Summary

Tony was pretty sure that the small human left on his doorstep was just a (really fucking frightening) attempt at extortion, and mostly just wanted child protective services to show up
yesterday. Then an extended trip to Afghanistan puts life, the universe and everything into perspective, and somehow, miraculously, Tony might be closer to happy than he's been in his life. He's even willing to accept the enormous pieces of the puzzle he's obviously missing. He should've learnt long ago that what you don't know will always come back to bite you in the ass.

Notes

So, I finished writing the first part of the series within a series that 107 will become, needed a slight break from that universe and decided to get out the beginning of one of the other ideas I've had, which should turn some of the tables a bit. I should add that this story will lift some action and dialogue straight from the films (which I obviously don't own), but I have tried to keep the known stuff to a minimum.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

So, I finished writing the first part of the series within a series that 107 will become, needed a slight break from that universe and decided to get out the beginning of one of the other ideas I've had, which should turn some of the tables a bit. I should add that this story will lift some action and dialogue straight from the films (which I obviously don't own), but I have tried to keep the known stuff to a minimum.

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"We can try again, I suppose."

"No, we cannot. The Asset almost broke the programming several times. Keeping him off ice without the option of wiping him for that many months another time could prove disastrous."

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"Mr. Stark."

Oh, shit. Tony knew that tone. That tone meant it was at least the fifth time Potts had said his name and that he was in for some serious passive aggressive efficiency. For a moment, he considered staying where he was. But then it would only get worse later, and JARVIS had a disturbing tendency to take Potts's side. Tony rolled his eyes, then pushed his creeper back out from under the car, grabbed a rag to wipe his hands down and put on a grin. "Hey, Potts, what's up?" The incessant tapping of Potts's stilettos made Tony's gaze zoom in on them, follow their sleek lines up long, perfectly formed legs, an impeccable skirt suit and-- What the ever-loving fuck? "Potts, is that a small human? Please tell me you didn't bring a small human into the 'shop. No small humans allowed in the 'shop. Where did you get the small human anyway?"

Potts raised a perfectly formed eyebrow. She was holding the small human away from her a little, as though it was a very small, slightly dirty bag of potatoes. "The 'small human' is a he. I think. And we call them babies these days." She paused a moment, and something about her gaze was disconcerting, the way it always was when she was about to tell him something she knew he wasn't going to like, something game-changing. Exactly like that, just about a hundred times worse. "Tony, he was in a basket outside the front door."

"Wait." Tony frowned, pushing himself to his feet. "What? I didn't order a small human delivery. Sorry. Baby." Even so, he could feel panic begin to well up inside him, icy and disorienting because, no, just no, there was absolutely no way. He was careful. He was always, always careful to make sure not to order any small human deliveries. "JARVIS, who brought short stuff? Did you get a plate, or something? I'd like to call them and ask them to come pick their progeny back up."

"I apologize, Sir," JARVIS said. "Approximately fifty-seven minutes ago, my systems went offline for two minutes and twenty-five seconds. The baby must've arrived on the premises during that window. I have no record of anyone entering or exiting."

Tony frowned, felt another sliver of panic break through before he squashed it down. Okay, someone was trying to, well, get money from him, probably. They'd put the small human here,
hoping Tony would get attached, and then they'd come and claim it back and demand money, hoping Tony would like the thing enough to pay up even after the paternity tests came back negative. "You're supposed to tell me when you have a malfunction, JAY," he said. "That's part of your programming. I specifically remember making that part of your programming."

"You did, Sir," JARVIS said. "And I did try to inform you. I can only presume you weren't listening."

"Tony," Potts said, and there was even more passive aggressive exasperation in there now. "Can we deal with the fact that someone literally left a baby on your doorstep now, please?"

Tony ran a hand over his face, and fuck, it was shaking, wasn't it? "I don't." He stopped, cleared his throat. "What do you usually do when... babies are left on your doorstep?"

"Call child protective services," Potts said. "And order a paternity test."

"Jesus fucking Christ." Tony groaned, gave his own hair a good tug. "No, there's. There's no way. There's absolutely no way. I use protection. I always use protection."

"Well, condoms aren't a hundred per cent," Potts said, voice going firm but gentle, in that way she always used when she was 'managing him'. Didn't make Tony feel one bit better. "They're... JARVIS?"

"Ninety-eight per cent effective when new, whole and used correctly, Ms. Potts," JARVIS replied.

Potts cocked an eyebrow at him.

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, raked his fingers the rest of the way through his hair until it was falling into his eyes. It shouldn't be so fucking hard to breathe. He had never tended towards panic attacks, but hey, small human who may or may not contain a portion of his genetic material. He was allowed a bit of a nervous breakdown. "I need a drink," he said, pulling his t-shirt down to cover the sliver of skin where it had ridden up his stomach under the car, and headed up the stairs and straight for the bar. By some exercise of will he hadn't quite realized he was capable of, he kept his hands steady enough to pull out a glass and a bottle of scotch, poured two fingers. Then, with a mental 'fuck it', he poured the glass full, threw half of it back in one go and kept the rest at hand as Potts came up the stairs behind him, still balancing the small human in her arms. "I can't even--" He blinked. "Don't I have somewhere I need to be today? Some award or unveiling or other bullshit?"

"Vegas, Tony," Potts replied. "You are set to leave in five hours."

Tony nodded. "Good," he said. "Good. Call child protective services. They can get rid of this--" he waved his free hand in the vague direction of the small human in Potts's arms and took another deep drag of scotch. "--before then, right?"

"Mr. Stark, I really suggest running a paternity test," Potts said. "It's better to know now so we know what consequences we may have on our hands later."

Tony winced. "Yeah, no, I think I'm perfectly fine without that. Really, really fine. You know what they say. 'Ignorance is bliss' and all that shit, right? So let's just stay blissfully ignorant on this one thing, okay? Ignorance sounds really fucking good."

"Tony, you know that's not going to work," Potts said. "Aside from the potential legal ramifications, not having this resolved means that you'll just keep thinking about it. This way, at least you'll know. Best case scenario, you know you're being played and never have to worry about it again. Worst case scenario--"
"Yeah, no, I really don't want to hear about the worst case scenario here, Potts, thanks very much. In fact I'd much rather--"

"--it's positive, and we figure out an airtight, legal, discrete way of handling things, and then we call child protective services and--"

"--pretend this is a really bad dream, go back to working on the Hot Rod, then get ready for Vegas and go gamble away a couple of million--"

"Tony!" Potts had high spots of red on her cheeks now, eyes narrowed, visibly angry. The small human in her arms let out a small whimper. "This isn't a joking matter. You need to take this seriously. You need to--" With a huff, she crossed the floor until she was right in front of him and plopped the small human into the crook of his free arm.

Tony nearly dropped the thing, fumbled to drain his glass, set it down and get a proper grip on the, well, the baby. "What? No, you can't just do that. I'm going to drop it and crack its head open, and. Fuck, Potts, what if I'm allergic to small humans?"

"You are not allergic to babies," Potts said. "You were one, once." She muttered something under her breath that sounded distinctly like, 'You still are, half the time'. "If you're not going to deal with this, I will. JARVIS, how fast can you process a paternity test?"

"That should take about eight hours, Ms. Potts," JARVIS said. "I just need a cell swab, from the inside of his cheek. I believe Sir has cotton swabs in his workshop. I can lead the way, if you would like."

"Traitor," Tony muttered. Then he realized Potts was headed for the stairs, felt pure panic stab through him. He was breaking out in real, actual cold sweat, God damn it. "Potts," he called. "Potts, fuck, you can't leave me alone with it!"

"'It' is a him, Tony," she called over her shoulder as she vanished down into the workshop, leaving Tony alone with a wriggling bundle of tiny person who was no longer just whimpering but beginning to actually scream. It was loud enough that Tony damn near dropped it in shock, again, and even when he had it balanced, he was convinced his eardrums were about to pop. "Potts!" he called. "Potts! JARVIS, what am I supposed to do here?"

"I suggest smelling his diaper, Sir," JARVIS said. "If that is clean, he might be hungry. Or he could simply be distraught. I believe rocking motions should help soothe him."

Tony grimaced, but the cries were getting worse. He would do pretty much anything to make that stop. Disgusted already, he bent his head slightly towards where he thought the diaper probably was. Thank fuck, nothing smelled funky. "What do you feed this thing?" he asked.

"Formula," Potts said, walking back into view. "Which you don't have. Traditionally served in baby bottles, which you also don't have. And don't get me started on what happens when he gets that diaper dirty."

Tony winced. "See, this is why we should just call child protective services right now and get it out of our hair."

"He," Potts said. "Hold him still so I can get a swab."

"You know," Tony said, swallowing. "Maybe you should hold the small human and I should do the swabbing, being the resident scientist and all, so..." He held out the baby, doing his best not to drop or otherwise break it.
Potts looked extremely unimpressed with that. "You are also the resident possible baby-daddy, so I think it's fair you do the holding here. Just, hold him still. Yes, like that, and I'll just." She held up the cotton swab up triumphantly. Then she frowned. "Okay, maybe you should upload this. I'm not sure how your. That, works." Movements supremely awkward, she managed to swap the small human out for the cotton swab, and Tony was not even embarrassed about how quickly he poured himself another glass of scotch and downed it. Upon half a second's thought, he picked up the rest of the bottle and took it downstairs with him.

He unscrewed the bottle with his teeth, spat out the cork and took a deep swig, relishing the burn as it went down. Drinking so much so fast was starting to take the edge off, make everything a bit more blurry, a bit less overwhelming, allowed him to bite down the panic until it was just a slight, manageable buzz in the corners of his mind. Still, he had to stop and take a deep breath when he came face to face with the scanner that would upload the DNA material into JARVIS's systems. He could contaminate the sample. Could even just throw it out. There was still a hundred ways to make sure he never had to know.

"Sir," JARVIS said. "If you'd insert the sample, please."

Tony took another long drink. Then, in one quick motion, he inserted the cotton swab and stepped back. He took another swallow, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and allowed himself to drop down into one of the workshop chairs. "Fuck."

The cries of the small human heralded Potts's entry into the workshop even before her crisp, precise steps normally did. "Please tell me you're not getting drunk with a baby in the house," she said, voice sharp.

Tony snorted. "I think I've earned the right to get a bit drunk right now," he said.

"No, Tony," Potts said. "You have not. You have, you have earned the right to go cold turkey right now. This is, you created this situation. Even if he isn't yours, you created a situation where he very well might be, and you can't just drink yourself into oblivion and make me pick up the pieces, Tony. This is not in my job description."

Tony snorted. "I think I've earned the right to get a bit drunk right now," he said.

"You are not the boss of me," Tony called, but it sounded weak, even in his own ears. He blinked a few times, and okay, so maybe that was a bit too much alcohol in not enough time on no breakfast. The room was swimming around him, and the baby was wailing and he wasn't sure he would be able to get up without dropping it.

"Sir, if I may," JARVIS said. "I believe it would be prudent to have Mr. Hogan discretely acquire the barest necessities for the next few hours. Diapers, formula and a bottle should about do it."

"Give me an exploded view," Tony said, taking in the sight of the engine specs as JARVIS laid it
"The compression in cylinder three appears to be low," JARVIS said.

"Log that," Tony said, and just then the music cut. Tony bit back a groan of annoyance. "Please
don't turn down my music."

"I cannot believe you'd let that woman inside the house with the baby here," Potts said, voice tight as
she stomped the rest of the way into the workshop. "Do I need to tell you what kind of headlines it
would've made if she'd seen him?"

Tony turned back around, grimacing. "Is the small human still here? Where are child protective
services? I really don't feel like they're putting my tax dollars to very good use right now." He
frowned. "It's been here all along? Wha-- JARVIS can't possibly be a good enough babysitter. He
doesn't have arms. Or a body. Or-- Christ, please tell me you didn't leave him with the bots."

"There are those paternal instincts," Potts said.

"Nope," Tony said. "I just don't want child protective services to show up and find out Dum-E has
decided to run a daycare."

"I stayed here with him," Potts said. "In the guest room. You should at least know the results and
make some decisions before we call in the authorities."

"Yeah, no," Tony said. "I thought it over. Decided I really, really don't need to know. Ever."

"Tony," Potts started.

"JARVIS, put the music back on," Tony said. "Full volume."

JARVIS ignored him, damn it.

"Tony, he's your son," Potts said. "You're his father. JARVIS finished processing yesterday, when
you were on the way to Vegas."


Potts sighed. "The good news is, you should be halfway around the world by now. My roommate
offered to help babysit. We'll call in the child protective services when you get home, if you still want
to. Take the time you've got on the trip to think it through. JARVIS has loaded some of your options
onto your tablet."

"I don't understand why we can't just take care of this now. Why are you trying to hustle me out of
here?" Tony said. And it wasn't that he wanted to leave. He wanted really badly to get the hell away
from here, but he'd be even happier about it if he could get the small person shipped out to the
authorities first. "Don't tell me you've gone and fallen in love with its supposed cuteness factor."

Potts gave a long-suffering sigh. "Your flight was scheduled to leave an hour and a half ago," she
said, conveniently ignoring everything else that had come out of his mouth.

"That's funny," Tony said. "I thought with it being my plane and all, that it would just wait for me to
get there."

And then he really was being hustled out while she switched, thank God, to some far more normal,
boring, business related stuff, and Tony was pretty sure he had bought a spring period some-artist-or-
other, and that maybe it was Potts's birthday, or anniversary (did Potts have a partner?) or something, but his head was too damn much of a blur to make much sense of any of it. He dressed in a rush, made it out the door and deliberately chose to drive himself. He needed to do something that was not sit passively in the back and stare at his tablet like it was going to bite him.

He needed not to think. Thankfully, he'd have Rhodey, the flight attendants and stripper poles and some hot sake to help with that as soon as he could make it to the airport.

Still, as he lay bleeding in the sand a day later, he couldn't help but wonder what would happen to the baby now.

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone enjoyed. Questions, speculation, anything is always welcome. Thank you for reading.
Character tags etc. will be updated along the way.

June 11th 2017: This is not truly a Civil War centric story. However, I have updated the tags to reflect what position this story will take when we reach Civil War. Now, the events of Civil War won't take place until 100k+ words into the story, but this way, you'll know what to expect and if it's something you actually want to read, and hopefully we'll all be the happier for it.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Definitely quite a bit of dialogue lifted directly from the film in this one. I hope you can forgive me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"This was a bad idea from the start, Zola. A serious misuse of our resources. The Asset is a weapon, not. This." A glimmer of distaste crossed his features.

"That may be, Herr Pierce, but our most potent version of the Super Soldier Serum no longer exists, except within his genetic code."

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Tony threw the dice, moved his pieces, flashed a slight smile at Yinsen's, "Good roll. Good roll." He was exhausted, felt exhausted all the time lately, ever since waking up in this cave. His chest ached, a burning, throbbing pain that made it impossible to get a proper breath. It was better than the car battery, but just barely. He had barely a snowball's chance in hell of getting out of here alive. Luckily, he was too damn busy most of the time to think about that, but these quiet moments were the worst, the times when all the things he didn't want to contemplate popped up, assaulted the edges of his mind.

Yinsen picked up the dice, shook them in the palm of his hand, and Tony needed out of his own mind, needed something more than just the game and the quiet, mindless commentary to keep himself occupied. The words were out of his mouth before he had quite managed to think them through, "You still haven't told me where you're from."

"I'm from a small town named Gulmira." Yinsen threw the dice. "It's actually a nice place."

Tony looked away for a moment. He wasn't going to ask, didn't want the answer. But... "Got a family?"

"Yes," Yinsen said, moving his pieces with the same deft, clever fingers that had installed the arc reactor just hours ago. For whatever reason, he wasn't meeting Tony's gaze. Not that Tony was particularly interested in the scrutiny that would've come with it. The words were out of his mouth before he had quite managed to think them through, "And I will see them when I leave here. And you, Stark?"

Tony felt his face pull into an uncertain grimace. "Nothing," he began to say, the habit so deeply ingrained, but, "Yeah, maybe." And here came the thoughts, the ones that had threatened to flood him every single time there was nothing to occupy his mind. Yinsen had called these weapons, his weapons, the hands they were in, had called that Tony's legacy, and that cut to the quick. That was what he was going to be remembered for, if he didn't make it out of here. That was all the small--No, he had to stop that. That was all his son would ever know about him. He hadn't even given the kid a name. Hells, he wasn't even sure what color his eyes were. He swallowed down the shame and despair that came with those thoughts, both of those feelings far too common these days. "A son," he said. "If they haven't shipped him off to child protective services by now, with me missing and everything." He ran a hand over his face, relishing the woolen scratch of his fingerless gloves.
"Yes?" Yinsen asked. He flashed Tony a small, sad smile. "We must get you out of here, then, mustn't we?"

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"Yinsen!" Tony could feel horror rising like bile in his throat, felt himself go cold all over. He was only half-aware of Yinsen's shouted warning, of twisting out of the way of the missile, and of turning around to fire at Raza. This could not be happening, could not. He could not have broken another promise, could not have lost yet another one of the very few people he gave two actual fucks about. Heart beating somewhere in the vicinity of his throat, where it most definitely didn't belong, he crouched down and raised the faceplate. "Come on. We got to go. Move for me, come on." He was running out of breath and his chest felt too tight to take another one. "We got a plan. We're gonna stick to it."

Yinsen's eyes were barely open, his voice barely there, and Tony knew already, no matter how much he didn't want to admit it. "This was always the plan, Stark."

Tony let out what little air was left in his lungs, tried to keep up the façade, the dumb belief that this might still have a happy ending. "Come on, you're gonna see your family. Get up."

Yinsen exhaled on a whoosh, and Tony was frightened it was going to be the last one. "My family is dead." Another few breaths, and he was fading, fading so fast, slipping right through Tony's fingers and there wasn't a damn thing he could do. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the shock of Yinsen's statement clamored for attention, but he couldn't, couldn't contain anything else right now. "I'm going to see them now, Stark. It's okay. I want this. I want this."

Tony had to avert his eyes for a moment, will back the tears that were rising unbidden, and fuck, he couldn't remember the last time he'd cried, the last time he'd felt this degree of crushed. He managed to raise his gaze, lock eyes with Yinsen one last time. "Thank you for saving me."

Yinsen's next few breaths sounded like actual struggles. "Don't waste it." His voice was barely a whisper now, closer to words shaped on the air escaping his lungs. "Don't waste your life." He was gasping then, for a second or two, and then it was over, and Tony heard the meaning of those few words loud and painfully clear. Don't waste this chance, don't waste your legacy, don't waste your chance at a family. And fuck, this was one of the best men he'd ever known, one of the few who'd genuinely cared for him, one of the less than a handful of people in his whole life he would've called a true friend, and he was gone, just like that, gone to save Tony, to give him this chance, and those absolute bastards had killed him.

Rage, unlike anything Tony had ever felt before, coursed through him. He slammed the faceplate back down and turned towards the mouth of the cave.

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Tony had never in his life felt relief like he did when he heard the choppers passing over his head, and he was calling for them, waving his arm, and he wasn't sure if he was laughing or crying, felt like he could take another flight even without the suit, and maybe this time he wouldn't even crash. He collapsed to his knees, legs suddenly incapable of carrying him as his relief chased away some of the adrenalin, allowed him to feel just how utterly exhausted he was, all the way down to his bones.

Then, seemingly between one blink of his eyes and the next, the choppers had touched down and the airmen were running towards him. Tony felt his eyes drop shut at the sight of Rhodey amongst them, let out a breath and sucked in another, more freely than he thought he had for the past three months. "How was the fun-vee?" Rhodey asked, and Tony couldn't help but grin. It was that or bawl his eyes
out, and he was not quite down with that shit. A strong, solid hand settled on his shoulder, squeezed, and it was all Tony could do not to collapse against it. "Next time you ride with me, okay?" And then Rhodey was crouching in front on him, pulling him against his front, and Tony keeled forwards into his hold, allowed himself just a moment to dig his face into his best friend's chest, allowed himself to just revel in the fact that he was safe, he was free, was going home.

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"Spoken to Potts lately?" Tony asked, cutting into Rhodey's rapid-fire questions about where he'd been held and what'd happened. There'd be debriefings soon enough, he suspected, and sure, he'd tell Rhodey. Right now, that just wasn't anywhere near the top of the list of stuff he cared about. He bit back a wince as the vibrations of the chopper jostled every single place he'd injured in the crash. Now that the adrenalin was mostly gone, he could feel every tiny ache and pain, and it was all he could do to keep himself thinking clearly.


Tony tried to smile, but couldn't quite get his mouth to follow that order. "And, er." He let out a breath, and suddenly the weight of the arc reactor was terrible, nearly insurmountable, until it was all he could do to inhale around it. "The." He stopped. Swallowed. Made sure to keep his voice lowered so the other airmen wouldn't overhear. "My kid. How is-- Did child protective services take him? Is he still there?"

Rhodey's eyes widened, and then his face tucked into a wide grin. "Really? You're. Really?" He reached out, squeezed Tony's shoulder. "Congratulations, Tony. Pepper said you'd come around eventually, but I." He shook his head, grin growing wider. "I'm happy for you. Really. What are you going to call him?" His grin grew crooked. "And may I remind you that you once promised you'd name your firstborn after me?"

Tony snorted, but felt another wave of relief surging over him. If Rhodey was talking about it like this, then there was no way in hell his son was out of his reach. "I was a bit drunk at the time."

Rhodey rolled his eyes. "You were about five seconds ahead from passing out. Literally, you passed out five seconds later."

Tony took as deep a breath as he was able, felt his lips tuck into a grin without him even having to think about it. "A: That was a great spring break. B: I have some of my best ideas when I'm drunk."

Rhodey blinked. "Really? You're going to name him James?"

Tony began to shrug, then cut the motion off halfway through when a stab of pain went through him. Something was definitely wrong with that shoulder. "James Edwin, I was thinking. On one condition. He's going to need an actual responsible adult for a godfather."

Rhodey let out a stunned-sounding laugh. "Sold."

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Tony could barely catch a proper breath as they came in for the landing. So close to home now, so damn close to seeing his son again, to finally looking at him, finding out what color eyes he actually had, learn all the little features that meant Tony would be able to make him out in a crowd of babies. So close to being able to fix his mistake, make a better legacy, turn the Stark name into something Jamie could be proud of some day. His whole body was thrumming with barely suppressed energy,
and the moment they set down, he knew he wasn't going to have the patience to let Rhodey wheel him out on that stupid chair the doctors back at the base had insisted on. Carefully, he pulled himself back on his feet, grimaced and gratefully accepted Rhodey's help when he swayed on his feet. And then, all too slowly, the back began to open.

As the airstrip, and Potts and Happy, came into view, Tony let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He was home. He was home, and he wanted to run out there, to, to. Fuck, he didn't even know. Not that it mattered. He was still too banged up to run, needed Rhodey's careful support, physical and verbal, to even stay on his feet as they made their slow way out of the plane. Off to the side, Tony could see the ambulance, but no, hell no, he didn't have time for that. The doctors back at the base had already taken up too damn much of his time. He had things to do, had a, a son to see. He wasn't going to let himself be delayed by poking, prodding vampires. "Are you kidding me with this? Get rid of it." Another step, and he had enough balance to let go of Rhodey's hand, make the rest of the walk under his own power. Potts was smiling. No, not Potts. According to Rhodey, she'd played a huge part in taking care of Jamie while he was gone, had fought viciously for Tony's parental rights. Screw employer/employee protocols. She deserved to be Pepper. "Your eyes are red," he said, and it was so much less profound than the thank you's he wanted to give her, but then verbal thank you's wouldn't be a whole lot less inadequate. "A few tears for your long-lost boss?"

She flashed him the tiniest of smiles. "Tears of joy," she said. "I hate babysitting almost as much as I hate job hunting."

Tony tried for a smile, but it probably came out as more of a grimace. His throat was uncomfortably tight. "Yeah, babysitting gig's over."

"Take us to the hospital, please, Happy," Pepper said the moment they were all in the car with the doors shut. Tony was not at all sure what to make of the sudden frosty vibe coming off her.

"No," Tony said.

"No?" Pepper turned to him, incredulous and still weirdly standoffish. "Tony, you have to go to the hospital."

Tony, more than a little uncomfortable with her demeanor, stared straight ahead even as she was leaning in in that way she had when she wanted to make him do something he didn't want to do. "No is a complete answer," he said. Pepper was saying something, some other objection or something, but Tony was too exhausted and too damn anxious to let this argument play out. "I don't have to do anything. I've been in captivity for three months. There are two things I want to do. I want you to call--"

"Tony," Pepper said, and she sounded so fucking wounded, and Tony had absolutely no idea what to even do with that right now. "At least see him."

Tony frowned. "I want you to call for a press conference, and then I want to go straight home and spend some time with my son." He let out a breath, somehow managed to keep it steady. "I wouldn't mind picking up a cheeseburger on the way, though."

Just like that, Pepper seemed to melt. "You aren't asking me to call child protective services?" she asked. "You're going to keep him?"

Tony nodded. "I'm going to keep him," he said, and fuck, but even saying it felt damn near indescribable. "Hogan, drive. Cheeseburger first."

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Tony honestly didn't think he'd ever felt this nervous in his life. It was bubbling through him, making him jittery, utterly unable to keep still. He was going to see his son. He was going to see Jamie, hold him the way he'd wanted to since that night Yinsen had first asked him about his family. He was going to finally find out what color his eyes were, what he looked like when Tony actually looked at him. He dismissed the lingering annoyance at the fact that he could've been there already if Obie hadn't insisted on that last conversation, on seeing the arc reactor. At least he hadn't had to tell the man he was staying slightly removed from the loop, at least for a little while, not when Obie was suggesting it himself. Tony, well, he was mostly just relieved that he hadn't had to explain that he wanted a bit of extra time to spend with Jamie, after missing out of the last three months.

At long fucking last, Happy pulled up in front of the house, and Tony was out of the car the moment it was still. Right in that moment, he didn't feel any of the aches or bruises, didn't feel anything but the bubbling nerves and the overwhelming need to just be inside already. JARVIS had the door open before Tony got there, and Tony made his way inside as fast as he could manage, rushed through and into the living room, and there was Pepper, and three bags, and a portable baby... cot, or whatever you called them anyway. And in her arms, still tiny but distinctly larger than last Tony had seen him, was Jamie. And suddenly, Tony was rooted to the spot, scared shitless, because even though Jamie was his son, he was also still a very small human, so fragile and breakable, so easy to fuck up in about a hundred different ways, and who the fuck was Tony to even entertain the thought of being a father?

Pepper got up, rolling her eyes, crossed the floor and maneuvered Jamie into the crook of Tony's good arm before stepping back with a small, soft smile, and Tony couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't focus on anything except the tiny, warm weight in his arms. Slowly, Tony made himself take a careful breath. Then he bent his head and took in the sight of his son, and it was like all the pieces of a puzzle falling into place, in a weird way he couldn't even really explain. Something, whatever it was, just made sense in a way it hadn't before.

Jamie's eyes were grey, and Tony had never loved another person so much in his life.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone for the kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions, and especially the comments. So great to know I've got people on board with this new one and that it seems to have sparked some curiosity. Keep the speculation coming. Even when I don't answer the questions, I still love reading your thoughts and ideas.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

New chapter! Once again, it borrows heavily from the first Iron Man film (which I do not own, in case any lawyers out there were wondering), but hopefully it manages to maintain a balance.
I also just want to add, for future clarification, that this story follows the version of the MCU timeline that says IM1 takes place between May and October of 2009 and IM2 in the spring of 2010. The sections in italics in the beginning of each chapter follow their own timeline, independent of, but tied into, the rest of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"And yet, this experiment has been an utter failure."

"If you look at it from the right perspective, you might call it a success, Herr Pierce."

***

Pepper stayed over that night, not that Tony needed her to. However exhausted he was, he was perfectly happy to get up every time Jamie let out so much as a whimper from his small, portable cot. It was difficult enough to go to sleep in the first place, damn near impossible to put Jamie down without tracing his fine, chubby features or stroking his dark, downy hair one last time. Who the hell knew that the warm weight and powdery smell of baby could be as addictive as any legal or illegal substance Tony had ever put inside his body?

By six in the morning, after the third nighttime excursion to feed or change the baby, Tony was too hopped up on the whole situation to even contemplate going back to sleep. "Hey, JARVIS," he said, walking into the living room with Jamie in the crook of his good arm. Jamie seemed as wide-awake as Tony felt, blowing spit bubbles and trying to grab at Tony's beard. "Yeah, you don't feel like sleeping either, do you, little guy?" Jamie replied with non-sensical babbling and the world's most gorgeous little toothless smile. "Yeah, I know," Tony agreed. "JARVIS, can we get some baby books? Can we-- Hey, do we know how old he is?"

"Certainly, Sir," JARVIS said. "I'll look through the reviews and find a selection of the highest rated ones, shall I? And young Master James is approximately three months old. I estimate he was less than a week old when he arrived."

"Wow," Tony said, flashing Jamie a grin that got him a loud, happy noise and flailing arms in return. "You really are little, aren't you?" He shifted his grip on the baby just slightly, ran the fingers of his bad hand gently through whisper-soft, dark hair. Aside from the eyes, he had Tony's coloring, had enough of Tony visible in his features by now that even if Tony had still wanted to deny the relationship, he doubted he'd have been able to. "Thanks, JARVIS. What else do we need that Pepper hasn't already bought?"

"I will look through some of the higher-ranked parenting sites and create a list, Sir," JARVIS said. "I have already taken the liberty of ordering baby merchandise from some of your favorite musicians. Congratulations, Sir." Tony could've sworn that was real, near-human fondness in his voice. "And may I add that I'm honored the young Master and I share a namesake."
"No one better to name my boys for," Tony said, feeling a tugging at his lips and a bubbling sort of lightness in his chest, despite the arc reactor, that he couldn't remember ever feeling before. "You got any of the books ready yet?"

"Pre-loaded to the tablet on the table in front of you," JARVIS replied.

Tony reached out with his bad arm, grabbed the tablet, wincing, and pulled it to him. It took quite a bit of maneuvering to balance baby, tablet and busted shoulder, but he finally managed to find a position that was mostly comfortable and allowed him to read and scroll through the books without having to put Jamie back in the cot. That done, he settled in to read.

***

"Happy dropped these off," Pepper said as she walked into the workshop, dropping a pair of shipping boxes on one of the workbenches. She pulled open one of them, pulled up a handful of baby-sized band and joke shirts. Onesies, Tony was pretty sure they were called. "Tony, honestly," she added, holding up one in particular. "'To do list: crap pants, take nap, suck some titties'. Do not turn him into a celebrity kid troublemaker before he's even a year old."

Tony held up his hands. "I take no responsibility," he said, even as he bit back a laugh. "Those are all JARVIS. Fucking hell, JAY, didn't know you had it in you."

Pepper sighed. "I guess it he has to show who programmed him every once in a while," she said. "What are you doing?"

"JARVIS and I are making a bouncy chair that's way better than any of the shit that's sold commercially," Tony said. "JARVIS, can you show her the blueprints? And do the stress tests now that you're at it." He cast a glance at Jamie in the cot, felt a grin pull on his lips when he realized that bleary, grey eyes were looking back at him. "You're awake, little man? Come on, let's go check out your new wardrobe." Quickly, he crossed the few feet separating him from the baby, picked him up, grabbed a random onesie from the pile and walked upstairs.

***

It took a week before he had no choice but to turn his attention back to the arc reactor. The current model was giving out inconsistent energy, and the bursts were leaving him short of breath for periods, and with more chest pain than he reasonably should have had. At least he now had a top-of-the-line Stark tech bouncy chair to put Jamie in while he worked, and a holographic mobile to keep him entertained when just looking at Tony wasn't fun enough. Still, it was difficult to focus on something that wasn't Jamie, wasn't getting Jamie's nursery absolutely perfect, wasn't making sure to be right with his son as much as he possibly could, so Jamie would never have to feel the same doubts Tony had as a kid. Ugh, daddy issues much? At least Howard had given him a pretty perfect recipe of what not to do.

It took three days to make the necessary upgrades and fabricate the Mark II of the arc reactor. Thankfully, Pepper was in the house so he could get it installed already. "JARVIS, connect to Pepper's tablet, please," he said, turning away from the project for a moment to tickle Jamie's delightfully chubby baby tummy and get a wide, gummy grin and babbled laughter in return.

"Ms. Potts is on the line, Sir," JARVIS said.

"Pepper," Tony said, making a face at Jamie, who squealed again and wiggled his arms and legs madly, setting the chair to bouncing, which only seemed to excite him more. "How big are your hands?"
"What?" Pepper returned, sounding completely confused, which, why? It was a perfectly logical question. Tony didn't even have that big hands, and he sure as hell wasn't going to be able to change the reactor. He had no idea how Yinsen had managed to install the magnet and everything in the first place.

"How big are your hands?" he asked again.

"I don't understand why--" And now she just sounded dubious. Oh, perhaps he should actually explain. Which, was probably easier if they weren't in different rooms.

"Get down here," he said, cutting her off. "I need you." He cut the call and pulled off his shirt, picking up the new reactor and putting it in his lap. Jamie, as always, started to reach for the light, babbling excitedly. He probably thought Tony was his own personal nightlight. Which, well, actually bothered Tony a lot less than it probably should. Tony plopped into a chair, flashing a grin at the baby, and turned his head to look at Pepper when she walked in. "Hey," he said. "Let's see them. Show me your hands." He held up his own hand, wiggled his fingers, which got another squeal out of Jamie. "Let's see them." She held her hands up for inspection. Yeah, that should about do it. "Oh, wow. They are small. Very petite indeed. I just need your help for a sec."

"Oh, my God," Pepper breathed, and something about the tone of her voice, the sympathy, made Tony ache. "Is that the thing that's keeping you alive?"

Tony turned the new reactor over in his hand. "It was. It's now an antique." He glanced up at Pepper for a moment before directing his eyes back to the new model. "This one will be keeping me alive for the foreseeable future. I'm swapping it out for an upgraded unit," he continued, looking back up at Pepper, "and I just ran into a little speed bump."

Pepper shook her head, eyebrows furrowing. "Speed bump. What do you-- What does that mean?"

"It's nothing," Tony said. "It's just a little snag." Carefully, he clicked the old reactor loose and pulled it free from the casing. "There's an exposed wire under this device. And it's contacting the socket wall and causing a little bit of a short. It's fine." Grimacing a little, he pulled the reactor wiring free and handed Pepper the old model. Off to the side, Jamie had grown tired of the show and was yawning as he looked up at his custom-made holographic mobile, tiny hands reaching tiredly for the shapes and colors.

"What do you want me to do?" Pepper stammered, pulling him back to the situation at hand, which, yeah, probably a good idea since the electromagnet would definitely need some new juice in the very near future, or he'd be forced to finally find out what it actually felt like when all the shrapnel in his chest began to move.

"Put that on the table over there," Tony said. "That is irrelevant."

Very gently, with far more care than Tony would've showed for an outdated model, Pepper placed the old reactor down on the worktop. "Oh, my God," she breathed, and Tony couldn't quite tell if she was awed or disgusted. He figured he'd go with awed.

"I want you to reach in," Tony continued, "and you're just gonna gently lift the wire out."

Pepper got ready, and Tony could practically see the way she was steeling herself, hand stretching out, little finger and thumb tucking in to make itself even smaller. She hesitated, looked up at him. "Is it safe?"

Tony really thought it would be, but it all kind of got out of control really quickly after that, and
Tony, well, Tony really missed the days when he didn't know what cardiac arrest felt like, but hey. The new reactor got installed, and he managed to traumatize at least one employee and then he was free to take Jamie upstairs, get him fed and put him into his awesome new crib. With a slight shrug, Tony plopped down on the bed and joined him in sleep.

***

Tony wasn't sure exactly when it was that he began to think about the armored suit again. Actually, no, that wasn't true. It was more accurate to say that he wasn't sure exactly when the nightmares began, but it was probably when he'd been back home for around three or four weeks. He was beginning to get used to Jamie, to having him around. Not used to in the way Howard had been used to Tony, where it meant he could completely ignore his existence whenever it suited him. Used to in the sense that he no longer needed to spend every spare moment smothering the poor kid, in that the nursery was done and Tony was starting to feel like every parenting book he read was a copy of one of the ones he'd read earlier. In that he'd found and improved every single age-appropriate toy and equipment and piece of furniture he could think of. In that he was starting to accept that sometimes the best thing he could do for Jamie was put him on a tiny-sized mattress on the floor (on his tummy, thank you parenting books) and let him reach for and interact with one of the holographic programs Tony had created for him.

The problem was that not being able to focus as much on his son left Tony's head free to head off in all kinds of different directions. During the days, that was easily enough handled by beginning to code and design the electronics line he believed would help tide the company over until everyone was done squabbling and they could move into clean energy. At night, his mind began to delve back into the cave in Afghanistan, waking up with a car battery hooked to his chest, having his face shoved into barrels of murky water, the overwhelming fear that the battery would get wet, electrocute him. Yinsen dying. He'd wake up, heart racing, bathed in cold sweat, trembling and racing on unsure legs to make sure Jamie was safe in his crib, that no one had grabbed him, had taken him away. Nothing felt safe.

"JARVIS, you up?" he asked one night, curled up on the stereotypical rocking chair he hadn't been able to resist making, Jamie safe against his chest.

"For you, Sir, always," JARVIS replied, and okay, that was a bit more sass than Tony remembered programming. Oh, well.

"Have we found out anything about Jamie's mother?" Tony got up, careful not to jostle Jamie too badly as he grabbed the (new and improved) portable cot and a blanket and tucked the baby in. Then he gripped the handles and brought it down to the workshop with him, put it in the corner and headed over to the computer, began to call up the basic code that he hadn't been able to help himself from doodling for the past few nights.

"No, Sir," JARVIS said. "There's no match between any national hospital records of any of your identified female lovers that fit the timeframe. None of their features match young Master James very well either. Grey eyes and a cleft chin aren't the most common features."

Tony groaned, because he did hate that loose end, utterly loathed it. He hated that there was no known person he could seek out, get to sign the parental rights over to him once and for all, hated the idea that someday some woman could just show up out of the blue and demand Jamie back. Still, he had to accept that there was nothing he could do about that, not at present. Had to accept that if that day ever did come, he had some of the best lawyers in the world in his corner. For right now, though, that was something he couldn't control. When it came to other threats, though, he could sure as fuck make them a lot safer than they were. After all, hadn't he already built the Mark I? Hadn't he,
if he was honest, already started advancing it? "I'd like to open a new file. Index as Mark II." He pulled open the basic Mark I design he'd been putting into the machine on other sleepless nights, used a pointer to drop it into the holo-projector.

"Shall I store this on the Stark Industries' central database?" JARVIS asked.

And yeah, no, Tony had a strangely bad gut feeling about that. At the moment, his board hated him more than ever, and he wasn't sure where everyone else stood either. He pushed himself out of the chair, watched as the design began to come to holographic life in front of him. "Actually, I don't know who to trust right now." He stuck the pointer in the pocket and rounded the projector. "'Til further notice, why don't we just keep everything on my private server?"

"Working on a secret project, are we, Sir?" JARVIS asked, and damn, there he went with the sass again. If this kept up, Tony was going to have to take a look at his code. Then again, he supposed sass he hadn't programmed kind of went with the whole 'learning intelligence' shtick, so maybe not. He pushed that thought aside, focused on the project in front of him, began to drag the substandard parts off and drop them into the virtual bin.

