrutably rumpled zen master vibe, he declined to say whether he'd been wondering where Tony had squirreled the device away
to, or where Tony had been spending so much of his time lately. Tony figured it was safe to say he'd wondered both. But Tony had given Jarvis the order to move The Other Thing to the paint shop yesterday, after he'd learned about the movie night plans, so that particular curiosity was one Dr. Banner would just have to live with.

"Seemed safer to work on it down here in the hard room," Tony said, mentally polishing his most bulletproof laissez-faire. "There's a lot more structural reinforcement down here than in my regular workshop, and less stuff I care about to get blown up if the worst happens, too." He was talking about Dummy, U, and Butterfingers, of course, but because his brain was an addicted little speedmonkey, it had to go and drop Steve's face into the list too. Tony made a mental note to poke it with a q-tip soon.

"Might not be all that safe, if the collapse events are anything to go by," Bruce observed as the elevator doors slid open, glancing upward at the several hundred tons of Avengers Tower that was currently crouched over their heads. "We might want to try setting up on the roof…" Then he stopped short, barely noticing when Tony bounced off his back, except to breathe out a shocked sort of, "Oh."

Oh. Well shit. There The Other Thing sat, painted, polished, showroom perfect, and all but purring in place with its front wheel slanted daringly, star-shaped headlamp teasing a wink over its shoulder as chrome dazzled and leather gleamed. Stupid, stupid, stupid. What the hell had he been thinking?

"Jarvis, you were supposed to tell me when the paintjob was done," he said through his teeth. "I am sorry sir," the AI answered, and for once he actually sounded like it, "Given the state of affairs as of last night, that data seemed frankly rather superfluous. I had supposed you might rather not know."

"Tony, this is..." Bruce reached to stroke the faring groove above the light, where a certain round shield would snugly sit and still allow a clear view of the road. His eyebrows lifted at the warmth of the metal, which was silly, because everyone knew that Cap hated the cold, so what kind of designer would begrudge the man an erg or two to keep his ride from freezing his balls off? Not that the state of Steve's balls was any of Tony's actual business, he reminded himself as he watched the track of Bruce's hand, how the paint's iridescent gleam swam like an electric halo around the shadow of his touch. That blue, that perfect blue of autumn sky and arclight fire and eyes that had no business being even real... that was what would give him away if anything did.

"It's actually practical," he rushed to explain. "The reflective particles are uniform, see? So it's just a matter of some electromagnetic tweaking during the paint application process to orient the particles so they can scatter any beam projections in a forward direction instead of randomly. In theory it should shed any kind of beam energy pretty well. Not as well as vibranium, of course, and we can't cover all bases, but," he shrugged, aware that he was totally babbling, but not quite able to make himself stop. "The Chitauri weapons gave a pretty good baseline, and a lot of what we're seeing now looks like it was built on that model, so it ought to be good for, say, HYDRA's pulse weapon habit. Don't know how it'd stand up to that force eye beam thing Cyclops has got going on though. I mean, I'd have asked him to do a field test on it, only I'd have had to talk to him for that, and he's kind of a dick, you know?"

Bruce gave him a knowing look that cut right through; over the glasses, sober and level, and telegraphing one fuck of a blow. "Tony, does he know?"

Tony didn't flinch. He did not fucking flinch at all, thank you. "Who, Cyclops?"
"Steve."

"Dude, \textit{you} didn't even know about it!" Tony tossed off a thousand watt grin and turned toward the back of the room, where he'd set up hardened, remote-work stations for things that were likelier than usual to explode. "And given that Steve hasn't even been home for a month, how the hell would he-"

"Does he know how you feel about him?"

Damn it. Tony aimed a glare Bruce's way, but couldn't say he was surprised when it didn't work. Bruce had taken his glasses off, folded them into one hand so there wasn't anything to hide behind. "I know a love letter when I see one," he said, "even when it's on wheels."

"Yeah, well," Tony shrugged. "The airborne design had some stability problems with only two repulsors, and the Chitauri sleds are too New Agey to be reliable. I'm still working on the wheel-free version."

"And that's why you haven't given him this yet," Bruce challenged as if he knew better. "Because you're already working on the upgrade? You bothered to paint it, detail the chrome, make an arc reactor shaped like Cap's star to run it on, and outfit it with an arsenal that would probably make Director Fury weak in the knees... but it's only a prototype?"

"Well, when you put it like that, it sounds stupid," Tony complained. Bruce just looked at him, arms crossed, hip brushing seat leather that just happened to exactly match the blue of Cap's uniform.

"You're not stupid, Tony," Bruce said, and it sounded a bit like a warning. "But neither is he. So if Steve doesn't know how you feel already, he will the instant you show this bike to him."

"Yeah," Tony let the word escape on a sigh, hooked a stool with his foot and slung it into place at the remote control panel. "That's pretty much not gonna happen though."

"What? Wasn't it you who warned me not to throw too much money at him, because it would freak out his depression-era sensibilities?" he asked. "Well, this is me, saying I get it, and yeah you were probably right about that. He... that bike cost more in work hours and materials than most houses, and how the hell could that be anything but fucked up and weird between teammates?"

"Tony..."

He waved the protest away half formed. "So yeah, maybe I got a little caught up in the design phase. I kinda do that, you might have noticed; it's a thing with me. I like to make cool things, and sometimes I lose sight of practicality along the way. It happens, just ask Pepper." He offered up a shrug and a careless grin. "That doesn't mean I'm stupid enough to waste the fruits of my genius on someone who's too uptight to even appreciate it."

"I can't see how he could fail to appreciate it," Bruce replied in a strangely sad tone as he drifted away from the bike and joined Tony at the workstation, "I mean, like I said, he's not stupid."

Tony scoffed out of habit. "Depends on the day. But really, that bike is totally not his style. Sure, the wartime newsreels show him riding the one Howard built him, but it's not like he's using any kind of transport in battle now. And let's face it; the back roads of Europe aren't the same as the kind of debris fields we're usually scrapping in. How could it help but throw a wrench right in his flow? His whole style with that shield, for instance; forward momentum, uneven roads, wind resistance, they'd increase the variables of his throw and catch trajectories exponentially."
Bruce shook his head, smiling a little now. "If anybody could adapt to that it'd be him. Cap's superior colliculus is a miracle in and of itself."

Tony shook his head. "Yeah, well, sexy sweetbreads don't help a guy steer a bike through a war zone when he can't keep hold of the handlebars," he said. "It's got the best gyro stabilizers and autopilot I could put into it, but Newton's first law is still gonna win the throwdown when he has to jump off and punch someone in the head. Even before you add in the ridiculously complicated weapons systems, it's too much to handle. If the damned thing didn't blow up underneath him, then it would only be a matter of time before it got just... trashed beyond repair. Ruined."

He sighed, scrubbed a hand into his hair, and shook his head again. "And then he'd still have to deal with the enemy, and hold the team together, and keep Fury in line while it was melting down to slag, and... yeah, I don't know what made me think he'd have any use for..." he waved his hand toward the bike, massive, elegant and irrelevant under its spotlight, "For this. He'd be an idiot to want it."

It hurt a lot more than it should have, saying those words, and Tony was actually pathetically grateful to feel the tentative, comforting press of Bruce's hand to his shoulder. "He'd be an idiot with a damned steep learning curve, and nope, I still don't see any reason why he wouldn't want it."

Tony huffed a smile, or at least part of one, and keyed his passcode into his docked datapad. "That's probably because you're not a recently defrosted, ninety year old war relic with moral fiber so dense that not even enlightened self interest can escape its pull."

"You have the weirdest ideas about him," Bruce laughed, squeezing Tony's shoulder once more before releasing it. "Sometimes I wonder if you two know each other at all."

"Tell me about it," Tony sighed, wishing he could find that as funny as he probably should.

Bruce let go of his shoulder then, turning to dock his own datapad into the robotics station and key in his passcode. Tony watched him work, and tried not to miss the warm weight of it too much. "Does Pepper know about all this?" Bruce added into the silence after a few moments. He didn't look up, or even cut a glance Tony's way, but neither of them had any illusions about where his attention lay.

That laugh was easier to give. "Doctor Banner, we're talking about Pepper here. Her mutant power is knowing exactly what I'm up to at all times. Trust me, none of this is a surprise to her; she's probably had it figured out longer than I have."

Bruce looked up then, with a wry, teasing grin. "Now that I can believe." He unfolded his glasses, set them back onto his nose, and peered through the blast shield at the iPod-sized disc clamped snugly in its magnetic brackets. "Ok, so bring me up to speed; what have we got on this thing so far?"

Chapter End Notes

Wow! So many awesome commenters last time -- I'm awed, I'm humbled, and frankly a little intimidated. I hope you all continue to enjoy the story now that the plot's emerging onto the stage properly.

Cheers, and thanks so much for your comments and praise -- way to keep a girl on track!
"Mine's the shortest, so I'll go first," Natasha said grim-faced as she reached for the cornbread. Tony didn't snicker like a 12 year old, but Clint did. Right up until she said, "We're not going to get anywhere with the bomber." Then he nearly dropped his fork.

Coulson froze too, and Tony eyed the agents' twin looks of blank shock with suspicion. Then he decided if nobody else was gonna ask, he might as well. "So let me get this straight; you can squeeze accurate intel out of a captive, hostile trickster God who's deliberately fucking with the entire team, but you can't get a drop out of one hillbilly wingnut? I thought fanatics liked to talk!"

"They do when they're breathing," she allowed, taking the potatoes from in front of Bruce and helping herself as the stunned silence settled around her. "As of this morning at ten fifteen, Mrs. Claire Huddell, 36 years old, no priors, tested clean for drugs, no violent behavior while incarcerated ceased to fit that particular qualification. Apparently there was a spontaneous fight in the exercise yard, at the end of which our bomber, her cellmate, and a guard were all dead."

"Damn it," Steve sighed, and passed the plate of ribs to Coulson. "Well, I guess that's-"

"It gets better," Natasha cut in. "The last visitor on record for Mrs. Huddell was Mr. Tom Burdick, the Director of HoratioCorp's security department. Only at the time, HoratioCorp had put him on an unpaid hiatus pending investigation into his possible role in the attempted bombing."

"Oh yeah. Cause that's not convenient or anything," Tony grumbled, just as Pepper snorted something that sounded a lot like 'moron' and stabbed at her chicken.

"He ate a bullet at his vacation home two days ago," Natasha went on, ignoring the interruption. "The police had just applied for a warrant to go and bring him in. Anybody want the last fried pickles?"

Clint passed them over. "Well, I have better news, but not a lot more of it. Sue's still a chatty drunk and a two-beer wonder, and Johnny's brain to mouth filter still shuts right off when there's a nice ass in view. The ass in question was not mine, before anyone asks."

"Pity," Natasha murmured, spooning coleslaw. She was ignored in her own turn.

"Richards made the same connection Bruce did between the collapse events and the portal energy," Clint snorted and picked up his beer. "He hasn't shared this with anybody though, because apparently he doesn't think he has enough data to make a 'firm conclusion.'"

Steve groaned and covered his face, muffling a comment about 'damned scientists,' which Tony magnanimously let slide unchallenged. Which made Pepper's kicking his ankle under the table entirely unfair, he wanted to point out.

Coulson was less circumspect about things. "Dr. Richards was contracted in September to do a preliminary evaluation of those readings," he said with exactly the kind of neutrality that telegraphed murderous intent when Natasha pulled it off, making Tony wonder which of them had learned it from the other. "Are you telling me he's holding out on us in favor of publication and peer review?"
Clint nodded, smug. "Pretty much. Sue was hell of pissed when she found out that people had been hurt in some of those events he was tracking though, so I'm pretty sure SHIELD will be getting that report out of him in a day or two. And yeah," he tipped a glance Tony's way, "Sue confirmed that it was a captured portal device that went off while you were there. It didn't bring the lab down only because of Richards' magical, mystical sciency-wienci anti-weird-collapsey-portal-device safeguards, but apparently it trashed a metric fuckton of other experiments they'd been running, so she had a lot to say about the whole event."

"Sciency-wienci?" Bruce chuckled.

"Whatever," Clint agreed and slipped a pen-sized vocorder out of his pocket. "It's all on here, but I warn you, whoever transcribes it is gonna learn a lot more than they ever wanted to know about Storm's recent dating conquests and Sue's marital woes."

"Jarvis is good for it," Tony volunteered, because he was the soul of charity, and not because he wanted ammunition for the next time Richards made him feel like a jumped up kid playing with his dad's erector set.

"SHIELD will send you a copy of the transcript," Coulson put in mildly, plucking the device from Clint's fingers and tucking it away in his jacket.

"No way! You're just gonna censor all the good parts!"

"And keep you from alienating a potential ally?" Coulson replied, unflappable. "Quite probably. Especially since it's likely we're going to need both his help, and that of Dr. Foster to establish exactly how HYDRA got its hands on enough of Dr. Selvig's data and equipment designs to let them even make a credible attempt at this."

Tony shared a weary glance with Bruce. That question had been bouncing around the lab all afternoon, chewed to incomprehensible pieces while they'd teased the device apart and hoped for some insight into one or the other. They hadn't got far with either problem.

"This is already a cross-initiative endeavor," Coulson went on, poking at his tablet. "As you know, the Fantastic Four became involved when there was a collapse event during one of their Dr. Doom battles. But other metahumans in the area have also reported encounters on or around the dates Dr. Banner has isolated. The X-Men reported a non-earth entity with fire-based powers in Green County on September 18th, and Daredevil is reported to have fought some kind of a monster in Hell's Kitchen on October 10th. I quote an eyewitness here; 'It was a big ass lizard kind of thing, only all smelly and hairy, with horns like a moose or something.' He aimed a glance at Thor. "Sounds a lot like a creature you described to me once."

"A bilchsteim," Thor agreed, jointing his chicken with the practiced ease of a man used to seeing his meals with the bones in. "This devil of yours, he killed the beast?"

Coulson shook his head. "Reports say it got away into the sewers."

Tony immediately put his thumb to the center of his forehead and said "Not it!"

Steve and Clint followed suit, Bruce a second after them. Thor looked like he wanted to, but either he wasn't sure his honor would allow it, or he didn't want to put down his chicken leg.

Natasha eyed them all with a smirk, and shrugged. "No big deal. The alligators'll get it."

Thor looked relieved until Bruce scoffed, wiping the smudge of barbecue sauce off his forehead. "If we're lucky. Otherwise they'll turn out to be genetically compatible."
"This is the entity the X-Men reported," Coulson called them back to heel, and they all looked up as he turned the tablet to display a shaky camera-phone vid. Not a lot to be seen on it; a chaos of flame, wind, claws and force-beams -- and a fifty foot tall dude who was not just *on* fire, but looked like he was actually made of it. They watched in silence as the SUV it picked up to throw at Colossus melted into a wad of slag and steel between the wind up and the release. Tony squirmed in his seat, trying to keep his brain from calculating the kind of heat that would take, and whether his armor would stand a chance against it.

"A Múspell knight," Thor sighed, reaching for his beer. "She would not have been easily felled, even by the X-Men. Were many injured?"

"Around a hundred," Coulson said without checking, "thirty fatalities on the site, four more in the hospitals later. The X-Men took a pounding at first, but figured out her weaknesses fairly quickly. None of them took any lingering damage, and it's difficult to say how many of the victims were civilian, given that we now suspect HYDRA's portal experiments to be a factor. If they opened one and... she came through, then it's possible that the bodies recovered from the wreckage had been the ones to cause it."

"Except for the knight," Pepper murmured, poking at the remains of her dinner. "She was innocent. Like the Sva... Sv-"

"Svartálfar," Thor supplied. "But the Múspell knight, at least, was a warrior." He sat upright suddenly, and gave the table a bang that had them all scrambling to steady their drinks. "Agent Coul's-Son, where have her cinders been collected? I would return them to Múspellheim and give her daughters the tale of her valiant end as an honor to her name."

Tony flinched, imagining small town officials having hosed and scrubbed away the residue of the X-fight weeks ago. Coulson, though, didn't bat an eye. "I'll e-mail Professor Xavier and find out where the remains were taken."

"Good," Steve spoke up. "And you'll be working with Heimdall to get there, right?" he asked Thor, pushing his plate back when the man nodded. "If the energy of the portal bombs is similar to the Bifrost energy, he's sure to have noticed something. You think he'd help us figure this mess out?"

"Aye, to be sure. Heimdall takes his wardenship of the Bifrost not less seriously than does any King his realm," Thor agreed. "He will not be unaware of this matter, nor, I suspect, will he be pleased at it. He would aid merely for my asking, as he is fealty-sworn to my father, yet I find it likely the task would be welcome to him."

Tony shared a dubious glance with Bruce, neither of them all that sure how helpful they'd find anything an Asgardian wizard-tech-mage-elevator-boy would wind up being to them. It wasn't the time to say so though, not with Steve looking so ferociously determined, and Thor looking so… ferocious. Still, Dr. Foster was going to be onboard, and she apparently had a gift for making sense of the hocus-pocus, they could always dump the New Agey things on her to sort out.

"When is it our turn for show and tell?" he asked.

"Smart kids go last, Tony," Steve's Captain-face eased briefly into that one-sided smile of his. "Otherwise nobody else'd get a chance to speak."

He reeled back, hand over his arc reactor. "Ooh! Harsh, Cap!"

"Only hurts 'cause it's true," Pepper observed sweetly as she picked up a napkin and aimed for Tony's cheek. "Hold still, you've got some-"
"Not actually true," Tony protested, ducking her ministrations and grabbing his own damned napkin. "Not today, anyhow. It's gonna take more than a few hours to crack that device and figure out how it works. More yet to figure out how to keep it from working. So the Science Brotherhood dog and pony show will be a few days in coming."

Steve nodded, but he had that too earnest look on, and his voice was gentle as he said, "Be careful with it, please."

Tony ignored the clenching sensation that sent through his chest, and rolled his eyes. "Golly, that's a good idea! So glad you were around to think of it, Cap, you must be some kind of a genius!"

Yeah, that shook some of the softness out of those eyes. Familiar ground, that angry flash and clench of teeth, but Steve didn't rise to it like he would have once. Instead, he hit low and dirty. "I haven't forgotten that you're smart, Tony," he said over his folded hands. "It's just that Howard nearly blew himself, his lab, and all his assistants to kingdom come the first time he got hold of HYDRA's blue energy tech. We were lucky we didn't lose him then, and winning the war would have been a lot harder to do if we had." The earnest look came back, but somehow it wasn't any softer than the rage had been. "I don't want to take that kind of a gamble now and lose it -- it'd be a hundred times harder doing this without you." He cut a glance and a nod toward Bruce. "Either of you. So reassure your team and say you'll be careful please."

"Reassure me, while you're at it," Pepper grumbled. Tony took her hand in his, even though she immediately clenched it tight. She did that when they had these 'bullet holes' conversations though, and Tony figured so long as she wasn't mad enough to cry, he was probably still doing okay.

Bruce came to his rescue though, hand over his heart, earnest expression giving Steve's a run for its money as he said, "I try to avoid exploding whenever possible, you know. I'm happy to make sure Tony stays in one piece too. At least while we're working on the portal device, anyway."

Clint cracked open another beer and chuckled. "Yeah, 'cause what could possibly go wrong when two super-geniuses are poking some other genius's twitchy, prototype time/space-tearing weapon with sticks to see what it does? Oof."

"Don't interrupt the genius when he's reassuring his team, Clint," Natasha said primly before fixing Tony with a look of such blatant expectation that it warmed the cockles of Tony's arc reactor. Either that, or the spicy barbecue sauce was fighting back.

"Guys, just remember that my warranty got well and truly voided a few years back," Tony replied, patting his arc reactor with his free hand. "I'm not gonna go trashing something as unique and awesome as myself over a little intellectual curiosity. Besides -- I've put too much work into this Tower for it to become another hit on the 'collapse event' list. Bruce and I will do our best to let Dr. Richards do all the accidental exploding in this project."

Steve nodded at that. "Thank you. Now if everyone's reported in, let's set the agenda for... yes, Clint?" he sighed, drawing everyone's eyes to the man's upraised hand, back-tilted chair, and the bottleneck he was walking back and forth over the knuckles of his off hand. He'd have seemed perfectly sober, but for the three empty bottles in front of his plate, and the fact that his liver had been keeping up with Johnny Storm's all afternoon. Even with a good thirty pounds on Clint, and a battle-hardened liver of his own, Tony wasn't sure he had the endocrinal fortitude to manage that trick -- Storm drank like a Marine. Actually, he drank like the Marines. All of them. Fire powers; go figure.

Still, the archer's focus was as laser sharp as ever when he had everyone's eyes on him. "I got a question for the smart kids, Cap. Jarvis, will you bring up that calendar Bruce was working on earlier? The one with the..." The grid of lines and dots appeared over the center of the table, rotating
slowly so everyone could see. "Yeah, that one. So who can explain to me why we aren't including-" he flipped his bottle cap through an early, empty square of the calendar, "-the School as a collapse event?"

"Because it wasn't," Tony answered, picking at his French fries.

"You sure of that?"

"Yeah, I am," Tony rose eagerly to the challenge. "Those were standard demolition charges in that sub-basement."

Clint's stare didn't waver. "You sure of that?"

Tony's sarcastic, affirmative reply ran abruptly aground as he saw Steve's brow knit and his eyes go distant and shrewd with memory at the question. He stopped to consider it again, and found that his intended 'yes' was a little hollow after all.

"No," Steve answered the question after a long, silent moment; hesitant, but not uncertain. "They weren't all demolition charges. The ones on the perimeter of the lab were -- the ones wired to the arc trigger, but that other one…"

"He's right," Bruce said, sitting up a little straighter. "That other one we figured for a dirty bomb was very much different. If it hadn't been radioactive, I wouldn't have thought it was a bomb at all, just a... generator, or a crude metering device or something."

"My big green buddy's radioactive too," Tony pointed out, seeing where this was going, and liking it even less in hindsight than he had at the time. "Especially when he's suiting up. If the portal device was an early prototype, that kind of a gamma burst could have been enough to upset any significant mass transfer, maybe even jam a portal up before it got bigger than a pinprick." He swallowed and cut a hard glance at Steve. "Looks like the Hulk saved your ass in more ways than one that day."

"Looks like," Steve agreed, and had the grace to look at least a little intimidated. "Anybody else have any bombshells before we get out the ice cream?"

Tony hesitated only a moment before he put his own hand up. As a scientist he never much liked it when his guts told him to do something without checking in with his higher reasoning first, but his years of experience in engineering and design had taught him not to ignore it. A little embarrassment was better than the sinking feeling of fucking up when even part of you had actually known better.

Steve gave him a nod to proceed, so Tony took a breath and did. "Since we're talking about the school thing, Cap, I was just wondering; how did you know the bombs were going to trigger off my arc reactor?" Steve sat back in his chair, obviously puzzled at the question. "That was the first time those showed up. Even SHIELD didn't have a whisper on anything like that, because I know my buddy Agent here would have made sure to warn us." Coulson backed his point with a brisk nod.

"So you got into the school and down to the lab first," Tony went on. "You saw those bombs before anybody else, and then you made a completely illogical call to keep me away from them. Why?"

"Tony, I told you why-" he began, brows drawing down.

Tony raised his hands to the protest. "No, don't get all defensive on me, Cap, just listen to the question I am actually asking you: You knew I couldn't go near them." He set his palms on the table and leaned into the stare. "How?"

"I…" the annoyance bled away from those blue eyes, replaced with a darting worry as he obviously
combed his memory for the answer. "I don't think I did know. I couldn't have -"

"Yes," Bruce cut him off, his expression sharpening toward lab-focus as he caught sight of the same set of cognitive errors that had Tony's attention. "You did, know, Steve. And I knew it too, otherwise I would never have gone down there when you called for me on the closed comm. I'm no electrical engineer, and like I said just now, I really do not like explosions."

Steve nodded, but didn't look at all happy at the news. "But you didn't say any of that at the time."

Bruce nodded. "I know, and that's really... not a thing I'd do."

"I thought it was weird," Natasha said. "No offense, Doctor, but you're easily the most risk-averse of us all."

"I am. And it was weird, but I went down there and tried to defuse those bombs anyway, and the only reason I'd have done something like that was if I knew that Tony couldn't get near them."

Silence settled around them for a long, uncomfortable moment, Coulson and Pepper watching while the rest of them combed their memories and added up the clues. Clint's quiet curse as he reached for his fourth beer spoke for the conclusion they all reached at pretty much the same time.

"My armor is psi-shielded," Tony said, reaching for another beer. Pepper gave him a warning look, but didn't openly object, so he twisted the top free, handed it down to Steve, and got another for himself. "Kind of shielded I mean, because there's not a lot of hard data out there beyond Grey and Xavier, but my brain's a very special place, and it's where I keep all the good stuff, so I figured it was a pretty important countermeasure." Tony took a babble-forestalling drink, then dragged himself forcibly back to the point. "I didn't know of any reason not to go near the bombs, but you two did, because someone wanted us to know about them."

"Someone who couldn't act directly, and couldn't warn us outright," Natasha added.

"We've got a telepath in the equation." It was Coulson who finally named the elephant in the room, and he didn't so much as glance when Clint swore again. "Someone's been leaning on you in the field. Question is, can we consider them an ally, a rival interest to our target, a victim, or a complication?"

"I vote we consider them armed and dangerous, and shoot on sight," Clint said, then shoved back his chair and stood. "I'm gonna go take a leak."

They watched him go in sympathetic silence. Pepper let that stand only until the door closed behind him though, and then she was turning to Steve with the kind of sharp look that board members and reporters everywhere had learned to fear. "Steve, the day of the bombing, when Tony was late and you offered to take me to lunch; was that a whim, or did you maybe..."

He picked the thought up where she'd dropped it. "I... no," he decided, squaring his ankle across his thigh and rubbing idly at his bent knee. "No, it wasn't just a whim. I can't explain it, but I was really worried about you leaving the tower alone. I really felt it wasn't safe, and..." he stopped, eyes drawn to his own hand. Tony couldn't decide whether he looked more surprised, or annoyed.

"What have you remembered?" Natasha prompted, low and soothing into the silence.

He didn't look up, but they all saw his fingers curl around his knee, slow and deliberate. "I remember that my leg hurt. Like I'd wrenched it good, maybe broke it, and it was taking its time healing up. But I couldn't remember -- Damn it!" He shoved suddenly away from the table, chair legs skidding on the tile.
"The telepath?" Bruce asked. "Just now?"

"Yeah," Steve clipped, storming over to the lounge area and digging through the carefully sorted piles he'd been working on all day. "She. They -- she broke contact, but I got-- where's that damned-- ah!

He pulled a ballpoint out of a file box and grabbed one of the brown delivery bags on his way back to the table.

They all strained to watch as he scribbled, the face emerging quickly in simple lines that carried as much in character as in geometry. A youngish girl, well under the 'legal' threshold Tony had taught himself to recognize in his roaring twenties. Her dark eyes were wide, mouth dropped open in alarm, her long, light hair moved around her face to suggest a sudden flinch.

"I don't know what this means," Steve said once the features were plain, and his pen was only adding depth and shadow to the scratchy little portrait. "But I've never seen this girl before."

"I have." Nobody was really surprised that got said, but nobody actually expected Thor to be the one who said it. He looked around the table, then back at the face on the brown paper bag. "Her name is Joan. She came to the roof of the school with her sister, Gloria when I was taking the children there to safety. They were pursued, and the villain was crafty, but no real challenge to me. He fell easily once he ventured from cover. Afterward, neither wished to leave the roof until all the rest had gone down to safety."

"She was the one who broke her leg when the building came down, wasn't she?" Tony blurted as the last pieces fell into place. "Jarvis, get me those-"

"No, Joan was unharmed," Thor kneecapped his enthusiasm bluntly. "I took her from the roof just before the blast. It was her sister whom-"

Steve put his pen down and straightened, but Coulson's voice got to the space before he could fill it. "Already on it, Captain," the agent said. "Since she was injured in a metahuman/terrorist attack, her treatment records are filed in SHIELD's databases, and…" he tapped at his tablet couple more times, then looked up with a smile just one click to the smug side of bland. "Miss Gloria Horatio will be returning to the hospital to have the pins removed from her leg in three days."

"Gloria Horatio?" Tony asked to disguise how his mouth had kind of fallen open at that. "As in-"

Coulson nodded and turned the tablet to show a schoolgirl with dark hair and an Asian cast to her face. "Granddaughter by Jerry Horatio's eldest son, Paul."

Pepper turned the bag for a closer look at the portrait and chewed her lip. "This girl can't be more than a half sister to Gloria, Thor."

He shrugged. "They behaved as sisters do, and did not mind that I called them so. Siblings need not always share parental blood."

"Jarvis, please run a search," Pepper said, still considering. "I'd like to see if this girl is in any photo records for the Horatios."

In reply, Jarvis brought up a sorting of newspaper and magazine clips, the biggest of which was a fireside photo of Jerry with two men Tony recognized as his sons, and the blonde girl Steve had just drawn. "Gerald Horatio with sons Paul and George," Jarvis said as the image rotated, "And daughter Joan, thirteen years old as of this photograph. School records indicate she is now fifteen, four months younger than her niece."

"Mm. Because that's not creepy or anything," Bruce observed.
"More, or less creepy than possibly working with HYDRA to weaponize the Chitauri's castoffs?" Tony wondered idly, using a plastic fork to dig barbecue sauce from under his fingernails.

"Equally," Steve decided, falling back into his chair with a disgusted sigh. "But more importantly, it's a complication. If Horatio is connected to the bombing attempt at his headquarters, then he's not just gonna sit still while we interview his granddaughter."

"Daughter," Tony corrected, "Probably from trophy wife number two hundred and then some."

But Steve was shaking his head, and rubbing his knee again. "No. The daughter didn't break her leg. I want to talk to the one with the limp, and I'm pretty darned sure that she wants to talk to me too. I'm just not sure how to make that happen without tipping our hand to Mr. Horatio. I don't know for sure he's involved in this, but if he is, and if he knows what his granddaughter can do, he won't want to let us get near her."

That was when Pepper finished her iced tea with a slurp that had no business being ladylike, wiped her lips on the back of her hand. "Bet we can make him do just that. Phil, when did you say she was going to be at the hospital?"

"Friday," Coulson gave a tight little smile, like he could see just where this was going. "Admission is set for ten in the morning, and they're expecting to send her home by five. Visiting hours end at eight."

"Perfect." Pepper grinned like she was staring down the food chain from the tippy top. "Avengers," she asked, all smiles and entirely perfect, even with a smudge of barbecue sauce on her nose. "What do you say to a little surprise PR work next week? I think there's a young accident victim who needs to get a surprise visit from her heroes to cheer her up in the hospital."

Steve's answering grin was every bit as dangerous. "Ma'am, I'd say it's practically our duty."

~* Put Baby In A Corner *~

"Iron Man! What happened?"

Steve was out of the SHIELD issue sedan and jogging toward them before Clint had even pulled to a stop beside Tony's Jaguar, "Pepper's waiting at the hospital already. Why did you drive by and circle the block?" He hadn't put the cowl on yet, but his Captain Face was locked down tight, and his shield was ready in his hands.

"Arc trigger," Tony gritted, wanting something to hit so badly he could fucking taste it. "The Mark VII picked up a signal when it did a flyover. There's something in that hospital that's wired to a goddamned arc reactor trigger, and if I get into its range it'll blow." And Pep was right there; phone turned off because it was a hospital and people who followed the rules did that at hospitals. And Tony was late, but not all that late for him, and the press was there already, so she wouldn't leave, and so he couldn't go and get her, and this was exactly how Steve had wound up buried under a fucking building last time, and Goddamn it, but this shit was getting old!

"You're sure of this?" Natasha demanded, bumping the door shut with her hip as she buckled her bracers on.

"Yes," Bruce answered, holding up his phone to show a flashing red dot. He was breathing from the belly, deep, measured breaths you could have timed off a metronome; all the warning any Avenger needed that for Dr. Banner, shit had just got completely real. "We haven't been able to figure out how to block the trigger's signal yet, but this sensor has passed every accuracy test we've put it
Steve swore, low and fierce, his gauntlets creaking as he clenched his shield in both hands. The glance he cut Tony's way made a slower heat curl through the rage for just a moment before it flickered and died. Not the time. Definitely not the place. They both knew it.

Thor slammed the sedan's door so hard it bounced back open as he got out. The scaled armor over his arms stitched his form with angry sparks as he stormed around the cars to join them. "Our foes have hid a weapon of death within a place of healing?" he growled, cradling the hammer's head in his hand like he had a target in mind already. "They seek to shield themselves behind children?"

"Not the first time, is it?" That was Clint, perching on the sedan's hood and twirling an arrowhead between restless fingers. "I mean, this is HYDRA; since when do we expect Marquess of Queensbury rules outta these clowns?"

"Not helpful..." Natasha sing-songed from Cap's shadow, then she nudged his elbow. "Are we calling this off for now? We can find another reason to talk to Gloria Horatio. Maybe even bring her to us."

Cap didn't hesitate. "No. We can't cancel today without tipping our hand. And we can't just leave it there." Steve stared over his shoulder toward the hospital in a pose at once ludicrously iconic, and completely, disgustingly, naturally him. "Whatever that trigger's wired to, we have to get the civilians away from it before HYDRA decides to set it off just to try and draw us in."

"Steve, we cannot evacuate a goddamned hospital," Tony said, swallowing against the ghosts of of mortar dust, shattered stone and blood in his nose. "We just can't! Not only would it be a PR nightmare, it would cause injuries when all those paparazzi and fanclub morons who showed up to our 'secret visit' got wind of it and stampeded!"

"Evacuating would take too long," Bruce said through his teeth. "Too dangerous."

"We can't be sure about the staff, either," Natasha added. "There's too many, no way of verifying their identities. Any of them could be complicit in this if HYDRA's behind the device. We even get hospital security involved, and there's a risk that an inside man could manually trigger whatever they've got waiting."

"Damn it!" Steve ground. "It's a trap, but if we don't step in it, then it'll be a massacre, and we'll still lose our witness." Then his frustrated glance scraped across Tony's face and stopped there for just long enough that Tony could see the lightbulb go off. A savage cunning swept the uncertainty right out of Cap's eyes, and he straightened to it with a tight little smile.

"We cut the wire," he told them all. "We find the device ourselves and disable it before HYDRA even knows we're on it." He turned to stab a finger at Bruce's phone. "That thing's got a range on it. Directional too?"

Bruce had closed his eyes to focus on his breathing, so Tony sighed and dug his own phone out of his pocket. Jarvis had already loaded the app. "Yeah. Get your phone out and tap it to mine; I'll transfer the sniffer, and you can--"

Steve shook his head, lips pressed thin. "Left it at the Tower," he said, then shook off Tony's frustrated groan with a glare. "Com makes it redundant in the field, and it doesn't matter anyway; we're under the radar. I'm too conspicuous." he waved his hand at this iconic self, and somehow Tony, nervy, angry, and being left behind again, damn it, managed not to make a comment about tightasses in spangly jumpsuits. "The press is expecting to see at least one Avenger in uniform, and if
"We got it, Cap," Clint said, pulling out his phone at the same time Natasha did. "We got civvies in the car. Nobody will look twice at Natasha, and they won't see me at all." They stepped up to flank Tony, who tap-clicked the sniffer app onto each phone. "Stark, can you get blueprints for-"

"Yeah, on it." Tony answered, glad of something he could do, and trying not to be too relieved that Steve wasn't going to be actually inside the building this time. "Jarvis, open a party call to Hawkeye and Black Widow. You're on data sorting duty for both of them."

"Of course, Sir," Jarvis said in stereo from their palms.

"You need three points to triangulate," Steve said, and there was a shade of trepidation in his Captain Voice now. Tony looked up, and followed his stare to Bruce, Thor looming behind him like a wall. "Dr. Banner, Hulk can't help us with this, but you can. You know what the arc trigger looks like, and you know the portal device too. We need you. Can you do this?"

It was on the tip of Tony's tongue to protest. It was cruel to ask Bruce, on the edge already, to walk into that hospital. But it was no less cruel of Cap to ask Tony to stay out of it, and they all knew that had to happen.

"I'll send the Suit over again," he said quickly, before he could decide against it. "A more accurate reading can establish the trigger's range. If I can get into the lobby, or even the parking lot, I can keep the press busy." He swallowed and made himself look at Steve. "You change out of uniform, and there's no reason you can't go in-"

"Yes, I can." Bruce said, his voice strained and brittle, as he caught Tony's wrist to shut up his babble. His eyes were definitely on the green side of hazel, but his gaze was level and determined. "I can do it, Cap. You don't need to go inside."

There was a moment of silence. Nobody protested. Nobody asked if Bruce was sure. Nobody even blinked away from the challenging stare he pinned on each in turn. If Tony hadn't been a mess of nerves and fury himself, he'd have punched the air and cheered.

"Good man," Steve nodded then, brisk and efficient. "Hawkeye, you have those plans yet?" Clint held up his phone and gave it an affirmative wiggle. Steve answered with a fierce little smile, and a clap to Tony's shoulder that rocked him to his heels. "All right; this is how we're gonna play it."

~* Fiddled While Rome Burned *~

See, the thing about Steve Rogers -- the thing that made him Captain America, instead of just a defrosted throwback with good aim and a lot of muscles, was the battle plans. Rhodey liked to say that no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy, and Tony had just enough secondhand experience with the military to know that mostly, that was true. That was the main reason why, when he'd been flying solo, Tony had refused to plan for anything, and just relied on his genius to see him through.

Only Steve's plans tended, contrary to all fucking sense and logic, to hold together in the field, whatever bizarre, fucked up things the Avengers had to adapt to. Unknown energy weapons on that giant squid? No problem; Cap's shield was already in the right place, and Tony or Thor in position to
take it down from on high. Three times the expected number of hostiles in an enemy base? Count on it that Hawkeye or Widow would get into place and spot the problem before anybody got cut off. Civilians with cameras and not enough sense to vacate the street when Doombots marched down 5th Avenue? (Fucking New Yorkers, man!) No problem; they'd run like bunnies when the Hulk made his entrance and reminded them that even Harlem was breakable.

On the surface, it was a simple enough thing; Steve understood his team's potential and their weaknesses, he spotted details, and he was good with patterns. Bing; bang; boom -- planning with enough flex to adapt to the unexpected, and enough structure to keep six deadly weapons pointed at the enemy instead of at each other or the wildlife. Except that once you got past that conveniently simplistic, high-pass assessment, it wasn't ever that simple. Steve's plans should have fallen apart a lot more often than they really did, and in the fastness of his own brain (and occasionally on the team comm,) Tony was man enough to admit that kind of drove him fucking crazy. It was good for team morale, and Steve was good for the occasional challenge to his authority, he figured -- kept the Captain honest.

That was what made it a bit of a shock to everyone when Steve's plan only held together for about ten minutes that day.

They'd lured Pepper, the press, and the fan club away to a small garden-cum-smoking area for the Cap and Tony show. It was about twenty feet away from the hospital's main entrance; close enough to keep an eye on the parking lot traffic, and on Thor, who was inside terrorizing the information desk attendants, and making the HIPAA laws wet themselves in fear. Tony was in full-on showboat mode, seducing cameras and fangirls alike with his rapier wit and billion dollar smiles while Cap and his dimples stood back with Pepper and looked wholesome. Were it not for the very real possibility that either an explosion, an inter-dimensional portal, a freaked-out telepath, or an impromptu HYDRA assault could turn up at any time, Tony would almost have been enjoying himself. All right, he was enjoying himself anyhow -- sue him.

The inside team had just found the device in a satchel on top of the linear accelerator in the oncology department, where low level radiation had interfered just enough with the arc trigger's signal to make finding it tricky. Bruce had talked the techs into clearing the room quietly while Natasha and Hawkeye set up the phones so Jarvis could begin scanning. The device wasn't wired into any external power source that they could see, so they were cautiously hoping it would be a matter of just picking the thing up and carrying it out like garbage. Garbage that required a radioactive courier and two armed and dangerous rearguards, that is.

So yeah; all had been going along swimmingly. Then Gloria Horatio apparently woke up, shook off the anesthesia, and decided it was time to bring the party to her.

The first Tony noticed of this development was between the 'Are You Secretly Dating The Black Widow' question, (cue kiss-and-dip photo op with Pepper; and the crowd goes wild,) and the 'Boxers, Briefs, or Commando' question the fan club never seemed to tire of. Tony had just dropped his usual pound of snark on that one and turned to hand the question off to Cap when he noticed the man had wandered to the edge of the garden and was whispering to Thor. There was also a girl clinging to Thor's arm; 15 or so, dark eyed, with honey blonde hair, and a face Tony had last seen in ballpoint pen on a brown paper bag. Jerry Horatio's little girl was staring at Cap like she wished she could grab his arm too, but didn't quite dare.

Pep took one look at Tony's expression and plucked the microphone out of his hands. He vaguely heard her taking some bullshit question from the Fox newsie about the arc reactors causing cancer as he clipped his visor snugly down and strode over to join the spandex party. "Jarvis, activate Cap's
"comm mic, private feed to my receiver," he ordered, and his helmet filled up with excited teenage babble.

"- said you'd come, and she said I should watch for you, but I so totally didn't believe her! You're her favorite though, so can you please please come and say hello to oh emm gee Iron Man too! This is so sick!"

"Why yes it is," Tony agreed as he stepped up to block the camera angles on her face. "Hello there, random variable. I haven't had the pleasure."

"Joan," she said, hand out, bright and brassy as only an upcoming socialite could be. "Horatio. You kinda know my dad. And my brothers."

"Kinda," Tony agreed, and mimed kissing her knuckles through his visor, which made her giggle. "Now why is it you're trying to lure my buddies here away from their devoted fans? Is there something special going on inside the hospital?" Something like a trap, maybe? he didn't say, and not just because Steve was glaring at him.

"Oh, but that's why you're here, isn't it?" Joan bounced on her toes, still clinging to Thor like she was afraid any or all of them would disappear if she let go. "To visit Gloria? She said you'd come to see her today. I mean, she said Captain America would, but you should totally come and say hi too? I mean she didn't say you'd be here, but she isn't always 100% right about things, and I know she'd want to see you! She's totally awake right now, too I can always tell, even when she's pretending."

Cap leveled Tony a look that needed no interpretation. Especially with the suit's HUD showing that the arc-trigger hadn't moved yet. There was no way this kid knew what was waiting in that gym bag Clint had found; she didn't have a trace of the angsty ennui it would take for a girl her age to use herself as bait in a deadly trap meant for heroes. But the device was still there, whether she knew it or not. "Sorry honey," Tony answered girl and man at once, "We're not quite done out here. Won't take much longer though. Why don't you take your buddy Thor inside and introduce him to your-"

"Oh, but no you have to come now!" she blurted, teen-cool evaporating momentarily into something nervous and real and a lot more frightened than fifteen. She swallowed it down quick, but Tony knew they'd all seen it. "See, um, my dad's coming down. Paul called him when he saw the Avengers were here, and he'll be here any minute to pick us up, and they won't let you in if Paul and Hana aren't there, 'cause you're not family, and Gloria will be so pissed-" she checked herself with a glance at Cap, "I mean she'll be so upset if she doesn't at least get to shake your hand before she has to go home, Captain! She's always, always wanted to meet you. Please, please say you'll come in and talk to her? Just for a minute?"

"Don't you do it," Tony muted his exterior mic and spoke into the comm. "Don't you fucking do it, Cap. Jarvis just looked up the girl's room number. It is directly over that oncology lab where they found the bomb, and I promise you Horatio's just the kind of coward who'd use his own granddaughter as bait. You walk in there and someone decides to set that thing off, you'll be taking Tasha, Clint, and -"

"There's no sign of a mercury trigger, Captain," Bruce chose that moment to speak up. "And the sniffer hasn't picked up any impact-reactive traces. As far as any of us can tell, it should be safe for me to just pick up and carry, so long as we don't rush." Or trip, or Hulk out, or run into HYDRA agents and explode, or fall through a rift in time and space and wind up on another goddamned planet. Tony bit his lip, hard.

"We've got an exit route through the laundry facility and out the loading docks in the back." That was Hawkeye, who had no fucking excuse for sounding like he was having fun, goddammit.
Then Natasha had to go and trump them with the best news of all. "We've also got a text from Coulson. SHIELD is moving on the hospital. Bomb and assault teams. ETA ten minutes."

"What?" Tony blurted furious. "Damn it, he promised they'd lay off!"

"Looks like he was overruled," Cap said with a hard glance over his shoulder at the crowd. "Bomb squad'll be useful once it's clear of the building, but we need to get ahead of the rest."

"Bomb squad?" the girl squeaked, huddling close to Thor as her eyes went big.

Thor wrapped a sheltering arm over her almost by instinct. "Fear not, brave Joan. You and your sister will come to no harm, I swear it."

"The Avengers are handling it, Miss Horatio," Cap agreed, earnest and sober. "But this afternoon is about to get much more exciting than anybody expected, and we're going to need your help if we're going to keep things under control. Think you can persuade Gloria's parents to come outside and meet Thor and Iron Man here by the entrance?"

She quailed for a moment, then cowboyed up with a jerky little nod. "I can do that, but Gloria won't be able to."

"I'll take care of her," he said, then turned to Tony with a look half stern, half pleading. "Iron Man, I still need you to run interference," he said with his mouth, while his eyes said something more like, 'I know you hate this, but I'm going to do it anyway, so please don't cause a scene.'

Tony did not say in reply. Nor did he say Are you high?, or See now, this is why teamwork sucks! Oh no. No, instead he stood there trusting the shielding of his suit to keep him from lighting the star spangled asshole on fire with his mind, and said, "You want me to buy you some more time? Sure. I'll do that. And you'll leave that comm on every step of the way, because so help me God, if it cuts out even once, I will tell all those reporters that you wear frilly panties under that uniform!" He gave Cap a poke right in the star. "And then Thor and I will be coming right in there after you, and every paper here will have a front page spread of you getting princess-carried to safety!"

Something flashed in Steve's eye then, and maybe it was anger or maybe it was something else. But the corner of his lips hooked briefly upward as he returned Tony's challenge with a crisp nod. "Sounds like a plan."

Then he turned on his heel, caught Joan's arm away from Thor's, and led her straight back into the hospital.

Tony watched him go with a twist in his belly that was sick, cold, and absolutely useless. "And me with nothing to blow up," he grumbled, turning back toward the slavering wolves behind the security barrier.

"Be at ease, my friend," Thor murmured to him as the pack greeted their approach with a rising roar of adoration. "The Captain has been in far worse danger of late."

"Not actually that comforting," Tony answered, flipping up his face shield and pasting on a smile. "Come on, Flashbang. It's your turn to answer the underwear question."

"Under-wear?" Thor asked just as Pepper handed him the mic, "Wearing under what?" Predictably, the fan club lost their fucking minds, proving yet again why Thor would always be a favorite, even when he wore sleeves.

Tony backed off and let him run with it, having lost every shred of give-a-shit for the game; for the absurd heroic posing, for the inane questions, and dewy-eyed kids who couldn't possibly know
better, but by damn ought to; for the press badge landsharks just praying for a whiff of blood in the water. He knew, with the same kind of giddy, nerdy gut-fire that had settled over him on the Helicarrier with Loki in the brig, that if he opened his mouth again, just one more time, whatever came out of it was going to draw blood. Or explode.

But he also knew he was being ridiculous. The bomb, be it portal, incendiary, dirty nuke, or glitter, was better than halfway clear of the building, and the sniffer scans showed no hint of another. There was no ambush of HYDRA goons massed just inside the hospital, just one little girl who was probably still groggy with anesthesia. There was no reason to expect Steve to be hurt, or even particularly inconvenienced here, but Tony was vibrating with the urge to fly straight in there and yank Captain America out by his utility belt.

"Take a breath, Tony," Pepper eased back to his side and murmured through a camera-ready smile. "We're nearly done here."

Tony modulated the Suit's speaker feed to a low hiss to reply. "I. Hate. Waiting!"

She flashed him a look of 'shock'. "Lies. Nobody does stoic patience like you, Tony." Which was technically true, given that Tony did not do stoic patience at all. However, sarcasm was not actually making him feel any better.

Someone in the back was waving a Marry Me, Iron Man poster, and it was all Tony could do not to torch the stupid thing with a repulsor blast. "I can't just stand around here being useless! Give me something to build, solve, or fucking fight, and I'm fine, but-" Tony stopped, arc reactor ramping up to keep pace with his heart as he watched the black Caddy limo come slinking into the parking lot and slant itself across two handicapped parking spaces.

He read the limo's vanity plates, and just like that, his fractious, fretful, tooth-grinding anxiety sharpened down to a single, calm point of laser-bright focus; Jerry fucking Horatio. A run of the mill executive douchebag like a thousand others Tony had met over the years -- no worse, no better; smug and fat, spending his money on politicians and disposable wives instead of hookers and alcohol. A pompous little fish in a penthouse office and thousand dollar shoes was how Tony had always thought of the man; a step up from bottom feeders like Justin Hammer, but nowhere near the league of corporate predators like Obie, or world-class threats like Loki.

But Iron Man and the Avengers had been clearing a lot of the toothier big fish out of the waters over the last couple of years. Nature might abhor a vacuum, but no barracuda ever lost sleep over one less great white shark in the sea.

"Well what do you know, there is a God," Tony breathed through a feral grin as he watched the man's wife, blonde, brittle-thin and ten years younger than Pepper, climb out of the car alone. "And apparently, he likes me today. Avengers," he added into the open comm as he fired his boot repulsors and took to the air. "I've got Horatio in the parking lot. How long am I stalling him for?"

"We're nearly to the loading dock. After that, another five to jack a car and get clear," Clint came back.

"Get me as much time as you can," Cap said at almost the same time, and in the background, they could all hear excited teenaged babble in the key of parental-persuasion. "The girl is still asleep, and I-"}

Tony dropped to the asphalt at the limo's side, not bothering to make his entrance look non-threatening. "Jerry, my man!" he shouted, hip-checking the chauffer's opening door hard enough to crumple it firmly shut as he strode past. The wife screamed something in Russian and bolted for the
hospital doors and Tony was happy to let her, especially since she hadn't shut the door before running off. He swung it wide and used a 'friendly handshake' to haul the old man out onto his feet to face the stampeding reporters. "Well, look who it is," he crowed, popping open his visor as the sharks arrived in a hail of camera flash and questions. "Look, everybody, it's the man of the minute!"

"Stark," Horatio snarled through a plastic grin. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Jerry," Tony answered, all teeth himself, "Just giving the devils their due. Smile big now!" And he waved the bellowed questions silent with one hand while he nailed Horatio in place with the other arm slung across his shoulders. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sure I don't have to introduce my buddy, Jerry Horatio, of HoratioCorp," Tony said, and waved more questions down. "This right here is a guy who's bucking for Grandpa of the year. I mean what other busy high powered executive with a billion dollar petrochemicals empire to run takes an impromptu day off, canceling board meetings and security inquests alike, just so he can be there when his little granddaughter gets done with her outpatient surgery? Huh? Come on now, give the family man his due!"

The applause was polite and short-lived. "You never struck me as being overly sentimental about family, Stark," Jerry said as Tony let the silence grow between them. "Though of course one can understand why."

Tony laughed, as much at the clumsy attempt to cut him dead, as at the gleeful expressions on the faces of the reporters who'd been close enough to hear it. "Well now that all depends on the family, doesn't it?" He jostled the man playfully against his chest and snagged the hell out of a fairly nice Italian suit in the process. "But now that you're here, Jerry, we can all go in together, and see how your brave little granddaughter is getting on!"

Even on his worst game, Tony wouldn't have missed that flinch, or the thwarted jerk that Horatio gave against his hold. "That's not necessary-" he began, and looked around as though he wanted his wife or his body guard, or maybe a cavalry charge to rescue him. "I know how you love your time in front of the cameras."

"Oh, but I insist," Tony told him, and turned the two of them toward the hospital entrance. "Wouldn't want anything unexpected to happen before we got you to your granddaughter's side now, would we?" That got him the glance, hard and assessing.

Tony gave it right back, and just like that, they understood each other.

"Let go of me," Horatio said as they left the press behind.

"Nope," Tony replied. "We're in this together, or you're explaining exactly why not to those nice agents who're just arriving now." He half-turned, let the man see the six black SUV's pulling into the parking lot, then whipped them back on course and marched them forcibly right over the perimeter.

Under the entrance awning, young Joan was enthusiastically introducing her mother and another couple to the Asgardian Prince who had saved her life. She was all big eyes and bigger gestures, and like every teen-aged girl ever, completely aware of her larger audience. "Hi daddy," she called, beckoning wildly as they joined the group. "You gotta come meet Thor! He's the best!"

Horatio's fake smile emerged once more at that, but Tony couldn't find himself inclined to analyze just why. Nor to resist it overly when the Joan caught her father away from Tony's encircling grip and dragged him over to try and glad hand Thor. Because that was Cap in the atrium, just visible through the revolving door; pale as milk under a shaky version of his public smile, shield hanging low, one glove tucked into his belt.
He was leaning — *leaning* on the information desk, shaking his head at the concerned patter the unit comm could only just pick up. "Just fine, ma'am. Say, you wouldn't have any paper back there, would...? No? No, that's fine. I'll just...gift shop? Sure."

Tony met him at the door, and he didn't bother to ask if Steve was all right. He didn't want to be lied to. Instead, he fell into step beside the Super Soldier and murmured, "We done here, Cap, or do you want to shake a few more hands before you go?"

Steve didn't even pause to look around before he nodded, leaned his shoulder into Tony's, and sighed. "Done, Tony. Get me out of here."

Chapter End Notes

And look! Moar plot! This one's a long chapter by comparison, but hopefully that's a good thing, because I've got houseguests right now, and so that's eating into my lead time for chapter 8. Hopefully I won't have to be late on the next update, but fair warning here, it might be so; I haven't seen these guys for a couple of years, after all.

Anyhow, thanks again for all the comments and observations -- as always, that is completely the way to keep a writer motivated for the long haul. I'm always squeeful whenever I get to read a new one.
"And what have we learned here, class?" Clint asked over engine noise, radio chatter, and the frantic scratch of pencil on paper. "That's right! Telepaths will always, always fuck things up."

"Clint," Natasha warned from the driver's seat, slanting him a rearview glare so dead it was beginning to stink. "Now's not the time to air your trauma."

"Just sayin' what's true," he replied, unrepentant and out of kicking range in the far back seat of their commandeered SHIELD SUV. By unanimous decision, the team had refused to split and regroup at the Tower after SHIELD had descended to officially sweep the hospital and deal with the bomb. They'd all heard Steve's shaky tone over the comm, and they'd all heard him use Tony's given name in the field too -- something that Cap never did himself, and which he came down hard on every time anyone else (Tony) did it. None of them wanted him out of sight in another car.

"Fuckin' psychics, man," Clint shook his head, peering over Steve's shoulder to watch the drawings emerge. "You shouldn't have let her get to you, Cap."

"Had to," Steve replied, not looking up from the notebook Bruce had grabbed for him in the hospital's gift shop while the rest of them wrangled reporters. "Anesthesia. No time, no... no control." He took a deep breath and squeezed his eyes closed, clearly trying to collect his thoughts. His drawing hand didn't stop moving though, as if he could tell from memory where the next lines needed to go. "She was afraid she wouldn't get another chance to tell," he said with the careful precision of someone trying his hardest not to stammer. Tony swallowed, curled both hands tight around the helmet in his lap so he wouldn't reach across the seat and snatch that goddamned pencil out of Steve's hands.

"Tell what, Steve?" Bruce urged from the shotgun seat, calm and blessedly level. "Can you tell us at all?"

That won a taut, jerky headshake, and a single glance that burned with frustration. "Anesthesia. It's all mush and..." he bent to the drawing pad again. "Images. Just pictures."

"Without context, that's not gonna be too useful, Cap," Natasha put in.

"I know!" he snapped just as Tony said, "Can it, okay?"

"We got more than we had," Tony went on after the shocked breath of silence had passed, and Steve bent once more to his drawing pad. "We got Jerry Horatio afraid to walk into that hospital with me, and that's evidence enough to start digging on. We got his psychic granddaughter afraid that someone's going to kill her, we got her aunt willing to run interference, and we got him aware that the Avengers are looking into his business."

"That could go either way for the girls," Natasha replied, no gentler.

"No." Tony shook his head. "Jerry's no genius, but he isn't a moron either. He's got too much to lose if he gets caught out dirty, even moreso if we prove a connection to HYDRA or those bombs. He'll check himself."
"And that'll make it easier to dig his secrets out," Clint muttered from well inside repulsor range.

Tony glared. "If SHIELD's records can't get us any context on Cap's masterpieces there, Jarvis has some of the best facial recognition capabilities in the digital world. We can get names and aliases, and build what we need from there." He looked back at Steve, still pale, sweat dampening the hair at his temples as he scribbled like his life depended on it. "The mission wasn't a wash."

"Sure," Clint bit back. "And while we're sweeping up crumbs, Horatio will be cleaning house to make sure we never figure out just who tha..." He stopped dead in his snark, staring at the sketchbook as the blood drained from his face. "Fuck."

"What?" Steve asked without a glance as the rest of them sat up sharp.

"That guy." Clint leaned over the seat to point. "What's his name? How does she know him?"

"It was this man who pursued the girls to the roof of the school," Thor said even as Cap was shaking his head. "I saw his face clearly when his helm shattered. It was he."

A small sound escaped Clint then, and he closed his eyes to take a breath that sounded like it hurt. "I never found him, after-" He swallowed, tried again. "After the Helicarrier. I tracked down all the rest; every researcher, every lab monkey, every mercenary and contractor who answered that bastard's call, I got. But not Syouf, and not his brothers either."

"Clint," Natasha said, a different kind of warning now.

He followed her glance to the SUV's overhead light, and the rigid anguish in his face shattered abruptly into a grin. "Fuck it, let headquarters listen in. I cleaned some house, and paid some bills last year, and believe me, the world is safer for it! Loki didn't want followers who valued human life, he wanted psychos who'd do anything for pay, or a chance to take a hit at SHIELD."

"So if the Brass didn't know what I was doing with all that computer access and leave time last year, it's because they didn't want to know."

"Or they didn't want to stop you," Bruce put in with a small, bruised smile for the grateful look that won from Clint. "So we have a starting point with this Syouf guy -- a link to Loki, and a link to Gloria in that he tried to kill her."