"I don't want this winding up in the wrong hands." Another piece of the design went as Tony took a closer look. He paused, cast a glance over his shoulder at where Jamie was sleeping peacefully. "Maybe in mine, it can actually do some good."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone for taking the time to subscribe, bookmark, leave kudos and especially for commenting. Always makes my day and lights a fire under my ass to keep on going.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Still borrowing quite a few lines and scenes from the movie, so the parts that you recognise do not in any way belong to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Well, then, please do enlighten me. How can you possibly call this a success? The boy has no trace of the serum in him. Fine heir to the legacy of Johan Schmidt he'll make."

"The girl, Herr Pierce. Or are you so close-minded you do not believe a woman could run our fine organization? Here I believed I were the relic."

A pause. Then, "And what would you have me do with the boy, Zola? Put him down?"

***

"How'd it go?" Tony asked, walking into the living room and taking in Obie at the piano and Pepper on the couch. He crossed the room and walked straight into the nursery, picking up Jamie and bringing him back out with him. This time, he noticed the pizza box. Winced. "It went that bad, huh?"

"Just because I brought pizza back from New York doesn't mean it went bad," Obie said, never ceasing his playing. Jamie blinked sleepily at the sound.

"Uh huh," Tony said, balancing Jamie on one arm so he could reach out and grab a pizza slice. "Sure doesn't." The smell hit him right in the face, made him acutely aware of just how hungry he was. "Oh, boy."

Obie finally stopped playing, getting up and walking over, casting a look down at Jamie. "So, the rumors spoke true for once," he said. "James Stark. The board will like that, at least. Been clamoring for an heir for the past decade." He sighed. "It would've gone better if you were there."

Tony made a sound that probably served as a decent substitute for 'no', finished chewing his pizza and tried not to be too, what, hurt? What was he now, a little girl? Still, it would've been nice if Obie had given Jamie more than a moment's attention. At least the proud father in him was rather insistent on that. "You told me to lay low. That's what I've been doing. I lay low and you take care of all..." He put his slice down for a moment, wiped his mouth.

"Hey, come on. In public. The press. This was a board of directors meeting," Obie said, walking the rest of the way to join them at the table, sitting down on the recliner.

Tony cocked an eyebrow, pretended to be surprised. They both knew he'd done his best to avoid those damn meetings since the first time he'd been required to attend one. "This was a board of directors meeting?"

Then there was some exchange about injunctions and stock that Tony basically went through on autopilot as he ate and watched Jamie yawn himself awake. It didn't matter. He was working to keep the company going. He'd have the first batch of electronics prototypes ready to send off to R&D.
within a couple of weeks, and he and Obie had the controlling interest of the company anyway. Whatever rights the board may or may not have had, they weren't as powerful as they thought they were, and Tony sure as hell wasn't going to let them have his son's inheritance. "I'm being responsible," he finally said, more than a little annoyed. "That's a new direction for me. For the company, I mean, me on the company's behalf, being responsible for the." He got to his feet, baby on one arm, pizza box on the other, began to make his way back towards the workshop.

"Oh, come on," Obie said, and the condescending tone Tony had once thought of as kind and fatherly suddenly just grated. "Tony. Tony."

"I'll be in the 'shop," Tony called. "Pepper, remember to give Obie the papers for the lawyers." Should've done that the moment he returned from Afghanistan. He'd just been so damned busy. Still, it was high time to get his will changed.

"Hey, hey, hey," Obie was calling, getting up to grab Tony's shoulder and turn him around, the grip just a bit too hard, and the way his grip on Jamie almost slipped just made Tony that much angrier. "Tony, listen. I'm trying to turn this thing around, but you gotta give me something. Something to pitch them." Then he was pointing at the reactor, and Tony felt distinctly uneasy in a way he very rarely ever had around Obie. "Let me have the engineers analyze that. You know, draw up some specs."

"No," Tony said. "No, absolutely not."

But Obie didn't even let him finish the first word uninterrupted, simply plowed on, "It'll give me a bone to throw the boys in New York."

Well, if Obie wasn't going to let him finish, Tony could return the favor, "This one stays with me. That's it, Obie. Forget it. Have Pepper send you the specs for our new baby line or something."

There was a glimmer of something on Obie's face, just for a second, there and gone before Tony could quite put his finger on it. Then he was grabbing the pizza box out of Tony's hand. "We really are making baby bottles? All right, well, this stays with me, then." He opened the box, seeming to relent. "Go on, here. You can have a piece." He'd put the smile back on his face, but it didn't look quite real. "Take two," he added, even though Tony obviously lacked the free hand to do so.

"Thank you," Tony said, walking straight for the stairs now without bothering to turn back around.

"You mind if I come down there and see what you're doing?" Obie called after him.

"JARVIS, send him the baby line specs," Tony said. "Goodnight, Obie."

***

"Hey! Ow. Ah ah ah ah ah ah," Tony got out, wincing, trying to direct the bots to do a slightly less painful job of getting him out of the armor.

"It's a tight fit, Sir," JARVIS said. "Sir, the more you struggle, the more this is going to hurt."

"Be gentle," Tony said, grimacing as Butterfingers tugged on one of the shin pieces, and shit, that really did hurt. "It's my first time. I designed this to come off, so... Ow, hey! I really should be able to..."

"Please try not to move, Sir," JARVIS said as You started in on yet another piece of the suit, and shit, Tony really was going to have to build some kind of device to help him get out of the armor more efficiently. And maybe do some redesigns so it would come off less painfully.
"What's going on here?" Pepper asked, and Tony forced himself not to startle at the sound of her voice. He sure as hell didn't want to make it worse than it already was. 

Slowly, he turned his head, took in Pepper and Jamie in her arms, giggling loudly and clapping his hands with very little coordination. For a moment, Tony struggled to find something to say, because fuck all, he was going to be in the doghouse now. A single glance at Pepper's face was more than enough to confirm that. "Let's face it," he said, and yeah, okay, that probably wasn't making things better. "This isn't the worst thing you've caught me doing."

Pepper's expression changed from disapproving to something a little bit closer to horrified, or frightened, perhaps. "Are. Are those bullet holes?" She gave Jamie a small bounce and he squealed in response. "Tony, you can't do stuff like that. You-- What's going to happen to James if you get hurt?"

Tony swallowed, and yeah, fuck, he hated the thought of that, hated the fact that he'd run the risk of getting himself killed, of making his son an orphan. "I'm trying to protect him," he said.

"Tony, that had nothing to do with protecting him," Pepper said, and her eyes were suspiciously wet now. "You were on the other side of the world. That was you, wasn't it? In Gulmira?"

"There's more than one way to protect someone," Tony said, and finally, fucking finally, the bots finished up and he could walk over and pick up Jamie, put him on his hip and marvel at how fucking big he was getting, how alive and incredible and beautiful. "There are weapons out there, shitloads of them, more than I ever could've guessed." And Jesus, he was thinking about Obie now. Obie was the last thing he needed on his mind. "They've all got our name on them, and every time some assholes like the Ten Rings use them, that's not just more blood on my hands, Pepper, that's another bucket load of people who learn to hate my name, to hate Jamie's name, and I don't want him to grow up with more of a target on his back than he was born with."

"You'd rather he grows up with strangers?" Pepper asked.

Tony sighed, bent to press a kiss to the top of Jamie's head. "That's not going to happen," he said, loading in enough conviction to effectively shut down the argument.

***

As Obie lowered him down onto the couch and Pepper's voice faded from his ear, Tony couldn't help but wonder how the hell everything had gone so damn wrong. "Breathe," Obie was saying, his voice a horrible parody of caring. "Easy, easy." He held up a device Tony recognized all too well. "You remember this one, right?" He wiggled the small, ill begotten weapon Tony had been mostly drunk when designing. "It's a shame the government didn't approve it. There's so many applications for causing short-term paralysis." He got up from behind Tony, which was a relief at least. The feeling of his breath on the back of his neck was beyond uncomfortable, and being defenseless was bad enough without being incapable of seeing your attacker. Cold shivers that had nothing to do with the paralysis ran down Tony's spine, and he couldn't help the fear that almost overcame him, that Obie would go right down the hallway and find Jamie asleep and... And do what? This was all so far out of the scope of normality, made no fucking sense. What was Obie doing? Where was the man who'd given Tony a smile and a pat on the head when even his own father couldn't be bothered to pay attention to him? What even was this?

Without warning, Obie gripped his jaw, hard enough he'd probably leave bruises, and turned Tony's head towards him. "Ah, Tony." He averted his gaze for a moment, but Tony, however much he wanted to, couldn't kid himself that it was out of guilt or sympathy or anything as positive as that. Had Obie hated him all along? Had Obie's role in his whole damn life been an act? Or had Tony
done something to push him in this direction? He couldn't even tell. A huge part of him didn't want to know. He wanted out of this situation so badly it hurt, wanted to go to the nursery, grab Jamie and hang on, keep him safe. He should invent something, some armored, weaponized pod that would assemble around Jamie in case of emergency or some shit, make sure that even if Tony got hurt, Jamie would still be all right. In front of him, Obie pulled out his earplugs.

"When I ordered the hit on you," he started, putting away the earplugs and leaning towards his bag, and Tony felt himself go cold all over at those words, felt something inside him crack, and fuck, he should've expected that by now, should've already known Obie was the enemy, had known, just hadn't realized it went this deep. Fuck, all those months in that cave, the shrapnel in his chest, the torturous days he'd spent half drowned and fighting off lung infections, even Yinsen. All of that was on Obie. "I worried that I was killing the golden goose." Obie pulled something out of the bag, some tool, probably modified, that Tony wasn't entirely familiar with. He did something to it that made it give out a noise that sent goosebumps into bloom all over Tony's skin. "But, you see," Obie continued, and suddenly Tony knew exactly what the device was for. He couldn't look down, couldn't see it, but he could feel the tickle as it cut through his shirt, the pull on his scars when it closed over the arc reactor. "It was just fate that you survived."

Tony felt himself jolt, despite the paralysis, when Obie pulled the reactor free of his chest. It was still connected, the electromagnet still running, but Tony knew it wouldn't stay that way, and fuck, he was not ready to die. "You had one last golden egg to give." The smile on Obie's face, Tony knew, would stay in his nightmares for weeks, if he survived that long.

"Do you really think that just because you have an idea, it belongs to you?" Obie asked, and if Tony had had his voice, he might've asked Obie who'd failed to teach him about intellectual property and copyrights, but then again, that might be a really shitty idea when the man was holding Tony's heart in his hands, and fuck, fuck, he'd felt better for the moment that joke had lasted. "Your father, he helped give us the atomic bomb. Now, what kind of world would it be today if he was as selfish as you?"

Obie pulled, and Tony could feel it through his own body when the electromagnet switched off, heard his own involuntary gasp, and fuck, how was he feeling it already? How was he supposed to last through fifteen minutes of paralysis if he could already feel something moving inside his chest, shredding his insides to bits? Obie took the reactor out of his device, made a show of turning it over in his hand, admiring it, as if it were just any other piece of machinery, as if it weren't the thing that was keeping Tony alive.

Who did shit like this? No one would just go up to someone, rip the pacemaker out of their chest and stare at it like it was art. Fuck, Tony had never felt so helpless in his life. Not in the cave, not when Yinsen died, not when his parents and Jarvis did, all those years ago, and Tony had realized he was damn near alone in the world.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Obie made a show of breathing, and fuck, how had Tony never seen him for the actor he was? "Tony, this is your Ninth Symphony," Obie continued, leaning over him, close enough that Tony could feel his breath on his face. Tony's stomach turned, and he wanted to get away so badly his skin crawled with it. "What a masterpiece." Obie sat down next to him, and Tony could feel his arm on the backrest behind him, hated it, fucking hated it, hated himself for all the times, as a child, when he'd let this bastard comfort him, when he'd let himself be tricked into thinking he had Obie in his corner. "Look at that," Obie added, holding the reactor up in front of Tony's eyes, and just seeing it there was making Tony feel nauseous, made the prickling, stabbing feeling of the shrapnel moving inexorably towards his heart that much stronger, that much more acute. "This is your legacy. A new generation of weapons with this at its heart. Weapons that will help steer the world back on course, put the balance of power in our hands. The right hands." And fuck, but that was scary. What kind of world would Jamie grow up in if Obie won, if Tony didn't survive this? "I wish you could see my prototype," Obie continues, putting the reactor away. "It's not
as... Well, not as conservative as yours." And there was the snap of the bag closing somewhere outside Tony's line of vision. It was frighteningly final.

"Too bad you had to involve Pepper in this. I would have preferred that she lived," Obie said as he got to his feet, bag in hand. He began to walk towards the door. "Don't worry about little James, though. I'm sure he'll have a memorable childhood in the foster system. Probably safer there than with you anyway. Oh, didn't I tell you? Those papers for legal? They were lost somewhere on the way to the offices. Maybe he'll come work for me one day. After all, your family's intelligence seems to run as deeply as your blind trust." He threw one last grin over his shoulder. Then he left, and all Tony could do was wait and hope for the paralysis to wear up before his time ran out.

"Keep the skies clear," he called behind him to Rhodey what felt like half an eternity later. "And keep Jamie safe." And he didn't want to go, was damn near certain he'd end up dead, that Ob-- that Stark wouldn't stop before Tony was wiped out and Jamie left orphaned and destitute, but that held true whether he went or not. So as much as he wanted to crawl into a corner and hide with Jamie clutched tight in his arms, he had no choice. This way, at least, they weren't sitting around waiting for what Stane might dole out on them.

Chapter End Notes

So many thanks to everyone who's left kudos, bookmarked and subscribed, and especially for the comments and speculations. Keeps the engine running.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Stuff taken from the film (again). This is probably the chapter that borrows the most and adds the least, aside from character motivation. Sorry about that. There'll be more originality later on, I hope.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"No need to take such drastic measures, Herr Pierce. He will make a fine heir for his father. And when the time comes, there is no such thing as an estranged sibling to bring a man to heel. The Starks will no longer be a thorn in our side, but another asset to be used and discarded."

Pierce cast a glance at the bloody hospital bed and the sweaty, trembling form only just beginning to stir back awake. "And, I suppose, if he turns out not to be useful, we can send his mother after him."

"With that word spat out, he stalked towards the door. "Send the boy to Stark. Wipe and freeze the Asset." He let the door slam shut behind him.

***

"Here's your alibi," Agent Coulson said, holding out a thin stack of cards, not only cutting Tony off, but forcing him to close the newspaper and actually pay attention to the way all his bruises and cuts stung with all the makeup Pepper was applying.

"Okay," Tony said, taking the cards and glancing at them, as best as he could over Pepper's ministrations.

"You were on your yacht," Coulson said, voice as calm and ineffable as ever.

"Yeah," Tony muttered, glancing over the lies printed on the stiff paper in his hands. Looked like it might work, like it might hold up. Something about it didn't sit right with him, though.

"We have port papers that put you in Avalon all night, and sworn statements from fifty of your guests," Coulson continued.

"See," Tony said. "I was thinking maybe we should say it was just Pepper and me alone on the island." He was kidding. Mostly. There had been these little moments, brief glimpses, where he'd thought, maybe. Like the dance at the firemen's gala, or whatever it had been. Pepper didn't so much as react when he looked up at her, probing, which, yeah. What he'd thought. Maybe there could've been something there, if not for the fact that he was pretty damn sure she cared more about his safety than whether he was a good man or not. If not for the fact that however much she loved Jamie, it was the way a doting aunt did, not the way a mother would. And fuck it, but Tony had to think about those things these days. Had to remember that he was part of a package deal. Pepper wasn't interested in being a parent, not in the foreseeable future, and Tony couldn't be with someone who wasn't already there. It was that simple, and it was surprisingly easy to put those budding emotions away in favor of being the father his son needed.

"That's what happened," Coulson said, more appropriately than he'd probably ever know.
"All right," Tony agreed, letting out a breath, felt himself let go of something else as well, something formless, insubstantial, something that could've been something, but didn't get the chance. Not deep enough yet to be mourned.

"Just read it," Coulson said. "Word for word."

Tony winced, tried not to pull his face away when Pepper started in on another bruise that needed to be covered up. He leafed through the cards again. "There's nothing about Stane here."

"That's being handled," Coulson said. "He's on vacation. Small aircraft have such poor safety records." And fuck, but that was actually kind of scary, the way his voice remained placid and his face stayed that calm, gentle mask while he talked about covering up someone's death. Tony fought to keep his breath from hitching at the thought. It was all still so fucking recent, so much fucking wreckage to sort through, and he didn't just mean the factory or Ob-- Stane's paper trails, but. No. Tony forced himself to stop thinking about that, thinking about all of it. He could deal with that shit later. Right now, he had a task he needed to take care of. "But what about the whole cover story that it's a bodyguard?" he asked. "He's my body-- I mean, is that... That's kind of flimsy, don't you think?" He kept looking at Coulson, willing him to say it was not, that it was airtight, that none of this would come back to haunt them. Tony had Jamie to think of, after all.

"This isn't my first rodeo, Mr Stark," said Coulson. "Just stick to the official statement, and soon, this will all be behind you." Something about the same ineffability that had seemed disquieting just moments ago was reassuring now. Tony couldn't help but wonder if there was some kind of spy class in how to pacify silly civilians. Wondered if he was an idiot for actually feeling reassured. It wasn't over, of course. Not yet. There were still weapons out there with his and Jamie's names on them, weapons that needed to be dealt with. But hopefully this was a step towards making sure this wouldn't be traced back to him, wouldn't make him more enemies that he couldn't afford with a six-month-old baby in his care. "You've got 90 seconds," Coulson said, mostly directing the words at Pepper.

Tony went through the cards again, only vaguely aware of Pepper thanking Coulson and something about the ridiculously named agency actually having an acronym a normal person might be able to remember. Which he then promptly forgot as well. Finally, Tony finished memorizing the cards and got to his feet only to realize Coulson was gone and Pepper had turned back to Tony, holding up his jacket. "You know," he said. "It's not so bad. Even I don't think I'm Iron Man." He stuck the cards between his teeth so Pepper could help him into his jacket.

"You're not Iron Man," she was saying, but Tony could hear the smile in her voice.

"I am," he said, affording himself a smile.

"You're not," she said.

"All right, suit yourself," Tony said, then let the playful mood drop. "If I were Iron Man, I'd have all sorts of baddies after me, and they'd make Stane look like a run-of-the-mill slightly disturbed petty villain, which, you know, if I were just me, would be fine. It would be good, even. I might have a girlfriend who'd know my secret identity, and she'd be worried sick about me, and it would be all kinds of romantic, but what I do have is a kid I can't endanger, and a responsibility to make sure his daddy comes home."

"You're right," Pepper said. "He's already a Stark. He doesn't need more danger than that." There was genuine concern in her voice at that. "I'm glad you're beginning to understand that, Tony."
Tony swallowed. "Do you think he'll be proud of me, one day?"

"I think you're his whole world," Pepper said. "Will that be all, Mr. Stark?"

Tony sucked in a deep breath. "That'll be all, Ms. Potts."

***

"...I'm just not the hero type. Clearly. With this laundry list of character defects, all the mistakes I've made, largely public." He was stumbling over his words, he knew, not at all the smooth talker he usually was in public, and his head was a mess. He glanced down at the cards, heard his own words echo in his mind.

One thing Howard had given him, growing up, aside from just enough good genetics to more or less make up for the faulty ones, was a name and an identity he could be proud of. Sure, he had been blind in a lot of ways, for a lot longer than he really knew how to defend, and the whole damn story might've been very different if he'd grown up in a world where the Internet existed. Still, the point remained: Tony had grown up with a place in the world he'd felt he'd understood, and a name he'd had pride in. The fact that even Howard had managed to supply that kind of meant it was the least thing, the most basic thing, Tony should be able to give to Jamie. And maybe if, like Howard, he had believed in his own press, in his own infallibility, he could've. Maybe if he didn't live in a society where nothing was private and all information existed everywhere for all eternity...

All the mistakes I've made, largely public...

How long until Jamie grew old enough to read, old enough to understand? Old enough to grow curious enough to type his own last name into the newest, the best search engine? And what would he find then? He'd find pictures of his father drunk, making an ass of himself, he'd find articles about the Stark weapons and the havoc they'd wreaked upon the world. He'd find tell-all stories from Tony's previous lovers and, God forbid, the sex tapes. He'd realize he had one parent and that that parent had spent most of his life being a complete and utter narcissistic asshole. He'd learn that Tony had turned Stark Industries around, sure, had stopped the weapons production, but wouldn't that seem like just too little too late, an inadequate band aid on a gaping wound, at this point? Tony had never given a whole lot of fucks about his own reputation, mainly because Howard had given too many, and in a lot of ways he still didn't, not for his own sake. For Jamie's, though, that was a different story.

Tony had a responsibility to keep Jamie safe. But there were a lot of ways to keep a person safe, weren't there? Safety didn't just mean the physical, and like Pepper had said, being a Stark already put him in danger. Tony had lost count of the number of times he'd been kidnapped as a child, and the thought of that happening to Jamie made something shrink small and frightened inside him. That was already a risk, though. If that was going to happen, it already would simply because of the size of Tony's wallet. Would he be in more danger or less if Tony's alter ego was known? Would the difference even be noticeable? Maybe there was even a chance that the armor would scare some opportunists away, and anyway, Tony already had the blueprints ready for the first prototype of the... Iron Cradle, he might as well call it. But what else did it mean to keep him safe? Wasn't part of that making sure that he had a parent he could look up to? Making sure his name stood for something good, making sure he could one day tell other kids his last name and have them be... impressed, or something, rather than appalled, have them talk about good things rather than the latest rumor or anti-war rally? Tony had had that, however false it might've been - Howard had kept his private life far more private over the years than Tony, after all. He wasn't sure he could handle the idea of not being able to give Jamie that. He wanted his son to be proud of him, and not just for his own sake, but for Jamie's, so Jamie would know who he was and where he belonged in the world, could hold his head
high and not have to cringe away and worry what everyone else thought.

"Stick to the cards, man," Rhodey was whispering, and Tony realized with a start that he was still at the press conference, that these thoughts had taken less than a handful of seconds.

Tony glanced down at the cards. "Yeah, okay. Yeah... The truth is..." It took looking at the lies on the card to realize he'd already made his decision, had already figured out the way he wanted this to go. He looked up from the cards, out at the reporters, out at the cameras. His whole life was going to change in a lot of ways. In most others, it wouldn't change at all. He would've still gone on doing this, announcement or no announcement, kept making the world safe from his own mistakes, kept trying to clean his name so his son could wear it without shame. The person whose life he was really trying to change was out back, with Happy, probably gurgling and laughing and trying to reach Tony through the TV screens. Well, then. "...I am Iron Man."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone for taking the time to bookmark, subscribe, leave kudos and especially reviews. Makes my day when I see a new one come in.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

We finished Iron Man! Yay! Now, upwards and onwards. I don't own the lines taken from Iron Man 2 either, just so we're clear.
Also, warnings for a brief scene containing voyeurism (professional on the side of the voyeurs, unknown and non-consensual by the people being watched.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Earlier:
"I can't believe they're making us watch this," one agent said. "If I wanted to watch Stark's pale ass, I'd go online."

"Yeah, ain't what I thought I signed up for either," the other one replied. "Someone has to make sure he don't go off books, though. Who knows what sex does to a guy after sixty years of abstinence?"

The first one snorted. "Turns him into a fucking whore's what it looks like." A glance at the video feed, an open grimace. "My girl doesn't put out like that. How much does a Stark sex tape go for these days?"

"Being shot in the head by one of the superiors, I imagine. Probably gonna go into some high-up pervert's spank bank. Don't got no clue how the hell else this qualifies as a mission." He glanced at the screen, returned his compatriot's grimace. "Guess he comes like a normal human being after all."

***

The first few times he felt it - the increased shortness of breath, the itching and aching around the arc reactor - Tony mostly ignored it. He was the first person in history to walk around with a fully functioning energy plant in his chest. There were bound to be some unforeseen side-effects, likely benign, that he was just going to have to deal with. By November, though, the skin around the reactor was inflamed and irritated, and the itch had turned into a near-constant burn that he couldn't seem to shake no matter how many lotions and salves he slathered on. "It's the palladium," he said to JARVIS. "Isn't it?"

***

With every day that passed, every element or combination of elements they excluded as viable substitutes, Tony felt a vice closing around him. On Christmas morning, as he helped Jamie tear the paper off the presents, it was all he could do to keep a smile on his face and not break the fuck down crying. His first Christmas with his son, and it might very well end up being the last. And then what the hell would happen?

He worked frantically. Every moment that wasn't taken up with searching for a cure or holding onto Jamie as if he could load a lifetime into a few months by will alone, he spent scouring the planet for his lost weapons, building prototypes for generators and electronics, enough to keep the company going for a few years, at least. And he set up the return of the Stark Expo, not as some huge ego trip, the way Pepper was accusing, but as a way to raise the company's profile, attract enough young
engineering talent to stuff the ranks full, give the company a future. He updated his will, made sure it was done properly this time. He knew Rhodey would come home to raise Jamie. He knew he could count on Pepper to run Stark Industries until Jamie was old enough to take over, if that turned out to be what he wanted. He knew that if he had to go, there weren't any better hands to leave this all in. If he had to go, all he could really do was make sure he left his son as bright a legacy as he knew how.

Not that he planned on going. So long as there was life, there was hope and all that, but as winter began to turn back into spring, the list of elements they had yet to test was growing depressingly short.

"Hey, kiddo," he said, swallowing down the sudden lump in his throat. Jamie was slowly coming awake in front of him, and Tony was still reeling from crossing yet another combination of elements off the list. The ones they were testing now were getting increasingly out there, unrealistic. He took a deep breath, did his best to pull himself together. Kids picked up their parents' emotions, according to the books. The last thing he wanted was to make Jamie as frightened or as fucking heartbroken as Tony was. And then those beautiful eyes were opening, and even as premature sorrow stabbed through Tony's chest, the smile somehow came easily to his face. "Sleep well?"

Jamie grinned wide, four tiny, pearly teeth peeking out. "Dada," he called, taking a moment to clap his hands before he gripped the side of his crib and pulled himself to his feet, chubby little fingers clasped around the handholds Tony had made sure to put into the design. "Dada," he repeated, and Tony reached in, lifted him up and reveled in the small arms wrapping around his neck, the tiny face pressing into the crook of his neck, the feeling of a warm body against his own. Drank it all in, and determinedly didn't think about the fact that chances were, he wasn't going to get to see this tiny boy grow up, wasn't going to see how smart and handsome he'd get, wouldn't be there for the first day of school, the graduations, anything. He wasn't going to be there, and he ached at the thought of another small Stark standing in a crowd of people, looking for one longed-for face and never finding it.

"Love you, kiddo," he muttered, and Jamie straightened up to flash him another grin, hands thumping the back of Tony's neck where he was trying to clap but couldn't quite reach. He smacked a big, sloppy kiss to Tony's cheek, and Tony wasn't entirely certain whether that was accidental or not, since Jamie toppled back against his chest in the same moment, but he'd take it. Take anything he could, and give back as much as he was able. If he lived long enough for Jamie to have any memory of him at all, he sure as fuck was going to make sure they were happy ones. "How about you and me go take a morning dip?" Tony asked, managing, somehow, to keep a smile on his face. One last normal morning before they shipped off to New York and the Stark Expo. It felt oddly like a countdown in the back of his head, the numbers invisible to the naked eye even as he felt them racing downwards.

Jamie replied with another "Dada," and another round of manic hand-clapping, and Tony laughed, almost despite himself, and kissed the top of the baby's head before wrestling him out of his pajamas and dirty diaper and into a pair of swim trunks. Jamie let out a high-pitched noise that sounded mostly like "Boo-boo."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Food first. Lazing in the pool after." He set about mashing up a banana, made himself a chlorophyll smoothie since he was in the kitchen anyway, and plopped Jamie into the high chair before seating himself next to him, bowl of banana goo and a tall glass of unappetizing smoothie - with a straw, to make it marginally more palatable - in front of them. He picked up the spoon, scooped up some goo and held it up in front of Jamie's mouth, waiting for him to open up and eat while sucking in a mouthful of his own meal. "Yeah, buddy, laugh it up. You're right; you did get the better end of the breakfast deal."
They finished up with a minimum amount of mess, and Tony pulled off his shirt and hoisted Jamie up on his hip, and carried him outside. Jamie caught sight of the pool and began squealing and wiggling so hard in his excitement that Tony damn near dropped him, and Tony couldn't help another laugh, grabbed this moment of happiness and held onto it, saved it up for all the ones he wouldn't get. "Easy, kid. You've already got the Stark genes. Don't need to get dropped on your head on top of that." He reached the pool, sat down on one of the deck chairs and got the belt and wings on the kid before jumping into the pool, Jamie squealing like a tiny maniac in his arms.

Tony did not like water, not one bit. He had, once upon a time. There was a reason he'd had a pool installed when he'd designed the house, after all, but Afghanistan had kind of taken the fun out of it. Until Jamie turned out to enjoy baths way more than any normal person, grew to love the pool more than banana, and somehow managed to put some of the joy back into it. It was all right, at least, so long as he kept Jamie in his sights and carefully didn't think beyond the moment he was in. Right now, he was in no mood to let the flashbacks get to him. He kept careful hold of Jamie's slippery flanks as the baby splashed and laughed, so happy Tony's chest hurt even worse than normal just from looking at him, and Tony couldn't help but tickle him, blow raspberries on his chubby little tummy, try to get as many laughs out of him as physically possible.

He wasn't sure how long they'd been in the pool when the tapping of Pepper's foot interrupted. Tony glanced up, almost guiltily, met her glance, but despite the sternness she was trying to exude, he could see a smile tugging on her lips. He grinned back. "Morning, Pepp."

"Pepepep!" Jamie squealed, waving tiny arms all over the place, accidentally splashing both himself and Tony. He laughed through his faceful of water, completely undeterred.

Seemingly despite herself, Pepper burst out laughing, and before Tony could quite catch up, she had one of the new Starkphones out and was snapping pictures all over the place. "Somewhere out there, someone is going to be willing to pay a fat wad of cash for these," she said, laughter still in her voice for a moment before she reeled herself back in. "And it's noon, really, not morning." She sighed. "I'm sorry, Tony. You need to go get dressed now if we want to be on time."

***

Blood toxicity: 24%

For a moment, as JARVIS read the numbers out loud to him, all Tony could do was stare at the drop of blood still sitting there on the tip of his thumb and try to hold himself together. Everything was falling apart. The palladium was spreading faster than he'd anticipated. The Stark Expo, while he was still proud of that idea, would take him away from Jamie way too much, and now the fucking asshats in the Senate wanted the suit, and Tony had to waste valuable time fighting them. Fuck that. He already knew, from long experience, that once he let go of a weapon, it was out of his hands, and he wouldn't be able to control the damage it would do. The suit was dangerous as hell, he could admit that since he was reasonably sure no politicians had a direct line into his mind. Aside from himself, there was probably only one person he'd entrust with it. Which begged the question of what was going to happen to Iron Man once Tony kicked the bucket. No, fuck no, he wasn't going to waste any more time on that shit, not right now. They'd already delayed him too damn much, kept him away from Jamie for a whole lot longer than he'd wanted, and he'd had to rely on Pepper's former roommate to babysit again, which he hated. Nice girl and all, but he didn't know her well enough to trust her, and-- He took a deep breath, forced himself to calm down, glanced over at the playpen in the corner where Jamie was busy sorting geometric shapes into their appropriate slots.

"It appears," JARVIS continued, "that the continued use of the Iron Man suit is accelerating your condition." Tony glanced at the scans, winced, began to pull up his shirt even before JARVIS could
tell him to, "Another core has been depleted." Grimacing, Tony clicked the reactor out of his chest, ejected the core and pulled the smoking wreck out.

"God, they're running out quick," he muttered, felt fear constrict around him for a moment, turn his skin cold, before he managed to suppress the feeling.

"I have run simulations of every known element," JARVIS said, and by the tone of his voice Tony could already tell that the results were the same as ever. Inevitability weighed him down. Really, he'd known for months now. The knowledge made him sick to the stomach every time he thought of it too hard. He forced himself not to look at Jamie again, didn't want the baby looking up and catching sight of the look he knew must be on his face. "And none can serve as a viable replacement for the palladium," JARVIS finally finished, spelling out Tony's death sentence. Tony swallowed down the whole thing, forced himself to focus on the motion of his own hands as he got out another core and clicked it into place. He lifted his shirt up again, re-installed the reactor. "You are running out of both time and options," JARVIS said, as if Tony wasn't already aware. Tony did glance over his shoulder now, to see Jamie looking at him with big eyes, toys abandoned, and Tony felt his throat click. How much of this shit could an eleven-month-old understand anyway? Maybe Tony should stop bringing him to the workshop when he knew the topic would end up being this. Just, he'd been kept away for a day and a half, and God only knew how much time he had left. He didn't want to give any of it up. "Unfortunately," JARVIS continued as Tony pushed his shirt back up, took in the slow spread of the black rash, too stunned to stop the AI's next words, "the thing that is keeping you alive is also killing you."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who took the time to read, bookmark, subscribe, leave kudos, and especially the ones who left reviews. I love reading your thoughts and speculation. Keep it coming ;)

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Earlier:
"I cannot believe the gall of those British bastards. If they'd managed to expose us before we're ready, we might as well have prepared to spend another sixty years starting over."

"HYDRA is fractured, Herr Pierce."

"HYDRA is stronger than it has ever been, Zola." He tossed a glare at the computer screen where the copy of Zola's processes resided. "In another ten years, at the most, we'll be able to put your algorithm into effect. Our time is nearly here."

***

57% blood toxicity

For long moments, Tony couldn't even seem to move, wasn't convinced his legs would carry him, couldn't let go of the counter in front of him or he'd fucking collapse. It was all happening way too fucking fast. After months of keeping the poisoning mostly under control, of trying and fighting and downing more chlorophyll than any human being should ever reasonably have to, the levels had more than doubled in less than two weeks, as if some kind of balance had been tipped and even his best efforts couldn't keep it down anymore.

He sucked in a sharp breath, did his best to ignore the constant burning in his chest, the way his head throbbed and his throat hurt and even his fucking teeth were starting to ache. He was running out of time, so much faster than he'd thought he would. Not for the first time, he regretted ever deciding to revive the Stark Expo, packing his whole schedule so damn tight when all he should be doing was spending every last precious second with Jamie. Instead he was in fucking Monaco for a fucking grand prix and Jamie was hanging out with a couple of bodyguards back in the hotel room. What the hell was he doing, throwing all this time away?

A furious, hopeless kind of restlessness gripped him, made his skin crawl and his pulse race and for a moment he wasn't sure whether he was about to burst out sobbing or screaming, or if he could somehow find a way to contain it all. His hands shook where he was clutching the counter. He needed to do something, needed to-- Fuck even knew what. He could go to the hotel room, grab Jamie and go home. Except he couldn't. He couldn't be with Jamie in this moment, no matter how badly he wanted to. He was too wound up. He'd frighten him, and that was the absolute last thing he wanted. Babies' memories were all wonky and strange, and Tony didn't want to risk creating a situation where Jamie's only memory of him was a frightened one. And fuck, he was just barely a year old. It would be a miracle if he remembered Tony at all. At least, hopefully, Tony had left enough of a positive data trail by now that the memories Jamie would undoubtedly make up for himself wouldn't be all bad. Tony glanced at the toxicity meter again, squeezed his eyes shut for a long moment. Perhaps he'd left enough for Jamie to be proud of him. He supposed one good thing was that a bead dad was less likely to be the utterly uncool nuisance to a future teenager than a living one.

He couldn't explain the strange recklessness that shot through him then, at the thought that all that really mattered at this point was what he left behind. Nothing else mattered, only what parts of himself he could leave for Jamie to find, and what he could make for himself in these last few days.
Weeks, if he was uncommonly lucky. And right now, suddenly, with all of this weighing on him, he needed to feel alive, needed to recharge so he could go back up to that hotel room and be the father Jamie deserved for a little while longer. Without bidding, his mind flashed to the race car that literally had his name all over it. He glanced up, met his own eyes in the mirror. "Got any other bad ideas?"

***

"Do you know which watch you'd like to wear tonight, Mr. Stark?" Rushman was asking, the sound of her stilettos surprisingly soft on the marble floor. Tony quickly pulled his shirt together to hide the rash, glanced out at the last bit of twilight still visible through the windows. His birthday, his last one. He'd be surprised if he survived for Jamie's, which they'd estimated to be five days from now.

Everything was falling apart spectacularly. He had Stern so far up his ass he could taste it, and apparently Howard had left behind a blood feud he hadn't seen fit to inform Tony of. Tony had tried to tell Pepper what was going on, but he couldn't get the words past his lips, as if the action of saying things out loud to another human being would make him drop dead then and there. He'd wanted so badly to just take Jamie and go to one of his villas in Europe, hide away from everything and let the rest of the world deal with its own shit, just be happy for a moment, give Jamie a last few weeks of having family. He hadn't. However much he might sometimes hate it, he did have responsibilities to more than just his son, most of them of his own making. He needed to at least attempt to get his affairs in order, though it was looking less and less likely that he'd manage it. Fuck all, he hadn't even managed to tell Rhodey, and Rhodey was the one who'd be left holding his friend's orphaned baby.

Tony took a breath, forced himself back under control. He adjusted his shirt, buttoned it up, began to make himself somewhat presentable. "I'll give them a look," he said.

Rushman put down the box and, judging by the sound of it, set about finishing the martini Tony had started in a fit of melancholy a few minutes earlier.

"We should cancel the party, huh?" Tony said, turning towards her.

"Probably," she said, the glass cradled delicately in her hands.

"Yeah," Tony said, walking towards her. "'Cause it's. Um."

"Ill-timed," she supplied.

"Right, sends the wrong message," Tony said, taking the glass out of her hands.

"Inappropriate," she said.

Tony took a sip, let the liquor roll around in his mouth. He didn't have much of a taste for it anymore, hadn't really indulged since Afghanistan, since Jamie, but something about the finality of all this... Fuck, he didn't even know, didn't feel like he had his head on straight anymore, which, according to JARVIS, was just another fucking symptom.

"Is that dirty enough for you?" Rushman asked, looking up at him with big eyes and pretty features, and a year ago Tony would've been all over that, but fuck, he was barely feeling the faintest stirrings of attraction right now. He'd go celibate for the rest of his damn life if it could buy him another couple of months with Jamie. Another couple of weeks.

"Gold face. Brown band," Tony said, deliberately turning towards the watchcase. "The Jaeger. I'll give that a look. Bring them over here." He placed the glass down on the coffee table, lowered
himself into the recliner as Rushman brought over the watches. "I'll take that," he said. "Why don't you, er."

She sat down on the armrest, slowly flicked her hair out of her face, and Tony wasn't sure what to make of the signals she was giving off. Might've found something funny in it, once upon a time, or something actually seductive, but he hadn't been amused in a while, and he didn't have the free bandwidth to give a fuck about sex. Thankfully, all she did next was lean in and start to dab makeup on the bruises still left over from Monaco, and Tony let out a breath of relief, felt himself relax the tiniest bit.

"I gotta say," he concluded, too damn tired to go beating about the bush and keep having to guess at what was going on behind her impassive face. "It's hard to get a read on you. Where are you from?"

"Legal," she said, which should've probably been kind of annoying. Tony generally didn't appreciate it when people played dumb, but right now he was in the odd kind of mood that made it easier to tolerate other people being deadpan and closed off. God knew he had plenty of secrets of his own.

Maybe that, the fact that something that would've normally annoyed him somehow made him feel a brief moment of connectedness, was what made him keep talking when he could just as well have kept quiet and let her shut down the conversation, the way she'd clearly tried to. "Can I ask you a question, hypothetically?"

She leaned back, snapped the makeup box shut.

"Bit odd," he said. He reached up, rubbed at his eyes with a grimace. Somehow, despite still speaking, he couldn't stand the thought of what would happen if she got a good read of his face. "If this was your last birthday party you were ever going to have, how would you celebrate it?" Words out, he felt back on slightly safer ground, dropped his hand and peered up at her.

Her gaze flickered for a moment before her face settled into a soft smile that actually looked pretty genuine. "I'd do whatever I wanted to do." Her gaze flickered down again for a moment before catching his once more. "With whoever I wanted to do it with."

Tony watched as she got up, walked towards the door. Then he sighed. "Call off the party, please. Not. Not Pepper and Rhodey. And tell Happy to come on up. Cancel the caterers. Order us some pizza. Please?"

Something flickered over her face when she looked back over her shoulder at him, there and gone too fast for Tony to get a good read. "Of course, Mr. Stark."

***

"That was the strangest birthday party you've ever thrown, man," Rhodey said when Tony walked back out into the living room after tucking Jamie into bed in the nursery. Pepper and Happy were nowhere to be found, and Rhodey had already finished clearing up, so Tony grabbed a beer from the fridge and plopped into the couch with a muted groan.

"What's so wrong about watching a good movie with a few friends and eating enough pizza to get a grease hangover?" Tony asked, screwing the lid off the beer and taking a long swallow.

Rhodey shrugged, dropping down next to him. "Nothing," he said. "Aside from maybe the grease hangover. Just not how you usually roll."

Tony returned the shrug. "Wouldn't have been appropriate with everything that's going on right now," he said.
Rhodey cocked an eyebrow. "Once upon a time, that would've just made you that much more eager to make a scene."

"Once upon a time, I didn't have a kid in the house," Tony said.

The smile Rhodey flashed him was damn near gentle. Then he ruined it by leaning in, gripping Tony by the scruff of the neck and ruffing up his hair hard enough that he was probably making static electricity. For a moment Tony was fourteen again and deliriously happy at having finally made a friend his dad hadn't had to pay, at the thought that a cool dude five years his senior actually wanted to hang out with him. The remnants of that boy was what made him go with Rhodey's tug and lean his head on his friend's shoulder. "I'm so fucking proud of you, Tones," Rhodey said, voice soft. "I'm not sure you even realize how far you've come. So damn proud."

Tony had to swallow hard around the lump in his throat to keep the sudden tears at bay. "I need you to do two things for me," he said.

Rhodey's arm wrapped around Tony's shoulders, gave him a squeeze. "Anything."

Tony snorted. "You might want to hear me out first," he said. "These aren't little things."

"When are they ever, with you?" Rhodey asked.

Tony let out a breath, pulled it carefully back in. He honestly wasn't sure whether it was the reactor or the palladium or pure fucking emotion that made his chest hurt right in that moment. Probably all of the above. "I need you to take care of Stern and the military for me," he said. "I'm giving you a suit. You, personally. Not them. You're the only one who pilots it. I know you trust them, but let that shit get mass produced, and then the whole world will have the suits, and that's not a world I want Jamie to grow up in. So. But I trust you. And you can use it for what you want to. Run missions for them. Take out the rest of the Ten Rings. Rid the world of Stark weapons, that would be an absolute dream. Just. Point is. They don't trust me, but they trust you. I trust you. And I want you to have it."

Rhodey didn't say a word for so long that Tony began to get worried. What if this was the whole conflict of loyalties thing playing up again, like back at the hearing? What if Rhodey insisted that he'd have to hand it over, that-- "Of course," Rhodey said finally, cutting off Tony's train of thought and settling his worries all in one go. He pulled back a little, just enough to look Tony in the eye without getting too close. "Just. Are you sure? All that 'I am Iron Man' stuff and everything, and--"

"Well, you can use another name if you want," Tony said. "Or you can use Iron Man. Your choice, really."

Rhodey's brow furrowed. "Tony, what the hell is going on right now?"

Tony shook his head. "Give me a moment," he said. "One more thing. One more thing, Rhodey?"

Rhodey nodded, but the concern didn't leave his gaze.

"Take care of Jamie?" Tony asked. His voice cracked in the middle and he had to stop for a moment to get it back under control. "Really take care of him. Don't. Don't give him up to some family who just wants to use him. Just. I mean, I know you'll probably need a nanny or something, busy man and all that, and I know you'll vet them. Pepper will help you. But, just. Be there for him. Don't let him feel alone, don't."

He had to stop again, reach up and run a hand over his eyes because he was fucking crying now, and he hated that shit, but he couldn't seem to get it under control, as if all these months of build-up were crashing down on him all at once. "I felt so alone, all the time, until I met you. Don't let him feel like that. And tell him the good stories, will you? None of the bad ones, not
until he's big enough. Give him that. Please?"

Rhodey frowned. "Tony, you know I love that kid like a nephew. Of course I'm going to be there for
him, but. You're starting to sound like. Like you won't? Tony?"

Tony ran a hand over his face again, could barely find enough air to form the next words. "I'm going
to die," he finally said. "Soon. Real soon. So just--"

Rhodey's eyes widened with horror, and somewhere by the door something dropped to the floor.
Tony looked up, shocked breathless and saw Pepper standing there, hand over her mouth, eyes
round. Her keys were on the floor and, Tony realized, her bag was sitting on the far end of the
couch, clearly forgotten earlier in the night. He was rooted to the spot, could only stare as the blood
drained from her face, as she turned around and rushed out of the house. By the time he had gathered
himself enough to get to his feet and run after her, she was long gone.

Rhodey grabbed him by the shoulders and steered him back to the couch. "I promise, Tony," he said,
voice surprisingly steady, picking the conversation up where they'd left it off. "I'll take care of him.
But now I want you to tell me what the hell is going on."

It was surprisingly easy to get the words out, and it was easier to breathe than it had been in days.
He'd give Pepper time to cool down, talk to her in the morning. Most important thing was that Jamie
had a good future ahead of him, whatever happened.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for the kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions, and especially for the
reviews. I turn into a giddy little kid every time a new one shows up.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

A longer than normal one this time, to make up for the fact that I'll probably have to post a bit less frequently in order to avoid having to take a break later on. I signed up for the WinterIron Holiday Exchange, so that will be taking up a chunk of my writing time for the next few weeks. Hopefully that'll pay off for all of us in the end. So, in the meantime, please enjoy yourselves with this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"And how long will we stand? After the death of Johann Schmidt, we scattered. We have become a thing of fractions, all heads and no body. Once in power, how long before our self-fashioned warlords turn on each other? HYDRA needs a leader."

"HYDRA has leaders."

"One leader."

***

"Pepper," Tony told the screen. "Pepper, I'm sorry. I tried to tell you. I just--"

"You tried to tell me? You tried to-- Well, Tony, you failed." Pepper's eyes were red-rimmed, her voice pitched higher than normal, and something inside Tony twisted painfully just from looking at her. "You're dying? How can you--"

Tony sucked in a deep breath. "Pepper, I'm sorry. I just." He swallowed. "I was scared, all right? I was scared it would be like this. That you--"

"That I'd be upset?" she asked. "That I would flaunt my, my upsetness in your face? Well, I'm sorry, Tony, but that's what usually happens when you find out your friend is dying. That's--"

JARVIS chose that moment to interrupt, "Sir, it appears someone has intruuuuuuuee--" JARVIS's voice cut off with a worrying drop in tone followed by an electronic whine. The call to Pepper cut off at the same moment.

Tony felt the rush of adrenalin immediately, the icy fear that weaved through him as he let the picture book drop and positioned himself so he was between Jamie and the door. He looked around for a weapon, swallowing around the frantic need to keep his son safe. There, on the counter. The knife block. He just had to figure out how to get there without leaving Jamie exposed and then-- "Fuck you, Fury," he spat. "Stop dismantling my AI."

"You kiss your son with that mouth?" Fury asked, stepping the rest of the way into the room. Jamie wriggled and squealed behind Tony. Little idiot already had a concerning love for pirates. Tony wished he had time to wean him of that.

Tony groaned, still more than a little annoyed, and very disconcerted about the ease with which S.H.I.E.L.D. could apparently take out JARVIS. He'd have to upgrade the code so that... Except, yeah, no. No time. "I told you. I don't wanna join your super-secret boyband. I've got other
priorities." Jamie crawled over his thigh, reaching for the fallen picture book they'd been busy with before the Pepperuption, and Tony had to scramble to scoop him up before he dropped off the couch and hurt himself.


Jamie had given up on the picture book now, and was making grabby hands for Fury, which, yeah, just wrong. Tony didn't know whose genes it was that were showing right now, but it sure as fuck wasn't his. The wiggling was getting out of control, though, so Tony carefully set him down on the floor, kept half an eye on him as he returned his attention to Fury. "It's. It's." He paused, quirked a grin. He felt completely wrong-footed, and that was not something he ever wanted to be around a guy like Fury. His mind went into deflect mode on autopilot, proving it was still functioning despite the pounding headache he seemed to have full stop these days. "I'm sorry. I don't wanna get off on the wrong foot. Do I look at the patch or the eye?"

Fury just kept looking at him with that small, unaffected I've-got-a-secret-you're-not-in-on smile, which did absolutely nothing to make Tony feel at ease. He should be able to feel at ease in his own fucking house, damn it. And Jamie, the little traitor, had gotten to his feet and was toddling unsteadily towards Fury, still making tiny grabby hands.

"Honestly, I've got a bit of a migraine going," Tony said, and this time the deflection wasn't automatic. It was fully intentional. He had a couple of days left to live at the very best, and he did not want to spend them watching Fury's stupid pirate patch and listening to his stupid cryptic words. He wanted him out so he could get back to reading Jamie his story. "So I'm not sure if you're real or if you're..." He shrugged.

Fury took a step closer and scooped Jamie up off the floor, making sure to hold him where he couldn't reach the patch, and Tony felt his teeth grind. It wasn't that he thought Fury would hurt the kid or anything like that. It was just. Whole situation. Uneasy. Yeah, about covered it. "I am very real," Fury said, actually patting Jamie's messy, dark hair with his free hand. "I'm the realest person you're ever gonna meet."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Just my luck."

Fury took a step closer and scooped Jamie up off the floor, making sure to hold him where he couldn't reach the patch, and Tony felt his teeth grind. It wasn't that he thought Fury would hurt the kid or anything like that. It was just. Whole situation. Uneasy. Yeah, about covered it. "I am very real," Fury said, actually patting Jamie's messy, dark hair with his free hand. "I'm the realest person you're ever gonna meet."

"That's not looking so good."

"I've been worse," Tony lied, reaching out and grabbing his mug of lukewarm coffee, drinking down the last dregs if only to expel Fury from his personal bubble. He heard footsteps, then, looked over at the deck door, only to find-- "What the hell, Rushman? Is that a S.H.I.E.L.D. uniform? Huh?" He took a couple of moments to blink, make sure he'd seen right, but yeah, that was definitely Rushman, definitely armed, definitely S.H.I.E.L.D. "You're fired."

"That's not up to you," she said, and what the ever-loving fuck was this even? How was this his life? What the fuck was S.H.I.E.L.D. doing spying on him? Last he checked, they were all playing for the same team. Friendly teams, at least. Mostly. Tony didn't really like pirates, especially ones who took down his software and stole his baby.

"Tony," Fury said, wrapping his free arm around Rushman and giving her a squeeze and fuck, yeah, okay, Tony was definitely hallucinating, because Fury was being affectionate with Tony's son and his (former) personal assistant right in front of him, and that was just not a thing that could possibly
be real in any universe. "I want you to meet Agent Romanoff."

Tony reached up, massaged the bridge of his nose. What even was his life? "Hi," he said, because what the fuck else was a guy supposed to do when the world was suddenly one big, fat joke?

"I'm a S.H.I.E.L.D. shadow," Rushmanoff explained. "Once we knew you were ill, I was tasked to you by Director Fury." Which. How the fuck did they know he was sick? Fucking bastards.

Tony wanted to grit his teeth, kick them all out and go back to just reading with Jamie, but he didn't see that happening anytime soon, which meant smile and take it and hope that meant it would be over sooner. So that's what he did, plastered his best bored smile on his face and kept his voice pleasant. "I suggest you explain yourself."

"You've been very busy," Fury said, letting Rushmanoff go and shifting Jamie so he was once again farther away from the eyepatch. "Made your loyal PA your CEO, churned out two years' worth of inventions in less than six months, let your friend fly your suit to the nearest Air Force base. Now, if I didn't know better--"

"You don't know better," Tony cut in. "Good reason for all that. Military's off my back now, right?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Fury said. "The military's off your back? You're Iron Man, and you just let them have it? What happened to indentured servitude and prostitution? I thought you had a spine, man." He glanced to his side at Rushmanoff, who was smiling faintly, and that faint smile was faintly Fury-like and utterly infuriating.

"According to Mr. Stark of a few days ago," she said. "Stern can kiss his ass. Or was it kick?"

Tony let out a breath, desperately wanted to snatch the still giggling Jamie out of Fury's arms. Maybe then he'd feel a bit less cornered, a bit less ganged up on, and fuck, couldn't they just leave him the hell alone? "What do you want from me?" he asked, suddenly unutterably exhausted.

"What do we want from you?" Fury parroted. "Nuh-uh. What do you want from me?" He was gesticulating wildly now, looking like he might actually be upset. Jamie giggled for a moment like it was all a great game, then settled down, suddenly quiet, a strangely thoughtful look on his chubby little face, as if he was finally catching up on the tense atmosphere in the room. Then he turned his head and bit his few tiny teeth down on Fury's earlobe. Fury pulled him off before he could do any damage, put him firmly back on the floor. Tony picked him back up, feeling a lot prouder than he probably should as he pulled him to his chest. "You," Fury said, voice rising further, as if he was actually something like angry. A tiny bead of blood bloomed on his earlobe. "Have become a problem. A problem that I have to deal with." Rushmanoff had slipped off to somewhere, and Tony suddenly had a bad feeling about all this. Not just the annoyed, unsettled feeling from before, but an actual bad one, like he might be in real danger with these people. He pulled Jamie closer and the toddler snuggled tight against him, small hands fisting around handfuls of the fabric of Tony's shirt. "Contrary to your belief," Fury continued, "you are not the center of my universe.

"Yeah, I get it," Tony muttered, the placating words coming automatically, the way they always did when he was caught aback by that cold swoop and clench in the pit of his stomach that still never failed to make him think of Howard.

Fury barreled on as if he hadn't even heard. "I've got bigger problems than you in the South-West region to deal with." He snapped his fingers. "Hit him."

And suddenly there was a sharp pressure against the side of his neck, the feeling of something cold sliding in, something sliding cold and sluggish through his veins. Tony flinched automatically and
Jamie began to cry. "God, what are you, going to steal my kidney and sell it?" Tony heard himself ask. His heart was pounding, his whole body cold and tight with fear, and Jamie's cries were echoing in his ears, and he just. What the fuck were they doing here? What was going on? What did they want with him? "Could you please not do anything awful for five seconds?" Tony asked, somehow getting his voice under some semblance of control so it wasn't shaking, the words not stuttered. Never show fear. He managed to get one trembling hang to stroke up and down Jamie's small back, pressed a kiss to the top of his head. He didn't feel like he was dying anymore than he already had been, so there was that. "What did you just do to me?" he asked, blinking. He was feeling better, he realized, in an odd, detached way. Despite the panic clawing at him and his heart still pumping madly, the headache was dimming along with the pain in his gums and throat and, well, everywhere.

"What did we just do for you?" Fury corrected, voice far softer now. Something almost gentle had settled over his face. "That's lithium dioxide. It's gonna take the edge off. I'm trying to get you back to work."

"Right," Tony said, too shocked, suddenly, in the wake of the fear, to feel much of anything. In his arms, Jamie was calming down too, eyes strangely distant as he stuck his thumb in his mouth for a moment before pulling it back out with a start. That... Something was off with that, but Tony couldn't worry about it right now, couldn't even process his own relief and unwilling gratitude. "Give me a couple boxes and I'll be right as rain."

"It's not a cure," Rushmanoff said. "It just abates the symptoms."

"It don't look like it's gonna be an easy fix," Fury agreed.

Tony could barely even feel the disappointment, knew it would be crushing him later. Mostly, it was just resignation. "Trust me, I know. I'm good at this stuff." He took a breath. "I've been looking for a suitable replacement for palladium. I have tried every combination, every permutation, of every known element." He felt heavy now, tired again despite the boost the neck-stabbing had given him, the resignation like a fucking blanket that still mostly just left him wondering what the fuck they wanted from him.

"I'm here to tell you," Fury said, "that you haven't tried them all."

***

"I'm so sorry, Pepper. I'll tell you later," Tony said as he directed a couple of the security guards to get the model down and into his car, Jamie a comforting weight against his chest. "Really, I will. But I gotta go take care of the dying thing first."

He was still reeling, from all of it, from the new side of Howard that had been revealed, the strange words and cryptic messages in that old video, from being put on house arrest and the fact that Coulson had actually spoken baby to Jamie. On top of that was the manic need to work, to keep going, that always came with being on the verge of solving a problem. And there was hope in there too, that he might actually make it to the other side. Too much of everything to feel much of anything right now, except urgency.

***

_Palladium concentration: 10%

"And dropping, Sir," JARVIS added.

The taste of coconut still flooded Tony's mouth, and Tony had a feeling he'd always associate that
taste with relief, sheer and powerful and incredible, with being alive. He didn't know if he'd ever figure out how this new element had not only been able to stand in for - and do better than - the palladium, but also somehow flush it out of his system. Right now, it didn't matter. He rushed upstairs, and pulled Jamie tight against him, his whole body feeling weak even as he knew he was stronger than he'd been in months. He barely kept himself from sobbing with the relief, wasn't sure it had all even properly sunk in yet.

Jamie patted his cheek clumsily. "Dada," he said.

Tony felt himself grin. His eyes stung. His mouth tasted like coconut. "Yeah, I know, baby boy. Love you too. We've still got a nice, long road ahead of us."

***

"You put HammerTech on my suit?" Tony asked.

"Hey, I kept them off your back, didn't I?"

***

"I'm keeping this, by the way," Rhodey said when they stood on the rooftop, disaster narrowly avoided.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Sure you are," he said. "In which case you can give Pepper a lift back to the hotel. I'm going to go spend some time with my favorite guy."

"You're a big, disgusting sap!" Rhodey called after him, but there was real fondness in his voice, so Tony let it slide.

"Whatever you say, Sour Puss!"

***

"I don't think I want you looking at that," Fury said, sliding the folder away from Tony. "I'm not sure it pertains to you anymore."

Tony frowned because, yeah, no, he hadn't particularly wanted to be part of the super-secret boyband. He had a kid to take care of, after all, and a company to... invent stuff for, and, well. Point was, he didn't have time. Didn't mean he had to like that he was apparently not part of it any longer and that it wasn't because of his own choice.

"Now this, on the other hand," Fury continued, "is Agent Romanoff's assessment of you." He handed a different folder over. "Read it."

"Personality overview," Tony read out loud. "Mr. Stark displays compulsive behavior." Tony looked away from the papers, met Fury's eye. "In my own defense, that was last week."

"Prone to self-destructive tendencies," Tony read. He rolled his eyes. "I was dying. I mean, please, and. Aren't we all?" He looked back down at the file. "Textbook paranoia. Does not trust anyone he doesn't have a long, involved history with, authority figures in particular. Headstrong." He glanced up. "Agreed. Unsuitable for teamwork, and can be considered compromised through the fact that if he believes a mission even slightly at odds with his son's welfare or safety, he will abandon it
immediately." Tony frowned. "You know that's a good thing, right? That's called being a good, loving father." He sighed. "Ah, here it is. Recruitment assessment for Avenger Initiative: Iron Man yes." He looked up, began to put the folder away, more than a bit annoyed that he'd had swimming pool time interrupted for this. "I gotta think about it," he said, somehow keeping from rolling his eyes. He still wasn't joining up. Wasn't a joiner, especially of something that would give him less time with Jamie.

"Read on," Fury said. His expression hadn't changed one bit.

Tony opened the file back up, flicked through to the page he'd been reading from before. "Tony Stark not..." He blinked. "Not recommended? That doesn't make any sense. How can you approve me but not approve me? I got a new ticker. I, I'm trying to do right by Jamie, I'm in a, a stable-ish family situation..." And what the fuck even was this? What was he arguing for? What was it about rejection that always made him want to be a joiner anyway, do anything for that tiny slice of approval from old men he didn't actually give two fucks about?

"Which leads us to believe that at this juncture we'd only like to use you as a consultant," Fury said, getting up and sitting on the table instead, meeting Tony's gaze from above and somehow not looming over him. For a moment, he kind of reminded Tony of Obie. Not Stane, but the Obie he'd thought he knew in his childhood, the proud (and sometimes disappointed) father figure he trusted to be in his corner. It was beyond disconcerting.

Tony kept looking at him for a moment before shifting his gaze straight ahead, swallowing down something bitter. Then he gave a mental shake of the head. Fuck this. Fuck the bastard for making him want something he had no business wanting in the first place, something he'd already decided he didn't want. He got to his feet so he no longer had to look up, stretched out his hand for Fury to shake. "You can't afford me," he said. Then he turned around to leave the workshop and went to pick Jamie, still just in his swim trunks, out of the playpen in the corner. Something didn't sit right, though. Something, probably that part of him he hated so much, the part that was still a small boy desperate for approval, or maybe the part of him that wanted to piss all over people who inconvenienced him, made him turn back around. "Then again, I will waive my customary retainer in exchange for... a small favor."

***

*Blood toxicity: 0%*

"See," Tony said, pointing at the numbers while Pepper looked over his shoulder. "See, I'm not dying. Would've been better if you hadn't found out in the first place."

The look Pepper shot him was both endlessly relieved, endlessly fond and endlessly infuriated. "I still wish you'd told me sooner," she said. She took a deep breath, kissed his cheek. "You owe me," she said. "Big time. And if you ever pull something like this again, I swear to God..."

Tony managed a smile despite the squeeze in his chest. "You're one of my best friends too. You know that, right?"

She gripped his hand, squeezed it. "I know."

Tony fell asleep in the rocking chair in the nursery that night, couldn't bring himself to leave. Couldn't bring himself to stop looking at Jamie, stop tasting the relief that he'd get to be here, get to see his son grow up, get to teach him to ride a bike, to swim, to read and do math and programming and whatever they wanted. His cheeks were wet, but he couldn't be bothered to dry them. They'd just get wet again. But he was allowed. He was alive, was going to be alive tomorrow and the next
day and the next year, was going to get the chance to raise his son, to be there for him, to work his ass off to be the father Jamie deserved. All the time in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who bookmarked, subscribed, left kudos and especially for all those lovely comments. Really made my day. So happy so many of you agreed that the right stuff had been changed.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Just a quick little comment here to begin with: I have a degree in early/special education and some experience working in the field. I am well aware of the fact that Jamie's language as well as his logic/reasoning and math skills are extremely advanced for his age. Nothing he exhibits should be taken as a benchmark for most other children. Jamie is a Stark. Did anyone ever think he wasn't going to be a tiny genius?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"And who would you nominate? Strucker? Whitehall? One of the Red HYDRA butchers?"

"Of course not, Herr Pierce. Even those among us who believe most deeply in Johann Schmidt's teachings do not embody them. Besides, giving the leader of any one faction more power will only deepen the divides in our ranks."

"You want the perfect human being you believed the Skull to be. Created from science, not bred. We don't have the means to create a superior race, Zola, not unless you fish the formula out from those rusted drives of yours."

***

"I cannot believe you," Rhodey said as Tony hoisted a sleepy Jamie up higher on his hip and gave the electronic lock his thumb print and retina scan. "Honestly, first serious time I get off in forever, and you drag me off to Spain."

"Doesn't sound so bad to me," Tony said, walking inside and fishing his phone out of his pocket, set it to upload JARVIS onto the house servers. With fewer cameras and less bandwidth, it wouldn't be as effective as in some of his more well-used properties, but still. "I mean, did you just listen to yourself? That literally sounds like I did an awesome thing for you and you're just being a bitch about it."

"Tony, it isn't even one of the good parts of Spain," Rhodey said. "There are no beaches in Madrid. Now, if it had been Barcelona or Málaga..."

"There are no engineering conferences in Barcelona and Málaga," Tony said, putting his phone on the table so it could finish uploading and stepping to the side so Happy and the housekeeper could start hauling the luggage inside. "And don't pretend you're not excited about the conference," he added. "You can pretend all day long, but we both know you're a card-carrying nerd. I was in MIT with you."

Jamie interrupted before they could keep the argument going, pointing up at a picture on the wall, other thumb going momentarily to his mouth before he dropped it. "Who dat?" he asked.

Tony followed his gaze, grinned. "That's daddy," he said. "A long, long time ago. And Grandma Maria. Daddy's mom. She owned this house, kiddo. We'd go here on vacation sometimes."

Jamie blinked at the picture, eyes going distant for a moment, the way they were doing with
increasing frequency these days. Tony bit down a stab of worry. "Pwetty," Jamie finally decided, fully present again.

Tony nodded, ruffling up the toddler's flyaway hair. "Very," he agreed before putting the sixteen-month-old down on the floor so he could explore. "And hey," he told Rhodey. "If you don't want to go to the conference and listen to my awesome lecture, you can just stay here and have a three-way battle with Happy and my aunt for babysitting privileges."

***

"Tony, we can't release a new tablet model yet," Pepper said with a sigh. "The current model is still top of the line, and we've got too many already fabricated to release a new one, never mind that we can't afford to saturate the market." She paused a moment. "In six months, this will be a huge deal. Right now, it's just not necessary."

Tony groaned, ran a hand through his hair. "What do you want me to do?" he asked. "You keep telling me we can't use arc reactor technology. I keep telling you it's safe, and--"

"Tony, we cannot afford the scandal if the wrong person gets their hands on it and manages to weaponize it." She slid into the chair across from him in the workshop, turning off her tablet and putting it away. "If you really want to keep going down the green energy route, you need to think about other ways of doing it. I know you could design a windmill better than anything that's currently on the market, if you set your mind to it."

"I could," Tony said, glancing off to the side where Jamie was sitting in his playpen, practicing his words with the help of JARVIS and a set of holographic images. "But why would I do that when they'll be antiques the moment arc reactor technology hits the market? Pepper, it's going to happen sooner or later. The question is whether we do it, whether we get the patents and make the money, or if we let someone else beat us to the punch." He took a breath. "Listen, I've done everything here. I've laid out plans for the installation that makes sure none of our technicians would even know more than a fraction of what they're working with. I've designed an AI-controlled security system and a very sensitive self-destruct function. No one will get their hands on it if it melts before they even touch it. I'm not an idiot. I've actually thought this through."

Pepper opened her mouth. Snapped it shut. Looked at him for a long moment. Then she gave another sigh. "You're determined about this, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"You're going to have to come up with the actual PR to sell this," she told him. "And Tony, please go over those plans sent up from R&D. Some of the poor engineers down there are sweating bullets thinking you're going to hate their ideas."

Tony gave another nod. "Is that all?"

Pepper cracked a grin. "That's all," she said, getting up and making for the door. "And I think your son is talking to the wall."

Tony frowned and pulled himself out of the chair, walked across the floor to crouch down by the playpen. Jamie didn't seem to even notice his approach, eyes distant as he babbled away in full-on baby mode, despite the fact that Tony knew for a fact that he spoke extremely well for twenty months old. "Hey, Buddy," he said, keeping his voice soft.

Jamie blinked for a moment before turning wide, grey eyes on Tony. "M'wia wants a JAVVIS," he
Tony blinked. "Who's Maria?" he asked then.

Jamie beamed up at him, and Tony couldn't keep himself from reaching down and scooping up the toddler. "M'wia's my fwiend," Jamie said. Then he flashed a grin. "Kiss?" he asked.

Tony let out a laugh and leaned in to blow a raspberry against his son's cheek, ruffling his hair.

"One more," Jamie said. "M'wia wants one too."

Tony blinked, but let the oddity of that pass. Lots of kids had imaginary friends. He smacked him another kiss and then busied himself tickling the kid until he was squealing with laughter.

***

Tony looked up in the middle of scrawling an idea on a napkin while explaining what he was doing to a very attentive toddler and slightly less attentive best friend when someone slid into their booth, the newest StarkTab model and a stylus making an immediate appearance from her bag. Tony frowned, folded that napkin and stuffed it in his pocket. "What's up, Brown?" he asked, already feeling pretty damn exhausted even as he plastered on his good old Stark smile.

Jamie looked up at the newcomer curiously, abandoning his crayons to look at her with wide eyes. "Hi," he greeted.

Rhodey looked on with narrowed eyes.

"Hello, Tony," Everhart returned before flashing a smile at Jamie. "And you must be James." Her attention returned to Tony. "He's a cutie."

"I know," Tony replied, already uneasy. "Last I checked, you didn't do celebrity gossip."

"You checked?" she asked with a cocked eyebrow. "I actually wanted to ask for a comment about the recent rumors that Islamic State in Iraq are using decommissioned Stark weapons against the coalition forces," she said. "Though I won't deny it's a pleasure to meet your son. You've proven uncharacteristically adept at keeping him out of the spotlight."

"Listen," Tony said. "Once upon a time, I made weapons. I made a hell of a lot of weapons, more than I realized, and a man I trusted sold them under the table and did not keep a lot of records. Finding and destroying them takes time because, sadly, half the time I don't know where they are until some of them are used."

"And yet you boasted about privatizing world peace while a civil war was raging in Iraq," Everhart said. "Sounds a bit like you're trying to have your cake and eat it too."

Tony did not grit his teeth, did not insult her, did not do any of the dozen things he wanted to right then. He stubbornly kept the smile on his face. "I was in Basra last week," he said. "Took out the cache there. Did you really come here to discuss old news?"

"No," she said. "I came here to--"

"Shit, Everhart," Rhodey interrupted. "We're trying to have an ice cream here. Tony's out with his son and his friend, who hasn't gotten to spend time with him in months because he's also dealing with Iraq. The fact that you slept with him once doesn't give you the right to wreck that."
Everhart's cheeks flushed, and she opened her mouth to say something else, but Happy was finally there, firmly escorting her away.

"Fuck, Tony," Rhodey said. "Please tell me that's not the last person you've slept with."

Tony's grimace and non-answer was probably answer enough to that.

***

"So," Tony said, putting the storybook away and turning Jamie in his arms until they were facing each other. "Snack time." With one arm firmly around his son's back so he wouldn't drop him, he leaned forward and snatched the bowl off the table. "How many jellybeans are in the bowl?"

Jamie frowned in concentration, eyes narrowing at the contents of the bowl. He pointed one grubby little finger at them one by one. "One," he said. "Two. Free. Free jellybeans."

Tony nodded, stroking a flyaway curl out of the boy's face. "Three jellybeans," he agreed. "And if I say you can have five jellybeans with your snack, how many do I need to go fetch?"

Jamie's face scrunched up as he slowly began to count on his fingers. "Two," he said then. "No, free. No, Mawia, dat's wong. It's two." He looked up at Tony with a triumphant look on his face, all big eyes and chubby cheeks and even as concern kept chipping away at something inside Tony, right now all he could focus on was how much he loved seeing his son smile. "Two, Daddy," he said.

"That's right," Tony agreed, shifting the two-year-old around until he could get to his feet, Jamie on his hip with his arms wrapped around his neck, and make his way towards the kitchen. "Good job, buddy. And tell Maria that was very close. Well done of her too."

"I don't hafta tell her," Jamie said. "She can hear you."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "Does Maria want a snack too?"

Jamie shook his head, giggling. "Dat's silly," he said. "Mawia isn't here."

Tony frowned because, yeah, that didn't really fit at all with any of the psychology articles he'd read on the imaginary friends phenomenon, unless it was a sign that Jamie was finally beginning to separate reality and fantasy. "Where is she, then?"

Jamie released one of his hands from where it had been gripping Tony's shirt and pointed at his head. "In here," he said. He blinked. "And. She don't know where."

"But she can hear us?" Tony asked.

Jamie nodded.

"And she can talk to you?" Tony pressed.

Jamie nodded again, and Tony made a mental note to talk to someone who knew psychology. He wasn't going to make Jamie talk to a shrink, not on his life. Tony'd had enough of that in his own childhood, wasn't about to subject his son to the same. But asking for some advice, coupled with some airtight nondisclosure agreements, that might not be a bad plan.

Tony was putting a sandwich together when the door opened and Pepper walked in, heels clapping against the floor. Jamie nearly fell off the counter in his excitement, and Tony quickly helped him down so he could race over and greet her. "Auntie Pepper! Auntie Pepper!" he was calling,
wrapping himself around her legs until she gave in, stuck her phone in her purse and picked him up. "Daddy says I can have jellybeans with my snack."

Pepper gave him one of the soft smiles that seemed mostly reserved for Jamie these days. "Did he now? Lucky you," she said before putting him back down, turning her attention to Tony. "You said you had a PR plan," she said.

Tony grinned, finished up the sandwich, cut it in quarters and put it on a plate before bending down and putting it on the child-sized table at the end of the kitchen island. Jamie raced over immediately, sat down and dug in. "We need to show the world what kind of energy an arc reactor can provide," Tony told Pepper, smoothing Jamie's hair out of his face in passing as he went around him, picking up a StarkTab from the counter and calling up the plans before handing it over to Pepper. "We could use some new office space. Boardroom. The facilities we have for R&D right now are outdated, and the more different types of technology we expand into, the more space we're going to need. I figure we should just do the whole thing in one stroke."

Pepper stared down at the plans for long moments before looking back at him, eyes wide. "You want to build a skyscraper."

Tony grimaced. "Yeah, no." He frowned. "Well, I want a skyscraper, but I'd prefer to leave the actual building to someone else. I can design a building if I want to." He gestured around him, trying to indicate the whole of the house they stood in. "But it's damn boring. Nearly as boring as netting investors."

Pepper sighed. "You want me to build you a skyscraper."

Tony shrugged. "Or, you know, find the people who can do it?"

Pepper stared at him for long moments. Glanced down at the tentative plans on the StarkTab screen. Slowly, a smile began to tug on her lips. "This could actually work," she said slowly, and he could hear the mounting excitement in her voice, however professional she was trying to sound. "This could really work, Tony."


"Moving back to New York?" she asked.

Tony felt a strange swoop of excitement. "Maybe I'm homesick," he said. "Maybe I don't want my kid to be a California boy. You know, it would be nice if he didn't end up associating Christmas with high sun and surfing and shit. And maybe it would be good for him, get to hang out with other kids with geeks for parents."

Her smile softened to something gentle, and for a moment Tony was reminded of just what he'd almost felt for her, once. "You know, I heard the Met Life building is struggling. Might be able to get it for a decent price."

Tony grinned. "Well, then. Chopchop. I've missed New York summers. Would like to be there by next year."

Pepper rolled her eyes. "Not a tall order at all, huh?" But they both know she worked damn fast when she wanted to.
As always, thanks so much to everyone who has taken the time to bookmark, subscribe or leave kudos and especially comments. It means more than you know.

On another note, IM3 is proving to be a little bitch to incorporate into this universe. Any ideas/thoughts/observations/etc., or even just a note on what was your absolutely favourite thing about or scene from the movie could be extremely helpful, so please weigh in with that. Keep in mind that Tony and Pepper aren't and won't be involved, and that in this storyline, Pepper is not 'the one thing I can't live without'. Thank you.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the wait. On the upside, I think I'm finally beginning to figure out how I'm going to handle IM3 in this story. On the less bright side, I'm going to stick with weekly updates for the time being. I'm busy writing my story for the WinterIron Holiday Exchange, and the plan is to focus on that until I'm done. At this point, I'm about halfway there. But hey, that means I'm basically posting a novel-length project over the span of five days just in time for Christmas vacation :D

It should be added that while I do have some training in psychology, I'm by no means a psychologist and while the statements in this chapter are well researched, I shouldn't be seen as an expert.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The formula is lost, as I have told you repeatedly. I lack the knowledge of the basic elements. I remember very well how I improved it, but the rest of the secret, the traitor Erskine took to his grave."

"Well, that's it then, isn't it, Zola? The formula is lost. We don't have the means to create a superhuman race. We'll just have to keep going with what we do have. Not that I believe what we've got is too shabby."

"That does not mean the serum no longer exists. We don't have the means to create a superior race, no. We have the means to breed someone who can."

***

"You're just in time to help with the clean-up," Tony said, retracting the faceplate and turning around to face Rushmanoff with a grin. "Thanks for that. You know how much I hate cleaning up after myself."

"You know I don't work for you anymore, right?" Rushmanoff asked, one perfectly plucked eyebrow cocked before she turned her head to sweep in the utter destruction that had once been a weapons cache full of black market Stark arms. "I really don't appreciate having to go to Iraq, even in November."

Tony shrugged. "I've got air-condition," he said. "Listen, what do I even call you anymore? I'd make something up, but I'm pretty sure you'd kill me for it."

She flashed him a smile that made her look, for a moment, so much like Natalie Rushman it was difficult to believe a year and a half had passed. "Natasha," she said simply. "If it helps, it is the same name. Just different languages."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I do know basic Russian, you know. More than whoever anglicized it in the first place." He paused a moment, taking in the sight of black-clad agents sweeping through the former battleground. He was getting way too used to this shit if S.H.I.E.L.D. wasn't even disconcerting to him anymore. "Can I ask you something?"
"Sure," she said, shifting so she was leaning back against the jet she'd arrived in with the rest of the busy little ants. And wow, okay, that was very low cut for a combat uniform. Tony supposed it was a good sign that he apparently had a libido again, although the idea of actually making a move on someone whose handle was Black Widow just seemed like it would be the epitome of stupid.

"You're all big on psychology and shit, aren't you?" Tony asked. "I mean, you wrote my assessment and everything, and thanks for that, by the way." He rolled his eyes. "Figure you owe me one."

"I figure it's debatable who owes who," Natasha countered. "But sure, psychology. What's your question?"

Tony grimaced. "Are imaginary friends normal?"

"James?" she asked. At Tony's nod, she continued, "At that age, perfectly normal, although it might be a sign that he could use the company of other kids rather than just being around adults all the time." She paused a moment, eyes narrowing, assessing him. Then, "What's unusual is that he showed the tendencies as early as when I was working for you, before he was a year old. The parts of the brain necessary for abstract thought, which are the ones that make imaginary friends possible, aren't usually developed until eighteen months."

A stab of worry went through Tony's gut. "So. He's an early bloomer. Or something's off?"

She shrugged. "Too early to say. I wouldn't worry, though, not at that age." She straightened up, adjusted her utility belt. Tony caught a glint of metal at her wrist. "We should get to work," she said. "Some of the stuff down there would take them hours to clean. In the suit, you can do it in a minute."

Tony let out a groan, deliberately theatrical so his relief wouldn't come through too strongly. "If we have to."