"Relative," Steve clipped, rubbing at his forehead with smudged fingers as Natasha pulled the SUV into the Tower's private parking garage. "I think. Can't be sure. She's terrified of him though."

"Twins," Clint said. "Ismail and Asef Syouf usually came as a set with an older half brother; Granyavich, I think. Something like that. He turned down Loki's invitation. Never said why."

"That's him," Steve said, and circled another face as Natasha stopped the van and killed the engine. This man was lighter skinned and lighter haired, but had the same dark eye and supple chin that marked the other Horatio men. "Uncle. I'm sure of it."

"Let me see that," Natasha demanded, turning in her seat and reaching back. Only a last minute burst of self-protection stopped Tony from batting her hand out of the way.

Either Steve had no such restraint, or the invasion of imagery going on in his brain had buried all trace of it, because he caught her wrist in his off-hand and barked, "No."
He caught up to himself when she jerked free of his grip, and he looked up at last with a trace of chagrin bleeding through the manic focus. "Sorry. I'm sorry. Just..." He looked down again, steeled himself, and stopped drawing long enough to rip a handful of pages out of the book. "Here," he said, and thrust them forward. Natasha took them like she expected to be grabbed again.

Her anger bled into surprise as she got a look at the portrait Cap had circled. Then she swore in Russian, slithered out of the car, and headed for the elevators at a ground eating clip that said plainly she wanted something to hit. Clint had the back hatch open a second later and was jogging to catch up, Thor following close on his heels. Steve, however, didn't look up from his work, didn't so much as notice that half his team had just stormed off to parts unknown while he bled someone else's memories all over the cheap paper.

"Right," Tony decided, throwing open his door and reaching across to unfasten Steve's seat belt for him. "Time to go upstairs, Cap; you're turning into me, and I'm kind of an asshole when I'm like this. Let's go." Someone snickered, but Tony was busy trying to urge the reluctant and therefore immovable object out of the car, and didn't bother to see who.

"M' fine, Tony," Steve said, shrugging off his grip. "Be there in a few. Just need to- hey!"

Bruce tucked the pencil he'd stolen behind his ear and backed several steps away from the car. "You need to come upstairs, Steve," he said in the same coaxing tone he sometimes used to get Tony out of the workshop for dinner. "We have plenty to get started with already, and because nobody else apparently feels like pointing it out, let me just say that you have a headache I can see from here."

Even through armored gauntlets Tony could feel some of the steel bleed out of Steve's arm at that. His sigh shook just a little bit as he let himself close his eyes. "Yeah, I do," he said, and finally let Tony draw him out of the seat. The fact that he didn't fight it when Tony swiped his sketchbook was all too telling.

Bruce took Steve's other arm as they turned toward the elevators. "I know you don't get headaches now, but did you get them much before?" he asked as they walked him, eyes closed, between them.

Steve shook his head, then winced. "Nah. Not like this. It passes though, right?"

Tony shared a look with Bruce. "Not something you can push through, Cap," he said, resisting the urge to tighten his grip on Steve's arm. "Headaches generally get worse until you give in to them." Or that was what Pepper said, anyhow, and Tony was pretty sure she hadn't been speaking metaphorically at the time.

"You need to cry off for an hour or two," Bruce backed him up as the elevator doors opened. "Have some water, lie down in a dark room for awhile, sleep a little if you can. Let the rest of us work with what you've given us, ok?"

"There's more though," Steve protested, squinting his eyes open at last. "Not just people; she dreams too, and she's seen-"

"Take the dream journal if you have to then," Tony said, knowing better than most how futile it would be to enforce rest on a mind at full sprint. "Just have Jarvis keep the lights low, and don't be a moron about it, okay?"

"Coming from Tony Stark? That's rich." Well, if he felt good enough for sarcasm, Tony figured it couldn't be all that bad.

He gave back a grin. "Hey, I'm an expert at neglectful self-abuse, just ask Pepper. On second
thought, don't ask Pepper; her memory's way too good. But the point is, I'm the authority in this elevator -- I might even have a doctorate in moron too, I've honestly lost track of my degrees -- so you should definitely listen to me."

And hey, that was almost a chuckle there. "Do I have to?" Steve asked as the elevator opened on his floor and Jarvis slid back the door to his apartment. The shades inside were already rolling down over the windows.

"No," Bruce answered, and gave him a shove toward his cave. "Believe me, that'll only make your head hurt worse."

~* Played Blindfolded Pictionary *~

"Jarvis, does Natasha still have those sketchbook pages?" Tony asked, peeling out of his undersuit and heading for the shower.

"She does have the physical items, sir," Jarvis answered, bringing the water on hot and the lights up low. "However I have scanned the images, enhanced them, sent copies to the team's tablets, and opened a real-time editing session on the projectors in the team lounge."

Tony smiled, loving, as always, the gorgeous efficiency of his creation. "Good. Coffee?" He stepped in and turned his face up to the falling water, letting it rinse the ghost of sour, nervous sweat from his skin.

"Brewing now, sir. However, I am uncertain how to interpret this mission's results as to whether I ought to order food in, or prepare the kitchen facilities for cooking."

That brought Tony up just a bit. How did today's mission rank? There had been no casualties, they'd got what they'd gone there for, and aside from Cap's headache there wasn't any particular cost to it, and yet…. And yet Tony found himself as exhausted and ground down as if he'd gone six hard rounds with twenty Doombots and a giant squid. His neck ached fiercely when he bent it to the spray, his knees felt watery and loose while his hands felt tight and shaky, and his stomach couldn't decide whether to crash to knee level, or flutter up around his arc reactor. Weird. He'd have to run a blood test and up his chlorophyll intake for awhile, just in case his toxicity levels were spiking again.

"Let Bruce decide that since Steve's not up to it," Tony said at last, scrubbing lather out of his hair. "And keep an eye on Steve too. He's supposed to be resting, but he's got a stubborn streak you could land a jet on, and I don't trust him not to keep working even though-" he stopped, alarmed at the sudden 'sproing' that filled the air. "What the fuck was that?"

"Only my irony meter, sir," Jarvis replied coolly.

"Irony meter." Tony glared at the motion sensor in the corner as he stepped out of the spray, because if you couldn't play straight-man to a joker you built yourself, then it was a harsh world indeed. "You don't have an irony meter."

"Not anymore, sir," Jarvis agreed cheerfully. "According to biometric scans of his apartment, Captain Rogers appears to be prone on his sofa at present; ostensibly, resting." Tony snorted at the unsubtle jab, and rolled his wrist to prompt the AI on to the rest of the headcount.

"Doctor Banner appears to be showering," Jarvis obliged. "Agent Romanov and Prince Odinson are in the team lounge, accessing the document set; Agent Barton is making use of the firing range; Agent Coulson has received copies of the scanned pages, and added several documents from SHIELD databases. He will be inbound from the hospital in approximately twenty minutes, and will
"return your Jaguar to the garage upon his arrival."

"Huh," Tony said, going in search of clothes, "Well good for him. I figured Hill would call dibs on that. What about Pepper? She coming in with him?"

"Ms. Potts has just arrived," Jarvis said. In the bathroom, the soaking tub began to fill.

Tony yanked the t-shirt down over his head and resolutely did not shudder. "Right. Chill a bottle of wine for her, and tell her I'll be down in the team lounge with the others," he said on his way out the door. Her preference for the tub was the only reason he'd had even one of the things installed in the building. Showers were just so much more efficient, really.

By the time Tony arrived in the lounge, Natasha and Thor had assembled Steve's sketches and media photos into a crude Horatio family tree on the primary video screen. Even hastily rendered and shaky, Steve's drawings looked somehow more real and alive than the flat, shallow newsprint smiles that verified each face.

Jerry sat at the top, smooth, smug and smiling in his photo, but snarling like a bulldog in the drawing. Tony had to wonder if the girl had given Cap that from memory, or from imagination. Joan, Paul, and George took up the row below that, Paul's pretty Asian wife shoehorned in a little below, and Gloria squared between them. All the assembly needed was a dog named Ringo.

"How's Steve doing?" Natasha asked, nudging three more sketches to the second rank as Bruce came into the room toweling his hair.

"Sleeping it off, according to Jarvis," Tony said, heading for the bar and piling shot glasses onto a tray. "So we're going with Steve's clue that those three are Gloria's uncles?"

"It's plausible," she answered, adding passport photos to the drawings of the Syouf twins and Valentin Granyavich, which made the relation between those men and Horatio's two acknowledged sons plain despite the racial nuances. "The ages are right, and HoratioCorp has oil and gas holdings in both Jordan and in the Ukraine; frequent travel; residential properties on record. That spells opportunity in my book."

"I've heard that housekeepers can be very loyal when they think they're a rich foreign man's wife," Clint slid into the conversation easily as he came up the stairs. "Especially when their sons get educated on the boss's dime." He was still in the clothes he'd worn to climb around the hospital's ventilation shafts, and his hair was dark with the sweat of a workout, but the manic edge was gone from his voice, and his eyes had lost that brittle look.

Tony grabbed three bottles from the bar, setting the vodka by Natasha's elbow and the whiskey by Clint's before bringing the bourbon back to his own spot on the sofa. He sat, snuggled his back into the arm and his feet over the spot where, in his mind, Steve's legs belonged, and set his tablet against his knees. "Well, I'll dish on the American sons then. Paul here -- Gloria's dad -- is the oldest. Not, as they say, bound for greatness. No ambition, no imagination, no drive; Jerry's gotten him about as far up the ladder as he can go. He's a... shark sucker. What're those sucky fish called again?"

"Remoras." Jarvis, Natasha, and Bruce all answered at once.

"That's the one," Tony snapped his fingers with a grin. "He's a remora, and he's not going to survive the feeding frenzy when the shark he's riding goes down."

"I'd agree with that," Natasha said, pouring vodka. "Paul Horatio is an executive because he was told it's what he would be, not because he's got any particular skill or interest in it. He's not a decisive
man, that's clear in his choice of wife," she went on, highlighting the slight Asian woman's face on the screen. "Korean, under-educated, and barely legal when she was brought here by the marriage broker, unless I miss my guess." Natasha said the words in the tone of one who knew damned well she missed nothing at all. Tony figured they were pretty accurate, given Jerry's taste for mail-order brides.

"Point being," Tony went on, "if he's involved in Jerry's HYDRA dealings, it's because he got caught in the undertow, not because he wants to be there."

Clint and Natasha shared a silent look, and a moment later she added the subtitle of 'flip?' to Paul's description. Clint just poured himself a dram of the whiskey and watched the pattern grow.

"Now George is the one I'd back for the heir to old Jerry's kingdom," Tony went on. "He's aggressive, he's smart, he's charming, and he hasn't got a conscience." He toasted the grinning face on the screen, remembering a handful of drunken conference encounters with the rakish man when he'd been young enough to think poking sociopaths was fun. "Luckily, he's an even bigger drunk than I am, and is in his dad's shit book for signing on with Hammer Industries instead of the family business."

"Hammer?" Bruce asked, worried for all the right reasons. "As in, Justin Hammer? That guy who built an army of drones to try and kill you at the Expo a few years back?"

Tony grinned and patted his shoulder. "That's the guy! Also the company whose R&D department inherited the arc reactor plans after Vanko blew himself up. I think it's a pretty safe bet that Georgie's the reason why the Avengers can't turn around without running into something wired up to an arc reactor trigger lately."

Natasha made a disgruntled noise over her tablet. "SHIELD's records on him say he's not a scientist."

"He's not," Tony agreed. "He's a thief. And if his dad's cozying up to HYDRA, then Georgie's smart enough to spot a design worth its weight in iridium to Iron Man's enemies. He might not get along with his dad, but George has always gotten along just fine with money."

"I do not like this family," Thor announced, setting down his teapot and two full cups next to the pile of shot glasses. Then he glanced at the screen and corrected himself. "The men thereof, I mean. The ladies seem fitting honorable, and young Joan and Gloria are bold as Valkyrie. They are deserving of better kindred."

The silence that followed that announcement was thick and awkward, and sliding a bit toward awful until Bruce picked up his teacup and raised it a sigh. "Don't we all?" he asked of no one.

To which Tony raised his own glass in ironic toast. Natasha and Clint followed a moment later, and Thor, who clearly wished he were toasting that with something heavier than tea. Then they drank the bitter toast together.

"I thought we agreed not let Stark run the debriefing sessions anymore," Coulson sighed from the elevator landing, startling everyone but Natasha. Bruce sloshed tea on his shirt and cursed. Thor gulped loudly and grimaced at the scalding. Clint looked like he was restraining a spit-take with all he had. Tony, who did not snarf bourbon up his nose, thank you very much, made a mental note to put a fucking bell on the agent, and waved hello with his favorite finger.

"Bruce's fault," Tony said once he could draw a breath without choking.
"Hey!"

"How did it go at the hospital?" Natasha asked Coulson, turning up another shotglass and filling both it and her own with icy vodka. Thor took the bottle from her when she'd finished, and sloshed a little into his cup.

Coulson sat and picked up the shot. "There was no sign of a second device, as you'd established. Evidence teams were sweeping the Oncology lab when I left, and the bomb squad determined that the device was a low grade chemical explosive concealing another device that Dr. Banner identified as a portal generator." He tossed the liquor back and swallowed without a wince. "Trigger, explosive, and portal device have been separated and secured in accordance with the data provided, and as soon as evidence is finished with them, they'll be remanded to the Avengers. Unless you'd rather pass this one on to Dr. Richards?"

"No," Tony said.

"Hell no," Bruce said at the same time.

Coulson smirked and took out his tablet. "I've pulled the files on the helicarrier insurgents you mentioned in the car," he said to Clint, opening the file onto the work session. "SHIELD did not find any bodies matching Syouf's description on the carrier after the incident, and he was not among the captured prisoners either. If he did not escape with Loki…?"

Clint shook his head and put his shot glass aside half full. "He would have been at engine two. Not close enough to make the escape."

"Then he'd be the guy that Cap pitched out the hole," Tony said, pouring himself a refill and pointedly not watching as Clint began to thaw by painful degrees. "And since Thor was nice enough to take care of Thing Two last month, that's two names off your party list." This time, Tony was the only one who drunk the toast.

"I've been wondering," Natasha said, scrolling idly through ranks of data. "Who paid for it all? Clint's report described facilities, weapons, and manpower that many countries couldn't bankroll. Criminal organizations generally don't fund their rivals' bids for world domination, even against a common enemy."

"I remember not asking about that," Clint replied, a little shaky, but determined. "I mean, I wondered, because he didn't show up with a bag of gold or anything, but…. And that… that stick of his couldn't control more than a few at a time, and he kept all of u -- those right near him at all times, until he got captured. Then there was only Selvig and me." He swallowed, rubbed hard at his face. "I never saw him pay anybody, or even negotiate a price."

"No prince would lower himself to do chatelaine's work," Thor said, refilling his tea and Bruce's. "Nor would Loki's illusions of wealth last long if he sought to cheat his army with the mere seeming of gold."

"Then someone bankrolled him," Tony said. "Jerry's the grand vizier type; he'd rather drive from the back seat than try and hold the throne himself -- HoratioCorp's lobbying budget proves that. So what did SHIELD find in Loki's tracks when they followed the money?" he asked Coulson, turning to prop his legs on the coffee table.

"We're working on that."

Tony put his glass down. "Working on it? It's been a year?"
Coulson's bland neutrality didn't waver. "Working on it. At the same time as we were working on containment of Chitauri weapons, rebuilding Manhattan, foiling invasive political agendas, uncovering and countering acts of terrorism here and abroad, and putting significant effort and resources to keeping the press, the fans, and the US government from eating the Avengers alive, indicting you for terrorism, or suing you collectively and individually into poverty."

Tony scoffed at that last one, but Coulson gave him no chance to speak. "SHIELD bore the brunt of Loki's attack on the Federal level, and it also took point on the resistance effort. We put agents, assets, weapons, and intelligence resources on the line, and lost a great many of them. We have not yet recovered the damage even now. There's a reason why that," he tipped a nod at the data mass hovering in the center of the room, "slipped under our net. While I'm sure it's comforting to lay it down to organizational incompetence, there's at least two people in this room who really ought to know better."

The agent's voice didn't tighten, his brow didn't knot, and his lips didn't press into a scowl, but Tony was pretty sure that somewhere not far under his mask of calm disinterest, Coulson was probably imagining tazing him where he sat. Natasha was watching him with that 'I am tracking you like a gazelle in the grasslands' look in her eyes, while Clint was sitting back with an expression strongly implying that his only regret, should she decide to leap for Tony's throat, would be not having popcorn.

"Hey, it's okay," Tony said generously and without sneering at all. "We've all had a lot on our plates since then, I guess. Doombots and giant squids and all, but you've got the Avengers on the job now, so between the combined genius in this room, and Jarvis' handy lack of sleep requirements we'll… what? What's with the face?"

"Actually, Stark, I need to ask you not to do that."

"Do what, exactly?" Tony challenged. "Your jobs for you?" Bruce caught his elbow and glared.

Coulson nodded. "Exactly. I understand your frustration, and frankly I share it. SHIELD missed important signs on this. It got out of hand, but the Avengers put the pieces together and thanks to you and the Horatio girl, we are on it now. And we are grateful for your work and insight, but now you need to let us work it."

"Why?" Bruce asked so Tony didn't have to. He didn't sound half as furious as Tony felt though, if anything, he seemed more intrigued, and maybe hopeful.

"Because the Avengers are celebrities, whether we like it or not," Natasha said. "Nothing we do is going to go under the radar for long, especially with Horatio already aware that we suspect him."

Coulson slanted her a grateful look. "I've cleared it with Director Fury, and I can promise full disclosure to the team; SHIELD's analysis department will liaise directly with Jarvis, to provide bidirectional, accurate data exchange. But you are combat operatives, not detectives. There are a lot of pieces in play today that weren't as of our meeting last Tuesday." He leaned over his knees to level an earnest stare, one he'd surely practiced in front of a picture of Steve. "This team digging at Horatio or HYDRA right now will put those SHIELD assets in personal danger."

"So what; we catch the intercept, but you get to run it in?"

"It's not a game, Tony," Bruce said. "People's lives are at stake here."

Tony shook off his calming hand and stood, unable to sit still any longer. "Well hell, it must be fucking Tuesday!" He paced the length of the room. "Look, all I'm saying is that SHIELD had its
"And the Avengers know better than most that sometimes it's the second chance that pays off after you've blown the first one," Coulson said, blandly punching the knees out from under Tony's building rant. He was the only one in the room who managed not to wince.

The appalled silence lasted a few heartbeats, then Thor put his teacup aside and stood, addressing them like a council of war. "My friends, we should consider this matter carefully; to hoard glory at the expense of victory is no glory at all."

"Glory?" Tony gaped.

Thor put a hand up and continued. "And too, we should not give judgment here or now, for though I see wisdom in Couls-Son's words, and in Stark-Son's as well, this can be no true Thyng if the Captain should not have his fair say to the proposal."

"He's right, Stark," Barton broke his silence at last. "Cap's the tactical man, and he's the one who got Fury to open the files to us in the first place. He should have a piece of this debate before it's signed and sealed."

"Fine!" Tony threw his hands up in frustration. "Let's get him down-" he cut the threat off abruptly as somewhere in the room, a phone began to play the muffled fanfare to *The Star Spangled Man*.

Tony wasn't the only one lunging for his pocket, but it was Bruce who took the call. "Hi, Steve. What's up?" he asked, then waited. The whole room waited in silence; not one of them pretending they weren't trying to overhear the response that never came. "Steve?" Bruce said again after a long moment. "Steve, are you ok?"

"Scan him, Jarvis," Tony snapped. "Right now. What's going on?"

"Captain Rogers is in his kitchen at the moment. His vital signs do not indicate emergency, however he does appear to be in some distress."

"Steve, I'm coming back up," Bruce was saying into the phone as he thrust up out of the sofa. "Just take it easy, I'll be right there." Tony and Thor both fell into step behind him at once, but Bruce put them back with a staying hand. "No, you wait. All of you. Noise and fussing won't help if it's what I think it is."

"Bruce," Tony couldn't even manage to wince at the pleading tone in his voice. "You won't even know I'm there. Quiet as a mouse, I swear it." Dimly, Tony was aware of the rest of the team, on their feet and ranged in a loose phalanx behind him. Coulson stood at point, his expression neither bland nor remotely disinterested, Clint and Natasha like attack dogs at his shoulders.

"Never in your life," Bruce scoffed, but he glanced back at the others and shook his head in defeat. "All right, but you're all staying out in the hallway or the gym until I say. And somebody needs to go get my med kit out of the lab."

"On it," Clint declared, and bounded for the stairs. After a second, Natasha followed, and so did Thor, apparently seeing some benefit to climbing five floors instead of letting the elevator do the work. Tony might have agreed, if he'd thought his knees were trustworthy.

He settled for the elevator instead, figuring the weight of Coulson's outraged silence couldn't be worse than the freaking-out he was only barely managing to hold at bay.

~* Shocked the Monkey to Life *~
"Jarvis, what the hell happened?" Tony muttered as Bruce gave Coulson and him a last warning look then shut the apartment door in their faces. "You told me Steve was asleep!"

"I believe I said he was lying down, sir," Jarvis corrected, voice pitched low and just a bit apprehensive. "Captain Rogers asked me about non-pharmaceutical headache remedies, and my initial research suggested an ice pack. His reaction to the light inside the freezer was unexpectedly severe."

"Migraine?" Coulson clipped.

"It would appear to answer those symptoms, Agent Coulson."

"Then why is he not at SHIELD medical right now?" This question he aimed square at Tony, with a glare that didn't even pretend to be bland. "A development like this is-"

"The guy can shake off a bullet wound in a week! He's not going to go into the hospital over a fucking headache, Phil," Tony growled back as Natasha and Thor appeared in the stairwell. "And a headache was all it was when we got back. He didn't even say anything about it!"

"Well, he wouldn't, would he?"

"Sir, Agent Coulson, please either keep your voices down or move away from the door," Jarvis said. "The Captain's hearing is unusually sensitive just now, and the vomiting is making things worse."

Vomiting. Christ. Tony closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. "How bad is it really, Jarvis?"

"I do not have scanning capacity beyond basic vital signs in the private apartments, but based on elevated heart rate and lowered body temperature, I believe this may be classified as quite severe. Possibly extreme."

"Coffee," Natasha murmured at his elbow. "Caffeine helps some."

"I can do coffee," Tony said, pathetically grateful for the chance to do something. Coulson caught his elbow as he pushed off the wall. "Not if he's vomiting, it won't. Let Banner make the diagnosis. You just tell me how the hell this happened."

Colson swearing was even rarer than Steve doing it, and it illustrated perfectly the depth of potential shit this whole episode stood to deal them. It also helped shove Tony off his island of micro-panic, and let him see what the worry was doing to everyone else. Thor was all but hovering, brows knit, hands flexing and curling emptily at his sides -- direct contrast to Natasha's waiting-cobra stillness, and Coulson's bad-cop interrogation scowl. And Clint, normally just as fond of his own voice as Tony was of his, hadn't said a word to anyone when he'd met them at Steve's apartment door. They were all freaked; one harsh word shy of bloodshed, and if Steve was the one standing out in the hall, he'd know just how to calm everyone down. Probably with an inspiring parable or homily; quotes from Aesop or Ben Franklin; a round of kumbaya, group hugs and motivational war stories… plain, unedited facts… something disgustingly earnest, anyway.

"I think it's… the telepath. Gloria," Tony said at last. "Steve said she was still down from the anesthesia, so she just grabbed his hand and downloaded on him." The bug in the car should have got that much, and Coulson's brisk nod confirmed it.

"Well, we know Cap's not psychic. That's one thing the serum didn't give him at all -- he wouldn't have been nearly so hard to find in the ice if it had, right? So his brain isn't wired for psi and it's trying to adapt to the transferred energy, but it doesn't have the right uptake links, and the signal is
banjaxing his coding. He's trying to rewrite it on the fly, and…” Tony blinked in sudden realization. "Actually, that happens with Dummy all the time. He gets hung up in these code loops, and I have to-
"
"Rebooting the Super Soldier is a little outside even your skill set, Tony," Bruce murmured as he opened the door to let himself and Clint out into the hallway. "But you might be right about what's happening to him. If you think of the brain as a bio-electric engine, then a migraine is absolutely analogous to a feedback loop."

"More like shorting right the fuck out," Clint said through his teeth, stress-pale in the hallway's gloom. "I've seen stroke patients more functional than he is right now."

It took all the willpower Tony had and a forbidding glare from Bruce besides to keep from shoving his way through the door at that announcement. "I came out here because we need help getting him to the bed," Bruce said. "And you all need to see what we're dealing with, because…” he stopped, rubbed at his neck, and sighed. "Because we might have to make a decision on his behalf, and it needs to be informed rather than impulsive."

"Jesus, Bruce," Tony groaned, and covered his face with a shiver.

"Not that decision." And no, Tony was not pathetically grateful to hear a smile in Bruce's reply. Nor to feel Coulson's hand take hold of his elbow in a grip that wasn't obviously a precursor to Tony being thrown into a wall. Tony just took a breath and figured if it made Coulson feel better, then he could put up with it.

"Now some rules," Bruce went on, fixing them each with a stern glare. "Nobody will speak louder than a whisper while we're in there, no matter what happens. I mean it. Even if he pukes or looks like he's seizing, you keep quiet and stay back. Thor, I need you to carry him to bed as gently as you can -- jostling him is as bad as shouting in his ear right now." Thor, who had been looking more and more distressed as the discussion wore on, nodded gravely, but seemed relieved to have a task.

"Tony, you're going to keep that arc reactor covered. He can't handle the light." Tony nodded and clapped a hand to his chest while he pulled out his cell phone with the other and tossed it into the corner. He heard several others clatter alongside it as he turned and reached past Bruce for the doorknob. This time, nobody stopped him.

He found Steve sitting against his kitchen island in a spill of melting ice cubes; legs akimbo, arms loose in his lap, head lolled forward under the weight of an ice pack at his neck. He looked horribly like a string-cut puppet until Tony knelt beside him to see the grimace on Steve's face.

"Hey, Cap," Tony murmured, fingers aching with the desire to touch; hand, shoulder, brow, anything. "You look like hell."

Steve twitched, gave a thready huff that might equally have been a laugh or a wince. "Yeah. Rather be shot," he whispered. "Think that hurts less."

"Looks that way to me," Natasha said, close at Tony's back as Thor crouched low on Steve's other side. "You holding up?"

'Does he look like it?' Tony didn't say. Positive. They were staying positive here, because that's what friends did for each other, right? Right.

But Steve gave that brittle laugh again and shook his head. "Not really," he said as she slipped the ice pack off his neck. "Haven't felt this rough since before the serum. Just keeps getting worse and
"I think the serum might be working against you now," Bruce said, nodding Coulson and Clint aside to clear a path to the bedroom. "Normally a migraine burns itself out into a fugue state, like tripping a circuit breaker. But if the serum's regenerating things fast enough, it could be keeping the feedback going."

"Oh," was all Steve had to say about that. Tony had a lot more to offer, but decided he'd better keep it to himself, lest he accidentally start screaming.

He settled for, "We're going to move you now, Steve. Hang tight, okay?"

"Kay," Steve managed to say before Thor's gentlest efforts rendered him speechless and panting. He managed not to throw up or pass out, but it looked like a near thing. Remembering to keep his hand over his arc reactor wasn't nearly as hard as Tony had thought it might be -- having something un-crushable in his fist was probably the only thing that kept him from babbling in helpless panic.

He hung back with Clint in the doorway while the rest of them got Steve settled onto the bed, a cold cloth over his eyes, and an empty trashcan on the floor beside. "You okay, Barton?" he asked, and won a wry twist of smile.

"Better'n you," he shrugged. "I'm just freaked out about the telepath."

Tony scowled at the implication, but being a motherfucking adult, he chose the high road. "Kid didn't know what she was doing. It's not like she attacked him deliberately or anything."

"I know. But the fact that she could do it at all is on my Things-That-Make-Want-To-Blow-Shit-Up list." Clint walked a coin back and forth across his knuckles; half showman's diversion, half nervous twitch. "I'm not a fan of people who can get into my head and fuck me up on the best of days, but not only do we have teen witch to contend with, chances are we're gonna have to call in Professor X to clean her mess up too."

They stopped short, all of them, as Steve yelped, "No!"

Natasha murmured a soft question and pressed his shoulders back as he struggled to lever himself up. "You can't call Xavier," Steve panted after a moment. "You can't. She's terrified of them. Mutants. Has nightmares of being sent away to that school. 'Where the freaks belong'." The quotes were obvious in the thick, bitter twist of his voice.

"She's a telepath," Natasha answered as she finished with his belt and threw it aside. "Chances are that school is the best place for her. She has nothing to fear from Xavier."

"No!" he caught for her hand and missed. "I know. That. But she... it's a choice Gloria gets to make. For herself. I won't let someone else make it for her, even if I don't agree with the fear."

"Another psychic's intervention could be the only way to stop this," Coulson said. "We might not have any other choice, Captain."

"Find another way," Steve answered, and Tony knew he didn't imagine the pleading note in his voice. "Don't make me betray her trust like that."

"Steve, you're immune to most drugs," Tony lost the battle with his restraint. It was the best he could do to speak the words instead of shouting. "Even the SHIELD medics can barely keep you under when they have to. What do you want us to do if this feedback loop makes you seize or stroke out, whack your head into a wall until your brain resets?"
"Worked for me," Clint said, only half snarking. Then the coin abruptly slipped through his knuckles and dropped to the carpet. "Or we could maybe shock him out."

"What?" Tony wasn't the only one who said it, but he was the one who shouted. So he was the one who got the stink-eye when Bruce turned from the bed and pointed emphatically at the apartment door.

"Out. Everyone," he said, scowl making it clear that he would not require the Hulk's help to clear the room if they didn't move quickly enough. "Back in the hallway or up to the lounge. I don't care which, just take this out of here now."

And yeah, there was enough light to see how Steve had curled up tight around his ice pack; both hands cradling it to his face while he twitched with each shallow breath. Time to go. Time to fucking go, before Tony accidentally put his fist right through a goddamned wall.

The scatter of ice in the kitchen was melting fast, slicking the tiles with a dozen tiny puddles of blue. Tony might have paused, grabbed a towel from the counter and cleaned the water up. Only behind him, Tony could hear Thor asking Barton to explain what he'd meant, and he had a pretty good idea that shouting where Steve could hear just might get him banned from the whole goddamned building, if it didn't get him shot. And shouting, as he wanted to do, about quacks who thought psychiatry meant shocking uppity, too-smart kids to make them 'behave', was only going to lead to questions anyway.

So Tony kept breathing, kept silent, kept walking. Out the door. Down the hall. Staircase up one floor to the penthouse. Ignore the fading voices behind. Ignore the ghost-smells of latex and conductive gel. Pretend not to know exactly what they were going to do to Steve, or that it was probably the best damned idea any of them would be able to come up with. Don't, just fucking don't call anybody Nurse Ratchett. Not out loud, anyway.

A waft of humid, candle-perfumed air greeted Tony as he came into the penthouse, and the faint swell of music from the bathroom made him more grateful than he knew he should be. She wouldn't read his face from two rooms away. She wouldn't need him to find the words to explain this unexplainable thing that was about to happen, or why it made him sick all over. He'd tell her once it was done, and spare her the futile effort of trying to think of a more humane way to stop the perfect storm inside Cap's skull.

Tony went to the bar, crouched low, and dug in the back until he found the heavy, lumpy bottle he wanted. "Jarvis?" he called, wiping the dust away.

"The team appears to be returning to the lounge area, Sir," the AI confirmed. "Only Doctor Banner remains in the Captain's apartment, and it appears he will join the rest in approximately-"

Tony stood, spotted a roll of duct tape on the hall table, and stopped to slap a strip if it over his shirt where the arc reactor glowed through. "Will he be gone by the time I get down there again?"

"I believe so, Sir."

And that was all he needed to hear. Tony took his time on the stairs; focused on setting each foot down square and smooth, balanced in the center of the step before he picked up the one above it. Focused on the hum of his reactor, and the sound of blood in his ears. Focused on remembering the phrase exactly: 'not so much falling, as sauntering vaguely downwards.'

Jarvis didn't warn him off when Tony got to the gym level, just dimmed the hallway lights to a sleepy glimmer and slid back Steve's apartment door. Tony took a breath, cranked the screw top off
the cheap bottle of gin, and went inside.

He could hear Steve breathing in the gloom; shivery huffs laced with just a thread of whine, each one making the hair stand on Tony's neck. He quelled the urge to sneak, recalling Rhodey's warnings and not wanting to see if Steve could startle-punch as hard with a migraine as he could without.

Tony let his shoes scuff on the carpet, let the bedroom door squeak aside under his hip. "It's me," he said, and sat on the bed by Steve's up-curled knees. "Brought you something."

"I know," came Steve's groaned reply, tinted just barely with a smile. "I can smell the gin."

"Yeah. It's pretty bad," Tony agreed, and took a drink. "Think you can take …?" Steve shook his head, more a convulsive shiver than anything else. Tony leaned to grab the duvet and flip it over him -- less like a burrito this time than an empanada. And sadly, not pantsless. Tony shook the thought out of his head.

"Thank you," Steve sighed, though for the warmth, or the shitty gin, Tony wasn't sure.

He took another drink, just a small one, and let the harsh sear of it bring tears to his eyes. "They're going to have Thor shock you unconscious," he said once the gin let him breathe again. "They probably figure that will be enough to shut the feedback down, and that your serum will repair the damage once things calm down." He wound his fingers in the duvet, idly focused on the plane of Steve's temple, and how it swept delicately down into the standing ridge of cheekbone. "It's a terrible idea. It's barbaric, and it's going to hurt like a motherfucker…but it's probably the least terrible idea we've got, really. So…" He choked off the rest as Steve's fingers, chill and weak, pried at Tony's grip on the blanket.

"Hey," Steve said, once he'd got Tony's hand wrapped around his own. "It's ok."

"It's not," Tony choked. "It's really not."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Steve," Tony snarled, laughing despite himself.

"I'll try to just get shot next time, ok?"

"Or you could, y'know, maybe duck."

There came a huff of laughter at that, and the fingers squeezed briefly. "You'll have to show me how."

"Remind me to look it up before we go into the field," Tony replied, snickering. "Wikipedia's got to have something on the subject."

"Sir," Jarvis spoke up, a quiet, commiserate murmur. "Doctor Banner and Thor are returning from the lounge."

"Right," Tony sighed and gave Steve's hand a last, gentle squeeze before slipping his fingers free.

Or trying to, anyhow. "Hey," Steve said, not letting him go. "Give me a drink of that before you leave?"

Tony eyed him, disbelieving, but while Steve's eyes were narrow and dark with pain, his gaze didn't waver. He looked back at the bottle, way too full to tip down to a prone man's mouth, and then
considered his chances of sitting Steve upright to drink. Then he picked up the bottle, took a sip into his own mouth, and leaned in to pass it to Steve like a poisoned kiss.

His lips were still soft, and Tony was sure he felt the brush of tongue through the burn as they parted to let the liquor flow in. Tony sat back, wiped the kiss away on the back of his fist, and wondered what the hell had he been thinking while he watched Steve work to get the tiny sip down.

"Jeez. That's awful…" Steve wheezed at last.

"Isn't it?" Tony found himself almost smiling. "Want me to leave the bottle?"

"Please." The grimace turned briefly into something almost like a grin, and Tony turned his back on it quickly. He screwed the cap back into place and set the gin bottle within reach, but out of flailing danger. Then he stood.

"I'm, ah, gonna go," he said. "Don't want Bruce to yell at me again." Tony shifted, tugging against moronic impulse, then sighed and told himself what he wanted to hear. "You'll be okay, Steve. It'll be okay."

"Thanks, Tony," came the sigh in return, and Tony was so pathetically glad to hear his name on Steve's lips instead of Bucky's, that he had to run from the room lest he accidentally kiss the man again.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, my lovely bog blossoms, all has happened about like I expected it to with my guests last week; I am, for the first time since posting on this began, no longer at least one chapter ahead of the schedule. This does not make me happy, and so NEXT week the posting day will change from Wednesday to Friday. Hopefully this will give me the time and traction to get my lead back in hand, and insure an un-interrupted roll-out.

I just wanted to let those of you not bookmarking know what to expect. And also? Still evil. Yup.
"All right, Cap," Tony said, switching the tray to one hand so he could open the office door. "It's time to put down the fan brush and step away from the happy little tree…” The office was the epitome of soulless middle management; anonymous, efficient, and, God dammit, empty. Only the faint smell of wood shavings and graphite, and a stack of sketchbook pages on the desk providing any hint that Steve had been here at all.

"Damn it, Jarvis!" Tony slapped the tray down, not even caring when lukewarm tomato soup sloshed all over the congealing grilled cheese sandwich beside it. "Where the hell did he go this time?"

"I'm afraid Captain Rogers was unsatisfied with this location," Jarvis replied, lighting the cubicle's wall screen with a map of the Tower, then zooming the focus down to a blinking icon of Cap's shield. "He relocated forty minutes ago."

Tony squinted at the screen. "Sub basement three, that's… What's even down there? Mechanicals?"

"Correct, sir. Heating and cooling systems, boilers, air and water filtration units, generators, secondary systems servers, steam and plumbing pipes, pumps, and filters, approximately three miles of conduit for various cables, Captain Rogers, and his sketchbook are all currently located in sub basement three."

"I note you didn't mention a chair," Tony couldn't help chuckling just a little.

"Well spotted, sir. I did not, in fact, mention a chair. However, the Captain found himself undeterred by that shortcoming, and seems content to sit on the floor."

A security camera feed windowed open in a corner of the screen, showing Steve sitting tailor-style against a wall in the bright spill of a mechanic's worklight he'd hung from the pipes above him. He had his sketchbook balanced on something that looked suspiciously like the access cover from one of the furnace units. "I suspect his attachment to his current location might be due to its being situated directly beneath the swimming pool. He did mention something about levels of shielding when he chose to move again."

"I swear, I'm going to end Barton for making that tin foil hat crack," Tony grumbled, taking a long, careful look at the man. His jaw was murky with stubble, there was graphite smudged thickly across his nose and one cheek, and his hair hadn't seen a comb since yesterday morning. The effect was unsurprisingly hot, given Tony's fervent desire to personally and thoroughly muss the man, but the just-rolled-out-of-bed sexy got a hell of a boost from the Steve's laser-focused attention on his work. So Tony had a competence kink -- that was news?

The skin around Steve's eyes wasn't pinched and taut now, as it had been in the van after the hospital. The wrinkle between his brows spoke of concentration, not of pain or disapproval, not that Tony would have any reason to know the difference or anything. Steve looked like he'd told them all he felt when they got up to find him sketching in the team lounge that morning; okay.

If an unwashed and untidy Steve who ignored every part of his normal morning routine, including exercise, food, and newspaper, and who hid in the basements so his team's private memories
wouldn't bleed over into the data he was frantically trying to record could be considered 'okay'
anyplace other than Bizarro World.

Tony turned to see what Steve had left for them on the desk, and grimaced to see Obie the War-
Monger glowering at him from the upper corner of the first page. There was Tony's old arc reactor
clamped in a metal claw just below it, and two long, vicious slashes of graphite X'ing right over the
image. The pressure of those two lines could be seen as divots on the next three pages down the
stack.

"Yeah, tell me about it, pal," Tony murmured, resisting the urge to touch his chest. He fanned the
pages to see what else he'd be cutting out of the scans before he turned them over to the team,
Coulson, and SHIELD.

There was one of Christine Everhart on the third page, her mouth stretched wide around something
Steve had stopped drawing after three suggestive, curving lines. The Swedish gymnasts were on
page five, barely sketched in beyond the suggestion of breasts, hips, and long, bendy limbs around
the one clearly rendered figure in the pile; himself. Jesus, had he been that young? Howard, bitter,
cold, and old was on page seven, drink in one hand, blueprint in the other. Tony almost missed the
one of Maria in her youth, laughing in her eyes as she kissed someone slight and reedy, whose pale
hair curled like rings around her fingers. None of Yinsen in this batch, thank God.

"Scan mode, Jarvis," Tony said, straightening the pages and taking them to the screen, where he set
them one by one over the flashing square Jarvis lit for him. "Facial recognition engaged, too. We
don't want any more of Bruce or Clint's family in this batch, and if you spot another one of Barnes,
Pepper, or Loki, pull them too. Don't delete them though. Separate folders for each."

"Of course, sir," Jarvis agreed as the software began highlighting and sorting faces over top of the
camera feed where Steve sat scribbling out more as fast as he could. Tony knew that expression, not
by sight, but by feel. He knew the drive to keep hold of something bright and potential and formed
entirely out of electricity in his brain; the manic urge to translate it into numbers, physics, vector and
code as quickly as possible, praying to abstract Gods that he'd get the magical, insane, meta-
quantum-physical fucking god-genius parts of it down before the whole thing decayed into glitter
and abstraction and New Agey bullshit. He understood that event horizon that hung somewhere
between creator and oracle, and some days he wasn't sure he ever really escaped its pull, since even
in battle, he could still sometimes hear the whispers harmonizing to the sound of explosions and
repulsor fire.

But that was him -- Tony Stark, over privileged genius narcissist fuck-up -- nobody expected him to
be normal. Cap wasn't like that though. He was realtime all the way, glancing across the synaptic
gaps without needing to jump them; intuitive, adaptive, and resourceful, sure, but he always kept
those red-booted feet nailed firmly on the ground. That was what made him the Captain, instead of
just another super-tough with a gimmick. And Steve, right now, wasn't anywhere near Cap's scary-
competent headspace: Steve, at this very moment, existed in the space between penciltip and page,
and nowhere else.

Pepper's reaction to Tony's concerns when he'd shared them over coffee that morning had been
somewhat less than sympathetic. The words; 'Gosh, Tony, someone you care about put himself in
danger's way, got hurt doing it, and now instead of resting like you think he should, he's obsessed
with his work, neglecting his basic personal care, and ignoring your efforts to take care of him? That
must really suck for you! Tell me about your pain!' might actually have been uttered. And quite
possibly deserved too, he was man enough to admit: he didn't like that shoe being on the other foot --
it pinched like a mother.
Tony tapped his fingers restlessly over the security feed, enlarging it, then enlarging it again until Steve's face began to pixelate beneath Jarvis' work. "He never went up to get his phone from the apartment, did he?" Tony asked.

"No, sir. He seems to have forgotten that you'd asked. Shall I notify agent Barton to find and include it in the Captain's luggage?"

"Yeah. I gave you speakers and mics down in sub-level three, didn't I?"

"You did, sir, though the maintenance workers and repairmen at times seem less than glad of it. Shall I pass a message for you, or would you prefer I opened a direct line?"

"Direct. I'll break the news to him myself." Tony turned and shoved the tray aside so he could perch on the desk. "Hey Cap. How's the brain-dump going?"

He didn't look up. "Hey Tony. It's going ok. What do you need?"

'For you to put that down, eat something, and act normal for half an hour,' Tony did not say, because he was many things, but actively hypocritical he tried to avoid. Instead, he settled on, "Fury's here."

That got a glance, unsurprisingly straight at the camera instead of the speaker-mount. Then he looked back down at his sketchbook and frowned. "Guess that explains that one then," he said, X ing out another drawing. "I don't think I should talk to him."

Tony chuckled. "Oh, trust; he's gotten a look at what you've been drawing all morning -- he doesn't want to get anywhere near you. But he does want you moved out of the tower. And," Tony held up a hand as Steve's eyes flashed impending defiance, "We all agreed. You're getting too much bleed over from the rest of us. It's distracting, and frankly it's freaking some of the team right the fuck out."

Steve's eyes shifted sideways for a second. "It won't be any better at SHIELD."

"You're not going to SHIELD," Tony couldn't help the growl, but Steve didn't seem to notice it. "We're moving you into the guest house at the Manor until you're done dribbling your brains all over the paper. Sloane and Coulson can keep you watered and fed, and move you to sunny corners when necessary, and since Phil's had something he calls 'resistance training', Sloane will be the only one there you know well enough to pick up interference on. That should help us get cleaner data out of all your work."


"No," Tony shook his head, emphatic. "Fury wants it, but no. We all agreed; you'll get any call the rest of us get, and from there you get to decide for yourself. If you can walk away from Gloria's memories and focus on the fight, then you play in, but if you'll lose too much data to the distraction, then we will cover you."

Because Fury had been right about one thing; the data they were getting from Steve's scrambled brain was likely to lead them to actionable evidence against Horatio faster than anything an army of spies and data-combers could turn up. And if they needed to try and make contact with Gloria Horatio again to find out what she knew when she wasn't loopy from post-op and grasping at straws, then Cap was going to be their best avenue for it. She liked him, she trusted him, and apparently she had his psionic number on speed dial, so until they could dig up some legal way to get the girls out of the Horatio stronghold, their options were slim. And also came with some pretty creepy, if hopefully temporary, side effects on the receiving end.
Steve looked up again, and this time his face held pure gratitude. "Okay," he said, and rolled his drawing hand at the wrist as if he'd just noticed he'd been using it for seven hours straight. "I can't tell for sure, but I think it's starting to slow down. I know I'm losing some things, and I know others are just scrambled to nonsense now, but yeah. This'd be easier at a desk."

"It'd be easier if you'd use a damn tablet stylus that would upload directly to Jarvis," Tony groused cheerfully. "But far be it from me to amend your luddite ways. I'm sure we can have a shipment of clay tablets and twigs sent over too, and did you just flip me the bird, Captain?"


"Fifteen minutes before Jarvis cuts the power to your light and turns on the fire sprinklers," Tony grinned back. "Happy will meet you in the garage with your bag in the car. Clint's packing you a spare set of undies as we speak, so is there anything special you want him to grab from your apartment while he's in there?"

The pencil stopped again, and Steve glanced at the camera. "The rest of my good pencils are in the box on my desk, and a fresh sketchbook from the shelf by the window please. There's a drawing board behind the desk, and…" he ducked back to his work so quickly that Tony just knew he was blushing behind that shitty, low-res video feed. "And my night clothes are under the left side pillow on my bed."

"Got all that, Jarvis? Make sure Clint knows to pack Steve's 'porn-I-mean-night-clothes'," Tony leered, eyebrows wagging. "Probably better have him check for lube in the night table too. Wouldn't want any chafing of those all-important digits of his. And dude, if your hand's cramping that much, Steve, maybe I better have Jarvis cut the power on you right now!"

"That one wasn't a cramp," Steve answered, tucking the finger away. "And stay out of my night table, or I'll give Dummy a Frisbee and teach him how to use it in your workshop."

Tony stood and turned for the door. "Aha! I knew you'd start using your powers for Evil sooner or later!"

"Sooner and sooner every day, Tony," Steve replied as he bent back to his work.

~* Shamed the Devil *~

Two days later, Tony's phone rang. Or to be more precise, it shrieked from his pocket at full volume, howling, "Tamper alert! Help! Help! Somebody's messing with me!" and scaring the bejesus out of a barista.

Jumping clear of the epic double shot red-eye extra-hot brewnami, Tony grabbed the phone and silenced it. Then he checked his shoes and trouser-cuffs for spots before waving off the kid's babbling apologies, taking note of the caller ID and swearing and hitting the callback button.

"Get the fuck away from that!" he barked, then winced at another smashing sound behind the counter. "Jesus, kid, not you! Calm down. Quit crying and go get a towel or something."

"Stark?" That was Barton's voice on the phone. "Why the hell is there a countdown on this crate?"

"Because some dumbass carny who couldn't comprehend 'do not disturb' decided to tamper with said crate and armed the damned defenses," he snarled back. "I mean, how tough is it, really? Disturb, plus not, minus do. Even the math is easy!"

"Your grammar is atrocious, Stark," Coulson said. "And your crate was in the way. Still is, though
from the timer, I'm guessing it'll blow itself and your garage up in about two minutes, so it won't be
for long. Should we evacuate Captain Rogers and Aunt April from the house, or just have a team
come in to clean up the debris after it blows?"

"It's gonna explode, isn't it?" Clint said, "I told you it was gonna explode, sir."

"It's not going to explode," Tony said, abandoning his hope of a quick caffeine fix when he watched
the rattled barista try to unscrew the pump-pot he'd shattered, only to dump more coffee all over
himself and the floor. "But the timer's going to arm countermeasures, so don't touch it again until I
get there, ok?"

"What countermeasures, exactly?"

"Anti-nosey-bastard countermeasures, Barton," Tony replied, heading for the car. "And on that
topic, I'm guessing Steve must be mostly back inside his own head now if you're willing to risk
proximity." Happy popped the trunk as he came around, and Tony pulled out his Suitcase. The
chances of combat on the way to the Manor were pretty slight, and the lighter weight armor was
closer than the Mark VII.

"Captain Rogers says he's done about all he can," Coulson answered that, his voice briefly loud as
the call switched to the helmet, then ramping back to bearable. "Most of what he got last night and
this morning were repeats of what he'd seen before."

"So he's sleeping it off now?" Tony asked, trying not to sound too hopeful as he waved Happy off
back to the Tower, and the board meeting he now was definitely not going to make, darn it all.

"No, he slept it out last night," Coulson said. Tony decided not to ask if Coulson knew that for a fact
because he stayed up all night to watch Cap sleep -- he needed data more than a cheap laugh. "He
seems to be back on his normal routine now; got up for a run this morning, ate without being
prompted, and has been helping Aunt April out around the Manor since then. Why, should I go get
him?"

"Nope! No need. Just curious, that's all."

He heard Barton snicker. "Looking for a chance to explain all the pictures of you getting your sex
on, Stark? Cause I sure as hell saw more than I wanted to of your naked ass in those drawings, and
I'm not a sexually repress- OW! What was that for?"

"Proactive correction," said Coulson, smooth as butter. "It's a new thing. Stark, this line through your
security device; it's secure?"

Tony had to think about that one. "Yeah, actually. Why?"

"Because I have a question for you about Jerry Horatio; how close was he with Obadiah Stane?"

It was always a sickening surprise how well Tony's guts remembered good old Obie. Tony took a
steadying breath, did a barrel roll, and told them to pipe the fuck down, because there was no
goddamned call to puke in the suit. "Not," he said then. "At all. I mean, they were more or less on a
level as corporate assholes go, and Obie certainly crossed paths with Jerry here and there, but I never
saw them do any bonding." In fact, Tony recalled Obie referring to Horatio as a weasely little turd-
sniffer on more than one occasion, but he figured that would qualify more as entertainment than hard
data in Coulson's books. "Again, I ask you; why?"

There was a pause, then, "I'm sending you a picture…" A beep, a ding, and five seconds later, a new
window opened on Tony's HUD, fading part of the midtown skyline behind virtual paper and
Tony gritted his teeth while he examined the picture, because he couldn't say 'I told you so' about Steve's post-shock memory scramble, on account of not actually having told anybody at all. Well… he’d ended up telling Pepper that night, but by then it had been too little, too late, and he'd made her promise not to tell anybody else the sordid, ugly, emotional story that went along with why he'd know how hard it was to remember things that happened on the day you got the zap. Tony hated particularly the fact that he was pretty sure he'd solved cold fusion when he was fifteen, but he never could get it all straight again once he'd come out of the fugue enough to hold a pencil.

No, no. The team didn't know just why Tony would have personal insight into why Cap's brain couldn't collate its contents in the wake of the 'treatment', and they didn't need to know. His talents were better served far to just pick up what puzzle pieces Steve could drop and see if he could find enough context to add to make Steve's fancy-if-random pictures play nicely with actual hard facts.

That said, some of these puzzle pieces were just fucked up weird, and this definitely counted as one of them. In the foreground, Obie and Horatio were shaking hands, arms slung across each other's shoulders like the best of friends. Obie was wearing some helmet-crown kind of thing, while Horatio wore a thick, heavy chain made of jeweled keys across his shoulders. Both men were weirdly translucent, letting the unlikely background show through their dark, expensive suits.

"Where's this supposed to be?" Tony asked as he veered around an apartment block.

"Sub-sewer hardened bunker complex," Clint answered, and his voice held the strain that discussing the Chitauri invasion always brought on. "In Queens, about four blocks from the river. It's where Loki had Selvig working with the Tesseract."

"Any reason Stane would have known about a privately built and owned, lead-shielded, hundred year old bomb shelter with its own water and sewer feeds?" Coulson asked.

"Hell yes," Tony answered without hesitation. "He had private testing and development labs set up wherever SI broke ground. I found out about most of them after he was dead. I think. I hope. This is just the kind of thing he'd have been looking for if he was going to do his normal 'skimming dangerous tech ideas off the cutting room floor' game." The revelations that had come to light after Obie's death had been deeply rooted, tangled, and ugly, and Tony was weary unsurprised to be only now discovering yet another layer to the shit pile that was his old mentor's essential humanity. He boosted a little more speed out of the repulsors as another thought occurred to him.

"Hey, where exactly is that place, anyway? The surface address, I mean?"

Coulson gave the numbers, and a street view map popped up to replace the drawing. Tony winced to see the unassuming brownstone in the quiet, neighborly street. "Yeah, that's what I was afraid of. I think that might have been a Stark estate property back before Stane took over the 'trust' and started selling them off to pocket the profits. Pretty sure I've been in that house at least once. It smelled like liniment."

"Would Stark Industries have records of those transactions?"

"Not of what Stane did. We know about most of it through second hand inference and accounting errors uncovered after his death, but…” He couldn't help a grin at the next thought that flashed through his brain. "But I know someone who's been keeping careful track of the Stark estate properties since well before Howard and Maria died. Ask Sloane to see the Other Books, and find out what she remembers about the place, and when it dropped off the estate's catalogue." Because if
Tony had to pick between Obie and Sloane for the champion title of grand master accounting ninja, he'd put every cent he had right behind the little old Amazon herself.

Said Amazon was currently standing on the Manor's kitchen doorstep, scowling at Tony as he flew past the sapling pear tree on his way to the garage. *Speak of the devil*, he thought and gave her a cheery backward wave.

"Sir," Jarvis spoke up as he powered down to a landing that wouldn't send gravel flying. "I am asked to relay a message from Mrs. Sloane." The voice switched abruptly, and instinct brought a shiver to Tony's neck as Sloane said, "Tell Mr. Stark I will have a late luncheon ready for him in twenty minutes, and in the meantime, he might just as well remove his unwanted rubbish from the garage and stow it someplace less underfoot."

Which wouldn't have made any sense at all, if Tony weren't staring at a twenty food refrigerated trailer that was blocking the drive and all the garage bays but the one in which Tony had told the freight company to park the armored crate. Clint was perched on top of the trailer, Coulson leaning against the rear bumper, looking surreal in workboots, jeans and a henley.

"Tell her she really doesn't need to feed me every time I show up here," Tony told Jarvis; a protest both futile and traditional. Then he popped open his faceplate and strode around to meet the pair. "You're out of uniform, Agent. And what's with the cold storage? Sloane run out of body-stashing space in the tomato patch?"

Coulson's mouth twitched into something smile-like. "Holidays are coming, Stark. Aunt April likes to think ahead."

"Yeah, cause it's just not Christmas without a rousing game of 'Where's Granny And What's That Stain In The Basement!'" Tony scoffed. "Seriously, I just had that kitchen re-wired this spring, so I know that kind of storage space Sloane's working with in there. So why the hell would she need another two hundred cubic feet of refrigerated storage for an empty-"

"The extra storage is for the extra food, which is for the dinner guests, Stark," Coulson said the words slowly, as if Tony might have trouble understanding them. "Ironically, a valid concern. Tony blinked in suspicion. "What dinner?"

"Thanksgiving dinner." And okay, now he really was talking like Tony was a moron, which was like entirely uncalled for. "Happens every year, apparently."

Tony would have folded his arms over his chest, only the armor didn't flex that way. Instead, he had to settle for bracing his hands on his hips in a way that just didn't feel complete without a little head-slide maneuver. Luckily, the suit didn't allow for that either. "Yeah, but what's it doing here?"

"Like I said; happens every year," Coulson cut him off. "And yes, it happens here. Aunt April's always had a thing for Thanksgiving. She likes to do it up right. And I think you didn't sign off on it because it's not your party." He tipped a nod at the still-humming crate then, and gave Tony a look that was just dripping with patience.

"Even though it's at *my* house?" Tony challenged.

"Your house, maybe. But it's *her* home, isn't it?" Clint put in, legs dangling over the edge of the truck's roof.

"And it's your crate blocking access to the auxiliary generator that we need to hook this trailer up to,"
Coulson added with a pointed stare. "So if you don't mind?"

"Fine, fine." Tony rolled his eyes, rounding the flank of the truck to get at the parking bay where his armored crate sat humming defensively to itself in the dark, a hydraulic jack abandoned under one metal corner. "Stand down, soldier," he told the crate in a low voice. "This is General Stark, giving the all-clear."

"General Stark?" Clint landed with a thud behind him. "Thought you were out of the military game for good."

Tony shot him a glare and gave the crate a poke to ground the residual static field harmlessly through the Suit and into the earth. "It's a password, not a declaration of intent. And before you ask what's in the crate, the answer is 'none of your damned business'."

Clint shrugged, unconcerned. "I know what's in it."

Tony didn't whip around, didn't gasp out loud, and if he stiffened up or flinched a little, well the suit probably hid it just fine. "Bullshit," was all he said, punching in the other half of the disarm code manually.

"Sure I do. You're stashing Christmas gifts out here where you think nobody will look for them."

And the thing that really sucked about Barton, (aside from the habanero and seaweed smoothies,) was how his deadpan voice was indistinguishable from his genuinely clueless but being an asshat voice.

"I don't need an armored secure crate to store a lump of coal," Tony said, finishing the hexadecimal code and standing when the security panel powered down with a sigh. "Which is all you're getting, Barton."

Clint grinned at that, eyes sharp with challenge. "Definitely Christmas then. Anybody who wanted to peek would have to get by Mrs. Sloane first." He half turned when Coulson came up behind him, and flashed a grin that was all midway. "Hey, didn't you tell me once you were your Aunt's favorite nephew?"

Coulson nodded serenely. "I always remember her birthday," he said, which Tony knew for utter bullshit, because what woman over the age of 30 actually wanted younger guys reminding them of the advancing years? "And I do know my way around Stark’s security code protocols…” Then they both turned to look intently at the crate, and the warning stamp running along its side. Tony expected the pair of them to start tapping their bottom lips in tandem and humming at any moment.

"Fuck," he said, more to himself and the uncaring universe than to anyone actually present. Because of course it would be those two who decided his shit needed poking. And Tony was well aware that even if he stood them down today, the subject would only come up again at a more awful time and in more awkward company. "Look, it's not anything important, ok?" he told them, just in case it might work. "It's just some stuff I didn't want around the Tower anymore."

Clint nodded sagely. "Yep. Which is why it's in an electrified steel box marked 'fragile, handle with care on pain of unanesthetized neutering' on it instead of in a landfill. Sounds totally legit to me."

Facepalming in the Suit was a bad idea. Tony made a mental note to look into that particular design flaw soon.

"You might as well just let us open it, Stark," Coulson chuckled, hands in his pockets. "You’ve got me curious now, and that’s automatically a class three security inquiry. I’ll have to file paperwork
and escalate if you hold out."

With a grin that was all sadism, Clint copied his posture exactly. "Oh yeah. Fury hates to see Form ST175A. It makes him cranky."

Tony glowered. "You two make me cranky, and I hate you both. You realize this, don't you?"

Clint's grin fell those last two feet from smug to sadistic. "Course you do. But Steve likes us, and I bet his shield could get through that crate easy."

Okay, that was a bigger flinch, and it kinda made the suit clank a little. Tony did his best to turn it into a glower of warning as he reached for the security pad. "You know, I can arm the system again as easily as I shut it down..."

"Oh, I doubt he'll even need the shield," Coulson said as if Tony hadn't spoken at all. "A crowbar should work if we wrap the handgrip in some rubber."

"Jesus, no!" Tony blurted. "What the fuck, Coulson? You didn't get enough jollies electrocuting him the first time?"

Coulson froze up a little at that, sliding into that 'unassuming calm on the edge of imminent violence' vibe he'd worn like aftershave from the moment Tony had first laid eyes on him. "I accept no responsibility for that, Stark -- my suggestion of asking Professor Xavier for help was overruled." A chilly little smile took no accusation whatsoever out of that statement, however offhandedly he might go on. "However, as I've said, Captain Rogers is doing much better today. He's been helping Aunt April out in the kitchen all morning, and he doesn't seem tired in the least. I'm sure he'll be up to helping us once we explain just why we can't move the container out of the way on our own. And of course he's well known for absolutely respecting 'keep out' warnings too, isn't he?"

"Okay," Tony said, resisting the urge to turn and make sure Steve wasn't already watching the whole exchange from the kitchen windows. He thought the fridge truck had to be blocking the sightline, but the way his luck was going... "No. Just no. You can't let Steve touch it. You really can't."

Clint didn't look surprised. "So. Not Christmas presents then."

"Fuck," Tony said by way of reply. "Jarvis, is Cap still in the kitchen right now?"

"Yes sir. It appears Captain Rogers and Mrs. Sloane are making dinner rolls, which by my estimate will keep him occupied for a minimum of thirty minutes. I assume you wish to be notified if he seems likely to leave the kitchen area?"

"Damn skippy," Tony growled, turning to get behind the crate, which was difficult given how close he'd set it to the house's auxiliary generator. "I don't care if he goes to take a piss, I don't want to be surprised by it."

Barton snorted. "Jeez, Stark, paranoid much?"

Tony punched in another coded command, and then caught the straps that furled out of the casing as a pair of small, sturdy caterpillar tracks pushed the whole crate up higher. "Shut it, Barton," he grunted, wrapping the straps like driving reins around his gauntlets, and heaving his amplified weight backward to get the front edge of the crate off the ground and settle all its weight onto the tracks. "I'm moving this down to the boat shed now. You want to see it, you keep your yap shut and stay out of my way." Then he hit the crawl gear with his free hand and followed the crated warbike out of its perfectly good hiding place in full view of the last person in the world who needed to see it.
Of course, Tony could just solve the whole problem by blasting the whole crate, bike and all, to pieces. It'd be easy. The armor was only shipping-grade steel, and Tony's repulsors had cut through harder stuff, and he wouldn't have to actually look at the bike itself until the destruction was fait accompli… except that Coulson and Barton were already poised like vultures for the first sign of juicy gossip, and Steve would come running at the explosion, and then he'd see the pieces of the bike, and he'd get that fucking look on his face, and Tony would just… no. That was a bad plan. Chewing up the lawn like a mini tank just so he could sacrifice his dignity to Coulson and Barton's amusement was a far safer option, and the fact that Tony could even think that without sarcasm was proof that he really did need to take some quality time soon to examine what the fuck his life had become. That was for later though -- later, and much less sober. Now was for getting the elephant out of the living room and into the goddamned boathouse. Hopefully without having to drench himself and half-fill the crate with water in the process.

Coulson opened the barn style doors for him just in time, ducking out of the way as Tony powered straight into the shed and set the crate down with a billow of dust and a rattling clang. He tried not to wince as he felt the weight shift inside it, and then reminded himself forcibly of all the ways in which it did not fucking matter whether the warbike got scratched or not.

"Ok," he said, flipping open his faceplate and turning to face the jury. "Either one of you says a word about this to anyone who is not standing right here, right now, I want you to know that I will personally destroy all evidence that this ever existed." He gave the crate a ringing tap with his knuckles. "And I'll make you watch me do it too, so do not even think of playing with me."

The two agents exchanged a look that all but quoted Shakespeare out loud, and Tony decided it was time to cowboy up and stop protesting so much. He keyed in the crate's release code and stood back as the top, ends, and one side of the box folded away, revealing jewel blue and mirror chrome to the sun's long caress. The awed, worshipful silence which followed soothed Tony's temper under a surge of pride and fierce satisfaction -- awe was just what she deserved, dammit.

"Jesus, Stark," Barton managed after a long moment. "This is… It's…"

"It's not your lookout," he warned, righting the blue leather saddle bags with a casual flip. "It'll be gone tomorrow. I've got twenty goddamned houses I can stash it at without even filling out a custom's form. It's nothing. It's a non-thing, and now you've seen it and satisfied your voyeuristic jollies, you're both going to forget alllll about it."

Coulson circled the bike, not looking forgetful in the least. "Is this equipped like the Stark M3500?"

Tony blinked, then remembered the blueprint designation for his father's field service motorcycle abruptly. "No… kind of." He shrugged at the patient look that won him. "I upgraded a lot. It's reactor driven, so the tankspace there is for ammunition and flame propellant. The missiles are equipped for modern armor, and it's got-" he shook his head abruptly. "You know what? It doesn't matter. It's not a thing we're doing."

That won an eyebrow. "Does he know that?"

No point even pretending they didn't all know exactly which he was in question there. Tony sighed, looking over the bike that Bruce had correctly pegged for a 'love letter'. "His call," he said with a shrug and just one glance at the house. "I offered, he declined."

Clint grimaced. "Ouch. I wondered what was going on with you two."

"It's fine," Tony said, wishing for pockets, and sunglasses, and maybe a drink to hide his face
behind. "We agreed. I agreed. It would be…" *bad for the team, reckless, selfish, dangerous, the worst idea ever…* all true; he couldn't decide which to say and he didn't want to say any of them.

"Thing is," he tried again, "I'd already built the damned thing by then." He might have laid his hand on the tank, only he was wearing the gauntlets, and wouldn't even feel the smooth paint as he scratched it to hell. He gave a shrug instead, and turned to inspect an old cedar canoe in the rafters. "It's fine though. I'm scrapping it for parts once I get some free time."

Barton took a step forward, hands reaching like he couldn't help himself. "You do, Stark," he growled, jerking to a stop. "And I swear on my balls, I will fucking *end you!*" His face held not a trace of humor in it as he stared Tony dead in the eye. "I am not even kidding. This bike is a dream, and I won't let you hurt her."

It was a rare day when Tony was relieved at having one of his bluffs called, but somehow the novelty failed to overcome his frustration. "Well it's not like I can give her to Steve, can I?" he demanded, striding away from the gleaming summer blue that matched the man's eyes way too goddamned well. "Here Cap, have a weirdly personal, extravagant, and probably stalkery present from your friend who's got no goddamned sense of appropriate boundaries. No obligations or anything." He scoffed, throwing his hands wide and bouncing his annoyance off a grin that didn't convince anyone. "He'd think I was…" *pushing.* Tony shook his head again. "No. He said no. He didn't want it. It would just be weird."

"Didn't want it?" Clint said, taking another protective step toward the bike. "Or didn't want you?"

Tony had designed his gauntlets with exactly enough hand mobility to let him flip the bird, so he did. "Just drop it."

"Mm," said Coulson, making another circuit of the bike. "It's easy to forget how young the Captain really is, isn't it?" Tony didn't miss the flicker of measuring glance the agent sent his way. "I mean, he was born in 1918, but he's only been awake for 23 of those years."

That almost distracted Clint from hovering. He huffed a laugh and said, "You know, I think that makes him younger than any of us. Damn. He hides that well."

Coulson shrugged. "Yeah, well. Orphanage kids can be like that."

And that's where Tony just had to roll his eyes. "At the risk of bursting into song, your honor, we are all orphans on this crew," he scoffed. "Well… most of us are, anyhow."

The agent flicked a glance at him, unimpressed, or possibly woefully undereducated in the ways of Gilbert and Sullivan. Then he rolled one shoulder in a shrug and leaned against the last standing wall of the crate to explain. "Kids who lose their parents early usually cope with it in one of two ways," he said, counting down his fingers. "Some, like you and Clint, never stop being kids at all. Then there are those like Natasha who become adults as soon as their parents are gone. I make the Captain as that second sort."

Tony gave an answering shrug of his own, remembering something about someone getting punched by a nun. "Yeah. Cap told me his buddy got them thrown out of the orphanage at sixteen."

"That would have been, what, the height of the Depression?" Clint finally tore his eyes from the bike long enough to aim the question at Coulson, who nodded.

"Front end of it."

Nodding back, Clint took that last step, and leaned covetously against the warbike's flank. "Poverty
"You never quite trust good luck after the bad kind takes the legs out from under your life that young. It's hard to believe the good things won't just get taken away without so much as an explanation when it's happened once already. You learn not to want things too much. Hey, didn't Steve do that with his crush back in the day, too?" he asked Coulson as if Tony wasn't still standing right there. "Carter, wasn't it? Didn't he wait to make his move until it was too late to do anything about it?"

'And with Bucky, he never made any move at all,' Tony thought, patience at an end as he remembered the press of hungry, searching lips, and data points lining up to an electric, impossible, and ultimately rejected conclusion. Then he took a breath through his nose and decided, 'Fuck this noise.'

"Right!" He took a step away from the crate and clapped his gauntleted hands together like a crashing gong. "Thank you, peanut gallery. And here is where I swear you both to secrecy, because your opinions do not fucking count, and you don't get a vote on how I screw up my life, or who else's life I take down with me," he said through his best reporter-bullying grin. "So can I count on your discretion, or do I have to destroy the fucking evidence to protect my plausible deniability?"

The agents shared a look, and through some silent eyebrow language, apparently agreed that the question was a stupid question and therefore undeserving of an answer, because they turned as one and began reassembling the crate around the bike as if Tony wasn't even standing right there. Tony figured he might get away with punching one or the other of them in the head, given that he was still in the suit, but the satisfaction would be drastically diminished when the one he hadn't punched then went on to take him out with a paperclip. Then there would be Sloane herself, who would wonder why her bidding had not been done in a timely fashion, and then probably find some way to blame Tony for the oversight. Those tomato plants of hers still freaked Tony out just a little bit.

All in all, it just seemed safer to leave the agents to it, and go up to the house for his lunch before somebody got an eye put out or went home crying.

~* Reasoned With the Beast *~

Tony's phone rang just as the removal bot was finishing up with his repulsor boots. Hank McCoy's furry blue face regarded him grinning from the touchpad as he fished the thing out of his pocket. "McCoy, you sexy Beast, how you doing?"

"That joke just never gets old for you, does it, RustBucket?" came the cheerful reply as Tony closed the French doors to shut the November chill outside. "Got a message you called?"

"I did." Tony shut the bedroom door before returning to the sitting area and dropping into the sofa with a grunt. "So when Professor X gets tagged in the field, which one of you guys patches him up afterward?"

There was a sound, low and rumbling, and reminding a small, scared part of Tony's brain that he was probably tasty even without condiments. He ignored it, and mentally reviewed the range and blast radius of the latest repulsor design until Hank managed an answer. "I'm guessing you aren't stuck on a meat and bone problem here?"

Tony scoffed. "Please. Between Avenger's in-house resources and SHIELD's medical facilities, we're better set up than you for physical trauma. No, this is brainspace stuff. And not to get all Facebook on you here, but it's also … complicated."

"What happened?"
Grimacing, Tony shook his head. "That's part of the complicated. I can't offer details, but one of ours got a big dose of telepathic contact that didn't go down the right way at all." He glanced across the long lawn, to where the guest cottage posed quaintly against the trees. "Seems to be correcting for it now, but we all just want to be sure there's no permanent damage."

"And you're not talking to Charles or Jean directly because you don't want us to know who the 'path is." It wasn't a question, and to Tony's relief, it didn’t ring of surprise or offense either.

"Well, I figure with Cerebro, the Prof's pretty likely to turn the telepath up all on his own sooner or later, but yeah, that's about the size of it," he said. "So what are our chances of getting our guy checked out without having to answer the 60,000 dollar question?"

Hank made that almost sub-sonic rumble again, then sighed. "What the hell, Stark? You know the only students here are the ones who want to come. Charles doesn't even make contact when he knows it wouldn't be welcome. So what's this whole cloak and dagger dance really about?"

"Informed consent," Tony answered, unwavering. "And secrets that aren't mine to divulge." 'And HYDRA messing with Loki's tech,' he didn't add, nor, 'And bombs designed with me in mind, and portals that can send an inconvenient Hero light years away, and a family that makes mine look Hallmark-cozy, and a little girl who was born way over her head, and just might let go of her only lifeline if she thinks he can't be trusted, and hey, by the way, d'you think Wolverine would survive being dropped into a planet that was essentially a spherical magma ball with sentient lava-people wandering around on it? Just curious for scientific reasons, is all.'

"Well, I guess I can't argue with you there," Hank said after a moment, his voice tired and heavy in that way outed mutants always got when talking about the closeted ones. "Let me ask some questions around here. I'll get back to you."

"Thanks," Tony agreed, shoving up out of the couch and tugging his jacket straight. "Would it be redundant to say I owe you a solid?"

"Very," came the amused reply just before the call cut off.

Tony chuckled and headed off to the kitchen, where he found Steve and Sloane lightly floured and diligently vivisecting a Horta sized lump of dough by hand. Every flat surface in the kitchen was covered with trays full of the egg-sized lumps, but they were still going strong.

Tony had to pause in the doorway as the uncomfortable reality of the moment settled around his stomach and tugged downwards. Steve was going to look up any moment now. He was going to see Tony in the flesh for the first time since he'd started illustrating Tony Stark; the Himbo Decades, and he was going to think of all that romantic bullshit he'd dreamed up about Tony and Pepper and just… fuck.

Tony closed his eyes, took a breath, and firmly told his inner sixteen-year-old-girl to shut the fuck up already. "I was told there would be pie," he announced around a grin calculated to make Sloane glower.

On cue, she turned, gave him a raking glance, and snorted. "Humble pie perhaps, but you'll have to make it yourself, Mr. Stark."

Oh yeah. Nothing like a bracing Sloane takedown to give a guy a good grip on his bootstraps. Tony could have hugged her just to see the sneer, if not for the kitchen shears a bit too close to her left hand.
"Hi Tony," Steve said with a smile and a little blush that really could have been a whole lot worse, considering some of the things he'd drawn in the last two days. "Didn't expect to see you today."

Tony grinned and breezed into the warzone. "Oh, you know how I do like to upset expectations."

"Better than most," Sloane agreed, snipping off another lump of dough. "Your lunch is still in the oven, Mr. Stark, and there's work to be done in the meantime. You'll be wanting an apron if you mean to stay underfoot."

"This isn't a social call, actually," Tony hummed, following her nod to pick over the wall hooks until he found an apron with frilly ruffles and blue and gold giraffes on it. "It's a fact-finding mission."

"And here I'd thought it was rubbish removal," Sloane muttered, and was ignored.

"You see, I've encountered a disturbing rumor."

"Just the one?"

Tony glared at Steve for snickering, and pressed on as if Sloane hadn't interrupted. "It seems I need to decide how hard it's going to be to crash a dinner party at my family mansion."

Then Steve's grin faded abruptly into confusion. "Why would you have to crash anything?" he asked, and Tony was treated to his first ever sight of someone other than him invoking the Wrinkle Of Disapproval as Steve glanced at Sloane. "I figured you'd be here for dinner along with the rest of us."

"Well, assuming I was invited, I would be," Tony hinted, broadly and without shame, "But-" Even expecting the clang of Sloane's shears smacking the dough board, Tony couldn't help jumping a little.

"Mr. Stark," she said through her teeth, advancing on him like she meant to dispatch him with her fistful of dough. "I have set a place for you at my Thanksgiving table every single year since you were old enough not to smear the food in your hair!" Tony gave a step, and then another as he eyed the dough warily. "In over thirty-five years, your lack of attendance, your lack of sobriety, your lack of propriety, and even your lack of acknowledgement to the invitation has never once constituted a significant deterrent to your welcome."

Tony blinked, shoulders warm against the wall oven. "Seriously?" She pinned him with a cobra stare that didn't waver as he felt the grin take over his face. "All these years since Dad moved us to Cali, you've been throwing a party here, I've been invited, and I never heard about it?" The words were out of his mouth before Tony recalled, vaguely and over the corpses of far too many drowned brain cells, getting engraved cards from the Manor's address every year around holiday time when he'd been at school. He'd ignored them, just like he'd ignored the ones Howard's secretary sent at Christmas and his birthday, and oh yeah -- fucked-up Stark childhood for the win there. Tony leaned on his best poker face, but the vindicated glint in Sloane's eyes told him she'd probably watched the penny drop, and rather hoped it had given him a lump when it hit.

"I believe your assistant is of the rather firm opinion that you do not care for holiday gatherings," she said breezily, turning to set her rather mangled dough-ball in line with all the others. "She has declined my invitations on your behalf these past dozen years or so. And before that, generally Mr. Stane tendered your regrets."

But clearly the stubborn old gargoyle had kept on sending them, bless her heart assuming she had one. Tony didn't, did not, and absolutely did not let the goofy, melty sensation that caused in
his belly show anywhere near his face, because thank you Captain America, the doe-eyed wibbly sap expression was already well in hand on the other side of the kitchen.

"So… Yeah," Tony decided once they'd both turned safely back to their work. "Pretty sure I can make the party this year. When is it?"

Steve did that eyebrow thing that seemed to imply a worry that Tony might have gotten himself whacked in the head recently. "Two weeks from Thursday, Tony. On Thanksgiving day."

"I knew that," Tony informed him. "Jarvis, clear everything out of my calendar, and send a message to Pep to reschedule anything important."

"Sir's calendar is already clear for Thursday, November twenty-second," Jarvis replied. Tony would have protested his 'explaining it to a five year old' tone if he hadn't been so startled. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a whole calendar day empty before the day actually dawned. Schedule cleared out by Evil, sure; entirely ditched when he got a Good Idea or a craving for fish tacos, yes, but not a calendar day that never got filled up at all.


Sloane gave him a scathing glare that somehow went right along with her knowing smirk as the oven timer buzzed. "I'm no genius, Mr. Stark, but I suspect it might be because of Thanksgiving day." She pulled on her oven mitts and rescued the four enormous pot pies that smelled just about better than sex from inside it.

"Now you two get yourselves washed up, and out of my way" she said, nudging the dough-Horta aside so she could put the hot tray down. "I'll bring lunch to the dining room once it's cooled a bit."

Steve looked briefly as if he might protest, but Tony caught his eye over Sloane's shoulder, and shook his head emphatically. Not leaving when the housekeeper told you to get was almost as bad an idea as showing up grubby at her dinner table, and what kind of friend would Tony be if he let Steve put his foot in that hole? He hooked his chin toward the door, stripped off his frilly giraffe apron, and led the way to safety and the washroom.

Steve was, thankfully, smart enough to follow.

"So this is a new look for you," Tony said, passing a hand towel and a smirk as Steve folded his blue canvas apron carefully and tidily as if it wasn't covered with flour and bits of dough. "Has Sloane been making you hang out with some lost colony of grunge rock hipsters over here or something?" He touched Steve's elbow, all sober concern, and asked, "Were there raves, Steven? It's all right, you can say. Show me on the doll where the bad fashion touched you...

"Boob," Steve chuckled, shaking loose. Then he glanced down at his clothes and shrugged, but had to reach under his plaid flannel and tug the too-small t-shirt down to his grubby jeans again. "Yeah, these are, um, spares," he said with a grimace that utterly failed to disguise his faint blush. "My other stuff is soaking in the basement sink right now. There was a bit of an incident with the cranberry sauce earlier this morning."

"Really," Tony drawled, "Steve, if you're down to only one change of clothing, there's no need to raid my Dad's closet. I'll get you the number of a decent personal shopper." He deflected a half-amused death glare with a grin. "Actually, let me do that anyway, okay? Because, seriously, this plaid thing is getting to be a problem with you."

Steve sniffed and dried his hands. "I have plenty of clothes, Tony. It's just laundry day, is all. Most of
"My things are on the line or in the washer." He folded the hand towel back onto the stack before nudging through the doorway with more shoulder than Tony thought strictly necessary. "And these aren't Howard's things anyway. He was even shorter than you; his stuff would never have fit me."

"Easy to say when you're artificially and somewhat freakishly tall," Tony shot back, righting himself to follow. "Don't forget, I've seen pictures of you without your serum on!"

Steve only laughed and put his long legs to good use. By the time Tony caught up to him, he was pulling out one of the chairs at the dining table, where four places were set for lunch.

"So you're feeling better then?" Tony asked, trying to decide whether he wanted to claim the seat beside, or across from him.

"Yeah," he said with a nod. "It's all kind of subsided to a dull roar in the back of things now."

"Good. 'Cause not that I've got anything to hide from you or anything, but that whole psychic Cap game was starting to freak Natasha out."

Steve chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Oh no, nothing at all to hide..."

Tony pulled out the chair beside him, leveled a look -- it was one of his best, too, hipshot, smart, and bulletproof -- and said, "All right smart ass, if you really are all back inside your own head, then shake my hand and don't tell me what I'm thinking!"

"I don't need telepathy to know you're calling me everything but a child of god right now, Tony," Steve chuckled, giving his hand a clasp that was brisk, decisive, and brief.

"I don't need telepathy to know you're calling me everything but a child of god right now, Tony," Steve chuckled, giving his hand a clasp that was brisk, decisive, and brief.

At least it was intended to be brief. But all it took was that second of contact, a glance too long in a safer direction than at eyes too knowing and too blue, and suddenly Tony found himself absorbed by the strangely familiar pattern of scorch marks on the cuff of the tee shirt that peeked out from under the rolled-up sleeve of Steve's flannel. "Guess again, Cap," Tony murmured as he gripped Steve's hand tight, pushed the flannel out of the way and stared at an oil stain shaped like Australia on the elbow, just where he'd expected to find one. "I'm not thinking that at all..."

Steve sat still and bore the manhandling in silence, his expression so carefully bland, so innocently baffled there was just no fucking way it could possibly be anything but an act. Tony didn't bother to hide his glee as he dropped Cap's hand and reached to unbutton his flannel.

"Sleep shirt?" Tony couldn't stop himself from asking. Steve nodded, defiant now instead of baffled: nervous, pink, and just a little shy.

"Sleep shirt?" Tony couldn't stop himself from asking. Steve nodded, defiant now instead of baffled: nervous, pink, and just a little shy. Tony let swell of pleasure rolling through his belly show on his face, not entirely sure what else to do with it. Steve, of course, went over all magenta and opened his mouth, though whether he meant to bluster, to apologize, or to try and explain, neither of them would know, for just then they both heard Clint and Coulson come bickering in from the yard, the clack of
Sloane's shoes heralding the way.

Tony shook his head, patted Steve's flannel closed again just over the t shirt's iconic design -- not incidentally where a blazing white star would be when he was in a different outfit -- and gave the gigantic sap a broad, gloating smile as he chose his seat and slid into it. "So tell me about this cranberry incident, Cap."

Chapter End Notes

And we're underway again -- now, with added Sloane! Thanks for being patient with me, my swamp lilies, I've now built up my lead by one chapter again, so things are a bit less precarious. Hopefully it'll all be a frantic, downhill slide with no breaks, on fire between now and the end of things.

In the meantime, thanks for being patient with me, and thanks to every one of you who took the time to drop me a comment -- it means more than I can express, and that's totally not just empty words. Thanks for helping me keep motivated!
Tony was good at an unreasonable number of things, but perhaps his very best skill was procrastination. Nobody was better at it, more efficient at it, more productive with it than he. Just give him a single boring meeting, publicity event, or debriefing to avoid, and he'd turn out the most staggeringly elegant leaps of technology and whimsy ever. Not only that, but it often turned out that Tony's procrastination had a field effect, rolling those nearby helplessly into its event horizon, and scattering in its wake a debris field of made up of frustrated PA's, shell shocked bouncers, waiters, strippers, and barkeeps, enormous tips, miracles and travesties of fashion, spontaneous patents, occasional explosions, bemused law enforcement officials, and the kind of stories most sane folks prayed their parents wouldn't hear of, even while they planned the most mortifying way they could inflict the story on their grandkids. Tony was, when he put his back into it, a walking supermassive black hole of neglected obligations, and let it never be said that he did not enjoy his work.

The pull of Tony's procrastination was enough to derail even the best laid plans of the most ferociously coordinated planner -- proof of that could be clearly seen in the half-packed suitcase, slouching with Pepper's clothes beside the closet. He might have felt badly about how thoroughly and mercilessly he'd distracted her from her chore of packing for a week in Stockholm, if he hadn't also made damn sure that she enjoyed the distraction to the fullest measure.

He grinned to himself in the half-gloom and shifted the blankets so the cool light from his chest reactor could play across the curve of Pepper's shoulder and stroke icy highlights from the warm tangle of her hair across the pillow. She'd be annoyed with him for making her late in the morning of course, but no more so than usual, and Tony figured hey -- what was the point of keeping a corporate jet if you couldn't reschedule your flight around some appropriate good-bye sex with your rakishly handsome, genius boytoy?

He sat up, careful not to wake her, but wanting the rare chance to play the light of his reactor across her face while it was unguarded in sleep too deep and (he dared say,) satiated to notice or call him a gigantic sap for it. It was like moonlight, stroking silver thick across the delicate bones of her cheek and jaw, catching like cool sparks in the eyelashes that lay soft and still over her cheek, and-

"Tony," sleeping Pepper said.

He frowned, plucking a strand of hair away from the perfect curve of her sleeping lips. "Shhhhh."

"Tony, you're watching me again," said sleeping Pepper in just about exactly the same voice that awake-and-pretending-to-be-annoyed Pepper sometimes used. And that was entirely not right at all, because how often did Tony get the chance to see this gorgeous woman's face with nothing on it but peace? Unfair was what it was. Completely unfair.

"Shh," Tony reminded her, running a finger across her lips to ease the tiny not-quite-frown, cute as it was, back into perfect, sleepy softness. "No talking. You're asleep."

She opened one eye, squinting just a bit, and under his touch her not-quite-frown quirked into a not-quite-smile. "Not if you're watching me, I'm not," Pepper said again, the lilt of her voice reminding Tony of the last time she'd explained to him how apparently, nobody who grew up with brothers
could sleep while being watched. She'd also tried to explain the psychotic sleepover hazing rituals of teenage girls to him, and like a supportive boyfriend, Tony had listened. But the real take-home point Tony remembered from those conversations was that her so-called 'normal childhood' had left his darling Pepper with deep mental scars, and a terrible, crippling paranoia. It was sad, really, and entirely unjustified, because Tony didn't even keep sharpies in the bedroom.

"I'm not watching you," he assured her, stroking her cheek and hoping he could convince that suspicious eye to close again. "I'm just thinking."

Pepper sighed, rolled onto her back, and folded her arms over the sheet. "You know, I'm reasonably sure that as the penis-owner in this relationship, you're the one who's supposed to just roll over and pass out after sex." She said with a smirk.

Tony sat up, grinning. "Hey! Are you impugning my manhood, saucy wench?"

"That depends," she mused, turning to slide her hand along his thigh. "If I do, will you stop watching me try to sleep?"

"Umm…" Tony bit his lip in concentration as her fingers traced the soft line of his prick through the sheets. But alas, he was officially tapped out -- no bars left, battery critical, please save your work and dock to a charging unit immediately. A twitch and well-sated ache was all the throb his throbbing manhood could manage. Still, Tony wasn't an engineer for nothing, was he? "That depends on how much workshop time you're willing to give me." Because procrastination, right? With proper motivation, it could totally turn out to be the mother of the next awesome sex toy, and hey hey, everybody wins in the end!

Not that that had happened or anything. Lately.

Pepper's laugh warmed Tony right out of his sudden dreams of diesel-powered double dippers. "That's what I thought," she said and kissed his hip. "And no, I'm all set, thanks -- no need to get out the drawing board on my account." She perched her head on her hand then, and braced up on her elbow to give him the too-knowing stare he'd come to rely on. "So. You going to tell me what's on your mind?"

And he had no choice then but to slide down, pull her into a hug, and nuzzle that spot under her ear. "Us," he said as she giggled and squirmed. "This." A soft kiss on the curl of her ear, and he scooted back so he could focus on her face. "This thing we have."

He could take another doctorate in Interpreting Pepper's Looks. This one translated to 'I am listening to the sounds you are making and waiting patiently for you to begin to make sense, you adorable, sexy, and occasionally foolish man.' Not the worst face she could have been wearing, given circumstances, so he pressed onward. "It's good, right? I mean, it's awesome." There. Her smile spread into the one that meant You are an enormous dork and I adore you for it, and am also somewhat flattered by your enthusiasm. One of his favorite Pepper-smiles ever, and Tony grinned to welcome it.

"It's not like not Leave it to Jarvis or anything, but you and me, we're like forces of nature." He stroked the flaming tangle of her hair along her neck and didn't even cop a feel on the way, because he was just smooth like that, dammit. "We totally shouldn't work, but we... We do, right?"

The smile now was edging into the How are you even real? range, so Tony wasn't exactly surprised when she darted forward and landed a kiss on the tip of his nose. "Apparently so. The betting pool on the implosion date must be sky high by now."
Diversionary tactic. Tony gave it the eyebrow and pressed on. "I mean, you're happy, right? Aren't you?"

That made her sit up. "Tony, you know I would not be here with you if I didn't want to be," she said, gently scolding. "And you know that I have never had any problem letting you know it when I wasn't happy -- whether you paid attention to it or not. Now what is this about?"

He flopped over to his back to watch his reactor glow play across the ceiling. "It's just... Us, and..." he waved vaguely in the air. "You in Malibu, or Dubai, or Stockholm, or wherever you have to go to keep SI running, and me here; the Avengers, SHIELD, the super villains and stupid random shit we deal with, and things like that tear people apart all the time. Even when there's so, so much love." And fuck it, he could not have this conversation lying down.

Tony shoved up out of the bed and turned to grasp both of Pepper's hands in his own. "Between us, we've got exponentially more relationship disaster potential than the entire seasonal cast of Jerry Springer, but... But we keep on not crashing or burning, and I don't-"

She twitched free a hand and clapped it right over his mouth with a not-quite-glare. "Anthony Edward Stark," she said, "if you dare propose to me again, I will kick you right out of this bed and you can spend the rest of the night in your workshop!"

"But-" he said to her palm.

Pepper shook her head, eyes dancing with mirth. "I'll do it, you know I will! I already have to get up half an hour earlier than I'd planned just to finish packing, and you know I never sleep well on planes!"

Tony put both his hands up in surrender, and didn't bother to hide the broad grin he knew she could feel under her hand. He made a disgusted sound, but Tony didn't let that stop him from turning to snatch the vibrating cockring off the night table and kneeling up beside her to present it. "Virginia, love of my life, will you do me the honor of-- Oof!"

Tony was still grinning when he picked himself up off the floor, though he'd lost the cockring when she'd thumped him with the pillow. "Bet you'd say yes to Mr. Darcy," he grumbled, reaching for jeans and hoping they were his.

"I would not," she explained, hefting another pillow threateningly, "A, because he does not actually exist, b, if he did, he'd be dead by now, and c, if I married anybody at all, including and especially you, you'd be impossible to live with over it. Now go! Go visit your mistresses in the workshop and let me sleep!"

"Okay, but if I build myself a new girlfriend down there, you'll have only yourself to blame!" he said, breezing into the closet for a shirt that didn't smell like he'd lived in it for days at a time.

"Just make sure and put her on the list," was Pepper's only reply.

~* Played 20 Questions With Lassie *~

"Natasha's back?" Tony interrupted Jarvis' headcount in surprise. "When did that happen, and why wasn't I notified?"

"Approximately 45 minutes ago, sir," Jarvis replied, stopping the elevator's decent toward the workshop and redirecting it to the team lounge floor without being asked. "She had returned to her suite at first, but has now joined Agent Barton and Captain Rogers in the communal kitchen. As per protocol 69, I determined that you and Ms. Potts might rather wait for the information than be
Tony glared at the touchpad knowingly. "Oh, don't you even pretend you didn't enjoy watching," he accused. "I programmed you, so I know what a gigantic perv you really are."

"I would not dream of dissembling," came the unrepentant reply. "Should I notify Agents Barton and Romanov and Captain Rogers that you will be joining them, or would you prefer the element of surprise?"

"Yeah, 'cause what could possibly go wrong with that? Rhetorical, Jarvis, don't bother answering it. Just let 'em know I'm here so Romanov doesn't put my eye out with a cracker or something. She's been a little high strung since Cap went down with sieve-brain." That was true of all of them, actually. Seeing the private, unforgettable-no-matter-how-much-you-drink moments of each of their lives spooling out across those sheets of paper had been tough for even Tony to roll off his shoulder. Both agents had taken it hard, but Natasha was the only one of the team who had openly run.

And if the rest of them had silently agreed to just go with her explanation of 'need to check some contacts', and not point out that she hadn't even called to check in until Steve was back to normal, well, you could call that teamwork and just roll with it, couldn't you? You could also call that enlightened self interest and a wish not to be assassinated by one's teammate, but who needed to split hairs?

"-file has six of his aliases, plus as much as I could verify of his childhood and training. He wasn't on anyone's radar as a kid, and by the time he got worth the notice, the Red Room along with the rest of the State agencies was going to pieces. He's a true independent, or he would be, if he wasn't obviously working for his father. Stark, stop eavesdropping and come sit."

"I'm just here for the pizza," Tony answered, swiping a slice from the nearly full pie between Steve and Clint, then slouching into a chair. "So who are we gossiping about, Jerry's Russian bastard?"

"Valentin Granyavich." Barton nodded toward the file on the table. "HYDRA ties, in case that's a surprise to anyone."

"Val Grady, as he's been known for the last year or so while working as Tom Burdick's assistant in HoratioCorp's security division at corporate HQ," Natasha hummed, pleased with herself and not afraid to show it. "That name and profile, along with about a hundred and fifty others got scrubbed from the records by the virus that hit during the bombing attack, by the way. I suspect that if we tracked down all those employees, we'd find more of HYDRA's heads buried in corporate clothing, too."

"Convenient," Tony observed, chewing. "And still conspicuous. Sounds like HYDRA to me. So I'm guessing you recovered the data files on your field trip?"

She gave him a cat smile and picked a mushroom off her pizza with delicate grace. "No. The virus was quite thorough, and I suspect the files were deleted before it even struck. However the employees who remembered working with the guy for better than a year? They had plenty to share." She flipped open the file and fanned out a few pages before tapping a line. "I got addresses, routines, favorite bars and restaurants, quirks, preferences, phone numbers, and a long list of known associates. And that's why I like field work better than hacking."

"Amen," Barton put in, rocking his chair back on two legs and boosting his heels on the table until Steve elbowed them off again and closed the lid of the pizza box.

"Agent Romanov, may I request you lay the pages of this file out flat to the table so I can scan
them?" Jarvis spoke up, sounding just a little eager.

"I got it, Jarvis," Tony said, nudging the box farther down Steve and Clint's end of the table. "You guys better get cracking on that pie, 'cause unless Thor's done some hard work in the pig roast leftovers, it is just not fitting into the fridge."

Clint obligingly scooped out two more slices then turned the box toward Steve, who shook his head and gave a pained smile. "You said you needed to verify something with Clint and I," he said to Natasha, inching his chair a little closer to her. "What else did you find out? Did we miss something in Indiana?"

"Gold star," Natasha said, and pulled a second file out from under the first. "You guys remember Charles, from the hotel?"

"Charles…" Steve looked blank, then snapped his fingers. "The night shift janitor? Nice enough, but not too bright? He kept calling me Joe."

"That's the one," Clint said, mouth full. "He called everyone Joe." He cast a canny look Natasha's way, and then a positively wicked smile spread across his face. It matched the one on Natasha's perfectly.

"Word in Lionvale was that he was a drifter, in and out of town a couple of times a year until the law would run him off. Then he got a job working for a local widow named Claire Huddel, and he settled right in. Nobody's seen him since October though."

Tony choked on his pizza. "Hudd- That's… Bomber!"

"Let me see," Steve said, his eyes flinty with memory as he held his hand out for the file.

Natasha held up the photo so they all could. It was a mug shot, nothing special about the face but for an ugly belligerence around the eyes and a beard you could hide a badger in. Steve and Clint, though, saw something much more in it.

"Nose is different," Steve said, squinting. "And the eyes are darker."

"Stage prosthesis and tinted contacts," Clint came back, biting into his second slice. "It's the guy, Cap. He's our direct link between the suicide bomber and Horatio."

"Jarvis," Tony plucked the photo from Natasha's fingers and slapped it down onto the scan window on the table top. "Project this shot," he said as the glass flashed. Then, when the flickering face rose above the plates and napkins, he tweaked it out bigger. "Now size and scale Grannievick's passport photo to it… aaand overlay." Tony blinked as the images lined right up. "Well, when you look at it like that…"

"Yeah," Steve sighed. "I barely spoke to the guy, but I guess that's him." Then he pushed back from the table and stood. "Jarvis, is there any peppermint in the kitchen?"

"Of what sort, Captain Rogers? My inventory lists loose herb, flavoring extract, ice cream…"

"Ice cream?" Tony asked, a little revolted.

"Shh." Natasha growled, staring at Steve with a tiny, worried line between her eyebrows.

"Um, tea maybe?" Steve actually grimaced.
"Hey, what's up, Cap?" Tony asked, standing too. "You look a little green there."

"I feel kinda green," Steve agreed, turning to make a wide circle around the table. "Ugh. Excuse me." And yeah, yeah he was limping slightly.

"Steve!" Barton's chair legs slammed into the floor just as Natasha slithered out of her seat. "Cap, hang on!" Both were on the man before Tony so much as managed to get away from the table.

Perplexed, Steve backed away from the agents flanking maneuver. "I'm just gonna go and-

"It's not you, you moron," Tony barked, marching straight through the tableau and grabbing a fistful of plaid cotton and biceps. "You can't even get food poisoning anymore, remember? Jarvis, put a call in to Coulson-

"I've taken the liberty of routing a party call to Agents Romanov and Barton's cell phones," Jarvis answered, and Tony once more praised the genius of his creation as Natasha's bloodless killer face and Clint's freaked out but not quite panicking face abruptly slid into distraction and a fumble for ringing smartphones.

Tony led Steve toward the lounge, thinking to get the guy safely sat down within reach of a trash can, but Steve hung back, swallowing hard and often, eyes focused fiercely on nothing. "All right," Tony sighed, rubbing light circles between Steve's shoulders, the way he remembered from all the times when Pepper held his head at the porcelain altar. "What's she trying to tell you? And try not to puke on me, okay?"

"It's..." he blinked, then licked his lips."I think she may be-

"The SHIELD agents in her condo block aren't due to check in for ten minutes," Natasha called. "Their handler is paging in now."

The shoulders under Tony's hand flexed as Steve barely restrained a retch. "Come on, Cap," Tony murmured. "Call it."

"Metal," Steve gagged aloud that time. "I can taste metal. Bitter. Burns in my nose." Then he gave a sudden shiver, and his eyes flashed wide and worried to Tony's face. "She's gone. We have to go, now!"

There was a moment of silence, sharp as ice.

"I'll prep the quinjet," Clint snapped, heading for the stairs.

"Sir, we're moving on it," Natasha said into her phone, hard on his heels.

"Alerting Doctor Banner now, sir," Jarvis said as the elevator doors opened.

Thor burst out of his apartment door down the hallway, hammer in hand, and hey lookit that, apparently pajamas weren't a thing on Asgard. "My friends," he called at full charge. "There is danger?"

"Yep," Tony answered, trying not to stare as he shoved Cap into the elevator, "Suiting up now. Rooftop in five minutes. WEAR PANTS! What?" he said to Steve's snort as the doors slid shut. "Thor's killing us in the fan-site hunk poll, and I do not want to look at pictures of his junk all over the internet for the next six weeks."

~* Fetched *~
"Heads up," Hawkeye called over the comm, voice rough with smoke and shouting. "I got a bird coming in from the river."

"Hostile?" Cap grunted, catching his shield and spinning to drop velocity before slinging it back at the army of fuel-filled drones currently bent on hosing down everything in sight that wasn't already burning with jumped-up napalm. There were still too many of the damned things swarming all over the burning condo tower and its neighboring buildings, and not being able to shoot them down without causing more fires wasn't making anybody happy.

"Unknown." The answer came back taut and short, and punctuated with an electronic crackle. "It's coming in way under the flight ceiling though, and it isn't announcing itself. I'm not seeing that as a good sign, sir."

Tony dropped off his latest load of smoke-stained tenants and flew up high enough to scan the incoming plane. "It's a Blackbird, I think," he said as Thor passed him with his own load of screaming rescues. "Must be aiming to crash, 'cause there's no fucking way that thing's landing anywhere around here." And yeah, wouldn't that add a whole new level of fucked up to this circus act? It was one thing to launch a rescue mission thinking one little girl was being poisoned, and another to arrive and find the bottom ten floors of her house in flames and swarming with HYDRA bots. Add in a suicide pilot, and Tony was just gonna have to go looking for someone to kick in the head. He charged his repulsors up hot with a grin. "I got this…"

"Don't need to land it, Rustbucket," Hank McCoy's cheerful growl came back over the open SHIELD line before Tony got near the intercept line, "And I don't need getting' either, so keep your paws off my bird. I brought you some reinforcements."

"X Men!" There was no mistaking the relief in Steve's voice as mutants began diving, flying, and teleporting into the combat zone. "We need hands on evac and rescue so we can put a stop to these robots!" He didn't mention the other thing, the thing all the Avengers were watching for while carefully not addressing -- the Horatio clan somewhere in all the chaos -- not on an open channel.

"You need fire containment too, Captain," That was Storm, leaping from the plane in a whirl of white hair that Tony just knew must be a bitch to comb out later. "It looks like the building's about to fall."

"You're not wrong," Tony said, squinting at his HUD, "My scans have the steel support beams in the bottom floors just about at their limit."

"Phew, gon' be a mess when she goes, too," Rogue observed, waving to Tony as she passed him on her way to the crowded rooftop where the Black Widow was defending panicked locals from the climbing fuel-bots. "How many y'all got left inside her?"

"Unknown," the Widow replied. "I've still got about fifty heads up here, and they're talking about more, bigger robots still inside. None of us can get past the sprayer bots to find out for sure." Not actually true, that -- the Hulk was totally fireproof, and had no love of little metal shooty things, it was just they all knew better than to send the Hulk on rescue missions that involved anybody less sturdy than Iron Man.

"I can help with that," said the skinny blue guy just before he grabbed Wolverine and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Sounds like fun! I'm in," Tony grinned, and didn't wait for permission before he blasted past the fuel-bots' perimeter and made himself an entrance through Jerry Horatio's million dollar view, fifty third floor, southeast corner.
"Thor," Cap called as Tony gained his feet at the expense of Jerry's entertainment system and scanned for human heat-sign. "If we clear the last of the residents, can you and Storm do something about the fire?"

"I fear to try, Captain. I have seen flames like this feed higher on a drenching rain-"

"We can starve it out," Storm replied. "Or freeze it. A focused microburst inside a cyclonic field will-" That was where Tony stopped listening.

Mainly because that was about the time the mech about twice the size of Iron Man came through the wall with its cannons blazing straight at his head. It was out the glass wall and flying away before Tony could pick himself up and get after it, and because it was just that kind of goddamned day, there were three more right behind it.

"Goddammit!" he bellowed, blasting one to pieces as the others made open air and scammed. "Jarvis, get a read on those bastards!" Because there were more where they'd come from, too. Hulking, bipedal and armed to the teeth, and what the fuck were they even doing in here with the whole place burning the fuck down, anyway? Dimly over the open comm, Tony could hear Wolverine trash talking more of the things as he located a nest all his own. Numbers began to scroll down the HUD, but not much that Tony could use while dodging two more as they crashed through the ceiling at him.

"Iron Man! Report! What are those things?"

"Heavily armored," he gritted, eyeing his reactor output and boosting repulsor intensity. "And damn fast. I have no idea what they're after-" the comm filled with Hulk-roar for a moment, making Tony's ears ring. He mowed down another, then took a hit that sent him spinning through a wall. "Are these things anywhere else but here?" he asked, shoving sheetrock and splinters aside as carols of shattering glass warned him to make for the outer wall. Windows up and down the block were smashing as more of the mechs found or made less-guarded exits. So that answered that. He scanned the night, relieved when Jarvis' count of the things reassured him that there weren't actually a bajillion of them zooming off in every-damned-direction in fact, there weren't even thirty. They weren't that fucked.

On the street, Cap was a flash of upturned white in sooty blue as he caught the Hulk's attention with a lovetap and pointed him at the scattering wave of robots. "Hulk! Iron Man! Catch me one of those!" he shouted before turning his attention and his shield back to the smaller, slower fuel bots. "Storm, Thor, Rogue, keep the perimeter for now. Fire control can wait till we know the building's clear. Hawkeye, have you found where these refuellers are coming from yet?"

"I see it, Cap," Hawkeye said over the roar as Tony and his big green buddy went happily to the chase. "I can take it down if someone can get me out over the river before it submerges again."

"I gotcha. Where you at, Sugah?"

"Roof's cleared, Cap. I'm going in after lurkers."

"Negative, Widow, get a scan from-"

"Wolverine, Nightcrawler, have you cleared the-"

Tony tuned the rest out, pushing his repulsors to get into the path of one mech that seemed a little bigger, a little faster than the others. He fired a targeted EMP burst on it, then followed the mech down as it plummeted, catching it just short of the pavement so he could lay it with a flourish at
Cap's feet. "One Of Those, as requested, oh Captain, my Captain," Tony said. "What do you want wi-"

He flinched aside then as the Hulk dropped like a rock out of the sky, throwing two of the mechs onto the pile like the big green show off he was at heart. "Catch!" he huffed with a grin.

"Oh, sure," Tony pretended to grumble, "Just cause you can hold one in each hand..." but they were both watching Cap, who picked the biggest of the mechs and sheared the edge of his shield right through the armor over its middle. Hulk liked this idea, and immediately began pounding his second catch into a crumpled mess. Tony fired up his cutting laser, hoping, as he watched Wolverine riding another of the oversized mechs to the ground in a shower of sparks and adamantium, that Cap's intuition wasn't... aw shit, it was. Because as the vibranium edge sheared the last clasp away, the mech's rotund barrel opened up like a clamshell, and Joan Horatio rolled out of the hollow center, drugged legless and woozy, and spitting mad.

"Got Gloria, Cap. My Mom... Dad. Fuckers... got everyone," she coughed as Cap scooped her out of the sparking wreckage, clinging to his chest with furious, desperate eyes. "You gotta...Stop them!"

"Break-break!" Cap shouted into the comm, bounding toward the SHIELD medics hovering outside the perimeter, "The large robots are priority now. Bring them down fast, but whole -- we got hostages inside!"

"Tally fucking ho!" Tony crowed, and blasted into the sky once more.

~* Traded My Dad For Two Goldfish *~

Fury showed up, Hill in tow once it was all over bar the screaming, of course

Thor and Storm had, between them thoroughly abused the meteorological patterns, and buried the fire under a column of icy air from up around pressure-suit elevation. And wasn't Tony looking forward to seeing what FOXnews made of the fallout weather patterns from that little stunt! The building was still going to have to come down, but at least it wasn't going to take half of the riverfront down in flames with it when it went. So score one for the good guys?

"26 of the hostage androids exited the building," Coulson was saying as the SHIELD posse strode up to the fountain plaza where the Avengers had gone to ground. "Eighteen of those were brought down intact. Agent Barton got a tag on one before sinking that minisub in the river, but the trace failed about two miles out of the city."

"Get extraction teams on that sub tonight," Fury cut in. "I don't want to hear about that goddamned fuel leaking into the water."

"Yes sir."

"How many hostages did we lose?"

"WE recovered six hostages," Cap stepped into the exchange with an icy stare and a jaw you could break the Helicarrier on. "The rest of the robots were either empty or booby trapped. They were ringers, just meant to confuse the trail."

If Fury had given Tony that kind of coolly appraising stare, Tony was pretty sure he'd have had to punch the guy. "How do you figure that, Captain?"

"Oh, I don't know, how about the fact that every single person we pulled out of those robots came
out of the Horatio condos?" Tony answered in an entirely reasonable tone of voice, ignoring the quelling look Steve sent his way. "Or that two of the three we still can't find are kind of the backbone of this whole investigation you kids have been doing lately. Does that begin to sound plausible to you?"

Fury turned a querying eyebrow to Coulson, who apparently spoke eyebrow fluently enough to answer. "Ivanna, Jerry, and their granddaughter Gloria Horatio are among the missing, Sir. We have other tenants unaccounted for, but we know those three were home at the time of the attack."

"The rest was clutter," Cap declared in disgust. "The fire, the fuel bots, the dummies."

"Sir, it could've been an extraction," Natasha said from the fountain, where she was wiping soot from her face. "A whitewash to make the family look like victims of HYDRA instead of allies while getting them out of our reach. Especially since not all of the victims were drugged before they were grabbed. It's hard to get a struggling adult into a space that cramped without injuring them."

Tony thought of the Stark Tech Earwig, the paralyzing frequency emitter Obie had nearly killed him with, and elected to say nothing.

"That's not a bad plan," drawled Wolverine from a few yards away. "Only it don't look so good when you find one of your missing victims hiding out in the medic tent and pretending he don't know that everyone and their badge wants a word with him, does it?" And damned if the hairy little fireplug didn't have one Jerry goddamned Horatio by the collar, marching the florid old clown into the plaza like a truant schoolboy. Behind the barricades, the news cameras flashed and strobed with glee.

"Don't, Cap," Tony declared, throwing both arms around Steve's chest and clasping back hard against the lurch. "It's not worth it-"

Steve caught on quick, dragging Tony's repulsor boots shriekingly along the pavement as he lunged toward Horatio. "Let me go," he growled as the man flinched back against Wolverine with a whimper. "People are dead! He needs to answer for this!"

"Stand down, God damn it!" Fury barked right on cue, tossing a knowing glance Tony's way before turning to become Jerry Horatio's savior, protector, and new best friend. "Hill, Coulson, secure that witness. The rest of you sit down and have a goddamned cookie before I ground you all!" Then he stormed off in a swirl of black leather and smugness.

"Is he always that charming?" asked Storm, icy air gusting around her as she touched down behind the fountain. Across the plaza, Rogue, Thor, Nightcrawler, and the Hulk were playing some arcane hybrid of toss-catch and keep away with the pieces of one of the hostage mechs. It looked like fun, but with the Hulk getting bored, or tired, or both, it was clear the game wouldn't be lasting much longer.

"Him? Nah," Tony said, belatedly recalling that he had no further pretense for clinging to Steve's back. "Sometimes he actually sleeps, and he's much sweeter then." He let go of Captain America and dusted a bit of soot off the blue shoulders with a grin.

He got an almost-amused glare in return for it before Steve shrugged him off and turned to offer Storm his hand. "Ms. Munroe, thanks for the assist," he said, shaking heartily before turning to Wolverine, who looked askance, but at a glare from Storm, submitted to the handclasp. "Mr. Logan. We weren't expecting you, but I'm sure glad you happened by."

Logan shrugged. "Thank your man Fury," he said, producing a cigar from somewhere Tony
promised himself he would never, ever wonder too hard about. "He called in a solid with the Professor when he heard you guys were jumping a hunch out here. The rest of us just came along for the party."

Steve blinked, anger flaring in his eyes before swamping suddenly into wary concern. "The Professor? But where's-

"Beast took him to the Helicarrier, he's been observing from there." Storm said with a smile for his surprise, which was entirely justified given that the X men always had one telepath or another riding herd when the team hit the bricks.

"Do you think…" Steve glanced at the building, still steaming with confusion. "You don't need to head back north right away, do you?"

She cocked her head, considering. Across the field, the Hulk sat down on a pile of crushed fuel bots and gave a yawn. "I believe Professor Xavier intends to assist Director Fury in debriefing those two gentlemen." She said, and tipped a nod toward where a cowed Paul and a blustering Jerry Horatio were being handcuffed and informed of their rights in full view of the slavering press.

Fury's voice carried nicely on the wind as he shut Jerry down. "No, you are not going to be free to go, Mr. Horatio. Now we can call it protective custody if you want, or we can call it suspicion of terrorism if that makes you feel better, but either way you and your family are going to be partaking of my hospitality for the foreseeable future. I suggest you shut the fuck up and enjoy it!"

Logan snickered as Hill and Sitwell hustled the pair into the waiting choppers. "I like his style."

"You want him?" Tony offered, and was ignored.

"Quittin' time," Hawkeye announced, leading Rogue and Nightcrawler toward the Quinjet. Thor followed behind, shielding Bruce from the cameras with his cape. "Free rides to anybody not covered in jet fuel." Which technically let every one of them out of the offer, but if Clint thought he was going to throw Wolverine off the jet for stinking too much, Tony wanted some popcorn for the show.

"Ms. Munroe, I'd like to speak to the Professor before you go back to Westchester," Steve said, staying Storm's arm as she turned. "Do you think he'd have the time?"

She shrugged. "I don't see why not, Captain. We've left better than half our team at the school, so the students will be at no particular risk." Then she followed Wolverine's saunter to where the rest were gathered at the Quinjet's side.

"I thought you didn't want Xavier involved, Cap," Tony said, pitching his voice low. "What happened to all that shit about respecting Gloria's choice?"

Steve gave a sigh, glancing once more at the ruined building. "I'd still rather she got to choose to trust him on her own, but… but we don't know what they wanted her for, if they wanted her specifically, or just wanted a hold over Horatio. It doesn't matter though; I've seen what HYDRA does to its prisoners, the ones they take on purpose, and the ones they just pick up along the way, and it is never pretty." A muscle jumped in Steve's jaw, and the leather of his gauntlet creaked under the pressure of his fist. "If I don't get Xavier's help to find where they've taken her, Gloria might not live long enough to make any choice about it at all."

Natasha melted from the darkness beside them, a pale silence of face and hands and scarlet hair in the dark. "You're not wrong, Steve. I don't want to quote demographics at you, but abductions under
circumstances like these tend to turn bloody very quickly." She laid her hand on his elbow for just a moment, then turned away as the Quinjet's engines began their warm up sequence. "The clock is ticking on this. We'll need a plan soon."

They both watched her go, Tony shamelessly enjoying the view while Steve… well hell, for all he knew Steve was enjoying the view too. Guy was a red blooded male, after all, and it was one hell of a view. Tony slid him a glance, but found Steve's attention focused years away from Natasha's retreating assets, the blue eyes worried and wistful and tense with something heavy, something lonely that Tony didn't so much want to understand as just to banish altogether.

"Gonna be crowded in the jet," he said.

"Yeah." Steve's hundred-year stare broke with a start, and he glanced Tony's way with a tight little smile. "And a long night too. Interrogation, then debriefings."

"Then they'll try and get us to bunk on the carrier," Tony agreed. "A hard bed in a room that smells like someone else's socks, and disgusting coffee when you wake up. That's the life."

Steve actually laughed at that. "I've had worse."

"So've I, but that's no excuse," Tony laughed, reaching out his left arm. "Ride up with me. At least we can shake some dust off before we get stuck in shitty plastic chairs for the rest of the night."

The look Steve gave him was dubious, but maybe just a little fond. "You're thinking of just heading straight back to the tower if I agree, aren't you?" he challenged. But he was already leaning into the curve of Tony's arm, already switching his shield to the outside hand.

"No," Tony lied, and put his boot a little farther out so Steve could step onto it.

"We'll meet you on the carrier, team," Steve said into his comm, then switched it off before slinging his arm warm and heavy across Tony's shoulders with a weary grin. "Try not to make a liar out of me, okay?"

Tony snapped down his visor to hide the grin he couldn't quell.

"I make no promises…"

~* Staked Out the Stalking Horse *~

It was still dark outside when his phone rang. Tony, having been in his bed for only about ten minutes at that point, went ahead and answered it -- there really were only a handful of people Jarvis would have put through to his phone at this hour after a mission, after all.

"Tony! My plane just landed and I saw the news!" Pepper, bright, hectic, and very far away, babbled over airport echoes in his ear. "Did SHIELD really arrest the whole Horatio family?"

"Mmm...." he stretched and rolled onto his belly. "I'm not wearing any pants. How about you?"

She chuckled. "A skirt today, darling, and those red Manolos you like. Now spill! Did the Avengers burn down Horatio's condo block? I saw the Hulk on the news, throwing robots around Battery Park."

"Yes, Miss," Tony grinned. "I have been a very bad boy. Shall I tell you exactly how bad? Would you like that?"

"Tony," she said in that way that meant she was impatient, amused, and adored his shenanigans. "While you definitely are inspiring in me the urge to punish you, it's taking more the 'read you sales
figures and stock projections until you cry for mercy' than what you have in mind. Now give me
details!"

"Come on, you love it!" he wheedled. "And we both know if you really wanted information you'd
just have called Agent directly."

She made an annoyed sort of hum then, while in someone in the background channeled Charlie
Brown's teacher over a loudspeaker. "Well, Phil's phone rolls straight to voice mail, so I'll have to get
my gossip from you. Now tell me what the hell went on last night!"