***

"Sir," JARVIS said, turning down the music and interrupting Tony's stream of thought as he checked over the hardware for some of the new equipment the medical branch of R&D had been developing. He hummed in reply, barely looking up from the 3D rendering. "I'm sorry for the interruption, but young Master James seems to be experiencing significant amounts of distress. Perhaps it would be best if..." Whatever else he had to say, Tony didn't hear it, simply dropped what he'd been working on and raced out of the workshop and up the stairs towards Jamie's room.

Tony pushed the door open to find the lights already on. Thank God for JARVIS. Jamie was curled up in the farthest corner of his new big boy bed, blankets bunched up around him, tears streaming down his cheeks while he stared off into nothing with big eyes. Tony rushed over, sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled the shaking toddler into his arms, carefully maneuvering them both around until they were up against the headboard. "Hey, Baby Boy, it's all right," he said, keeping his voice soft as he pressed the words into the crown of Jamie's curly head. "I'm here. Daddy's here. You're okay."

Jamie jerked momentarily, then turned into Tony's embrace, pressing closer, face digging into Tony's shoulder, tiny fingers clenching around small handfuls of Tony's shirt. Tony stroked carefully up and down his narrow, warm back, kissed the top of his head, held him close. "Daddy," Jamie said, voice shaking. He was gasping softly, burrowing closer, and Tony felt his chest clench at the sight of him like this, the sound of his scared voice.

"Yeah, Sweetheart," Tony said, heard the rasp of his own voice, and God, no one ever told you this before you became a parent, did they? How much it fucking hurt sometimes. "What's wrong? Can
you tell me? Did you have a nightmare?"

Jamie shook his head against Tony's chest. "No," he said. "Not me. Maria had a nightmare. She's real scared, Daddy."

Tony shook off the habitual sense of unease. "Did she?" he asked. "That's no good. Did she tell you what it's about?"

Jamie shook his head again. "Won't tell me," he said. "She's real scared. She wishes she could really feel you hugging her."

Tony swallowed, uncertain, but right now was not the time to rock the boat, not nearly. "I wish I could hug her too," he agreed.

"She wishes you were her daddy too, Daddy," Jamie said, pulling back just enough to look up at Tony with wide, grey eyes and a wobbling bottom lip.

Tony felt that clench again, and what could it hurt? Maria wasn't real. "Well, then," he said, keeping his voice gentle. "Tell her I'll be her daddy if she really wants me to."

Jamie's smile was blinding. "I love you, Daddy," he said. "Maria too."

Tony leaned in, pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Right back at you, Baby Boy," he said. Forcing a smile, he amended, "and Baby Girl."

"Stay?" Jamie asked, maneuvering around until he was mostly lying back down, head pressed against Tony's hip.

Tony brushed the hair out of his face with careful fingers. "Of course," he said. "I'll stay until you're asleep."

***

"You," Dr. Sanchez said, looking Tony up and down as he stepped into her office and plopped himself down into a too-small chair. "Are quite a bit older than my usual patients."

Tony flashed her a grin. "Physically," he said.

She ignored the quip and sat down herself, on a brightly colored beanbag chair. Tony had to admit he might've liked his own childhood shrink a bit better if his office had been this interesting. "I'll admit, when my secretary told me you'd booked a time, I expected it to be for your son, Mr. Stark."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "He's a toddler. Really think I've managed to fuck him up bad enough for him to need a shrink already?"

She shrugged. "From what I hear, his mother isn't in his life. Losing a parent, even one you don't know, can create trauma even at a very early age." She flashed him a smile. "I don't normally work with adults, you realize."

"Yeah, no," Tony said, and it felt strangely like defeat. "I'm not here about me. I just wanted to ask some questions. Far as I could gather, you're one of the best, and you signed the NDA, so..." He paused, looked down at his hands for a moment, looked across the bright carpet to the toy box on the other side of the room, the plushies stacked on a shelf against the wall. "What can you tell me about imaginary friends?"
Dr. Sanchez raised an eyebrow. "So it is about your son," she said. "Whatever it is you're concerned about, I'm sure I'd be a much better help if you'd actually brought him with you."

Tony shrugged, but didn't give any explanation. Last thing he needed was her analyzing him. "Imaginary friends," he prompted.

She cocked her head to the side. "How old is James?" she asked. "Around three?"

"You've done your homework," Tony said, stuffed his hands in his pockets to keep from fidgeting. "Two years and eight months."

She gave a slow, thoughtful nod. "I'm sure you've done yours as well," she said. "You must know it's not uncommon at that age. So what is it that made you concerned enough to come here?"

Tony swallowed, got up from the chair, suddenly too agitated to stay seated. "How do you tell the difference between an imaginary friend and something else? I mean, you said it yourself. His mom just dumped him on the doorstep. That might've done something." He paused, had to take a moment to wet his lips, calm down. "How do I know it's not actually something like DID?"

For a moment, he thought he might've actually stunned her silent. Then she nodded, seeming to take his words and charge on with them. "Does he ever display major personality shifts?" she asked.

Tony shook his head. "No. He's just Jamie. I just..."

"That, and the fact that he's aware of... What does he call his friend?"

"Maria," Tony said.

"The fact that his personality doesn't shift and that he's aware of Maria's existence makes me think it's very unlikely to be DID or anything similar," she said. "Mr. Stark, what happened to make you so concerned?"

Tony shrugged, moved across the floor to pick up the teddy-shaped paperweight on her desk, weighing it in his hands for a moment before putting it back down. "He says she has nightmares that she doesn't want to tell him about," he said. "He insists she isn't actually physically present, but inside his head. He... A lot of it just doesn't sound like anything I read about in the books."

She gave him a small smile. "Being a parent tends to feel that way," she said. Then, "I know imaginary friends were once seen as a negative thing, Mr. Stark, but we've come a long way since then. Did you know several studies show that children with imaginary friends tend to have a more developed vocabulary, a wider imagination and creativity, and show more empathy than other children their age? Which is the cause and which is the effect is something we don't know yet, but the fact that he's capable of expressing as much to you verbally as he is already proves he's got unusual linguistic skills for his age. How is his logical reasoning?"

"Exceptional," Tony said. "And I'm being as objective as I possibly can in saying that. He does simple additions and subtractions. Last week he asked how seven O'clock could be both breakfast time and bedtime."

Dr. Sanchez's smile, this time, was indulgent. "He sounds like a very special little boy," she said. "It sounds like he probably knows, on some level, that Maria doesn't exist, but is using logical reasoning to explain to himself why you can't see and hear her despite the fact that his imagination makes him believe she's real. As for the nightmares..." She frowned a moment. "May I ask you a personal question?" she asked.
Tony let out a breath, made himself nod. In for a penny, in for a pound and all that. "Sure."

"Do you suffer from nightmares?" she asked. "It would only be natural, with your history."

Tony sighed. "Yeah, yeah I do."

"Does James?"

Tony shook his head. "Not that I know of."

"So he would know nightmares exist, and might feel bad about the fact that you have them," Dr. Sanchez said. "Which he's probably aware of, however well you think you hide them. But he won't have much of a concept about what a nightmare actually is, except that it's bad. Having Maria experience nightmares might just be his way of processing and of empathizing with something he doesn't understand."

"So you don't think there's anything to worry about?" Tony asked, breath held instinctively, somehow vaguely aware of the fact that a weight he'd barely been consciously aware of anymore might be on the verge of being lifted.

"I would be able to give a more certain answer if you'd actually let me see him," Dr. Sanchez said. "But from what you've said, it sounds like he's an exceptional boy, probably genius level, with more empathy than he knows what to do with, likely to grow up to be a kind, successful, well-adjusted adult. Let him have Maria. It isn't hurting anyone."

The breath whooshed out of Tony, and suddenly he wanted to laugh, lighter than he'd been in months. "So I might as well just get used to her?" he asked.

Dr. Sanchez flashed him a smile. "Might as well just get used to her," she agreed.

Chapter End Notes

DID: Dissociative Identity Disorder, more commonly known as split personality or multiple personality disorder.

Thanks so much to everyone who took the time to bookmark, subscribe, leave kudos and especially comments. Thanks for all your thoughts on IM3. Definitely helped me narrow in my focus a bit. Once again, I love speculation, questions, thoughts, concrit, anything you want to share. And, once again, sorry about the wait and the fact that the next one will be about as long. Thanks for sticking with me.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Borrowing quite a few lines from the films again, *Avengers* this time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"You forget. The serum does still exist. We've got what remains of it locked in a bank vault beneath Washington DC. We don't have the means to create a superior race, no. We have the means to breed someone who can."

A snort. "And you forget, Zola, that your generation left the Asset to the tender mercies of Red HYDRA for decades. You know as well as I do that he graduated from the Red Room in the conventional manner. Sterile as a mule."

***

"Daddy, I love it!" Jamie raced into the room and spun around in a circle, arms out as he took in everything from the wallpaper to the furniture and books, mock arc reactor nightlight and toys. "It's awesome!" 'Awesome' was his new favorite word, and so it was kind of losing its meaning, but Tony took it in the spirit it was given and held his arms out when Jamie made to race back to him. Tony swept him up and ruffled his hair, giving him a quick tickle that left them both laughing and breathless.

"Glad you like it," Tony said, hoisting Jamie up higher on his hip. Soon enough, too soon, he'd be too big for that, and Tony could already feel his gut clenching at the idea of that. He carried the boy back into the hallway, cast a glance back into living room, taking in the whole space, the mix of post-modern interior design and child-friendly items that was utterly perfect for their miniature family. He needed to remember to tell Pepper to give the interior decorators a bonus. "There's something else I want you to see," he added, pulling open the door next to Jamie's, the one with the big purple 'M' on it to match the blue 'J' on Jamie's. Tony pushed open the door and JARVIS helpfully turned on the lights to reveal what was hopefully the perfect little girl's room. Tony wouldn't know. He didn't know any little girls. But please, fuck, let Jamie like it.

Jamie looked around with a soft little gasp before turning to Tony with wide eyes. "For Maria?" he asked. At Tony's nod, he surged forward, wrapping his arms tight around Tony's neck. "Thank you thank you thank you." He was silent for a moment, still wrapped around Tony like a small, stubborn octopus. "Maria says thank you too. She thinks it's real pretty. She wants to be here so bad."

Tony smiled, kissed the top of Jamie's head. "I'm glad she likes it," he said. "You want to go play, or do you want to see the 'shop?"

"'Shop," Jamie replied, without missing a beat. "When's Auntie Pepper coming over?"

"Ms. Potts should be arriving in approximately twenty minutes, Master James," JARVIS replied.

Jamie turned to Tony with a big grin. "Is JARVIS going to live here too?" he asked.

Tony nodded. "JARVIS is going to live here too," he agreed. "Let's go see the 'shop."

"'
Disconnecting the Tower from the grid and knowing that somewhere above, it would soon light back up like a beacon was one of the best feelings in the world. Amazing enough to make it almost easy to disregard the way the water was pressing against the suit from all sides, the way flashbacks threatened on every stray corner of his mind. He finished up the job, then shot toward the surface, as excited, he imagined, as Jamie had been on Christmas morning. He shot past a ship and out of the harbor, straight towards Stark Tower. "You're good on this end," he said. "The rest is up to you."

"You disconnected the transition lines?" Pepper asked, voice coming clear through the internal speakers of the suit. "Are we off the grid?" Her anxious face flashed to life on a corner of the HUD, Jamie's pressed next to it from where he was clearly delighting in being carried.

"Stark Tower is about to become a beacon of self-sustaining clean energy," Tony said, watching as JARVIS brought up the schematics and overview.

"Wow, so meaning the arc reactor takes over and it actually works," Pepper said, which. Well, he'd kind of thought she'd have more trust in the whole project by now. Oh, well, he could allow her this last little bit of skepticism. It would make her reaction when it did work all that sweeter.

"I assume," Tony said. "Light her up." And then he was watching, feeling excitement whoop through him, as the Tower, straight ahead, lit back up, from bottom to top, and fuck, that was gorgeous.

"How does it look?" Pepper asked, her hushed voice completely at odds with Jamie's squeal and clapping hands when the lights turned back on around him.

"Like Christmas," Tony said, not really able to find better words for it with the excitement still rushing through him and the memory of Jamie on Christmas morning still so clear in his mind. "But with more... me."

Pepper was saying something or other about awareness and PR and zoning and going to Washington, but Tony couldn't really be bothered to listen, too busy taking in the sight ahead of him. This was the culmination of what he'd been working on since Afghanistan. This was the incarnation of what he wanted the company to become, what he wanted to hand over to Jamie one day. This was the Tower he'd imagined, giddy as a child, for the past year. Fuck. They'd really done it, hadn't they?

"Pepper, you're killing me here," Tony cut in when the droning finally got to be too much. "Enjoy the moment, remember?"

"Enjoy the moment," Jamie parroted, wagging a grubby little finger in Pepper's face.

"Well, get back here and we will," she said. "The ice cream cake is melting, and this one had tried to get at it four times already."

Jamie looked shamefaced.

"Hey, kiddo," Tony said. "Save some for your old man, will you?" He touched down, heard the whirr of the disassembly rings coming to life around him as he walked towards the penthouse entrance.


***
By the time the message to go to Stuttgart pinged in, Tony had been reading for so long his eyes hurt. Eh, he’d learned something new. Or something he’d known and then forgotten at some point or other. Oh, well, who even cared? He knew it now. And that was without getting into the whole thing where S.H.I.E.L.D. had apparently hijacked a Stark-funded Arctic operation and found Captain fucking America, and better not get into that whole can of Howard right now.

He got in the suit, loaded in the coordinates. "You think I can catch some shuteye while we get there, JAY?" he asked.

"I don't see why not, Sir," JARVIS replied. "Going into battle on no sleep hardly seems optimal."

Tony snorted. "Can you give me an update on Jamie first?"

"Master James is currently exploring the Smithsonian Apollo exhibit with Mr. Hogan, Sir," JARVIS replied. "Would you like me to bring up some visuals?" The hijacked surveillance videos were flashing across the HUD before Tony had even answered, and Tony allowed JARVIS to take the wheel, letting himself drift off to the sight his son's obvious excitement.

***

"These were in Phil Coulson's jacket," Fury said. "Guess he never did get you to sign them." And then he threw the trading cards on the table, smearing the fresh blood across the glass surface. Tony had to look away because, fuck, whatever his relationship with Coulson had been, however strained it had felt half the time, he was a good man, a kind man, who'd done his honest best to help Tony out of some pretty shitty situations. Hell, just two days ago, if it was even that long, Coulson had given Jamie a hug and let him blather on about his new room before driving both Jamie and Pepper to the airport. Just hours ago, Tony had tried to convince him to arrange a romantic getaway with his cellist girlfriend, and what the fuck even was life when men like that just. Just stopped. Died, because of some freak alien megalomaniac?

It all seemed stupidly petty, all of a sudden, the conflicts, the rows, the way they'd all been getting on each other's nerves, the whole-- Fuck, it just. He squeezed his eyes shut, rubbed a hand over his face. They were supposed to be better than this. Tony had chosen to be better than this, and it was not Rogers's fault that Howard had brought Tony up, deliberately or not, to have a complex. And okay, he could've been less of an asshole about it, but really, that wasn't Tony's problem. He was used to dealing with assholes, disliking them but finding a way to work with them anyway. He should've been able to do this, but everything had just felt so fucking tense, so tightly strung, and now a good man was dead because they were all idiots.

"We're dead in the air up here," Fury continued, and Tony blinked his eyes back open to take in the sight of Captain America's furrowed brow as he reached out to pick up one of the bloodstained cards. He turned his face away "Our communications, location of the cube, Banner, Thor. I got nothing for you. Lost my one good eye. Maybe I had that coming." A beat, then, "Yes, we were going to build an arsenal with the Tesseract."

Tony looked back up, and he knew some part of him should feel smug, should feel vindicated. He couldn't, though. Something heavy had settled over him, and he couldn't seem to shake it. Fuck, what if Jamie had seen him acting the way he had for the past few hours? What would he think of his dad then? Better. He needed to do better.

"I never put all my chips on that number, though, because I was playing something even riskier. There was an idea, Stark knows this, called the Avengers Initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could. Phil Coulson died still
believing in this idea, in heroes."

And suddenly Tony couldn't take it anymore, this 'rousing' speech, this whole fucked up situation. He didn't want to do this, but he wanted to leave it behind even less because. Fuck. Jamie. And Coulson, Coulson who had been an ally for years, could've been a friend if Tony had let him, had still been capable of that degree of trust. It was all so messed up, and Tony hated it, hated this feeling that everything was wrong, not knowing how he'd gotten here and having less of a clue how to make it right. He got up, walked away. He needed to deal with this without Fury whispering manipulation in his ear.

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Tony was sure he should be more surprised than he actually was when Rogers came to find him at the open, gaping space where Loki had taken out Coulson. Or maybe Rogers hadn't come to find him at all. Maybe he'd come to pay respects to Coulson, which, really, considering their rocky beginnings, made a hell of a lot more sense.

"Was he married?" Rogers asked.

"No," Tony answered. "There was a uh... cellist, I think." Tony knew, but it was easier not to get into it right now, not to get dragged into soliloquies about mourners left behind and all that shit and fuck, he just. He couldn't, right now. He just couldn't.

"I'm sorry," Rogers said. "He seemed like a good man."

Tony snorted, and suddenly he was angry, so fucking angry it was bubbling up through him. He was angry with Coulson for leaving Audrey behind, for taking stupid risks when he had people out there loving him, selfishly angry about the fact that there was a very good chance Tony was now going to have to explain death to Jamie. "He was an idiot," he said.

"Why?" Rogers asked, and his ridiculous arms were crossed over his equally ridiculous chest now, a disapproving expression plastered all over his face. "For believing?"

"For taking Loki on alone," Tony said, backing away, restless and utterly uninterested in another fight.

"He was doing his job," Rogers said, like a good little automaton, and fuck, Tony had no idea who, out of him at his worst and Rogers right now, had the least regard for human life. This was the man his father would never shut up about? Really?

"He was out of his league," Tony said, letting his own arms drop and raising his face to meet Rogers's gaze head-on. "He should've waited. He should've..." He let out a breath, unsure how to finish that sentence.

"Sometimes there isn't a way out, Tony," Rogers said, and he was coming closer now, and Tony realized he himself was walking in the same direction, that in a moment they'd be right up in each other's faces again. Not that that was going to make him back down.

"Right," he said. "How did that work out for him?"

"Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?" Rogers asked as they passed each other.

Tony spun back to face him, the anger back at full boil, and all he could see was Jamie's laugh, and Yinsen dying, and Coulson letting a little boy blather at him excitedly. "We are not soldiers," he spat. He took a breath, forced himself back under control. "I'm not marching to Fury's fife."
"Neither am I," Rogers said, infuriating calm still firmly in place. "He's got the same blood on his hands that Loki does. But right now we gotta put that behind us and get this done. Now, Loki needs a power source. If we can put together a list of..."

Tony listened to the motivational little speech with half an ear, let his gaze drop to the blood smear on the wall. Some sort of realization was nudging him, trying to make itself clear. If only he could put the puzzle pieces together... "He made it personal," he mused out loud, not giving a damn that he was cutting off the Rogers off mid-pep-talk.

"That's not the point," Rogers said, and there was an edge of exasperation in his voice now.

Tony looked straight at him again. "That is the point," he said. "That's Loki's point. He hit us all right where we live. Why?"

"To tear us apart," Rogers said. The exasperation was gone now, and whatever intelligence he had seemed to be working at full speed behind those shielded baby blues.

"He had to divide and conquer us," Tony said, feeling the near-physical sensation of another piece falling into place. "Great, but he knows he has to take us out to win, right? He wants to beat us and he wants to be seen doing it. He wants an audience." Again, he began walking, couldn't seem to hold still. He always did do his best thinking while in motion.

"Right," Rogers said. "I caught his act in Stuttgart."

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "That's just a preview, this is opening night," he continued, still moving, still talking, mouth and hands, and fuck, he was just on the edge of full picture, could almost see it. "Loki's a full-tilt diva. He wants flowers, he wants parades, he wants a monument built in the skies with his name plastered..." Oh God, thank fuck Jamie was in D.C. "Son of a bitch."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who bookmarked, subscribed, left kudos and especially to those who left comments. Never fail to put a smile on my face. And thanks so much for putting up with the pace. On the bright side, I'm 40K words into the Christmas fic, so there'll definitely be a lot for everyone interested to read next month.
"So he was," Zola said. "But you forget the effects of the serum."

"I read the reports. It took seven tries, three different methods, before they beat the serum with that chemical concoction. Gave me nightmares to read about it."

"They did, Herr Pierce. But I made a few... changes to Erskine's original formula, when I still had the base. The serum that was given to the Asset is not as fast-acting as the original, nor does it create the same overwhelming physical change. I sacrificed those components for adaptability. And the serum has always had tendencies to imitate a virus. It seeks to be self-perpetuating. The only way to manage that is to keep the host capable of reproduction. Red HYDRA may have succeeded, but the serum still found a way, as evidenced by the physicals the Asset has undergone after the last few missions. He is perfectly fertile. Just not in the sense traditionally associated with a male."

Tony pushed himself up from the ground, trying to figure out some way to dealing with the Chitauri all but swarming him, swarming the City, threatening to wreck absolutely everything. He gritted his teeth, shot his repulsors at the nearest soldiers, forced himself to keep going even as his body reminded him of just how long he'd gone hard without rest. Adrenalin pumped through him, helped him keep his focus as he took out another handful of aliens. He did his best to force the thoughts lingering in the dark corners of his mind silent, but couldn't quite seem to manage. Couldn't seem to stop wondering what would happen if they failed here, if the invasion swept over the rest of the world. What would happen to Jamie if this spread, even if they did end up winning? In the pit of his stomach, a tight ball of icy fear knotted itself together that much more tightly, even as another cluster of Chitauri came at him, forced him back to the ground.

"Stark, you hearing me?" a voice called through the suit's speakers. Fury, Tony realized, even though he couldn't quite spare the moment it would take to answer. "We have a missile headed straight for the City."

"How long?" Tony managed, and paid for the split second's distraction when one of the aliens slammed a metal beam over the back of his neck, slamming his head into the asphalt.

"Three minutes, at best," Fury responded, and Tony raised his head back up, got his nearest enemies with a pair of repulsor blasts. "Stay low and wipe out that missile."

"JARVIS, put everything we got into the thrusters," Tony said, getting up on his haunches and taking in the direct situation.

"I just did," JARVIS replied.
Tony fired off another few blasts and shot up into the air, kicking off the stubborn alien clinging to his boot. He set the course and jetted off with as much speed as the damaged suit could muster.

"I can close it," he heard Natasha say, the words seeming to come from far away as he flew over the harbor. "Can anybody hear me? I can shut the portal down."

Tony let out a breath at those words. They could contain it, then. If they could stop more Chitauri from coming through, then the rest of the world was safe. Except there was still a nuke headed for Manhattan, and. Fuck. He inhaled on a shudder, kept his course. Fuck.

"Do it!" Rogers called.

"No, wait," Tony said. And God, he wanted so badly for something miraculous to come in and change this situation, make it so that he didn't have to do... what he was about to do. Wished he could just jet it down to D.C. and pull Jamie into his arms, hold onto him, forget that any of this had ever happened. But what kind of man would that make him? Not someone worthy of being Jamie's father, that was for fucking sure.

"Stark, these things are still coming," Rogers said.

"I got a nuke coming in, it's gonna blow in less than a minute," Tony said, altering his course just slightly to make sure he would be at the right angle. He braked, did a one-eighty and pushed the speed as high as it would go. "And I know just where to put it." He could see the nuke with his own eyes now, coming in just above him. With one last burst of speed, he caught it up from underneath and grabbed hold.

"Stark." Rogers's voice was almost too loud over the speakers. "You know that's a one-way trip."

"Save the rest for return, JAY," Tony said, turning off the comms. He didn't need Rogers in his ear telling him what he already knew. He needed to keep this tiny bit of hope, hold it close. Needed to believe there was a chance of a return trip, or he wasn't going to be able to do it.

"Sir," JARVIS confirmed. "Shall I call Master James?"

Tony almost didn't want to, couldn't imagine any world where he'd want to have this conversation. But he couldn't go without saying goodbye, couldn't do that to his own son. Jamie wasn't going to understand now, but one day he would, and if Tony didn't get to see that day, he'd at least make sure he'd done this one thing right. "Please," he said.

He heard the simulated dial tone as JARVIS connected to Jamie's kiddie edition StarkPhone, then a click and Jamie's excited voice, "Daddy!"

"Hey, Jamie," Tony managed, keeping his voice calm and clear even as his eyes stung and his throat threatened to close in on itself. "How's it going?"

"There was something strange on the news and Auntie Pepper sent me up to the pilot," Jamie said. "I get to see the cockpit."

"That's great, Baby Boy," Tony said. He swallowed, hard, tried to get rid of the lump in his throat. The HUD was blurry to his eyesight. "Listen, I wanted to tell you something." He sucked in a deep breath, forced himself to keep talking, to not break down crying now, no matter how much he stood to lose, how much he stood to miss. "I love you, so much. And I'm so proud of you. I always will be. No matter what you do or who you decide to become. I'm always going to love you, and I'm always going to be proud of you."
The wormhole was a gaping maw right in front of him now, ready to swallow him up. Tony forced himself to keep going.

"I love you too, Daddy," Jamie said. "Lots and lots. And-- Wait." A slight pause. "Maria says something bad is happening. She says that's why you're talking like that. Daddy, what's going--"

Black space opened around him, and the connection cut. Tony bit back a sob, sent the nuke flying towards the nearest spaceship. And God, there were so many of them, such a vast universe, more than he'd ever imagined, and Earth was so vulnerable, Jamie was so vulnerable, he couldn't even comprehend it.

The last thing he was aware of was falling.

And then something was roaring at him. He sat up, gasping, trembling with adrenalin, throat dry. His faceplate was missing. He looked around himself, saw the Hulk leaning over him, Rogers and Thor off to the side. "What the hell," he muttered. "What just happened?" And then, just because of the utter strangeness of the situation, "Please tell me no one kissed me."

Rogers crouched down, panting, looking up at the sky. "We won," he said.

Tony relaxed, letting his eyes drop shut for a moment as utter relief washed through him, made his whole body go limp. And then, because somehow that was how his body worked, he couldn't get his mouth to stop running, "Alright. Hey. Alright. Good job, guys. Let's just not come in tomorrow. Let's just take a day. Have you ever tried shawarma? There's a shawarma joint about two blocks from here. I don't know what it is, but I wanna try it." He bit his lip, remembered the agonizing fear in Jamie's voice. "Anyone got a cellphone?"

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After shawarma there was a brief, odd moment where everyone seemed to be looking at everyone else for direction, everyone droopy-eyed and yawning, all but sleeping on their feet. Tony was just as exhausted, but unlike everyone else, he actually knew where he was going, which, for whatever strange reason, was all everyone needed to follow him back to the Tower like a row of ducklings. The elevator was still working, which was a hell of a good thing, or Tony might just have broken down and cried, and within moments they were in the battered penthouse. Tony barely had time to step into the wreckage of the living room before a tiny blur of boy sped into his arms. Tony, despite the exhaustion, lifted Jamie up and hugged him tight, kissing the top of his head. "Hey, little man. How was D.C.?" he managed, suddenly choked up all over again.

Jamie didn't answer, just kept clinging, face digging into Tony's collarbone. Tony let out a sigh, carried his son further into the penthouse so the others would have room to enter. Pepper stepped into view, the look on her face an all too familiar mix of fury and fear and relief, which lasted right until she realized they weren't alone. "Tony," she said, with a lingering sharpness still right there in the back of her voice. "I see you've brought guests."

Tony flashed her an apologetic smile and moved onwards, dropping down into the couch that was miraculously still standing. "Hey, look, Jamie. Natasha is here. You remember Natasha, right? Comes to visit every once in a while, make sure Daddy is behaving himself?"

Slowly, Jamie turned around, sticking his thumb in his mouth and keeping it there as he looked at the newcomers with wide eyes. "Hi, Nat," he said, and just from the sound of his voice, Tony could tell he'd been crying. Made him want to punch someone's face in.

Natasha dredged up a tired smile. "Hello there, James. How are you?"
Jamie gave a small, shy shrug, snuggling closer to Tony's chest and turning halfway back around, his free hand grasping Tony's t-shirt, bunching it up. Tony ruffled up his hair, the movements slow and tired, but still, having Jamie right here, being able to touch him and feel the warmth of him, it filled up something inside him that had gone cold and empty and frightened these past few days. He wasn't about to give that up just yet. Still, people were gaping, and Tony was pretty sure only part of that could be written off as exhaustion. Part of it was probably Jamie. "Everyone, this is James Stark," he said. "Jamie, these are... The Avengers, I guess. Can you say hi?"

Jamie stuck his thumb deeper into his mouth, looking at the strangers through his lashes. Finally, movements slow, he pulled his thumb free. "Hi," he said, voice barely more than a soft, little squeak, and in that moment he sounded more his age than Tony thought he probably had since he'd been maybe eight months old.

Thor was the one to finally break the sudden silence. "It is an honor to meet you, Son of Stark," he greeted. "I did not know you had a son, Stark."

Tony cleared his throat. "Yeah, we didn't really have a whole lot of time to sit down and have a family discussion, big guy."

"And you must be the Lady of Stark," Thor barreled on, walking up to Pepper and bending over her hand to kiss it and fuck, Tony was half certain this whole scene was just an illusion that came from complete and utter exhaustion. "Your son is most beautiful."

Pepper blinked and damn, was that an actual blush? "No," she said. "No, I'm not. I am Pepper Potts. I run Stark Industries. And I'm not Jamie's mother."

Thor frowned, and fuck, this whole damn situation was so damn awkward Tony would be laughing his ass off if it were happening to someone else. Unfortunately, it was not. Tony cleared his throat. "So, er. Pepp, do we have any rooms that are intact enough to put these guys up?"

Pepper opened her mouth to answer, but Jamie beat her to it, tiny index finger pointing at Rogers. "He's a bad man," Jamie said. "He's a bad, bad man. Maria told me so. He's Captain America."

And yeah, okay, Tony might not like Rogers all that much, which Jamie had apparently picked up, somehow. Still, not exactly a good thing, and Rogers looked positively crushed, which, yeah. Alone in a world you don't know and the son and grandson of an old friend both contribute to giving you a rough start by clearly not liking you. Ouch. At least people couldn't claim Tony didn't have some kind of sense of empathy. "Is he wearing a cowl?" Tony asked.

Jamie looked uncertain, but shook his head.

"Then he's not Captain America right now," Tony said. "He's just Steve Rogers, and Steve Rogers is one of the good guys, okay? Tell Maria she's wrong."

Jamie looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded, sticking his thumb back in his mouth. Tony mouthed 'sorry' and 'overactive imagination' over the top of the toddler's head, wincing slightly.

"Pepp," Tony reminded, pretty desperate, by now, to get this whole situation over with, and Pepper immediately turned into the master organizer she was, pointing everyone in all different directions until everyone was gone. Then she took charge of Jamie and shooed Tony off as well.

***

Tony woke up the next morning still exhausted, so much so that everything seemed to pass in kind of a blur. A few things stood out, like his throwaway comment to Banner, "Seriously, you should just
stay. I have way better employee benefits than India, and we'll build a rocking lab for you."

Banner blinked, didn't really say anything for a long moment. Then, "Stark, you have a child. You can't possibly want the Hulk around James."

Tony shrugged. "I trust you," he said, and somehow, when they'd sent off the Asgardians, Banner was climbing into the car with him, about to go back to the Tower 'for a while, anyway'.

There was the whole awkward handshake with Rogers, and the odd feeling of respecting someone, knowing you worked really fucking well together, and still not really liking them at all. At least there hadn't been any fisticuffs.

Thor had said something about how Tony should make sure to find Jamie a worthy mother, which was hopelessly old-fashioned, and Barton had said something about getting a practice bow because sharpshooters should start training young, which, what? Jamie wasn't going to be a sharpshooter. He was Tony's son, a Stark. Would likely be a decent shot, but not exactly sniper material, especially with a bow and arrow. Natasha rolled her eyes at everyone else's antics and left with a wave.

And that was about it, what he could remember of the day before coming back home and heading straight to bed for a five-hour nap that ensured he was at least somewhat awake when Pepper dragged him into the living room to discuss the Tower repairs and renovations.

Still, it beat being dead. It beat New York City being blown off the map. And maybe, just maybe, he'd made a new friend. Which, given his age, he should probably be less giddy about, but fuck it, he'd missed having someone to science with.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone for taking the time to read, bookmark, subscribe, leave kudos and especially comment. I means the world to me.

Still on a once a week schedule. Holiday fic is turning into a right beast. I hope at least a few of you are willing to suffer through 80K+ of my lack of restraint.
**Chapter 13**

Chapter Notes

Bit late this time. Sorry. Had family stuff to do yesterday. Hopefully you'll all have fun with this chapter regardless.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What? Are you saying he's..."

"Oh, he's still male. Mostly. But the serum found a way," Zola confirmed. "His body has developed ovaries and a womb to compensate for the damage he sustained, fantastical as it sounds. We'll need to run more tests, of course, but my belief is that we still have every possible chance of breeding an heir to Johann Schmidt's legacy."

***

Sometimes, Tony wanted to leave New York so bad it hurt. He wanted to snatch Jamie up and go back to Malibu where he could look out the window without seeing the memories of a wormhole in the sky, without seeing invasion ships and feeling the vacuum of space closing in around him, strangling him, crushing him. He started packing several times a day for the first few weeks. Then, slowly, more rarely. Malibu wasn't going to work for them anymore. Tony knew more about the arc reactor project than anyone, had promised Pepper he'd take an active part. Which meant board meetings and business meetings and PR, all of which centered around Stark Tower, which was being rebuilt around them. Jamie was getting too old for Tony to have two bases and just take him with him. He needed stability. He needed preschool and other kids and pedagogy and who the fuck even knew what, and Tony knew that if he returned to California, he'd never get that stuff done. If he went back to California, he wasn't sure he'd be able to return at all. Jamie needed this, needed to be here in the Stark Tower preschool that was up and running again after the battle, needed a father who wasn't going to run at the first sign of trouble. So what if Tony had to put up with nightmares and insomnia to pay for it? At least he hadn't had a panic attack in front of the boy. Yet.

He took a breath, looked down at the t-shirt he was clenching between his fingers, the open suitcase in front of him. Slowly, he exhaled, keeping himself forcibly under control. Then he picked the clothes he'd managed to pack back up and kicked the suitcase back under the bed, shoved the shirts and underwear back in the closet and walked out of his bedroom, making sure not to look at the windows. It was beautiful out. He knew that without looking. This time of the year, in New York, there'd be a certain crispness in the air and the trees would be turning red and gold and orange. It was beautiful out there, but he couldn't bring himself to look, because all he'd see was a gaping wormhole and aliens swooping through the streets, wrecking everything.

"Sir," JARVIS said. "It is four twenty-five PM. If you want to pick young Master James up at the agreed-upon time, you should leave now."

Tony nodded, took another breath and wished he could get it in as deep as he'd been able to before the arc reactor. "Thanks, JAY," he said, voice sounding scratchy even to his own ears. He sighed, smoothed down his hair from where he'd been running his hands through it in agitation, and made for the elevator.
JARVIS was kind enough to keep the ride down at a slower pace than the machinery's actual capacity, giving Tony enough time to collect himself and put on a face that would hopefully tell everyone who saw him that he was perfectly all right and in control. He brushed his shirt down, making sure it wasn't too wrinkled, took a deep breath. With an obnoxious little 'ding', courtesy of JARVIS, the elevator door opened and Tony stepped out onto the thirtieth floor, made his way through the brightly painted wardrobe with all the tiny cubbies for each child, shoes and tiny coats stacked everywhere. He made it through and into the hub of frantic activity that was the Stark Tower preschool.

It was strangely soothing, in some way he couldn't quite understand, the sudden noises so constant they turned into a blur, the chaotic nature of the whole space a buzz of activity. It was all unpredictable, but even with a pair of kids play-fighting in a corner, it was nothing at all like a battle. This was life, in some way he wasn't sure he knew how to define. Maybe he should volunteer a few hours down here sometimes, see if it was as soothing as a few minutes promised to be.

"Daddy!" Jamie shouted, pulling him out of whatever trance he’d been in. A moment later the kid was barreling into him, and Tony snatched him up and gave him a tight hug.

"Have a good day, buddy?" he asked.

Jamie nodded, all wide eyes and big smile, and started blabbering about building a Duplo version of the Stark Tower and eating sandwiches and the million other little things that had made up his day, and Tony couldn't help but grin in response, at peace for the first time all day. Then his eyes widened. "Is Uncle Bruce cooking dinner?" he asked.

Tony couldn't help but laugh, completely unsurprised that Jamie had taken to Bruce just as quickly as he had himself, giving him uncle status almost on sight, although for Jamie it seemed like more of a food thing and less of a science thing. "He was still in the lab when I headed down, I think," he said. "But maybe if you ask real nice..."

Jamie nodded again, very seriously this time. "I'll be very nice," he promised.

"Making any friends yet?" Tony asked.

Jamie shrugged. "A little," he said. "Maybe. Some of the kids are nice. Maria doesn't really like it. She likes it better when I only play with her."

Tony made sure not to wince visibly, made a mental note to speak to Dr. Sanchez again. She'd said the whole imaginary friend gig would make Jamie more social, not less. "Maria's going to have to learn to share," he said.

Jamie bit his lip for a moment, head turned to the side. "It wouldn't matter so much, except she has no one else to play with," he said.

Tony ruffled his hair with a small grin and put him back down. "Go say goodbye to Miss..." He grimaced, unsure.

"Miss Walker," he said, running off towards a harried-looking blond woman. "Miss Walker!" he called. "Miss Walker! Daddy's here. I'm going home!"

Miss Walker gave a quick wave, met Tony's eyes from the other side of the room and nodded to assure him she'd seen him. She looked back down, picked a StarkTab up from a nearby table and pressed something or other. Tony guessed she was signing Jamie out or whatever. He didn't really know how that stuff worked, just stayed waiting in the chaos until Jamie came rushing back, grabbed
"No vacation, Daddy?" Jamie asked, and his voice was so hoarse it was barely more than a pitiful little whisper that made Tony want to wrap him up in (even more) blankets and just hold him close until the nasty tonsillitis went away. Well, fuck, this was another one of those things no one ever told you before you became a parent, the way your kid being sick was way worse than when you got sick yourself.

"Yeah, no," Tony said, stroking sweaty hair out of his son's too-hot face. "Nope, sorry, little man. No Japan this time around. Just going to have to talk to Auntie Pepper and make sure everything is in order, and then we'll laze in bed and watch cartoons until you're better. Wouldn't have been that much fun anyway. Well, you'd have had fun. You'd have gotten to hang out with Happy and see loads of..." He frowned, reminded himself not to make things worse, which, judging by the disappointed look on Jamie's face, was exactly what he was doing. "I'd have had to sit in meetings all week, though. This time we get to just hang out together instead. Way more fun."

Jamie flashed him a wide, pale smile before falling into another coughing fit that made Tony wince and grimace and rub the kid's back as if that would somehow make it go away.

"Now, how about I go fix you something warm to drink and call Auntie Pepper, and then I'll get in my jammies and we'll watch a movie?" Tony asked, leaning in to press a kiss to Jamie's burning forehead. Jamie nodded sleepily against him and Tony gave into the temptation to smooth an extra blanket over his tiny, trembling form before making his way out of the room. "JARVIS, call Pepper," he said. "And find a recipe for something that's tasty and age appropriate, and helps with tonsillitis."