Well, since she’d asked so nicely, Tony did, pausing to let Pepper gasp in horror at Gloria and Ivanna
Horatio's kidnapping, to let her wilt in relief at Joan and Hana's rescue, to grumble in suspicion at
how neither of the rescued men were drugged, and then to curse long and loud at men in general
when he told her about the note Hana Horatio had passed to Natasha in the ambulance. Of course,
she then went on to praise her men in particular for getting the poor abused woman away from her
husband and father in law, and into a SHIELD safehouse straight away, so Tony didn't take it
personally at all.

Especially given that he hadn't even got to the 'good' part yet. When he laid that one on her, the
silence that followed was dense, icy, and rather horrifying.

"A heart attack." Not a question.

"A pretty massive one too," Tony sighed. "He actually coded twice before they got him to the
Helicarrier. And believe me, we all were skeptical, but even if Jerry was somehow faking it, the
crash team wasn't. And the docs have him sedated now to try and stabilize his pump."

"Unbelievable."

"Right there with ya, babe," he answered her disgust with full measure of his own. "Professor X
can't even have a go at him because the docs think he's so goddamned delicate that an unwilling scan
could set him off again." Which sucked beyond the telling, because after what Gloria's accidental
download had put Cap through just a week before, not one of the team could even pretend the
concern wasn't completely justified. And Jerry Horatio's answers weren't going to do anybody any
good if he took them to the grave with him.

"And what about Paul?" she demanded after taking a good long moment to curse. "I mean there's no
way he's innocent in all this. Not after his wife had to ask for Natasha to get her away from him."

"Yeah, only not so much. He's an asshole and a mutant-hating bigot, but Jerry actually kept him in
the dark about most of the HYDRA thing. He knows a little bit, generally, signed off on a couple of
things here and there, but overall we know more about the mess than he does… so SHIELD is
cutting him loose sometime today."

He had to hold the phone a little away from his ear for a moment then.

"You know the routine, Pep," Tony went on when there was a break in the ranting. "He's pulling the
'friends in high places, and oh gosh, I'm just a victim of circumstance, it's all a big misunderstanding,
and you don't have the evidence to hold me,' trick. It's not like any of this is a surprise except him
having the balls to play it."

"No, it's bull! SHIELD is part of Homeland Security, which can detain anybody involved in terrorist
activities for as long as necessary, which, hello, is kind of what HYDRA does!"  

"I know that, don't yell at me!" he griped back. "Why are you even yelling at me? It's not like I made
the call! Fury seems to think he needs to keep SHIELD's record of prisoner relations all sparkly and not Guantanamo-bay-like. They're calling it 'giving him some rope.'"

There was a pause. Tony could hear Pepper breathing deep and even through her nose, the way Bruce did when he was fighting his temper. Strangely, just as terrifying. "So they're turning him loose to see what he's going to do?"

"Or to see what HYDRA's going to do," Tony admitted, a little uncomfortably.

"Bait."

"Yeah." Tony said, trying not to picture Steve's outraged glower when Fury had told them the news, how his jaw had flexed hard and furious against itself, locking words that simply had to be explosive behind his teeth until he could managed to nod crisply, snap-turn on his heel, and march from the room. "We don't know why HYDRA tried for them, but if it was important enough to stage an attack that major, we either need Jerry to tell us," he paused to allow Pepper her scoff. "Yeah, that. Or we need to catch them at it."

"And that poor little girl's caught up in this now too," Pepper said after a quiet moment. "And Jerry's wife. What's HYDRA going to do to them, Tony?"

Any other person outside the team, Tony might have lied to, fronted, bullshitted, tapdancing the truth into a bear-suit and a tutu. But this was Pepper, and after the whole Palladium thing, they kind of had a deal. "Who knows?" he admitted. "Hostages to get something from Jerry maybe. House cleaning if HYDRA thinks they know something. Or if HYDRA's found out about Gloria's telepathy, maybe they want her as an … um… asset."

"Oh God," she said, and Tony heard the telltale crinkle of Pepper unwrapping her emergency chocolate. "They don't know, do they? They didn't take that little girl to use her as a tool?"

"Well, if they did," he sighed, eyeing the splash of arclight blue across the ceiling of his room, "at least that means they've got a reason to keep her alive."

Chapter End Notes

And here we are at posting night, my blighted posies. More Pepper in this installment, but no less Steve for all that, I feel. And bonus X Men too, because I can't quite help myself.

So I'm off to Toronto for World Fantasy Convention next weekend, but I'm a chapter ahead at this point, so 11 will launch on time (if not a little early.) No promises on 12 though. It's hard to maintain 2 - 3000 words per day during a convention, even with two 8 hour drives on either end.

I will do my evil best though. And as always, thankyou upon thankyou to all you commenters who let me know that you like what you're reading. Thanks for the muse-fuel, y'all. It helps more than you can know.
When he got up again a few hours later, Tony found the Scorpions shirt waiting for him beside his coffeemaker, clean, folded neatly, and topped with a handwritten note.

Tony, I apologize. I shouldn't have taken this. It was inappropriate of me, but I saw it caught up in the trees when I went out that morning for a run, and I honestly didn't think you'd miss it, since you'd thrown it away. Sorry if I've made you uncomfortable.

And yeah, a good long laugh was a heck of a nice way to start the day, wasn't it? Just imagining the big doofus creeping guiltily into Tony's kitchen to leave it, heart in his mouth lest Tony wake up and catch him there, had to be the silliest thing Tony'd thought of in days. His life, man -- sitcoms were jealous!

Tony wiped his eyes dry, and stopped short of chucking the note into the trash. He picked up the shirt, shaking it out of folds so neat and even Tony was halfway to sure that Steve must have ironed the damned thing. He'd certainly mended the tear in the back collar and shoulder seams, where the jersey had ripped against the rough granite wall. The stitches were neat, even, and precise along the seams, and Steve had even darned over the holes farther down the shoulders, fine threads weaving over the gaps to make them stronger than before. The come stains at the front had come out in the wash, but Steve hadn't bothered to do anything about the solder burns and grease stains that years of shop-wear had put into the sad old thing.

Tony could just picture him all tucked down into a rocking chair, needle and thread in hand, and one of those red felt tomato pincushions on his knee as he rescued a cheap, worn out concert tee of a band that would probably make him wince, from oblivion. Pure sentiment. What a gigantic, adorable sap that man was!

The fabric was soft in his hands, warming with the scent of laundry soap, but sadly without the smell of Steve's skin underneath the perfumes. He put it to his nose and breathed deeply, chasing the ghost of that night, wishing he could remember accurately past the vague, stupidly romantic ideas that Steve had smelled of sunlight and wishes, lust, spunk, and wild October leaves on a cold wind. He hadn't. He'd smelled like Steve. Just Steve, not some twee girl's creepy vampire boyfriend-stalker-soulmate, not like cologne, or cookies, or the goddamned Old Spice dude, whatever the cracked-out lustmonkey in Tony's brain wanted to think. Steve had just smelled like Steve that night. But unfortunately the damned shirt didn't.

Tony tossed the shirt over his shoulder and turned to search the junk drawer until he found a pencil. Then he flipped the note over to write on the back.

Steve, don't be a dumbass. Keep the shirt. It was too big for me anyhow.

"Jarvis, where's Cap right now?" Tony asked, getting the coffeemaker underway and searching his fridge for something more breakfast-like than ketchup, pickles, and a lemon. "Also, why do I have five jars of pickles in here, but no actual food?" He picked up a heel of bread and considered
carefully whether those would be raisins in it, or spots of mold. Either was kind of disgusting, actually.

"Captain Rogers is in the communal kitchen at present, sir, cooking pancakes and bacon for Professor Xavier and his associates. If you'd like to join them, I can inform him of your intent. I believe there is plenty to be had, given that most of the team prefers eating there over in their apartments under most circumstances."

Tony eyed his coffee, then his pickles, then sighed. "Yeah, ok. Tell him I'll be down in a few minutes. Is the rest of the gang there too?"

"Dr. Banner is there, as is Thor and Agent Coulson, however Agents Barton and Romanov have informed me that they will be at SHIELD headquarters, assisting in the interrogations today."

Tony snickered to himself at that one. Spies and telepaths -- what could possibly go wrong? Other than every-damn-thing, of course. He got a mug out of the cupboard and filled it with life's blood, and headed for the elevator, whistling.

One brief stop by Cap's eerily tidy apartment to put the shirt back where it belonged, and then Tony was following his nose toward the smells of maple, bacon, and intrigue.

"Stopping a man's heart is far more complicated a prospect than it sounds, I'm afraid," the Professor was saying when Tony came in. "The body -- the psyche -- has certain fail safes around the vital processes like respiration and circulation, and even a powerful telekinetic would be far more likely to cause a stroke, or an arterial rupture than the kind of cardiac arrest Mr. Horatio suffered last night."

"But a single blow to the sternum can cause an arrhythmia like that," Bruce protested. "And I can name fifteen drugs off the top of my head which can make the heart just give out."

"Got a point there, Professor," McCoy put in from behind a carafe of orange juice that looked like it was pretty much just for him. "Stopping a ticker isn't that hard at all. Electricity does it all the time."

"Drugs show up in the bloodwork," Tony threw in as he circled through the kitchen to start that coffeemaker on a second pot, and steal some bacon while he was in there. (The spatula slap to his knuckles was totally worth it.) "And so would the trauma of a chest impact or a bad shock. SHIELD docs would have picked up any of those chemical triggers. I honestly think the attack was legit. Old Jerry's been a prime candidate for one just about as long as I've known him."

"Hmph. And the cancer can't be helping either," Logan said. Then, when the room went silent and every head turned to stare, he shrugged beneath the cloud of cigar smoke that Munroe was clearly keeping directly over his head, and took another slug of coffee. "What? The guy stank of it. I've smelled terminal cases before."

"Prob'ly distracted by the heart attack an all," Rogue said, sweet as vinegar pie over the funny pages of Cap's morning paper. "Betcha somebody's updatin' that file right now. Wolvie's nose don't lie."

Xavier nodded as well. "What little I was able to glean passively from the man last night supports the hypothesis. Mr. Horatio was prepared to die. Not pleased about it, but not surprised either."
"Jerry's the CEO of a Fortune 500," Tony protested, taking Steve's spatula hand to rescue a pancake that looked likely to burn. "If he was getting treatment for the big C, it would be news, no matter how secret he tried to keep it."

"Didn't say he was getting treatment for it," Logan replied with a grin as Coulson reached for his phone and quietly excused himself from the table. "He didn't smell like chemo drugs or half cooked from radiation, he just smelled like the cancer."

"And that changes everything," Cap decided, turning back to the griddle as Tony's pancake broke apart into three soggy, half-cooked pieces.

"How?" Tony asked, surrendering the spatula with a grimace and stealing another piece of bacon.

"Because the decisions a man makes when he knows that he's dying aren't for him," Steve said, nudging the pancake chunks back together and gluing them back together with a dribble of batter. "They're for the people he's leaving behind."

Tony watched him rescue the poor abused flapjack, a sad little thing Tony would have scraped into the garbage and replaced without a second thought. Cap had it more or less back together in two efficient flips while Tony stood there thinking about airplanes, aliens, and atomic bombs. Then he picked up his coffee mug and went to join the others at the table.

~* Kicked The Guy Off The Damned Wire *~

Jarvis buzzed his phone about half an hour after they'd finished breakfast.

At that point, Coulson was still edging his way through the deeply edited, SHIELD approved summary while the X-Men examined the holograms of Cap's sketch file and gave each other significant looks whenever the logic-flow stuttered out. Tony had been watching Coulson's face, waiting to see when the deadpan would crack, if at all, when to his utter humiliation, his pocket began to play Mr. Roboto.

Steve gave him a scowlingly curious look as he pushed up out of the sofa, but Tony shook his head. If Jarvis was ringing him privately, then whatever it was he had to say wasn't for general consumption. "Excuse me guys," he said as he headed for the elevator. "I need to take this call."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, sir," Jarvis said as soon as the doors pulled closed, "but my Tower based server is under attack, and I thought you should--"

Tony held up a hand, thinking of Wolverine, Beast, and Cap, all with ears better than they had any right to be, and attention they needed to be focusing elsewhere. "Noise canceling projection first," he said, then when the air assumed the deadened hush he nodded. "Okay, whatcha got? Bored teenager? Anonymous? Trojan horse? 4Chan? Jarvis, do you need to be dewormed?"

He didn't get the expected sass in return. "No sir, this is a more significant attack than the norm, but my systems are still quite secure. I have quarantined the signal and its viral load, and launched my countermeasure protocols already."

"And you pulled me out of the meeting why, exactly?"

"Because my trap and trace program is indicating that the virus originated at this address." Tony's phone buzzed in his hand, and he glanced down at the map, then enlarged the image just to be sure.

"The Scarlet Gates?" He had to laugh. Had to, for real. "What, are we being hacked by massage therapists now? Did I not leave a big enough tip after my last manicure?"
"Sir, according to current data on my SHIELD Dispatch line, the agents assigned to monitor the Horatio brothers have reported in from that garage in the last twenty minutes."

Well that shot the hilarity right down, didn't it? "I thought George was trans-Pacific last night from Tokyo," he said. And as alibis went, that had been a good one for the younger brother. Hardly ironclad, but expensive lawyers had floated worse excuses past juries.

"He was, sir. According to surveillance, his flight arrived at La Guardia approximately one hour ago, at which point his elder brother picked him up in a HoratioCorp fleet limousine."

"Complete with remote listening countermeasures, I'm assuming?" All the Stark limos had them, after all, and in the age of corporate espionage, sound-baffling a car or twenty cost a lot less than stolen patents, lawsuits, and bad press.

"Just so, sir."

"Ok, but what the hell do the Horatios think they'll accomplish with this?" Tony had to wonder. "Puddin' at least has to know he's got no fucking chance at getting into any system of mine."

"Sir," Jarvis cut in, almost alarmed. "Agents on the scene at the Scarlet Gates have radioed in a call of shots fired."

Tony didn't drop his phone, quite. "What?"

"Shots fired on the scene, sir. Two, possibly three assailants. Agents are moving in now.""

"Open the doors," Tony barked. "Get Coulson in-"

"Sir, what ought I to do with this infected upload?" Jarvis' nervous tone caught him up briefly. "It seems hardly coincidental that the source and timing of the attack should-"

"Sandbox it. Set up a clean server, remote monitor it, and let's see what those assholes think they've got in their pants. Now doors!"

The elevator slid open and Tony put his head back into the silent room. Xavier had moved his chair to face Steve on the sofa, and had two fingers laid along Steve's temple bone. Both men's foreheads were knotted with concentration, and Tony knew he wasn't imagining the light sheen of sweat dotting Xavier's bald head.

The other X-Men sat around the lounge in various attitudes of intent concern, (Munroe and McCoy watching from either end of the sofa), polite boredom, (Wagner and Rogue, staring out the window, and reading a magazine), and outright disinterest, (Logan, asleep in Cap's armchair). Thor was hovering behind Steve's place on the sofa -- too protective to be considered polite, but given what Thor had been asked to do the last time Steve had let a telepath inside his skull, Tony absolutely could not blame him. Bruce, on the other side, was paging through a magazine, and making a decent show of not being freaked out in the least by it all.

Coulson, on the other hand, looked over the pair with an expression that might have served for bland curiosity, if you didn't know the agent at all, or happened to miss the way he was trying to light Xavier on fire with the power of his eyeballs alone. The direction of the agent's gaze didn't flicker when Tony gave him a 'get over here' head-jerk, but he knew as he ducked back into the elevator that his presence had not gone unremarked.

A moment later, Coulson stepped in, frowning. "Stark?"
"Agent." Tony replied as the doors closed and the chamber quieted. "I thought SHIELD was leaving the Horatios alone for the day."

Coulson had his phone out of his pocket and scanning his thumbprint at once. "Monitoring only, unless HYDRA makes intervention necessary." The phone came to life in a chorus of message alerts, each one a tinny little clap of doom. Tony stood there waiting, cool as a Capcicle and not fidgeting even one tiny bit while he watched Coulson scan through them, face turning by increments to stone. "You get all this from Jarvis?" he asked, looking up at last.

Tony shook his head. "Not what you're getting. Sum it up, I'll show you mine when Jarvis is done vivisecting it."

Coulson turned the phone so Tony could see the picture: a limo with its doors open, Paul Horatio sprawled beside it, his shirt splayed out like bloodied wings around him as the medics leaned close to their work. Slightly out of focus, Tony could just make out other figures slumped and spilled about inside the car, bodyguard, driver, and… he blinked.

"Shit, is that the wife? Jerry's wife? I thought HYDRA had her! How'd she wind up dead in a limo under a massage parlor?"

Thin lips quirking, Coulson took his phone back. "Looks like she got a day pass," he said. "Or else they didn't much want to keep her."

"Shit," Tony said again, trying not to picture Steve's face, pale and pain-haunted after the hospital visit. "So Gloria…"

The phone dinged again, and Coulson's smirk died. "It gets better. We've got no trace of George Horatio now. Security cameras in the garage never went offline. Agents locked the site down as soon as shots started. He's just gone."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Agent Coulson," Jarvis spoke up, "but I must disagree with your assessment. George Horatio is still inside the garage, and most likely injured. I recommend your agents search for him using infrared detection, as I believe Mr. Horatio employed some form of concealment or cloaking technology to hide from his attackers."

"Jarvis?"

"I have broken the attack code, sir," the AI answered the implied command. "The virus was merely a ploy to get my attention. The true package hidden beneath it is a recording George Horatio made of the meeting with his brother, and the subsequent attack by Ivanna Horatio on himself, his brother, and their employees."

"Damn," Tony whistled, unwillingly impressed. "I told you George was the smart one."

But of course Coulson had to be contrary about it. "He must not have spotted his tail if he went to the trouble," he grumbled. "What makes you think he's still in the garage at all, Jarvis?"

"The fact that the signal is still broadcasting."

_Hammertech must really be doing better now that Justin's in jail._ Tony had time to muse in the stunned silence that followed. Then Coulson yanked his phone from his pocket and gave Tony the look that usually preceded a statement about tasers, as he pointed at the elevator doors. "Out, Stark."

"Hey! My elevator!"
"My clearance level."

"Jarvis will just-"

"Jarvis knows better," Coulson replied, brisk as a slap. "Do you want to do this with me now, or do you want me to bring in George Horatio alive?"

"Yeah, yeah, keep your panties on," Tony huffed. Getting sent from the room so the grownups could talk was his favorite fucking game ever. But then he remembered what cards he still had, and yielded to good sense. "Jarvis, clean up the recording thusfar, clip it, and send it to my phone. Agent Coulson's too, THEN to SHIELD analytics. And you," he jabbed a finger at Coulson's lapel, "are welcome."

Only then did he turn toward the doors. Jarvis slid them open, and Tony stormed out into the team lounge before he thought of anything wittier to say.

The exam was over, though from the expressions all around it hadn't gone as anyone had hoped. Xavier had wheeled his chair back, and he and Cap both cradled steaming mugs in their hands. Thor had relinquished his guard position and joined Rogue, Beast and Nightcrawler at the table, where a delicate house of cards was taking shape between them. Logan was snoring. Only Bruce and Munroe remained at the sofa, both intently listening as Xavier tried to explain.

"Think of it as scar tissue, Captain," he said as Tony came to join the little group. "Gloria's interaction with your psyche was rushed, forced, and to be frank, rather brutal."

"Unfortunately, that psychic scarring has made you harder for me to read, as well, Captain." Xavier's eyes flicked Tony's way briefly as he continued. "That is, I could pick open the defenses your mind has erected, I could find her imprint upon you, and I could use that to trace the girl's physical location, but the damage I would leave behind me in your mind would be unconscionable. Imagine taking a man whose broken back is barely healed, and forcing him to run behind a horse, or be dragged. Whichever he managed to do, the wound would destroy him."

"Don't you say it, Tony thought, glaring at Steve's fixed profile. Don't you say it would be worth it, you asshole! Don't you say you can take it. And don't you fucking dare say you're fine!"

"Steve," Bruce leaned to put a hand onto his arm, but had to flinch back from the glare that earned him. "We knew it would be a longshot, trying to find her this way, but it's not-"

"Ask yourself what HYDRA would do with a telepath like Gloria," Steve bit out through his teeth. "Ask yourself what they would have to do to her to make her into the kind of fanatically loyal weapon they've always used; an assassin who will kill without conscience, and die willingly before capture -- before rescue. That's what they do to people they get hold of, Bruce." He slammed his mug down, not even flinching when steaming tea sloshed over his knuckles. "Cut off one head, two
"They've all said that, every one, just before they killed themselves! You ask yourself what HYDRA might do to make a little girl act that way, and then you tell me we've done all we could to save her!"

"Hey," Tony cut through, angry and worried in equal measure. "Hang on. HYDRA might not even know that she's a-"

"They know."

"But-"

"They. Know." Steve thrust out of the sofa, covering his face with one hand until he could manage to take in and blow out a deep, trembling breath. "Her whole family knows that she's a mutant, Tony. Joan is the only one who doesn't think she's..." He bit through the words, breathed carefully, then started again. "It's a threat the Horatios have used to control her since she started dreaming true as a little girl; that she's not like them, that she's not right, not human, that she'll be sent away to live with the..." he didn't say the word 'freaks', but everyone in the room heard it all the same. One of the mutants was actually growling under his breath, loud in the silence as Steve shook his head with a grimace. "I'm sorry. That's why I didn't want to involve you, Professor. You, your school, your team -- Gloria's been raised in fear of you, of what she thinks you are, and do. But now it could all be so much worse if we don't-"

Munroe shifted on the other sofa, crossed her legs in a rustle that drew every eye to her. "Your concern is commendable, Captain, but the fact remains that you cannot ask this of Charles, any more than I could ask Dr. Banner to slit Rogue's throat."

Even Tony flinched at that, Bruce went pale at Rogue's irreverent wink, and Thor rumbled in wordless protest, but Steve only stared back into the woman's eerily pale eyes as she continued, implacable and calm. "We must find another way to help the girl."

Steve swallowed, throat working loudly in the loaded silence. "You have the machine," he said at last, breaking Munroe's stare to turn back to Xavier. "Cerebro. It could help-"

"Bad plan, Captain," McCoy answered, exactly the sort of cheerful that covered up deadly serious. "I built that machine for range and power, not for delicacy. He's more likely to turn your brains to Spam with Cerebro than without it."

"Dammit," Steve sighed, sinking back down into the sofa again. "The one time it'd be useful to get my skull broken into..."

"Um, hey?" Rogue put in, coming to perch nonchalantly on the coffee table between Steve and Xavier; a charming human shield who could bench press Tony's favorite car, and ruled spandex like it was her Constitutional right. "So this Gloria girl, she looks normal? I mean, she passes for human?"

Steve nodded. "She favors her mother."

The girl nodded back, fiddling with her gloves. "And they been at her since she was little?" Another nod. "But her power ain't destructive, she don't light things on fire, or make em fly around the room smashing people she don't like?"

"Just telepathy, and dreaming the future, though she's not as good at that."

Xavier nodded. "Precognitive interpretation takes practice, but telepathy is the most intuitive of the psychic skills."
Tony sat up. "It's the most common too, isn't it?" he asked, suddenly sure he could see where Rogue's line of questioning had been going.

"Yes," the Professor said. "Telepathy at lower levels is so common I personally consider it less a mutation than a rare, recessive human gene. Precognition is another such."

"Uh huh," Rogue went on with a pleased glance Tony's way, "So if they took after her with the mutant hate soon's her gift showed, betcha it's 'cause they knew just what to look for."

"And that means there's at least one more mutant in the Horatio family," Tony finished, already combing his memories for some sign. A little too much luck in the stock market? A little too accurate reading of his opponents at the bargaining table? A little too much skill in getting his way at the merger meetings? Had little Joan got her way with Thor at the hospital on more than the strength of her enthusiasm?

Beside him, Steve sat up straight again, all but vibrating inside his skin as he reached for Tony's wrist like it was hope itself. "Tony. Her mother asked SHIELD for protective custody last night, didn't she?"

"She did, Captain," Jarvis supplied. "Mrs. Hana Tsue Horatio requested Agent Romanov's help in extracting herself from her abusive marriage as she was removed from the attack site where her daughter, and Mr. Jerry Horatio's wife were kidnapped. She and Miss Joan Horatio are currently being housed under guard at a SHIELD safe house."

"That will be her then." Munroe slid to her feet with a rustle and a nod, as if the conversation was over, and they were all dismissed. Strange how much better she pulled that off than Fury, Tony mused as she raked him with a knowing glance. "Unless the other girl shows signs of abuse as well?"

"None," Tony said it at the same time as Thor.

Steve backed them up with a nod as he got to his feet as well. "Joan's the family favorite, and her friendship with Gloria is genuine, but if she's gifted, she doesn't realize it." He smiled, a little thing, strained and sad as he added, "Might actually wish she was gifted, actually."

Xavier answered with a nod that was both knowing and sad in its own right. Then he pushed his chair backward into the room and turned to face the windows. "Gentlemen, please tell Director Fury that I will be happy to assist Mrs. Horatio in finding her daughter as soon as she's ready to make the attempt."

Tony opened his mouth to tell Jarvis to place the call when the elevator doors opened and Coulson strode into the room, crackling with barely restrained violence under deadly calm. "Stark, Captain Rogers, you're wanted on the Helicarrier."

Steve was out of his seat at once. "What's happened?"

"Shit. Forgot to tell you, Cap," Tony said, shoving to his feet as well. "There was a thing. With the brothers, and now-"

"We'll debrief in the chopper," Coulson cut him off. "Short form is that we have George Horatio in custody, but he'll only speak to-"

"Lemme guess; his lawyer," Tony sighed, going to the bar to retrieve his bracelets and clip them into place.
"You, Stark," Coulson answered, turning on his heel. "He wants to talk to you. Rooftop in five, gentlemen."

"Agent." Steve caught up with him in two long strides. "Why do you need me for this?" He tipped a nod back toward the lounge, and the X-Men who were clearly at loose ends and out of place in the tower.

Tony could understand Steve's reluctance -- after all, a mutant abused, kidnapped, and imprisoned by terrorists with a history of brainwashing? There was no way in hell the X-Men were going to just go home once they'd found out where Gloria was being held. Which meant that the Avengers were suddenly at double strength, and double the team's normal disaster potential. Cap had to be itching to sit down with Munroe and Logan to figure out some battle plans.

Coulson almost looked sympathetic when he shook his head and slipped his sunglasses into place. "The Director didn't tell me, but he does want you there."

Then he shook off Steve's grip and disappeared into the elevator again.

And what could Tony do about that, really, except to offer the crowd an apologetic smile, and say, "So I guess we'll see you guys when we get back." He spread his hands, taking in the room around them, but also the whole of the Tower in the gesture. "Mi casa es su casa, make yourselves at home, my secrets guard themselves, and all that jazz. Jarvis will help you out if you need anything, just please try not to burn the place down or get arrested," Steve's hand wrapped tight in his collar, and Tony let himself be hauled backward toward the elevators, calling, "And if there's any nude hot tubbing while I'm gone, I do NOT want to know about it!"

The noise Steve made as the doors closed was downright skeptical. Hurt, Tony turned to him with a glower. "I don't. Not a word."

"Course not," Steve almost smiled. "You'll be busy watching the security feed and hoping for a glimpse of Rogue's or Storm's behind."

Which was true enough that Tony had to slant him a suspicious glare for a moment, and wonder if Xavier wouldn't have said something if Cap's temporary telepathy hadn't gone over a little more than temporary. But Steve only laughed at him again, and clapped his shoulder as the elevator stopped and opened its doors on his level.

"See you topside, genius," he said as he strode off and left Tony in the elevator, bemused and alone.

His life, ladies and gentlemen; because clearly Captain America just wasn't frustrating him enough yet!

~* Been the Good Cop *~

"She knew where the cameras were," Natasha said as they watched the elegant woman approach the limousine, her oversized hat carefully angled to shield her face. "And the chauffeur wasn't surprised to see her there."

Tony grimaced at the screen. "Bet he was surprised when she shot him in the throat though," he observed as the murder played out in grainy monochrome.

"They always are," Natasha agreed. Then she paused the video feed, and pointed. A door on the far side of the limousine had thrust open, muzzle flash casting what might or might not have been a shadow on the cement floor. "That's when George ran for it."

"Stealth tech?"
"Army contract prototype," she agreed. "Hammertech's had the contract for a couple of years now. It's supposed to combine reflective stealth and field repulse technology, but it hasn't passed the field tests yet."

Tony snorted. "Lemme guess; unit's too heavy, stealth won't hold up in bright light, the field won't stand up to standard armor piercing rounds, and the whole thing glows like Christmas under infrared." He shook his head, grinning as she shrugged agreement. "That contract was being shopped around back when StarkIndustries still did Military bids. We didn't even bother to submit a proposal for it. The tech wasn't there five years ago, and it's not there now." Otherwise, the Iron Man armor would have an invisibility setting, and quite possibly be made entirely of energy. One day, one day.

"It's close enough that it managed to save George Horatio's life though," Natasha said. "He activated it when she approached the car. From the way she emptied her clip into the car, we figure she knew he was there, but couldn't get a clear sight of him. Otherwise she'd have -"

"Seen that he had a gun too and ducked before he put two in her head?" Tony asked.

She gave that tart little smile of hers and shrugged. "That, too. Now. Here's where it gets interesting," she swept the security video off to the side, and pulled Ivanna Horatio's file up on top of it. "This woman, her name actually is Ivanna, by the way, has one of the best identities I've ever seen. It's... well, let's say her false ID is two generations deep, and I know some billionaires who wouldn't be able to get work this good. It's safe to say that if we hadn't gotten her fingerprints and blood match in the garage, we might never have made her."

"So... she was another one of your international super secret super-spies then?" Tony asked, careful to keep his tone light, lest she take a notion to kill him for asking too many questions.

"That's the funny part," she said, pointing that sharp little smile briefly at him. "She wasn't. I'd have recognized her style otherwise, no matter how much surgery she'd had, and at least there'd have been something on her in SHIELD's files. As it happens though, this woman was just a medical tech -- a low level, teenaged lab assistant... with the Red Room."

Tony carefully kept his eyes on the screen. "You're sure?" Not because he thought she wasn't, but more because he couldn't quite see how. The woman had looked younger than Natasha when he'd seen her at the hospital.

"Believe me," she said, nodding at the blandly pretty fiction on the screen, "records are sketchy around the Soviet fall, but I made sure. Ivanna Ionova Horatio was a very minor Red Room asset once upon a time."

"So how did she get caught up with HYDRA here and now?" Tony asked.

"That's what we're hoping George will tell you, Stark," Natasha answered, tucking a curl of hair behind her ear and picking up her clipboard and pen.

He gave his tie a twitch and settled his jacket with a shrug as he followed her from the conference room. "I guess. You know we're not buds, me and Puddin', right? He's probably only asked for me thinking I'll go easy on him because we shared a hooker in Amsterdam once."

She glanced back. "The Copenhagen Peace Conference in 06?" Tony gave her a scowl, but nodded. SHIELD had been up in his grill so long it really ought not to surprise him when they picked fossilized bugs out of it anymore. She nodded back at him, and walked on with a grin. "That was a Mossad agent, actually."
"It… You know, I'm not even gonna ask," Tony griped. "So what are the rules here?"

"Rules?"

Tony met her bland query with a scowl. "Yeah. I know there's rules. There's always rules to this kind of thing. Things I can't say, things he can't know, things that'll make you strangle me with my own optic nerves when I leave thinking I got what you wanted." See now, she was smirking at that, while he was trying not to shudder, and that just proved the fuck out of his point, didn't it?

"Relax, Stark. You don't know enough to fuck this up." He was on the point of objecting when he remembered the optic nerve thing, and just decided to just nod instead. She stopped in front of a blank-faced door and patted his elbow. "We've got something like twenty cameras and mics in there, and I know for a fact Jarvis will be recording from your phone the whole time as well. We're not going to miss anything. You just get him talking, and keep him there as long as he'll do it."

He grimaced as she slid a card and punched a code. "Yeah, see, getting Georgie talking is the easy part. It's the getting him to shut the hell up that's hard."

"Pot, kettle." Natasha keyed the door open before he had the time to object properly, and in two steps transformed from a cat-suited killer of men to a sickroom saint. The kindness in her voice was positively chilling. "Your visitor is here, Mr. Horatio."

George looked up at her entrance, face hard, thin, and unimpressed. But then his eyes raked over Tony, and for a moment they flared into something much more alive: anger or glee or eager, reckless greed, or maybe just hope. It was gone too quickly to be sure, buried under Georgie's habitual greeting-smirk. "Starkie Pie. Took you long enough to get my message."

"Sorry Puddin'," Tony tossed off a shrug and turned a flimsy plastic chair around to sit backward. "Little Timmy fell down the well and had a compound fracture of the upper mandible, so I totally missed you tossing gravel at my window. Maybe next time, you should say it with flowers."

"Or with a kiss, huh?" George leered, which was really no more than Tony had expected. He returned an eyeroll and tucked his sunglasses into his pocket. It gave him a moment to look George over for the signs: the bruising that had nothing to do with him getting shot; the fine red rash on his legs; the yellowed sclera of his eyes; an angry blister under the left ear, where his hair was longer than even a corporate playboy usually wore it. George saw him looking and sneered openly, don't you dare pity me written in every line of his too-thin face.

Which Tony met with a nod, because really, he didn't pity the man. Consequences were a bitch, but Georgie had known the score as well as any man who picked up a needle or put aside a condom. "Give us a moment, will you Sweetheart?" he asked Natasha, giving her a wink and a nod toward the door.

"Of course, Mr. Stark. Mr. Horatio, if you need anything, please just press the call button, and I'll-"

"Yeah, yeah. Get lost," he sneered like he wanted to bite. Tony raised his eyebrows in query once the doors closed behind her, but all George did was shrug. "She's not a real nurse. They're never that nice."

Tony grinned his camera-blinding best. "Pfft. Who the hell cares? She's damn fine eye candy. You, on the other hand..."

"Look like my white blood cells feel," George agreed with a feral sort of grin. "Whereas you look like you got a heart transplant from a Chevy." Then his grin twisted to the side, settled into
something less petty and more genuinely mean. He settled back against the bed rest and licked his lips. "So back at the Gates... did I get her?"

No question which 'her' he meant. Tony gave a nod, not missing that the first person George asked after wasn't his ailing father, or his big brother, but the woman who'd apparently tried to kill them both. "Yeah, your wicked stepmother was DOA when backup arrived." He cocked his head and took his time judging the satisfaction that settled over George's features. "So you gonna tell me why that gives you the warm fuzzies? 'Cause I gotta tell you, I always knew you were a twist and a bit of a psycho, but I don't remember you being into blood sport in the past."

George gave an incredulous look and gestured along his body; arm sling, taped ribs, hip cast, catheters and all. "Sorry, but since when does self-fucking-defense not rate as a good reason to cap a bitch?"

Tony invoked the ghost of Cap's best Condemnation Face and stood. "Yeah. Fine. Nice chatting with you, Puddin', but my time's valuable these days, and you're wasting it."

"Stark, come on, you can't."

"No, George. I know you dig the power games, but this time you don't fucking have any," he leaned low over the bed, hands braced on the metal rails that rattled beneath his weight. "You got no power here, I do. You want to sit here and play headgames with me, you're gonna need a head start to keep up. So here's a few of the cards I got in my hand, just to help you decide how much more of our time you need to waste before I walk out and let the Homeland Security terrorism laws have you."

He held up a finger and started counting. "You wore an experimental energy field vest to meet your brother -- who is also now dead, by the way -- at the airport!" Another finger. "You made sure to be out of the country when your whole family was attacked by terrorists who knew an awful lot about what they were going for." Another finger. "You designed a hack that would live stream what happened in that limo -- your carefully staged self-defense case -- to a guy who's seen you naked, high, and covered in glitter, just in case he's dumb enough not to realize how hard you're working to cover your own damn ass."

Tony wouldn't have thought George could go paler, but he managed it. "Starkie, you-"

"I think maybe Paul was the real target here, Puddin'," Tony said, dusting his hands with three loud claps. "With Jerry down, Paul's the real heir to HoratioCorp, isn't he? So maybe stepmom Ivanna was actually an accomplice to get him out of the way, and your shooting her in the garage was nothing more than tying up loose ends."

"No!" There. That desperate yelp hadn't been anything but the truth. Tony waited expectantly while the man got his breathing under control. "That bitch is where it started. It's all been her fault, and I never trusted her, so I made sure she couldn't fuck me over. But when they told me she'd been grabbed, I knew it had to be ... I expected them to try something. I didn't know what, exactly, but when Paul said he'd sent my chauffeur home from the airport, I figured he was gonna try... I dunno... something."

Tony scoffed. "You thought Paul was going to kill you?"

George had the grace to look abashed, at least. "No, not kill me. Jesus, pansy like him couldn't kill a fucking spider. It's just I thought he might... I thought with Jerry off the field, she might make him..." He ran his free hand through his hair and gave it a yank like he needed the pain to brace himself.

Then he leveled Tony a look more honest than any yet had been. "Ok. So after Halloween, when the
"You mean HYDRA," Tony clarified without mercy. "Terrorist group, Nazi roots, likes faceless minions and hates Captain America on principle. That's the buyers you're talking about here, right?"

George looked sour, but nodded. "Yeah. Only they weren't holding up their end. They wanted to take possession, but didn't want to pony up what they'd promised, and."

"Wait, wait." Tony put up a hand. "You mean Jerry had those fucking portal bombs designed, tested, and built on spec?!" The bitter look George flashed him made it clear he'd fought for the same point more than once in the past, so Tony just set his hand down again and sighed. "Right. So we've established your dad lost his fucking mind and started burning money. What did he do when he suspected the murderous, world-dominating terrorists he was dealing with might have been less than honorable men?"

"He moved it all. All the research data, all the machining equipment, all the hardcopy, server backups, every prototype, even the goddamned tools got centralized."

"And the people?" George blinked, momentarily thrown, and Tony felt his chest tighten with rage. "The people, Puddin, the scientists, the techs, the engineers who did the fucking work; what did he do with them while he was centralizing?"

"How should I know? Bought them off, probably," George recovered with a careless ease that all but proved he'd never bothered to ask or wonder. He waved the question away and went back to his point like it had never been asked. "Anyway, Dad put the entire project under a bio-lock security protocol keyed directly to him. Blood, prints, retina, biometrics, testicle texture and 20 fucking questions for even him to get in. Anybody tries to bypass or cheat that system, and the whole lab and everything in it gets bricked. The device will eat itself, and everything that got used to make it, and nobody gets nothing."

"Which would be a smart standoff position," Tony agreed as if he didn't want to punch something. "Except for the part where Jerry Horatio's dying."

"Because the decisions a man makes when he knows that he's dying aren't for him." Cap's words echoed distantly in his mind, and Tony blinked. "You two were the backup plan," he accused. "You and Paul were supposed to get into the lab in case Jerry couldn't."

"It takes all three of us, actually," George's blistered lips twisted in a grimace. "Paul, me, and the brat. All alive, all cooperating fully, or everything he's fucking cared a cent about for the last year goes up in sparks."

"So why wouldn't you be cooperating?" Tony shrugged to answer George's glare. "I mean come on, you seemed plenty on board with the rest of the gig, working with HYDRA, blowing up buildings with illegal testing."

"Hey, I just did what Dad asked me to-"

Tony laughed openly. "Never in your life, Puddin! Never without a fight. You were in this. Don't think I don't know exactly where all those arc reactor triggers came from. Ah ah, your poker face is shit," he waved George's protest away like a fly. "No denials, no diversions, no bullshit. Now why did you put so much planning into how you were gonna resist?"

"Because if they got the device before they paid," George explained as if Tony was five, "they
wouldn't have paid!"

He shook his head. "This was never about money. Not the way your dad and HYDRA both have been throwing tech around and burning lab facilities. There's no profit in waste on that scale. None."

George watched him for a long moment, silent, intent. Scared, but not of Tony, not of SHIELD, and not, he thought, of HYDRA either.

"What was the price?" Tony asked, beginning to trace the data points toward conclusion.

George kept watching, chewing his lip, waiting.

Tony claimed the chair again, folded his hands across the rickety plastic back, and waited right back at him. The count made it to twenty seven before George broke, looked aside with a weathered laugh and a shake of his head.

"I saw you on TV last year you know," he said. "Tony fucking Stark, fighting aliens alongside a big green monster, a pagan god, and a guy who punched Hitler in the face back in the day." He fiddled the corner of his blanket between frail, pale fingers, then he cut a wry glance at Tony from under his lashes and shook his head. "So trust me, Starkie Pie, I'm aware of the irony when I say you're not gonna believe this..."

~* Juggled With a Fool's Skull *~

"Not bad," Natasha told Tony when he finally emerged again. She offered a smile and a very tall paper cup full of the blackest, bitterest, strongest coffee SHIELD could grudge up, both of which Tony accepted with a shiver.

"I feel like I need a shower," he said, grimacing at the first too-hot sip. "I fucking hope you guys got everything you need, because if I have to go in there and talk to that sad little sicko again, I'm gonna seriously need like a gallon of single malt in me first."

The smile she gave him in reply was somehow sympathetic, and yet without a scrap of mercy anywhere in it. But at least she patted his elbow instead of shanking him or something. "I can't say a location on the stash wouldn't have been good to have," she admitted, leading him back down the hall.

He shook his head, and shivered through another sip. "He really didn't know. That's just the kind of power play bullshit Jerry would pull on his kids, too."

"I know. But we'll get analysts onto it anyway, just in case he knows more than he realizes he does. Between the dick measuring and the wheedling for favors, there might be something we can cross-reference with our files on him." She stopped at a bank of elevators, smirking when Tony's momentum carried him several steps beyond it.

"Conference room on the observation deck," she answered the question he hadn't asked. "Steve's there already, and the X-Men should be arriving any time now. You guys needed to talk to Mrs. Horatio, right?"

"Well yeah, but I kind of figured that's what the safe house was for."

She shook her head as the elevator arrived. "Safe houses don't work when crowds of celebrities and superheroes are seen wandering in and out of them. Besides, the Director seems to think that Hana and Joan will be safer at Stark Tower anyhow."
Tony rolled his eyes. "Have I mentioned how much I fucking love the way he assumes that anything of mine is his to fuck with?"

She cut him a sidelong glance, and shrugged. "Pot, kettle. Anyhow, it was my idea." At his startled glance, she shrugged. "I like to keep my sources of intel close. Especially when my enemies have already tried once to take them away. And Thor really likes Joan." All of which was true, but none of which conveniently fed Tony's desire to have someone he could safely take swings at just then. Fury, who gave as good as, or worse than he got, was at least good for a good, tension relieving snarkfest.

When the elevator stopped, however, Natasha didn't leave it at Tony's side. "Clint's flying Hana and Joan in," she said as Tony turned her a look. "I'm meeting them at hangar deck one. Figured you'd rather go and wait with Steve for now."

He gave her the eyebrow. "Oh you did, did you? And why would you think that?"

"It's cute how you actually think you're subtle," she smiled as the doors slid between them. "Conference room three. See you in thirty, if not before." And then she left him standing in the hall, alone but for the faint, unfamiliar sensation of mortification hovering over his head.

So Tony did what he always did in situations like these -- reminded himself that he was Tony Fucking Stark Goddammit, and shame was for losers. If he felt like finding conference room three before the meeting, it was just him being prepared, not pathetic, even if his friend did happen to be there already. Seriously, someone was going to have to talk to Natasha about her wildly unfounded assumptions sometime soon.

Steve was, of course, exactly where he was supposed to be -- conference room three, parked at the head of a long, wide board table, eyes fixed on the yellowed pages before him. If you looked up 'scary-competent' in a dictionary, you'd probably be looking at that very picture. And if you didn't know Steve from Captain America, you'd also miss how his face was pale, as set and still as wax in the harsh fluorescent lights; how the rhythm of his breathing was precisely, exactly measured in the silent room; how he didn't blink, didn't shift, didn't so much as cut a glance toward the door when Tony came into the room.

Tony's lingering anger at George's headgames didn't last a second under the cold dread Steve's face brought welling up out of his guts. He pressed the door quietly to, and went to take the chair at Steve's right side. "Hey," he said, and let his hand rest on the table just beside the curl of Steve's gloved one.

It was a long, silent moment before Steve managed to reply. "Hey." Then he slid the file Tony's way without another word. Which was convenient, because while Tony was good enough to read type upside down, sidelong, and even reversed from the backside of a holographic projection, he wasn't nearly so good with handwritten script.

He pulled the pages close and squinted. "What am I looking at?" He flipped a page, then three more, and shook his head. "Are these in... what, German?"

Steve nodded and scraped the cowl backward off his head. "Yes they are. Fury said the recovery teams found them. One of those hostage bots we brought down last night had a small document safe in it." He nodded at the file, and only then did he meet Tony's eyes. "These were inside it."

"What do they say?" Tony asked, keeping his blackjack-blank. Keeping the memory of George's sneer shoved down in a very silent hole in his mind.
"He said she brought proof with her from Russia, Starkie. Hard evidence direct from the guy who actually pulled it off. You know my old man never ponied up a cent of his own without a fucking guarantee on paper."

Steve looked down at them again, a single, pained glance before he shook his head. "I can't really ... I'm not sure."

Tony gave that claim his best look of scathing disbelief. "I know you speak German, Cap. It's in your file, which, yes, I have read." Steve took another breath, long, taut, and whistling through his nose, and then he surrendered a nod. Tony pushed the files back in front of him and tapped them with an imperious finger. "So give; what's this say?"

"I can't tell," he bit back, and the flash of anger in his eyes was a cleaner thing than the frozen anxiety of a moment before. "Tony, they're research documents. Science stuff that I couldn't make heads or tails of even if it was in plain English."

Think about it. What could you do if no disease could touch you? If you could fuck up your liver, your lungs, your goddamned heart, Stark, and your body would just grow new ones. Don't you tell me you wouldn't be tempted to try it out, no matter the cost.

Tony shook his head, swallowed hard. "Bullshit. You understand enough that your fucking hands are shaking, Steve. Now tell me what the hell this is."

Steve closed his eyes, and for a moment, underneath the broad muscle and long bone of his frame, seemed very, very small. "I can't make it all out. It really is technical, but..." he swallowed. "When I went AWOL that first time, -- when I went looking for Bucky, remember, I told you?"

He hadn't told him. Not exactly, but Tony knew the story, so he nodded anyway.

"I. Um. He was." The red leather gauntlet made a frantic riot of wheat-gold hair. "There was a laboratory, and this table. He was. Bucky," his voice cracked under the strain, but Steve pressed on like it would kill him not to. "They had him strapped-

"Cap." He flinched as Tony touched his arm, but steadied then, and allowed a second gentle press of palm to sleeve, and innocent, so fucking innocent. "Steve, I know. I mean, I don't know, because I wasn't there, but I..." The amount of willpower it took to stop himself from tapping at the casing of his arc reactor was frankly astonishing, but Tony managed it for Steve's sake. "I get it, ok?"

"No, you don't." Steve looked up with something shattered behind his eyes. "Because there were tables like that... laboratories like that in every other HYDRA prison base we hit!" He swallowed, set his hand carefully, gently, precisely down on the table. "We never found any other... survivors, or, um... evidence that the labs were ever- that there were other prisoners who-" Tony gripped Steve's arm harder, trying and failing to counter the tremors he could feel beneath the knotted muscle. "Command said once my squad started taking out the other bases, HYDRA probably didn't have the time to continue the research." His mouth twisted around the word like he was trying his best not to touch it. Then he turned those blue eyes up from the past like he'd just realized he was drowning in it. "But we weren't the only ones who got to HYDRA bases, Tony. I know the British got a couple on their own once we had Schmidt in retreat, and the Soviets got at least three, and I don't." He swallowed. "I don't know what... what they found."

"The math is simple enough, Starkie. You want what Dad's got, I can help you get to it, and I can even probably help you get a solid shot at the bad guys in the bargain. And all I want in return is my life back. If that Russian bitch and her immortal Nazi-Commie assassin wasn't all a pipe dream, then I want a dose of this magic fairy dust nano virus she had Dad convinced of. I want to be test subject"
Tony made himself look at the documents again. "Is that what... these are?"

Steve nudged the pages with his finger, as if he didn't want to touch them without the gauntlets. "I don't know, but I think... maybe." He swallowed, then shook his head. "Fury said the copies are being translated now, but..." It was an obvious effort, but Steve turned several of the thin, yellowed pages over before stabbing his finger solidly at a signature that was just this side of an illegible scrawl. Over it, though, the same words had been carefully printed in a neat, copperplate hand.

*Dr. Arnim Zola.*

Tony closed his eyes, took a breath, and began to swear.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween, all you goblins!

I'm breaking one of my rules here, and not only posting early (you would normally have gotten this chapter on Friday, but I'll be at WFC over the weekend, and will have no time then), but you're getting it before chapter 12 is even in the bag.

So I hope you enjoy your Halloween treat! Look for chapter 12 a week from Friday, and in the meantime, thank you -- as always -- to all you commenters who share your squee with me and help me keep plugging along. Seriously, this would not be happening without you!

Cheers, and happy Samhain!
"So he actually thought *Loki* was gonna cure his cancer?"

Tony couldn't blame Steve for that incredulous tone, really. "I know, right? Because a Trickster God who specializes in illusions is *totally* gonna waste his time patching up his bankroll once he's made himself king of the world!"

Behind Steve in the hallway, Clint was shaking his head like he wasn't sure whether to laugh, or go find somewhere to throw up. "Well I guess it's better than Horatio selling out the human race for profit," he said, but not like he believed it.

"And it also explains how Granyavich and Ionova knew what to offer him," Natasha added, folded tidily against the facing wall. "If the twins were acting as their father's envoy with Loki's task force, they'd have told their half brother the price on the table."

"Gold star for the lady," Tony agreed. "And if it just so happened that Grannybitch had met his dad's latest baby momma while they were back in the USSR, and she happened to tell him about the vintage documents she'd lifted from her previous employers..." The four of them looked back down the hall to the observation bay, where Joan Horatio, quite possibly the only one of his children for whom Jerry Horatio actually cared, was teaching Thor and Bruce how to play Hearts. Gloria's mother sat a little removed from them by the windows with a magazine in her lap and her eyes focused somewhere between the horizon and the end of the world.

"There's a good chance that HYDRA wasn't even consulted on any of this," Tony said into the considering silence. "It could just have been an in-family con game. We all know that, right?"

Steve nodded unhappily. "They have seemed weirdly... restrained about it all. The HYDRA I remember wouldn't ever have paid contractors like Horatio to build their weapons. They'd have taken the scientists and engineers they wanted captive and forced them to work at gunpoint." He shook his head and tapped the closed file folder against his thigh. "If this was all a ploy for Granyavich to gain traction inside the organization, the higher ups might not even have known what he was doing in HYDRA's name. He might have been keeping it all secret until he could hand the finished devices over and claim the credit for himself."

"That sounds like Horatio style," Tony groused quietly.

"Now that the portal bombs work though, we have to expect that HYDRA will *get* involved," Steve went on. "We have to treat this as if they're already in this all the way." He didn't look down at the file, but everyone else did, all of them wondering.

"Jarvis is translating the notes right now," Tony said after a silent moment. "We can have Bruce vet them when he's done. Nobody's ever come closer to replicating Erskine's serum than him, so if there's anything to this crap of Zola's, he'll be able to tell us."
Steve pressed his lips and took a breath, clearly steeling himself for something. "There is. I mean, there was." He licked his lips, glance flickering warily between the three of them. "Something to it. Tony, when I rescued Bucky and the others from the prison factory, remember I told you how I found him? The condition he was in?"

Tony didn't wince, but he wanted to. Steve didn't need to say the word 'torture' -- all three of them had gone there already. "Nazis did a lot of that though, Cap," Tony tried. "They were kind of famous for it, you know?"

That won him an unfairly scathing glance, he felt. "Yes, Tony, I do know that. Point is, I practically had to carry Bucky from that room, but just an hour later we started the 60 mile march back to Allied territory, and he kept up. Didn't fall behind, didn't need to be carried, didn't ask for breaks. Didn't need any help at all. He kept up just fine."

Oh. Tony felt his face go cold with the memory of stale water, ozone, and vomit. Oh.

"Shit," Clint agreed.

Natasha though, shook her head. "HYDRA used to have a lot of things that they don't anymore. Zola's one of them. The Tesseract's another." She reached across the hall, rested her hand for a moment on Steve's elbow, as if to ground him. "I'm pretty sure we have enough trouble on our plates with all this already, so can we not borrow more just yet?"

Steve gave her a sour look. "I'd love to tell you yes, Widow, but I'm pretty sure I don't actually get a deciding vote on that."

"Well it looks like the vote's deferred anyhow," Clint put in, drawing their gazes with a nod down the other side of the hallway, where Storm, Beast and Nightcrawler were escorting Professor X from the elevator lobby, Coulson and his briefing files a respectful distance behind. "It's just about showtime."

"Yup," Tony agreed, plucking the files from Steve's hand and turning back to the conference room with a sigh. "Send in the clowns."

~* Been the Bad Cop *~

After Cap finished speaking, Hana Tsue Horatio was silent for a long time -- so long that Tony had to hold his breath and recite pi in his head to keep himself from fidgeting. She sat absolutely still, her dark eyes shielded behind her hair, staring at the hands she had folded carefully, precisely on the tabletop in front of her. It was actually hard to tell for sure that she was breathing.

"I... I'm sorry," she managed at last, raising her face and sweeping aside her hair to reveal a smile as charming as it was hollow. "You have the wrong idea, sir. My daughter is a normal little girl."

"Absolutely normal, Ma'am," Cap agreed, pinning her with that earnest stare that had foundered villains and billionaire playboys alike. "She's a wonderful girl, smart and resourceful, and very gifted. I know you must be terrified after what's happened, which is why we want your help to find her now."

"No, Mr. America, I mean you say my daughter is..." she waved a hand at the drawings on the conference room's videoscreen where dozens of terrifyingly intimate moments were captured in graphite, and offered up a brittle laugh. "You say she told you these things inside your head, with only a touch. But you are wrong. She could not have done this."

The ghost of 'no child of mine...' rang in the shocked silence that followed, and Tony ground his
teeth. It didn't help, so he waved a hand at the screen and blurted, "Did you look at the drawings, lady? Do I need to quote you the statistical improbability of that many accurate hits without personal context? Captain America has no reason to have known any of that. And he didn't know it until your daughter-"

"Then perhaps he is the mutant!" she yelped, then flashed him a glance that was equal parts panic, defiance, and contrition. "He must be, to know so much that he could not have seen," she continued in a more neutral tone. "But he is a super-hero, and my daughter is not magical. She is normal." Tony could see how hard she tried not to flick her glance toward Hank McCoy and Kurt Wagner, both of whom were watching with identical, carefully expressionless faces. "My daughter is human."

"There is nothing inhuman about your daughter's gift, or your own, Hana," Xavier said into the silence that followed that. "Human history is full of telepaths and predictors, who-"

"No, please listen to me," she broke in, not quite managing to look squarely at the Professor before she fixed her pleading gaze back on Steve again. "What you want is impossible. I cannot tell you where these people have taken my daughter. What you think we are... it is not who we are. My daughter is human, only human, and so am I."

'Jesus Christ, Tony, what the hell's the matter with you? Can't you act like a normal kid for five goddamned minutes? Huh? Is that actually too much to ask?' And just like that, Tony was out of his chair, hands slapping flat and loud to the table, stilling the rising murmurs of protest the others had begun.

"All right, that's enough bullshit," he decided, heart racing with an overload of Enough Goddammit.

"Stark..." Tony gave Coulson a 'deal with it' glance, then fixed his attention back on the problem at hand, who had shrunk into her chair, arms half-lifted before her, like she thought the table was suddenly going to burn her or something.

"Answer me this, lady," he pressed on with his point but dialed back the anger enough to keep Steve from objecting. "Let's assume for a moment that you're right about yourself -- that you have absolutely no meta-human mutation whatsoever, and your DNA is as exciting and unique as white rice." He leaned across the table, stared at her expectantly until she managed to look him, however briefly, in the eye. "Do you actually love your daughter?"

She licked her lips, sat up just a little straighter, eyes still ticking nervously about the room, as if she suspected a trick. "What do you-"

"Do you love Gloria?" Tony pressed, merciless. "It's not a hard question."

Uncoiling a little more, she hardened her chin, met his eyes and answered, "of course I love-"

"Ok, good for you," Tony waved the words aside like smoke, and pinned her with a dare. "Now what if you're wrong about her? What if she is exactly what we say she is -- a telepath, and a precognator, and a mutant. Will you still love her then?"

Someone in the room hissed at that, a thin, whistling breath of outrage. Tony had learned that sound by heart well before his fifth birthday, and he didn't let it distract him now. He kept his stare, ballsy with challenge, squarely on Hana Tsue Horatio's face as the blood rose in her cheeks and her eyes went hard and bright. "I told you, she isn't-"

Tony rolled right over her, ruthless and not sorry. "Will she still be your little girl even if she's a mutant like them? Will she still be the baby you carried inside you?" She was flinching again, but not
because she was startled, oh no; now she was flinching because the truth fucking hurt. And Tony had not a single scrap of sympathy whatsoever.

"Will you still be able to love her even if it turns out that she's not what you expected, maybe even not what you wanted? No, don't look at them," he snapped as her head started to turn toward the X-Men at the end of the room. "You look at me. You look me in the eye and you answer my question. No more bullshit, no more dancing around it; Can you love Gloria even though she's a mutant? Or is she dead to you already?" She did look him in the eye, her own swimming with tears, bright with anguish, and if that was all she had to offer then Tony did not goddamned well care if she was scared. Let her stand the fuck up, push back like a real mother. Let her fucking deserve the brave, strong girl HYDRA took away from her, and then he could cut her some slack for her feelings!

"Tony..." Steve warned, rising and putting a hand on his arm.

Tony didn't bother to shake him off. "Because I will tell you this right now, lady, if your love for your daughter depends on her not being a goddamned telepath like you, then it's probably better if we just back the fuck off right now and let Gloria stay with HYDRA -- at least they seem to want her!"

That was too much. He'd known it when it was coming out of his mouth, and he'd said it anyway, and fuck if now that breakthrough point he'd been so sure he saw in her dark eyes hadn't turned straight into a breakdown instead. She covered her face, wilting into her chair as she babbled brokenly in Korean. No way she was standing up now, goddamnit.

"That's enough, Mr. Stark," Xavier said, looking at Tony like he'd just taken a dump on the carpet instead of being the one to finally get through the mime show of denial and excuses. "You've made your point."

Steve tugged Tony away from the table, steering them both out the door and into the hallway, murmuring, "Give her a few minutes, Tony."

He shook the hand off his arm as soon as the door closed. "She's had sixteen years of minutes, Steve," he bit back. "We don't know how many more minutes Gloria has left. HYDRA's had her more than 24 hours, and you know those odds."

"This isn't a normal abduction."

"We don't know what it is, Steve," Tony snarled back, "For fuck's sake, it's not like it was a hard question, anyway."

"Yes, Tony, it is for her," Steve insisted, heading them both into the lounge where Bruce was poring over his tablet, the pages of Zola's file spread out on the cushion around him. "It shouldn't be, I know, but Hana's been living in fear of this for a long time. Probably since before she even left Korea, and-"

"That's no excuse!" Tony blurted, pacing the length of the sofa from the end where Clint sat throwing knives at a message board, past Bruce in the middle, and back to Cap's end again. "It's no fucking excuse at all."

Steve watched him burn off the anger in quick, thunking strides, an odd sort of sympathy on his face as he said, "And I'm not asking you to excuse her, Tony. Her, or anybody else. Just give Hana a moment to find her courage, all right?"

"She's her mother!" Fuck. He hadn't meant to yell. He offered a wince in answer to Bruce's scowl,
and a sneer to Clint's raised eyebrow.

Steve just nodded, too calm by half, and said, "She is. And you just kicked a hole in the shield she's been using to try and keep her and her daughter safe all their lives. A minute or two more patience isn't a lot to ask, in comparison. Hey," Steve's hand shot out suddenly, snared Tony's arm and stopped him in his tracks as he turned at the end of a circuit. His face was so open, so unguarded, and so terribly earnest that Tony couldn't fight being tugged down to sit beside him. If Steve ever turned to Evil, the world would just be fucking screwed, was what.

"Hana loves her daughter, Tony," he said. "That's why she's been denying this so fiercely -- because she loves Gloria, and because she's learned just how badly mutants can be treated within the law. She wants to help us, she's just frightened is all."

Clint threw his last knife then slipped off the sofa to retrieve the collection from the message board while Tony struggled to dump the frustration and be reasonable. "I get that, Steve," he managed after a couple of breaths, watching Clint resume his perch in an uncharacteristic silence. "I get that she's been knocked around, and she has her reasons to be scared, but that doesn't change things one fucking bit where Gloria's concerned. If Hana can't get over her own trauma, then the end result's the same, whether she wanted to help or not; her daughter's fucked."

"I know that," Steve answered, still looking at him like he could see straight through. "But Tony, Hana might be our only way to find Gloria in time. She won't fail us, but we have to give her every chance to succeed."

"You know who else needs every chance to succeed?" Bruce grumbled from beside them. "Especially if you expect him to make some kind of sense out of the translated, half-encrypted, seventy plus year old ramblings of a guy who might have been a genius but was definitely the bad kind of crazy, and kind of a perverted creep too, from the look of things?"

As far as the team had come in finding comfort with Dr. Banner's Occasional Condition, there wasn't one of them who could miss that particular note of aggravated strain in Bruce's normally calm voice. Tony was pretty sure he felt the blood draining from his face as he turned, deflective smile rising on instinct.

"Umm, I'm guessing this guy right here?" he said, pointing at Bruce, who glared back from over his glasses.

"No points for the obvious, Stark," Clint sniped quietly, flinching when Bruce's glare pinned him too.

"The odds for that success would be markedly improved if there were a lot less distraction going on here," Bruce finished, shooting a final glare Steve's way.

Cap only nodded though, and offered a peacemaker's smile as he got to his feet. "I think they have green tea at the Medical level mess hall, Bruce. Want Tony and I to get you some?"

Bruce peered suspiciously between the two of them, and then huffed. "Yes. Yes, I want you and Tony to go away and take your time getting me a cup of green tea. With honey."

"What, I have to leave to fetch refreshments but Barton gets to stay and perforate the decor?" Tony protested, and while he didn't bother struggling as Steve hauled him to his feet, he did press a hand squarely over his wounded arc reactor. "That's just hurtful! Bruce, I'm hurt."

"Not just yet, you aren't," came the growled reply as Bruce bent his head over the tablet once more.
Barton said nothing, just blew the two of them a silent kiss as Steve led Tony back down the hallway toward the elevators.

"Come on, Tony," Steve chuckled. "We can check in on Thor and Natasha while we're over there. And isn't that the mess with the really good coffeemaker, too?"

Tony shot him a glare, but followed. "You're totally not buying me off with espresso drinks," he warned. "Your nasty little homework assignment has busted my lab-buddy, and it'll take more than a barista in a Kevlar jumpsuit to make me forget it!"

"Perish the thought," Steve replied with a smile that showed no farther than the crinkle outside his left eye, "I figure it'll at least take one of those four-shot, triple caramel lattes with whipped cream to even get a start on buying your forgiveness."

"Ugh. That and some insulin and I'll be all set," Tony replied, which made Steve laugh openly and clap him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, you can order the bitter kind in the tiny little cup," he said, drawing them to a stop outside the conference room. "We'll just pretend the other one's mine. That way you can steal drinks when you think nobody's looking, like you always do." Then, like the gigantic coward he was underneath the hero act, Steve totally ran and hid from whatever entirely justified and undoubtedly stunning comeback Tony might have served him, by putting his big blond head inside the room to ask if any of the others wanted coffee.

"Thank you, Captain," Xavier replied, "but I wonder if I might trouble you for tea instead?" He sounded every inch the schoolteacher, and looked it too as he helped Mrs. Horatio sort through the images on the touch screen.

The woman looked rattled, a bit tearstained, but to judge from the defiant glare she shot Tony, she was over her whole helpless little mortal shtick, so good for her.

"Of course," Steve said, then looked to the other three mutants for their orders. Storm wanted water, Nightcrawler and Beast both perked up at the mention of coffee, which actually kicked Tony's brain right into gear. He backed into the hallway, fished his phone out of his pocket and sent a quick text to Bruce.

*McCoy's pretty into cellular bio I hear, and Wagner just might be better at reading German than even Jarvis; both are bored out of their skulls in here. Don't be too proud to ask for help, Brucie.*

"Anything for you, Ms. Horatio?" he heard Cap asking as he put the phone away.

"There should be more pictures," she said, scowling at the videoscreen like it was holding out the good stuff on her. Which shouldn't have startled Tony, given that she was, y'know, psychic and all, but he couldn't stop the chill all the same. From the look on Cap's face, it startled him too.

"There was some feedback from the rest of the team," Tony explained to the eyebrow he was getting from Xavier and Steve. "I had Jarvis cull the ones that obviously didn't belong, but everything that's relevant to this case is right there in that file."

"No it isn't," said no less than three people at once.

Jarvis, who was apparently plugged into the conference room via his access port with SHIELD dispatch, uploaded another ten folder icons onto the screen. "I sorted and prioritized the Captain's work according to facial recognition algorithms, and known individuals associated with the Horatio family," he said as Xavier began enlarging the thumbnails. "I can reassemble the images as they appeared in the Captain's sketch pages if that would be helpful."
That was when the *Tony Stark, the Himbo Years* file opened up like a pair of carpet-burned knees. Tony winced, but reminded himself that there wasn't much in there that couldn't be found on Google, so what was he gonna do about it?

Grab Cap by the shield arm and haul his ass off for coffee was what. Tragically literal coffee, of course, though metaphorical coffee would have been a hell of a comfort just then too. But if Tony couldn't have hot, furtive elevator sex with his *friend* while his youthful indiscretions were being aired behind his back, at least he could get some caffeine out of the deal.

~* Known When To Stop *~

"I used to think it'd be pretty keen, you know," Steve said as they waited for the bored barista-agent to work her way through the drinks order. He was watching the girl work, but Tony could detect a wistful distance in Steve's eyes that had nothing to do with the chocolate to espresso ratio of Thor's mocha.

"Froofy coffees?" Tony hazarded a guess and was rewarded with a sidelong glance and an exasperated smile.

"Telepathy," Steve answered. "Being able to look into someone's eyes and know what they really thought, what they really meant to do. Would have been really useful sometimes, back when I was little."

"Seriously?" Tony laughed, shaking his head. "Why would you need a cheat code? I mean, even before the serum you must have always-"

"The mug," he answered. "Also known as the mark, the chump, the sap, and in the case of most girls, 'that nice friend of Bucky's.'" Tony winced at that last one -- kiss of death, no doubt about it.

Steve's mouth twisted up, wry and amused. "I got into so many fights because folks seemed to think I was the best joke ever. Only so many times you can be the patsy before you stop believing anybody's what they say they are. Didn't mean I liked it, or that I took it well, but..." he half shrugged. "I just remember thinking that if I could just look at someone and *know* whether they were playing straight with me or not, then maybe I wouldn't always wind up being wrong when I tried to give folks the benefit of the doubt."

Tony gave Steve his best 'bullshit' face, and only when Steve rose to the regard with a huff of annoyance did he reply. "Like you wouldn't have done it anyway," he challenged with a smirk. "The benefit of the doubt is all you ever give people, Steve, even when you know damned well they don't deserve it! Even when all they've shown you is meanness and pettiness and fear and spite, there you are, still giving them every chance you can think of. You, Captain America, are a man of faith." He reached out and poked Steve right in the star. "You're a true believer, a Paladin in the cult of human kindness, and don't pretend you'd even know yourself without it."

That actually won a laugh. The silence that settled between them was comfortable, and smelled enticingly of mocha, but Tony knew it wasn't going to last. The considering stare Steve was giving him was kind of a big hint at that.

"What about you though?" Steve asked at last, and Tony stiffened. Shit, he wasn't about to bring up all that Loki-and-his-scepter-of-douchebaggery inspired bullshit they'd said all the way back when they'd first- "I mean, didn't you ever think it'd be nice to know what people were thinking?"

Tony totally did not wilt in relief. He didn't. What happened was that he leaned over, grabbed Cap's caramel death bomb coffee off the counter and sipped a little off the top before the melting whipped
cream could dribble down the side. It was sweet, way too hot, and it bought him exactly enough time not to look like a moron. And Steve bought it completely, too. The knowing smile on his face probably just meant Tony had whipped cream in his moustache or something.

"Hell, man, most of the time, I was pretty sure they weren't thinking," he said, reaching for a napkin. "It's a genius thing, I guess. It takes us awhile to figure out why all the people around us are so damned slow, and just don't get stuff that's just... obvious, you know?" He shook his head, remembering just how popular he was not during his early school years. "I think I was heading to college before I figured out that other people were really using their brains at all."

Steve looked at him, blue eyes gentle, lips moist and sad. "Okay, but how about feelings? Empathy. That's supposed to be part of the gift, right? Knowing how people really feel?"

Tony thought of his dad, and shivered. "Again, pretty sure I already knew what people felt about me. I can't say that having proof of it would have been anything I'd ever have wished for. And anyway," he challenged, steering the conversation forcibly away from the cliff's edge. "You take a long look at Charles Xavier and tell me you think knowing the inside of people's brains has made him a happy guy."

A chuckle, and Steve shook his head. "You'd only call me a liar," he replied, and stole Tony's drink. He got whipped cream on his nose.

"You're a disaster. Here, hold still," Tony grabbed his chin and applied a napkin to the problem. Steve rolled his eyes, but submitted to the grooming with grace. "And don't think I failed to notice that past tense, by the way," he said as he turned to pitch the napkin into the trash. "'I used to think it'd be pretty keen'. Meaning you have a different opinion now that you've had a firsthand taste of telepathy?"

That wistful look came back into Steve's eye, and he rubbed at his neck just under the slouch of his cowl. "Well, it just doesn't seem like it's done much good, is all. The girl tried to send me a signal, but I turned it all into noise by the time I could get it out. Even when things were clear in my head, I still didn't understand what they meant."

"Noise," Tony agreed as the barista-agent set his quad-Americano on the counter and went to find paper trays. "This doesn't happen to you often, does it?" Steve gave him that quizzical expression of his, and Tony waved vaguely in the direction of his head. "Not being good at something the first time you pick it up, I mean. Oh, don't give me that face. We both remember the Phone Incident."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Tony, it took me a week to figure out how to turn the damned thing on."

"And a week after that, you'd worked out how to do just about everything but hack a hardened mainframe with it," Tony agreed, pleased with how neither of them felt the need to mention how Tony had dummied up a bullshit set of instructions to put into the box with Steve's brand new, pre-release, exclusive-beta StarkPhone, or what those instructions, if followed, would have led to the next time the phone's GPS detected Steve in the vicinity of Fury's office. "Hell, Bruce still has to get Jarvis to help him upload his photos from the phone to his server, and how many times a week does Barton's butt call us all to chat?"

"Depends on the pants," Steve chuckled.

Tony grinned and pulled out his phone to bump a tip to the barista-agent. "Exactly. So my point, oh unreasonably competent one, is that if you'd been actually born with Gloria's gift, or hell, if you'd even given yourself a week to get used to it, not only would the bad guys not stand a chance, but not a goddamned one of your teammates would have a secret left that we could hide from you." He
picked up the tray with the caramel confection on it and stole another slurp as transport fee, leaving Steve to get the other two trays.

"Natasha would murder me in my sleep," Steve chuckled, following Tony toward the secure medical ward. "Unless Fury got to me first." Then he flashed a glance Tony's way, and the bashful-but-intrigued blush came back to his cheeks. "Wouldn't do me any good to see anybody's secrets anyway. All those images didn't make people any easier to understand. It was all just more complicated, more crowded... more data didn't really mean more information."

And bless his all-American head, but Steve was totally talking about those pages and pages of Starkporn he'd lovingly rendered, wasn't he? It was more than Tony could choke down without the cockles of his flinty little heart going over all toasty. "More data is more information, Cap," he tossed over his shoulder, hiding his grin. "By definition."

"Fine then," Steve grumbled, close behind. "Information makes no damned difference at all when none of it makes sense."

"And that right there's what I mean," Tony said. "If you weren't busy trying to see the very best in everyone, the data would make all the difference." Tony turned, sharp and quick on his heel, and Steve had to lurch up short, curling over the drinks trays so that nothing would slosh. He was in no position to dodge it when Tony clapped a steadying hand to his shoulder. "For anybody but you, the data would be your simple answer, all the proof you needed to make your mind right up." Tony slid his hand upward, over the rumpled cowl until his fingers curled in the soft, fine hairs at Steve's nape, and though the skin heated fiercely against his palm, though the blue of his eyes spiraled out into stunned black over his blushing cheeks, Steve didn't pull back, and he didn't shake free.

"But you're too busy extending credit where nobody thinks it's due to reach conclusions like that," Tony murmured, reckless in slow motion as he eased in to brush his lips over the shell of Steve's ear. "So thanks for that, Cap." He was pushing his luck and he knew it, but Tony couldn't resist just one more brush of his thumb over the racing pulse under Steve's jaw, just another second of blush-scorched skin against his cheek.

"I should dump this coffee all over you," Steve warned, even as he still didn't pull away.

"But you won't," Tony said as the better part of stupidity caught him by the scruff of the neck and pried him out of headbutting range. "So thanks for that too." Then he strode off down the hallway, leaving Steve to hopefully talk himself out of kicking Tony's ass while he was getting his blushes under control. And maybe Tony would have liked to say he was sorry for stepping so clearly over the Friendzone line, but really, who would he be fooling?

~* Stole the Last Can of Who Hash *~

Tony had intended to wait outside the secure medical ward for Steve and his dignity to catch up, but the guards posted there had other ideas. "What's up, guys?" Tony asked when they waved him over to the door. "Someone need a pee break or something?"

The tall one smirked. "No, we're all good here, Mr. Stark. It's just the Director's waiting for you. Said to send you in right away."

Tony backed out of reach. "I didn't." It didn't count as a lie if he denied the accusation preemptively, right? Tony was innocent of a great many things, after all.

"Sure you didn't," said the small one with a wink. "Director wants to see you anyway." She keyed the door open and bowed him through with a flourish both grand and sarcastic. "In you go, Driven
Snow.

He boosted his chin and gave his jacket a tug. "Naw, he'll be coming along later. Be sweethearts and buzz him in on my account though, will ya?" Then he swanned on through like it was a velvet rope rather than a prison door.

On the other side, Hill was unimpressed with his entrance, but that was nothing new. "Sorry, I didn't bring you anything," he said to her. "They were fresh out of O positive." She gave him that piercing look of hers that probably meant she was consumed by a near-uncontrollable lust, and turned on her heel to march away at full speed. Tony stole some more of Cap's froofy coffee, then sauntered after her, grinning.

He wasn't surprised that they wound up at the security monitoring station. Tony didn't figure Nick Fury for a fan of bedside manner, even the rotten kind, given the man's grudge against human frailty; he'd probably get hives if he actually had to deal with a sick person face to face. The ranks of security monitors made a nice buffer between suffering and the need to act like he gave a damn.

"Stark," Fury greeted him without turning from the screen, where today's entertainment was being provided by Jerry Horatio, currently enacting a heartwarming reunion with his daughter Joan under the protective eyes of guest stars Natasha Romanov and Thor Odinson. "You bring enough coffee for everybody?"

"Nope," Tony answered, setting the tray down and taking a chair.

"Right." He stole Tony's quad-Americano from its paper socket without looking. "Where'd you lose Rogers?"

Tony shrugged, all innocence. "Am I my Captain's keeper? I mean, not that I'd mind it if somebody absolutely had to, but if Steve was my Kept Man, there'd be some definite stylistic changes happening to the Captain America uniform..." Hill made a noise in her throat that could have been laughter, or a wordless plea for permission to shoot Tony in the head. He gave her a grin and finger-wave just to be optimistic.

That made Fury look up at last, casting a glance over the coffee tray, Thor and Natasha's names on the cups still in it, and Cap's on the one in Tony's hand. Then he took the tray and held it out to Hill like orders in need of enforcement. "Call down to Conference three," he said. "Tell Captain Rogers we're waiting on him here."

"Yes sir," Hill replied, and took the tray like she wished it would bite and give her an excuse to throw it at the wall.

When she was gone, Tony whistled through his teeth. "Gotta hand it to you, Nick, I'm not sure I'd have the nerve to make Hill deliver coffee for me."

"That's because she wouldn't deliver coffee for you, Stark," he answered, sipping Tony's drink and watching Joan describe something to her father with great, sweeping teenaged gestures.

"Hmph. I'd be afraid to drink it if she did."

That won a smirk. "Genius after all." Then Fury nodded Tony’s attention toward the screen. "Anything about this guy you need to tell me, Stark?"

Tony actually laughed at that. "What was that, your Dumbledore impression? 'Cause no, Headmaster, I haven't been secretly fighting evil instead of banging the Quidditch team in the Room of Requirement, I promise."
Fury didn't rise to it, alas. "Good to know. Only I'm more interested in why Jerry Horatio wants to see you dead than in what you and your Johnson aren't getting up to. Thought you might be too."

"You read George's statement yet?" he asked, letting his grin fade out. Fury nodded, and Tony shrugged. "Then I think that makes it pretty clear. Jerry backed Loki in exchange for a Get Out Of Death Free card, which he lost when we kicked Loki's ass back to Asgard. So he blames the Avengers now that his cancer's-.

"No, Stark," Fury cut him off, waving a hand at the screen where Thor and Joan were now telling a story together while Jerry looked on fondly and Natasha pretended to read a magazine. "He doesn't hate the Avengers, he hates you personally, in a very specific, 'I-would-like-to-see-Tony-Stark-dead-in-a-ditch-preferably-on-fire' kind of way. I'd like some more data on that."

"Who wants Tony dead?" Steve asked from the doorway, eyes wary, brows knit. He'd taken the cowl off, combed his hair, and to judge from the dampness around his temples, cooled his face with some water before answering Fury's summons. All put together now, laced straight and zipped up tight, except for the bitten softness no frown could quite press from his lips…

Tony gave himself a mental kick and pulled on his trickster grin in answer. "Half the StarkIndustries board of directors," Tony replied, holding Cap's froofy coffee out to him with a nod toward the monitor. "And Jerry Horatio. Though Nick here tells me Jerry's set a little more of his heart on it than most people do."

"Why?" Steve asked Fury as he claimed his coffee and the chair on Tony’s left. "I mean, Tony saved his daughter from HYDRA. Why would Horatio want him dead?"

"Now that is an excellent question," Fury snarked with a pointed look at Tony. Tony ignored him. "Asking why people hate me has never been worth my time, Cap -- either I already know because it's obvious, or I'll never get it because it's personal. As for Jerry there, if it isn't wrapped up in him resenting his mortality, I can't say I know where his grudge is coming from." He slanted a look Fury's way. "Assuming this is real, actual hatred as opposed to, say, constipation."

"Trying to blow you and Pepper up at a board meeting makes a pretty good case for hatred, I'd say," Steve observed.

"Technically, that was you and Pepper," Tony shot back. "Look, all my connections to Jerry have been secondhand, through George-"

"Horatio's son, your party buddy, who's now dying of AIDS," said Fury.

Tony ignored the interruption doggedly. "And Obadiah-"

"Whom you blew up."

"Yes, I did," Tony rose to that goad. "Though I can say with perfect honesty that the idea that Jerry Fucking Horatio might be out a secret business partner never once crossed my mind while the Iron Monger was trying to kill me!"

Steve gave Tony a worried glance and pushed the coffee back his way. "Colonel, I think it'd help to know what brought all this on. Has Mr. Horatio said something? Made any demands?"

"Only thing he's asked for since he woke up after the heart attack was his daughter," Fury said.

"And that equals him wanting my head on a plate how, again?" Tony asked.
"Because he's offered to surrender the Portal project." Fury paused for effect and a sip of coffee, then pinned Tony with a glare. "To you, Mr. Stark. He wants Iron Man alone to escort him to an undisclosed location, where he says he is prepared to turn over all his data, prototypes, and lab equipment to you once and for all."

Tony couldn't help it, he began to laugh. "Jesus, Jerry, Bond villain much?"

Steve didn't share the amusement though. He was staring at the video screen like he could see straight through. "She told him, didn't she?" he asked Fury. "Joan told him she was going to be moved to Stark Tower."

By way of answer, Fury precisely rewound the video feed, and then zoomed in on Jerry's face, saying, "That she did," as he let the tape roll again. And sure enough, you could see the penny drop like an asteroid strike. One moment Jerry was all smiles, eyes warm as his teenaged daughter perched on his bed to share her adventures, and the next, his smile was collapsing on itself, sliding into numbed shock, then a sick, flaring pain. After that, though, it was pure wrath in those eyes, so massive, dense, and cold that even Tony had to shiver.

So of course, Fury paused the feed right there. "The nurse came in for the hourly check two minutes later. Horatio passed him this."

Tony reached for the note, but Steve was faster. He scanned it quickly, and his scowl over the worried glance he stole Tony’s way might as well have read the whole thing out loud. He offered it over, but Tony waved the note away -- this one was in the 'it's obvious' category. Jerry hadn't asked after either of his sons, his wife or his lawyer when he'd woken up in SHIELD medical's custody, he'd asked for Joan. Just Joan. Just the little girl who came into his life on a breath of hope when he was old and grey and staring death in the face for the second time. The little girl who was bragging with glee over being allowed to go home that night with the enemies who had stolen his promised immortality.

"The decisions a man makes when he knows he's dying," Tony observed, finishing the too-sweet coffee with a grimace. "Not so altruistic, in this case." Steve gave him a mournful look, but said nothing in defense of what had been, admittedly, a pretty sentiment.

Tony sighed, laced his fingers together and gave his knuckles a ratcheting crack. "Ok then. When are we gonna do this?"

The moment of stunned silence, he’d expected, but the glance of weary accord that Cap and Fury shared was a bit of a surprise. Since when were they agreeing on things without him?

"And what exactly do you think we're doing, Stark?" Fury was the one to ask.

"What, aside from getting the portal tech before HYDRA gets its hands onto it, and just possibly getting a break on the hostage situation with Gloria?" Tony challenged. "I dunno, taking an old loser out for one last gloat, maybe."

"That's not what this is, Tony," Cap answered with a scowl. "You know it's a trap as well as I do. Horatio's been taking shots at you since September, and some of those shots have been damn good ones. You can't think we're going to give him a free swing at you now that he's got the advantage!"

Tony laughed at that, actually cackled, and couldn't even feel sorry about it. "God, it's cute how you two are acting like Jerry's actually a threat here," he said. "The guy can't get to the toilet on his own. SHIELD controls his communications, his movements, hell, even the color of his jammies. He can't call for backup, he can't set up any kind of ambush, and he won't have so much as a paperclip on
him when we go. What's he going to hit me with, harsh language?"

"We don't know what kind of protections he's worked into that lab," Steve pushed back. "But if he wants you in there alone with him when he's disarming it, I think that's a pretty good bet that he's got something with your name on it."

"And if it's got my name on it, then I'll scrape it off or blow it up," Tony snapped. "Just like I do with the rest of my tech that falls into terrorist hands!"

"Oh, is that what you think we're doing here?" Fury snarked, all eyebrow. "Because me, I thought we were in the business of saving the world, not throwing irreplaceable assets away on petty business grudges."

Tony bristled, but the quelling scowl Cap shot the director pulled him up just short enough for him to get his reply in first. "Look, Tony it's a simple tactical fact; you don't let your enemy choose the battleground if you can help it. And if you can't help it, you sure as hell don't let him choose the time and terms of engagement too!"

"And you know what else is a simple tactical fact?" Tony demanded, chair legs squealing as he shoved to his feet. "That HYDRA is the enemy in this equation, not that sad old fart in the hospital bed! Horatio is a fucking banker, an accomplice at best, no matter what delusions he might have had about being the power behind Obie's throne, or Loki's."

"I won't bet your life on it!" Steve growled, on his feet and looming. "Not on a damned grifter's game we know nothing about!"

"Ok, first, it's not your life to bet," he shouted back giving the star on Cap's chest a futile shove. "And second-"

Fury's communicator sliced through the argument with one shrill beep. Tony jerked back a step before the signal took over the main security monitor in a crackle of feedback, scraping Jerry's frozen stinkface away in favor of Hill's own moderately more attractive, if no less chilly stinkface.

"Sir, we're getting reports from Operation Charybdis," she said as Fury set all four of his chair's feet onto the floor and dropped the shit-eating grin in favor of his normal scowl. "We have movement, sir, lots of it. She didn't glance at either Steve or Tony, but there was no doubt she'd noticed they were there.

"Coordinates?" Fury asked, flashing a look between the two of them that threatened brig time or worse if they interrupted. Then Hill did look at them, and her lips pressed tight for a moment, until Fury prompted her with that eyebrow thing that his scars made so very grisly.

"We have confirmed movement at six... correction, ten of the monitored sites," she answered grudgingly. "Calls are out to the rest of the field operatives, but not all have responded yet."

"What kind of movement?" Steve asked Hill, ignoring Fury's glower. "Overt, or recon?"

"And where the hell is Charybdis?" Tony added.

Hill gave him a sour look and rolled her eyes. "Straits of Messina."

"It's the code name assigned to SHIELD's monitoring operation on the collapse event sites," Steve answered Tony without a glance. "After an ancient Greek whirlpool that pulled ships apart. Now what kind of-"
Unimpressed with the impromptu classics lesson, Hill turned her attention back to Fury. "Sir, I really think-"

"Answer the Captain's question please, Agent Hill," Fury cut her off, getting to his feet.

Her eyes went all squinty, but she straightened to the order. "Is this a briefing, sir?"

"A courtesy," Fury answered. "So Stark doesn't feel like he has to waste everybody's time hacking into our servers again. What kind of movement do we have out there?"

"Covert at present," she admitted like it hurt. "Teams of two to six, dressed as utilities workers – gas, phone, electric, sewer. Unmarked vehicles, but all are using monitoring equipment of some kind, and they seem to be performing grid sweeps of each area."

"What kind of monitoring equipment?" Tony asked, already reaching for his phone.

"Look for the backup agents," Cap said at the same time. "They never mobilize operatives without hidden backup."

"Give me a map on this screen, sightings in red. Let's see where these guys are coming from." Fury, of course, was the one who got his way at once, but as soon as the map arose, a column of live monitoring feeds sprang up beside it.

Tony leaned close to peer at one toward the bottom, where Con Ed utilities drones were wandering in pairs around a burned-out gas station. "That's not a gas sniffer," he said, doubletapping the image to expand it. "That's a Geiger counter. Hey!"

"Sorry," Steve said, but didn't reduce the frame he'd enlarged over Tony's. "What about those?" he asked of the men in coveralls and paint masks, poking through what looked like someone's garden. "Same thing?" This filming was closer, clearer. Tony had no doubts behind his instant nod.

"The portal bombs throw off a radiation pulse when they open," he said, turning to Fury, who'd dragged his map to another screen so he could stare at it without interference. "They're trying to track Horatio's lab through it."

"Oh, you think?" Fury answered without turning away from the scattering of pulsing red dots across the city's face. "Question is, can they do it?"

"Get me one of those sensors and I could tell you their odds," Tony shrugged. "Or you could just put me in a car with the guy who already knows where we're going, so we get there before-"

"Agent Hill, why are these four screens in with the rest?" Steve asked, his voice gone over with that sharp wariness Tony had come to recognize from battle as the Captain's 'Shit Gets Real' voice. "The cameras aren't tracking anyone, and the coordinates don't match anything on the map."

"Agents at those locations have not yet reported in," Hill replied. "They're within the range of-"

"Even this one?" Steve cut her off, jabbing a finger at a sleepy row of tenements where the only movement was a box truck trundling carefully along past the parked cars. "There are agents on the scene at that one right there?"

"Yes Captain Rogers, even that one."

Fury stepped forward, his face gone over into that hunting dog look of his as he asked, "What do you got, Cap?"
Steve half turned, flickered a glance toward Tony, and hesitated. "I'm not sure."

And just like that, Tony's mad-on came back full strength. "Yes you are," he said, almost wishing he was in poking range again, because like fuck was he going to let that star spangled asshole fucking protect him from the truth. "You know exactly what you're looking at, and what it means." He blinked, remembering suddenly. "Fuck, Steve, you drew it! I pulled it out thinking it was bleed over, but you put it on paper two weeks ago!"

Steve shook his head and looked again at the feed. "No, it... Tony, it doesn't look right. It's not how I remember."

"That's because the whole goddamned place was rebuilt afterwards," he answered, punching the numbered coordinates from the feed into his phone and calling up the street address, because if he was going to be an asshole about this, he was going to be the asshole with the actual data, thanks. "But you recognized it for a reason, and-"

"One of you two clowns want to share the punchline anytime soon?" Fury growled. "Or should I just send an intercept team out there right now and hope for giggles?"

"Cap used to live there," Tony said, showing the street address on his phone. "Until a year ago last spring, when HYDRA leveled the building and laid siege to the whole damned neighborhood. But I'm betting that after they paid off the owner and tenants, SHIELD didn't exactly keep tabs on the neighborhood, did they?"

"You'd lose that bet," Hill replied, terse and sour over the open comm. "Obviously, given that agents are there now. The developers, contractors and management all checked out before the building began at the site."

"Better run those checks again," Tony began.

"HYDRA didn't bring my building down," Steve cut him off. "That was Vilye Dhirac, the Latverian refugee from Doom's weapons factory. He blew up his basement lab because he was working on something he didn't want HYDRA to get their hands on." He sighed, scrubbed at his neck and grimaced at the look Tony gave him. "I know, it's just..." Steve shook his head, lip pulled between his teeth. "There's nothing but coincidence backing this idea up."

"I believe in aliens, gods, blue mutants, heroes, honest cops," Fury growled, grabbing his coat from the chair. "And I'm willing to give a hearing to Santa Claus, but I do not believe in coincidence! Now I got two psychics in one room, a hostile witness in another, and HYDRA sniffing around where none of us want them to be, so if you two want to give the pissing match a rest, I thought maybe we could go and get some actual answers here while we still got time!"

And with that, he turned on his heel and stormed away, the video screens going dark as soon as he was gone, because Hill was just sweet like that. Even the lights clicked off, just in case the point hadn't been clear.

Tony went after Fury, brain ramping up plans to get Dhirac on a secure line so they could talk about the portal bombs without SHIELD listening in, but before Tony made the hallway, Steve grabbed both his shoulders. Tony was scruffed off his feet and straight up against a wall before he could so much as duck, squeak, or struggle.

Instinct took over for a second, and he panic-thrashed as Steve pressed looming close in the dark, bracketing Tony's body with his. Steve let him swing and claw, let Tony get his hands around the Kevlar and leather, let him wind his fingers in Steve's short, fine hair until the ghosts of dust, stone,
ozone, and blood faded and became stale coffee, processed air, and Steve's cologne around him. Only then did he realize that Steve's hands had dropped to cradle his waist, his face pressed close to the wall, cheek to cheek with him, lips grazing Tony's ear as he whispered, "Shh, Tony. Listen to me. Listen."

"Steve," his voice cracked, giddy and loud in the darkened room. "What the fuck, man? You can't just..."

"Listen, Tony," he murmured again, and his big, warm hand rubbed soothing circles through the fabric of Tony's shirt, like he didn't even notice the trembling. "I need you to listen. This is important, ok?"

He fought the urge to squirm, feeling his body responding to the warm press of Steve over him, despite, or perhaps because of, his earlier alarm. The ridges of Cap's star butted against the hard ring of the arc reactor, throwing mad shadows and contrasts along the line of Steve's neck, and the rumpled, gleaming strands of his hair. His lips were so fucking soft against Tony's ear, his breath so damp and so hot. Tony curled his hand over Steve's neck, anchoring himself now, so he could manage a nod. "Ok."

"You are not an asset," Steve's voice curled down Tony's spine, but his hands caught and stilled the shiver that followed. "You are not a resource. You are not replaceable..." and here he paused to press a kiss against the soft lobe of his ear. "And you are not expendable." Then he let go, slowly, gently, giving Tony plenty of time to get his feet under him, his knees straight, and to convince the clamoring, hopeful crack monkey in his pants that no, Cap was not going to lean in and kiss the fuck out of him right here in front of God, SHIELD and everybody.

But damned if it didn't look like he wanted to.

Tony swallowed, met Steve's stare in the arc-lit gloom, and held it until he was sure his voice wouldn't shake. "Better me than someone innocent, Cap," he managed after awhile.

"Better no one at all," Steve said, and twitched Tony's rumpled lapels. "We're a team for a reason, Iron Man. Don't forget how much more The Avengers can do together than alone." His lips quirked then, and his thumb just brushed the edge of Tony's throat as he smoothed the collar down, and Goddamnit, but this had to be revenge for the thing in the hallway with the coffee trays, didn't it? "And also, don't forget that between Jarvis, Pepper, Bruce, Natasha, Clint, Thor, and Coulson, your team has about a hundred ways to drug you unconscious and lock you in a box until you get over any urges to prove your worth by stupidly risking your life, okay?"

Then he clapped two gentle slaps to the side of Tony's face, tipped a poster boy salute, and marched away, leaving Tony and his hard-on to face the dark alone.

Yeah. totally revenge for that coffee thing.

Chapter End Notes

And we're officially flying without a net now, kids!

Not going to cry off or anything, but I've had an unexpected Cat Trauma Thing happen, and that's pushed my writing time back under other priorities. So I'm posting chapter 12 without chapter 13 in the can -- don't like it, but I'd rather keep what schedule I can than
hold back for my own comfort.

In the meantime, THANK YOU for your continued support, squees, and motivation the like of which can hardly be quantified. Thanks for helping me take my mind off the things I can't help, and get enjoyment out of the make believe world I control in my head. You all are the best!
Tony had a plan.

It had been a good plan – a plan he could fly by himself underneath the plan that Cap, Fury, and X had glued together last night. A holdout plan. A wire-cutting plan. A Hail-Mary of a plan that would answer questions only a munitions designer would think to ask about walking into a bad guy's super-secure lab. Tony's plan put a 'yeah, but' on the end of that question's answer, and stuck a solid 'but maybe not' onto the conclusion that followed. Worlds had been saved on weaker plans, and this plan wasn't weak. It was sound, it was elegant, and it was stunning in its simplicity.

The plan had fit, close and smug in the cradle of his right gauntlet as he walked Jerry through three successive closets, stacked like nesting dolls full of poison gas nozzles and blood tests, focused microwave emitters and brain wave analysis units, plasma cannon and fingerprint scanners. Tony hadn't worried about any of it, because there was one thing he knew; Jerry wanted him inside that lab, and that was why, and where, Tony's plan was going to work.

Which made it a bit of a shock when, precisely twenty seconds after Jerry Horatio finished entering the last passcode set and bellied up to the eye scanner for a final squint, Tony's beautiful plan came crashing around his ears in a million horrifyingly familiar pieces.

He felt the air change around him first, like a rolling, velvet shrug, felt his throat close tight, his eyes bulge with panic as his limbs just went away. And then the suit was dropping to its defensive, automatic three point stance, and Tony was staring at the metal gridded floor of the security room and trying to make himself scream.

"And this," said Jerry as the security chamber, no bigger than a coat room, no less armored than a tank, filled up with that thin, distant sound that was not so much sound as the sensation of falling forever inside your skin while your whole world narrowed down to the sound of your heartbeat thrashing in your ears. "This is the point where you expect me to tell you why, isn't it, Stark?"

Tony said nothing, could say nothing, could move not so much as the smallest voluntary muscle in his body. If he could have, he'd have been firing repulsors on full and smashing his way out of the trap, portal bombs and Horatio's smugly rhetorical questions bedamned, but he couldn't. He couldn't!

"What's that noise?" Cap demanded over the comm. "Iron Man, Widow, are you hearing that?"

Jerry rolled his wheelchair back in the sub-aurally resonant air, and now that it was activated, now it had something to screen against, Tony could see the faint blue glow of a jammer tucked into the bastard's ear. Probably the set had been mistaken for hearing aids by the SHIELD security idiots who wouldn't take an old man's medical prostheses, and who never saw the specs of Obadiah Stane's favorite 'failed' invention.

"What noise, Cap?" Barton, clipped and nervy, wind baffling his mic. "I can't hear anything but you."

"There's something..." Bruce, fretful, tense. He was the closest. Just across the street from the rebuilt 'apartments', three floors up in Mrs Whatsername's front parlor, beside the stoop in case he needed to

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get angry, but he couldn't just yet. He couldn't, because they were not in, the lab door was not open yet, and Tony was stuck in the teeth of the trap and Natasha was...

"I hear it." Wolverine, through his teeth. Metal sounded on metal in a hissing slide.

Beast agreed with a growl. Both of them somewhere in the goddamned tunnels with Cap; both of them useless, fucking useless. Tony needed a telepath, but X was serving HYDRA a red herring in Queens with the rest of his merry mutants, and why the FUCK wasn't Natasha answering? Tony knew she'd been with them in the car with them from SHIELD HQ. Coulson left his door open for her, silent and unseen in Georgie's stealth field vest, when he and Tony had moved Jerry from the car to the wheelchair. She was here, somewhere. Not in the room, please not in the fucking room!

"Iron Man. Widow. Report!"

"I'm stuck! I'm fucking stuck, Cap just like before oh god just like when come and get me you fucker just get here just fucking Tasha it's got her too I don't know where she should have hurry I'm sorry hurry oh god hurry I can't!" The shout made it no farther than Tony's head as Jerry took his hand off the security scanner plate and turned to face him.

The man was grinning that same chummy bullyboy toothshow he liked to flash when he stood up from the big chair to shake the hand of whatever poor sap he'd just casually ruined, or cornered his prey in the cocktail lounge and bought them a drink and where the FUCK was Natasha? The antechamber wasn't that big, was built for fire coverage, not comfort, so it had no convenient nooks or ledges where she could have been perching, and with the suit in defensive rest, he was taking up most of the available space that Jerry wasn't. She should have answered by now, if she wasn't locked up just as tight as him. Oh Jesus, they were so very fucked...

"Iron Man!" Steve's voice cracking with all the panic Tony couldn't voice for himself. "Widow! Damn it!" Faintly over the comm, he could hear boots take off running, echoes of a narrow space crazing the sound. How far away were they? It was less than a mile to the White Eagle at street level, but the tunnels were old, and built to confuse pursuers, and who the fuck knew how long two mutants and a super soldier would take to get from point A to point saving-Tony's-ass, and fuck, FUCK, the screamer would stop them too, wouldn't it? With their hearing even better than his, they'd go down quicker and harder, and then Jerry would have them too, and god DAMN it, how could they even get close?

Steve, NO!! He put everything he had into the thought, praying that Steve had held on to just one tiny shred of the gift Gloria had thrust on him. Hoping that he'd know, or guess, or remember somehow what to do about it. Hoping that the cocksure, risky, are-you-mad-man plan Tony made and kept to himself while Cap, Fury and X were setting up their carefully covered game board last night hadn't come to a crashing, bleeding, burning end already. Hoping he hadn't just screwed them all.

"You're smart enough to know this was a trap, Stark," Jerry said, rolling the wheelchair back across the antechamber until his knees were inches from Tony's open faceplate. "Certainly the Captain had to know. He's clearly the common sense of your little freakshow." Tony's mic didn't pick up Jerry's words as he leaned over to catch Tony's frozen, furious gaze. It was full, instead, of the screamer's near-silent broadcast, close enough now, that Tony could actually hear the sound instead of just feeling it squirming like a wad of maggots in his brain, knotting and slipping and drizzling awful down along each nerve as his heart leapt and charged and struggled to get free.

Jerry noticed it, spotted the strain, the rage in his eyes. His grin widened as he leaned in close with the screamer in his hand, and tucked it right inside the cradle of Tony's helmet like a precious keepsake, a lucky talisman, a furious wasp with its sting already buried. Tony's breath locked up
tight for a second as it rattled against the metal, then a reflexive swallow settled it firmly under his jaw so that the awful sound amplified through his skull bones and he could barely think through the need to vomit or scream.

"So maybe you thought that Iron Man could shoot your way through whatever I had waiting," Jerry mused on. "Or maybe you walked in here thinking I'd reveal my grand plan to you, and then your happy little band of playmates could swoop in and save the day. Either way, I'm happy to prove you wrong." He slapped Tony's helmet twice, vicious parody of paternal kindness. "You don't get an explanation, Stark." Jerry snapped the faceplate down, and it locked it into place with a hiss. "I don't owe you shit."

Then he stood up out of the wheelchair, pressed a single button beside the pressure door, and sauntered through when it slid open, leaving Iron Man behind like an irrelevancy. Like the shattered loser of a boardroom duel. Like garbage on the curb that it was someone else's job to come and haul out of the way. Not in the lab... the nonsense thought tickled him as he watched a long center stripe of the floor in the room beyond tilt slowly down to become a kind of ramp into the basement, where lights were coming up, and machines were flickering to life. Tony tried to see, tried to focus his attention, and figure out what he could identify, but trapped inside the suit, the screamer's volume increased, as did the pressure of the vibration. His skull was ringing, echoes upon echoes until Tony could hear nothing but blood in his ears, could taste salt and copper in his throat, could not make sense of his HUD for the flashes and glimmers of false light going off in his brain.

Seizure? he wondered, but couldn't remember if the screamer's lab tests had ever been fatal. The mice hadn't said anything about hallucinations or phantom sensations, but Tony thought he might be hearing Jarvis' voice over the shrieking. That might have been a comfort if he could have made out the words or, y'know, fucking moved. Still, nice to be not all alone while waiting helplessly to die this time...

Then Tony's suit, his skull, and his ears filled up with a feedback squeal ten times worse than the screamer's tone. There was a flash of pain, bright and gorgeous against his throat, a smell of scorched hair, and abruptly the squirming knot of awful in his brain went still. Tony almost fainted with relief.

"-agnetic pulse has incapacitated the device, Captain," Jarvis was saying when his ears finally cleared again. "The effects of this attack will wear off in fifteen minutes, presuming best possible result."

"Not soon enough," Cap barked. "Override the suit. Get him out of there."

No, don't... It wasn't lost yet. Tony's plan. He could still do it. Now the screamer wasn't filling up his brain with panic, Tony knew they still had a chance. The ramp blocked a lot of Tony's sightline into the basement lab, but he could see Jerry puttering around from vault to workstation to fabricator, tucking data cards and hard drives into his pockets while he powered up various other devices. Not clearing out, oh no; he was setting up, just like Tony knew he'd do if he got the chance, and what was it Selvig had said in his report? "The Tesseract. It changes you. Shows you things. Makes you understand truths you never could have imagined before."

"I'm sorry, Captain, but my protocols for taking even limited control of the suit are very precise, the moreso when Sir is in operation thereof." Jarvis said. "Sir must be either unconscious for longer than three minutes, or else I must be given the override command from an authorized source."

"So knock him out and take over," Wolverine said, practical to a fucking fault.

"He can't," Bruce answered. His voice was too low. His breathing was too fast. "He can't do anything to hurt his creator."
Jerry attached a climber hoist to the channel on the back wall that the floor section had slid down to become the access ramp. Into the clamps of the thing, he fixed a tarnished silver ring, about as big as a charging plate, with a lens-like sheet of violet-black that was about as dangerous as the Helicarrier's combined arsenal held in the middle of the ring. When the hoist stopped its climb, that disk was aimed like a cannon straight at Tony's face. Just like he'd expected. Move your hand, Stark, he ordered himself in vain. Move your fucking hand!

"Dammit, Jarvis, this isn't Asimov," Barton said. "We know you're on his side, so can the laws of robotics and find a way around it!"

"He can't!" Not a roar. Not quite yet.

Hold on, Bruce, Tony thought, struggling to move while watching the banker who'd paid for Loki's king gambit move around the laboratory like he'd been raised to it. We can't lose you too...

"Intel, Jarvis." Cap's command voice cut through the argument like vibranium. "If you can't get him out, then tell us what's going on in there – where the hell is the Widow?"

The disc stared at him across the empty ground floor, locked into place between two bulkhead style doors with daylight from the windows gleaming across its face as the hoist clamped its rollers down and settled. In the lab below, Horatio was docking a laptop into the base of the lift, its screen scrolling with equations too fast, too furtive for even Jarvis' quick zoom to capture. Tony didn't need to do the math, didn't need to show his work -- it was obvious now what the old man's plan had been. Servos whined as the black disc aimed itself, stalled, corrected left, then upward, then left again. Light crawled across its face, and then Tony could see himself, Iron Man reflected in that glass darkly. It was just so fucking obvious he could have cried.

"My scanning capacity is limited, Captain. The suit's systems have taken some damage from the internal magnetic burst, but I have determined that there is a static biomass which answers generally to the Black Widow's statistics fairly near to Sir's location. I am attempting to access the building's security camera system to verify this, but by my estimation it will take me-"

"Is she alive?"

"Based on temperature, I estimate a 96% chance that she is merely unconscious."

Something in the vest, Tony realized, his throat heating with disgust he could just barely swallow down. Something George didn't know about. Or maybe he did. Fuck, I thought the SHIELD techs checked it for traps. GodDAMN it!

"Captain!" Thor's voice was a bellow of wind and muscle, cut through with shouts and distant gunfire, Mjolnir a shuddering whine of velocity. "Shall I join you? This battle goes well enough!"

"No, Thor. I need you to stay with the LMD's. Keep HYDRA looking the other way as long as you can."

"But the Lady Widow-"

"We'll get to her before you could. You just keep HYDRA off our backs!"

Except no, they wouldn't get to the Widow first. Tony could read that failure in the sheer size of the black disk -- Vilye Dhirac's experimental dark energy capacitor -- captured and refined, its power leashed to Horatio's portal generator like a bomb to a Buick. It was easily ten times the size of the portal devices they'd captured before, and having talked to Dhirac about his work, Tony now knew that meant Jerry was either going for a much wider door, or a much farther threshold.
"It shows you things..." Tony bore down hard against the stillness until his vision was flickering and his ears roared with the effort.

"I can get her," Clint announced just as Tony's fingers finally, *finally* twitched.

"Damn it, Hawkeye, I need you covering exits and approaches!" Cap's voice echoed around him, buried in the clatter of boots on brick. "Don't leave us blind up there!"

"I see better from a distance, Cap. Doesn't mean I'm blind up close." Barton's cheeky tone all but announced he was gonna do it anyway since nobody could stop him. There were scraping noises, boots in gravel, then a quiet curse. "I got movement on the street, Cap. Box truck coming from the south, two in the cab, definitely heading our way. Permission to blow it up?"

"Could be civilians," Bruce objected.

Over the comm, Barton's bow creaked with tension. "Not inside the SHIELD cordon. Not today. Cap?"

"Stop it at the corner. No explosions."

Tony flexed his hand again, felt his knuckles scrape against the gauntlet's locked joints. A start, at least. If he could find the repulsor trigger, and get enough control of his mouth to give Jarvis the reboot command, then maybe...

"Captain, might I suggest you hurry?" Jarvis called as across the empty room, the touchscreen beside the metal exit door flashed to life. Below in the lab, Jerry either didn't notice, or didn't care.

"Trying," Cap answered. "The tunnel's partially collapsed. We have to go topside. What's happening?"

"Someone is accessing the lab via the back door. Sir's motor responses have not yet recovered enough to-"

Gunfire chattered briefly over the comm, undercut with Barton's cheerful cursing and Bruce's precisely measured breaths. "Looks like we're on someone's radar, Cap!" Barton announced, his bowstring singing.

The keypad flashed again. Tony flexed his thumb as hard as he could, felt the repulsor trigger click uselessly beneath it. *Almost...*

"I got ten... fifteen hostiles. Hard targets, heading for the lab," Clint called out. "Can't stop em all without-"

"Captain, our foes have fled," Thor cut in. "They are coming your way, and quickly!"

"Jig's up, Captain," Coulson confirmed. "They're inbound. ETA less than five."

Something whined on the comm, high and fast. Bruce grunted, sounding almost surprised as the air punched out of him. But then his comm signal shattered into a rising roar that Tony could hear through the walls. The floor under his hand shuddered as the Hulk hit the street like a ton of rage and ran off to find something to pound.

The keypad flashed one final time, and the bulkhead door swung back with a creak. Tony had never seen the two people behind it in person, but he'd seen their faces often enough in Steve's drawings and Jarvis' webscans. Valentin Granyavich, smug and smirking in HYDRA blacks lead Gloria
Horatio into the laboratory and didn’t bother to close the alley door behind them. He stopped a second, surprised to see Iron Man in the vestibule, then laughed out loud.

"So you have caught him after all," he called to Jerry in the lab below as he gave the girl a nudge toward Tony. Whether she was cowed, or complicit, she went where she was told.

"No thanks to you," Jerry answered, peevish and bustling, the pockets of his chinos bulging and clattering as he moved.

Granyavich laughed. "Stark was your pointless obsession, old man, not mine. Is he alive still?"


Gloria ducked to peer at Tony's facemask. Her hand, reaching for the hinge between the gold and red, trembled.

"Yes," she murmured as her grandfather shrugged the question off.

"Stane told me the Screamer wasn't fatal," Jerry said, not turning from the keyboard as his eldest bastard strolled to the head of the ramp and looked down, easy as if he'd come for coffee and a chat.

"Squeamish?" Granyavich laughed. "Or is there some other reason why you have not put two bullets through his famous brain by now?"

"Damn it, Jarvis!" Steve's voice, cracking with strain. "We're cut off! Get him out of there!"

"Authorization code required, Captain."

"...no," Tony managed as Gloria found the visor's manual release, and his sweating face prickled with the sudden wash of cold air. Her eyes fixed on Tony's only briefly before they flinched away. All he could be sure he saw in them was fear.

"Biomass transfer," Jerry said, ignoring his son's looming. "Stark can die on the other side, once I've gotten-"

"Gotten your precious godling back," Granyavich said, disgusted. Tony's heart staggered in his chest as Gloria laid gentle, cool fingers against his forehead, and his limbs twitched under a sudden wash of pins and needles. "You can think of nothing else, can you? Bringing back a creature that thinks of you as an insect, and setting him up as a King. My associates can-"

"Your associates can do nothing," Jerry bit back. "I've spoken to experts, shown them the documents. Without the Tesseract, Zola's formulas don't work. They can't cure anything, can't heal anything. They're useless as tits on a nun. Useless as you."

Don't do this, Tony thought to the girl as his body twitched inside the armor, no more under his control now than it had been with the Screamer howling inside his brain. *You don't need to do this. We can still help you!*

"I'm sorry," Gloria whispered as below in the lab, machinery began to power up in earnest. Tony heard himself grunt, felt his shoulders and back flex, trying and failing to overcome the suit's lockdown by strength alone.

"Useless as a conquering God," Granyavich said, all cheerful agreement over the Mauser he pulled from his side and fired into the lab below. Gunfire exploded, deafening in the empty room, ricochet
and shrapnel hissing and whining through the boom. Gloria screamed and flinched into a huddle beneath the Iron Man's outstretched arm. Jerry spun and fell wetly across the workstation, knocking the laptop free of its dock. The machines did not stop humming though. The air in front of the black disc did not stop thickening.

"Jarvis, take over the suit!" Cap screamed over a comm alive with chatter, clatter, and gunfire, "Get him out of there! That is an ORDER!"

"Emergency authorization code 'Captain America: That is an Order' accepted." And yes, Jarvis did sound relieved. "Initializing reboot sequence."

"No..." Tony wheezed again, unheard in the chaos as the comm went dead in his ear, and a green status bar flickered into view on his upturned visor. Through the open back door, he could hear the fight now, distant firecracker pops, roaring, crashing, and the smell of burning plastic.

The portal's capacitor flexed against its steel binding, shivered in the long winter sunlight as Granyavich spat, and then swore, low and heartfelt in Russian. Then he turned a glare on the girl. "Get him up," he said, kicking the wheelchair down the long ramp and jogging after. "Over there, by the window. I want him visible."

"But I-"

"Remember your mother," he shouted over her protest as he hauled Jerry into the wheelchair with a grunt.

Gloria made a broken noise, but Tony felt the armor shift as she crawled out of its shelter and crouched to reach for him once more, to take his body, useless as it was just now, away from him again. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her eyes swimming with tears now. "He'll kill her. I have to..."

"He can't." Tony jerked in surprise as Natasha's voice murmured, low and close. Gloria flinched as well, looking around the antechamber in thinly veiled panic. "He's lying. You must know he's lying."

"T'sha..." Tony fought to shape words, fought to warn her. "Port'l... Go!"

"He is?" Gloria's sudden hope was a jagged, hushed thing. "But he showed me a... he said it was hers, and he'd..."

"She's safe. Unhurt. Looking for you." The words were barely louder than the hum of power building through the room, but they rocked the girl on her heels like a shout. "She told us you would be here."

Gloria licked her lips, obviously tempted, not daring to believe. Tony summoned up the memory as her dark eyes flickered to his, rank with desperate hope and equally desperate dread. When she touched him again, he was ready to show her Hana, fierce and definite beside the SHEILD vidscreen as she pointed at the pen-scratch drawing of Steve's rebuilt apartment building. "There. She is not there now, but when you find her, that will be the place."

She gasped, and the hope that flooded her presence in Tony's mind was tinged with guilty horror and oh god what have I done. Thoughts were complex, fish-slippery, stinging with emotion as Tony grabbed for them. Only this was clear -- traps and plots stacked up around them like nesting dolls, one inside the other, inside the other, each baiting the next for bigger, more dangerous prey. Tony could hear that prey's voice through the open door now, all brisk orders and shouted commands, fighting through hell to come to Tony's rescue but without a clue what was sprung and waiting out in
"Get him up, girl," Granyavich yelled over the portal's rising hum as he rifled Jerry's bloody pockets for the hard drives and machinery the old man had stashed there. "Tony Stark's worth more as bait than meat. Get him clear of the gate before it opens if you want to save his life!"

"What does he mean, Gloria?" Natasha asked, and why the fuck was she just talking? Why wasn't she grabbing the girl and running for it? What the hell did that vest do to her? "Who is he baiting?"

"C... Captain America." Shame washed through those whispered words, cold and blinding; so massive it could bury a strong man ninety years deep in ice, so compact it could be loaded in the back of a moving van.

Tony's gut seized up tight, but the thready groan that made it past his lips had no time to become words. The air cracked like glass in the center of the room, turned violet, spun and whirled around itself in a knot of velocity and power. Primed, hungry, just now realizing it could not feed on itself. They were out of time. They were out of options.

"You know what's going to happen next, kid?" Tony thought the words as carefully, as clearly as he could.

"Yes," she murmured, and her voice echoed inside his head. "I... I'm sorry. I don't know -- he doesn't know how to stop it."

"I can. And Tony thrust it all at her; one solid lump of data, equations, and the memory of a five am phone call to a Latverian expatriate who understood dark matter better than anybody realized. He felt her choke it down. Sixteen years old. Even he'd had trouble with quantum physics at that age. But then she struggled past the details to grasp the question at the plan's core with shaking hands, and Tony felt her shiver as she understood, all at once, just how dangerous the answer to that question might be.

Then Granyavich was upon them, shoving Jerry's wheelchair between Tony and the growing whorl of light, and setting the brake. Gloria ducked away, her mind-touch thinned and weak but echoing a new determination under the fear. Tony couldn't see where she went, but he heard her squeak and struggle when Granyavich lunged for her, felt a ghostly wrench at the side of his head, and was not surprised when Granyavich returned to view hauling the girl by her hair.

"I said get him up!" he snarled, thrusting her at Tony. "I'm not losing this chance."

"But Grandpa's dyi-"

"He's alive enough for the biomass transfer. Now get Stark moved, or I'll shoot you in the spine and leave you for the portal too!"

Gloria closed her eyes and took a breath, tears escaping down her cheeks. But when she spoke, her voice was steady and strong. "He can't move, not without power. The suit is in lockdown and rebooting."

"Then get him out of it!" Granyavich shouted. The gun was in his hand again, his uniform's left breast bulging around the shape of a hard drive. "There has to be an emergency release. Find out where it is and."

the street for him. No. Fucking. Clue.
"There isn't enough time," she gritted back, "The suit needs power to come off quickly, and that," she pointed at the whorl of light behind Granyavich's shoulder, "is going to reach critical density before the reboot is complete and nothing can stop it!" She cut a glance at his outstretched repulsor gauntlet then, so quick, so guilty, so furtive, that her kidnapper couldn't possibly have missed it.