"Of course, Sir," JARVIS said, playing the waiting tone for a moment as he dialed Pepper's phone. Tony glanced at the recipes JARVIS had pulled up on the nearest holoscreen, shook his head. "No, I want all those positive effects. I will-- We're just going to combine them. Lemon, ginger, milk, buckwheat honey. That should still work, right? Do we have the ingredi--"

"Good morning, Tony," Pepper greeted.

"Morning, Pepp," Tony said, watching the screen in front of him as JARVIS wrote out the answer and in which cabinets he'd find the ingredients. Mostly the fridge, as it turned out. Huh. How had he never realized there was ginger in the fridge? "So, Jamie's sick and I'm not going to Japan."

Pepper's face morphed into an expression of concern. "Oh, Tony. Is he going to be all right?"

"Should be just fine," Tony said. "Bruce says so anyway. But he's got tonsillitis, and I can't leave him here. I need to--"

"Oh, thank God," Pepper said. "For a moment there I thought it was something serious." She sighed, pulled on her stern face. "Tony, you have to go. You know that. After the nuclear disaster, Japan is on the verge of changing their whole energy strategy. We have a very small window to get in on that, Tony. We need it. If we can get a contract with the Japanese government, our doors into Asia are open, and then it won't be long before Europe follows. Japan is key, Tony, but it's time sensitive. You know that. And you know that you're the only one who understands the project well enough to sell it to them."

Tony ground his teeth, walked to the fridge and got out milk, ginger and lemon, found the honey in a
"Tony," she said, warningly.

"Jamie's sick, Pepp. I can't just... Jet off to the other side of the world," he managed. "He needs me here, Pepp. He." He paused, sucked in a deep breath. If he didn't get himself under control, he'd end up ranting and raving about how Howard had never given a fuck when Tony caught a bug and how bad that had hurt.

"Tony, you're being that overbearing parent no one can stand," she said with a slight roll of her eyes. "He's not as delicate as you're making him out to be."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "Well, it's not like I can bring him with me when he's sick, and I don't have a babysitter," he said.

"Tony, you--" Pepper looked behind him. "Dr. Banner, good morning. How are your babysitting skills?"

Tony looked behind him to see Bruce in a pair of pajama pants and a t-shirt, glasses askew as he yawned. "Not really my profession," he said. He blinked. "Tony, you need a babysitter?"

Gritting his teeth, Tony shook his head. "No, I don't. I'm not going to Japan."

Bruce gave him a long, considering look. "I could do it, you know. Jamie and I get along well enough. I've got medical experience." He shrugged in that way he had, making himself look smaller. "If you want me to, that is. I mean, I'd understand if you..." He trailed off, wincing, and Tony heard the insecurity all too well, saw the self-deprecation that flickered across his friend's face.

"I trust you," Tony said. "You wouldn't hurt him. The other guy wouldn't hurt him. I just..." He sucked in a breath, because he was kind of cornered here, wasn't he? Couldn't insist on staying without looking like he was going back on what he'd just said, and Bruce had been so damn hard to get out of his shell. "Let me go talk to Jamie first."

***

However fine - excited, even - Jamie had been at the prospect of hanging out with Uncle Bruce for a week, and however happy he'd seemed in their nightly video chats, Tony was still a mess of nerves when he returned to the Tower, contract finalized and wrapped up. "Sir," JARVIS greeted when Tony stepped into the penthouse. "May I say it's a pleasure to have you back. And I might add that if you wish to see Master James, he's in the private biology lab with Dr. Banner."

Tony dumped his suitcase on the floor, kicked off his shoes and coat, and made his way to the private elevator. JARVIS bumped up the speed and he was down there in half the normal time, stepping off and into the lab where Bruce and Jamie were bent over a screen together, chattering back and forth. "Oh, God, kid, please tell me you aren't planning to go into biology?"

"Daddy!" Jamie shouted, scrambling off his chair and darting across the floor, all but flying into Tony's arms. Tony held him tight, kissed the top of his head, felt something inside him that had been stretched taut all week finally relax.

"How've you been, little man?" Tony asked, keeping the boy on his hip as he walked over and sat down on the abandoned chair. "Had a lot of fun with Bruce?"

"I had lots of fun," Jamie said, eyes shining with excitement. "We made cookies, and we watched cartoons, and Uncle Bruce is teaching me about dee-enn-ay." His pronunciation of that last bit was
slow and uncertain, his forehead creasing in concentration as he said it. "But don't worry, Daddy. I still like building stuff way better."

Tony felt a laugh bubble out of him, couldn't help but give Jamie's small body another squeeze.

"Here's something interesting we discovered," Bruce said. Tony looked at him over Jamie's head, noted the fact that although Bruce's voice was light, his face was dead serious. "Seems Jamie here is a very special kid. Because usually all little boys get something called an X from their mom and something called a Y from their dad, but Jamie here got a Y from his mom and his X from you."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "That's pretty rare, isn't it? XY females and accidental pregnancies?"

"Maybe not as rare as we generally think," Bruce said. "Most XY females don't know they're XY." He shrugged. "It's not really anything important. Just a fun fact we found out, right, Jamie?"

Jamie nodded, flashing Tony a proud grin.

"The Maria situation is getting a bit worrying, isn't it?" Bruce asked hours later when Tony had tucked Jamie into bed and was more than ready to get to bed himself, just as soon as he'd had a nice glass of scotch and watched the news.

Tony shrugged, pouring himself a couple of fingers. "It's weird, sure," he said, plopping down on the couch. "But I've spoken to an expert, several times. She says there's nothing to worry about. He's perfectly fine."

Bruce sighed. "She's probably right," he said. "I guess I tend to get paranoid when it comes to voices in people's heads."

"Hey, you're good," Tony said, turning the TV on. "Plus, as far as I know, Jamie has never been exposed to gamma radiation. I've also never seen him turn green, except when I painted him myself three weeks ago because he wanted to be the Hulk for Halloween."

Bruce let out a seemingly involuntary chuckle at that. "He does have some strange antibodies, though," he said then. "Tuberculosis. H1N1, of the Spanish Flu variation. Some other minor stuff that we haven't really seen for decades. Strong enough to suggest second generation instead of the logical third."

"You're saying that because he's weirdly immune to stuff, he's schizophrenic and about to turn into the Hulk?" Tony asked, cocking an eyebrow and good God, if Bruce ever had a kid, Tony would spend the rest of his life feeling sorry for the poor thing. Bruce would be an even worse fretter and worrier than Tony tended to be.

"Not at all," Bruce said. "I'm just saying it's an interesting genetic quirk. His antibodies are as strong as the ones you got from your father and whatever he was exposed to in the World War One era slums of New York, rather than being a generation diluted. Stronger, even. Judging by antibodies and genetic markers, his other parent would, statistically, have to be a man of at least partly Celtic descent, and at least ninety-five years old."

Tony doubled over laughing, barely noticing the news anchor's report on a terrorist attack on the West Coast. "Yeah, no, sorry, dude, I think I'd have noticed if I'd brought home a geriatric man with childbearing hips." He took a sip of his scotch. "I tend to prefer people who couldn't have been Howard's classmates. Good one, though."
Thanks so much to everyone who took the time to bookmark, subscribe, leave kudos and especially review. It means so much to me.
I'll also add that I am by no means a geneticist. I know some very basic high school level stuff, and I know about antigens because my whole family’s weirdly immune towards TB. If anyone with greater knowledge wants to come in and add their two cents, though, please do go ahead.
Chapter 14

This chapter, and the next ones, will borrow quite a bit from IM3. I don't own those bits of plot and dialogue, just in case anyone didn't already know that ;P

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A long beat of silence. Then, "Surrogate?"

"That doesn't seem wise. There are numerous examples of normal fetuses breaking their mothers' ribs. Who knows what one could do when enhanced by the serum? In all likelihood, the surrogate would die before the pregnancy was even viable. Besides, there may be advantages to a serum-saturated environment throughout the fetal development. The nutrients alone..."

***

"Listen," Tony told Jamie, crouching down in front of the chair so he'd be on eyelevel with the kid. He carefully pulled the numbing patch off Jamie's thin forearm, threw it in the general direction of the trash and tore open the packaging of a disinfection wipe before carefully rubbing the cleaning alcohol into the revealed skin.

"Daddy, that's cold," Jamie interrupted with a small giggle, legs wriggling enough to almost hit Tony right in the arc reactor.

"Yeah," Tony said. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry." He picked up the injection gun, looked up and met his son's eyes. "This is going to sting a bit," he said. "Not gonna lie about that. But you remember helping me build the new Iron Cradle?"

Jamie nodded. "So I can fly away if someone bad comes after me," he said, eyes showing a bit more understanding than Tony was entirely comfortable with his three-and-a-half-year-old displaying.

Tony nodded. "This will make it so it can always find you," he said. "But it's going to sting a bit going in. Is that all right?"

Jamie gave another serious nod.

Tony gritted his teeth, halfway hating himself already. Then he pulled the plunger, winced when Jamie did, did his best to ignore the sick feeling that gathered tight in the pit of his stomach at the knowledge that he was causing his son pain. He immediately pulled the boy close, kissing the top of his head before he drew back enough to wipe away the small spot of blood. "So sorry, baby boy."

Jamie pulled himself together admirably, an adorably pig-headed expression taking over his face. "I'm not a baby," he said. "I'm a big boy. It didn't hurt that bad."

Tony reached out to ruffle his hair, letting his knuckles draw over Jamie's cheek. Some of the baby fat had dropped away over the last few months, revealing what would one day be a square jaw and truly impressive cheekbones. Tony's baby boy would be a true heartbreaker one day. "Think you can handle another three?" he asked.
Jamie gave another determined nod. "I'm a big boy," he said again.

"That you are," Tony agreed, squeezing Jamie's shoulder before moving onto the next numbing patch. Jamie could handle it, he was pretty sure of that. He wasn't sure how well he'd deal with it himself, though.

He was just putting a Hulk band-aid over the last injection site when JARVIS interrupted, "Sir, may I commend you on testing the transmitters on yourself and reading the safety instructions before injecting your son. Although, I would've admired it even more if you'd read said instructions before injecting yourself. I should also add that Dr. Banner is approaching."

Before Tony was even done rolling his eyes at the mothering, the workshop door opened and Bruce walked in, face settling into a frown behind his glasses as he took in the scene. "Tony, are you chipping your son?" he asked.

Tony shook his head. "No." At Bruce's cocked eyebrow, he rolled his eyes. "Not technically. I chipped him years ago."

If anything, that only made Bruce's frown worse. "Why would you chip your son?"

Tony stood up straight, dusted off his pants. "Did you know I was kidnapped seven times before I turned twelve? 'Starknapping' was an official work in at least a couple of dictionaries in the seventies." He shrugged. "It was no fun. I have no intention of ever letting it happen to Jamie if I can help it. So yeah, I chipped him."

Bruce still looked like he was about to object, and this really wasn't a subject Tony wanted to discuss in front of Jamie. At all. Thankfully, JARVIS had gotten really good at the whole reading faces thing. "Master James, I have recorded your favorite cartoon. I have it cued up on the den area entertainment system, if you would like to watch it."

Or maybe not so thankfully, since Jamie took off with a whoop and left Tony without a human shield behind which he could avoid certain uncomfortable conversations.

Tony took a deep breath. "It's a legitimate concern," he said. He rolled his eyes. "And it makes me feel better. I'll take it out when he's older and has some training, I swear, but right now..." He shook his head. "I have nightmares almost every night," he said then. "And sometimes, I wake up in a cold sweat and realize I haven't dreamt about Afghani caves or wormholes or aliens or someone stealing the reactor. I dream that Jamie's mom has decided she wants him back. And she manages to take him somehow, and I know I'm never going to see him again. That dream is the worst one, absolute worst." He inhaled sharply. "So maybe I'm a terrible parent for chipping my infant son, but if it means the risk of losing him is just the tiniest bit smaller."

"So," Bruce said. "If you chipped him years ago, what were you doing just now?"

Tony flashed him a grin. "Let me show you the newest model of the Iron Cradle. And the new suit. New suit is pretty damn cool too."

Tony looked at the towering pile of boxes and immediately began regretting his life decisions. Most
prominently, the idea of giving Jamie a proper New York Christmas (which led to the idea of
decorating the penthouse) and the subsequent decision to go on an Internet tinsel shopping spree.
"What was I even thinking?"

Bruce clapped his shoulder before plopping into the couch. "I have absolutely no idea," he said.
"You do realize we aren't tall enough to hang anything from the ceiling, right?"

"Ladders," Tony said, but the thought kind of made him feel exhausted. "The suit?"

"Do not try to hang Christmas decorations while wearing the Iron Man suit," Bruce said.

And yeah, okay, Bruce probably had a point there. Besides, it wasn't like all he'd bought was ceiling
decorations, at least he was pretty sure that wasn't all. So some of them could probably be hung
without a ladder. He cast a despairing glance at the boxes, let out a sigh and set about opening them.

Half an hour later, he was determinedly trying to get a garland of fake evergreens as straight on the
wall as he possibly could without resorting to a bubble level, and solidly enough to hang glass balls
and stuff from. Mournfully, he looked out over the rest of the living room, still undecorated. He
needed to build a bot for this shit.

"Daddy!"

Tony jumped, and almost stabbed his own hand with a pin before he turned around and caught sight
of Jamie. He managed to crouch down and get his arms open just in time for the kid to barrel into
him, backpack flying from one small shoulder. "Hey, kiddo," he said. "How was daycare?" He
 glanced down at his watch. Winced. Why had JARVIS not warned him about the fact that he was
going to miss Jamie's pickup time?

"Uncle Bruce picked me up," Jamie said, inadvertently saving Tony from his own confusion. He
 glanced up at the fake evergreen tinsel stuff. "What's that?" he asked.

"Christmas decorations," Tony said. He frowned. There'd been a Christmas last year as well, but that
was before Jamie hit the really inquisitive age. Also, Tony wasn't entirely sure about memory
formation at two and a half years old. Still, someone had to have explained Christmas to Jamie by
now, right? TV, if nothing else. "You know what Christmas is, right?"

Jamie gave a small shrug. "Something about presents," he said. "Maria says she doesn't know what it
is, though."

Tony nodded, frowning. He wasn't sure how to explain Christmas properly, especially without
getting into the religious aspects, and his family had never been big on those. Sure, for all intents and
purposes, Tony had been raised Catholic, but Christmas had mostly been about showcasing what a
perfect family Howard Stark had, and parties to show he was richer than his peers. "JARVIS?" he
asked.

"I will look for a selection of children's books and films that attempt to explain the various meanings
of Christmas, Sir," JARVIS said. "They'll be ready for your screening shortly."

Tony grimaced. Maybe he should just call Rogers. Sure, they weren't exactly friendly, but Captain
America should, theoretically, get a kick out of attempting to explain the meaning of Christmas to a
little kid. He glanced over his shoulder, cast Bruce a pleading glance.

Bruce held up his hands. "Don't look at me. I was raised atheist."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I'm assuming this isn't a big enough emergency to call Cap," he said. "Maybe
Rhodey or Pepper."

Jamie was giggling, which didn't exactly help. Oh, well. "That's pretty, though," he said, pointing up at the green stuff. "Can I help?"

Sure. Tony supposed that was one way of working around the problem.

"For the record," Bruce said. "I'm not sure any of the others have anyone to celebrate Christmas with. They might appreciate a phone call."

Tony groaned. "I think accidentally buying Natasha the wrong present is a pretty sure way to get yourself killed," he said. Then he rolled his eyes. "Sure. JARVIS, send out some invitations. Let's attempt this thing." He ruffled Jamie's hair. "Things I do for you, Kid. Let's hang this tinsel."

"Sir," JARVIS said. "I assume Ms. Potts, Lieutenant Rhodes and Mr. Hogan are also to be invited?"

"Sure," Tony responded.

"Sir," JARVIS said again. "It has been twenty-seven days since Mr. Hogan last checked his email. I am not sure he will receive the invitation."

Tony snorted out a laugh. "That sounds about right. Call him up for me, will you?"

He had to wait for long moments, and he could just imagine Happy fumbling around trying to pick up the video call on the new tablet Tony had been nice enough to give him for his birthday. "Hello?" Happy finally said as his face popped up on the nearest screen. Or, well, part of his face.

Tony bit back a laugh. "Is this forehead of security?"

"What?" Happy said. Tony could just see him blinking, terrifyingly enlarged until he got the point and put a bit of distance between himself and the tablet. "Yeah, I've got a real job. What do you want? I'm working and I've got something going on here."

"What?" Tony asked. He could feel a smile tugging on his face. Shit, but he'd missed that man. "Harassing the interns?"

"Let me tell you something," Happy said. "You know what happened when I told people I was Iron Man's bodyguard? They would laugh in my face."

"I said you could be Jamie's bodyguard. That wouldn't be so bad, would it? Kid loves you."

"Jamie is three years old and goes to daycare in the same building where he lives. What would you have me do? Go to daycare with me." Happy let out an exaggerated sigh. "I had to leave while I still had a shred of dignity. Now I got a real job. I'm watching Pepper."

"What's going on?" Tony asked, trying to keep his grin down. "Fill me in."

"For real?" Happy said, and he sounded so ridiculously surprised and, well, happy, that Tony felt a pang of conscience. He was going to have to remember to call Happy up more often, just to ask how his day was going.

"Yeah," Tony said.

"All right, so she's meeting up with this scientist," Happy said. "Rich guy. Handsome."
"Right," Tony said, and had to bite back a smile. Happy's crush on Pepper was pretty damn adorable. Now, if only Happy would go and actually do something about it rather than project all over Tony, well...

"I couldn't make his face at first, right, you know I'm good with faces," Happy continued.

"Oh, yeah, you're the best," Tony said, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Jamie hadn't wrecked the living room. He hadn't, thank fuck, although he and Bruce were making an utter mess of Tony's boxes of Christmas decorations.

"All right, so I run his credentials. I make him. Aldrich Killian. We actually met the guy back in-- Where were we in ninety-nine? The... science conference?"

"Uhm..." Tony frowned, had to take a moment to actually connect the dots. As a rule, he had a very blurry, fragmented memory of the nineties as a whole, especially when it came to particular times and places. Still, this one had been significant. This one had been... Yinsen. "Switzerland," Tony said, biting back the old, all too familiar pang in his chest.

"Right. Right. Exactly," Happy said.

Tony took a breath, brought himself back on course. Tried to see if he could remember more about Switzerland and '99. "Killian, nah, don't remember that guy."

"Of course you don't remember," Happy said, and was he-- He was actually rolling his eyes, the rat bastard. "He's not a blonde with a big rack. First it's fine. They were talking business. But now it's like getting weird. He's showing her his big brain."

"His what?" Tony had to bite back a laugh and God, he really did miss having Happy around all the time.

"Big brain. And she likes it." Happy sounded absolutely horrified at that tidbit. "Here, let me show you. See?"

"Look at what? You watching them?" Tony frowned at the screen, which Happy was clearly moving around. Still, Tony wasn't seeing anything other than Happy. He was going to have to remember this stuff for the next Starkpad model, make Happy test out the prototype. That way he'd get something everyone in the world was guaranteed to be able to operate. "Flip the screen and then we can get started."

"I'm not a tech genius like you," Happy groused. "Just trust me. Get down here."

Tony glanced over his shoulder again and swooped in to help hang the next bit of green tinsel. "I'm in New York, Happ. Flip the screen. Then I can see what they're doing."

"I can't. I don't know how to flip the screen," Happy said. "Look, you can't talk to me like that anymore. You're not my boss, all right? I don't work for you. I don't trust this guy. He's got another guy with him. He's shifty."

Tony grinned. He was pretty sure Happy had never had as much fun in his life as he was having as head of security, even if it did make him paranoid. "Relax."

"Seriously?"

"I'm just asking you," Tony said. "Secure the perimeter. Tell him to go out for a drink or something."
"You know what? You should take more of an interest in what's going on here." And there he went
with the disapproval and the projection. "This woman is the best thing that ever happened to you and
you're just ignoring her."

"Happy," Tony said. "Pepper and I are not, have not and never will be dating. You should just ask
her out. You can take her for a date when you both come up here for Christmas. It'll be nice."

"Christmas?" Happy said.

"Yeah," Tony said. "Christmas. You coming?" He blinked, remembered the slightly bizarre nature
of Happy's earlier words. "'Big brain'?"

I'm gonna follow this guy. I'm gonna run his plates and I'm gonna... and if it gets rough, so be it."

"I miss you, Happy," Tony said.

"Yeah, I miss you too," Happy said, and Tony was pretty damn sure he even meant it. "But the way
it used to be. Now you're off with your superfriends and I don't know what's going on with you
anymore. The world's getting weird."

Tony winced, could suddenly feel space and wormholes pressing in all around him and yeah, no,
fuck, he wasn't dealing with that right now. "Hey, I hate to cut you off. Do you have your taser on
you?" He was pretty sure the fact that Jamie was in the room was the only reason he managed to
keep his voice steady.

"Why?" Happy asked.

"I think there's a gal in HR who's trying to steal some printer ink," Tony said, and he might've said
something else as well, but mostly he was done with the call, and he was pretty sure Happy was too.
He put on a smile, turned back to Bruce and Jamie. "Let's get some of those decorations up. Drop
my needle, JARVIS."

Three hours later he got the phone call that Happy was in critical condition in the ICU.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who took the time to subscribe, bookmark, leave kudos
and especially reviews. Unless you're a writer yourself, you probably have no idea how
much those mean. Hint: a lot. So yeah, thanks :D

Also, I finished my monster of a Winteriron Holiday fic. Yay! :D It's off with Potrix to
be read over; thank you for taking on that task, and sorry again for the length. And sorry
about that to the rest of you too. I did not mean to write nearly 90K; hopefully a few of
you will be up to the task of reading that monster. What does this mean? It means that
while I'm taking a few days to just breathe and not worry too much about writing, I
should be back on 623 soon enough, so posting should pick up pretty soon. Yay?
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Yup, I moved the events of IM3 by ten days or so. Didn't want to completely wreck everyone's Christmas ;)
Also, Steve decided to be a kicked puppy and invade the story. I decided to let him.
The IM3 storyline will stretch over more chapters than any of the other films so far, since it's the one that's getting changed the most. Figured I'd give you a heads up.
Enjoy, I hope ;P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You would risk keeping the Asset out of cryo for nine months without, I assume, the option of a wipe?"
"I would."

***

Tony should've listened. He should've actually stopped to listen to what Happy had been saying, shouldn't have just been amused and missing him and trying to invite him for Christmas and fuck. What even was happening? Accepting Happy's transfer to head of security had been specifically so he wouldn't get hurt, because he was ridiculously loyal and Tony was getting in situations way out of Happy's depth, these days. He just--

He was only half-aware of asking Bruce to look after Jamie, getting in a suit and setting off for California. Wasn't really fully aware of much of anything until he found himself in Happy's hospital room. And then it all came crashing into him. Happy's face, swollen and discolored, and not for protecting Tony, but for trying to do the right thing, for following a hunch Tony hadn't even been willing to listen to. He could hear the humming and beeping of the machines, could see where everything was hooked up to Happy's body, and something inside him twisted, painful.

He was vaguely aware of talking to the nurse, trying to make sure Happy would be comfortable, hyperaware when he read the medical chart and noted all the damage. Fighting down the sudden lump in his throat was physically painful. He had to put his hands in his pockets to keep them from shaking as he made sure the SI security guys were clear on their task. Then he went back and sat down by Happy's bedside, and just sat there, tried to figure out what the hell had just happened.

He'd tracked what Happy had been up to, what plate it was he'd been tracking, everything. He'd even, in the suit coming down, looked up Killian, not that there was a hell of a lot to find. Well, AIM was doing well, but nothing seemed particularly underhanded, definitely not linked to the Mandarin and the terrorist attacks that had been wrecking the West Coast. The Avengers should've been brought in sooner, or Tony should've. He should've looked into it, should've tried to figure out what was going on before everything went to hell in the Chinese Theater, shouldn't have let Rhodey talk him down. Sure as fuck shouldn't have let Happy follow up on his gut in this instance. Just. Fuck.

A hand settled on his shoulder, delicate fingers squeezing. He glanced up, attempted to smile at Pepper and didn't quite manage. "This isn't your fault," she said, voice gentle. "You know that, don't you?"
Tony shrugged. "Should've done something," he said.

"You can't fix the whole world, Tony," Pepper said. "You can't always keep everyone safe." And for a moment he wanted, needed, to be back in New York, needed to see Jamie, make absolutely certain he was safe.

Tony had to swallow again, pushing down that urge. He'd be back soon enough, and until then, Jamie literally had the Hulk for a babysitter. He was safe. Nothing would happen to him. "He likes you, you know," he said. "You know that, right?"

A faint blush dusted her cheeks. "How is he?" she asked.

Tony listed off the medical chart in layman's terms, and felt no better for it whatsoever.

***

Tony stared at the sea of phones and mics and cameras all stuck in his face, and the guilt and fear and everything he'd been trying to slog through all coalesced into rage. How could all these people just-- How could they-- How was he the story here? He wasn't the one who'd gotten hurt. He wasn't the Mandarin. Why was he the one they all descended on? He took a deep breath. Because he was Tony Stark, yes. But maybe also because he was Iron Man. Maybe they wanted him to make them feel better. Maybe he was supposed to. "I've been told to stay out of this," he said. "That it was business as usual, for our military and law enforcement to deal with. But that can only go so far. You don't keep throwing rocks at something if you've got missiles. It's time to bring the big guns out this time, and I'll tell the Mandarin to start looking over his shoulder. We're coming for him." With that, he stepped into the suit, felt it close around him, and shot up into the sky.

***

"Sir," JARVIS said as Tony came in for the landing. "I feel I should advise you that Captain Rogers showed up at Stark Tower approximately two and a half hours ago."

Tony blinked. Frowned. "Could you find him a room for me?" he asked, ever so slightly confused. It wasn't Christmas yet, not for another week at least. This wasn't just punctual. This was... Someone who had been looking for an excuse to be anywhere but where he had been and jumped at the chance the moment he got it, as though it was about to be taken away from him. Fuck, Tony really hated the fact that he understood people a lot better than he preferred to let on. Where had the Cap even been since the Battle of New York? And fuck, couldn't he have waited just another couple of days, until Tony had the energy to-- Well, mostly until Happy was better and Tony could think straight again.

Still, he landed on the roof and let the mechanisms strip off the armor, made his way into the penthouse. And stopped short. Somehow, in the less than a day he'd been gone, every bit of tinsel and other decorative festive bit of silliness had moved itself from the boxes and onto the walls. Which-- How did that even-- Tony blinked. "Holy shit," he said.

Rogers's head popped out from behind some decoration or other and it was all Tony could do to keep from jumping in shock. "Hey, Stark," Rogers was saying, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck. "Thank you so much for the invitation. And, er... I hope you don't mind--" He gestured at the room as a whole.

Tony blinked again, tried to get his brain back up to speed. "I think we just figured out what your real superpower is," he said at last. "Thanks for that. I was going to use the suit."
Rogers looked positively horrified.

"I hope JARVIS helped you find a room," Tony said. "There should be a couple of suites down on Bruce's level."

"Yeah," Rogers said. "Yeah, sure." He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry," he added. "For just showing up, I mean. I just..." He trailed off, and Tony was struck again by the whole damn thought of what it must be like, displaced in time, with nowhere and no one and fuck, Tony didn't not have the emotional capacity to think through that.

"It's fine," he said, waving a hand dismissively, and God, since when did he get in the business of picking up strays? "We were just talking about you yesterday, actually."

"Oh?" Rogers said, and he looked so disgustingly touched that Tony couldn't quite help but feel a pang of something.

"Yeah," Tony said. "Turns out I have no idea how to explain Christmas to my son. Seemed right up your alley."

Rogers blinked and Tony muttered some excuse or other before making himself scarce. "Feel free to use the kitchen," he called over his shoulder. "And if there's anything you need that we haven't got, just tell JARVIS." He walked down the hallway, stopped and knocked on Jamie's door. "You in there, kid?" he asked, sliding the door open. Sure, the knocking thing was good manners and should be passed on, but Jamie was at least a good five years away from actually having to answer before Tony stuck his nose inside.

Jamie glanced up at him. There was something strange about his expression, almost sullen, which was extremely unlike him. Then he turned his attention back to the holographic game he was playing, narrow shoulders oddly tense.

Tony frowned, suddenly uncertain. Jamie wasn't acting like Jamie at all, and it was beyond disconcerting. "Rogers finished up the decorations," he said. "You wanna come see?"

Jamie shrugged, but didn't really take the time to remove his attention from the game. And that was definitely odd; he'd been way into those damn decorations yesterday before Tony left.

Tony moved further into the room, sat down on the floor next to Jamie. "Is this about Rogers?" he asked. "Did you not want him to come?"

"Don't care," Jamie muttered, and yeah, that was definitely more sullenness than Tony wanted to deal with, let alone nearly a full decade before his son was supposed to be a damn teenager.

"You feeling okay?" Tony asked, leaning in closer and wrapping an arm around Jamie, giving him a quick hug. He returned that, at least. "Is this about Happy?" As much as he'd tried to make sure Jamie wouldn't know, the kid was observant as all fuck and had been in the room for the beginning of Pepper's phone call. He'd know something was wrong. "Because Happy's gonna be okay, Jamie. All the doctors told me so."

Jamie shrugged again. "People get hurt when they stick their noses where they don't belong," he said, voice oddly tight, and Tony felt an odd kind of twist in the pit of his stomach.

"JARVIS, save progress and turn off the game," he instructed before swooping Jamie up into his arms. For a moment, all he could bring himself to do was clutch his son to his chest, as close and tight as he dared. Where had that even come from?
"I was playing that," Jamie protested, but his fingers were clenched in Tony's shirt, the top of his head nudging Tony's chin as he burrowed into his neck. His voice was shaky, and Tony felt another twist in response. Something had to have gone wrong. Someone in his daycare must've said something, or one of his teachers or, hell, even Bruce. Tony was sure JARVIS wouldn't have let him hear any of that from the media or anything in the apartment, and fuck, right now that didn't matter. What mattered was making sure that notion was erased, completely and utterly.

Only problem was, he had absolutely no idea how. Because it was true, wasn't it? Trying to do good did put people at risk. Except... "If no one ever stuck their noses where other people say they don't belong, we'd all get hurt," he said. "And sometimes being hurt is worth making sure we know what's going on and try to do the right thing about it."

"Happy got hurt," Jamie said, and his voice was definitely shaking now. He sniffled, on the verge of sobbing with it. "Maria says it's his own fault. He shouldn't get into other people's stuff. Daddy, why did Happy get hurt?"

Tony swallowed down the sudden lump in his throat. He squeezed his eyes shut, pressed his face into his son's soft hair for a moment. "Sometimes bad things happen to good people, even when they're just trying to do good stuff," he said. "It's not fair, but there are bad people out there, and they don't care about fair. They don't care that they hurt people. They don't care that they hurt Happy. But that just means we gotta fight harder, because they don't get to win."

"I don't care," Jamie declared, and he was speaking through sobs this time. "I just want Happy to be okay."

Tony ran his hand up and down Jamie's small back, wished he knew the right words, wished to God he could just make everything okay. For Happy. For Jamie. For everyone. A whole hell of a lot easier said than done, that. "How about we go look at the Christmas decorations?" he asked. "We can take a picture, send it to Happy. That way, when he's done sleeping he can see how nice it all looks."

There was a long pause where Jamie didn't say anything at all. Then, "Okay," and it was so small, so weak, Tony didn't know what to do with it. How had he never realized how frightening all of this must be to his son? How had he not stopped to realize that Jamie was getting old enough to start understanding just a bit too much, and not necessarily the right parts? For now, at least, it seemed like disaster averted.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who took the time and interest to bookmark, subscribe, leave kudos and especially comments. They really do mean the world to a writer.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Took a while longer to update than I anticipated. Sorry about that. Seems like IM3 is insistent on being as big a pain to write out as it was to plan, plus the WinterIron Holiday fic is still kind of rumbling through my mind, probably will be until it's posted. Hopefully I can speed this up once Christmas is over, at least. The middle part of the chapter is lifted from IM3, credit where credit's due.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"And who would you use for a stud?" Pierce asked. "The Red Skull wasn't just the serum. He was a genius scientist in his own right. Someone like Whitehall isn't stupid, but I don't think he's as smart as he tends to think. Besides, who knows what he's done to his body over the years?"

"There's the penchant for insanity as well, Herr Pierce. And having someone prominent from any of the factions father our next leader would defeat the purpose. One group would still have more hold over him than the others. We'd remain fractured."

***

Tony was already exhausted by the time he left Jamie's bedroom. The kid was properly asleep, finally, but it had meant sitting with him for nearly an hour and a half. He hadn't asked for the comfort, but he'd seemed so uneasy that Tony simply hadn't had it in him to leave, too fucking wrung out already from everything that had happened in the past day or so to be able to leave Jamie alone when he clearly wasn't all right. Tony shook the worries off as best as he could, let out a breath and made his way back down the hallway and into the living room. He headed straight for the bar, found his way through the decorations and quickly poured himself a couple fingers of scotch. "Want some?" he asked, blinking slightly when he realized Rogers was apparently still hanging around. Was there something wrong with the suite JARVIS had found him?

"Can't get drunk," Rogers said, strangely self-deprecating.

Tony shrugged. "Doesn't mean you can't drink," he said. "I have no plans of getting drunk either, for the record. Kid in the house and all that." He fished out another tumbler, poured and carried both drinks with him to the couch where he sat down a good few feet away from Rogers and handed over his offering. "Thanks, by the way," he added. "For talking to him. Turns out that for a genius, I've got surprisingly little understanding of holidays."

Rogers looked a little like he wanted to laugh but didn't quite dare. He covered up nicely with a sip from his tumbler. "I have a feeling he mostly thinks Jesus and Santa are both superheroes and the concept of a superhero day frightens him a little," he said with a wince. "Sorry about that. I did the best I could."

Tony made himself smile, sank into the backrest. He kicked off his shoes and pulled up his legs, tried to let some of the tension of the day seep out of him. Tried not to let the idea of Jamie being frightened by the concept of a superhero day get to him. "Better than I could've," he said. "Thanks."

"He's a good kid," Rogers said. "He--" He grimaced, and despite not knowing the guy, Tony could
imagine all too easily what it was he wasn't saying. 'He doesn't seem to hate me so much anymore'.

"Yeah," Tony said. "Sorry about that. Overactive imagination. And he was just... Really wound up that day. He knew something had happened, but he didn't know what, and I guess his mind just ran away from him. He's usually more polite than that."

"Today must've been difficult for him too," Rogers said. "With the-- Your friend. I saw you on the television earlier. If you need help, dealing with that situation. Just let me know."

Tony dredged up another smile, sipped his scotch and beat down the urge to just down the whole damn glass. "Thanks," he said. "And..." He grimaced. "I'm sorry, about that day. What he said. I wasn't too pleased with you back then, and he's really sensitive, picks up on things too easily, and--"

Rogers shook his head, cutting Tony off. "It's okay," he said. "I don't think either one of us put our best foot forward that day. And he really does seem like a good kid." He sipped his scotch again, eyes going distant for a moment. His Adam's apple bobbed on a swallow. "He reminds me, a lot, of someone I used to know."

Tony grimaced because yeah, no, they were actually getting along, stiltedly and awkwardly so, maybe, but that still counted. Bringing Howard into it would fuck things up in seconds. Still, all he could do was brace himself for it.

"He's a lot like Bucky," Rogers said.

"Wait, what?" Tony said, blinking, because that was not at all what he'd expected to hear. "Bucky Barnes? Your friend?"

Rogers nodded. "He even looks like him," he added. He frowned. "You think they might be related somehow?"

Tony shrugged. That was definitely not something he'd ever considered. Then again, he didn't really make it a habit to think about dead WWII vets. Was pretty sure he hadn't given Bucky Barnes more than a passing thought since Howard declared he'd grown out of his Bucky Bear and made him donate it to a children's hospital. "Not on my side," he said. "I mean, you'd know, but Howard and Barnes weren't related, and my mom was imported. I have no idea about Jamie's mother's side, though. Who knows? Not like we can run a test with nothing to compare the sample to."

Rogers frowned. "I'm not sure what that means," he said. "Not sure it matters either."

Tony shrugged, drank down the rest of his scotch. "Maybe I should get him a Bucky Bear," he said. "Wonder if they still make those." He stretched, pulled his t-shirt back down when he felt it ride up. "I have to get down to the shop. You've got free use of the bar, the kitchen, whatever. Tell JARVIS if you need anything."

Rogers looked at him with disgustingly earnest eyes. "Thank you, Tony."

***

Tony collapsed into the workshop couch, had to take a long moment just to rub at his temples, try to keep it all together. He sucked in a deep breath, tried not to think too badly about the memory of Happy's ravaged body, focus on what needed to be done instead. "JARVIS?" he asked, pulling himself up and walking to the nearest set of holographic screens.

"I've compiled a Mandarin database for you, Sir," JARVIS responded as Tony began to manipulate the data that came up in front of him. "Drawn from S.H.I.E.L.D., FBI and CIA intercepts." Tony
slowly turned around, holding the data packet between his hands before blowing it out into an exploded view. "Initiating crime scene reconstruction," JARVIS said, and took over, using every bit of information he'd been able to find to recreate the virtual scene that suddenly lay in front of Tony.

Tony quickly completed the set up, then stepped closer. "Okay," he said, taking the final step up onto the platform. "What've we got here? Names," he began, leaning in to read some of the nearest notes. He was vaguely aware of the fact that he was speaking his observations out loud, but that didn't matter. Might make it easier to think. "Close," he finally said, when he was pretty sure he'd got all he was going to get from the notes. With a hand gesture, he shot them down so only the virtual landscape remained.

"The heat from the blast was in excess of three thousand degrees Celsius," JARVIS observed, even as the blast was digitally reconstructed before Tony's eyes. "Any subjects within twelve point five yards were vaporized instantly."

"No bomb parts found in a three mile radius of the Chinese Theater," Tony added, beyond grateful that the 3D images falling away in front of him didn't particularly resemble actual people.

"No, Sir," JARVIS confirmed.

"Talk to me, Happy," Tony muttered, and gathered up the nerve to glance down at the digital representation of Happy's body, right at his feet. The representation expanded to life-sized. Data points emerged around it. Happy's face appeared, and yeah, no, he was going to have to get rid of that feature at some point soon. He pushed away the sudden bout of nausea, concentrated on the data, just the data. He needed to figure this out. He sucked in a deep breath, followed the lines and angles, where the blast had come from, tried to figure out what it was he was missing. JARVIS noticed Happy's finger and where it was pointing just as Tony did, outlined it in red just as Tony began to walk toward it. He sat down on the nearest chair, pulled part of the simulation out of the whole and placed it on a worktop. "When's a bomb not a bomb?" he muttered, pushing away every bit of evidence that didn't seem to matter. The image quickly became clear. He frowned at it, leaned down to squint at the virtual dog tags, verify that he was seeing correctly, before filing that away, sending the block off to be archived and analyzed as he stood back up. "Any military victims?"