"There's something though," he shook her again, fingers knotted white around dark hair. "Tell me!"

"DO IT!" Granyavich shoved her at the gauntlet tugging strands of her hair loose as Gloria staggered, then caught herself against Iron Man's arm. Outside, something exploded, shaking the ground. Inside, Jerry made a gurgling noise, his hand moving weakly over his chair as if searching. The Portal's pitch changed, deepened. The statusbar flickered, just one taunting green pip away from complete.

Gloria found the switch under his thumb, and deactivated the magnetic clamp that was holding the coaster-sized portal device – the one they'd captured from the bomb at the hospital visit; the one Tony had liberated from the trained apes in SHIELD's engineering labs; the one Tony had hastily painted up to look like just another part of his gauntlet; the secret weapon Tony had gambled his life on, -- over his repulsor casing. It fell into her hand just as the reboot loaded, and Tony felt the terrified brush of her mind against his as their gazes met for just a second. You can do this! Tony thought; to her, to himself. Be ready. Then Gloria was spinning on her heel, slinging the capacitor into the stretching portal like a girl who never heard of an underhand pitch.

Tony hit the repulsor switch, and if the blaze of white came a microsecond later than it should have done, it still hit the capacitor square on, knocking it down the wormhole's throat even as the energy burst activated the capacitor itself, released its dark energy into one sudden, focused burst.

Ask yourself this, Tony Stark; what would happen if you tore a hole in space inside a hole in space? Dhirac had posited the question earlier, weary and appalled at the news of his invention's perversion, but intrigued, as no scientist could help being intrigued, by the question. How finely could space be folded? What was the density of a tear in space/time? Could one wormhole swallow another whole, or would it choke on the relative mass? It would bug him for weeks afterward that Tony never got the chance to witness firsthand the answer to those questions.

GO! was the thought foremost in Tony's mind as Gloria's follow through spun her under the repulsor blast. She was bolting for the street door before the flash had faded. Jarvis snapped the visor down, HUD tracking her retreat and Granyavich's lurching pursuit as Gloria hit the door at a run and scrambled down the stoop.

"The girl has escaped," Jarvis said into the comm. Tony grunted as around him, the suit thrust up from its crouch and turned.

Granyavich bulled through, gun in hand as the security glass door smashed back against its frame and shattered. He spun in place suddenly, face comically shocked, a ribbon of scarlet bursting like a party streamer from his left temple before a second bullet caught him in the chest, lifted him up, and flung him down again like a rag doll.

"FUCK!" Barton's voice crackled through the comm's static. "Sniper!"

Cap's reply was immediate. "Can you clear him?"
"On it!"

"I'm on the girl!"

"Tasha!" Tony managed as he felt the repulsor boots rumble beneath his feet. "Get! Her! Out!"

The HUD flashed to infrared and back too quickly for Tony to see anything but a white smear against the wall to his left, then the armor lurched, grabbed, and yanked. Fabric tore, sparks dazzled as the field shut down, and Natasha, finally visible to Tony's eyes and cameras, pale, ragged and gorgeous, sagged into Iron Man's arms with a grunt. Behind them, the portal choked, howled in a million keys of awful. Jarvis tucked Natasha into a bridal carry that Tony would surely bleed for later, and bashed out through the ruins of the door.

On the stoop, the suit flinched to the side, and two bullets, heard more than felt, pinged off the shoulder. Jarvis was already tracking their trajectory as he hit the repulsors and blasted into the air.

"Gotcha!" Barton crowed, then leapt from the building like he thought he could fly. Jarvis tracked him across two more buildings before he dove off into a tree.

"I have the Widow and Iron Man secured," Jarvis announced through the comm as the street panned wide with distance across Tony's HUD. "However the portal inside the building appears to be fracturing. May I suggest evacuating the neighborhood?"

But even as Jarvis suggested it, Tony knew it wouldn't work. The skirmish was too tight, too chaotic, bodies swinging, firing, falling and dying, and the team was a handful of colorful smudges in the heaving sea of black. The Avengers couldn't disengage and run without giving HYDRA a clear shot at their asses.

"Expected result?" Cap was a bright blue dervish in a sea of fallen HYDRA who looked like they'd been protecting the box truck with all they had. Which, considering what it contained, they probably had been.

"Unknown, Captain. It could explode, in which case the blast radius would-"

"Lab rat!" Tony wheezed the override's counter-code just as his helmet comm finally picked up, and hearing Tony's voice for the first time since the screamer took hold, Steve nearly got himself shot as he flinched in shock.

"Ton- Iron Man?" He sent two soldiers flying as he turned to stare upward, his face a pale, hopeful smudge.

"Get out of there!" Tony called, shifting his weight in the way that should have sent the suit arrowing down into Cap-grabbing range, but in fact only made him wobble midair until the AI could correct the suit's attitude. "Jarvis, damn it, override code Lab Rat! Give me the wheel, god damn it!"

"I am sorry sir, your motor control is still far too compromised to allow for piloting the suit. Bio scans indicate it will be another-"

"Jarvis, so help me, if you don't-"

"Stark, put me down." Natasha, still wrapped in the stealth vest that was not nearly so stealthy now Jarvis had torn the connectors loose, half rolled in his arms to point at a nearby rooftop. "Gloria's down there. You have to get her out of the fire zone."

Jarvis half turned, zoomed his cameras, and found the girl at once, running like a maniac straight into
the fray. She was headed for the box truck, ducking and sliding past every obstacle, ignoring the bullets. Suicidal might be the right word for it, only it wasn't, because Tony knew, seeing the look of dogged determination on her face, that it was really Cap she was running toward. Cap, who was ten feet from the truck, from the trap HYDRA had built to contain him, and fighting his way closer with every second.

The good thing about having a genius AI in control of your ride, if there was any good thing about that, was that Jarvis didn't take a lot of time for pearl-clutching when there was a decision to be made. Tony's stomach lurch ed as they dropped toward the building the Widow had indicated.

She wriggled free and dropped before the suit had even touched down, fetching up limply against the knee wall and fixing Tony with a savage glare. "Now get down there before that kid gets herself killed, Jarvis!" she said.

"Negative," Cap shouted. "You're both benched. Jarvis, where is Gloria?"

"I see her," Wolverine called. "Just ran by that burning jeep. Beast, you're closer, I got these assholes."

"Alley-oop!" came the reply as a mass of blue fur, teeth, and claws tore its way free of the melee and knuckle-galloped after the girl. "Bad idea, honey," he said, dropping to the street in front of her. "You are squishy and easily perforated."

Gloria shrieked, ducking under his reaching paw with a speed born of pure panic, and thrusting one hand out in a warding move that should have been futile for anyone who wasn't a high end telepath. Beast reared back, clutching his head with a roar.

Gloria skidded around him, screaming, "CAPTAIN!"

And that was when the wormhole exploded -- literally shattered -- one big, semi-controlled portal fracturing with a scream to become a hundred tiny ones that whirled outward like scythe blades through the buildings, the cars, the crowds of HYDRA agents. Hungry little mouths that did not care what they swallowed, so long as it had mass. Some were so fast and small that they barely flashed before collapsing, but others, the larger pieces, rolled out like bumblebees, ponderous and savage.

And they were everywhere, moving at random. One was headed in a long arc for the box truck, for Gloria, or for Cap, whichever it could get to first. The HUD's fire control tracked it, as it tracked them all, animating two tiny figures who at present velocity, would meet directly under the spot where the portal would land.

"Jarvis," Tony forced the threat past the heart in his throat. "If you let them die, so help me-"

"Directive?" Jarvis clipped as he dove, dodging and weaving around dying portals on his way. HYDRA was still firing, but now they were the ones trying to disengage and run, like they knew just what those portals could do.

"Catch her," Tony had time to say as they swooped street-low. "Get them off the target zone!" Then they were on her. Gloria shrieked again as Jarvis caught her by the middle and yanked her aloft, but before she could do more than flail, Jarvis slung her headlong into the arms of Steve, who was leaping an overturned humvee.

It was a beautiful throw, but nobody else in the world could have made the catch, not without killing one or the other or both of them in the landing. But Cap slung his weight aside midair, kicked over to match Gloria's attitude for the grab, then used his own velocity to roll them to the ground in a tumble
that probably hurt, but at least didn't look fatal. Tucked low beneath the shield as they came to rest, Cap couldn't see the portal go chewing through the air over their heads, couldn't see it take the box truck broadsides and slice it in half, couldn't see the flash of white-blue light as it hit, and half the truck disappeared.

But he picked up his head just in time to see it clearly when the blast of ice erupted from the crippled generator trap that HYDRA had been trying to get near Captain America since the last time they'd trashed this neighborhood nearly a year ago, and wrapped itself around the Iron Man armor like a ten ton frozen fist. Steve's face, mouth open in preface to a scream, was the last thing Tony saw before the suit's cameras cut out.

~* Kicked an Angel Off the Head of a Pin *~

It was five minutes of hell before they broke Tony out of the ice.

The suit's circuits, already damaged by the internal EMP that had destroyed the screamer, just couldn't handle the sudden, jolting stop that had come along with getting buried in an iceberg, so Jarvis' control was knocked offline, and all Tony could do was lie there inside his shell, listening to distant smashing noises while he tried not to panic. Tried not to remember a prison of alien stars and the suit dying around him as the nuke hit the Chitauri mothership. Tried not to remember arid desert chill and the taste of rank water, vomit, and battery acid in his throat. Tried not to remember loose-jointed, unstrung weakness, the grit of the workshop floor scraping raw his knees and elbows as he crawled toward his spare life.

He didn't make a sound. Later, he would be proud to remember that.

At last, the distant, muffled thunks exploded into motion as Thor and his irresistible force finally put enough kinetic energy into the ice to break it apart. Tony rolled free of the shards, even as the lightning jolt juiced his reactor into crazyland. His mouth filled with the taste of bile, metal, and coconut, but he managed not to scream. Again, it was something.

Jarvis was back online before the suit clattered to a stop, and Tony was able to shove away the all the reaching, clutching, helping hands and get to his own goddamned feet. He ignored the babble of questions, buying time by taking a look around, getting the lay of the land while his brain reset from panicking babble to Tony Goddamned Stark.

The portals had burned themselves out and collapsed; HYDRA had rabbited from the scene; SHIELD agents and X-men picked off stragglers and fielded the press while Hana Horatio, brought from the helicarrier in Fury's own chopper, talked her daughter down out of her entirely justified hysteria. Charles Xavier sat beside Fury, waiting for his elevator pitch moment, and it was all so fucking cozy that Tony, sweating, shaking, and chilled clear through, wanted to be sick.

"I have to go," he said, to Jarvis, to no one, to the battered blue gravity mass vibrating anxiously in his peripheral vision. "I'm just gonna. You don't need me to-"

"Tony." Soft. The word was soft, low and resonant with worry, and that was fucking good, because if it had been a shout, Tony didn't think he'd have been able to just shake Cap's grip off his arm instead of turning with repulsors blazing. Steve backed a wary step, hands lowering as he said, "Let them take a look at you first. The medics."

"Yeah, no. No need." Tony stepped away, watching Coulson and Barton shepherd the medical team who'd gotten Natasha off the roof toward the waiting medical vans. "I'm fine. Jarvis, is the suit flight-stable?" The numbers flashed across his HUD in answer. Not really, but enough to at least get him the hell out of there. Which was where he really, really needed to be just then.
"Tony, please don't just-"

"Again, no. I'm done," he announced over the open comm, blasting away from the street with all the force his compromised repulsors could muster. "See you all at home." And though Jarvis had the suit's HUD track Steve's upturned face as the street retreated below, Tony resolutely refused to look at it.

He didn't make it back to the Tower. The repulsors started to cut out after only a minute of flight, and Jarvis proved that he still considered the suit under his control by aiming them for the Mansion, which was closer, and oh thanks so very fucking much, also not a place Tony wanted to be right then.

Sloane came running not long after Tony hit the removal platform on the terrace. She looked no more pleased to see him than he was to see her. "For pity's sake, what do you think you're doing?"

"Well obviously," he grunted as the removal arms struggled to get the chest plate loose from the helmet, "I'm having a nice game of pinochle!"

"Don't be an idiot, Stark," she declared, tightening her grip on the cleaver and advancing with grim purpose, "I wasn't talking to you, I was talking to this damned fool machine that seems to be trying to take your head off." She ducked under one of the grabbers, slapped another out of the way, and landed a solid thwack with the handle of the cleaver just to the left of the throat clasp. Then something shifted, and suddenly the clamp could settle where it was supposed to, and the manipulator could get the probe into place and trigger the helmet release and suddenly, blessedly, the helmet pulled away and clean, bright, viciously cold air replaced the damp, warm suit-funk in Tony's lungs.

Which is why he was still trying to cough his lungs up when the SHIELD helicopter buzzed in, loud and low over the manor's roof, and Captain America dropped like a bomb onto the terrace beside them. Between the flying dust of the chopper leaving and the flex of Steve's thighs as he rolled to his feet, that didn't help Tony's coughing fit one tiny little bit.

"I'd wondered when you'd be getting here," Sloane said, stepping back out of the manipulators' way and turning on the man with a scowl. "This is your idea of leadership then? Letting Tony fight in that condition?"

Steve scraped the hood back off his brow and spared her exactly one glance from the glare he was pinning on Tony. "No ma'am, it isn't. He been here long?"

"Okay, first," Tony got out as the coughing wound down enough that he could speak. "Don't talk about me like I'm not here, and second," he switched his glare from Cap to Sloane. "Don't touch my stuff! And third, I don't need Captain Spanglepants to tell me when I can fight. God damn it, why won't that back plate come off?"

The noise Sloane made was dripping with scorn. "I'm sure can't imagine, Sir. I'm just the cook."

Then she turned to flounce back inside, saying, "Captain Rogers, this looks like a job for you and the brandy decanter. I'll just bring it back down, shall I?" Then the French doors banged shut behind her, and Steve was storming to the removal platform like he meant to rip Tony right out of it.

"What the hell was that?" Steve ground out, stopping just short of the platform as the grabber arms whined and lurched Tony in place.

"What, that part where you and my fucking housekeeper discussed me like a stray animal?" Tony
snarled back, bracing against the tugging. "Or did you mean the part where I nearly suffocated while SAVING YOUR LIFE?" He hadn't meant to say that, realized what he'd revealed only when Steve's face went even more ashen in the long afternoon light. "But I think the 'that' in question here is you fucking up my armor so I can't DO MY FUCKING JOB!"

Steve didn't step back from the roar, but the blood rose high and fierce into his cheeks. "You were-

"That was me," Tony shouted over him, "nearly letting half of Brooklyn get sucked through a wormhole because you-

"You went silent on the comm! Horatio was talking over you like you were-

Like he was paralyzed, helpless to do anything but crouch there and watch while Jerry did his best to... Tony shook his head to clear the memory away. "I had a plan!"

Then Steve did grab him. Tony could feel the shoulder pauldrons grind against the pressure of his grip "A plan?" he said through those too-perfect white teeth, "You never said one word to me about a-

Tony tried to sweep his arms between to break the grip, but a grabber arm got right in the fucking way and would not move. "A plan YOU nearly ruined when you put me into goddamned Nanny mode!" The collar brace gave a pop, and suddenly his back was fucking freezing!

Steve gave him another shake, brisk enough to uncouple the pauldrons, which weren't supposed to come off before the coif, and goddamn it. "What was I supposed to-

"YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO FUCKING TRUST ME!" Tony screamed, then added, "Fuck." Because he really hadn't meant to say that.

"YOU... just... I don't..." Steve let Tony go like he was hot, taking a step back, and then another, and Tony could fucking watch him shut down. The furious pink drained from his skin and stayed gone, the eyes that had been blazing mad went suddenly armored and icy, and the forehead went from wrinkle of disapproval to smooth as polished ice. Captainface. Steve was giving Tony Captainface, the one he gave to enemies and prisoners and rude reporters, the one he'd worn that first time they'd really fought, in the lab on the Helicarrier. The one Tony hadn't missed one single, tiny fucking bit.

"What was the noise I heard on the com?" he clipped. "The one that knocked you out."

"It didn't knock me out," Tony mumbled, ducking as the coif pulled off over his head and the burned out screamer rattled down the length of his armor before spinning off across the terrace. Kind of a shame, since he'd really have liked to crush the fucking thing under his repulsor boot right then.

"Jarvis was familiar enough with it to know its symptom progression, and how to disable it. So that means you know too," Cap said, his hands curled awkwardly at his sides like he'd much rather they were filled with Tony's throat. "So what was it?

Tony didn't look to see where the screamer had rolled, he just fucking didn't. "It's... it's nothing. It's not import-

Don't. Lie. To. Me." Not quite a shout. Not quite a threat. Quieter, and far worse than both. Steve's teeth were gleaming through the words. "Something stopped you cold in combat and took you offline for better than 20 minutes. I WILL know exactly what it was before I have to encounter it in combat myself."

"You won't, ok? Encounter it, I mean."
Cap's chill didn't waver. "Less than convincing," was all he said.

"You won't!" The removal unit finally, finally finished and withdrew. Tony managed not to shiver as he stepped down shoeless to the terrace. "It wasn't supposed to..." he waved a hand vaguely, took a breath, and tried again. "It was a mistake, ok? It wasn't even supposed to exist at all anymore, because I destroyed the damned things after Obie used one to try and-"

"Obviously," Steve said as he turned away, "you didn't."

Tony lunged after him, caught his arm and dragged him around again. "NO! EVERY DAMNED ONE! Serial number by serial number, and every goddamned prototype too, even if it didn't work! I even melted down the machinery they were made on, because I didn't want to ever..." Tony dragged in a breath so icy it nearly choked him, locked his gaze and clung to Steve's elbow with both hands. "Goddamn it, he ripped my reactor right out, and I couldn't even MOVE! I nearly died. Pepper nearly died. You think I wouldn't do everything possible to make sure that would NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN?"

Steve was silent too long, but Captainface had eased into a searching kind of stare. "But you didn't destroy all the designs for it," he finally said. "And Jerry Horatio got them."

Tony nodded, beginning to shiver in the thin mesh undersuit.

Steve turned them both toward the French doors. "So was that part of your plan too?" he asked as he ushered Tony into Howard's bedroom and shut the doors behind them.

Tony whirled on his heel, fury slicing neatly through the guilt. "Fuck you," he breathed. Steve just kept walking until he reached the dresser, and the brandy decanter set conspicuously on top of it. "You know damned well that-"

"How, exactly would I know?" Steve asked, sloshing the snifter way too goddamned full, and then setting it down like he'd much rather smash it. "How the hell would I know anything about your plan, seeing as how you couldn't manage to trust me with any part of it?"

Tony swallowed, stunned for a minute at the venom in those words. Then the rage splashed back out, and he was striding across the room. "Fuck you, Steve!" he snarled. "Don't you fucking twist my-"

But Steve sidestepped the poke and thrust up one broad red hand into Tony's way. "Enough. I need to go check on Natasha and Dr. Banner now," he said. His glove was filthy with dirt, scorched and bloody, the leather in tatters so the flesh peeked bone-white from beneath. "You have your drink and I'll talk to you later."

Seeing red, Tony lunged, grabbed Cap's shoulder to turn him back again. "Don't you fucking dismiss me! You are not walking away from me!"

Steve twisted, ducked, grabbed, and then slung Tony across the bed, ten feet fucking away. His shoulder slammed into the headboard, and the whole frame shuddered in a squeal of jouncing springs and sliding linens. "You wanna fix that armor," he said from the doorway, head turned to deliver his parting shot, ragged glove curled around the doorframe. "Then maybe you oughta think about what makes a fella want to stick around."

Then he was gone, leaving behind nothing but a sick twist in Tony's stomach, and a bloody handprint on the doorframe. It dripped, shiny and red as Sloane's voice carried through from the hallway. "Seems like that went well." Another drop formed and slid, thick and bright across the
"I need to get back to SHIELD HQ, ma'am," Steve's voice was tensely formal, and fading with distance. "Really rather not try and get a cab dressed like this. Is there a car here that I could..." That wasn't someone else's blood, it was Steve's. Someone else's blood would have gone tacky by now. This was livid, scarlet.

Tony slithered out of the ruin his landing had made of the neatly-made bed, remembering a sound like someone had been hitting the ice with a bell over and over and over again. Steve... it had to have been Steve... had been shouting uselessly over the noise. Vibranium, ice, leather, flesh. The strength of a Super Soldier who wouldn't back down.

"Fuck," Tony said, opening the dresser and grabbing something out without looking. He wiped at the blood with a white cotton undershirt, but only managed to smear it all over the wood and wall paint. He turned the rag to try again, but the wet, sticky cloth against his palm made him flinch to a stop with his gorge in his mouth. The shakes were starting. Tony was way too goddamned tired for this shit right then. "Fuck," he said again, then threw the bloodied shirt on the floor and went to take a shower.

~* Started the Bullet Hole Conversation *~

Enough brandy to wash the sticky, sour taste from his tongue, plus a couple more because what the fuck ever; shower so hot it left his skin stinging and red exorcised the ghost of cold from his joints; soap that smelled of herbs and pine, not of rank sweat, metal, and panic; Led Zeppelin through the speakers instead of clanging, shooting, screaming battle chaos. No better way to greet the inevitable adrenaline crash, Tony figured – a prescription better than Xanax.

He dialed the volume down after the third repeat of When The Levee Breaks, and wiped the dripping hair from his face, saying, "Jarvis, set up a diagnostic on the suit. What's it gonna take for me to get it up and running again, and can I do it in the shop here, or do we need to get it home?"

"Diagnostic is running now, Sir," Jarvis answered coolly. "The armor's structural integrity is sound, most of the affected systems being limited to the helmet and joinery. At present it appears the damage can be corrected with coding, and some circuitry rebuilding."

Tony nodded and shut the water off. "Nothing that can't be fixed in some quality time with a soldering iron then." He grabbed a towel, thick, soft, and nearly big enough to wear as a toga, considered shaving for exactly two seconds before deciding fuck it, the mirror could just stay fogged up. There wasn't anybody he needed to be presentable for anyhow.

"... If you say so, sir." The answer was so long in coming, Tony had almost forgotten the context. He turned from the dresser with a glower. "Are you judging me, Jarvis?"

"Doing so is not within my program parameters, sir."

"That's not a 'no,'" he warned.

"As you say, sir," Jarvis answered, not sounding nearly contrite enough, all things considered.

"You refused my override."

"You were not yet physically capable of commanding the suit, sir."

"Not the point." Tony stared between the dresser full of Howard's clothes and the pale gold, slightly
rank undersuit he'd slung across the bed, trying to decide which one he'd feel more gross about putting on. He went with the undersuit, figuring it wasn't all that gross. "Don't you ever do that to me again, Jarvis," he said, sitting to slip the footpads on and began the war between tight fabric and damp skin.

"I cannot make that promise, sir," and finally, Jarvis actually sounded sorry. A little bit. "You encoded me with a deep directive to save your life whenever possible."

Tony shook his head, pressing the clasp just above his ass, and straightening as the back seam sealed itself in a series of tiny magnetic pulses that felt a lot like a shiver. "Not at the cost of..." he bit the words back, changed tack, and tried again. He didn't want to reprogram the AI if he could help it, but unexpected behavior was dangerous for the whole team. "Jarvis..." Tony said, collecting the Iron Man helmet from the sofa where he'd tossed it on his way inside, "I don't like being helpless. I can't take it. It's a thing. You know that."

"I do, sir," Jarvis answered, swinging back the fireplace and lighting up the elevator platform that accessed the basement workshop here at the Manor. "I share your dislike of you being helpless, and judging by the Captain's reactions, I surmise he shares it as well. Which is why we both made every effort to help you."

Tony was about to call bullshit on that, but a Joan Jett ringtone, and then Jarvis cut him off. "Sir, Ms Potts is on the line," the AI said as the workshop came to life around him. "Shall I connect the call?"

He covered his face with a sigh. "She got the combat override alert, didn't she?"

"That alert is automatic, yes. Shall I connect, or take a message?"

"Stop trying to get me in trouble," he warned, setting the helmet down and reaching for the patch cables and a spare terminal. "Put her through before she kills me from half way around the world with the power of her mind."

The only answer was a click and the brief sound of echoingly open air. "Tony?" Pepper asked, anxious, but thank Christ, not panicked.

"Hi, Pep. So there was a thing tonight." Best to get the confession out of the way first, when he might win some clemency for not making her drag it out of him.

Her answer was all eyebrow. "So I gathered. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm just fine." He got the terminal rolling, and set the helmet into the attached download cradle. "Tired though. And, no, the armor isn't full of bullet holes this time..." Two dents in the shoulder hardly rated a mention, Tony figured as he settled down to tell the tale.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. November kicked my fluffy butt in about seventeen different ways, kittens, but at long last, I have managed to claw my way back on track with this. I really hope you all enjoy this chapter!

For those of you who haven't yet read it, there are some referenced in this chapter that harken back to things that happened in We Are Shangri La, so they'll make a bit more
sense if you have a look at that one too. But they should stand up well enough even if you don't.

As always thank you to all you readers who have kept me motivated with your comments and enthusiasm. Your help has been immeasurable in this long haul, because comments are love, and cookies, and kittens and rainbows and unicorns and Steve on a blanket in a speedo.

(Whoops. Got a little TMI on me there. Sorry.)

Also; still evil. Still not sorry.
"So I hear there's this big do on Thursday," Tony said into the lull.

They'd been talking for awhile, Tony winding down by slow degrees as he made Pepper fish for details he'd edited out of his confession, and glad beyond the telling of it that she wasn't right there with him. The hands-shaking-too-much-to-type thing was aggravating enough without being given the third degree over it, and anyway, he was fairly sure it would clear up once the caffeine kicked in.

"Oh you heard that, did you?" she shot back, arch and exasperated and completely charmed, it was plain. Half an hour on the phone with Tony would do that to any girl, after all.

"Thanks-giv-ing," he enunciated carefully and overloud. "Kind of a big deal, they tell me..."

"They?" she laughed.

Ah. Well. Because clearly, a SHIELD cordon could keep out highly militarized HYDRA assault teams as well as assholes with cameraphones. Except for how it apparently couldn't!

"Lacking photographic evidence, I cannot confirm any rumor of airborne girls," he evaded, typing in a YouTube search over the top of the scrolling, scrambled lines of code. "Valkyries and mutants don't count. So. Thanksgiving. You doing anything?"

Pepper actually laughed at that, a bright sound full of joy and love and words that didn't need saying anymore because this was Pepper, and he was Tony, and they just knew.

"Yes, Tony," she said with ironic cheer, "I am doing something for Thanksgiving."

He'd been afraid of that. "Well... what? I mean the Green Energy conference ended Monday morning, so you should be getting home any time now, and we could-"

And just like that, the cheer exited stage left, pursued by a bear, leaving ironic to hold the scene alone. "I'm not coming home until next Monday, Tony."

Tony did The Eyes. It was good practice, even if she couldn't see him and get the full effect. "But what about Thanksgiving?"

"Tony, you spend Thanksgiving in your workshop every year," she said in a way that made it possible to hear her rolling her eyes. "Ten years I've known you, and the standing order for Thanksgiving or Christmas events was that you didn't want to go unless you could be too drunk to remember them afterward! I've lost count of the number of times you've told me how much you hate the whole holiday season, and never want to hear another word about it."

Dear God, she was beautiful when she got all ranty like that. Made Tony almost wish they were Skyping. Then he fumbled a tray of tiny allen wrenches to the floor in a thousand chiming keys of goddammit, and nearly fell out of the chair trying to catch them, and then he remembered why that wasn't a good idea. He used his foot to scrape the wrenches more or less into a pile, and mustered his defense. "I don't hate Thanksgiving. Pepperrrr! How could you say that about Dummy's birthday? I do some of my very best work on Dummy Day!"
"And that would be my point that you're proving right now." He could picture the smile curling through her words just as clearly as he could hear the canned chatter of a television somewhere behind her. And that was good, because if she was ignoring the television to talk to him instead of muting it like she usually did, then she couldn't be all that invested in whatever was not him, right?

"Well, if I wasn't going to work all weekend," he tried, smooth as 30 year scotch. "If I was going to do something for the holiday, would you come home for it?"

She made that sigh of hers which usually meant 'I find myself doubting your alleged genius' then, and said, "Tony, I have family. Family that I happen to like, love, and enjoy spending holidays with as much as you enjoy spending your holidays with your robots. We're having Thanksgiving at Lizzie and Mary's house this year, and I'm going to be here with my family for that weekend, sitting around the backyard, eating leftovers, not getting my uncles arguing about politics, and watching Sally play with her turtle. And no," she added after giving Tony just enough time to open his mouth in protest. "You can't come too."

"Pepper!" He slapped a hand over his arc reactor. "Unkind!"

"And yet," she mocked his pain remorselessly, "after your performance at the Potts family Christmas two years ago, still entirely justified!"

And that was just completely not fair. "In my defense, it did grow back."

"You're ridiculous!" She acknowledged his point with a giggle, but didn't actually yield her own. "No, sweetheart. You'd hate it just as much as you hated it last time, and I would hate watching you hate it, and my family would hate not getting why you hated it so much, and just... No."

"But!"

And that was when she went for the throat. "Whatever it is you've done to get Steve mad, you don't get to use me or my family gathering to hide from it."

"Steve's mad?" Dodged nimbly enough, he thought. "Why would Steve be mad?"

Pepper's tone grew just a bit sharper. "You need to deal with it on your own, Tony."

"Oh, and by the way, I like how you assume it's my fault! That's a really nice touch."

"Oh stop," she laughed. "I can hear you pouting across five states. And what I assume is that it was Steve who called me an hour ago, saying you'd had a hard day and could probably use someone to talk to."

Tony blinked, dropped his feet to the floor so quickly that the chair shuddered. "He what? That asshole!"

"AND," Pepper rolled over Tony's entirely justified outrage, "he doesn't strike me as the type of friend who'd leave you on your own after a fight where you needed to use the emergency override-"

"Who says we're-"

"UNLESS you'd made damned sure he would leave you alone. Which is probably why you're down in your workshop by yourself right now, and not upstairs debriefing with the rest of your team."

He blinked again, staring at the workstation, where Jarvis was repairing the scrambled code in a calmly scrolling line of retro green, and YouTube had located ten videos of Gloria Horatio's brief but
historic venture into unpowered flight. "The team's debriefing?" And no, damn it, he did not sound pathetic.

"In the library, Steve said. I think he brought the team back to the manor because you're still there." Tony didn't think she needed to sound so smug about that, really. But neither did she need to go over all puzzled and ramble on with, "Why are you there, anyhow? You hate the manor."

"They're debriefing upstairs, right now," Tony dragged Pepper back to the salient point. "Without me?"

Again, with the audible eyeroll. Pepper needed to see a good ophthalmologist to get that under control, because it just could not be healthy. "Well, I don't know," she asked, all sweetness and eyebrow. "Did you turn the lab intercom on so that someone could reach you, or did you set Jarvis to full-block like you usually do?"

Jarvis put up a status window on the workstation, blinking at the top with the block order, and trailing message and entry requests after it like retweets on an Iron Man sighting. Damn it. "You're still assuming-" he tried.

"Very little, actually. You chase everyone off after you've had a scare, Tony. You always have, you know."

"I didn't chase you off," he grumbled, knowing it was a lie, that he did, and often, and he tried to make it up after, but that didn't always... he shook the thought from his head and grabbed his point firmly. "...you always came back?"

"Stockholm Syndrome," Pepper said, and her voice was nothing but fond. "Look it up." Tony spit his coffee despite himself and then the red-haired harridan proceeded to mock his pain openly and out loud.

"You'll be fine, Tony," she said as their giggles wound down at last. "Stay home in your genius-cave and build something amazing if you decide not to talk things out with Steve. You'll be happier either way, and we won't void the warranty on Daddy's pacemaker this year."

Tony took a drink of his coffee, then said, "Mmmm... Nope."

"Tony..." why had he never noticed that Pepper had her own kind of Captainvoice? You'd think after ten years, he'd have made the connection.

"No, I mean I won't stay home," he said. "I'm gonna stay here instead."

"There."

"Yup!"

"At Stark Manor." She named the place like she wasn't sure he'd ever been there, or maybe like she thought he might have been dropped on his head recently.

"It's apparently going to be a big fancy do, and Sloane's pulling out all the stops," he told her airily. "I had meant to invite you as my plus one, buuuuut, since you've made other plans, I guess I'll just find myself another date instead."

She spluttered at that, and he couldn't help grinning. "Tony! What do- who- Sloane?"

Then it was his turn to laugh at her misfortune. "Ah ah, you had your chance to go to the ball with
me, Potts. Now you're stuck with the turtle. If you ask me really nicely though, I might save you a piece of the pie."

Jarvis finished with the fire control code, and loaded the borked flight stabilization algorithms over top of the YouTube window. Tony watched the numbers scroll as Pepper sighed, exasperated in his ear. "We have pie, Tony."

"Yeah see, you say 'pie,' but I hear 'supermarket bakeries are the death of the soul.'" he chortled, helpless in the grip of schadenfreude now. "But even three days old, Sloane's will make you weep with joy. Assuming it lasts that long... Thor may be going to traumatize Foster's family, but there's still Steve's appetite to consider, and I'm pretty sure Sloane likes him more than you..."

"Sloane doesn't like anybody," Pepper spat.

Tony leaned close over the workstation and tapped at a few keys. "Whoops! There's that bad boy. Jarvis, pause that. Gotta go, Pep. Geniusing that needs doing and all that." Then, feeling lighter than he had in days, Tony swept his hand flat beneath his chin, and Jarvis cut the call before Pepper could give voice to her baser instincts.

He stretched, popped his neck left, then right, and settled down to the best balm his soul could ever require: some serious code-unfucking.

~* Got Sent To Bed and Actually Went *~

Jarvis cut power to the soldering iron after the third time Tony burned himself and threw it at the wall. A clear overreaction on the AI's part, since the cord on the thing stopped it flying anywhere farther than the end of the workbench, which was totally fireproof anyway. But when Tony said as much, Jarvis just responded with a twenty point symptom list for prolonged exposure to the screamer device, with half of the points highlighted, and the line -- "In nearly all cases, symptoms abate after 12 to 14 hours of sleep." – highlighted, in red, and blinking.

"Are you trying to imply something, Jarvis?" Tony asked, sarcastic in the face of the work timer at the bottom of the screen, which indicated they'd been at this particular codebash and circuitbang for about five hours now.

"I wouldn't presume, sir," Jarvis lied smoothly in reply. "However, Mrs. Sloane has requested I inform you that while she does not relish the idea of asking Captain Rogers to break down the workshop door so she can bring down the tray of food she has prepared for you, she has no particular moral objection to it."

"I thought Steve was busy doing team-building exercises without me again," Tony said. And no, that was not petulant, or bitchy, it only sounded that way because of the penlight between his teeth. Because it wasn't like Tony wanted to be upstairs filling out paperwork and practicing trust falls anyway, but if anybody could get Steve back down here and compromising Tony's newly installed security doors, it would be Sloane. And Steve had fucked his hands up enough already today.

"Well fine," Tony decided, clicking off the worklight and heading for the stairs, "I guess I can spare a few minutes for soup and sarcasm."

He emerged from the elevator to find full night outside the windows, but the Master suite lighted and warm with the smell of woodsmoke. Sloane looked up from re-making the bed, and nodded him toward the sofa by the fireplace without a word. She didn't look any more pissed off than usual, and he couldn't detect any obvious poison in the savory tomato soup, and the grilled cheese sandwich had bacon in it, but no ground glass, so Tony took that as a sign that he was forgiven.
"So I hear you've been invaded by Avengers," he said into the silence as she finished laying out the bedspread and turned to eye the pillows with malicious intent.

"Not the first time, is it?" she answered, choosing two and scruffing them by a corner each. "At least there's no horse in the ballroom."

"Hey, Sif apologized for that," Tony reminded her, then winced as she whacked the pillows together like she wished they were anvils and Tony's head was between them. "Anyway, it's just a debriefing, so I'm sure they can't be getting too rowdy on you." Not without me there, anyway.

She finished punishing the pillows, and slung them onto the bed. Then chose two more with obvious relish. "Rowdy isn't how I'd describe it, no," she snorted and began whacking. "They eat like toddlers, the lot of them."

"Well," Tony rose to the team's defense, though he wasn't certain just why. Maybe because Thor's table manners might be all jaw and elbow, but he was damn handy with a hammer when a guy was stuck in a fucking iceberg. "Saving the world burns a lot of calories, you know. I think they can get a little slack on not using the shrimp fork correctly."

She set down the pillows and gave him a look over her glasses. "So speaks one who's never tried to feed toddlers." Tony shook his head, and she snorted. "Well, I served them the same as you, only they're all half asleep in the soup, picking at the sandwiches, and still too busy going on about snipers and mutants and body counts and who shot whom and who got away with what to take themselves off to bed like civilized human beings." She put the pillows in place and turned the bed down with practiced ease, and a significant glare in Tony's direction.

He ignored it. Exhausted to the point of shaky he might be, but it had been decades since he'd let Sloane tell him when to go to bed, and he didn't intend to backslide now. "Well, at least Steve'll be giving your food its due attention," he declared around a mouthful of grilled cheese heaven. Sloane braced her arms over her skinny chest and huffed, and Tony felt his eyebrows rise in disbelief. "Come on, I've seen Rogers the Destroyer eat."

"Well tonight it's more like Rogers the Distracted," she grizzled, clearly offended. "Picking everything to bits and talking over it instead of eating a bite." Tony felt his stomach sink. Steve never wasted food like that. He ate like he was afraid he'd never see food again, and would finish everyone's leftovers right at the table if he wasn't fended off with a fork.

Sloane rolled her eyes at Tony's stunned silence and huffed again. "Oh, don't make that face, it's just his type. I've seen it before. He'll neither eat nor sleep till he's seen all his chicks safe in their roosts, at which point he'll likely take sick and fall over." Which would be why Steve had insisted everybody come to the manor, Tony realized with a trickle of warmth that he chose not to question too deeply.

"Anyway," she finished, scooping up Tony's tray and plucking the spoon from his fingers before he'd even realized the bowl in his other hand was empty. "I'm far too old to waste my time trying to get through that kind of duty-bound nonsense. The boy knows his way around the kitchen if he gets hungry, and if not, I daresay he'll last till breakfast."

Tony opened his mouth to correct her on the finer details of Super Soldier metabolic rates, but something in her glare made him snap it shut again. Then he looked down at the gory remains of his dinner and remembered the tomato plots with a shudder of enlightened, if slightly tardy, self interest. She was probably right anyhow. Steve did know his way around a kitchen, especially one filled with obsolete appliances like Sloane's was. Whether he'd USE it or not was more a question of how stubborn he was feeling, Tony figured, and yeah... the big idiot probably could last till breakfast if he
decided to get his martyr on.

Taking his silence for the agreement it was, Sloane turned for the door, five foot nothing of brisk smugness in a steel grey pantsuit. "Put that filthy onesie you're wearing outside the door when you've waited long enough that it seems like your idea to go to bed. There are pajamas in the dresser."

"Okay first, it's a conductive mesh biosuit, not a onesie-

"It's indecent."

"And second," Tony pressed onward doggedly. "Like hell am I sleeping in Howard's pajamas, because it's creepy enough to be sleeping in his bed!"

Sloane turned at the door to give Tony a look that suggested he might have been recently dropped on his head, and she thought his resulting delirium faintly amusing. "What makes you imagine that anything in this room ever belonged to Howard Stark?" she asked. Then she left before Tony could muster an answer for that.

It did make him look around the room with renewed attention though, and to realize that he couldn't actually remember having been inside his father's room when they'd lived here, let alone to remember what the furnishings had looked like. So for all Tony knew, Sloane could very well have donated everything in it to a homeless shelter, or burned the lot. The only things Tony knew had been his father's were in the study, shrouded under canvas in the garage, or shoved into the back corner of the workshop. Everything else Howard had cared about had moved with them to California.

Kind of a nice feeling, actually, realizing that was probably what Sloane had meant when she'd insisted that she always kept a room for Tony. Not his childhood room, which was a guest room now, not his father's room just handed down with clean sheets, but the Master Suite made over fresh for the Master of the Manor. For Anthony E. Stark to use. Sure, the furniture wasn't as modern as what he'd choose for himself, but it was, now he looked at it, subtly more casual, sturdier, simpler – more him than the throwbacks that populated the rest of the house.

So in a fit of sentimental gratitude, and because Jarvis didn't seem likely to let him back into the workshop again, Tony did decide to get in the goddamned bed, but he decided not to wear the damn pajamas OR the undersuit when he did it. He was adult enough, after all to know it was high time; that the shaking of his hands, the graying out of his vision, the ache in his joints and feverish twist of pain at the base of his skull were only going to get worse until he gave in and made a sacrifice on the altar of unconsciousness. He didn't need to be mocked by his housekeeper for passing out on the sofa when there was a perfectly good, non-Howard-cootied bed sitting right there.

But in a silent room with the smell of smoke on the air, battered and sore, and still jittery after the day he'd had already... Well, Tony wasn't sure he could get drunk enough to think trying to sleep under those conditions was a good idea. Tony lay in the cloud-soft sheets, toasty between goosedown duvet and heated featherbed, and feeling his heart rate inch upward as he listened to the fire murmuring and rustling to itself in the old iron grate.

"Jarvis, is the team still debriefing?" he asked after only a few minutes of trying and failing to get comfortable.

"I would not use that term to describe it, sir," Jarvis replied. "However, I can replay the session for you now, if you'd care to review it."

"Yeah," Tony sighed, relieved that his AI knew him well enough to offer. "Only not too loud. Don't want to make Sloane cranky or anything."
And like the brilliant creation he was, Jarvis brought up the recording with the volume so low it actually sounded like they were talking in the next room, their voices fuzzed and indistinct through the wall so that he couldn't follow the words, only the comforting relevancy of their tones. Nat's contralto was terse, but loose with exhaustion; Bruce's baritone ramble was muzzy with facts and endorphins; Thor, full of bemused rumblings and sudden crescendos; Clint's tenor, bright with sarcasm and defensive cheer, counterpoint against the arid amusement in Coulson's voice; Cap inserting brusque questions throughout, as level and measured as Jarvis without the accent or the sass.

He was restrained, fronting, but Tony was still glad to hear him, and to let himself drift to sleep on the familiar cadences, pitches and timbres that meant, more than anything, that they'd made it. That despite everything, they were all okay.

~* Known When to Stay Down *~

Tony woke some hours later, sweaty, shaking, and terrified to try to move for fear he'd find he couldn't. 'One last golden egg to give' thrashed around his head, as it often did on nights like this, but now it had I don't owe you shit, Stark fighting for its rating share on the Nightmare Channel. Because Tony's life was fucking awesome like that.

Rain was rattling on the patio stones, tapping at the windows when the wind gusted, and that sound more than anything helped his racing, charging heart to settle; it hadn't rained in Afghanistan. Not even once. Hadn't been raining that night in Malibu either, or this afternoon in Brooklyn. So rain was good. Rain meant that the reason Tony couldn't feel his feet was because he was tangled too tightly in expensive sheets, not because he was paralyzed and waiting to die with a gaping hole in his chest or the world. Rain meant the softness beneath him was a high grade mattress, not coarse blankets thrown over sand, or a five thousand dollar hand-loomed silk carpet. Rain meant that the grudging orange glow playing across the ceiling was coming from the fireplace embers, not a forge waiting to burn up the last days of his life in a bid for revenge.

He'd made it out. He'd made it home. He was okay.

Tony took in a deep breath, smelled laundry soap and his own sweaty musk over the lingering woodsmoke tang, and blew it out long and slow. He'd kicked the thick duvet off sometime during his sleep, leaving the sheets and blankets to try and strangle him in his sleep. A few judicious fidgets worked out the direction of his restrictive swaddling, so it only took a few yanks and flailing kicks to shake the whole mess loose. Then he could roll over and face the French doors and the chill, soaking rainstorm going on outside.

Beyond the doors, he could see the Iron Man armor still standing beside the platform where the removal bots had left it. A silent, reassuring sentry -- a reminder Tony never got tired of seeing – that he'd won, that he'd beaten the odds, beaten the bad guys, and found a way to not just live, but to triumph. That Iron Man was a hero... A hero whose damned helmet, Tony remembered with sudden chagrin, was currently wired to a laptop in the basement, leaving the rest of the armored suit standing out in the damned rain, like a great big Tony-shaped goblet. Damn it.

He rolled out of bed, glad of the fire-warmed air, and the thick carpet between him and the hardwood. "Jarvis, have the removal bots section out the suit and stow... wait a minute..." Tony paused, put a hand over his arc reactor to block the glare, and peered through the glass at not one, but two figures out there in the darkness, face to face and still as chessmen on a forgotten gameboard. "Who else is out there?" he murmured.

"Captain Rogers," Jarvis answered quietly just as a distant lightning flash revealed the man himself, standing barefoot in his undershirt and uniform pants in the pouring rain that was probably more like sleet because hello, November in New York. He was facing down the armor like he didn't notice the
cold, or the storm, just staring at the void where the helmet belonged as if he expected the empty suit to fight, and glowering like he wanted to land the first punch if it dared to do so. Tony couldn't tell for sure, but the way the faint light played along his jaw, it almost looked like Steve was talking to the empty, headless armor. Or maybe he was struggling not to talk instead, the tight, grinding motions of muscle over bone a sign of words choked back and chewed to pieces instead of let fly.

Tony stared, greedy as always for this or any chance he got to watch Steve unawares, to try and read the mind and heart behind the facade of nice-guy cheer he used to keep the world at arm's length. To see the unguarded rage, the sorrow, the loneliness, guilt, and fear that made the man real, and alive, and flawed and gorgeous, and genuinely Steve, without a spangle to be found. Cap was the golden mean; precise, elegant and inhumanly perfect, but the Steve Tony loved was a tea bowl with flaws that made him uniquely, entirely beautiful.

The tableau, or stand off, or dressing down, or whatever it was didn't last long though. Steve shifted, swayed in place as if unlocking his knees took more effort than he'd planned, and took a single measured step. He unfurled his hand from the clench it had held at his side, and reached out to put it palm first over the breastplate, like he was blocking out the light from Tony's arc reactor just as Tony himself was doing at that very moment. In an eerie sort of displacement Tony half expected to feel those cold, wet fingers touch down over his own hand, but of course, he didn't.

It was a gentle thing, that touch, and careful, belying the taut-strung, barely restrained violence of moments before. The contact didn't even have enough weight behind it to rock the armor where it stood, but the motion seemed to exhaust Steve utterly. His shoulders drooped, head sagging from its proud lift to hang in a helpless angle that made his hair slither down across his face, dark and wet with the sheeting rain. Tony had never seen Steve look quite so lost, and though the meddler in him ached to break that moment open, to kick it over and run to the rescue, some wiser instinct kept him still.

Because if Steve had wanted to say this, whatever this was, to Tony's face... well... he would have, wouldn't he? That wasn't a good thing to admit, that this broken moment lay unnamed and unclaimed at Tony's feet, but it was an important thing, and he had enough emotional savvy to recognize it, however little he liked it. What made a fella want to stay around? The same thing that made him want to run for the hills – this. The knowledge that he could have done, that he had to do better, even if he didn't quite understand how.

And it was that realization, as much as the creeping cold pouring off the glass that drove Tony back across the room into bed, tugging the duvet up from the floor and cuddling up tight beneath it with a shiver. He was fully awake now, watching Steve's shadowy form through the windows as he turned away from the armor at last and crossed the patio to enter the other bedroom. Tony had thought of it as Maria's room before, but now he wasn't so sure. Sloane always seemed to put Steve there when he stayed at the manor, and she had redone a lot of the rooms after Thor's infamous welcoming party.

The rooms still shared a bathroom, which was actually the only direct passage between them. Tony had once thought the sleeping arrangement said some pretty sad things about his parents' marriage, but now he found it strangely comforting to listen from a safe distance as Cap got himself ready for bed. To hear the mundanities of showering and brushing teeth, of wrung-out clothes and wet boots dropped into the tub, and to take them as a baseline, because if the man could manage to gargle mouthwash, then he couldn't be too badly off, right? You didn't bother to put your towel in the hamper if your heart was really breaking, did you?

But Tony could catch, just on the edge of hearing through the patter of rain, that Steve was humming to himself as he puttered about the suite – something soft, simple and sweet, all falling notes and
swaying rhythms. *I used to sing with my ma, back when I was little.* Tony remembered Steve's words as bureau drawers whispered open, then quietly shut in the other room. It was comfort, he realized with a shiver, the reason Steve sang to himself now, quietly, privately, when he thought no one would hear. Just as Tony reached for the company of his bots, or hid himself in the music of his childhood when the silence was too big to swallow, Steve filled his empty silences up with lullabies and love songs – maybe because he was lonely, or sad, or weary, but most of all, because nobody else would.

It wasn't long before Tony heard the covers of the other bed rustle, and then go quiet. He lay still, counting minutes, watching the play of darkness against the ceiling, and thinking about how good soldiers learned to get to sleep in minutes whenever, wherever they could. Thought of how Steve always crashed so damn hard after a bad mission, it was almost like a mini-coma especially when he'd hurt himself. Thought of how he totally wasn't getting up to sneak into the other room so he could spy on the man, it was just that Tony wanted to get a real, proper look at Steve's hands -- to see how badly he'd cut himself before the marks all healed up and Steve could pretend that nothing happened, that nothing hurt him. If Tony was being ninja silent with the bathroom door, and covering his arc reactor carefully as he went, well that was courtesy, right? He wasn't enough of a jerk to crash around and deliberately wake the man up when, judging by the even, shallow meter of his breath, Steve had only just gotten fully to sleep.

Steve was facing the French doors, the closest exit, like he had the next sentry watch, curled up around one of the spare pillows pulled down sideways under his shoulder and knee. His face was gentled smooth, the high bones stained a cool orange from the City lights reflecting off the stormclouds. No sign of nightmare behind those eyelids, Tony thought as he crept around the bed to better see, no twitching ghosts of ice or explosions, of trains or planes or reaching hands. Not yet, anyway. Steve's right arm curled firmly over the pillow, but the left stretched from beneath it, hanging a little off the edge of the bed, palm up in the air, reaching languidly for nothing. It reminded Tony eerily of the nightmare Steve had had in the team lounge after dinner all those months ago, on the night after the school collapse. He had to wonder, with a giddy sort of recklessness, whether he'd get yanked into a stranglehold again if Tony were to try and take that hand in his own now. Or if Tony would want to struggle at all if he did.

Tony stifled the urge and instead crouched down to peer at the extended hand, keeping his own telltale heart firmly covered. The scar lines crossing Steve's palm and fingers were plain; lurid and angrily red, even in the stormy, reflected light from the windows. Tony sucked his teeth to be sure he wouldn't hiss as he found himself imagining how deep those cuts had to have been for the serum not to have erased them already. The idiot was lucky he hadn't severed actual fingers, because as near as Tony could tell, he'd either broken or forgotten the straps on the shield, and taken to holding it by the edge while he tried to chop his way through the...

Then Tony's breath stopped up tight in his chest without a sound. Steve was awake. The stillness that grabbed Tony was an animal thing, so thorough and bone deep that it felt almost like a full body flinch as his mind flooded with horrified certainty. Steve was awake right then, and was watching Tony in silence. Right. At. That. Moment. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe under the weight of that knowing.

"I wish..." the words came out of the darkness as quiet as a breath, and deafening in the silence of Tony's silence. He closed his eyes, let the dread and mortification of having been caught escape through his teeth, but otherwise stayed where he was as Steve went on with a sigh. "Tony, I wish you could have told me."

And what could Tony say to that? *I wish I had? I wish I didn't have to? I wish you'd known me since*
we were kids, so you wouldn't need to guess what I'd do in a trap like that? I wish I was wrong about what you'd have said if I did try and tell you what I meant to do? No. None of that. None of that was any fucking good.

The scarred fingers curled, then flexed in gloom, reaching across the chilly air that hung so thick between them. "I wish you could have trusted me," Steve whispered.

Tony let go of his chest, and let the silvery blue light pour out over them both as he covered Steve's upturned palm with his own. "Steve, I gave you voice override authority on Iron Man," he murmured, low and earnest and for once in his life, hiding nothing at all. "Nobody else in the world has that authority, not even Pepper. How are you getting a vote of no confidence here?"

"I just..." Steve let go of the pillow and pushed up onto his elbow, the movement tugging Tony to lean just a little closer than before. "How is it trust to give me that, and then hate me for using it?"

"I don't," Tony said, and settled wearily from his crouch to kneel on the floor. He had to be better, he realized, because it was much too late now to run for the hills now. "I don't hate you, Steve. Look, you know I can be a dick when I'm freaked out, and what I said wasn't..." he lost the thread of his apology, if that's what it had been, in the weary droop of Steve's face, the sweep of still-wet hair sliding forward to hide his creased brow and downcast eyes just as it had when he'd stood out in the rain before. "Hey," Tony said, reaching to try and tip that face up to the light again, to find Steve's gaze with his own. "Hey..."

Steve curled into his touch though, nuzzled Tony's palm open with his chin in a way that was nothing if not a promise... or a plea. "Tony," he breathed the words damp and hot across the heel of Tony's thumb. "I just can't if you don't trust me, if you won't talk to me when..." he closed his eyes, while Tony watched in sinking, frozen horror. "I can't, because that would mean I couldn't trust you, and I can't..." Those eyes, impossibly blue in the arc light, opened again and fixed on Tony's face like he held some kind of power here, like Tony was somehow any more competent or capable than when he'd been weak as a kitten and buried in ice.

"I can't do this if I can't trust you," Steve said then, his fingers tightening around Tony's as if he were pulling him in rather than cutting him loose and saying his goodbyes.

_Too late to run for the hills_, Tony told himself one more time. Then he licked the dust from his lips to whisper, "Do what, Steve? What can't you do?" Because it would be better to know, wouldn't it? To hear the condemnation out, have it on the table, along with all the broken pieces and fucked up parts before he had to try and figure out just where the hell it had all gone wrong. If even the Friendzone was burning down and all he had was one bucket of water, then he damn well needed to know the best place to throw it.

Steve took a deep breath then, and shoved the pillow off the bed. Tony blinked, startled as much at the soft whump of it against his thighs, as the realization that Steve wasn't wearing anything to sleep in. Then, "This," Steve said, and keeping a tight grip on Tony's hand, he rolled backward on the bed, lifting the blankets out of the way and tugging Tony gently, inexorably in after him.

It was slow as gravity, gentle and steady, and Tony had every chance to yank his hand free, shove to his feet and go back to his own damned room like any sane man would have done instead of letting this beautiful, naked disaster of a man pull him into his bed; instead of letting Steve drape Tony like a blanket across his body that oh fucking hell, was really not wearing anything to sleep in, and somehow managed to be a little cold still, despite that super soldier metabolism; instead of letting Steve wind his arms up around Tony's back, bury his nose in the crook of his shoulder, and shudder out a sigh that felt like it had to fight its way past seventy five years or more. "This..." he murmured again, and kissed Tony warm and wet under the ear.
And what could Tony do but melt? His cock, already half hard the instant Steve had started to pull, conscripted every drop of blood that his stunted little conscience might have used to think twice, to lean back, to not kiss that full, soft mouth for all it was worth, or to ask what are you doing you said you didn't want me are you sure oh please be sure you beautiful son of a bitch because if you give me another taste I won't be able to let you go again. But Steve's hands, cool and strong as they stroked Tony's sides, didn't feel unsure, and Steve's tongue, slipping and twining with his own like they were battling for dominance, didn't have a single doubt about what it was doing, and Steve's cock, hardening alongside Tony's in the heated, sweaty cradle of their hips, knew its mind absolutely.

Tony broke the kiss, rearing back with a gasp that absolutely was nothing like a sob as Steve grabbed his ass with both hands. "FUCK yes, do that," he wheezed as broad fingers delved, sweeping his crack from sacrum to furl to balls and back again. "Oh my God you changed your mind. Tell me you changed your mind. Tell me this isn't just some post battle -- oh Jesus, Steve, -- post battle comfort and reassurance buddies -- fuck, there, oh right there, God, your fucking hands are so big, -- getting each other omph!"

Steve kissed him silent then. Not many of Tony's lovers ever managed that, because so many had tried that as a tactic for attempted censoring of Tony-mouth, he'd developed a pretty high resistance to it. This silence, though, was worth it. This silence was a long, moist thing full of tongues and hands and tiny, animal noises. Frantic at first, but slowing by fascinated degrees, gentling between them until finally it was Steve who broke away with a gasp. "Not just that, Tony," he murmured between soft, quick kisses to his cheeks, his chin, his eyelids. "Not with you. Could never be just that."

And to hide the way his arc reactor buzzed a little faster at that statement, Tony pulled back and offered up a cheeky grin he figured might be big enough to keep hidden the enormous, sloppy surge of relief that was swamping him from the inside just then. "Hey now, I've been told the Iron Man is very reassuring!" He tried to roll away, but Steve followed him over, and oh fuck yes, half a mile of naked Super Soldier muscle pinning him to the bed put all kinds of spin on Tony's definition of 'comfort'.

Steve grinned, and then nuzzled low under Tony's jaw to graze his stubble with perfectly even teeth. "Are you sure you want to put the suit on before we go a couple of rounds?"

Tony's laugh rattled into a groan when Steve found the sweet spot between his shoulder and throat and gently bit. "Steve..." he managed, rolling his hips against the delicious press of weight. "Starting to want you to make me...."

He felt the laugh against his neck just before Steve shifted his hips and made Tony see stars. "Only starting?"

"Fuck... fuck you."

"Yes please," Steve laughed again, and Tony had to groan as the puff of air jostled Steve's hips and oh God bless America, that cock alongside Tony's own.

"Oh God, do that again, and we'll have to wait awhile..." he mumbled around his own lip. Then, "Wait, where are you going? Nonono, no way!" He grappled at Steve's shoulders to stop him rolling off, suddenly terrified. "There is only one good reason to stop what you're doing, and nothing is actually on fire, so don't you dare!"

But Steve only resettled himself, taking more weight on his knees and arms, and giving Tony a smile that was too sad, too understanding. "Sorry," he murmured around a sweetly lazy kiss. "Don't want
"Not the speed," Tony answered, distracting himself from the need to come by calculating the subtle geometry of Steve's back muscles with his hands. "S'the distance."

"Wasn't planning to go far," Steve said, and slid down to do some mapping of his own. The heat of his tongue along Tony's collarbone was enough to shatter the calculations into a heartfelt groan. That turned into a yelp of approval when nipples entered the equation. Again, as before, Steve was all careful exploration and searching, deliberate focus, mapping the lines of Tony with hands and tongue like he needed to know them by heart forever. Just as thorough, just as searching, just as exhaustive as before, but exploring now, learning him like someone who meant to come back and back and back again, and didn't want to have to stop and ask directions when he did.

"Oh Jesus Steve, don't go at all..." Tony breathed before he could stop himself, and god damn it, there went his sexmouth, which was actually more mortifying than his drunkmouth by a long shot. And harder to shut up, too. Especially when Steve's hand curled around his prick and gave it a long, stroking pull that made Tony see stars. "Don't change your mind after, just don't do that to me agaaaaaaaaahfuckyes!"

Steve's tongue was on his prick, and it was strong, and slick and hot and velvet-rough sliding from root to crown, his mouth a wet furnace that followed the same path back down and oh sweet mother of chrome, sucked. Tony jolted upward like he'd been shocked, barely stirring Steve's weight on his hips at all, and oh fuck, the fact that Steve could keep him pinned while sucking Tony's brains out his cock should be terrifying, but it wasn't. It wasn't anything but mind blowing. (Oh, hah!) "Jesus, Steve," he groaned as those thick fingers delved low and intimate behind his balls, and suddenly he didn't know whether to push backward or forward.

Steve pulled off with a soft pop and a look of concern. "Sorry, am I hurting you?"

Tony laughed, high and giddy and helpless. "No, you're killing me!" he gasped when he could, winding both hands in Steve's fine golden hair. Then he had to groan as Steve stuck a finger into his mouth to wet it. "Possibly literally. As in, if I don't come soon, you'll have to figure out how to hide my body, and then Pepper will turn to Evil and destroy you aaaaaAAAAAAYES!" Tony bore down against the burn, wanting that finger inside him almost as much as he wanted the tight, sucking pressure of Steve's mouth on his prick again, as much as he wanted Steve's hand knotted tight with his own against his belly to hold him down in place and keep him right there, right in that moment forever.

He was shaking, panting as he felt Steve's knuckles press up behind his rock hard balls, felt that broad, strong finger curl home like it knew the way, felt the head of his cock nudge tight at Steve's throat, felt him gag a little, muscles fluttering and seizing around him. Then so suddenly it almost hurt, Tony came, the roar of blood squeezing his own hectic babble from his ears, his free hand grabing randomly, frantically for Steve's shoulders, his hair, his beautiful, shocked face as he pulled back, then determinedly swallowed and swallowed and oh fucking Jesus, swallowed some more.

"How," Tony tried once he thought he could manage to talk, but then he had to gulp and shiver against an aftershock groan. He tried again, breathless. "How are you even... Why would you... Christ, Steve!" He shuddered again as Steve took one last lick across the exquisitely sensitive head of his cock, then pressed a gentle kiss to the hollow of Tony's hip. "Why?" was all he could manage when those eyes looked upward to his again, shy and smug in equal measures.

He got a half shrug and a grin that had nothing virginal at all in its provenance. "Always wanted to try that," he said, then chuckled when Tony couldn't hide his shock.
"Try that?" Tony wheezed. "You mean you just... and you never even..."

"We had porn in the 40's, Tony. Clubs and bars in Harlem and LA and London, if you knew how to ask about it." Steve shrugged, bashfully pleased and probably blushing in the gloom. "Soldiers told stories, shared dirty magazines. You know I'm a quick study." He turned his wrist to draw his finger out, and set another seismic reaction racing up Tony's spine.

"Ok, that you are," Tony wheezed, giving in to the urge to stretch against the empty feeling Steve's one goddamned finger left behind as it dragged free. "And yeah, you totally get a gold star on that one, because wow, but-" Tony sat up to catch at Steve's shoulders and drag him up into kissing range, then licked into his mouth, chasing his own salty musk on Steve's tongue. "But that wasn't," he gasped when they parted for breath, "what I meant when I asked you why."

"I know," Steve kissed his cheek bone, his right eyelid, his temple bone, then his ear. His cock was still hard, pressed so close between them that Tony could feel Steve's heartbeat through the veins pressed into his hip. "You want to know why this. Why now, after I said no before, right?"

Tony nodded, not quite willing to trust his voice in answer. He busied himself with licking the new sheen of salt from the hollows of Steve's throat instead. Steve curled one hand around the back of Tony's head, as if to keep him there, tucked beneath his chin and suckling brief, purple roses into the creamy flesh. "Can you be with me anyway, Tony?" He felt, as much as heard, Steve's question under his lips. "Not knowing why, just that I want this, here, now, and with you?"

There was a part of Tony that wanted nothing more than to cackle at that earnest, heartfelt, fucking ridiculous question, and declare that of COURSE he'd hit that star spangled ass and not ask twice. That he'd wanted a bite of Cap's big apple for fucking ever, and like hell was he going to turn it down now. But that was the idiotic part of him, and Tony wasn't anywhere near drunk enough to get away with putting that part in charge of this. This 'this' was far too fucking important. This 'this' was much more than trophy hunting, bedpost notching or getting his pipes well and truly cleaned. And Tony wasn't stupid either, he did have more emotional range than Dummy, no matter what Pepper might say when she was pissed over his refusing to toe the nice guy line. Just because he usually didn't give a fat damn about social and relationship dynamics didn't mean that he couldn't fathom them. Tony saw the parallels here, and realized that this, this right here was more or less exactly what he'd done to Steve all those weeks ago; made an offer as unexpected, as overwhelming as it was tempting, but with an enormous question hanging over it like a ten ton anvil. And like Steve then, Tony now, had no way of knowing whether that anvil was held up with cable, or with chewing gum.

If this had been anyone else, even Pepper, Tony would have been pissed, turned contrary and snide at the thought of such a manipulative payback, but... but this was Steve, and Steve didn't play those kinds of shitty, passive games. So this wasn't payback, and it wasn't a setup, and it wasn't a test, so much as it was an ironic, half-comic symmetry that Tony was almost, almost horny enough to find hilarious instead of terrifying.

He gave a sigh, kissed goodbye to a particularly bright hickey that probably wouldn't see morning, and then threaded his fingers into Steve's still-wet hair to pull his face near for a too-chaste kiss. "Can I ask something else?" Steve's lips twitched a smartass smirk, but instead of pointing out that Tony just had asked something else, he only nodded. Tony rewarded him with another kiss, not quite so polite. "You've changed your mind?" Again, he nodded, something furtive and worried flickering through his eyes almost too quickly to be seen. Tony carded his hair again, and tried on a reassuring smile, hoping he was feeling in the right direction, and not about to put his hand down on a landmine. "So is it that you don't want to say why you changed it, or that you don't know why yet?"
"I know why," Steve said, and leaned into Tony's petting with a sad little smile. "And I will tell you, it's just... complicated. And there are other things I really want to do more right now than talk." He rutted his hips just a little at that, skidded his still-hard cock up along Tony's thigh and left a cooling streak of pre come behind it to show just how patient he was being while Tony dithered about his feelings.

So that was fucking enough of that! With a grin, Tony worked his hand between their bodies so he could take hold of Steve's cock and give it a promising stroke. "That," Tony said over the ragged groan Steve choked out then, "I can absolutely respect. So long as you have lube."

"Lube..." Steve repeated, but not as if he actually knew what the word meant. Which would possibly have something to do with that thing Tony was doing with his wrist. It was a very good wrist thing, one of Tony's favorites.

"Lube, soldier," Tony grinned, biting Steve's earlobe to get his attention back above his waist. "Because if you even try to get out of this bed before you've done your best to fuck me right through it, I swear to God I will do my best to kick your star spangled ass even without the suit!"

Steve made a broken noise deep in his chest as all the air escaped him at once. His fingers clenching hard around Tony's shoulder and neck, and for a moment, Tony almost thought he'd pushed it too far, and they'd both be waiting awhile for the second course. But then all at once, Steve was moving, lunging across Tony's body to reach for the night table drawer, so that big, hard cock drove down across his own, not entirely soft yet, for a breathless, delicious moment. "Oh fuck, Steve!" Tony yelped, and caught his ass with both hands.

"Yes. Damn it, yes," came the response, breathless over the sound of rummaging. Then he rolled away, sat back onto his heels between Tony's knees, and set a small, squat jar down on Tony's reactor facing. "Always wanted to try that too," he said, cheeks a hectic pink in the reactor glow, eyes fever bright and starving.

Tony peered down at the jar, and had to choke down a giggle. It was Vaseline. Talk about old school! They were going to have to have the blood-test and modern prophylaxis talk before long, but like the 'why are you doing this' talk, Tony figured there were about a thousand things he'd rather be doing just then, starting with getting Steve's fingers right back where he wanted them.

So he made a mental note to have Jarvis forward his latest blood test to Steve later, and before Steve could misunderstand his hesitation, he thumbed the cap off the jar and grabbed Steve's hand with a leer. "I'll just bet you have, soldier," he said, driving two of Steve's thick fingers into the goop, then slopping up some more onto his own to lead the demonstration. "Now watch and learn; it goes about like... this."

It didn't take much demonstration, really. Steve got the idea right away -- like a tactical genius, or a guy who'd had years to think about what he'd like to do, and what might be the best way to go about it; like a guy who'd spent a lot of sweat and spunk and wrist action imagining just how the whole thing would work, and now needed only the barest guidance to validate his very, very good instincts. Tony decided pretty quickly that he was a big fan of Steve's instincts, and of his hands, and of his mouth, tongue, teeth. Of Steve's stubborn goddamned patience and excruciating attention to detail, Tony was less of a fan, perhaps.

Or perhaps not, given that he was so slick and hot, so hard, hungry, and desperately ready for it when Steve finally let Tony push his hand out of the way and guide his body up to where they both wanted him to be, that there was hardly a twinge of pain. There was only a brief shock of eager recognition when the head of Steve's prick slipped past the guardian muscle, and then the irrepressible urge to writhe around the weight and pressure as it drove smoothly, deeply inward.
Delighted and breathless Tony wrapped his legs up around Steve's waist and pulled, stretching, arching helplessly into the sensation as Steve settled down against him at last, all trembling arms and hitching breaths with his heart racing, pounding so hard so that Tony could feel it from the inside.

"You okay?" he asked in a voice that was just nothing at all like a breathless squeak, thank you very much.

Steve took a deep, trembling breath, held it as his cock pulsed heavily once, then blew it out with a whimper. "Feels. I don't want. I'm so..." He broke off in a groan as Tony couldn't help the shivering clench those words stirred in him. "Baseball scores, oh God...Tony"

"Jesus, Steve, I'm right behind you," Tony managed, quelling another stretch with all his strength. He worked a hand between them, gripped himself in greasy fingers and pulled. "Who was... shit. Who was the guy from your squad – the one with the bowler hat and mustache?"

That made Steve pick up his head, confused. "Dum Dum Dugan?"

"That's the one," Tony purred, licking at Steve's shoulder, and rolling his hips just a little. "I'm imagining him in that dress Natasha wore to the gala. The grey lace one with no back?"

Steve giggled then. The feeling was indescribable. "Cigar and all?" he said, rolling his own hips down just a little, and shivering as Tony groaned up to meet him.

"And all those... oh fuck... all those freckles..."

Another giggle. Tony saw stars. "Back hair," Steve huffed, and Tony could feel the grin against his jaw. "So much back hair."

Another breath, steadying, readying, and then Steve was pulling back, and back, and back, dragging Tony's ability to think, speak, reason, imagine anyone in any dress at all, focus his eyes, and even breathe, out of him like pearls on a string. Only a high, hungry keening sound remained, and then Steve slid firmly, solidly home. Then he rolled back and did it again, only harder, and oh Jesus fuck the man didn't even need to aim for his prostate, just ground along it like a million miles of gloriously bumpy ride, and Tony was going to come, any minute he was going to go off again like a fucking bomb, and all he wanted in his life was more, and more, and harder.

Then Steve shifted his weight, rocked back onto his heels and took Tony's hips in his hands to bounce him down and down, and down again. Tony had to let go of his prick just so he could hold the fuck on, but it didn't matter because he was coming anyway, clenching and shivering in Steve's hands, striping spunk and quite possibly his brains all over his belly, his chest, his arc reactor, and his fucking beard, and Steve wasn't stopping at all, just pounding Tony right through it.

Then finally, when Tony was hovering on the edge between 'oh god never stop' and 'okay, all fucked out now', Steve slammed home one final time, and stayed there, mouth open in soundless shock, face tipped to the sky, absolutely still but for the cock lurching and pulsing and spending itself inside Tony. If he hadn't already come twice, just the rapturous look on Steve's face would have been enough to get Tony hard and hungry again. As it was, though, Tony found himself struggling to get his hands up onto Steve's chest, worried the man was going to pass out and collapse on him.

He felt the charging of his heart through his ribs, felt it when Steve's breath unlocked in a ragged, sobbing kind of sound, then felt the careful unwinding of that coiled-spring tension as Steve eased Tony and himself back down to the bed, gentle, precise, and wrecked. Tony reached out, cradled him down into the cooling mess on his chest and belly, then shivered a moan as the down-tilt of his hips slipped Steve's softening cock from his body.
Tony smoothed a hand down Steve's back, feeling the ghost of shivers beneath the heated, sweaty skin, feeling the breath slow by degrees as Steve eased fully, bonelessly down. "You okay?" he murmured into the pulse at Steve's temple. That had been intense, even by Tony's standards.

"Yes," Steve whispered back, his hands slipping under Tony's ribs to curl beneath his shoulders. There was something in his voice though, something edgy and thin, and Tony had a pretty good idea from the clutch of those broad hands, the quelling weight of that body over his own, and by the way Steve was hiding his face in the crook of Tony's throat, of just was bothering him.

He reached a little, smiling as the shift made Steve's grip tighten, then caught the bedclothes and pulled them up around them, settling the cool linen and heavy duvet over them like thick snow. He had a knowing smile ready when Steve picked up his face, startled and hopeful. "Getting kinda cold," was all he said.

Steve swallowed, the movement of his Adam's apple brightly lit from the reactor below it. "You'll... you'll stay?"

"Hell yes," Tony beamed back, shoving a pillow farther down beneath his neck and settling cozily in. "Are you kidding? I want a front row seat when your little super soldier gets up in the morning to blow reveille."

Steve gave a disbelieving laugh, but he didn't resist Tony pulling him down again. "You're such a cornball."

"You can't expect sophisticated humor after a fucking like that one," Tony said, planting a kiss on the crown of Steve's head. "You're lucky to get full sentences." Steve's only answer was to crack a mighty yawn and then cuddle down against Tony's shoulder with a smile that even felt smug.

And this, Tony admitted to himself even as the consciousness bled out of him and sleep flowed heavily into its place, This is going to change everything... But strangely, he couldn't muster up the energy to be afraid.

Chapter End Notes

Confused yet, my bog blossoms? Don't worry; I still have at least one more chapter to blow everything up, and cement my standing in the Evil League of Evil for all time! Muahahaha... oh, wait. That's the other story.

Still, there's more to come, so fear not if your final questions aren't answered; I have a plan. That's technically better than a way, I'm told. Or at least more defensible.

Thanks again to all of you who've been taking the time to let me know you've liked this. You are the glue in my binding, the vibranium in my arc reactor, and the siren lure that keeps me at the keyboard when I start thinking that pithed monkeys could write this stuff the better. I adore each and every one of you!
It wasn't the most restful night either of them had ever had. Half of that could be laid at the feet of normal post-bad-mission wind-down shakes, and for Tony there was also the distraction of obsessively rehearsing what he was going to say to Pepper – not so easy as it seemed, given the giant, glaring variables and unknown quantities in Tony's data that made it damned difficult to even know what to tell himself about just what was going on. But mostly, the restless night was pretty much the normal consequence of sharing a bed for the first time with someone whose breathing, twitching, smells, and snoring were unfamiliar.

Not that Steve snored, the perfect bastard, but Pepper had long since let Tony know, in no uncertain terms, that he did, so Tony self-consciously jerked awake every time he heard himself start up. Steve twitched himself awake pretty often too, dodging familiar nightmare setups with a practiced flinch, grunt, blink, and sigh before settling right back into sleep again. Tony knew that dance well enough to go a couple measures of it himself, despite the comfort of Steve's body heat turning the bed into a basking furnace.

The itchiness of dried spunk on Tony's skin didn't help things either, but it never crossed the threshold from annoyance to 'yeah getting into the shower now before I claw something bloody', so Tony ignored it, and tried to focus on the fact that Steve hadn't left, or changed his mind, or faded away like a frustratingly explicit dream. Steve was still right there, right where he could touch him, and smell him, and cuddle right up against him until Tony got too sweaty and had to roll away to dump some heat into the cooler side of the bed while grinning like a loon. If the night turned out for Tony to be more like a series of ten minute naps interspersed with mildly irritated wonderment, it just meant that he wasn't all that hard to wake up for 'reveille' when the darkness started to bleed into gray.

"Mmm... Steve?" Tony rolled his ass up into the weight half-slung across his back and hips, and oh yeah, hello there, soldier. He drew one knee up higher in invitation.

"Yeah?" the word gusted warm and amused over the back of his neck as Steve frotted gently into the hollow of his thighs.

"If you make a bugle noise in my ear right now, I will build a robot for the express purpose of nutting you when you least expect it." He squirmed a little, getting things lined up while Steve, cottoning on quick enough, picked up, shifted over, and curled his own knee up hard behind Tony's.

"Might be worth it," Steve mused, rubbing close. " Wouldn't want you to sleep through..." a shocked sort of sigh escaped him as his prick caught just right against Tony's furl, still slick and easy from the night before, and nudged just so far inside. Then he took a shaking breath, and finished his lame joke. "Wouldn't want you to sleep through muster, civvy."

Tony grudgingly gave him a snicker, then wrapped his fingers tight into the hand Steve curled just by his chin on the pillow. "You're hilarious, Cap. Now fuck me." Steve started to pull away, to reach for the night table, but Tony tugged him back down again. "No, it's fine, we don't need anything. Just go easy," he coached, rocking shallowly. "A little more each time... ohhhyeah, just like that..."
And then there weren't any more jokes for awhile, just a sweet, slow, tidal kind of screw that built up in slow, steady intensity rather than the rocket-fueled climb of last night. A crucible rather than a bonfire, all stretch and roll, grasp and slide, their coming less like an explosion this time, than like the sweet, sudden uncoiling of a spring that had wound down as far as it could go. The release left them both lazy and boneless, stickily smug and buzzing in their skins as the pinkish glow of sunrise stained the silvery sky outside.

Steve slipped away to bring back tissues and a wet cloth from the bathroom. Tony rolled back with a yawn, pulling off the covers and presenting his nakedness so the man who'd got him dirty could clean him up again. "Let's have a nap, then do that again," he suggested. Steve chuckled, scrubbing at a long-dried sticky spot beside Tony's reactor casing, but before he could answer, some kind of enormous and terrifying wild animal snarled a death threat from somewhere under the man's ribs.

"Um," Steve said, blushing. "Kinda hungry, actually. Thinking about some breakfast."

Tony peered at him, then stole the washcloth, found a clean corner, and scrubbed a spot off Steve's hip. "You're going to leave me alone in this nice, pre-warmed bed and go off to fraternize with Sloane instead?" he challenged.

Steve's grin widened. "Unless you're hiding breakfast in there with you, yeah."

"Oh, give me ten minutes, I'm sure I can come up with something nutritious for you," he leered. That made Steve laugh outright, and steal the washcloth back again. "I wouldn't recommend that actually," he said, slipping out of reach. "I missed dinner last night, after all, and I'm so hungry now, I might forget myself and bite."

Tony clutched the blankets over himself. "You win! Cannibalism is definitely on my Red list. You go," he waved imperiously in the direction of the kitchens, "feed the beast and save your quota of kittens, and I'll just look after this nice warm spot for awhile longer." Then he rolled over into the huddle of covers that smelled so delightfully of sex, and closed his eyes again, listening with half a smile to the sounds of Steve puttering quietly after clothes and shoes in the bureau and closet.

He was almost back to sleep when he felt the kiss press into the hair at his temple, saying, "I'll bring you back some coffee later, ok?"

"Mmm, you do that," Tony hummed, and let the smugness carry him the rest of the way down into a richly deserved sleep.

~* Mis-counted a Gift Horse's Teeth *~

He woke some three hours later to a rude splash of sunlight across his face, and no coffee anywhere in sight. Which just fucking figured, didn't it? Tony huffed to himself, half listening to Jarvis' dry recitation of the day's predicted weather while he took himself off into the bathroom to clean up. Steve's uniform and boots were gone from the tub and hamper, and Tony's undersuit with them -- a detail that made Tony's heart quail a little, imagining Sloane coming in to get them. But upon peeking through to the other bedroom, he noted that the covers had been twitched straight on the bed, though it hadn't been 'made', per se, and he let himself relax. Steve had to have taken them when he left, tidying his quarters before mess assembly, like a good little soldier.

A good little soldier who was currently Absent Without Leave, Or Tony's Coffee. "Jarvis, where the hell did Rogers get to?" he asked, going to inspect the dresser for alternatives to wandering around the house naked, or stealing the clothes Steve had obviously stashed for himself in the other room. Tony wasn't sure if Steve deserved the honor of Boyfriend Shirting, given his clear and flagrant
coffee-dereliction, after all.

"Captain Rogers appears to have been conscripted into KP duty, Sir," Jarvis announced after a pause, during which Tony discovered shorts, socks, undershirts with long and short sleeves, and one lonely pair of very clean, very new jeans in the bureau. "I believe Mrs. Sloane requested his help with the potatoes."

"Potatoes?" Tony blinked, pulling on a pair of shorts. "Why would she... oh. Is it Thursday already?"

"Thursday, November twenty-second," Jarvis confirmed. "Designated in the United States as the holiday of Thanksgiving."

"Yeah, yeah, spare me the Wikipedia article until after I've had my coffee, okay?" he grumped, wondering if maybe he shouldn't just go back to bed for awhile, and skip the whole awkward holiday gathering pre-show thing. "What time is it in Pottsville?" he asked, selecting a pair of socks and a belt from the top drawer.

"Ohio time is nine fifteen A.M. Sir, the same as it is here. However it seems relevant to mention that Miss Potts has set her call status to 'blocked, barring actual life-threatening emergency' status until midnight."

"Of course she did. Because she's busy cheating on me with the turtle," Tony said, running a hand through his bed-hair before deciding that if anybody could rock the 'shagged hard and put up wet' look, it was him. He didn't know whether he was more inclined to consider Pepper's lockout a minor slight, or a reprieve, however temporary, from the inevitable Reckoning. Technically, it was both. "And now Steve's thrown me over for the potatoes too."

"Your life is indeed one of privation and sorrow." No one could deadpan like Jarvis. It was one of the magical things about him. "If it's any consolation however, Captain Rogers did ask me to notify him when you had slept yourself out. Presumably to fulfill his offer to bring your promised coffee."

"Yeah, well don't bother, Jarv," Tony shot back, heading to investigate the closet. "No point getting coffee in bed when you aren't actually in bed anymore. I'll go get it myself."

"As you say, sir," Jarvis said in a tone that made clear the rolling of eyes he didn't actually have.

Tony ignored him, snapping on the closet light to find, to his surprise, that the shirts and suits inside it actually did belong to him. As in, he remembered buying and wearing them, but not actually ever bringing them to the manor. They were all on the older side, hardly his current favorites, but all his clothes, and ones that fit him just fine. His spare tux was even there, with shirt studs and cufflinks tucked into the pocket, and Tony knew for a certainty that he'd last seen that on its way to the cleaners after that thing with Natasha and the gazpacho at the Governor's birthday party. Tony wasn't sure whether stealing his clothes to stash at the manor put Sloane's hospitality over the line from touching thoughtfulness into creepily stalkerish, but he figured it was probably best not to think too hard about it before he'd caffeinated himself properly. He chose a wine-coloured button-down to go with the jeans, and shoved his feet into a pair of loafers.

He found the kitchen buzzing with strangers in chef's jackets and varying expressions of terror as they chopped, peeled, blanched, braised, basted, blended, and baked under Sloane's flinty eye, with not a trace of unreasonably attractive Super Soldier to be seen. One peek inside was enough to convince Tony that venturing inside for a more thorough search would be a Bad Plan. Sloane might seem to be preoccupied with the pie crust, but Tony was pretty sure if he put one foot inside that room, he'd find himself cornered and covered in flour before he could muster a defense.
The dining room, however, was similarly besieged. Servers were polishing their way through the crystal, silver, and china as if the stuff wasn't already fucking spotless to begin with, and there wasn't a trace of the breakfast dishes -- or more to the point, of the coffee carafes, -- to be found. Even the ballroom was filling up with round catering tables, hired chairs, and random flower arrangements. The two bored teenagers ironing linens in the corner by the grand piano spared Tony about half a glance each as they worked their way through the napkins. Neither Steve, nor coffee seemed to be lurking about anywhere.

Tony was actually beginning to consider his odds of getting the nearest Starbucks to deliver him something as dark, black, and bitter as his flinty little heart when a pointed cough at his elbow startled him three feet into the air. It was only through some innate sixth sense that Tony managed not to swing wildly around and knock the mug of coffee flying from Sloane's hand when he landed. And he most definitely did not scream like a little girl.

"Jesus, woman!" he wheezed, pressing a hand over his arc reactor. "Didn't anybody tell you I've got a heart condition?"

She smirked in answer, and put the cup into the other hand, which he'd had thrust out toward her as if there were a repulsor in the palm. "Truthfully, Mr. Stark, I can't recall anybody mentioning to me that you had a heart at all." Which was just completely unfair, given that he still had his old Mark 1 arc reactor around as proof of that fact. But Tony hadn't yet gotten enough coffee into him to manage more than 'no, you are' levels of repartee, and he knew it. From the satisfied glint in Sloane's eye as he took the cup, she knew it too.

"Now if you're done lurking about and intimidating my hired help," she said, herding Tony back across the dining room, "there's breakfast waiting for you in the kitchen."

"I don't want to go in the kitchen," Tony said in a perfectly adult, and not in any way whiny tone. "It's full of your flying monkeys, and half of them have knives. I could wind up in a pie or something!"

"You'll be quite safe, Mr. Stark," Sloane smirked, chivvying him along with a flap of her hands. "I'd have needed to have you butchered and hung up to bleed dry at least three days ago if you were to be anything like edible today."

"Oh god, Sloane, that is so not okay!" Tony wheezed, absolutely, positively not laughing as he backed out of her reach and edged his way into the buzzing hive that was the kitchen. "How would you even know something like that?"

"Spoken like one who's never shot his own dinner," she replied. "But given the substances you've put through that body over the years, I doubt anything could be done to make you fit for a decent table anyway." She snagged a plate of sausage rolls from the counter as she herded him past, and shoved them into his hand.

"Hey, I'll have you know there have been no complaints about my taste, OR my flavor!" Tony protested, clutching the sausage rolls to his chest and putting on an air of injured vanity. One of the girls at the sink giggled, so he gave her a wink in solidarity.

Sloane rewarded this with a sniff of disdain, and a smile she couldn't quite hide. "Mm. Your consistency, however is somewhat lacking." He yelped as she poked a vicious finger into his side, but through his catlike reflexes, managed to neither drop his sausage rolls, nor slosh his coffee, nor body-check the cook who was murdering celery at the counter behind him. "Stringy, tough and stubborn. All the roasting in the world couldn't tenderize you." She made a show of tutting and shaking her head. "Dog food, at best, I'd say, and then only if you didn't much like the dog. Now get
"Out of my kitchen, you're in the way."

"You fraggf me in fere!" Tony protested around his breakfast.

"Doesn't mean you're welcome to nap in the corner," she answered, aiming another poke at Tony's ribs, and smirking when his dodge put him directly in front of the outside door. "Go on then, out with you. Your playmates are keeping themselves busy down at the guest house, and you might as well join them until the guests begin to arrive. Yes," she pressed on as Tony opened his mouth, "there is more coffee. There. Not here. Now off you get."

Tony backed out the door, but caught it with his elbow before it could slam shut after him. "Look, Jarvis said that Steve was somewhere around here, so unless he's the one being made into pies, could you maybe..."

Sloane gave him a glare that was half you're ridiculous, and half I could light you on fire with my mind, then leveled a finger over Tony's shoulder toward the garage. "That'll be him coming back with the potatoes now, I suspect."

Taking a drink of his coffee, Tony turned to look. Sure enough, there was Steve, all pink and cheerful, with his shirt sleeves rolled up despite the wintry air as he rounded the fridge trailer that Coulson and Barton had hooked up to the generator two weeks back. He carried a metal tub piled high with yellowish, lumpy things, and his grin caught fire when he spotted Tony by the door.

Tony was on the verge of calling out or grinning like an idiot -- neither being good ideas when his mouth was full of coffee. He considered waving awkwardly with his coffee mug, or maybe bounding toward Steve in slow motion, arms akimbo, hair streaming artistically, and wildflowers and sausage rolls scattering from his path as a hidden orchestra swelled with passionate violins, but then he spotted a gleam of sky blue in the shadow of the trailer, and promptly forgot how to breathe.

The warbike leaned under the garage's eaves, gorgeously rumpled, with muddy tires, a spotted windscreen, and traces of last night's rain still beading up along her seat and tank. Her star-shaped headlamp, glowing bright even in full daylight, leveled an accusing stare at her creator, and Tony's heart, which had just begun to race at the sudden dump of dopamine into his brain, abruptly tripped over its aorta and fell flat on its ventricles, knocking a horrified wheeze out of Tony's mouth before he could even think of stifling it.

That wasn't a good idea when his mouth was full of coffee either. Sloane tsked, and pounded his back as Tony choked and sputtered, shoving him a few more steps clear of the door as Steve ran over. "Oh, he's all right, just forgot how to swallow his food, is all," she told him, her hand between Tony's shoulder blades a sharp little mercy for the way it let him keep his face turned away from Steve's worry. "Go on and take those inside to Miss Marks, will you Steven? On you get, I'll stand here and make sure he doesn't die before you get back."

Tony waited until he heard the door bang closed before whirling on his heel and, for want of an empty hand to point, jabbing the plate of sausage rolls accusingly at Sloane. "How did that get there?"

She glanced down at the plate for a smirking moment before following the thrust of his coffee mug toward the warbike. "In the usual way, I expect, although I suppose he might have as easily carried it, given those old photos of his stage performances. He strikes me as a more practical sort though."

"No," Tony ground right over her deflection. "No, I left that locked up in an armored, electrified crate in the boat house, where he shouldn't even have seen it, let alone ridden, driven, or carried it anydamnwhere!"
Sloane boosted an eyebrow at him. "You left it in the boathouse, I'll give you that. And I'll admit that transport container you left next to it was nothing but awkward and in the way until I had it hauled off last week, but obviously the Captain's motorcycle was not inside it at the time."

"Yes it was!" he didn't shrill. "It had to be! I locked the thing back up myself!" Sloane just looked at him as though he were sadly slow, and then shook her head. Tony drew breath to argue, calmly, rationally, and reasonably his point, when a tickle of memory traced an icy line across his certainty. Sloane took the plate of sausage rolls out of his hand just in time for the penny to drop, thus saving Tony from a very messy facepalm indeed. Because no, in fact, Tony had not locked the warbike back up himself.

"Mrs. Sloane?" he asked from behind his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Stark?" Sweet mother of Chrome, you could hear that smirk from orbit, he was sure.

"How is your tomato garden doing these days?"

"Dead, Mr. Stark, it being November. You might have noticed?" He had noticed, in fact, the moment she'd shoved him outside without a coat, and the chill sinking into his bones just made him meaner now.

"Good. I'll make hiding your nephew's body that much easier," he growled, scrubbing the mortification from his face and standing upright with a glare. "Think there'll be room for Barton too, or will I need to put him through the chipper first?"

She laughed at him then, a high, merry sound that was almost as alarming as it was infectious. "Do have Jarvis record it when you try, Mr. Stark," she replied, plopping his breakfast back into his hand. "I'd hate to miss the spectacle. If the rest of the family's still here when you do, we could even get a sizable betting pool up with the rest of the guests."

Tony managed a sufficiently savage glare in response, he thought, but Sloane only snickered again and shooed him farther off down the gravel path. "Can't think why you'd made that kind of a production about it anyhow," she said, crunching along beside him in her sensible shoes. "It's hardly the first motorcycle the Captain's been given, after all."

Tony gave her a look over the rim of his coffee cup, and Sloane laughed again. "Oh honestly, you didn't think Howard would have made him pay for all those motorcycles he used, crashed, lost, and blew up back in the war, did you?"

"Not the same thing," Tony objected. "Dad was under contract, getting paid by the Army. And anyway, soldiers are supposed to get free stuff, not..." he glanced back toward the house, relieved and yet disappointed not to see Steve at the kitchen door yet. He was at the sink, laughing as he talked to whoever had roped him into helping them handle one more little thing before he went, unaware, as always, of just what that perfect fucking smile did to Tony's brain. "Not Depression era orphanage hard luck kids getting handed something even I'm a little afraid to figure out how much it costs..." Tony swallowed as Steve looked up through the window, saw him watching, and that smile went just a little predatory at the edges. "He didn't think I was trying to ... buy him?" Tony asked Sloane, hating how small that question sounded coming out of his mouth.

Sloane made a rude noise behind him. "I'd say he was a moron if he did think such a thing of you," she growled. "But if so, then a hand crafted, personally designed, entirely unique gift that must have taken you weeks to create is perhaps the only purchase price that boy could accept for his heart. So well done, Mr. Stark. Now finish your breakfast so I can take back the plate."
Tony obediently bit into the last sausage roll, but couldn't give it the attention it deserved. He was too caught up in the prismatic glitter of the warbike's arc reactor through the angled panes of its facing lens as he wandered near, drawn in as helplessly as a mosquito to a bug zapper. "You just..." he sighed, tracing with his eyes the wintry sunlight's gleam, like a stroke of opal dust across the warbike's blue flanks. So beautiful, so dangerous, so costly on so very many levels. "It wasn't supposed to... You shouldn't have done it."

"I know." Sloane's frank reply drew Tony out of his sinking reverie, and he was surprised to find her grey eyes softened when he met them. "You should have."

"I was going to," Tony lied, looking back toward the bike again. "Soon. I would have."

He was relieved when she didn't bother to contradict. "It's a habit I'd thought myself long past, you know, picking up after you," Sloane said, setting a hand gently on his shoulder. "Tidying your messes, and fixing the things you'd no interest in fixing for yourself. Not my place now that you're a man grown, and fully capable of facing your own consequences, but..." she caught his eye and shrugged, her smile half rueful, half fond, and entirely out of place on her pale, craggy features. It should have been terrifying, not heartwarming. "But it's done," she shrugged, taking Tony's plate and mug, both empty, and turning back toward the house. "And all things considered, I cannot say I regret it. Nor, I think, do you, really."

And if Tony was going to be honest about it – let's face it, when had that ever been a good idea? – he didn't regret it. Was he mortified? Terrified? Scrambling to figure out what the fuck he was going to say for himself as Steve held open the kitchen door for Sloane, then slipped out afterward? Hell yes, he was. Tony could feel his internal bullshit generator ramping up toward full power with every passing second. But on another level, it was almost a relief to have the damned thing out of the box; waveform collapsed, probabilities defined, consequences inbound, and vaya con Dios everybody.

He made himself stand still as Steve's boots came crunching up the drive behind him, trying not to steel himself against the words he half-expected, trying even harder not to let his nerves prompt him to fire off a preemptive strike of his own and set the whole conversation blazing before it even got going. Tony couldn't restrain the flinch when a warm, thick, and unexpected coat dropped suddenly over his shoulders though.

Steve was standing there glowing at him when Tony clutched his dove grey cashmere overcoat closer and turned to stare. "You looked kind of chilly," he explained.

"And you're not?" Tony asked, then winced at his own acid tone.

Steve's smile faded just a bit, but before Tony could scramble to damage control, he'd nodded and leaned in a little closer, his gaze sliding off to trace the withered post-autumn hues of Sloane's kitchen gardens. "Yeah, a bit. It's not so bad though," Steve shrugged. "Daytime, feet on solid ground, no snow, no crashing airplane, no arctic ocean for miles around. I don't mind it so much."

Tony knew the sound of whistling in the dark when he heard it, but in the face of the frankly pretty massive vulnerability Steve had just freely shown him, he found he hadn't the heart to call bullshit. What business was it of his if the man wanted to hit his own buttons in hopes he could short a few of them out? Whatever got you through, right?

Tony distracted himself with the business of getting his arms into the coat's sleeves, but still hadn't thought of what to say by the time he'd done so. The silence, mortal enemy of Tony's dignity and couth, loomed over his head, and his bullshit generator started to approach critical density while he jittered in place and tried to think of how to begin.
"She's perfect, Tony," Steve came to the rescue just in time, as usual. He nodded toward the warbike in answer to Tony's half-panicked, half-relieved glance. "The balance, the responsiveness, the power. And so darned fast. I've never driven – never seen anything like her. Thank you."

"Of course you haven't," Tony ignored the uncomfortable gratitude in favor of the comment's salient point. "There isn't anything like her, Steve... And there never will be. he managed not to say it with his mouth, but from the softening glint of Steve's eyes, Tony was pretty sure he'd heard the thought anyhow. "I... wasn't sure the interface wouldn't throw you. It's not exactly motor industry standard."

"But it made perfect sense, once I stopped expecting it to be like anything I'd seen before," Steve answered, setting a hand to Tony's shoulder as if anchoring him to the ground, or stopping him from bolting. From the outside it probably just looked companionable, but from where Tony was standing, that hand had its own gravity well. "It just needs to be taken on its own terms, is all, not compared to older, outdated models. Besides, I've figured out trickier, more dangerous things."

And because that smile was pulling Steve's mouth wryly to the left, and because Tony's hands were jittering in his pockets, and because he wanted very badly to just curl himself under Steve's arm and lean into the soldier's mass, but didn't trust the hirelings in the kitchen not to whip out their cameraphones, Tony was pretty sure he'd heard the thought anyhow. "I didn't mean for this to be-

"I know," Steve cut mercifully through his babble, turning up as unguarded a face as he could manage with his heart knocking at his throat, "That wasn't your style at all, having your housekeeper give it to me after we'd been fighting. If it'd been your idea, I would have just found the keys in my mail drop, and then not seen you for a week while you hid in your workshop so I couldn't try and thank you."

"Lies!" Tony forced a grin and bumped Steve's shoulder with his own. "I might have made a big press release production out of it too."

Steve laughed aloud at that. "Only if Pepper or Fury forced you to. Only then I'd have known it was coming, because you'd have been griping about it for weeks." He bumped Tony's shoulder then, not quite hard enough to send him staggering, but not so weakly as to make it obvious he was holding back. "And you'd probably have painted it pink if that had been the case, too."

"Well, I did consider a rose color scheme briefly, for shock value and all," Tony lied airily, "but I didn't want Barton to get jealous and demand his own My Little Motorbike in purple." That got the laugh he'd hoped for, and that made it easier to let the truth just slip out on its heels. "I thought it might be too much. This, from me. That you'd think I was... pushing."

The look Steve turned on him then was sober, earnest, and just short of chilling. "I might have, if I thought you'd bought it," he said, then offered that shy little smile, the real one that started in his eyes, and never came out when there were strangers nearby. "But you made this, Tony. You imagined it, you designed it, you built it... for me. Because you knew I would love it, and probably because you couldn't help yourself once you'd had the idea, because you knew you would love it just a little bit too." He turned back to the bike with such a soft, doting look that Tony was almost a little jealous of the machine. "Only one other person's ever given me anything like this before."

"Howard," Tony nodded, proud of how he managed not to let his voice go mean and ragged. "I saw the plans for the bike he built you in the army-" He trailed off as Steve slanted him a disbelieving glance and shook his head. "But, what about the black one then? The one he had in storage for you..."
that wasn't...?"

"The army bike was a prototype," Steve said, "designed off the captured HYDRA vehicles we brought back from our raids. Howard just wanted to see if he could make the engines work without the blue fuel cells, and he never really was happy with the results. The other one was a prototype too. Howard said he was thinking about getting into automotives once the war was over and weapons tech wouldn't be profitable anymore." Tony didn't miss the worried glance as Steve realized what he was saying and guessed how close he must be treading to bad ground, and maybe it was that wordless little worry that made Tony decide to let go of that taut, hot flicker of resentment under his belly before it could build itself a horrible vocabulary.

Instead, he put his back to the kitchen windows and fished Steve's hand out of his trouser pocket to slide it into the pocket of his coat along with Tony's. "Well if it wasn't Howard, then who?" he asked.

Steve twined their fingers together. "Coulson. My uniform. I didn't realize it until after, when I saw those cards of his, but he... I think he knew how much I would need to have something like that when I picked up the shield to fight again after the ice. Something familiar, and maybe iconic, but new, not just remade to copy the old style. Like a promise that Captain America could work in this modern world, so there was no reason Steve Rogers couldn't figure out how to find a place too."

Tony nodded, surprised to find that he wasn't even a little bit jealous. Proud, maybe, that his gift ranked up there with Phil's in Steve's mind, and maybe a little bit dubious that Steve was right about how little Howard had cared about the bike he'd made him. Mostly, he was smug, happy, and just a bit relieved that the whole thing hadn't gone as terribly as he'd feared it would. "Steve Rogers isn't too bad at figuring things out," he allowed with a squeeze of his fingers.

Then he let the silence lie, comfortable and patient between them for a long moment before he threw out the oh, so casual question, "So this. This was why?"

Steve cut him a look of surprise that slid quickly into amused as he shook his head. "Naw. I mean, yes, sort of. It got me thinking. I mean a bike like this... She's everything a fella like you would want to give someone he loved. She's freedom, power, protection," he turned, and put his free hand over Tony's chest, a gentle weight against the arc reactor's casing. "And a heart that's unfathomable, inexhaustible, and unlike anything else in the world." He hung on the word, eyes fixed on Tony's, as if he'd forgotten the question as thoroughly as Tony had, and was also about to fall right into the building event horizon of 'oh god you need to kiss me right now and I don't care who sees' between them.

Then Steve blinked, shook the moment off, (damn it,) and finished his thought. "So seeing the bike made me ask some questions I hadn't asked before, but..." he dropped his hand and shook his head. "But I can't say she was why I changed my mind, no."

"Then-" Tony jumped as his phone buzzed against his ass, and War Pigs began to blare from his back pocket. He noted with some amusement, as he dug beneath the coat to retrieve it, that Steve's ringtone for Coulson's texts was one of the generic preloads – a barking dog. Apropos, all things considered.

"Preliminary ballistics report is in, the text read.

Tony felt Steve straighten beside him, the Captain sliding into place without a second thought. "Good," he said, as if to himself, but the caught Tony's eye, and hooked a nod toward the guest house as he turned to begin walking. "This'll be about that sniper. I told Coulson it couldn't have been HYDRA."
"It couldn't?" Tony asked, falling in beside Steve and missing already the heat of his hand in his left coat pocket. "I mean, Granyavich could have been throwing them over, and if they found out..."

He shook his head. "If they'd known he would be there, they would have broken into the lab through the tunnels before we ever got near it, not set a sniper to watch for one of their own coming out of the building. A HYDRA gun would have killed Gloria too, not let her get out into the street like she did." Tony saw Steve quell a shiver as they turned onto the doorpath to the guest house, but he didn't think it was because of the cold. "That sniper had every chance to pick Clint off after he stopped the truck and started taking down hostiles, not to mention me, Beast, and Wolverine once we got above ground. We're all on HYDRA's list, but this guy didn't take any of those shots. He just held his position, ignored the fight, and waited until Granyavich put his head out into the open. Then he took his one kill shot and got out of there."

"He took two more shots too," Tony reminded him.

Steve glanced over, his eyes dark with the familiar, protective rage that so often lurked there during debriefings. "I'm aware. Natasha thinks they weren't serious. A warning telling her, or maybe you, to keep your heads down and watch your backs."

Tony gave that a moment's consideration, glancing through the picture window as they passed, to see Natasha, Coulson, and Bruce around the fireplace, heads close and eyes intent while Clint focused on either polishing his shoes, or cleaning his gun, Tony couldn't tell exactly which. "Well, he did miss the shot," Tony mused, pulling open the door. "And Jarvis' processing speeds would make his reaction time quicker than a human's but..."

"Not bullet-dodging quick," Steve finished the thought with a nod, following him in. "I'm not sure whether I agree with her or not, but the ballistics report will help shed some light, I hope."

"Stark. Captain," Coulson turned from the fireplace with the kind of eager glint that only came into his eye when there was either a huge pile of paperwork to do, or he was threatening someone, (Tony,) with a tazer. "You bring him up to date on the sitrep?"

"Some," Steve shook his head. "Not all." He went in to lean near the fireplace while Tony shrugged out of his coat, and trying in vain to look like he wasn't about to moan from the heat after the chill of standing outside for twenty minutes with no coat on while talking about a damn motorcycle. Tony rolled his eyes, but chose magnanimously not to nag.

"Don't repeat yourselves on my account," Tony snarked, flopping into the sofa next to Clint and propping his heels on the table, where apparently the agent was polishing his guns and his shoes at the same time, and with the same cleaning supplies. "I'm a quick study – I can keep up."

If Cap looked a little pink around the face, well that was down to the cold, and had nothing at all to do with Tony's choice of words. "So the ballistics report," Steve prompted without a trace of subtlety, but got away with the dodge because he was totally Coulson's favorite. "You've got a lead on the sniper?"

"Not directly," Coulson answered, his glint dimming just a bit. "We're monitoring the admission lists for every hospital and clinic in the city, and for 300 miles around, but we haven't had a white male turn up with a puncture wound to the left shoulder."

"I got the hit," Barton growled, "It was solid, no graze. Arrow stuck in right under his deltoid till he broke it off in the fall."

"Nobody's saying you missed, Clint," Steve said, flexing his fingers toward the flames.
"Most likely his handlers have their own medics taking care of the wound," Natasha put in over the rim of her teacup. "He won't turn up in a hospital."

"Not unless they're inept hacks who can't get legitimate work, and they nearly kill him," Tony offered cheerily. "Maybe he'll turn up with gangrene in a few weeks." Natasha gave him a dirty look, which Tony ignored in favor of the sudden and thrilling discovery that someone had set up a coffee service on the bar.

"Maybe," Clint growled through his teeth as Tony lunged out of the sofa to get himself a fix. "Or maybe he'll turn up in a ditch with fletching sticking out of his ear first." Which just went to show you how well Agent Barton bought Natasha's theory that the sniper wasn't really trying to hurt her.

"We don't have an ID on him yet," Coulson chided. "And until we do, we do not have a kill order either. Analysts are going over the battle footage to see if facial recognition can make him at all, but he's just a wild card at this point." Natasha made another noise, but said nothing as Coulson flipped open one of his beloved manila folders.

"What we do have though, is a trail on his ammunition of choice: .308 rounds."

"European," Clint observed, "Even NATO uses those rounds." No one in the room looked at Natasha. "Which would make sense given the rifle I saw when he rabbited. Accuracy International AW 308's are not a hobbyist's gun, if anybody's curious."

"More to the point, the same caliber bullet with identical rifling marks was recovered from Ivanna Horatio's body after the attack under the Scarlet Gates salon. Another of the same appears to have gone through Paul Horatio's body after death, but evidence had to dig it out of the asphalt, so that's harder to identify for sure."

"I thought Georgie shot Ivanna," Tony protested. "After she shot Paul and the driver."

"Oh, he did shoot her," Coulson said, turning a page. "The Coroner dug three 22 short rounds out of her cheek, chest and belly, but it was the .308 round through the heart that killed her. The shot to Paul Horatio appears to have been insurance."

"Agents on that scene reported three shooters instead of two, didn't they?" Natasha murmured, setting her tea cup aside. Tony huffed, remembering Jarvis saying something to that effect at the time. He'd just assumed they'd been wrong, or mis-heard things due to the echoes.

Coulson turned another page, then looked around the room. "Analysts have also found damage consistent with .308 rounds on several of the hostage robots we recovered from the attack on the Torrance Towers."

It was several long seconds, filled only with the crackling of the fire as it chewed through the logs in the grate. Then Steve put the obvious conclusion onto the table. "He was after the Horatios."

"No." Then everyone in the room was looking at Natasha. She looked defiantly back at them all, her visual roll call ending with Bruce. "He was after the people who had possession of, or access to the Zola papers."

Bruce sighed, and cut a martyred glance Tony's way before boosting his glasses out of the way so he could rub the bridge of his nose. "So I guess we'll be seeing him again then," he muttered into his palm.

"Not if I see him first," Clint muttered, tucking a wing-tip between his knees and buffing the toe with gun oil.
"Okay, but if that's the case, why didn't sunshine pop Jerry when we took him into the building?"
Tony protested. "He had to be there before we were, or Hawkeye would have spotted him going up that cell tower."

"If Granyavich was his primary target, he wouldn't have wasted a shot taking out the bait," Coulson replied. "And if he was stalking Granyavich instead of the portal device there's every reason to believe he'd have been seen at the lab before. Horatio was probably a bonus kill for him."

Tony sighed and took a hit of his coffee, rolling his neck against the tightening chill. "Well, he got his extra credit then, even if he didn't pull the kill shot. By the way, Bruce and I want to sit in on Jerry's autopsy."

"We do?" Bruce let go of his nose to blink at Tony.

"Hell yeah. You didn't see him down in that lab, but trust me, that was not the same brain function that Jerry Horatio, douchebag CEO, was flying five years ago." Tony shrugged, not letting his eyes linger too long on Clint's, or Steve's. "We need to have a look at his grey matter and see what the Tesseract changed in there."

"Not possible," Coulson answered, cold.

"No, I mean it. This was a Flowers For Algemon kind of transformation, only without the weepy ending, and we need to understand it better. This actually happened – it completely changed a grown man's brain in a way that's not supposed to be even possible. This is not a genie you can stuff back into the bottle here, and it would be a criminal waste of opportunity to let it go by when."

"Stark," Coulson shut the file folder with a snap, and stared him down with the kind of deliberately mild patience people usually reserved for toddlers and political fanatics. "I am not arguing your point; I am saying it can't be done. There will be no autopsy possible on Jerry Horatio."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me. Lawyers. I fucking hate lawyers."

"Tony." Steve's voice, full of concern, dragged Tony out of his rising rant, and he couldn't quell a shiver as he met those earnest blue eyes. "SHIELD doesn't have Jerry Horatio's body."

He froze a little, fingers tight around the coffee cup. He made himself take a drink and swallow it before asking, "Then who does?"

"We've been hoping you could tell us that, actually," said Fury from the vestibule, his kevlar and leather traded in for a black suit and wool topcoat. Hill shut the front door behind them, all but unrecognizable in tan slacks and a scarlet sweater, with her hair loose around her shoulders. "Because I've got to tell you, I find the idea of a wheelchair-bound millionaire terrorist two days out from a major cardiac arrest, and ventilated about the chest and throat going missing from his own murder scene to be downright unsettling."

~* Stayed For the Fourth Quarter *~

"Tony," Bruce said from behind him. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Turning with his second best camera smile, Tony put his back to the bar and set his glass of spiced cider into Bruce's hand as if he'd poured it specifically for that purpose. "Sure, bro. Shoot."

Bruce glanced at the cider, unimpressed. "Alone?"

Tony made a show of looking around the rooms crowded with agents, Avengers, and unnervingly
calm strangers, and poured himself another mug of the hot drink. "Nope. You heard Sloane; I'm grounded and on Host Duty until she says otherwise." He topped his mug up with brandy, but wasn't surprised when Bruce shook his head at the decanter.

"Tony, I think they can watch football and compare battle scars and My Little Pony toys without you for a few minutes," he said, but underneath the patient amusement, Bruce's brown eyes were unflinchingly determined. "And I don't think we want Coulson's ten year old nieces to overhear this."

Tony let the smile fade into a look of alarm as Bruce took hold of his arm in a grip that was both gentle and threatening. "Why, are you breaking up with me? Is this one of those 'It's Not You It's Me' kinds of talks? Because that thing with the mass spectrometer was totally not my fault, and I already ordered you a better one, it's just held up in customs because Canada sucks-" Tony bit the ramble off as Bruce pressed his thumb just so over the nerve cluster, and sent a jolt through his arm that numbed it to the fingers.

"Hey now," he said as he put his fireplug-density and low center of gravity to bully Tony into the empty vestibule. "I happen to really like Canada."

"I want full credit for the bear joke I am not making right now," Tony grumbled back as the still air of the entryway, muffled with racks of coats against every wall, surrounded them. "Although, in the interest of etymology, I do have to wonder if the term even applies to straight guys at all..."

"I was watching your face," Bruce cut through the joke as if he hadn't heard it. "When Fury told you about Horatio. The rest of us heard about it last night during the debrief, but you didn't know he'd disappeared until right then." Tony tightened his grip on his mug, but kept his face neutral as he nodded. Bruce's eyes narrowed just a bit, and his grip on Tony's elbow softened, but did not slacken. "And you thought of something."

Tony took a breath against the sense memory of that horrified adrenaline dump epiphany, then blew it out angry. " Fucking right I thought of something," he growled, shaking his arm free. "I thought about how I was right there -- right on ground zero for... It was supposed to be me. Almost was me. So I was thinking about how I hadn't realized that the metal panels around that last security room were reflector grids to focus the beam inward until I was planted between them, and feeling pretty goddamned stupid about the whole thing!"

Bruce crossed his arms over his chest, cider untouched in his fist. "Bullshit."

"What?"

"You heard me."

The football watchers gave a roar into the tense silence that followed. Tony broke the stare with a clanging eyeroll and a huff of genuine annoyance. "I'm not lying," he said, because everybody knew truthful misdirection wasn't the same as lying at all. "Fuck, Banner, why would you even think that?"

"Because I saw it, Tony," Bruce answered, starting to sound concerned now. "The others fight with you, eat with you, spar with you, and share your home, but I've watched you work. I've sat in the same lab with you and watched the lightbulb go off inside your head far too many times to miss it when your 'eureka' face shows up anywhere else."

Tony blinked, charmed and glad to be a little distracted. "I have a 'eureka' face?"

Bruce's eyeroll wasn't half bad, really. "You do. And you were wearing it for about three seconds.
Then you shut it down harder than a hacker poking at Jarvis."

"Well yeah, given that was when Sloane came in and gave us all marching orders," Tony replied. "Even Natasha jumped to when she said to go and make with the socializing."

"That's not what happened," Bruce said, voice still gentle despite the challenge. Tony raised an expectant eyebrow and waited. Bruce held up his hand and started ticking fingers down. "You thought of something. Then Steve asked Fury what the evidence techs had found at the site, and you made your face go blank. Then you leaned against the wall for five more minutes with your face hidden in your coffee mug, and then Mrs. Sloane asked you to come up to the house."

And then Tony had booked it out of the guest house like a kid ditching detention. Not that that had happened or anything. Recently.

The tiny curl of Bruce's lips hinted that he'd decided not to mention that detail purely out of the goodness of his fuzzy, oversized heart. "So what did you think of, and why did you not want Fury to know about it?"

And no, Tony wasn't cornered. He'd wiggled out of much tighter spots, with people who knew him a lot better, but the problem here was that this was Bruce, a genius in his own right, and therefore only one or two data points and a synaptic gap away from the same damned conclusion. Dissembling would only accelerate things, and remove what little power Tony had over it. Still, nothing ventured... "SHIELD's already on it," he tried. "They have all the evidence, the computers from the lab, the hard drives Granyavich was carrying-

"The ones the sniper put a bullet through?"

Oh. Well. Tony took another drink and tried again. "Look, it's not like outing this now will do any good anyway, 'cause it's not like we can go back and fix it or anything. We deserve a day off after all we went through yesterday, don't we? Is one fucking day so much to ask? Give us one fucking day, at least, to just eat turkey and watch football like normal people, then we can call Richards and McCoy and Selvig and Foster in."

"Tony..."

He pushed on, hoping babble would distract Bruce's genius if it couldn't trip it up altogether. "It's too late to do anything now, even if I am right, which there's actually a chance I'm not. They didn't find any trace of him, and it's already been twenty hours, so if they were going to find any way to track him, they'd already have it and be on the trail without us, so-

"Track him." Bruce's hand made an abortive move toward Tony's arm, one he stopped when Tony flinched away from the touch. "Tony, you're not talking about Jerry Horatio, are you?"

Damn it. Tony hated his fucking mouth sometimes. He shook his head, knowing there wasn't anything else he could do. Bruce's eyes flickered across Tony's face, seeing him, reading him even as he looked right through to follow the mad flash of his own thoughts.

"Biomass transfer," he said after a long, breathless moment. Again, Tony nodded, waiting. He saw Bruce get it in a sudden constriction of his pupils, as if a literal lightbulb had gone off in a face too stunned blank to show it any other way. Not so much a 'eureka' face, as a 'fuck, can I outrun the blast radius' face. Bruce took a thin, long breath, and then his eyes focused on Tony's again as he whispered, "There was no collapse event."

"Not until the second portal opened, and shattered the first one," Tony agreed.
Bruce took a few more precisely measured breaths before he swallowed and asked, "Tony. Did Jerry Horatio switch places with Loki?"

And wasn't it a relief to suddenly not be the only one asking? Tony wanted to giggle at the sudden, unexpected emotional release of it, and only stifled the urge by filling his mouth with spiked cider. "Fuck if I know, Bruce," he admitted. "If enough of Jerry's tech survived the portal fracture, maybe we can figure it out. Or maybe Thor's buddy Heimdall saw what happened, and Asgard's already got their version of the Texas Rangers riding to the job. Or fuck, maybe Granyavich really was a good little HYDRA flunky after all, and set the coordinates to bring back the Red fucking Skull!"

Tony didn't scrape his fingers through his hair, but only because he remembered that he had about seventy people in his house who expected him to look like he knew what a comb was for, and that Sloane was one of them. "I don't know where the portal went for takeout, or what it brought back. All I can say is that even if Jerry's heart did give out before that portal opened up on him, there would probably still have been enough energy in his cells for him to register as 'living'. And if Jerry Horatio's living mass went one way through that portal, then someone else's living mass came back at the same time."

Bruce reached out and switched Tony's cider with his own, finishing the spiked drink in one long pull. Then he wiped his lips on the back of his hand and muttered, "Jesus..."