JARVIS enlarged and clarified the dog tags, putting them up for easy viewing. "None, according to public record, Sir," he said. Tony hummed. "Bring up the thermogenic signatures again," he said, watching and getting into position as JARVIS carried out his demands. "Factor in three thousand degrees."

"The Oracle Cloud has completed analysis," JARVIS informed as Tony climbed up on top of a cabinet for a better view of all the data points JARVIS was bringing up. "Accessing satellites and plotting the past twelve months of thermogenic occurrences now."

Tony glanced down as everything was transformed into a map of the States and data points localized all over the place. "Take away everywhere that there's been a Mandarin attack," Tony said, sweeping his eyes over the map to make sure he wasn’t missing any details. One by one, he filtered out the ones that didn't fit. Who knew excess of 3000 degrees was so rare? Well, technically Tony did, and maybe he should be more surprised about the amount of explosions in the past twelve months in general, but-- There.

*Rose Hill, Tennessee.*

"That," Tony said, pointing at it. "You sure that's not one of his?" he looked at it more closely, squinting to catch as much of the information as he could.
"It predates any known Mandarin attack," JARVIS said while Tony was still busy rifling through digital files. "This instance was the use of a bomb to assist a suicide." He paused, and Tony was vaguely aware of muttering something or other as he brought the Rose Hill file to the forefront, zooming in and focusing on it. "The heat signature is remarkably similar. Three thousand degrees Celsius."

Tony frowned, looked at the articles, the file on the suicide bomber. "That's two military guys," he noted. "Ever been to Tennessee, JARVIS?"

"Creating a flight plan for Tennessee," JARVIS confirmed.

With a single gesture, Tony cleared the digital landscape. "Save all the pertinent files to the HUD," he said. "I better get some sleep. We got a big day tomorrow, buddy."

---

The next day, someone had cooked breakfast, which Tony found kind of odd, because usually even Bruce couldn't be bothered to make anything more complicated than toast and cereal before noon. Rogers, he guessed - Steve, it had to be Steve if he was calling Tony by his first name these days. Which, yeah, okay, if Steve was going to play personal morning chef, it might be worth offering to let him stick around. "C'mon," he told Jamie. "Let's have a seat, see if these omelets are as good as mine--"

"Your omelets aren't good," Jamie interjected, the little brat, but he did climb into the seat and waited expectantly while Tony scooped up servings of eggs and bacon for both of them and sat down. "This is good," Jamie added once he'd swallowed down his first clumsy forkful. "Did Uncle Bruce make breakfast?"

"I think this was Ro-- Steve, actually," Tony said. "You know Bruce doesn't like mornings."

"Breakfast was indeed prepared by Captain Rogers," JARVIS said. "He then went for a run, though he appears to be close to returning."

Tony winced. "Please tell me we aren't eating Captain America's breakfast," he said. Then he glanced at Jamie and winced again. "Steve's breakfast," he corrected. He wasn't sure where 'Maria' - and, by extension, Jamie - stood on the whole Cap issue these days, but he wasn't going to push it.

"No, he ate before he left. I believe he meant to cook enough for everyone," JARVIS said.

Jamie appeared mostly uninterested in that whole exchange, simply kept eating his breakfast. After a while, he glanced up at Tony. "Do I have to go to daycare today?"

Tony frowned. "Of course you do," he said. "It's not Christmas break for another week."

That sullen look made another appearance, and yeah, Tony really wasn't looking forward to the teen years. "Can't I just stay here with you?" he asked.

"Is this about what happened to Happy?" Tony asked. "Happy'll be just fine, kiddo. I promise. And no one's going to hurt you. If anything happens, the Iron Cradle will be right there. You know that, right?"

Jamie gave a shrug. "But if you're just going to the 'shop, I can come with," he said. "I can help, or I can be really quiet in a corner. I can play a game."

"You can play games with your friends in daycare," Tony said. "I have to go somewhere today. I
might not be back to pick you up from daycare, but I'm sure you'll have loads of fun, and Bruce will pick you up, and--"

Jamie's eyes narrowed. "Where are you going?" he asked, and for probably the first time, Tony kind of wished his son wasn't this intelligent. How many people in the world even had conversations like this with their three-year-olds?

"I'm going to Tennessee," Tony said. "I'm going to see if I can find the bad people who hurt Happy so they won't be able to hurt other people ever again."

Jamie's eyes widened, and suddenly his bottom lip was wobbling, big eyes tearing up. "You can't," he said.

"I have to, though," Tony said, reaching out and smoothing a hand through his son's hair. "I need to make sure they don't hurt more people."

Suddenly, without warning, Jamie was launching himself at Tony, latching on like a baby monkey. He was outright sobbing, one hand clenched in Tony's hair and the other in his shirt. "No," he was saying. "No, Daddy, nonono."

"Hey," Tony said, swallowing down the sudden lump in his throat. He stroked a careful hand up and down his son's back, returning the embrace. "Hey, buddy. It's gonna be all right. I've got the suit, you know. I'll be fine."

"No," Jamie sobbed. "No. Maria says you'll get hurt, just like Happy. I don't want you to get hurt. You can't go, Daddy. I don't want you to go."

And sitting there with his hysterical son in his arms, Tony was suddenly painfully aware that he was going to have to rethink a million things about his life. He leaned down, pressed a kiss to Jamie's dark hair. "Okay," he promised. "Okay, I won't."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who took the time to bookmark, subscribe, leave kudos and especially to those of you who commented. It means the world to me, especially when the story isn't exactly writing itself.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

So, that took a while, but I'm done posting Seize Yesterday, and we can get back to our regular scheduled 623. Have fun :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What do you suggest?"

"An outsider, unaware. And I happen to know of one genius who isn't too discerning about where he puts his DNA."

***

In the end, it didn't actually take that much thinking to figure out what his next step was going to be. It was simple. Ever since he'd come back from Afghanistan, Jamie had been Tony's first priority. Jamie had been the motivation behind everything, Iron Man, his decision to go public, SI's newer directions, even flying that fucking nuke into space. Every single thing he'd done that mattered, he'd done for Jamie. But now Iron Man was hurting Jamie. He'd reached an age that Tony hadn't really foreseen, where he was old enough to understand that what Tony did was dangerous but not mature enough to realize that sometimes that was necessary. Tony hated the idea of retiring the suit, even temporarily, hated the idea of letting bad things happen when he might've been able to do something about it. He had done so much shit in his life, it had only ever seemed right that he kept fighting to make up for it. But Jamie was the priority, and until he got to a point where the concept of Tony being in danger didn't frighten him to this extent anymore, Iron Man had to go.

Knowing he was doing the right thing didn't mean he felt any better about pushing tasks he could've done himself off on other people, though. "You're sure it's not a problem?" he asked, glancing at the nearest screen out of sheer habit. There wasn't anything to look at; Natasha, apparently, didn't do video in phone calls.

"Send me whatever information you've got," she said. "I'll grab the next flight out to Tennessee. Not like I've got anything better to do for the next couple of days. I'll get back to you when I know more."

Tony sighed, felt a lot worse about this than he probably should. Natasha would probably have fun with this kind of mystery. It was just... This one was especially difficult to let go. Tony imagined a lot of the things involving Iron Man would be, but this was even more so. This was about finding out who had hurt Happy, and why. This was as much about Tony Stark as it was Iron Man, if not more, and he couldn't help but feel like shit for pushing it off on someone else. Still, remembering Jamie's face when he'd begged Tony not to go, just a few hours earlier, that was enough to firm his resolve. "Thank you," he said, then rolled his eyes at himself. She'd already hung up, and he wasn't sure why that even surprised him anymore.

"I could've gone, you know," Steve was saying, and Tony had to stop himself from jumping a few feet into the air. Fucking super soldiers sneaking up on poor, unsuspecting people.

"Where'd you come from?" Tony asked, trying to cover up his shock. He glanced ahead of him, tried
not to feel too guilty at the sight of the holoscreen in front of him where his latest changes and refinements of the Clean Slate protocol were running through for final checks. It wasn't like Steve would be able to make heads or tails of the code anyway. And it wasn't like Tony had cause to feel guilty either. He was doing the right thing even if, for now, the right thing had to be what was best for his son and not, necessarily, what was best for the world as a whole.

Steve slid a cup of coffee across the nearest worktop, looking strangely bashful. "I wanted to--" He cringed. "I wasn't all into pulp and stuff, not like--" He stopped again, swallowed visibly, and again Tony felt that pang of sympathy. "I still find it interesting, though. All this new technology. JARVIS let me in. I didn't realize you didn't want-- I heard you, on the phone. With Romanoff. I'd have gone, if you'd asked me."

Tony flashed him a smile and hoped to God he looked even halfway reassuring. "Yeah," he said, "I know." And he was surprised to realize he meant it. He might not know Steve that well, and they definitely hadn't gotten off on the best foot, but looking into this was the Right Thing To Do, which meant he could've counted on Steve to be all over it. "But you aren't the best guy for the job. Neither am I, to be honest. We're both too flashy. Infiltration and investigation, that's got Natasha written all over it. I should've called her the moment I knew there was a lead."

"We did infiltration and investigation during the War," Steve objected, but it sounded half-hearted at best.

"Does 'we' mean 'you' or does it mean Dernier and Barnes?" Tony asked. "Even you have to admit you lucked out on that first POW rescue, and that it was more down to brute strength and luck than actual talent in that particular area of expertise." At Steve's dumbfounded look, Tony couldn't quite help a laugh. "Come on, you must've guessed I grew up on stories of you. You're no spy."

Steve looked almost sheepish for a moment, before a strange sort of melancholy took over his features. "It's just all kinds of surreal," he said. "It feels like, like yesterday. The concept of someone older than me having grown up knowing about stuff that I feel just happened, it--" He stopped, grimaced. Then he sucked in a sharp breath and put on a smile. "It was mostly Frenchie and Bucky," he acknowledged. "So I'm guessing we're on standby for whatever she discovers?"

Tony bit back a wince. "Well," he said. "You are. And Bruce, if it gets really bad, and I'm pretty sure Natasha's got Barton on speed dial. I'm mostly going to be playing tech support for a while."

Steve looked at him for a while, considering. Then he cocked an eyebrow. "This got something to do with a little kid who's scared by the concept of a superhero day?" he asked.

Tony sighed. "Yeah," he said. "I'll be back in the game soon enough, but not until he's ready. He's..." He reached up, ran a hand through his hair. "I'm all the family he's got, and my job is to make him feel safe, not to frighten him more. I hope you guys can understand that."

Steve reached out, clasped his shoulder. "I was wrong about you, you know," he said, and for a moment Tony felt his chest clench in some kind of hurt disappointment he didn't even want to attempt to assign words to. "You're a good man." He gave a light squeeze, his hand large enough to encompass Tony's whole shoulder which was, well, kind of creepy, actually. "Drink your coffee," he said. "Let me know if you need anything." Then he left, and Tony stood still for a moment, blinking and wondering what the hell had just happened before picking up the cup and downing it. Coffee didn't always make everything clearer, but it did make shit better.

***

Tony waited until after dinner. Might've waited longer too, what with the way anxiety kept building
tighter and tighter in the pit of his belly. Mark 42 and the Iron Cradle were still down in the workshop, he reminded himself. He and Jamie were still protected. He wasn't leaving them vulnerable for whoever was out there to stomp all over. He was doing what he had to do, in the here and now, to make his son feel safe, doing what he had to do to make sure Jamie could let his own anxieties go. He took a deep breath. Then he scooped Jamie out of his custom-made Tripp-Trapp chair, bobbing a finger against his nose. "C'mon, buddy," he said. "We're getting your coat and then I've got something to show you."

Jamie looked up at him, and Tony couldn't help but take note of how tired he looked. He definitely hadn't slept well last night. Still, he looked up at Tony with that incredible, overwhelming trust Tony still had no idea how he'd ever deserved, and nodded, an excited smile tugging at his mouth. "Is it a surprise?" he asked. "What is it?"

"Wouldn't be much of a surprise if I told you, now, would it?" Tony asked, giving Jamie a quick hug before he put him down on the floor. "Go get that coat, and put on a pair of shoes. It's cold out."

Jamie gave a quick hug and scurried off to do just that. Tony took the offered moment to suck in another couple of quick, deep breaths. Bruce and Steve had been surprisingly all right with Tony hanging up the suit for the time being, and he wasn't sure what to do about that exactly, whether to be grateful for their understanding or give into the nagging feeling that it was because they didn't particularly need him anyway. It didn't matter. It wouldn't change anything either way. He needed to do this. He did. And he needed to make sure he never forgot why. Jamie returned a moment later and Tony plastered on a smile, which actually turned genuine a moment later when he realized Jamie was dragging one of Tony's jackets along behind him, a mulish look on his small face. "It's cold out," he parroted.

Tony didn't even try to bite back his laughter at that. "You're right, Jay," he said. "Thank you. That was nice of you." He took the jacket out of Jamie's small hand and shrugged it on quickly. Something inside him swelled at the sight of the proud smile on Jamie's face, and suddenly it was the simplest thing in the world to take his son's hand and lead him out onto the roof and into the new chapter of their life. "Clean slate protocol, JARVIS," he said. He glanced down at Jamie, and for a moment, it actually felt like a weight was lifting from his chest. The apprehension would be back in a moment, he knew, but right now, right this second, he was happy with his choice, at peace with it. "Jamie," he said. "You know I love you, right?"

Jamie nodded, looking very serious for a moment, as if he really did understand the significance of the moment, even if he didn't know what was really going on yet. "I love you too, Daddy," he responded, and he was so earnest about it, stating it like a simple fact, like the Earth was round, and Tony would never get over how that made him feel, would never stop trying to deserve it, one way or another.

"What I want more than anything in the world," Tony said, "is for you to feel happy and safe. And right now, Iron Man isn't making you feel very safe, is it?"

Jamie looked hesitant for a moment, but then he shook his head, gaze falling for a moment before his eyes met Tony's again, all Stark iron despite his young age. "No," he admitted.

Tony nodded. "Then Iron Man is going to go away for a while, until you feel ready for him to come back," he said. He took a deep breath. "And we're going to send him off in style. JARVIS?"

Tomorrow, there'd be press conferences. There'd be explaining himself and watching the inevitable stock drop, there'd be nation-wide criticism to deal with and God only knew what else. Right then and there, though, there was only Tony doing whatever was necessary to take a weight off his son's thin shoulders that he'd never realized he'd put there to begin with. He reached out, lifted Jamie up
and watched as the suits flew out of the workshop hatch, one by one, creating a formation high in the sky. Then, one by one, they exploded like fireworks.

Tony wasn't going to pretend it wasn't painful, at least to himself. Wasn't going to try to convince himself it didn't hurt a little bit every time one of them went up in flames and multicolored sparks. For long moments, it was all he could do to keep his own breathing under control, to not see the wormhole, to not be consumed by the panic that threatened to make him break out in cold sweat and hyperventilating glory. He felt naked, in a way he hadn't felt in years, but in the end, none of that mattered. What mattered was the awe on Jamie's face, the relief in his laughter, the tight hold of his small arms around Tony's neck. That made it all worth it.

"Sir," JARVIS said, just as they were watching the last few bits of sparkling lights fade back into the usual light-polluted New York night sky. "Armed helicopters appear to be headed straight for the Tower."

Tony swore under his breath. "We're sure it's not just reporters?" he asked.

"Certain, Sir," JARVIS replied.

Tony swallowed. "Deploy the Iron Cradle," he said. "Set the course for the helicarrier." He got down on one knee, looked straight into Jamie's eyes. "You know how this goes," he said.

Jamie's bottom lip was beginning to wobble. His eyes were welling up with tears. "You're not supposed to fight no more," he said. "You're supposed to stay with me."

"I'll be right behind you," Tony promised. "Right now, you gotta be brave for me, though. Just like we talked about. Okay?"

With a loud sniffle, Jamie nodded.

Tony forced a smile onto his own face. "Go bug some pirates for me, kiddo," he said, reaching out and giving Jamie's hair a quick ruffle. Then he took a step back so the Iron Cradle could wrap around Jamie and send him to safety. "Get me the forty-two," he told JARVIS.

"Yes, Sir."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the bookmarks and recommendations, subscriptions, kudos and especially for the comments. You guys have no idea how many times you've made a crappy day better.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the wait. I appear to be suffering from a bit of writing fatigue after the Holiday Exchange. Thankfully, I'm about to go on vacation. Total relaxation and loads of heat. I'm crossing my fingers I'll come home refreshed and ready to churn out chapters at a better pace. (This does also mean that it'll be around two weeks before the next update, since I won't have my computer and internet might be spotty.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Later:

"Sir, Secretary Pierce, Sir, please, I can explain."

"I damn well hope you can, Jackson. For your own sake. So, please, do enlighten me. What could possibly have possessed your team to expose a pregnant asset to a near-lethal voltage of shock therapy?"

***

As battles went, this one barely counted. It was more of a skirmish. Might've counted as a back alley fight, except for how the Stark Tower most definitely did not count as a back alley. Between the built-in Tower defenses and the current houseguests, Tony didn't even manage to do more than keep the helicopters from crashing into pedestrians down on the street, which, considering the fact that he was supposed to have given this whole gig up just a few minutes earlier, was probably for the best. "Well, that was anticlimactic," he told JARVIS as he touched back down on the roof. "Damage report?"

"Minimal, Sir," JARVIS said. "It would appear the Hulk has some attachment to the current décor and went to some lengths to make sure nothing happened to it."

Tony blinked. "Well, who'd have known?" He glanced over the information flashing across the HUD before getting ready to take off again. "Could you tell Steve and Bruce I have to go fetch my kid back from S.H.I.E.L.D.?"

"Certainly, Sir," JARVIS said. "But--"

"Just set the course," Tony said. "Please tell me they haven't gone off radar."

"No, Sir," JARVIS said. "But the Iron Cradle does not appear to be heading for the helicarrier."

Tony frowned. "Must've configured those algorithms wrong when I formatted the new Mark. A short stab of worry went through him, but he shoved it away. There was bound to be a perfectly reasonable explanation here. "Track it."

"Search in progress," JARVIS said.

Tony gritted his teeth, hovering, and this part was never something he dealt well with, especially when it came to Jamie. Tony sucked at waiting, and right now was absolutely not a good wait. Every
moment he spent there, just hanging in midair, he could feel his anxiety rise, and panic would follow close on the heels of that, experience told him. He could already feel the first tendrils wrap around him, and--

"Agent Romanoff is calling," JARVIS informed. "Shall I put her through?"

It should probably be embarrassing just how relieved that bit made Tony feel. He let out a breath. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, do that."

"Stark?" Natasha said.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, sucked the breath back in. "Yeah, I'm here," he said. "How are things?"

"I'm in Rose Hill," she said. "Something is definitely going on."

"Could you be a little more specific about that, please?" Tony asked, trying to get his mind to switch back into some gear that wasn't screaming at him about how much he needed his son in his arms right the fuck now.

"Well," Natasha said. "I visited the memorial, the place where Chad Davis set off the bomb. Except six people died, including him, but only five impressions were left on the wall. I figured you may have some sort of insight there."

Tony narrowed his eyes, tried to think it over. "Somehow, he burnt hotter," he said. "Which is difficult, with the explosion being so hot already. He'd have to... He'd almost have to not just be at the epicenter, but be the epicenter, which--" He frowned, because that was triggering something, nudging some puzzle piece closer to its actual place, but not enough that he could quite read it yet. "What else?"

"I talked to Davis's mother," Natasha said. "She was supposed to meet with someone else, apparently, had some dead soldier's file with her and everything. I established a connection, but had to slip out when her contact arrived. I did manage to get pictures of the file."

"Send them to me?" Tony requested.

A moment later, they were flashing onto the HUD. Tony skimmed through most of the information, trusting JARVIS to highlight anything that might make a difference. He frowned. "Why's it marked MIA? Doesn't look like this guy was ever missing in action, he was--" And that was definitely a puzzle piece sliding into place. "AIM."

"Sir," JARVIS said. "The Mandarin has made another broadcast. Shall I stream it to the HUD?"

"Yeah," Tony said. "Yes. And send a copy to Natasha's phone. Right, Nat?"

"Thank you," she said.

The video streamed across the HUD, and Tony, fuck, he couldn't take this on top of everything else. Couldn't process this whole situation on top of everything else. Couldn't muster up the energy to feel anything other than numbness at the hostage situation.

"Don't call him," Natasha was muttering, and Tony was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to hear it. "Don't give them that. Don't--"

And then Ellis went on to give the Mandarin exactly what he'd wanted, and Tony watched along
with the rest of the country, mostly just resigned to the whole thing at this point, as the hostage was shot anyway. "If I want to get a call in with Rhody, I better do it before the White House comes along and monopolizes his time," he muttered. "JARVIS?"

"Placing the call, Sir," JARVIS replied.

"Tony, what?" Natasha was saying. "Why are they trying to lure War Machine, or whatever Rhodes is going by these days, into this mess? Why do you need to call him?"

"Hello," Rhody said.

"Hey," Tony said. "Do you think I should just go ahead and paint a target on the side of Stark Tower? Would that get me fewer or more unwanted drop-ins, do you think?"

A short pause. Then, "Tony, what?"

"Don't roll your eyes at me, Sour Patch," Tony said. "And don't pretend you aren't doing it either. I can hear it. It's literally like your voice is rolling its eyes at me, and that was a legitimate question. I did not deserve an eye roll."

"You deserved an eye roll," Rhody said. "What are you doing? Was the Tower attacked again?"

"Listen," Tony said. "Your big rebranding, your new design, that was AIM, wasn't it?"

"Yeah?"

Tony gritted his teeth because, yeah, he was still missing some pretty big pieces here, but he was beginning to see a picture and he did not like it one fucking bit. "Dammit. I need your login."

"It's the same as it's always been," Rhody said. "WarMachine68."

"And password please," Tony said. He could've had JARVIS hack it, but he preferred not to hack his friends' stuff if he could avoid it. It was rude, and it set a bad example for Jamie. Plus, with Rhody he only ever had to ask anyway.

"Look, I gotta change it every time you use it, Tony," Rhody said. "It's a pain in my ass."

"And you'd have to change it if I hack it too," Tony said. "Just make this easy on us both. Give me your login."

Rhody gave that annoying long-suffering sigh Tony was half certain Jamie was only a few months away from learning to imitate, which was scary as all fuck. "WARMACHINEROX with an X, all caps," Rhody finally said.

No one in the world could've had anything bad to say about the fact that Tony burst out laughing at that.

"Yeah, okay," Rhody said, but at least he was smiling. Tony could hear it, and he would testify to that if he had to.

"That is," Tony started, and finally managed to calm his laughter. "So much better than Iron Patriot. You know how difficult that was to explain to my son, by the way? I had to tell him that Captain America and Uncle Rhody did not have a baby."

Rhody groaned out loud. "Listen, the Secretary of Defense if trying to call me. I gotta go. Give Jamie my love."
"Come home for Christmas and give it to him yourself," Tony said, but he did allow the call to be cut. "JARVIS, get into AIM for me, would you?"

A moment later, they were in and looking through what appeared to be video interviews, with Natasha still following along from her end. It was streaming to her phone, should be, if she hadn't disabled that function along with everything else to do with video calls. There was Chad Davis, talking about not letting his injury beat him. And there was--

"That was the woman who came looking for Mrs. Davis," Natasha said. "Tony, she definitely had an arm when I saw her, and I'd swear on anything that it wasn't a prosthetic. They don't make them that lifelike and functional."

"Not yet," Tony muttered, making an absentminded mental note to look into that. He had a very clear idea, suddenly, and no clue where it had come from.

Then there was a vaguely familiar man (Aldrich Killian, as Tony remembered from recent research. He still didn't actually recall meeting the guy) talking about addiction and how it wouldn't be tolerated.

"They're testing some kind of drug," Tony commented. "And it's gotta be working, if that woman you saw had her arm back. Strong stuff, but they have to keep a lid on it. No one wants addictive medication." Grimacing, he directed JARVIS to open the video files for the test trials. 'Extremis'. Why did that sound familiar? "Oh my God," he breathed. "Shit, are those actually-- Are they on fire? What the hell--"

"He blew up," Natasha supplied, and even she sounded like she was having a hard time, either watching the footage or processing it, or both. Tony wasn't sure, he knew he was currently having a problem with damn near everything. "Bombs that leave no casings, no trace and burn so hot they incinerate everything around them," Natasha supplied. "You said yourself that Davis was not on top of the epicenter."

"He was the epicenter," Tony said again. "When's a bomb not a bomb?" He let out a breath. "A bomb's not a bomb when it's a misfire. This stuff doesn't always work. It's faulty. But he found a buyer. Sold it to the Mandarin."

"Seems like it," Natasha said. "Send me the files?"

"On their way," Tony said.

"That still leads us to a dead end," Natasha said. "We have no idea where the Mandarin is, or even where AIM operates from. I mean, sure, they'll have a nice office somewhere, but you know as well as I do that those will be cleaner than Cap on Sunday morning."

"JARVIS," Tony said. "Can you run a trace? Factor in available AIM downlink facilities, see if you can pinpoint the Mandarin's broadcast signal from there."


"Iran?" Tony supplied. "Pakistan?"

Natasha let out a groan that sounded strangely like a hiss.

"What?" Tony asked. "I thought we were done seeing who could list most country groupings and were moving onto individual States. JARVIS, where is it?"
"Actually, Sir," JARVIS said. "It's in Miami."

"Seriously?" Tony asked. "Can you bring that up on the screen for me?"

And, well, shit. It did say Miami, Florida.

"Sir," JARVIS added. "I have picked up the Iron Cradle signal. It appears to be in Georgia."

"Georgia," Tony muttered. "Why the hell is it in Georgia? What's in Georgia? JARVIS, track its course and set us to intercept. Can you get in touch with it?"

"Setting a course now," JARVIS said. "Sir, I am unable to establish communications with the Iron Cradle. It does not appear to be moving."

Just like that, panic shot through Tony's whole body, gripping him with cold fingers until he was gasping, trying to curl in on himself. JARVIS took control of the armor with just enough time left to keep them from crashing, but that wasn't much help. He couldn't breathe, could feel his throat tightening, couldn't properly see the HUD.

"Tony?" Natasha was saying. "Tony, what's going on?" A pause, and then, "Tony, breathe. Slow. Follow along with me."

And then she was breathing into the phone, slow and steady, in and out and in and out and Tony somehow managed to start copying her, slowly felt himself begin to regain some measure of control over his own body. "Keep your mind clear, Stark," Natasha instructed. "You need to keep it together and go get James. Are you all right to drive?"

Tony took a final, deep breath, vaguely aware that JARVIS had taken them supersonic. "Yeah, yeah," he managed, voice slightly rougher than he'd have liked. "JARVIS will send you the files and the coordinates and stuff. I'm going to go."

"Good luck," she said. Then the call cut.

What followed were pretty much the longest seventeen minutes of Tony's life. As if from far away, he was aware of JARVIS trying to talk to him, but JARVIS wasn't a chatterbox at the best of times, and with Tony not really answering, he didn't talk much either. He was also sort of aware of fielding a phone call from Bruce and Steve back at the Tower. He was pretty sure he managed to give them his destination and promise that he'd get back to them, and then, somehow, he was right there, right where the Cradle was supposed to be.

He managed a passable three-point landing, and then all he could do was stare and try to keep breathing while his heart threatened to pound its way out of his chest. The Iron Cradle was there all right.

It was empty.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for the bookmarks, recs, subscriptions and kudos and especially for all the comments. Without those, it probably would've taken even longer for me to get into the groove of writing this chapter.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry about the delay. I was on vacation, and then on the bus back from the airport, I managed to fall out and break my wrist. Only just started being able to type without pain this weekend. Sooo, have a very delayed chapter. Hopefully updates will become more regular again from here on out.

Some dialogue lifted (or slightly altered) from Iron Man 3. I don't own that either.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Sir, the situation was getting out of hand. Memories and self-awareness began to return as early as three months ago. He became aware of the situation about a month later. He was-- Maybe I better show you some of the surveillance."

A long pause, coupled with disapproving eyes and a squirming medical technician. Then, "Perhaps you'd better."

***

"JARVIS," Tony said, trying to keep himself together, trying to keep from panicking. "Track the chip. Right now."

"In progress, Sir," JARVIS responded.

Tony's heart was pounding. He could feel his whole body shaking, could feel his fucking helmet closing in on him. It took so much out of him not to give into the panic that he almost collapsed with it. Still, he made himself breathe deep and keep calm, look more closely at the empty husk of the Iron Cradle. "JARVIS, is that--" He trailed off, swallowed, damn near staggered under another wave of terror.

"Yes, Sir," JARVIS said, and it might just have been Tony projecting, but he was pretty damn sure he heard his own fear reflected in JARVIS's mechanical voice. "Judging by the blistering in the paint and the deformation of the metal, the Cradle has been exposed to significant amounts of heat. Not enough, I believe," he quickly added, "to have caused significant damage to Master James."

'Significant damage' was not the same as 'no damage', which was absolutely the only fucking thing Tony was in any way all right with. He glanced down at his hands. Even in the gauntlets, they were shaking. His knees felt like rubber; without JARVIS locking the joints of the armor, Tony probably would've collapsed. Something distressingly like a sob was caught in his throat. For a moment, it was all he could do to just keep his breathing somewhat steady, keep out of hyperventilation territory.

There was a part of him, locked in somewhere in the back of his mind, that wanted nothing more than to just break down and cry and wait for someone to come and take this off him. He shoved that urge away; he had more than forty years' experience to tell him no one was coming. Besides, he wouldn't want to lay down and quit without Jamie. This wasn't getting better until he had Jamie back, could make absolutely sure his son was all right. He just maybe wished he wasn't so alone. And yeah, sure, there were the Avengers. There was Natasha out looking into what happened to
Happy, there were Steve and Bruce on call and he knew he could call up Rhodey, but none of them would feel this way, and. And that mattered, suddenly. That mattered a lot. Most of the time, Tony was selfishly grateful to have Jamie all to himself, but there were times, the best and the worst ones, mostly, where he felt the lack of a, well, a parenting partner or what the hell you'd even call it, so keenly that it hurt. Right now, he'd have really fucking liked not to have had to be the only strong one.

"Sir," JARVIS said, and Tony straightened his spine, throwing off the pathetic internal whining as well as he could, which was pretty damn well. He'd known whining didn't get you anywhere since he was a toddler. "May I point out that some of the heat marks resemble human handprints?"

Tony swallowed, somehow kept himself steady. "Extremis," he said. "Could you send an alert back to everyone?"

"Yes, Sir," JARVIS said. "Tracking complete. Master James appears to be in Miami. The same coordinates where we tracked the Mandarin broadcasts." There was a pause. "Sir, I'm afraid the chip is not picking up on any signs of life."

For a moment, the world stopped. Time didn't matter. If JARVIS was still speaking, Tony wasn't hearing him. For that moment, absolutely nothing happened. Tony wasn't thinking anything, wasn't feeling anything. Everything had just. Stopped. And then it all crashed into him, striking him in a way nothing ever had. It wasn't despair or grief or anything like that. Sure, it was there. He could feel it, lurking in the background, threatening to come out and overwhelm him. But what hit him was rage, unlike anything he'd felt before. It burnt through him, fiery and icy all at once until he was grinding his teeth. His repulsors whined, charging up. He needed a target. He needed a Goddamn fucking target right the fuck now. "Let's go," he said, and he didn't even recognize his own voice.

JARVIS didn't speak, could probably read him well enough to know that right now, it would not be appreciated. He simply plotted out the course, and Tony kicked off, heading straight for Miami.

***

The security at Mandarin Mansion was laughable. Tony probably would've been able to MacGyver his way inside with Christmas ornaments and some perfectly legal stuff bought from the nearest hardware store. As it was, though, there was a special kind of satisfaction in repulsoring everyone's asses into next week. It didn't change anything, didn't make him feel any better, not really. It did make him feel less like he was going to scream until he had no throat left. It made the breakdown he could feel closing in on him seem a bit farther away. Nothing registered, not really, didn't penetrate the strange fog that seemed to have built up around his mind, shut him off from the rest of the world. He noticed things in bits and pieces, like the fact that the fountain was falling apart and the garden was overgrown and the security guards were wearing very cheap suits, but none of it connected, none of it became anything whole, significant.

And then he was inside, crashing through walls and not giving a fuck because, shit, if Jamie was-- He couldn't even think it. He just had no more shits to give. None.

There was a girl, passed out on top of a table. Vaguely, he mused that that was a bit strange, but then he let it go. Didn't matter, not in the great scale of things. Tony wasn't entirely sure anything would really matter in his great scale of things again. He pushed that thought away immediately when the roaring, black despair threatened to close in around him.

A man and a woman were gambling at a table, rambling about the air condition or something. Tony didn't care. He let the repulsors loose, half annoyed at the knowledge that JARVIS was overriding him, keeping the blasts non-lethal.
He smacked through another door, heard the wood splinter around him. On the HUD, JARVIS made sure to point out a TV screen paused on the Mandarin. At least Tony hadn't crashed the wrong party, not that there'd been any doubt in the first place. He moved on, crashing through into something that looked halfway between a cheap TV set and a gaudy bordello bedroom. Two girls were crouched behind the bed, looking at him with frightened eyes, hands in the air. Tony would've repulsored them anyway, except JARVIS was still overriding him, and fuck it, this time he really was deleting that piece of junk collection of scrap code.

Behind a door off to the side, a toilet flushed.

"Sir," JARVIS said. "Captain Rogers is attempting to contact you."

Tony blocked him out, muttered a 'mute'. Then he focused on the man coming out of the bathroom.

Confusion, in the end, was what brought things back into sharp relief. It was the Mandarin, no two ways around it. But he was staggering around, speaking about fortune cookies in a slurred British accent, wearing a shabby robe, and just-- What the fuck even was this? And how had the idiot not noticed Tony, in his suit, standing practically right in front of him? "Hey," Tony snapped out, forcing his teeth not to grind. He held a hand up in front of himself, pointing the repulsor right at the Mandarin, listened with some satisfaction to the whine as it charged.

The Mandarin's eyes focused on Tony, and he jumped, eyes widening, hands coming up above his head in surrender as a fortune cookie dropped to the floor. "Bloody hell," he shouted, still in that accent that didn't suit his persona at all. "Bloody hell. Iron Man? Take whatever you want. Except the guns are fake. Those wankers wouldn't trust me with real ones, and-- Anyway, if you want one of the birds--"

"Woah, woah, woah!" the not-Mandarin backed away, hands still up even as he staggered and hunched in on himself, and fucking shit, this guy was pathetic, wasn't he? Which begged the question, again, of who was pulling his strings. "He's here. And he's not here," Not-Mandarin finally managed, after he'd somehow maneuvered himself completely into a corner. His voice, the way he was speaking in a calm-the-crazy-down tone, was pissing Tony the hell off. "Where?" he heard himself roar. "Where is the Mandarin? Where is he?"

"Woah, woah, woah!" the not-Mandarin backed away, hands still up even as he staggered and hunched in on himself, and fucking shit, this guy was pathetic, wasn't he? Which begged the question, again, of who was pulling his strings. "He's here. And he's not here," Not-Mandarin finally managed, after he'd somehow maneuvered himself completely into a corner. His voice, the way he was speaking in a calm-the-crazy-down tone, was pissing Tony the hell off. "He's here, but he's not here. He's--"

Tony took a step closer, hand still raised, and Not-Mandarin couldn't seem to look away from the glowing repulsor. "What do you mean?"

"It's complicated," Not-Mandarin said. "Hey, it's complicated."

"It is?" Tony asked, and he could feel that enraged roar rising up inside him again, threatening to take him over, speak through him. He had half a mind to let it. "Uncomplicate it." He glanced over his shoulder where the two girls were tittering among themselves and watching the goings-on with dazed eyes. "Ladies out," he snapped. He didn't even bother watching as they wrapped themselves in sheets and ran out the door. "Sit down," he told Not-Mandarin, gesturing at the bed.

Not-Mandarin, for whatever fucked up reason, dropped to his hands and knees and began to crawl towards the window.
Tony gritted his teeth and fired off a blast that nearly set the idiot's beard on fire. "Sit," he heard himself scream.

Finally, the Not-Mandarin seemed to give up on whatever he'd been trying to do, got to his feet and plopped down on the bed. For someone who'd just been shot at, he was remarkably, annoyingly calm. Drugged out of his fucking mind, more than likely. He wafted his hands around a bit before letting them drop. "My name's Trevor," he said. "Trevor Slattery."

Tony let his hand drop, didn't charge the repulsor back up. He'd have it ready in a moment if he needed it anyway, and as much as he wanted to shoot shit, right now, even with the biting, nagging anger, he needed answers more than he needed anything. He took a step closer. "What are you?" He forced himself to calm down, to talk like a rational human being, even though he felt the furthest thing from it. "You're a decoy, right? A double?"

"What?" Slattery sounded genuinely offended. "What? No, no, I'm absolutely not." When Tony raised his hand again, Slattery gave a slight jump, and how the fuck did one person swing so violently back and forth between reactions when threatened? "Don't hurt me. I'm an actor," Slattery said, managing to make 'actor' sound like something else completely.

"You've got a minute to live," Tony informed him, quickly running out of patience. "Fill it with words."


Tony swallowed, felt his carefully laid puzzle fall into pieces all over again. "Then how did you get here, Trevor?" he asked.

"Uhm, well, I. Uhm." Slattery moved backwards as Tony advanced, finally placing himself in an armchair and realizing that, once again, he had nowhere to go. "Had a problem. With, uhm. Substances. And I ended up. Doing things - there's no two ways about it - in the street, that, er, a man shouldn't do."

Tony wanted to scream at him, or blow his fucking head off. "Next," he bit out.

"Then," Slattery said. "They approached me, about a role, and they knew about the drugs."

Tony bit his tongue until the worst of his frustration had passed. He didn't let himself examine the feelings that were ready at the heels of that frustration. "So, what? They get you off them?"

Slattery looked more than a little confused. "They said they'd give me more. They gave me things. They gave me this palace. They gave me plastic surgery. They gave me things." And then he was fucking falling asleep. The asshole was sleeping, at repulsor point, and Tony's baby boy was God only knew where, and--

"Did you just nod off?" He heard the snarl in his own voice and did nothing to bite it back. "Hey." He lifted his foot and nudged the idiot none-too-gently with the toe of his armored boot.

"Oh! And a speedboat," Slattery said. "And the thing was, he needed someone to take credit for some 'accidental explosions'." He made actual finger quotes at that last bit, and Tony was tempted to repulsor him out of spite.

And then, just like that, the pieces fell into place again. Formed a new picture, but this one lacked the holes the old one had had, and Tony felt rage tear through him. "'He'?" he asked through gritted teeth. "Killian? He created you."
"He created me," Slattery agreed.

"Custom made terror threat," Tony concluded. His jaw hurt from being clenched too tightly. His eyes stung, because fuck, why did they have to go and involve his baby boy in all this? What did Jamie have to do with anything? What-- Except Tony didn't have the luxury of thinking like that. He'd grown up in a family exposed to those kinds of threats. He knew that kind of thinking was useless. Jamie didn't have to have a damn thing to do with anything. It didn't work like that. It didn't-- He shook his head just slightly, pulled himself together by the skin of his teeth. No breaking down now.

Slattery was still talking, probably had been for a while. He seemed like the type of guy who couldn't get enough of the sound of his own voice. Something about serial killers and Western iconography, and Tony honestly didn't care. It already made sense. He wasn't some baby who needed it all laid out for him. "Of course, was my performance that brought the Mandarin to life," Slattery concluded. He began to offer Tony a beer, then seemed to think twice about that when he realized the faceplate would be in the way.

"Your performance?" Tony asked, and he felt old, and wrung out, and exhausted, and fuck all, he wasn't sure how many emotions one person could survive in such a small span of time. He wanted to sob, and he hated himself for it. It wasn't time for that. Not yet. He wasn't done yet. "Where people died?" His performance, which had been enough of a distraction to have cost Tony Jamie, and-- No. Not now. Not yet.

Slattery went onto a rant about theater blood and costumes and production values and who the fuck even cared?

"I'm sorry," Tony said. "But I've got a friend who's in a coma, and he might not wake up. I've got a son who's missing, and--" He had to stop, swallow, hated how weak he was making himself sound. "You're gonna have to answer for that. You're still going down, pal. Get it?"

He couldn't remember a time when he'd been more off his game, which was the only reason he could think of as to why he didn't realize what it meant when Slattery was staring over his shoulder rather than at him, when he hadn't even noticed the warnings the muted JARVIS had been flashing across the HUD. Only reason he didn't get himself knocked to kingdom come by the man sneaking up behind him was JARVIS taking control of the suit, making him spin and slam a gauntleted fist into a vaguely familiar bald head.

"Ah, ah, ah, ah," the television said, and Tony spun around to face it, recognizing Killian's smug features immediately. There was a small plastic bag in his hand. Tony just barely recognized the tiny, faintly bloody chip nestled within. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," Killian said. Then he stepped to the side, revealing what looked like a primitive clinic of some kind. And there, on the bed, lying mostly still but clearly alive, staring at the camera with wide, frightened eyes. Jamie.

Jamie was alive.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all subscriptions, kudos, recs, bookmarks, and especially the comments. I promise I'll answer all of them over the next couple of days, but right now my wrist needs to rest.
Also, I love co-writing and miss it terribly, and I have an idea I'd love to work with someone in shaping out and realising. So, if you're interested in co-writing and don't mind high fantasy, soulmate stories and mpreg, please ask me to tell you more (and link me to an example of your writing, so I can see if our styles are compatible at all). I really hope someone will be willing to give this thing a try.
Chapter 20

Hello everyone,
Not sure if anyone remembers me, but here I am again. I want to apologise for the delay.
As I mentioned in the last chapter, I broke my wrist. Turns out it healed up wrong, so I
had to go get it rebroken and reset, and I'm only just starting to regain any sort of
flexibility in the join. I'm still having some issues with soreness, so progress may be slow,
but I'm going to do my best to get back to regular updates.

The first clip shows a bland room made up of a bed and a bare array of medical equipment. The
Asset sits on the bed, looking out of character in pale grey pajamas. Eyes vacant, unmoving,
following his orders, however unusual. Everything in order.

The second clip shows a time stamp that places it several weeks later. The lights have dimmed. The
Asset lies on the bed, covered by a thin sheet. He's shaking, moaning in his sleep, thrashing and
turning. Nowhere near the quiescent rest that one should be able to expect from the perfect weapon.
Still, when a clearly frightened medical technician wakes the Asset up, there is no visible change in
him, only the habitual stance and vacant eyes.

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Afterwards, Tony didn't even remember stepping out of the armor amid JARVIS's loud objections,
didn't remember putting his hands up or letting himself be taken to a car. Not the ride through Miami
or the boat trip that took him out to some oil tanker or other. In some distant corner of his mind, he
knew he should be paying more attention, that every detail he took in might prove valuable later, but
he couldn't seem to process anything beyond the fact that Jamie was still alive, but still in danger.
The constant veering back and forth between panic and relief made it damn near impossible to think,
let alone to take in any of the things he’d usually have been able to register without a thought. Made
it impossible to care. He wasn't even sure what had happened to his armor.

And then Killian was in front of him, and Tony had never felt like this, never felt this all-
encompassing, damn near physical need to kill another person. This man had stolen his son, had
burnt him out of the Iron Cradle, had torn the tracker out of his arm - and not carefully, judging by
the amount of blood Tony had seen on that chip. Had threatened him, never mind if he'd used words
or not. The rage, the utter loathing, was so deep and base it threatened to consume every bit of him.
And fuck, it was all Tony could do not to physically jump the man and try to tear his eyes out like an
enraged animal.

"Mr. Stark," Killian greeted. "Kind of you to join us."

At the 'us', everything came into sharp focus and Tony found himself scanning the space anxiously,
looking for Jamie. Instead, his eyes fell on a familiar woman. It took just a moment for him to place
her face, which, really, was kind of stupid. He should've known she was involved somehow, no
matter how unlike her it sounded. Extremis was her baby, after all. "Maya," he greeted, the name
coming out curt. He turned his attention back to Killian. "You absolute asshole, where is my son?"
"Safe and sound," Killian said, and the smile on his face did absolutely nothing to ease Tony's need to pummel his face until even his own mother wouldn't recognize him. "In the other end of the tanker. We need to discuss business. Once we've reached a satisfactory agreement, I'll personally take you to see him."

Tony gritted his teeth so hard his jaw ached. Jamie must be frightened, alone in a strange place, surrounded by strangers. Tony ached for him, a physical thing, the pain of it sneaking through his whole body, cutting him, making his throat close up and his eyes threaten to sting. For a moment, all he wanted was to drop to his knees and beg, promise anything - everything - if he could only see his son. Pride be damned, principles be damned, Stark men are made of iron be damned; all he wanted was to see his son safe and the rest of the world could go to hell for all he cared.

Except no matter how much he sometimes wished it, Tony wasn't that stupid. He couldn't agree unthinkingly to whatever demands Killian had. He had to think about the consequences, like fucking always. Had to make sure he didn't take part in creating a world he didn't want his son to grow up in, had to make sure he didn't set them up to be stuck in a situation where they became disposable. Getting to Jamie wasn't enough; it was only the first step. He needed to figure out how to get them out of here as well, and preferably to a world that was still standing. Swallowing around the sudden lump in his throat, he looked up. "What business?" he asked, voice as smooth as he could possibly get it with the hint of a croak still clinging to the back of it.

Killian turned the floor over to Maya with a flourish that belonged in a public presentation and rubbed Tony entirely the wrong way. Maya at least had the decency to look vaguely uncomfortable when she cleared her throat. "This really isn't the way I'd have preferred to do things, Tony," she said. He believed her, and he didn't care one bit. No matter how badly she felt about it, he was still here. Jamie was still here, probably frightened out of his mind. Whether or not she felt a pang of conscience, that was still unforgivable. When he didn't respond, she visibly straightened her back, as if finally taking some kind of ownership of the situation. "What we're working on here---" she started.

"Extremis. I'm not a complete idiot." His palms hurt, he realized. It took looking down to find out that he'd been clenching them so hard even his short, blunt fingernails were digging grooves into the calluses on his hands. "So please tell me, what about that made you think you needed to kidnap an innocent little boy?"

She had the courtesy to flinch, not that it made much difference. Tony filed the observation away anyhow. If he encouraged it, the guilt might get bad enough that he could use it. She visibly steeled herself again. "This doesn't have anything to do with James," she said. "I needed you."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. He wasn't going suggest they let Jamie go and keep him. Not yet. He'd know the moment if it came; this was not it, and he couldn't waste it. "Really doesn't seem like the best situation for flattery, does it?"

"It's not flattery," she said. "It's--" She swallowed with a click, and a flash of resentment came over her face, there and gone again so fast he nearly didn't catch it. That wasn't good. "Bio tech isn't even your field, but you nearly solved it. Back in Switzerland. The glitch. You were drunk and playing around, and you nearly solved the riddle I've been working on for the past twenty years, in your head. And I'm so close now. Extremis is practically stable. I just need you to finish those equations, Tony."

"It's not flattery," she said. "It's--" She swallowed with a click, and a flash of resentment came over her face, there and gone again so fast he nearly didn't catch it. That wasn't good. "Bio tech isn't even your field, but you nearly solved it. Back in Switzerland. The glitch. You were drunk and playing around, and you nearly solved the riddle I've been working on for the past twenty years, in your head. And I'm so close now. Extremis is practically stable. I just need you to finish those equations, Tony."

Tony snorted. "Stable?" he said. "I'm gonna tell you right now that it really isn't. Out on the streets, people are going bang. They're painting the walls, Maya. You're kidding yourself."

A slight tic in her jaw. "You can help me fix it," she said then. She pulled an old scrap of paper out of her pocket. Some kind of convention nametag, Tony realized. Bern, signed 'You know who I am'. 
Oh, he'd definitely had his hands on that at some point, even if it was ancient history. She flipped it over and showed him the writing on the back.

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "Did I do that?" he asked.

This time she looked almost sad, and fuck her and fuck her emotions. He really didn't give a damn right now. "Yes," she said.

Tony shrugged. "I remember the night, not the morning. Is this really what you've been chasing around?"

"You don't remember?" she asked, looking downright devastated, and some smidgen of satisfaction ran through Tony at the sight. He did remember. Even if he hadn't, she was practically repeating herself. And seeing the equations in front of him definitely was triggering something.

"Can't help you," he said. And there, there was that look in her eyes. This was the moment, or would've been if Killian hadn't been there. He could get to her. He really could. The relief almost made him stagger, despite the anger still flowing through him, and fuck, who knew one person could feel so many emotions in one day?

Killian stepped in, then, literally taking a step forward. For a moment, he reminded Tony of Hammer, always trying to make himself bigger, always trying to own the room, always coming up just a little short. Except Tony was starting to think this guy was a hell of a lot more dangerous than Hammer. "I think it's time you saw your son, Tony," he said. "Maya, why don't you take him?"

Maya gave a jerky nod, and led the way out of the room.

This time, Tony was more aware, more alert, able to take in the layout of the tanker, commit it to memory, store it so it would be easily available when he needed it. And he would need it. Sure as fuck didn't plan to stay here one second longer than he had to. Speaking of... "What happened to you, Maya?" he asked. "You used to have a moral psychology. You used to have ideals. Wanted to help people. Now look at you. Kidnapping innocent children to get what you want. Letting fuck knows how many others become collateral so you can finally make your discovery. I get to spend every day of my life around people who still have their souls."

She looked stricken, looked almost guilty. They'd stopped moving at some point, which was no good. They needed to be right by Jamie when she made her choice so that Tony could be out of there with his baby boy in his arms before she inevitably changed her mind. He started walking again, setting a quick pace, and she took the prompt, leading the way onwards.

Finally there was a door, and Maya unlocked and opened it, and inside, sitting on what still looked disturbingly like a hospital cot, was Jamie. Tony's throat went tight, and his knees almost gave out from under him at the relief of it. "Jamie?" Tony asked. "Sweetheart?"

Jamie lifted his face, grimy with tear tracks, eyes too big in his face. "Daddy?" he asked. And then he was across the floor and in Tony's arms before he inevitably changed her mind. He started walking again, setting a quick pace, and she took the prompt, leading the way onwards.

"Daddy?" he asked. And then he was across the floor and in Tony's arms, and Tony clutched him as tightly as he dared, kissed the top of his head, hands frantic as they checked the kid over for injuries besides the obvious, bandaged wound on his arm. "Daddy, you came," Jamie whispered.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut. "Yeah, buddy," he managed, voice far too thick. "Of course I did." He made himself straighten up, forced his voice back under control. Then he turned so he could meet Maya's eyes over Jamie's shoulder. "Get us out of here," he said.

Her eyes flickered with something like fear. He saw the momentary determination in them, felt relief
flood him, threaten to steal every last bit of strength he had left. Her mouth opened.

So did the door. "You know what my old man used to say to me?" Killian asked, the smile on his face carefree, his body language casual, as though none of this bothered him in the slightest. Tony wanted to kick his teeth in. "One of his favorites of many sayings. The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese."

Tony steeled himself, made himself not waste time mourning the window that had opened and closed back up just as fast. "Not still pissed about the Switzerland thing, are you?" he asked, carefully cupping a hand over the back of Jamie's head, shielding his face in the crook of Tony's neck. The less he saw and heard and eventually remembered of all this, the better off he'd be.

"How can I be pissed at you, Tony?" Killian asked, still terribly casual, forebodingly so by now. "I wanted to thank you. You gave me the greatest gift that anyone's ever given me: Desperation. If you think back to Switzerland, you said you'd meet me on the rooftop, right? Well, for the first twenty minutes I actually thought you'd show up. And then the next hour I, well, I considered taking that one-step shortcut to the lobby, if you know what I mean."

Normally, Tony would've deflected, would've tried for humor, something, anything, to stay in control of the situation, grasp onto some illusion of superiority. He wasn't going to risk provoking these people, though. Even if the suit was still under his control - and he honestly couldn't remember if he'd made sure to secure it - it would be all the way back in Miami. It wouldn't be here in time to keep them safe if Killian went completely unhinged.

"But as I looked down over that city," Killian continued, "- nobody knew I was there, nobody could see me, no one was even looking - I had a thought that would guide me for years to come. Anonymity, Tony. Thanks to you it's been my motto ever since, right? You simply rule from behind the scenes because the second you give evil a face - a Bin Laden, a Gadaffi, a Mandarin - you simply hand people a target."

Tony squeezed his mouth shut, didn't say any of the million things springing to mind. This man was mad, was fucking certifiable, that much was clear, and that probably only made him more dangerous. As much as Tony usually preferred to poke at things until they exploded and he could repair the remains, with Jamie he had to be careful, so fucking careful. He couldn't lose his son. Could not. Would not. Never.

Killian proceeded to go on a ramble about the fake Mandarin, gesturing and intonating as though it was some kind of performance, and Tony gritted his teeth, tried to focus on Jamie's trembling form, on keeping them both calm. They'd get through this. They'd get out. They had to. "Anyway," Killian said, finally seeming like he was about to wrap up his damn monologue. "Ever since that dude with the hammer fell out of the sky, subtlety's kind of had its day."

Tony didn't want to give him anything, but nor could he afford to piss the asshole off. "So what's next for your world?" he asked, teeth gritted so tightly his jaw ached. He couldn't manage more than a monotone, let alone anything that could pass for actual interest. And he knew that was stupid, knew that whatever information he could get, he should grab with both hands and clutch tight. He couldn't make himself care about that, though, not until Jamie was out of danger. Couldn't even care about the way his head was going in circles, jumping from one conclusion to the opposite one like a rat in a maze. He was surprised he hadn't lost it yet.

"I want to repay you," Killian said, and Tony felt a cold shiver of foreboding trickle down the back of his neck. "The selfsame gift you so graciously imparted to me." And suddenly, Tony was noticing the suitcase in his hands, the syringes lined up inside. The smile on Killian's face was deceptively
sane, even as Tony felt terrible, utter, gut-wrenching fear begin to take him over. "Desperation," Killian said, pulling out a syringe. "You or the kid, Tony?"

Tony clutched Jamie all the more tightly, and he was probably hurting him, but he couldn't let go, could barely breathe through fear and rage and God, who the fuck would even--

Killian took a step closer.

"Me," Tony said. It came out sounding like a croak. "I'll do it. Just--" He swallowed, and he wasn't sure who was shaking the hardest, him or Jamie. Jamie was clutching at him, was mumbling something or other, but Tony couldn't hear him over the rush of blood thrumming through his ears. Tony caught Maya's eyes over Killian's shoulder. She'd gone pale, lips thinning. One hand was hidden behind her back, but she was trembling. No help to be found there.

"The boy it is, then," Killian said with a broad smile. "Thanks, Tony. We've needed a juvenile test subject quite desperately. Need to find out what effects it'll have on a body that's still developing." He took a step closer, syringe held up.

Tony stumbled backwards. Felt the wall against his back. They were cornered, like fucking animals.

Nowhere left to go.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for sticking with me this long :D All comments were read with a smile (and have finally been answered). Thanks so much for those, as well as all kudos, subscriptions and bookmarks/recs. They meant the world to me, even when I couldn't do much of anything.

Some dialogue was taken from Iron Man 3. I own none of that, obviously.

And I'm still really looking for someone who's interested in co-writing a piece. Hit me up if you're interested.
Hello everyone. So. Stuff happened. Like some of you may or may not remember, I broke my wrist about a year ago. It healed wrong. Had it rebroken (by a doctor this time). It healed again, properly this time, except now I apparently have my grandmother's wrist and have to regularly use a brace for it if I strain it or, you know, the weather's bad.

Either way, around the time I could properly use my wrist again, Cap: Civil War had come out, and that film fucking slew me. I'm not really going to go into it so much more than that, but yeah, I didn't know what to do with the MCU fandom at all for a while. So, I spent some time reading stuff in other fandoms. Then I retreated into Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire for a bit (yup, that's how much Civil War hurt me), read a lot and wrote an AU where everything's nice and dandy for my fave (turns out I'm a Stark girl regardless of the universe). If any of you are into GoT/ASoIaF and feel like it, you can find that fic under my pseudonym.

Then I decided it was about time to finish editing an original work of mine from a few years back, got started on that. And then I realised I was kind of past Civil War. I can deal with it now. Watched Dr. Strange, and loved it. I'm reading MCU fic again. So, in the end I decided I'm going to try my damndest to finish at least one of my MCU stories before I return to working on my original stories. I went back to this one, and I've been reworking the plot to work with AoU and CA:CW, and so far I kind of like where it's going.

Unlike last time, I do not have a lot of free time on my hands. I can't give a certain posting schedule and be sure I can stick to it, and I can't promise I'll always be answering reviews - it takes me a lot of time to answer those, and I have calculated that several times, I've spent longer answering comments than I did on writing the chapter itself. Even so, common thread questions, I'll do my best to answer in the next chapter's notes, and I'll do my best to engage when I have the time on my hands.

Either way, know that reviews do help fuel me to keep working towards reaching that elusive end, and that I read each and every one and am so grateful for them.

So, now, onto the chapter. Hopefully, some of you remember the story. If not, hopefully I can pick up a few new readers along the way. Either way, I hope someone out there enjoys.

The timestamp has moved another few weeks forwards. The change isn't visible, not at first. The Asset sits still on the bed, as he should. A closer look, however, reveals the glaring difference to earlier. The pale eyes are no longer vacant, are the furthest thing from empty. He's doing the one thing he was never meant to do; he's thinking.

The timestamp, in the next clip, has only changed by a few days, but it's a different room, still in the laboratory section of the base, but there's more equipment present. Scanners, an ultrasound machine and a monitor. Several medical technicians are busy checking the Asset over. It takes medical
training, or observational skills beyond the ordinary, but on the monitor, the faint shapes of two tiny embryos can be made out. The Asset is still as always, passive, but once again his gaze is alert, following everything, observing, moving about the room and seeming to take everything in, from the movements of the technicians to the ultrasound wand and the gel on his bared, still flat stomach.

It is beyond disquieting

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Tony felt adrenalin pump through him, felt the desperation turn into something else, something almost feral, wholly instinctive. The only way the asshole was going to get to Jamie was if he went through Tony first, and Tony was not going to make that easy. He put Jamie down, stepped in front of him. Jamie wasn't even objecting, for all that his small hands were scrabbling to hold onto Tony's pant legs. God, the kid must've been beyond frightened. Tony was too, somewhere in a corner of his mind that wasn't consumed by rage and a pure protective instinct he thought he might've only ever felt shadows of before. He would do anything, could almost believe he could do anything, so long as Jamie made it out in one piece. That was all that mattered.

"C'mon, Tony, loosen up," Killian said, stepping all the way into Tony's space. Tony forced himself to remain still, to wait for the moment where he'd be able to get Jamie an opening. "It won't hurt much, and then we can discuss salary and benefit packages. I even offer childcare." Something had changed in his voice. It was still smug, but the mock jovial tone had vanished, leaving behind something far darker. His eyes flashed, fiery as embers, and that same rush of fire seemed to flicker over the skin of his face for a moment, making him look the furthest thing from human. Tony swallowed. Extremis. Killian had shot himself up with Extremis.

Tony wasn't getting out of this one alive. Jamie might not either, as much as that thought hurt, but Tony definitely wasn't. The certainty was alien, detached almost. It settled him, though, in some strange way. Calmed him. He would do his best, and then there'd be nothing else left. He sucked in a shuddering breath, tensed his muscles in anticipation, and--

"Let them go."

Tony's gaze flickered past Killian to Maya, and shit, he'd damn near forgotten she was even here. Had forgotten how close he'd felt he'd come to getting through to her. Closer than he'd realized, it seemed. "Hold on," Killian said. "Hold on." The mock-jovial tone and expression were back, and he actually had the gall to pat Tony's shoulder as he turned around. Tony let his eyes settle on Maya again, took in the situation completely. She had a syringe, a second syringe, and she was. She was holding it to her own bared neck, and what the fuck even--

"Maya," Killian started.

"I said," Maya repeated, voice stronger now, more determined. Killian's attention seemed to be completely on her, and Tony, heart pounding, took the chance to reach back and grip Jamie's hand tight, began to edge towards the door. "Let them go."

"What are you doing?" Killian asked. Tony was still watching intently, doing his best not to make the faintest noise. He took another step, and Jamie copied him carefully, silently. One more step, and another. Just a few feet, and they'd reach the door.

"Twelve hundred CCs," Maya said. "A dose half this size and I'm dead."

"It's times like this my temper gets tested somewhat," Killian said. Thankfully, although the words were clearly aimed at Tony, he didn't turn around, didn't pay them any attention. He was too focused
on Maya, who - although she must've been able to see every step Tony and Jamie took - didn't give a thing away. "Maya, give me the injector."

"If I die, Killian," Maya said. There were tears in her eyes now. They flickered to Tony for a moment, shot through with something that looked a lot like remorse. She didn't look long enough for Killian to catch on, and Tony took another step, and another. He could almost reach the door handle now. "What happens to your soldiers? What happens to your product?"

"We're not doing this," Killian said, and his voice had picked up speed. He actually sounded agitated now. Tony wished it could've given him any kind of satisfaction. Wished he could even bring himself to care whether Maya made it or not. But none of it mattered, not next to the thought of getting Jamie out of here. "Okay, Maya?"

Maya took a step back and Killian stalked after her, still facing away, but further from the door now. "What happens to you? What happens if you go too hot?"

Killian stopped advancing, and Tony filed those words, that piece of information, away from some other time, when it might be useful. Tony took the final step, cracked the door open - it made no noise, fucking thank Thor and his dad for that one. He guided Jamie through and made to follow. And then Killian was turning to look at Tony. Tony saw the flash of panic in his eyes, and there was a gun - how the hell had Tony not seen the gun? - and the ringing pop of a shot, and Maya was dead, and--

Tony pushed it all away, threw himself out the door, grabbed Jamie's hand and ran. Lifeboats. There had to be lifeboats. Or a chopper. A chopper would be really fucking good right about now. The deck rang out with a metallic clang with each of their footfalls, and the moon was glinting on the ocean. Tony couldn't see land anywhere, and where the fuck was that helipad?

Up. They'd have to go up. Even if the helipad turned out not to be up high, it would give him some kind of a vantage point, some clue, some plan that was less vague than hoping they found transportation so he wouldn't have to throw himself and his son into the fucking ocean when they were so far out he couldn't even see the coast.

There was a lump somewhere in his throat that had nothing to do with exertion or shortness of breath, and fuck, right now was really not the time to be fighting down tears, no matter how fucking frightening this whole thing was. Jamie was holding up all right - okay, he had tears trailing down his cheeks and his hand trembled in Tony's, but he was still doing as he was told, was keeping up admirably. If Jamie, not even four years old yet, could stay that strong, Tony damn well could too. He reached down, scooped up his son - he wasn't sure if he was trying to comfort them both, or if it was an attempt to get more speed - and rushed towards the narrow metallic staircase he'd just caught sight of.

He heard footsteps behind him, but he couldn't - wouldn't - turn around to look. Keeping one arm around Jamie, he grabbed the stair rails and hauled himself up as fast as he possibly could. His breath was ragged, and his pulse pounded like a drum in his ears. Jamie's small hands clutched at his shoulders, and the top of his head was digging into Tony's collarbone, and Tony was pretty damn sure the heat and weight of it, the need to get his son to safety, was the only thing keeping him going. When was the last time he even slept?

Just a few steps left, and he'd be up top, able to finally get a proper view of the layout of the tanker. He hauled himself up, and up, and--

A beam of fire crackled through the air in front of him. It was all he could do not to drop Jamie, fall right back down the fucking stairs. As it was, he managed to turn around and shield his son with his
body. He could feel the heat scorching his back, probably burning holes through the fabric of his t-shirt.

"I thought that might make you reconsider," an all too familiar, all too smug voice said. Tony looked over his shoulder at Killian. Something like embers were still visible under his skin, making him look like some terrible, mythical monster. "Listen, Tony, you should be able to take it as a challenge."

There was that ugly smile on his damn mug again, there and gone again within a few moments.

"Look on the bright side. I inject him, and you get to save him. Or I can burn you both to a crisp."

Tony could see movement off to several sides. They were surrounded, and even if it had only been Killian, Tony still might not have stood much of a chance, not without the suit. So what the hell was he supposed to do? There was no way in hell he could let Jamie be shot up with that shit - even if Tony had almost figured it out, drunk and distracted, over a decade ago, even if it might help him find an opening, even if-- No, there was no way in hell that was happening. And there was no way they were getting burnt to a crisp either. So what the hell was he going to do?

Jamie sniffled wetly against his throat, his arms tightening around Tony's neck for a moment. And then, before Tony quite registered what was going on, the kid had slithered out of his hold and was walking across the deck towards Killian. Not fearless - he was trembling, narrow shoulders held too stiffly - but so fucking brave, and maybe Howard had had a point way back when. Stark men were made of iron indeed, with Damascus steel for spines. All those thoughts, those smidgens of admiration, crossed through Tony's mind within a fraction of a second, and then he was screaming at Jamie, damn near begging him to come back. He launched himself after the boy, but another beam of flame blocked his path, and he had no choice but to throw himself back.

"What's it like to know your kid is smarter than you?" Killian asked. His hand was tight around Jamie's arm, and Jamie still held his head high, shoulders squared, and Tony was proud, so damn proud, and so frightened he thought the reactor would give out on him.

Jamie's tiny fists clenched. "Daddy will save me," he said, and his voice shook, and Tony wanted nothing but to hold him and never let go. God, why couldn't he act his age for once in his short life?

The flame dissipated, and Tony was lurching forwards again, except there were hands now, on his arms and shoulders, holding him back. He was vaguely aware of the heat burning through the fabric of his clothes, scorching his skin. He couldn't feel it. Couldn't feel anything other than rage and bone-deep fear when he realized he was never in a million years going to be able to break those grips.

He could do nothing but watch as Killian brandished the syringe once more, stabbed it into Jamie's neck. He pulled the plunger, and Tony's whole world stopped.
Thanks so much for the support, and especially the reviews - those really do mean the world to me. Even though I haven't answered, I have read and enjoyed each and every one, and thanks so much for your well-wishes regarding my wrist. It means so much. Thank you so much for your understanding, and I am so happy to see that there's still an interest in this story.

Some of the review questions are answered in the post-chapter A/N.

For this chapter, I am going to add a special warning for a pregnant person attempting to deliberately induce miscarriage.

Also a note that my use of Tony's 'fixed' Extremis is some kind of mixture of film canon and what I know of the comics, ie the technopath element.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The timestamp has moved another two weeks in the next clip shown. Initially, there's no great change. Sure, the Asset's eyes are disturbingly alert, but then he has been out of cryo for longer than he has ever been since the initial programming and training. There's a flash of indiscernible emotion on his face, something caught somewhere between rage and sorrow. For a moment, all that shines through is tenderness beyond what anyone would've ever expected of an emotionless weapon. His flesh hand caresses his own belly, where the slightest bulge has become visible. Then determination takes over. He pulls back his metal arm and slams his fist, hard, into his own abdomen. All through the videotaped room, red lights flash. There's no audio in this part of the video, but anyone can look and imagine the blaring alarm. The scene fades away.

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There was a period of time that was somehow wholly missing from Tony's memories. Whenever he tried to recall those first few moments after Killian had stabbed the syringe into Jamie's neck, his mind hit on a blank. More often than not, that blank would trigger a panic attack that left him on the floor, gasping for air.

When he did come back to himself, though, there was absolutely no room for any panic attacks, wasn't room for anything other than what he had to do. He couldn't allow himself to think in anything other than formulas and equations, or he'd break down, and he wouldn't get back up.

He couldn't look at the hologram of Jamie that Killian had put up in the shoddy, makeshift lab (for motivation), but he also could not. Watching Jamie writhe and scream in pain made Tony want to die, to take his place, *anything*. It made him feel useless, utterly worthless, in a way he never had before. Fucking impotent. What kind of a father could've let something like that happen to his child?

Watching made it so damn hard to breathe Tony came close to passing out more than once. Not watching made him feel like the scum of the Earth, because if he could do nothing else, the least he owed his brave, wonderful son was to bear some kind of fucked up witness to his suffering. He was guiltily grateful that there was no audio link. Listening to the screams he could see all too clearly wrenching their way out of Jamie's mouth would've broken him, completely and utterly.
He wasn't sure he was completely sane anymore. Or maybe it was the world as a whole that had lost its head. How the hell could any kind of a human being bring themselves to do something like this to an innocent child? Jamie was three years old, Christ's sakes. He was three years old, and screaming his head off from excruciating pain, fire visibly scorching right beneath the surface of his skin. And Tony wasn't even allowed to be there to comfort him. He'd never wanted to hold Jamie and keep him safe the way he did right now.

Now, Tony wasn't a stranger to the fact of life that was child kidnappings. He'd been a victim of them himself more times than he cared to count. No one had ever seriously hurt him, though. Not until he was an adult. Not anything that really counted anyway. How the hell could anyone bring themselves to do this?

Bringing his mind to the formulas and equations and locking it there was the hardest thing he'd ever done, and the most necessary one. He needed a plan, and he needed it now, before that bastard kil--

He couldn't think that. Couldn't, or that would be the end of it.

He brought the basic formula up onto the (networkless, fucking bastards) computer he'd been given access to, worked through the numbers with a fevered kind of desperation he hadn't experienced in his life, even when the palladium was killing him.

They brought Jamie's bloodwork in for him to analyze. He wasn't sure what time it was. He was so fucking tired he couldn't even see straight, but it wasn't like he could just stop either, not while his son was burning the fuck up a few (insurmountable) metal floors away.

The blood was unlike anything he'd ever seen. There were similarities to what little information he had about Steve's blood, but it was completely different all the same. This was painfully unstable, like water drip-drip-dripping toward a lump of magnesium, and fuck, no, fuck--

Was this how his parents had felt those times when he'd been kidnapped as a kid? Tony wasn't sure he was doing them a major disservice by thinking not. Maybe he wasn't giving them the credit they deserved. He know his mother had to have been worried sick. Maria Carbonell-Collins Stark had loved him, through her hazes of pills and alcohol and depression, she'd loved him, in her own fucked up way. Howard, he wasn't so sure about. Howard had implemented the policy about never negotiating with kidnappers. Tony wasn't sure if that had been to protect him or to protect SI. He knew that right at this moment, he'd give everything he owned if he could just have Jamie, safe and healthy, in his arms.

His mind was running 'round and 'round, and focusing was getting so damn hard he could've sobbed with it. Plan. He needed a plan. Okay, okay. What he needed first was a clear objective, and that one was pretty damn obvious. He wanted to get at least Jamie - and preferably both of them - out of here alive. So far, so simple. So how did he accomplish that?

What were the obstacles? Jamie was hurt as all fuck, and they were surrounded by fiery super soldiers on a craptastic boat in the middle of the ocean. Okay, yeah, reality sucked. Just when he'd been starting to think reality might be something he could live with - Christmas had been looking good this year - shit like this happened.

How could he overcome the obstacles?

That was the billion dollar - or son saving - question, wasn't it? Even with the suit, Tony wasn't sure he'd be able to hold his own against however many fucking Extremis soldiers Killian had here. And if Iron Man wasn't enough, then what the fuck was he supposed to do?

He glanced at the screen in front of him. Felt his stomach turn. No. He couldn't, could he? There was
no fucking way he could shoot himself up with this shit, right? Right. It wouldn't do one bit of good if both he and Jamie wound up unstable enough that even if they survived this shitstorm, they'd only end up blowing up Avengers' Tower. Tony might rescue his son only to harm him more in the long run. So what, then?

What then. That was the question, wasn't it? Same one fucking Killian wanted him to answer. And Killian - Maya, really - was the one who'd given him the answer.

He'd clean up the formula. Get this shit working right. Then he'd be able to save Jamie and end this fucking shit show all in one go.

Tony took a deep breath, buckled down and went to work.

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Somewhere in the back of his mind, Tony was aware Killian should have more eyeballs on him than he did. There should be a guard inside, if only because of Tony's history with kidnappings and their tendencies to end up worse for the kidnappers than him. There wasn't, though. There were a few video cameras, but it was ridiculously easy to find blind spots and angle himself so nothing of what he was doing was visible. Something had to be keeping Killian and his goons distracted. Tony hoped so, anyway. Prayed so because, fuck, he needed any advantage he might be able to get.

Tony turned his attention back to the calculations on the screen, forcing himself not to glance at the monitor showing him the video feed from Jamie's room. He looked over the calculations one more time, felt his chest clench that much tighter with nerves. This all had one foot too many in the squishy sciences for his peace of mind, even discounting the fucked up situation. As Bruce would have said, he was not this kind of doctor. And fuck, but he could really use Bruce's help right now. Bruce or the Hulk, one or the other. Preferably the Hulk first, to break them the fuck out of here, and then Bruce, to help him fix the mess that was his little boy's genetic code right now.

He sucked in a sharp breath of air, forced himself to focus through the exhaustion, and the panic and desperation and everything that was going so damn wrong with him. Carefully, he read through the codes and genetic sequences he had written up before casting a glance at the equipment standing at the ready. Maya's base was there already, as was everything necessary to synthesize the new version of Extremis. Part of Tony wanted to just get it made and hand it over like a good little dog expecting its treat. But it wasn't that simple, was it? To Killian, this was clearly personal. Revenge against the asshole self Tony had left behind years ago. If Tony gave him a stable, working formula, chances were he and Jamie would both end up dead. He had to be smarter than that. Braver.

He pressed the button to synthesize the new formula, making sure the quantity was exactly what he wanted. Then he sucked in another breath, tried to get it deep enough to quell his nerves, stop the tightness of his lungs and the dizziness taking over his mind.

It didn't work.

It seemed to take forever before the right amount was produced. Tony couldn't stop looking at the door. He raised a hand, wiped the sweat off his own forehead, did the best he could to control his own breathing patterns. It was taking too damn long. Any moment now, someone might walk right through this door, pick up what was produced, and fuck, this was not a formula he ever wanted getting into anyone else's hands. To distract himself, as much as to make sure he wasn't wasting any time, he turned back to his computer, made sure the machinery would keep producing the serum even as he began to wipe every trace of his calculations and code from the drive. He checked, double checked, triple checked. Not a trace left.
Mouth so dry his tongue would've stuck to the roof of his mouth if he had let it, Tony returned to the drip-drip-drip of the chemist equipment he didn't understand nearly as well as he would've preferred for this whole thing. His hands shook. He reached up once more to wipe another coat of sweat off his forehead before it could drip right down into his eyes. There was nothing else to do, at least not for the next couple of minutes. And so he gave into temptation, let his eyes be drawn to Jamie's monitor.

The sight that met him damn near crushed him. Jamie was writhing on his bed, his skinny little wrists buckling against smoldering restraints. His face was an artist's study in tear tracks and pain markers. His grey eyes were so full of fear Tony felt part of himself crumple at the sight. A sob got caught in Tony's chest. The next one, he had to push down through sheer effort. He couldn't afford to cry now. It wasn't an efficient response to the situation. Despair and sorrow weren't either. Anger. That was what he needed. That was what he had to hold onto. Some asshole had done this to his son, was putting him through this, more and more of it for every moment that passed, and every moment Tony waited might be Jamie's last. And just like that, he felt it welling up inside him, that rage, that hatred, that had controlled him before he found out Jamie was still alive. That was what he needed, and so he grasped it, clung onto it, let it cloud his vision and blur his thoughts.

Gritting his teeth, he reached out with hands so steady part of him was scared by his own control. He picked up the beaker containing the serum, measured out two portions, one adult sized and one far smaller. He loaded each into a syringe and put the smaller portion in his pocket. Then he ripped off the bottom of his shirt and tied it around his arm like a tourniquet. Without second thought, he pushed the syringe into the first the best vein he could find. He pressed down the plunger.

The world exploded around him. His mind screamed. His whole body ached. Everything hurt like an open wound. For a moment he thought perhaps he had messed up his equations, perhaps he had finally killed himself and doomed Jamie in the process. And then there were no thoughts. Just fire.

He screamed, and then he could no longer do that either. All he could do was burn and burn and burn.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully the next chapter will come a bit more quickly, but hey, we're about done with Iron Man 3, which was always one of my main stumbling blocks. So yay for that :D

Other notes:
Re the other stories in this series, I make absolutely no promises right here and now. At the moment, my only goal is to finish this one. If I try to do more and spread myself too thin, it becomes too much and I won't be able to do any of it, so right now, the only plan I have is to finish this one. I am sorry about that, but I hope you can understand and that most of you will agree that something's better than nothing.

I have seen some of the Netflix stuff, and quite enjoyed it, especially Jessica Jones. Due to my current time constraints, I have to admit that I'm not at all up to date on it, and the only series that has any impact on this story is Agent Carter. The other TV show canon can be disregarded.

I definitely understand why some of you may want longer chapters, but for me, for this story, this length is ideal. Hopefully, it will eventually translate into quicker updates too ;P
Chapter 23

Thank you so much for all the kudos, bookmarks, recommendations, subscriptions and especially the reviews. It means the world to me, and I cherish every single review even though I haven't had the chance to answer.

I should warn that the writing in this chapter is strange and disjointed and perhaps a bit mechanic at times. It's not quite the same style as usual, but that's pretty deliberate, since Tony is dealing with sudden onset Extremis and severe emotional trauma.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the scene becomes clear once more, the Asset's been restrained. He's fighting it, for long moments, muscles bulging and straining. A bruise is already forming on his slightly curved belly. Fearful technicians are bustling all around him, trying to stay out of range even as they set the ultrasound machine back up, searching frantically for moving images, for living heartbeats.

For long moments, the Asset keeps thrashing before falling back down on his bed, still and placid, eyes staring at nothing, blank once more. The ultrasound wand finds the two fetuses once more. Both tiny heartbeats are clearly visible on the monitor.

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All at once, the world became clear once more. Tony could see the room around him more clearly than he had before - had he needed glasses and not realized it? Everything was crisp around the edges, so damn clear. He blinked, and everything came back. All the rage, all the hatred. He felt the burning start up somewhere deep inside, but he could control it. He knew that instinctively. He could control it. He simply chose not to.

Teeth gritted, he let his flaming hand make contact with first the lab equipment, then the computer he'd worked on. It all went up in flame, every trace gone, simple as that. Breathing was easier than it had been in years. He didn't need to give it conscious thought, did not feel like he had to struggle for breath around the arc reactor. That didn't matter, not really. One thing mattered, and one thing alone. Jamie.

He blinked, and suddenly the whole world opened up to him in a whole new way.