"Yeah, no," Tony couldn't help grinning. "Pretty sure it wasn't him."

That won a chuckle and a reproachful glower. "Tony, you know we have to let the others know about this."

"I know," he promised, because he did, he really did. "But not today. It won't do us any good to go running after it now, not when SHIELD's not even done with the scene, or all the garbage HYDRA left there to muddy the trail. And is Natasha even recovered from that-" He let the phrase peter off under Bruce's amused stare. "I didn't hear what happened to her," he tried. "Why couldn't she move until Jarvis grabbed her?"

"Low-voltage short in the lining mesh of the vest," Bruce answered. "Long as she held her body still, it would time off after about 30 seconds, but if she moved more than an inch or so, it would go off and lock her muscles up again. That's why she could talk, but couldn't interfere. But she's had some Gatorade, a good night's sleep, and a couple hours in the gym to work out the lactic acid now, so I wouldn't blame this information block on her if you know what's good for you."

"Okay, can I blame it on Steve then?"

"Blame what on me?" Steve asked from the doorway, because of course super soldier hearing could pick up his goddamned name over the sound of the Dolphins getting trashed and Pinkie Pie's Neighing Commandos conquering single-hoofedly both the Decepticons and their Bratz minions.

"The fact that I want to have Thanksgiving dinner before we go back to work," he said, turning and putting Bruce's tepid and brandy-less cider into Steve's hand. "I mean, it's kind of your first one in what, ninety years? And I wouldn't want to get punched in the head for disrespecting such an American institution; especially since you did all that work on the potatoes."

Steve sipped it without losing his smirk. "Sloane's the one more likely to punch you in the head," he said. "But it'd probably be over raiding the bar early, not because you disrespected her potatoes."

Tony cut Bruce the booze-thief a filthy glare at that, but Steve only laughed. "That said? I am in favor of a day off, so can whatever all this is about really wait until tomorrow?"
Tony nodded, then looked expectantly at his lab bro, who looked reluctant, but nodded too. Steve added his nod to the collection, and sipped again. "Good. You can tell me about it then. In the meantime, Mrs. Sloane asked me to tell you she's waiting for one last guest to arrive, but if they're not here in ten minutes, she wants you to start getting people into the dining room."

The football game chose that moment to be exciting, and the resultant roar made Tony think longingly of his workshop and bots. "Doesn't she have people for that?" he said in an absolutely not-at-all-whiny voice.

Bruce and Steve both laughed at him, and Bruce clapped a hand on Tony's shoulder, saying, "Yeah, she does," in a way that sounded strangely unlike he was agreeing with Tony's legitimate complaint. But as he went to turn them both back toward the gathering rooms, Bruce went suddenly still and flight-tense beside him, staring through the sidelight windows that flanked the door as if he was watching a ghost walking up the drive instead of Betty Ross.

"Buddy?" Tony said, reaching his hand up between Bruce's shoulders, as much to calm him as to hold him up in case the naked shock on his face meant he was going to faint instead of turn green and run for it. "You ok?"

Steve, peering over both their heads, suddenly cracked a grin. "Oh good. I'll go tell Mrs. Sloane she's here," he said, as Bruce finally squeaked a breath past his teeth.

"You..." Bruce managed. "Who... Betty's. She's supposed to-"

"I took the liberty of inviting Dr. Ross as your plus-one, Dr. Banner," Jarvis put in, sounding his fair share of smug. "Her RSVP indicated she was not engaged, and quite happy to drive up from Virginia for the event, so long as her father the General was not invited."

"Hmph," A derisive snort announced Sloane's arrival in their little gathering, a steely, pint sized amazon with a pleased smirk and a gravy-smudged apron in her hand. "As if I'd have that repulsive drunkard in my house without a muzzle," she grumbled. "Throwing him out once was more than enough to revoke his welcome."

Bruce stared at her like she had two heads, but didn't resist as Sloane took his arm off Tony and used it to steer him toward the door. "You threw General Ross out of your house?"

"Yes, a long time ago. Well, technically, the police did, but the end result is much the same," she said, and if she noticed Tony's manly little squee of delight, she didn't make comment. "Now are you going to go and greet the poor girl properly, Doctor Banner, or do you intend to leave that job to Jarvis as well?"

Bruce didn't need to be told twice. He was out the door and jogging down the drive before she'd even finished speaking. And when Sloane turned back to fix both Steve and Tony with an expectant glare, then cut a pointed glance at the empty dining room, it turned out that neither of them needed to be told at all.

"I'll get Coulson, Clint, and the kids," Steve offered as they turned to begin herding the guests in to dinner.

"I'll get the remote and break up the game," Tony answered, then, "And remind me to have Professor X find out what kind of mind control telepathy Sloane's got going on too, okay? Because that shit cannot be normal."

"Will do," Steve replied without a trace of smirk.
"For what we are about to receive," Steve intoned, head bowed over his empty plate, "may the Lord make us truly grateful." A smattering of half assed 'amens' sounded through the rooms as he unfolded his hands and reached for his napkin, but Steve didn't seem to mind that his own had been the most sincere of the lot. Then again, Tony figured it was probably something he was used to by now – being the lone point of sincerity in a plastic, fantastic world. Sloane looked happy enough with the blessing, anyway, and it being her party, that was what really counted.

Tony slid his own napkin into his lap, then considered his as-yet empty wineglass with just a touch of wistful impatience. He'd have liked to bring a stronger drink to the table, but between Steve seated on his left, and Sloane at the head of the table, he hadn't quite dared.

"You look like you're expecting to get shot instead of fed, Stark," murmured Natasha on his right. Her wineglass had somehow acquired a Twilight Sparkle charm around the stem. Across the table, Clint's had Fluttershy, and Fury's had Rarity, and Jesus fuck, the cognitive dissonance of Secret Agent Bronies was just about enough to distract Tony from all his own holiday ghosts.

"Um. Habit," he admitted when he was sure he wouldn't giggle and thereby get himself impaled on a shrimp fork. "Never been a big fan of Thanksgiving. Or any of these Happy Family Showcase events. Especially..." he waved vaguely at the dining room, dressed for company in silver and linen, but still wooden, rigid and dark beneath.

"I hear that," Doctor Ross agreed, tucked in between Bruce and Steve. "Pretending that everything's perfect just makes it all so much worse." She filled her glass and passed the bottle to Steve, who leaned closer than he strictly needed to in order to fill Tony's.

"I never much cared for it either," he admitted with a tiny, rueful smile. "Nuns always seem to put a lot more weight on gratitude than on sharing good fortune or celebrating plenty."

Clint chuckled, emptying the bottle. "And then there's the Army's idea of Thanksgiving Dinner..." To Tony's amusement, Fury, Hill, and Steve all shared Clint's shudder of remembrance.

"Cardboard turkey, tin flavored cranberry sauce, and sawdust stuffing," Fury huffed. "Only thing those geniuses down in the mess could get right was the damn gravy."

"And the potatoes," Steve added, glum of voice, but merry of eye. "Loads and loads of potatoes..."

Natasha, watching them all with pursed lips, snickered at that. "Americans. You make a holiday out of your conquest, and then use it to torture yourselves in the name of family and gluttony."

Hill's pointed cough, which sounded something like "New Years Eve", put a bit of true humor into the redhead's smugness, and she shrugged airily. "When Russians celebrate, we celebrate. Novy God is twenty times the excess and insanity, just without all the family drama. Or the turkey."

"I like the turkey," Agent Sitwell ventured.

"And I may ask you to prove that in a couple of months, Agent Romanov," Tony grinned as the platters of food began to make the rounds. "I'm not sure I quite see how you could manage to make my New Year's Eve party even more celebratory than it's been in years past."

She chimed her wineglass against his, and showed a very pointed sort of smile. "Challenge accepted, Mr. Stark." Then the food arrived, and they were all too busy finding room on their plates for even a taste of everything on offer to keep up the verbal sparring.
Later, when the hush of eating had eased into a comfortable lull of table conversation around them, Steve turned a considering stare on Tony. "So what did make you decide to come?" he asked. Tony gave him a look, and Steve grimaced, reproachfully nudging Tony's knee with his under the table, as if that would cover his blush. "I meant instead of staying home in your workshop. Jarvis said that's what you usually do, and no, I really don't believe it's down to..." another nudge filled in that pointed blank, and the glint in Steve's eye underscored it neatly.

And Tony thought briefly of carrying the joke, but realized that the urge to deflect was reflex, not any honest desire to hide the truth. Especially from Steve. He was, if he was honest about it, a little charmed that Steve even wanted to know.

"Sloane did," Tony said, casting a glance at the head of the table, where the old housekeeper was engaged in a spirited debate with an old man in a fez and the green haired hipster girl across from him. "I meant it when I said I always hated Thanksgiving. Howard and Maria always turned it into a publicity thing, so it was all uncomfortable clothes and posing for photos; company manners, too many forks, and condescending strangers expecting me to play with their moronic kids while they talked shop or gossiped with my folks." He swirled his fork through a smear of gravy, idly tracing fractal patterns over the memories he really hadn't missed at all.

"Miserable. I used to sneak off as soon as I could get away from the table, and go hide out in the kitchen where the servants were eating their dinner." He cut a grin at Steve to banish the gloom. "Now that was a lot more fun. Especially when they got tipsy enough to forget I wasn't supposed to hear them talking shit about my old man and his customers. Jarvis told the best dirty jokes, all subtle and British, but mean like a scalpel too. And Sloane always made something special -- something amazing and extravagant that she didn't send upstairs to the party. I guess she liked to experiment with over the top desserts on people who couldn't fire her if they sucked or something," he shrugged, "but for a kid, a seven layer cake where each layer was a different flavor and they all had different fillings and icings was kind of a big deal."

He was underselling it, actually. The memory of that cake was still enough to make Tony's arc reactor cycle faster, although that could have been reflexive anticipation of the accompanying sugar rush, too. "She always made sure I got some of whatever she'd made, even when she had to save the last piece for me because I got cornered by some debutante's mom, or Congressman I needed to do tricks for."

"That was what I thought of when I heard she was doing this," he shrugged at last, looking up to meet Steve's blue, blue eyes, relieved not to see pity there. "Those holiday suppers down in the kitchens, with people who were glad to be there, really enjoying the company. It was like... feeling welcome, I guess." He finished his wine, then frowned into the empty glass as though the words he wanted were hiding there. And what do you know, they were. "No," he decided on a sudden whim of truthfulness. "It was feeling wanted."

Steve snagged another wine bottle from the middle of the table with a boarding house reach that would have dragged Tony's tie through his plate full gravy artwork if he'd tried it. "Yeah," he agreed, refilling both their glasses while settling his leg under the table so that it pressed, bracing, warm, and companionable against Tony's from knee to ankle. "That's why I came too."

Chapter End Notes

Wait for iiiitttt...
Sorry to be late again, my marsh posies. We just had our belated Thanksgiving last weekend, and my life turned into cooking for several days. Still, it made writing this chapter a bit closer to home than it might otherwise have been, so I can't call that a bad thing, overall.

I hope you enjoy it, and yes -- the next chapter will conclude the story. I've been asked if there will be others in this 'verse, and truth be told, I think it's quite likely there will be. If for no other reason than because Sloane is not going to stand for being retired. I can't say what they'd be, or when they'd hit at this point, but I am saying the possibility is a strong one. I don't want to end up in Sloane's tomato plot either.

As always, thanks so much for you who commented with such enthusiasm last time. (Oh yeah, I can tell what you like!) You've really made this serial a good time, despite all its efforts to buck me off. Thanks for reading! See you at the finish line!
"It was the ice, wasn't it?"

Steve looked up from the dessert buffet, adorable and perplexed, his fork poking from between his lips as he negotiated the limited space on his plate to admit one more slice of babka. "Mm?" he said.

"It was because of the ice," Tony reiterated with a grin, and plucked the fork free so Steve could better admit he was right.

"Actually, it was because of the pumpkin pecan cheesecake," he said bashfully, glancing at the ranks of sweets still on offer. "But everything looked so good, I couldn't help getting a little greedy."

Tony gave him the stinkeye. "I'm not talking about why you went for second helpings at dessert, Rogers, I'm talking about why you went for second helpings with memphfmm..." Damn, that man was quick with a snickerdoodle. He glared, chewing.

"Sorry," Steve shrugged, trying to be subtle about glancing around to see if anybody had heard. "This just doesn't seem like the right place to- ow..." Tony let him recapture his fork, but not before jabbing Steve in the tie with it one more time.

"Why, because there's seventy people sprawled in various stages of food coma over half an acre of manor house? Steve, you're the only one over the age of ten with the metabolism to still be awake right now, let alone eating more." Jesus, that little boy grin never did get old, did it? Tony fought down his own reflexive smile, because dopey-in-lurve might look adorable on Steve, but so did a spangly jumpsuit, and Tony knew better than to think he could pull off either look with any sort of cool.

"Now, since the Coulson-Sloane-Reynolds Next Gen Army are all outside playing jai alai right now, and you and I are actually the only ones even in the room, that makes this the ideal time for you to admit to me that you had your change of heart last night because seeing me get caught by that HYDRA ice trap freaked you out and – don't you put that cookie in my mouth, you censorious bastard, I'm making a point here -- made you realize that you might lose your chance if you didn't okay Rogers, you are not allowed to be laughing at me right now, you realize that? Because..." he peered narrowly at Steve, who was clearly snickering, and just as clearly shaking his head.

"What do you mean, 'no'?" he asked, then bit at the cookie Steve was still holding in front of his face at mouth level, because food-censoring was one thing, but cardamom shortbread was another.

"I mean it wasn't the ice," Steve said, thumbing a crumb from Tony's beard as he took his hand away.

"Wasn't?" Tony mumbled, confused.

Steve shook his head. "Course not. Tony, I'm a soldier. I've been to war before, and I've lost friends before, heck, ordered some of them to their deaths. Even before that, when I was just a kid, I knew how easy it is for a person to die, any day, for any stupid reason." Steve's eyes were just as warm, but now the weight of his age crept across them like a long shadow, and Tony found himself
thinking of orphanages and illnesses, gangs and corruption, cold, hunger, and drink -- the long-toothed monsters of poverty. Then Steve blinked, and the smile was back in his eyes again. "We do dangerous work against dangerous people, and barring certain members of the X-Men, when heroes get killed it tends to be a permanent thing."

Tony snickered and poured more coffee into the ridiculously undersized china cup. "Don't forget Asgardians and super soldiers," he chided.

Steve acceded the point with a rueful nod. "Thing is, Tony, I knew from the start that I could lose you in battle, but you're not the most careful man in the world at any time; I could as easily lose you to a cocktail olive, avian flu, a crosstown bus, an EMP, or an infected wound."

"Hey," Tony laughed, "we do have this little thing called penicillin now, y'know. It stops people dying of infection."

Steve grinned back. "Sure, when they don't hide the injury from their teammates because they 'don't have time to go to Medical.'" Which was completely not fair, and had only happened that one time anyway. But Steve went on before Tony could raise his objection. "And anyway, I know what penicillin is. And what it looks like too; I've seen the crop you're growing in the fridge in your lab."

"I have a fridge in my lab?" Tony blinked.

"Yeah," Steve said, turning with his full plate and strolling back toward the media room, where the Grinch was playing to a catatonic audience. "That's where Dummy stashes all the food I bring down to you when I don't stay around and watch you eat it. I'm pretty sure Jarvis has a monthly extermination routine for it, but one day our next supervillain is gonna come out of there and he'll get to you first."

Tony laughed, and nudged Clint's feet out of his spot on the sofa. "Nah. Bruce will get 'im first. He's murder with that autoclave of his."

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If a person ever wanted to see just how tiny Steve Rogers used to be, all they needed to do was to watch the guy in a crowded room. Captain America was fully capable of owning every acre of star spangled muscle he occupied when there was game face to command, but drop poor Steve into a crowded bar, a heaving dance floor, or, in this case, a parlor stuffed full of SHIELD agents comparing 'no shit, there I was' stories, and he'd all but turn himself inside out trying to somehow take up seventy five years less space, and leave more for everyone else. If it hadn't been so hilarious, Tony would have felt sorry for the guy.

As it was, he just hung back in the doorway, half listening to Barton recounting the infamous Harry Potter Fan from Hell story, (also known as the Magic Wands Suck Donkey Balls story, the Accio Hulk Is a Dumb Idea story, and the Please Can't We Just Forget That Happened' story, depending on who was doing the telling) while he waited for Steve to either look up and meet his eye, or to disappear in a puff of awkwardness altogether. Eye contact won the race, and when Tony hooked a 'cmere' nod at him, there was such naked gratitude in those baby blues he couldn't really regret it.

"Hey Tony," Steve murmured once he'd picked his way across the sea of knees and party shoes. "Did you need me?"

"Desperately," Tony answered with the appropriate leer, taking delight in Steve's blush as he caught his sleeve and backed them away from the doorway. Honestly, sometimes it was like the man didn't know him at all, handing him straight lines like that. "Relax, Cap," he chuckled, patting his arm. "I'm
not going to molest you here in the hallway. You just looked like you needed some air, is all."

As he'd expected, Steve picked up on the unspoken promise, and while his cheeks went pinker, his smile went from nervously polite to positively predatory in two seconds flat. "Oh, eventually I'll need air..." he replied, six four of blue-eyed innocence. "Serum did a lot to help my lung capacity."

Tony checked his hoot of laughter, but not before he spotted Natasha's head turning their way. He nudged Cap another step or two to the right, and put both their backs to the door. That left them facing the battalion of kids in the media room, but the kneebiters were less likely to be skilled in lip reading, he figured, and besides; the graphics on Super Bug Hunt were pretty darned good.

"So... this was a carpe diem kind of thing then," he ventured once the silence between them outweighed the sounds of video gunfire and Barton's sense of humor.

Steve glanced away from the screen with a puzzled little smile. "Hm?"

"You know," Tony said, bumping his shoulder. "Last night. That was all seize the day, live for the moment, no brakes, go with God?"

"Hmm... The day?" Steve made a show of that eyebrow thing. "Was that what I seized then?"

"Oh yeah, you're hilarious," Tony growled. "And dodging the question, don't think I haven't noticed."

The eyebrow stayed, but Steve's smile was sneaking out as he asked, "There was a question?"

"You," Tony gave him a poke in the chest for emphasis. "Had a sudden change of heart." Another poke, harder, and then a narrow glare, because if Steve thought that restraining Tony's poking finger was going to get him to surrender his point unmade, he had another think coming. "Realized you weren't living in the Depression anymore, and were allowed to have nice things if you wanted them," he finished in full on double-dog dare you to try and lie voice.

"Because there's plenty to go around now?" Steve grinned, pointing Tony's finger at the ceiling like a loaded gun before letting go.

"I..." Tony blinked, not sure whether he was shocked, or delighted. "Dude, did you just call me a slut?"

Steve's laugh was surprised and artless, and covered his retreat better than a sniper on a ridgeline. "No Tony," he said, closer and quieter as the gamers scowled briefly their way. "And no, that isn't what changed my mind."

"No?" Tony dug, not sure he believed him.

"No." Steve answered, fondly indulgent, and yet still so earnest you could break a tooth on him.

Tony peered, readying his poking finger. "No trying to rewrite old regrets? Not making hay while the sun shines because you'd missed the boat before?" And if Steve wasn't going to mention that rather appalling mixed metaphor, Tony sure as fuck wasn't either.

But Steve only clapped Tony on the shoulder and gave him a companionable jostle, as if they were discussing a training exercise rather than an infraction SHIELD would consider somewhere between fraternization, defiling a national treasure, and high treason, depending on whose rulebook was being consulted. "If that were the case," he said with a chuckle, "I'd have been dating Agent Carter months ago. She looks a lot better in lipstick and drawn on nylons than you would."
And oh hey, didn't that open up all kinds of interesting notions? "You don't know that," Tony dared, quietly wicked under the roar of laughter that came rolling out of the parlor as Barton finished his story.

Steve, bless him, only grinned wider, patted his shoulder one last time, and said, "Point. You can prove me wrong sometime when we're not surrounded by highly trained killers and pre-teens though, okay?"

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"You were overcome with lust."

Steve didn't drop the coffee cup he was washing into the sink, but it was a near thing. Tony didn't let the impromptu juggling, or the scolding glare distract him though. He just leaned in the kitchen doorway, arms braced, toe side-propped over the other foot, and waited for the inevitable admission of guilt.

What he got, though, was a sigh and a shake of Steve's head as he reached for the hand towel. "Glad to hear you remember that," was all the infuriating man said, as if his blush wasn't confession enough.

"Admit it," Tony challenged. "Confronted with all this naked hotness at your bedside in the dark, your rigid morality crumbled under your animal urges, and you decided just this once to roll with it and have a good time."

Steve turned from the sink then. "Yeah, Tony. That's exactly what happened," he said with a smirk that declared that wasn't what had happened at all.

He peered for a long moment, then gave up a sigh of his own. "That isn't what happened, is it?" Tony asked.

"Nope," Steve said, and his smirk uncurled into that bashful smile of his. "Well, it's a little like what happened the first time, I'll give you that, but..."

Tony threw up his hands. "Gah! You're enjoying this!"

"Kinda, yeah," Steve admitted, crowding into the doorway Tony hadn't yet vacated. "It's not often that I have the answer and you don't -- can't blame a guy for enjoying that while it lasts." Then before Tony could duck, he dropped the quickest, most furtive kiss in the history of the world onto his goddamned forehead and slipped out of the kitchen.

Tony scowled at the empty kitchen, tapping out a Fibonacci sequence on his reactor casing with irritated fingers. "Jarvis, I do believe that man is being evasive," he declared.

"So it would seem, Sir," Jarvis agreed.

"Well, he can't hide the truth forever," he said, pushing off the doorframe and tugging his jacket straight. "I am going to get to the bottom of this!"

"Of that, sir, I have no doubt."

***

"It wasn't some kind of alien sex pollen, was it?" Tony murmured in Steve's ear as George Bailey dove into the river after Clarence.
Steve didn't turn his head away from the screen, but cut an incredulous look at Tony with his eyes. "Excuse me?" he whispered.

"Well, we probably won't ever know where all those portals went," Tony explained, using his cup of brandy-with-a-dash-of-egg-nog to shield his lips from the rest of the room. "Anything could have come through, and I was just wondering if maybe you got exposed to something that made you go into some kind of man-heat when-mphh!" Steve pushed the bottom of Tony's cup with two fingers, making Tony decide between drinking the contents, or wearing them.

"Shh. I haven't seen this movie," he whispered, fighting a smile while Tony valiantly did not choke.

"Hmm. Not a denial, but not a confirmation either. Was it mind control then?" Tony pushed on, moving his cup safely out of range. "Voodoo? Did anyone pluck out some of your hair recently?"

Steve conspicuously took up a large fistful of popcorn from the bowl in Bruce's lap. "Tony..." he warned, but the smile was winning its way out from under his disapproval-face.

"No, this could be important," Tony said, putting aside his cup to better fend off the popcorn if he had to. "If HYDRA is using the Black Arts, we need to mphl!" Steve's other arm, which had been thrown along the back of the sofa, suddenly wrapped around Tony's head, hand clamping down over his mouth as it pulled Tony in tightly against Steve's side. "Tony," he whispered against his ear before Tony had quite finished snickering and geared himself up to apply elbow-point to ribs. "Natasha is glaring at you."

Force-cuddled as he was, Tony's reflexive flinch at that news didn't get him very far. "Mph?"

"Yes, she is," Steve said, lips warm and soft against the curl of Tony's ear. "And she's got a nutcracker in her hand."

"Mph!"

Turns out Natasha had never seen It's a Wonderful Life either.

***

Bruce left with Betty around eleven, bound for some impromptu weekend getaway in the Adirondacks, because apparently Dr. Ross was more convincing than Tony when the question of time off from saving the world was concerned. Tony didn't take it personally though; after all, he found the sexy doctor's assets rather convincing himself, even though he wasn't invited.

Still, watching the happy couple's taillights as they pulled off down the drive did give Tony another idea, and since Steve was right there waving beside him, he saw no reason not to try it out.

"Some mysterious benefactor sent you a set of wire cutters and you had an epiphany," he challenged. It wasn't such a farfetched idea, actually, given the number of Avengers who'd already figured out Tony's crush, and volunteered advice on the same. Any of them could have meddled. Avengers loved meddling.

Steve, apparently used to the questions now, only tucked his waving hand back into his pocket and gave Tony a smirk. "Is that what they're calling it now? An epiphany? In my day we just called it 'sex'."

"Psh," Tony waved the joke away with a careless hand and a goading grin. "In your day they called it indecency and a prison sentence at best."
Steve pretended to consider for a moment, then nodded back with a grin of his own. "Mm. That's a point for the modern day then."

"Just one?" Tony asked, not backing down as Steve crowded into his personal space, took hold of his shoulders, and then backed him squarely under the mistletoe.

"Well," he chuckled, leaning close, "I counted three, as of this morning..."

"God," Tony wheezed once their lips came apart and let the air back in. "You're going to kill me."

Steve chuckled, no less winded as he pressed their foreheads together. "Just a little," he promised. "Later. After Fury leaves." Tony couldn't help a little shiver and stole a worried glance over Steve's shoulder at the mention. But contrary to the legends, the devil did not actually appear whenever his name was spoken. All the same, Tony didn't protest when Steve stepped back to a socially appropriate distance and tugged his clothes straight with quick and nervous hands.

Tony caught his arm before he could slip back inside though, and gave the man the most earnest stare he could muster. "Steve. I will figure this out," he promised.

The smile he got in return would have been smug on anybody else, but on Steve, it was fond, proud, and just a little hungry, like he still couldn't quite believe this was actually happening between them. Which, fuck if Tony couldn't sympathize.

"Tony," he answered with a quick squeeze to his fingers. "I'm sure you will."

Tony didn't get another chance to make a guess -- his last, best guess, in fact, -- until an hour and a half later, after the last minivans, taxis, and SHIELD fleet cars had pulled out of the driveway, and the last of Sloane's minions had disappeared back into whatever unholy dimension she'd conjured them out of. And even then the walk back to the master suite through the not-as-empty-as-he'd-been-expecting Manor was a bit fraught with peril.

"There you are," Steve said from the closet, where he was hanging up his suit. "I was wondering if Sloane had killed you after all."

"Nah," Tony shrugged, watching Steve slip the tie from his collar and hook it around the hanger's throat and most definitely not thinking of totally filthy and kinky uses for the length of silk. "She did just save me from Clint and Tasha though."

At Steve's inquisitive eyebrow, Tony shrugged again, surrendering the doorway in favor of the low sofa that faced the fireplace. "Yeah, I don't know. They were either giving me a deeply coded shovel talk, or trying to propose some kind of archaeology vacation for the team in Mexico, I couldn't quite tell which. There was definitely mention of deep holes in the jungle, forgotten dig sites, and someone's heart getting ripped out."

Steve gave a chuckle. "Well, it'd be warm, at least," he said, unpinning his cufflinks.

Tony hummed, slipping his own tie from its knot as he watched the golden skin of Steve's shoulders emerge from white cotton by elegant degrees. "So," he asked as the shirt was wadded up for the toss. "Stockholm syndrome?"

Steve's shirt missed the hamper by several inches. "What?"

"It's actually a thing," Tony told him, coiling his tie around his hand in an entirely innocent fashion. "I looked it up. Apparently if you abuse someone enough, you can brainwash them into thinking
they actually like you. Or something."

Prowling -- that was the word for what Steve was doing. Followed by looming, scowling, and oh fuck yes, distracting Tony from the effect completely with the proximity of all that naked super-skin almost within nibbling range. "Okay, Tony," Steve said, enough warning in his voice to drag Tony's attention upward of his collarbones, "these are getting a little insulting now."

"Then give me a hint!" Tony demanded, flinging his arms wide in exasperation. They just happened to land over Steve's own on his hips when Tony brought them down, not quite close enough to get at the drawstring waist of his pajamas... yet.

"Okay;" Steve said, dropping to his knees and catching Tony's hands before they could wander, "one hint: it had something to do with Bucky."

"Barnes?" Tony said, and didn't yank his hands back, but only because Steve's eyes were so blue and earnest there just wasn't room for mockery to be hiding in there.

"That'd be the one," Steve nodded.

"Aaaand that's somehow less insulting?" Tony griped.

Steve's disapproval melted into a fondly indulgent smile, and then he loomed in close. "You're not fooling me, Stark," he said, arms braced on either side of Tony's head, cornering him against the sofa back. "You're too smart to jump for the easy answer."

"Well, it's not like there aren't corollaries," Tony insisted, turning his head stubbornly when Steve leaned in to kiss him quiet. That just got his ear nuzzled, but Tony figured he could cling to his point all the same... even with those large, clever fingers flicking his shirt buttons open one by one. "And since you clearly have a thing for sassy, foul mouthed... ah fuck... ass kicking, dark eyed brunettes, so... it's entirely plausible." He craned his neck as Steve's teeth wandered down the column of his throat. "Mmm. Stop that..." he said, expecting (hoping) to be ignored.

Nor did Steve disappoint. "You're right," he said against the curve of Tony's shoulder, the barely-there scrape of his beard making the skin burn with hunger. "I do have a type. Doesn't mean I can't tell my flames apart."

"Oh, I'm a flame now?" Tony snickered, fingers carding the fine, soft strands of Steve's hair, holding that busy mouth at its work.

"For instance," Steve went on, nibbling his way up to Tony's jawbone and tickling the coarse hairs with his tongue, "Buck never could grow a beard to save his life. And he didn't have arms like these," he said, palming Tony's shirt, loosely open now, off his shoulders and down to bunch at his wrists. He picked open the buttons there without looking. "Mmm... blacksmith's arms with jeweler's hands. God, the things you can do with them... And oh yeah, he didn't date fellas either."

"You... you're cheating," Tony announced, tugging weakly at Steve's hair. "Distracting me with hickeys is cheating."

That finally made Steve sit back onto his heels and chuckle. "I'm kind of surprised you're not. I mean I thought for sure you'd have asked Jarvis by now."

"Jarvis?" Tony let his hand drop from Steve's neck. "Why would he..." Then abruptly, he remembered the flex and gleam of Cap's wet jaw in the rain, and how the furtive light of the storm made it look as if... "Jarvis would know, because you talked to him about it!" Tony declared, yanking his hand free of his sleeve to poke Steve hard in the chest. "You went behind my back and
got chatty with my—"

Steve caught his finger, still laughing. "With your best friend," he said, and kissed the knuckle.

"You called Rhodey TOO?"

Steve let go and sat back on his heels, all trace of laughter gone in an instant. "I'd never do that, Tony. From what I can tell, he respects Pepper as much as I do, and I wouldn't dream of hurting your friendship with him by digging for information he'd think was none of my business. Jarvis though, Jarvis already knew why I would ask those questions, and nothing I could say would ever shake his faith in you. So yeah, after our fight, when I needed to try and understand why you'd do what you'd done, I asked the only person in the world you trust completely."

Tony froze, stomach twisting as those words evoked the ghost of others far more terrifying, whispered in darkness like a promise or threat. I can't, because that would mean I couldn't trust you, and I can't... I cant do this if I can't trust you. Suddenly wanting a lot more air, Tony shoved himself sideways on the sofa, cushions tilting and rumpling in his wake. "That's not true," he snapped, not bothering to hide the note of hurt at not being believed, not being enough again. "God damn it, Steve, I told you! I trusted you with the—"

"Can I explain before you get mad please?" Steve cut through, infuriatingly calm as he lifted a palm to Tony's ire in a kind of surrender that didn't seem to promise surrender at all. There was a question in his eyes, and expectation, but not regret, not amusement, and no fear either – not a leaving face, and not a fighting face either. Tony had seen both of those on Steve. This was patient, stubborn, and still somehow warm. This was something else, and so Tony stifled the crowd of sour words clogging his throat, and managed a grudging nod.

"When you built my bike, who was the first person you told about it?"

"Bruce."

"Jarvis," Steve corrected, then went on before Tony could protest the point. "When you were trying to find the palladium solution for your arc reactor, who was the first to know that you were sick?"

"Jarvis." Tony didn't even try to dissemble on that one, because if he skipped Jarvis, who had guessed something was wrong before Tony had, then the next person in line would have been Natasha-I'm-from-legal-my-ass-Romanov, and just no. Hell no.

"And when you built the Iron Man Mark 2, who helped you do it, from the redesign outward?"

"Okay, but the point is, Jarvis is a tool that I always use when it comes to machines, so yeah, I'll always trust him when it comes to building or design, or—"

"Or running your house, or buying your food, or guarding your sleep, or handling your money, or managing your calendar, or ordering apology flowers for your lover when you've been a jerk," Steve kept the list rolling, his smile beginning to creep out at the edges. "And yeah, you talk to him too when people around you don't make sense. I've watched you do it, when you think nobody's around." He flushed a little at Tony's eyebrow, and ducked his head to admit, "Those noise canceling buffers you have in the kitchen and common area walls aren't always enough to block out my hearing. Especially with the air ducts pointing more or less straight up from there to my rooms. I don't try to listen, but for a soldier in the field it's the quiet noises that mean trouble, and if I'm asleep that always wakes me right up."

He pushed to his feet, then turned to perch on the arm of the sofa, far more delicate than a soldier of
his size had any right to be. "My point is, you trust Jarvis more, and with more, than you're ever gonna trust a person. Any person. Jarvis is your Bucky – he's the guy who's been with you forever, the guy who took care of you when you were down, and the guy who bought you a drink when you were on top of the world. The guy you'll tell anything to, everything to, even if he gives you hell, because you know good and well he isn't gonna rat on you. You know he's got your back no matter what. I'd be jealous of him, if I wasn't so damn busy being glad you had the genius to build yourself someone that loyal when you needed him!"

"Sure," Tony bit out between his teeth, "'Cause when you can't inspire any kind of loyalty in the actual, real humans around you, then at least you can code some into your fake best friend without being pathetic, right?"

"Forgive me Sir, I must contradict you," Jarvis himself put in, his voice cuttingly precise. "My persona-coding, ethics and reasoning parameters were based on the behavioral patterns of an actual, real human who was around you voluntarily for many years, and who, given superior medical care to what had been available thirty years ago, might be around you still today."

Tony took a shaky breath, wondering where the ghostly smell of shoe polish, spray starch, and pomade would be coming from. He cut a glance at Steve, to find those blue eyes gone soft and open, no trace of confusion in them. He knew, then, or he guessed.

"Sloane told me about Edwin Jarvis," he confirmed, looking like he wanted to reach for Tony, but thank God, knowing better. "You made it pretty plain that Howard and your Ma didn't let you get all that close to them, so it was Jarvis who got to keep your secrets and help you get out of trouble, just like any best friend would do. It was Jarvis who let you know you weren't actually all alone in the world, that someone really would miss you if you were gone from it. Just like Bucky did for me."

"But he worked for the-"

"Sir, may I suggest you restrain the urge to imply that Mr. Jarvis' loyalty was a purchased commodity rather than a matter of genuine attachment?" the AI said in a voice that all but screamed that Tony's auto-set shower temperatures, workshop playlist and coffee chemistry were on the line here.

"He's right you know," Steve said, equally forbidding. "I remember how Howard was to work with, I can only imagine how he'd have been to work for, especially once he started to hit the bottle. He didn't drink often during the war, but when he did, he was a mean drunk with a smart mouth on him, out to prove he was tougher than any flatfoot with more brains than all of us together." He shook his head, missing the way Tony couldn't drag his eyes away, missing how his mouth was hanging open, waiting for words that had no shape in his brain. It was ridiculous. Tony knew that about Howard. So why did hearing the same words falling out of Steve's mouth make him itch, and clench, and want to squirm out some kind of bullshit denial? What the hell was wrong with him?

Tony managed to pull it together by the time Steve looked up again, sober and certain. "Sloane stayed with the family because of your Ma, Tony. Edwin Jarvis stayed with the family because of you. And when he died, you built someone as much like him as you could manage."

He turned his gaze to the fireplace, glad of the chance to fix his eyes on the beautiful, quiet destruction happening there, fire consuming all the wood's strength for its own, leaving only ash and cinders behind. "You make it sound pathetic," he said, not whining at all.

"Do I?" He could see Steve shake his head in the corner of his eye, teeth a flash of moving white. "It isn't. If I could have brought Bucky back that way, even just as a voice in my head, don't you think I'd have done it in two seconds flat? 'Course I would," Then he reached for Tony's shoulder, and for some stupid reason, Tony let him grab it, let him tilt Tony's face away from the dance of greedy
flame, and bring it back to eyes like a sky he could plummet through forever and never hit ground.

"You needed an ally when you were alone in the world," Steve said, "and you made one. You made one of the best, and who can blame you for trusting him? He isn't going to reject you, or leave you, or betray you like other people can – like other people will, even when they don't mean to, or want to."

Tony pulled that hand off his shoulder, but trapped it in his own before Steve could pull it away. "But just because I trust Jarvis doesn't mean I don't trust other people," he began, but Steve was shaking his head, already not believing. And still somehow smiling about it.

"You don't, Tony," he said. "Not fully. You never learned how, and quite frankly, Jarvis makes it easier not to."

Swallowing hard against the weight in his throat, Tony made himself ask, "Then last night, when you said you couldn't do 'this' if I couldn't trust you..."

But Steve's smile only grew at that, went a little easier than before as his fingers squeezed gently, fondly. "I was already factoring Jarvis into the equation."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Meaning...?"

"Meaning," Steve deliberately copied his tone, "that when you don't give me enough intel to understand what's going on, as long as I can turn to your best friend to get at least something like a clue, then I feel I can make it work. Because the stakes are too high for me to fly blind in this – not just for me, but for you, and for Pepper too, and maybe even for the whole team, which would then affect lots more people too. I can't play loose with that responsibility, run on guesswork and wishful thinking." Tony didn't flinch to hear his own carefully-hid worries coming out of Steve's mouth, but it took some doing. As if he understood, Steve rubbed his thumb across Tony's knuckles and smiled again. "But if I can triangulate on one thing, it's that Jarvis knows you better than anyone, that you tell him more than you tell anyone else, and that he loves you too much to ever betray you."

A deep breath helped loosen the knot of nervous stupidity in his throat. Not as much as a slug of scotch would have, but Tony wasn't willing to extract his hand and go pour himself one just yet. Another breath, and he could conjure up about half of his best brat-prince grin. "So you got insecure about 'us', and interrogated my AI?"

Steve made that single-eyebrow, 'are you being deliberately dense' face of his, but it was Jarvis himself who got the first word in. "If I may, sir, Captain Rogers merely asked my assistance in-"

"You should just play it back for him, Jarvis," Steve cut in, still holding Tony's gaze with something like a dare, though whether it was a challenge to watch the feed, or to refuse it, Tony couldn't guess. "He doesn't like summaries anyway." And there was that corner-smile, the one that said Cap had spotted something nobody thought he knew, and was enjoying proving someone wrong.

Tony rose to it without a single qualm. "Yeah. I want to see it." And oddly, it was the truth. He did want to see for himself what it was that Steve could possibly have asked, what information Jarvis could possibly have given to bring about the change he hadn't let himself hope for. And if he was relieved to be given open permission to snoop into it, then by fuck he was going to take full advantage of it.

Steve didn't look surprised or disappointed at that, and he didn't look nervous either when he stood up and leaned over Tony to press a kiss to the top of his head. "I'll just go have a quick shower while you do," he said, then disengaged his hand and strolled away into the bathroom without looking
Tony waited, indecision suspended between the twisting dance of fire, and the hissing fall of water behind the closed door. Jarvis brought the feed up in the screen over the fireplace without being asked, but waited until Tony tilted his chin up to look at it before he set it to play out.

~* Seen the World In Black And White *~

The world was nightvision green, blurred with rain, and panning slowly to the left. The feed clicked from camera to camera, each tilting along until its view overlapped the next; driveway, fountain court, formal garden, gazebo, croquet lawn, kitchen garden, boathouse, guest house, tennis court, pool house, and then along the holly hedges that sheltered the property from the road. Nothing moved in the night except for the storm, until a Captain America shaped shadow separated itself from the general gloom and wandered into view from beneath the tree line. He didn't hurry, didn't hunch against the drenching downpour, or flinch when the thunder rumbled, but he didn't dawdle like a man enjoying the rain might have done either. He just... marched, making for the doorpath that ran from the guest house to the manor like a soldier who had miles to go, and a battle to fight at the end of them, but who knew better than to complain about his orders.

Resigned, Tony realized, watching the camera zoom onto Steve's face as he drew near to the stone terrace. He looked resigned. Shoulders squared, hands half-curled, eyes fixed low against the rain, jaw set tight with determination to endure, lips pulled narrow with silence. It was awful to see, knowing as Tony did, that he had built that look and put it on the man as surely as his father had the shield.

Cap -- because it was Cap then, armored up tight in his cowl and Kevlar, not sweet, trusting Steve Rogers who read the newspaper every morning because he hated watching it on television -- cut across the short lawn to the stone patio, clearly heading for the doors that let into Maria's room, but a lightning flash blinded the camera for a moment, and when the filters recovered, he had stopped, his attention fixed by the armor Tony had left assembled beside the removal pad.

He stood there in the rain for several moments before Jarvis spoke up, his voice pitched low and smooth. "Captain Rogers, is there some way I can assist you?"

Cap barely flinched, surfacing from deep thought, and then he shook his head and turned to face the armor fully. "I just..." he sighed, drifted a few more steps closer to the headless metal shape, then shook his head and scraped the cowl back from his brow. "No, Jarvis, probably not."

"If your concern is for the lingering effects of Sir's paralysis episode," Jarvis put in anyway, "all available research indicates that there will be none of any significance once Sir has slept twelve to twenty hours."

A tiny, pained smile broke the hard line of Steve's lips then. "So sometime next week then," he said, then he took a breath that flexed his ribs and back so far it looked like it hurt. "Pepper called?"

"She did, Captain."

"She's coming back?" The question came out pressed flat, and wrung dry of anything that might speak of hope or disappointment, or envy or regret, and somehow that only made it sound that much more desperate.

"Not until Monday." That made Cap's head lift, his eyes a startled flicker to the camera most people never noticed.
"Monday? But he was..." An abortive gesture, as if he'd barely restrained a point backward to the doors behind which Tony was probably just then sinking into nightmare. "He shouldn't be alone after that. After what nearly happened."

"I believe Ms. Potts has a very clear understanding of Sir's preferences under conditions such as this, Captain." There was no mistaking the reproach there, but Steve didn't seem stung by it. "It is hardly the first time his survival has hinged upon a matter of luck."

"Luck..." Cap said, and maybe he shivered, or maybe it was the force he put behind the closing of his hands that made the brace of his shoulders quake for a second. "Guess she's got years of experience telling her when he meant to get himself killed versus when he just lost control of the situation." And yeah, just then he did sound jealous. As jealous as Tony had ever heard him, and that alone held down the wash of indignant rage at the (not so very inaccurate) insinuation Cap had made.

"Eleven years and six months," Jarvis agreed, implacable.

Cap gave a nod, crisp and brief. "She's your favorite. Out of everyone Tony knows, she's the one you trust most, the one you... like best." He hadn't been about to say 'like', that much was obvious. Less clear, though, was whether he'd avoided 'love' out of respect for Jarvis, or because the word hurt on his tongue just then.

"Ms. Potts has been a consistently positive influence in Sir's life. The more so since his experiences in Afghanistan. My preferences, and in fact my function parameters favor the continuance of Sir's attachment to her, and hers to him. She is... good for him in ways that are simple to list, yet difficult to quantify."

"Then why didn't you-" Steve stopped, forcibly checked the ragged note in his voice, then tried again. "At the tower, when we danced on the observation deck, and then... Why didn't you stop it? Why didn't you say something?" The words came out low, measured and steady, but raw and bleeding all the same. As if he'd heard the depth of the wound they'd revealed, Steve raised his hand, set it gently over the empty reactor shield, and let his head hang low. "Why didn't you stop us?"

"Because I perceived no conflict of interest, Captain," Jarvis answered, gentler now. "By all appearances, consent between you was mutual, neither seemed in any danger, nor were there intoxicants involved."

But instead of taking comfort, those words seemed only to weigh the man farther down. "Does it mean so little now?" he asked, so low the microphone barely parsed the words from the falling rain. "So long as it's legal, it doesn't matter if it's wrong? Doesn't matter what lies get told, doesn't matter if someone's heart gets broken." He shook his head in slow defeat, and Tony felt his blood freeze just a little, realizing how close Steve had come to walking away in that moment. Not just from Tony, and the offer he only now realized he'd never managed to properly explain, but from the idea of letting anyone in like that again.

"Captain," Jarvis put a note of query on the word, as if asking permission, or forgiveness. "I believe I have misspoken. It is not precisely accurate to say I saw no harm in what happened. More truthful would be to say that I perceived a great potential benefit in the assignation... for everyone involved."

Steve didn't pick up his head, but the camera's focus was close enough to catch the flex of light along his temple as eyebrows knotted in confusion beneath. "But you said that Pepper was-"

"The parameters of my programming do not limit me to loving only one person at a time, Captain," Jarvis said, making an obvious point of explaining no further. Because, of course, he was Jarvis, and
certain things would never be his to reveal, whether his coding allowed it or not. He was Jarvis, and he'd always want Tony to at least try and clean up his own messes if he could. He was Jarvis, and he would never stop wanting the whole world to see the best of Tony, no matter how often Tony showed the worst.

Steve didn't pick up his head, but his eyes closed, as if against a flare of pain, and it was a moment before he could speak. "Would Pepper be hurt to find out what we did?" he whispered, once the rain had dragged his hair down into a lank, dripping curtain before his eyes.

"I did not believe so then," Jarvis said. "Nor has that belief changed."

And there went that enormous sigh Tony remembered seeing. "I don't understand any of this..." the words escaped, thin and lost on his emptying breath, almost like a surrender.

"I believe your understanding goes deeper than you realize, Captain." Jarvis' voice now took on the coaxing, chiding note Tony usually heard when he'd been in the workshop too long and was closing in on his second missed meal. "However perhaps further consideration might better take place somewhere warmer and drier than this? My scanners indicate your core temperature is dropping rapidly, and your heart rate is significantly slower than is usual for you."

"Oh." Was all he said, but when the lights came up in Maria's bedroom, spilling a blinding emerald glare across the terrace stones, he turned obediently toward it, and slipped inside at the opening of the French doors.

"Cut it there," Tony said, barely recognizing his own voice. Silence wrapped tight around the room, and after several heartbeats he realized that the shower had stopped running in the bathroom. Steve hadn't come back into Maria's room, leaving Tony alone to watch, as he'd promised. That was good for several reasons; it gave Tony a chance to get his face under control, to check his breathing, to tap out a comforting measure against his arc reactor while he wondered what had passed through Steve's mind between the door and the bed. Just how far had he gone down the rabbit hole Jarvis' words had opened underneath his feet? How had he navigated from near-perfect regret to tugging Tony into his bed and not letting go until morning?

It felt right to be the one seeking Steve out after that; Tony was still the one with the questions -- different ones now than before, but still. Steve had gone to Tony's room after his shower, but rather than taking up half of the neatly turned-down bed, he'd gone to lay on the floor, naked and glorious, stretched like some great golden lion before the hearth. The firelight traced the muscles of his back and ass in gold, made a glittering treasure of his drying hair, combed smooth and just begging for fingers to fuck it up properly. Face pillowed on his hands, he turned from the fire to watch when he heard Tony come into the room, his eyes hooded, heavy, and calm. A world away from the green-tinted anguish Tony had witnessed moments before.

Steve smiled when Tony dropped to his knees beside him, hummed happily when Tony's hand came to rest on the swell of his ribs. "Understand better now?" he asked.

Tony nodded, but then had to shake his head. "You said you'd changed your mind," he said, focusing on the bath-warmed skin sliding beneath his fingers. "But it didn't seem like a change." He didn't want to say what it had seemed like, didn't quite dare invoke that nightmare, for fear of finding it true.

As if he understood, Steve levered himself over, put his back to the fire, and curled his knees up behind Tony's heels. "I did change my mind," he said slowly, carefully, "I decided to trust you, to believe what you said; that being with me wouldn't hurt you and Pepper, even though I don't understand how it possibly couldn't. I want to believe it so badly, and it scares me that I could still be
completely wrong about what I think you're offering me, and what it would cost, but..." he stroked a broad, warm hand down Tony's thigh, and offered a smile that was at once half terrified, and heartbreakingly brave. "But one of us has to trust first, to show the other one what's needed. And after what Jarvis told me... Well, I still don't understand how, but I understand that it's possible, and I guess I'm willing to let that be enough until you're ready to explain the rest to me."

Tony let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, stroked his palm down Steve's ribs, and then back up again, promising himself the most thorough ass-kicking ever for having overlooked such a stupid answer, and worse, the goddamned question that had stood between them like a wall for weeks now. "You can ask me anything, you know," he said, and his voice didn't even shake.

Steve smiled, shook his head, and curled in tight to rest it on Tony's knees. "Wouldn't know the right questions to ask, I think we've proved that already," he said, nuzzling in close. "But you're a genius, Jarvis has better sense than either of us, Sloane seems to approve of this, and we've got three more days before Pepper gets back home. Between us all we ought to be able to make some sense out of this mess by then."

~* Hacked the 'Nice' List *~

Later, when the fire had burned down, when they'd righted the chairs, slid the bed back into place, rescued the blankets and sheets from the floor and dozed off together in a sweaty, smug tangle beneath them, Tony woke up. It wasn't a nightmare, or the leaping, chattering mania of his multi-genius monkey mind, or even because his nose itched, he had to pee, and Steve's weight was cutting off the blood supply to his arm.

Well actually, his nose did itch, he did have to pee, and his arm felt like it had gone without blood flow for so long it was either missing, or withered down into a little black Dumbledore-claw, but those were all afterthoughts. What actually woke him was the quiet of the old house, the darkness of night pouring in the windows, as if the City was worlds away rather than just beyond the holly hedges, and the eerily rare sense of contentment he usually didn't get anywhere outside arm's reach of a soldering iron. A sense of being safe, of being cared-for, of being loved. Weird how that could sneak up on a guy when his best girl was away.

He smiled, felt his beard rasp in the fine silk of Steve's hair, felt the huff of breath against his collarbone, and for just a moment or two, allowed himself to be nothing at all except happy.

Then he felt he'd better get his ass out of the bed and into the bathroom before he exploded in the bad way. Steve grumbled, grumbling like a sleepy bear until Tony shushed him, blowing softly into his ear until he had to cover it with his hand.

"mphgoing?" he murmured, inching up just enough for Tony to drag his vestigial arm free.

"Gonna go wash up," Tony murmured, kissing his nose because fuck, why not? "You got your shower earlier, and I want one now I'm all sweaty."

"Like you all sweaty."

"I noticed," he said, and dodged the half-assed grab that clearly intended to drag him back into the bed's gravity well. "But I don't have the bandwidth to explain watersports to you right now, so round... um... five will have to wait till the plumbing resets."

And even mostly asleep, let it never be said that Steve Rogers was stupid. "Ew," he observed, tucking down under the duvet again.

"Oh, I have such wonderful things to show you," Tony chuckled, backing into the bathroom. "But
Jarvis: "Two a.m. Sir, the same as it is here," the AI replied, and Tony thought smugly that he sounded just a trifle less exasperated than the last time Tony had asked that question. "It seems a bit late to be waking Ms. Potts, don't you think?"

"Well obviously it's not, since she set up that call block to go till midnight," Tony reasoned.

And Jarvis, seeing the eminent sense as usual, sighed and gave up the point, asking, "And shall I engage the noise-canceling fields over the bedroom area with, or without music?"

Tony glanced back at the door and shook his head. "Nah, don't bother. Just place the call."

Pepper picked up after a dozen rings, halfway between frantic, furious, and too much wine. "Tony? What's the matter?"

He gave her his most dazzling grin – the real one, not the camera smile, because she knew the difference, and the poor girl deserved some warning, after all. "Hey Pepper. I'm just calling to let you know that everyone's all right."

The hair was rumpled on the left side of her head, and it looked like there were candy racecars on the wallpaper behind her as Pepper sat up and scowled warningly. 

"Thanksgiving chez Stark," he explained, reaching for the shampoo. "I know you were worried, so I thought I'd call and report. Nobody got an eye put out, nobody got arrested, nobody got poisoned and fed to the tomato patch, nobody went home crying," he paused, then made a show of reconsidering. "Well, one of the kids couldn't find her GI Joe doll and kind of pitched a fit when it was time to go home, but then Coulson made Natasha give it back, so that turned out okay. And that was it, pretty much. Nothing you'll be seeing on CNN."

Her glare intensified, doubling its atomic weight in suspicion. "If I turn on CNN right now, it's not going to say it's nothing, is it?" she dared.

Loving this game, Tony ducked under the spray to answer. "I'd be shocked if CNN had anything about it at all, unless their press crews have gotten way better at infiltration lately. But if those clowns did report on Starkgiving, you know they'd only get it all wrong anyhow."

"Tony..." she said again, but this was the you are an adorable scamp and I should really punish you for being more cute than you are annoying tone of voice, not the you will pay in painful ways for this one, so he figured he was still okay.

"No, seriously. Pinky-swear promise," he hooked the finger in question at the screen and swiped his hair back with the other hand. "It's all fine. Besides, if you turn on CNN now, you'll wake your uncle up. You know he can smell politics from a mile away, and then he'll keep you awake talking libertarianism for the rest of the night."

She made a rude sound in her nose that was not quite disagreement, and then the view tilted crazily as she flopped back down, phone held arm's reach above her. The bed had Star Wars sheets on it, and Tony had perhaps a tiny little flare of jealousy over that. "Well, thank you for calling to let me know the truth then," Pepper smirked as if she knew, flipping her hair up over the pillow with her free hand. "I know I can always count on your honesty and integrity."
"Yyyeah," Tony said, rubbing the back of his neck. "About that."

"Yes?" Really, how was it fair that she didn't even sound surprised?

"I kind of did a bad thing..." He peeked up at the view screen through his lashes, and took at least some hope in the barely-restrained twist of amusement on Pepper's lips.

"What did you do?" She asked in that strict-teacher voice Tony loved so damn well.

He bit his lip, took a breath, then came clean. "Steve..." Her giggle was immediate, and stifled all too quickly behind her hand. "...twice."

She sat up again then, eyes wide. "Oh, you little shit!" she declared in a voice that made Tony hope she had the room to herself. "Twice?"

He shrugged, totally not blushing and grinning like a loon at the memory. "Or maybe more than twice. Kinda lost count, actually."

"You Shit! How was he?"

Tony gave up all pretense of cool at that, and showed off his full-on fucked senseless grin. "About how you'd expect," he said, and backed up so she could see the love bites along his shoulders and collarbones.

She looked suitably impressed, and more than a little turned on. "That good? Whew!"

"Oh yeah," he chuckled. "So can I keep him? Please?"

"Tony," she frowned, and the teacher voice was back. "You know the rules; once gets a pass so long as it's not in the news, but you're only allowed seconds from the hit list. And Steve is NOT on the hit list."

"I know, and I'm sorry," Tony replied in a totally and completely not whiny nor even a little bit wheedling tone. "But it's not like I planned this or anything." She didn't look convinced, so he brought out his big gun without remorse. "And anyway, you totally still owe me for Coulson!"

She rolled her eyes, but lay back down again with an annoyed huff that said she knew he was right. "As I remember, you made me take Ryan Reynolds off my list for Phil," she grumbled.

"But Pepperrrr..."

"Shh," she said, waving a hand at him. "I'm thinking. Okay. You can put Steve on the list IF you take Brad off it."

Tony flinched back against the tiles, covering his arc reactor with a shocked hand. "But Brad comes with Angie! They're a twofer!"

"Exactly." Pepper's smile was a cruel thing, and Tony told her so with a point and glare.

"You're a hard woman, Potts."

She smiled then, and was entirely, perfectly beautiful. "That's why I'm still here, Mr. Stark. Now go back to bed, or wherever you left Steve. I'll see you on Monday. We can do a double lunch date if I can drag Phil away from his paperwork." Which was about as likely as Tony convincing Steve to go without a workout in any given day, but if anybody could do it, Pepper would be the one, so he just nodded.
"Gory details as usual, my darling?"

Her grin turned feral. "Are you kidding? I want video!" Tony barked a laugh as she reached for the phone and said, "Pics, or it didn't happen, Stark!" Then the screen went dark.

Tony shut the water off, rubbed quickly dry, then used the towel to wipe down the mirror so he could eyeball himself in the glass; hiccups, bite marks, bruises and all. He looked well-used, hard-ridden, fucked right out, and smug as a red dragon in a dwarf hoard.

"Mr. Stark!" He leaned over the vanity and pointed at his reflection with a grin. "You just had incredible, life-changing sex with the pinnacle of human physical perfection; a living legend; a scientific singularity; a walking national icon in tight blue spandex. What are you gonna do next?"

So of course that would be when the Steve would open the bathroom door and lean against the doorjamb, arms crossed over his chest, and hips shot to make it impossible to ignore the fact that his cock was already hanging thick and long, and climbing toward half-staff with every beat of his heart. "Well I'm no genius or anything," he said, eyeing Tony with a leer that was probably illegal in most states, "but if you were to ask my tactical opinion, I'd say 'fix your list and come do it again' sounds like a good plan to me."

To which Tony, apparently not quite so fucked out as he looked, could only salute and grin. Cap's plans were the best!

~* Fin *~

Chapter End Notes

TA DAAAAA!!! ~o~
This is finally the end of the novel that is *Never Have I Ever*

Thanks to all of you who read along, who dropped kudos, who asked questions, left squee, called me evil, and loved my lumpy, irregular little word-baby even though it was occasionally noisy, inconvenient, and covered in stress.

I know I left some things 'unresolved' in this, and some of those choices were deliberate because I intend further stories in this series (dammit) however, some of those choices had to be made because stopping to explain would have dumped velocity, or diverted attention from something even more important to the plot.

So I'm opening an offer here: If there's something somewhere in the arc that caught your notice and you didn't get enough of it (more than just the naughty bits please, you pervs,) feel free to ask me about it here in the comments, or on my LJ (Cluegirl at lj dot com), my DW, (Cluegirl at dw dot org) or my tumblr (kingsgrave dot tumblr dot com). I will either answer them outright, or if they're ticklish enough, I'll write a drabble or ficlet to answer them, and credit you directly.

Because, as we all know, worldbuilding is half the fun of fanfic. The other half is comments.
Love to you all, and happy New Calendar Day!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!