Biomechanics, he reminded himself. This was not all biology. It was tech too. That was the main thing Maya and AIM had overlooked, after all. The tech was an integral part, and with no work on that side of things, how could they have ever expected this shit to work at all? Still, it was a shock like no other to open his eyes and see the world not only through them, but through thousands, no millions, of cameras, to have all the information in the world at the tip of his finger. Any other day of his life, it might have made him gape in awe. Right now, he only cared about what he could use it for. He had only one objective. He needed his son out of here, safe. Preferably in his arms.

He blinked again, and the worst edges of the anger and hatred seemed to bleed away. It did not change the importance of the mission. It did not make him want to kill every living being on this
tanker who was not Jamie one bit less. But somehow, it made it all feel unreal, half a step removed. The sensation was so alien it was damn near nauseating. Tony pushed it away. He couldn't deal with all that right now, couldn't even begin to process it. He had one thing he needed to do, and one thing only. Afterwards, he'd deal with the rest of it.

He stepped up to the door, placed his hand over the lock and let the heat he was producing so easily burn right through it. Even as the lock began to smolder, he accessed all the security cameras onboard and blocked out everything else, focusing on getting a good overview of what was happening in his immediate surroundings.

Jamie was two floors down and about a hundred and fifty feet north of him. Quite a few of the minions were occupied on the other side of the platform - and how had he ever thought this was a mere tanker to begin with? - dealing with something. Tony couldn't care less what it was; all it meant to him was that they would be out of the way.

The lock fell out of the door. Tony checked on the syringe full of serum in the waistline of his jeans; still there.

Sir?

Tony blinked, stopped short for a moment. "JARVIS?" he asked.

Sir, I cannot express how happy I am to hear your voice, JARVIS replied. I do, however, understand, that brevity is of the essence. I thought you might like to know that Mark Forty-Two is in the cargo hold.

An image overlaid with a map was seemingly projected right into his brain. On any other day, Tony would have questioned that. He would've definitely questioned JARVIS's seeming ability to talk right into his mind. Today was not that day. Today none of that shit mattered. "Can you control the suit?" he asked.

I am afraid I have been locked out, JARVIS responded.

Tony gritted his teeth, focused on the suit. To his shock, it took only a thought to unlock it and give access back to JARVIS. "Get it to Jamie," Tony said. "I'm going to free him and I'll inject him with this. Then I need you to take him back to Stark Tower. Understood?"

Understood, Sir, came JARVIS's reply. For a moment, Tony could sense his hesitation, his concern, could see all the lines of code that made up JARVIS flash before his mind's eye. He dismissed it all, jumped down the first flight of stairs, then the second. Backup is on its way, Sir, JARVIS added. Tony filed that bit of information away. It wasn't relevant right now, wasn't relevant until it got to him. For now, he was on his own, and strangely certain that was still going to be enough. Not to deal with everything, perhaps, but then that wasn't the priority. Jamie was, and Jamie alone. There was still a good chance Tony wouldn't make it out, but right now he didn't give a flying fuck.

Objectively speaking, Rhodey was easily better parent material than Tony was. Truth be told, so long as he could get Jamie out, the boy might be better off if Tony died in the attempt. Somewhere beneath the code scrolling past his vision, some more primitive part of Tony screamed at that idea, but it was easy to ignore.

He knocked some minion into the side of the hallway hard enough to crush several bones and distort the metal wall. He didn't stop to watch, only made his way onwards. Three, four, five doors. He stopped at the sixth, reached out and pulled it out of its frame before throwing the distorted metal onto the floor. He stepped inside the room, dismantled the surveillance cameras with half a thought
and made his way to the cot. He ripped the restraints off, careful on Jamie's small arms.

"Daddy," Jamie cried, wrapping his newly freed arms around Tony's neck and clinging so tightly he might've cut off a lesser man's air supply. Tony registered a dim, distant sense of relief and supported the child with a hand under his rump. With his other hand, he reached for the syringe in his waistband. He made out a vein quickly enough and stabbed in the needle, pulled the plunger.

"JARVIS," he said, and a moment later the armor was there, opening up. Tony deposited Jamie into the shell, felt a flash of satisfaction when he realized he had completed his mission, and well at that. Jamie stared up at him with an expression he couldn't name. Then he armor closed around him, and he flew off.

Without so much as thinking about it, Tony torched the room. Then he turned around and left, using all his senses, human and mechanical, to search out further targets.

On the periphery of his senses, JARVIS was flashing the image of a helipad and the directions to get there, but Tony didn't care. Why should he? These people had done him wrong, and Tony wasn't leaving until they had all paid, until none of them remained to pose a threat to James Stark, designated 'the one person he couldn't live without'.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed (he was, though: 4:57 minutes, 17 casualties and 5 fatalities) when he realized Captain Rogers was hailing him. Had been hailing him (for 1:07 minutes). It took him a moment to recognize the importance of his own name. Tony, Captain Rogers said through the comms he wasn't wearing. They've got the president. It took another several seconds (12.7) to recognize the significance of that, and another moment (4.3 seconds) to analyze whether or not that was worth paying attention to.

The President of the United States of America was important to the stability of the world and especially to the stability of the United States of America, of which James Stark was a resident, and that stability was of utmost importance to the safety of James Stark, designated 'the one person he couldn't live without'. Within the next breath (2.1 seconds) Tony prioritized the president's safety.

"Got any instructions, Cap?" he asked. (Instructions would be flawed; Captain Rogers did not have any intel on Anthony Stark's current skillset.)

Black Widow, Hawkeye and Colonel Rhodes are extracting Potus. You and I are going after whoever's responsible for this mess. What can you tell me, Tony?

Anthony Stark attempted to upload every bit of information he had on one Aldrich Killian only to realize Captain Rogers had no means of downloading said information. "Aldrich Killian. He has a bastardized version of Extremis," Tony said. "That means he has about the same skillset you do, but he also burns and regenerates." The info was woefully insufficient, but the inadequate channels for information sharing did not allow anything further.

Thank you, Tony, Captain Rogers said. We can do this. You don't need to worry.

"I'm not worried," Anthony said. He was not. Why would he be? Captain Rogers might be inferior to Killian, but Killian was very much inferior to Anthony Stark. And even if he hadn't been, worry was such an unnecessary emotion. So unproductive. If anything, it was more likely to stunt progression than foster it, and what was the use of that? "JARVIS," he said, cutting off the link to Captain Rogers for a moment. "Where is Killian?" Anthony Stark could have looked himself, of course, but for this particular job, JARVIS was a fraction faster than he was (until the next upgrade at least), and it was inefficient not to use all programs available.

JARVIS hesitated a moment before projecting a location into the mind of Anthony Stark. Anthony
Stark immediately pointed all cameras in the vicinity in the right direction even as he sped up his pace, making for the target with all the speed he could muster.

Then he was on the deck, with water to all sides and Killian right in front of him. It would not be an even fight. Aldrich Killian's version of Extremis was inferior. It did not provide Aldrich Killian with the same stream of information Anthony Stark had access to. While Aldrich Killian might have the biological advantages the serum granted him, he had no access to the technological advancements Anthony Stark's littlest finger could get to with the barest twitch. Aldrich Killian was hopelessly outgunned, and he did not even know it.

Somewhere in the back of the mind of Anthony Stark, something crowed with vindictive victory. Some part of him found it pleasant, to have outdone this inferior lifeform. It formed a smile on his face. Anthony Stark did not bother to stop it; it had the effect of intimidating the target, which could only serve him. "Stand down," Anthony Stark ordered, even as his hindbrain admonished him for giving the asshole this much of a chance. This utter bastard had shot his son up with an untested drug that caused immense suffering, had... Still, the protocols were somehow there, in the back of his mind, even though Anthony Stark did not remember anyone programming them. As if from far away, he heard himself repeat the Miranda rights.

Aldrich Killian laughed at him. "Is that what you revert to?" he guffawed. "Some rebel you are."

Anthony Stark did not compute. When had he ever claimed to be a rebel?

Then Aldrich Killian was trying to attack, and Anthony Stark could not allow that to pass. His backup was weaker than he was, and Aldrich Killian was a threat to James Stark, 'the one person he couldn't live without'. He must be ended, if he would not allow the system to take its course. Anthony Stark rushed forwards, gripped Aldrich Killian by the neck and threw them both overboard. The ocean would quench their fire, might debilitate Aldrich Killian, but Anthony Stark was so much more than that.

He did not know how long he stayed down there, how long everything kept getting darker and darker. As if from far away, he watched as Aldrich Killian grew weaker and weaker. Anthony Stark counted Aldrich Killian's heartbeats carefully, monitored his life signs as carefully as any AI without access to the Internet or medical equipment could be expected to. He monitored his own too, but prioritized it as lesser. After all, James Stark, 'the one person he couldn't live without', did not need Anthony Stark nearly as much as he needed Colonel James Rhodes.

He sensed the way Aldrich Killian's heartbeat slowed down. He sensed the way his own did too (110 beats per minute. Then 70. Then 50. Then 45. Then 30. Then 20. Then 10. Then 5.)

Aldrich Killian's heart might have stopped beating. But there was no way to be sure. Anthony Stark did not know entirely how the underdeveloped version of Extremis worked. He had not taken the time to find out before developing the proper formula. Who knew what Aldrich Killian could survive? It was better to be certain, for the sake of James Stark, designated 'the one person he couldn't live without'.

Bit by bit, his uplinks to satellites vanished. Then his Internet connection. His link to the Avengers comm system persisted for a while after that, but Anthony Stark had put it on mute a while ago. Then everything else began to shut down too, and suddenly his bio-visual display began to short out, first in flickers, and then in blacks flickering in around the edges, swallowing up more and more of the display.

Anthony Stark let go of his last breath, and everything went black. As if from far away, he felt a pair of strong arms wrap around him, felt something like up. Then he felt no more.
Chapter End Notes

If anyone here is also reading my asoiaf fic, just a quick note that I'll post the final chapter ASAP, but it might still be as much as a week before I get access to the computer where the file is saved. Yeah, I was dumb and forgot to email it to myself. Sorry about that.

Also, hey, the chapter I finished writing last night finally introduced Maria on screen, so yay for that :D It's still a while off for you guys, though, sorry to say. Got a few years of story time to get through before we get there.
Thank you so much for the kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, recommendations and, especially, the reviews. They never fail to put a smile on my face and help inspire me to move the story forward, so thank you.

The timestamp has moved again, just over a week. The bump on the Asset's belly is not that much larger. It is still barely discernible, except to people who already know what to look for, or know just how trim the Asset usually is. For long moments, there seems to be nothing to look out for, not unless you know to pair the timestamps with the schedule of the changing of guards. If you do that, however, you know that less than a minute from now there will be less manpower outside of the Asset's room than otherwise.

For the next forty seconds the Asset stays as it is, reclined and distant, gaze signifying someone who is barely there. Then, all at once, from one moment to the next, the Asset appears to come alive. With more strength than anyone knew he had, he rips the restraints apart, and then he's taking his wrists to his own teeth, biting and tearing. Blood is gushing, and the first five technicians sent in lie dead within half a moment.

"That is why we wiped him," the scientist says. "It was the only way to keep both the Asset and the heirs alive throughout the gestational period."

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Tony woke up with a strangled gasp. Panic flooded his whole body. It took a while to figure out how to even breathe. "Jamie," he managed to press out. "Jamie. Where is Jamie?"

The sensation of human hands pushing his bangs out of his forehead was so acute it made him shudder, brought him straight down to Earth in a way he wasn't sure anything else could've. "He's safe, Tones," Rhodey's soft voice said. "He's in his room and he's healthy and perfectly all right, and right now he's asleep because it's three thirty in the morning."

Tony squeezed his eyes further shut for a moment, tried to remember everything that had come to pass. Some of it was so distant he couldn't even remember it. Even the things he remembered most clearly felt more like an out of body experience than anything else. "What happened?" he asked. His whole mouth felt like cotton wool, sucking up every bit of moisture afforded to him.

"Jamie was kidnapped by a terrorist organization," Rhodey said. "You gave yourself up to keep him safe. The big baddie shot him up with an experimental drug. You fixed the drug, tested it on yourself and used it to stabilize Jamie. Then you took over the enemy base and killed the asshole behind it all. Cap had to fish you out of the ocean, but the short of it is, you got both of you out of there safe and sound, Tones."

Tony sucked in a mouthful of air, tried to remember it all. For a moment, he almost thought it might be possible, but then he had to give it up. Too many details were lost in the recesses of his mind, impossible to access. He hated that, fuck, he hated it so much and it grated like nothing else, knowing he had information without knowing how to process it.
"Your team was there, though, and me too," Rhodes added. "You saved Jamie and killed the bad guy all of your own, but because of what you did we managed to save the president, prevent a hostile takeover of our country, and to unravel and take out a terrorist organization." Tony could damn near hear the smile in his voice. "SI stock is higher than it's ever been."

"Jamie," Tony repeated. "He's all right?"

Rhodey sighed.

"JARVIS," another voice, which Tony recognized as Bruce's, cut in. "Could you please wake up Cap and Jamie? Tell them Tony's awake and needs to see them. Guide their way here, if they need it."

"Hey Brucie," Tony slurred. "You didn't have any problems with the big guy, did you?"

Bruce took a long moment to answer. Then, "The Hulk didn't do anything they didn't deserve," he said. "I was an idiot who experimented on myself, but I was a grown-up idiot. Jamie's not even four years old yet, and they didn't give a fuck, and--" His voice vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

"Doctor Banner had to remove himself from the premises," Rhodey said a moment later. "He was getting a bit green there." He paused for long moments, and Tony felt the habitual need to fill the silence with chatter. Exhaustion held him at bay, however, and he breathed out a slow breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

"What happened, Platypus?" Tony asked at last.

Rhodey, rather than waste time on the things Tony could put together on his own, cut right to the core of things. "Doctor Banner did a lot of the work himself," he said. "He called in a colleague you've had on your watch list for a while too. A Doctor Cho, if you remember her?"

Tony managed to lift a hand, waved it. "Helen, yeah," he said. "I remember. I've funded a few of her projects. She's the real deal."

"She helped stabilize whatever it is you and Jamie were shot up with. Neutralized it even, with Doctor Banner's help, when she had enough of an idea of that serum to see how it desensitized you to emotion and increased aggression. Mostly, anyway." He paused a moment. "Since the healing capacity was already there, we took the chance and had your arc reactor and the shrapnel removed. All it's going to do is add to your life expectancy, the number of years you'll get with Jamie. But it had to be removed, Tones. From the information we've got, it makes you - and Jamie - into high functionning psychopaths at best."

Tony swallowed sharply, but nodded. It was all so very distant, but he did remember that incredible focus. There was something seductive about it. Or there might have been, if not for how clearly he suddenly remembered not caring at all about Jamie's fear, only about his safety. Ever since he had returned from Afghanistan, Tony had been so painfully aware that safety was so many different fucking things. It wasn't just about being physically alive and unharmed. That was just the easy part. The things that actually mattered in the long run were harder, took so much more out of him. And they were so much more necessary. "JARVIS," he said. "Whatever records we have on Extremis, please delete them," he said. His memory of himself on Extremis was vague at best, but he knew he had been no father like that.

JARVIS hesitated for a moment, and that somehow jolted Tony back to something more than his current emotional reality. The reactor was supposed to be gone. Suddenly frantic, Tony reached towards his chest, expecting to find the plexiglass covering that had been part of his life for about as
long as Jamie had. His hand found nothing but a standard issue hospital gown. He pushed under the edges, searched almost frantically. There was nothing. Nothing but smooth skin and strong bones and muscle.

Tony slumped back into the bed, let that settle and register. "Any other differences?" he heard himself ask.

"Well," Rhodey said. "According to JARVIS, and Doctor Banner, and Doctor Cho, you are about twelve to fifteen years younger, physically, than you were before. Back at your prime, so to speak."

Mid-to-late-twenties, Tony translated that as, and how the fuck was that necessary? He'd been in the thirties before the board of directors began respecting him the first time around, and-- Who the fuck even cared about that kind of vanity? What this really meant was more years with Jamie, and Tony would give anything for that. Absolutely anything.

Still, it was so damn difficult to reconcile this reactor-free body with the one he had lived in his whole life that it made his breath catch, made him feel as though someone was doing their very best to pull the rug out from under him. He could already tell it would take everything he had to stay balanced. With a heavy blink that didn't actually give him much of a view of his surroundings, he focused back in on the order he'd given JARVIS in the first place. 'Delete all files pertaining to Extremis'. Some part of him still wanted to do that, never wanted to have to even imagine that level of dissociation and everything that went with it ever again. But on the other hand, this might keep Jamie alive where nothing else could, if something beyond Tony's comprehension were to happen again. Or it might keep Tony alive when he might otherwise die and leave Jamie alone. And that... That was something he suddenly couldn't dismiss. "JARVIS," he said at last. "Keep the data to yourself, please. I want you to only allow access when there is no other choice."

"Yes, Sir," JARVIS responded. Unless Tony was very mistaken, there was more than a small measure of relief in his voice.

A moment later, Tony was distracted from thinking of any of that at all when the door opened and Capt-- Steve led Jamie in by the hand. Tony slowly blinked his eyes open just in time to see Jamie sprinting towards him. Breathing such a deep sigh of relief it was damn near painful, Tony opened his arms and wrapped them around his baby boy, holding him tight. And fuck all, he never planned to let go ever again. "I love you, baby boy," he said softly, carefully raking his fingers through Jamie's soft, dark hair.

"Love you too, Daddy," Jamie replied, clutching him so tightly it damned near hurt. Tony didn't care one bit, so long as they were both still alive to feel it.

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Jamie clutched his Bucky Bear close when Tony walked him towards Dr. Sanchez's office. Tony couldn't help but share in his anxiety, even as he did his very fucking best to show as little of it as possible. He had tried so damned hard to make sure this wouldn't be necessary, to make sure they wouldn't need the kind of too-rough, too-curious outside help Tony had had foisted on him as a child. Thank fuck he knew Sanchez already, at least a little, or he might not have had any fucking clue what to do when his baby began to wake up sobbing and screaming from nightmares.

That still ground on his nerves, the fact that Jamie was in pain and nothing Tony did could seem to help him. It was almost physically painful, seeing this kind of fear and anger in him, and at such a young age too. Tony wished to all the Gods in existence that there was something he could do, might have done, but no matter how hard he tried to contact Thor's dad - and he had actually tried - nothing seemed to work. So good old Earth psychology it was, even if Tony was no more sure of that than he was of the reliability of Old Norse Gods. "It's all right, Baby Boy," Tony forced himself to say
when the doors opened and Jamie's name was called. "It'll be all right."

As he watched Jamie enter Sanchez's office, he wasn't certain if he had been talking to his son or to himself. Out of the two of them, Jamie had always been more resilient, had only ever started giving into nightmares after the whole Extremis thing. Tony... Tony wasn't sure when he had last slept, whether he would ever get a full night's sleep again. He was wrecked, he was done, so fucking done. He had been building armors again, sure, and new iterations of the Iron Cradle, with code no one in existence could hope to crack, but even so it still didn't make him feel safe. He wasn't sure anything ever would. All he could hope for was a full night's sleep for his baby boy. Tony, well, he was willing to admit he, himself, might very well be a lost cause.
Thank you so much for the support, especially the reviews. They do mean the world to me. Once again, I'm sorry I couldn't respond to your reviews. I hope to start doing that again at some point hopefully not too far in the future, but until then, please know they are a huge part of what's keeping me motivated to finish this story. Soon, I'll even be writing Bucky in, and I absolutely cannot wait.

"I understand," Alexander Pierce said. "Get the scientists working on a stronger material for restraints. Hack into Stark Industries if need be. But that cannot happen again. If we have to keep him restrained for the rest of the gestational period, that is what we will do. But no more shock therapy."

The clearly frightened underlings scrambled to do his bidding, but they did do it well. When the Asset began to regain awareness, several months later, his bulging belly a constant reminder, there was nothing he could do about it.

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"Maria's scared," Jamie told him softly one night, padding into the workshop in socks and pajamas, trusty Bucky Bear held under one arm.

Tony turned away from his work, blinked a moment to focus on his son's face. He was so Goddamn tired his vision swam around the edges. "Why is she scared?" he asked.

"Because she was wrong," Jamie said. "The bad guys, they took us and we hadn't done anything. You weren't even a superhero anymore, and you had stopped sticking your nose in their business. They took us anyway. And then Nat and Steve and Uncle Rhodey and Uncle Bruce stuck in their noses and saved us. So it can't be bad to do that, even though they're all telling her it is."

Tony frowned a moment at the sudden introduction of some mysterious 'them', but he knew Jamie was talking to Sanchez too, and if the Maria situation was getting more worrying, she would tell him. "Well, being wrong can be scary," he said, and for a moment his mind flashed back to the Ten Rings camp in Afghanistan, staring at piles upon piles of Stark weapons, unable to believe what he was seeing. That sense of everything turning on its head, everything being wrong, nothing making sense anymore... He remembered that all too clearly.

Jamie gave a small, pale smile and padded across the floor, crawling up into Tony's lap and cuddling close even as he nodded. "Captain America isn't really a bad man either," he commented softly.

"He isn't," Tony confirmed. "Is there."

For long moments, Jamie was silent, a warm, steadying weight in Tony's arms. Then he looked up at him, pale grey eyes wide. "When people get to make their own choices, are those choices all dumb?"
A strange shiver went down Tony's spine. He shook it off, made himself focus on the question, on soothing his son's fears rather than his own. "No," he said. "Not all. Some will be. We all make dumb choices sometimes. It's how we learn, and how we grow. It's what makes us human, I think. And something great comes from dumb choices and mistakes sometimes. I mean, it's not like Alexander Fleming meant to make penicillin. It was a weird fungus that grew on his stuff or something, but thank Thor's dad we've got it, right? Marie Curie died from radiation sickness because she liked to carry radioactive material around in her pockets, but she also founded nuclear physics as a field of science. Isaac Newton began to puzzle out his theories on gravity because he got hit in the head by a falling apple." He smiled, stroked a careful hand through Jamie's hair. "And you. I never planned for you, but you're still the best thing that has ever happened to me. Thing is, without the ability to make dumb choices and mistakes, we'd still be stuck in the stone ages. Burning our fingers on the soldering iron stings like a bitch, but how else are we supposed to learn how to wear work gloves?"

Jamie flashed him a brief, mischievous grin. "You don't always wear work gloves when you solder."

"Well, maybe I'm a slow learner," Tony told him. "But you understand what I mean, right? If you don't let people make their own choices, you may be able to keep them safer, but they won't ever have a chance to grow or become the people they can be, and we'd all be worse off for it in the end."

Jamie nodded. "I get it," he said. "Maria does too. It makes sense."

Tony flashed him a grin, leaned in and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "If either of you have more questions, just ask. I'll give you the best answer I've got, and then you can make up your own mind, all right?"

"Thank you, Daddy," Jamie said. Then his whole face scrunched up around a yawn. "I think I want to sleep now," he said.

"Sleep well, buddy," Tony replied.

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"Tony," Natasha said, looking straight at him.

Tony looked blearily back before focusing on his coffee once more. He had tried to sleep again last night, but had managed less than two hours before a nightmare woke him up, this one bad enough to leave him gasping and trembling on the floor for hours after making JARVIS show him the video feed from Jamie's room. His whole body still felt weak from it, and a strange lump remained lodged in his throat, damn near immovable. And he was still so fucking tired.

"You need help," she said. "Everyone's noticed, but apparently the consensus is that we're all treating you like glass at the moment. So I'm going to tell you what everyone knows and no one has the guts to say: You need professional help. You are running on no sleep. You are jumpy. Your decision making skills are questionable."

"Aren't you and Cap supposed to be training with those S.H.I.E.L.D. special ops teams?" Tony asked, lifting his mug and taking a long swallow. It didn't do much to wake him up. His hands threatened to shake around it.

"You're being a shit father," Natasha said at last. "Jamie is worried sick about you, a blind person could tell you that. Sending him off to a psychologist isn't enough Tony, not nearly, not when you won't get yourself the help you need. You are compromising his progress, and sooner or later you're going to make a shitty call, and he'll be the one to pay. Get help." With that, she turned and walked.
Tony drained the last of the coffee and poured himself another mug.

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"Daddy," Jamie said, voice very soft as he crawled up onto the couch next to Tony, burrowing in against his side. He was a little too pale, with traces of dark circles around his eyes. Tony had sat up with him for hours last night after he woke sobbing from a nightmare and couldn't go back to sleep. Gods, what was he supposed to do? Even therapy didn't seem to do its job very well anymore.

"Should people who are stronger and smarter get to decide over everyone else?" Jamie asked, jolting him out of his fearful contemplations.

Tony blinked, wrapped his arm around Jamie while raising his other hand and rubbing it over his face, trying to get rid of the slow, gritty feeling that had been taking him over. How long had he been sitting here, just staring out at nothing? Then he processed the question and blinked again. Frowned.

"'Course not," he said at last. He took a long moment to try to crunch the information he needed to impact down to a level where he could make it understandable. Jamie might be a genius, but he was still just four years old. "It's... I'm objectively smarter than the president, right? At least if we talk about pure IQ. You are too. If I put on the armor, I'm stronger than him too. Does that mean I should get to be president?"

Jamie shrugged. "Maybe you'd be good at it," he said. "Maria thinks so."

Tony couldn't help a small grin. That was so utterly sweet it tugged at something in him, made it go tight and tender. "Thank you," he said. "I'm not sure you're right about that. But you know why the president is the president, right?"

Another shrug. "He won an election," Jamie said.

Tony nodded. "Now," he said. "I'm not saying democracy is the perfect system, because not all people are good, and sometimes they, people, collectively, are morons. But the idea is that everyone, even the weakest, dumbest person in a country gets to have a hand in choosing who decides over them. That means, in theory, that the leader owes them. The people chose who they thought would do the most to take care of them and their wants and needs, and so the leader owes them to do that. You know what I mean? He's responsible, in a way someone who has just chosen on his own that he should make all the choices isn't. If you just take power because you're strongest, then you can be as mean as you want, and the people who are not as strong end up suffering. Besides, we may have a higher IQ than the president, or..." Or perhaps that was too high a level. "Aunt Pepper gets to make a lot of choices for Stark Industries, you know. Objectively, IQ-wise, she isn't as smart as us. But we both know that Aunt Pepper is really smarter than anyone, right? Just in a different way."

Slowly, Jamie nodded. "And she knows you let her decide, so she isn't going to make bad choices. She's gonna be responsible."

"Exactly," Tony said. "It's like... I get to decide over you quite a bit. Is that because I'm stronger and smarter, or because I'm your dad?" Then he frowned. "Actually, maybe that's not the right example. Anyway, I get to choose until you've made enough small choices on your own to do it for yourself. But it's never with the goal that I get to make all your choices for you for the rest of your life. It's to keep you safe until you can do it for yourself. And in the meantime, I still listen to you, right? When we have to make choices for others, it's either because we love them and want to help them until they're ready to be on their own, like some countries America makes choices for right now. Or it's because they've trusted us to make those choices for them, which means we're responsible to them and owe it to them to make the right calls. I think." He frowned, rubbed at his face again.
Jamie nodded again. Then his face tucked into such an expression of utter heartbreak Tony felt something inside him crack just from looking at that small face. "How bad a kid do you gotta be to make your parents leave you?" he asked. And fuck if that wasn't enough to make Tony want to break down and cry. Suddenly, all he wanted was to find Jamie's mom, hunt her down and force her to apologize to this wonderful, amazing little boy who she was never, ever going to deserve.

"You can't," he said. "A child cannot be that bad. Not possible. It's always, only, ever going to be the parents' fault. Sometimes there are going to be extenuating circumstances," he added. "Parents can die, and it's not necessarily anyone's fault, or parents can be in positions where they are not capable of taking care of their kids, and the best thing they can do, the most loving thing, is let them be with someone who can. But even that is never the child's fault. Never."

Jamie gave a small smile at that.

Tony sucked in a heavy, painful breath. "Do you miss your mom?" he asked.

Jamie blinked, looked almost confused for a moment. Then he shook his head. "No," he said. "I don't care about her. I got you. But Maria doesn't have anyone."

Tony sighed, pulled Jamie closer until the boy was almost in his lap, and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. He was so fragile in Tony's arms. "She's got us, doesn't she?"

The grin Jamie gave him was strong enough to make Tony smile back automatically, regardless of whatever disturbing thoughts and questions this whole conversation had brought up.

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"Mr. Stark," Dr. Sanchez said, when Tony came to pick up Jamie. "If I could have just a quick word?"

Tony nodded, squeezed Jamie's shoulder before leaving him to the toys in the waiting room and following Dr. Sanchez into her office. "What is it?" he asked.

"You must know that Jamie is very worried about you," she said. "He says you don't sleep. You don't eat enough. You don't smile enough. He says when you do sleep you wake up screaming. He is making himself sick over you." She paused a moment, then sighed. "I can recommend a colleague of mine if you need help, but I can tell you that you do need to change things either way. Jamie can't make any more progress with me while he's worries about you."

Tony swallowed. "I'll take that under advisement," he said, feeling torn in a dozen different direction and, simultaneously, utterly unable to move. What the fuck was he supposed to do now?
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions, and especially for the reviews. They mean the world to me and I really hope I'll be able to start answering them soon again. Until then, please know what a huge part they are of keeping me going and how much I appreciate them.

Chapter specific warning for a severe panic attack. See end notes for more.

Still, given the amount of attention and awareness the Asset had given to the children growing within him, Pierce is understandably nervous when it comes time to employ the Asset's services once more. Pierce holds out the picture, keeping all expression off his face. "This is your target, Soldat," he says.

The Asset merely inclines his head, his face as expressionless and his eyes just as empty as they were before the disturbance.

***

"Sir," JARVIS was saying. Tony startled, dropped the welding torch - thankfully before he'd managed to burn himself - and pushed up his welding mask. "Sir," JARVIS repeated. "I believe you should see this."

Tony frowned, and blinked several times to refocus his eyes. It took a moment before everything more than a foot or two away became more than a strange, foggy blur his eyes couldn't quite seem to penetrate.

JARVIS had turned on the TV and projected it onto the nearest wall, and after a few more blinks, Tony could make out medieval looking buildings, and then a headline screaming 'Greenwich, London, England'. And then the words faded right back into non-importance. Tony's eyes caught on the spacecraft, the people who were screaming and fleeing, the car pile-ups. The spacecraft. It was stuck in the earth like a hovering, lumbering, black monolith, towering over all the nearby buildings, power flickering an ominous red.

Tony's breath caught in his throat. Very consciously, he sucked it the rest of the way in, then let it back out slowly. He gripped the nearest workbench. Relief flooded over him when he knew for sure that his hands weren't shaking, couldn't, not with his own harsh grip on that unyielding surface grounding them.

Somewhere in the background, a reporter was damn near screaming something or other, but Tony couldn't make it out. All he heard was noise.

The spacecraft opened, and aliens walked out.

Tony's heart skipped at least half a dozen beats.

They weren't Chitauri; he could tell that at a glance. They weren't Chitauri, but they were still not human, and nothing about them screamed 'we come in peace'.
Tony's stomach clenched with a strange icy cold. Very carefully, he forced another mouthful of air into his lungs. "JARVIS," he said. "Do we have an armor ready for launch?"

"Sir," JARVIS said. "May I remind you that you are on leave from the Avengers Initiative. Master James--"

Tony swallowed, felt the conflict tear through him. Go out there and protect the world, protect Jamie and his world, or stay here, play the civilian, help his son feel safe, even if it was all an illusion? "Where is Jamie?" he asked. "Can you give me a visual?"

JARVIS split the screen in two, and for a moment Tony could pretend that the left-hand half and the utter mess that was London City didn't exist, could focus his whole attention on the right-hand side. And there was Jamie, just a few handful of levels down in the preschool, grinning toothily. His hands were brown with clay. In front of him was a slightly lopsided but still very impressive model of Stark Tower. In some ways, it was obvious it was a child's work. It was crooked, and the edges uneven. But the attention to detail was astounding. The tiny windows and doors were incredible, the recollection as well as the execution far beyond what could be expected of a child Jamie's age. Then again, Tony reminded himself - he felt his breath start to come smoother and easier, no longer a struggle every bit of the way - Jamie was almost exactly the age Tony had been when he'd built his first functional circuit board and accidentally revolutionized the world of computers for the first time. It was frightening, on the one hand, to see Jamie display the same feats of recollection, innovation - some details were changed to fit Jamie's own fancies - and motor control that Tony had at that same too-young age, but on the other hand, Tony couldn't help but feel proud too.

And prouder, somehow, for knowing that Jamie was creating his own little wonders in a safe, secure environment. It wouldn't be turned into a publicity stunt or a new patent - Tony would never dream of allowing that. Jamie would get to enjoy his accomplishments with the people who mattered, without the rest of the world watching, waiting to devour him.

"Sir," JARVIS prompted. "Master James is safe. He displays signs of joy and pride, high levels of dopamine and none of noradrenaline or cortisol; no physical markers of stress or fear whatsoever. He is having a very good day." Gods, when had JARVIS decided to become an expert in neuro psychology or whatever that even was?

Nonetheless, Tony managed a smile at it, felt relief rush through him, and a faint kind of almost echoed joy. But even that only lasted so long. Knowing Jamie was safe calmed him for the moment, but it also scattered his attention. Suddenly, he was seeing the left-hand side of the impromptu screen again, even if only out of the corner of his eye.

And then, with a start, all his attention was on that side of the wall. His lungs clenched tight. He could not breathe. He thought his heart stopped in his chest. He was cold, cold, coldcoldcold. He could not breathe.

Terror gripped him and clenched him to its frigid core. His hands shook where he clenched the edge of the workbench. His vision blacked out for a moment. Then it came back into all too sharp focus. Blurred again. Then focused mercilessly. His knees trembled beneath him.

Wormholes, or something like it. More and more of them appearing. People stepping into nothing and coming out of nowhere. He thought he saw Thor in there somewhere, which should be reassuring, should tell him it was all safe, but Thor was all alone, and Thor was appearing and reappearing. Buildings crashed and vanished. People screamed. More cars piled up. Thor vanished. Thor appeared once more. Thor was all alone.

Tony's knees buckled. His chest hurt from lack of air. He tried to suck in a breath. Failed. Tried
again. Failed once more. He tried again, drawing in every bit of strength he had, willing to trade it for just a sip of air. A little bit came in on a gasp, like breathing through wet cloth. And suddenly part of his mind was back in the Afghani desert. He had a car battery in his chest. Rough hands were shoving at him, forcing his face into rancid-tasting water. Shocks coursed through his body when the water hit the exposed circuits. Pain burnt through him.

Numbers flashed before his eyes. 15% toxicity. Then 25%. Then more and more and more. Tony could only watch the numbers grow. A phantom wail assaulted his ears. Jamie. Jamie would grow up without him, and Tony wouldn't have been there for him. He would be a disappointment, as much a failure as Howard had been. More. Even as Tony listened, the wails grew more and more distant.

Tony sucked in another sharp, insufficient breath. He felt lightheaded. Desert heat beat down on him again. The taste of rancid water filled his mouth. Sparks of pain assaulted his nervous system, flashing up and down his spine. He forced another breath into his mouth, down his throat, into his lungs, like breathing through the world's skinniest straw.

"Big man in a suit of armor," Howard's voice said, Jamie's voice said. "Take that away, and what are you?" Tony opened his eyes wide, tried to face this threat head-on, this threat that he, at least, knew he could face. He opened his eyes, and he saw Thor being sucked into a wormhole.

For a moment, Tony's heart seemed to stop. His chest hurt. He blinked, and when he opened his eyes once more, all he saw was space. Black emptiness and distant stars and Chitauri warships, hundreds upon hundreds of them, further than Tony could see, more than he could ever hope to count. His mouth opened around a scream that would have no sound. There was no sound in space, after all. Only empty, cold, isolated darkness, and this was how Tony was going to die, this was how the world was going to die, how Jamie was going to die.

And then Jamie was dying. He was strapped down on a hard operating table. Fire licked at his skin, but the flame was barely visible, no more than a shadow beneath his skin. Tony saw his face contorting, saw the pain breaking down his clever, beautiful little boy, and this hurt like none of the rest had. This rent him to pieces, cut away all the strings keeping him up, keeping him together.

As if from far away, Tony was vaguely away of his legs giving way, his knees buckling, his mind blacking out for a moment. From a world away, he felt cold metal flooring beneath his cheek, felt the throbbing of a head injury.

A wormhole flashed across his vision, promising the end of all things, the world, hope, everything he had ever held dear.

Tony tried to breathe. He wasn't sure he managed.

Jamie was still in front of him, on the operating table, burning from the inside. Tony ran as fast as he could. Everywhere he went, black hands reached out and gripped at him, scratching and clutching, holding him tight. Trying to prevent him from reaching Jamie, his son, the one thing he couldn't stand to lose, couldn't live without. Tony screamed, struggled onwards.

He never seemed to get any closer.

Still he ranranran, ran through water and molasses and hardening asphalt, struggled against hands and arms and grips much stronger than he was. He was sobbing by now, as much as he could when he could hardly breathe.

Jamie's hand caught fire, that precious, perfect little hand which had just been covered in clay, busy
creating, there one moment and ash the next. Panic gripped Tony and shook him like a dog with a
toy. He screamed and screamed and screamed and tried to struggle onwards as more and more of his
baby boy caught fire, evaporated before his eyes.

"Daddy!" Jamie called. "Daddydaddydaddy!"

Tony screamed and sobbed and tried to tell his baby he'd get there, but the words turned to ash on his
tongue. He couldn't get the breath to try again.

"Daddy, please!" Jamie called

Tony curled in on himself as he watched the last bits of his baby boy burn into nothingness, leaving
him cold and empty and so, so alone. Distantly, he felt cool metal against his cheek. Dimly, he heard
himself gasping for air, felt his lungs struggling and fighting against themselves. Faintly, he sensed
his own racing, pounding heart, the way it could barely keep up with its own pace. He felt cold, so
cold, so empty, so... so...

Someone touched him, and Tony screamed, head full of languages he couldn't understand and
hostile hands pushing his head under that filthy, filthy water.

Someone sobbed.

Maybe it was Tony.

It was not, he realized, after half a dozen desperate, uneven, insufficient gasps of air. He tried to blink
his eyes open, but all he could see was a blur of color and shapes. He squeezed them shut again. He
wasn't sure he wanted to know what he'd see if he opened them anyway. The Ten Rings in the
Afghani desert, or the numbers counting down to his death by the thing keeping him alive, or the
wormhole and the army sure to wipe out them all. Or Jamie, deaddeaddead because Tony wasn't
strong enough to protect him.

"Daddy." That sounded like a sob too, but Tony couldn't trust it, couldn't be sure. Hadn't he just seen
Jamie burn up right before his eyes? "Daddy, please. Don't be scared." It still sounded like a sob, but
it did sound like Jamie, and not quite like dying. "Daddy, please. I love you, and I'll protect you. Just
breathe, Daddy. Please be all right." Another sob. "Daddy, please."

Tony's whole being clenched in pain at those words, at the sobs and the tone of desperation in that
dear, little voice. With all his might, he felt himself swimming towards some kind of metaphorical
surface, struggling with all he had against all the currents fighting to drag him down.

"Daddy," Jamie said again, and Tony sucked in a sharp breath, seemed to actually get some proper
air this time. Slowly, still gasping and panting, he forced his eyes open. And there was Jamie. He
was alive and whole, and Tony wanted nothing more than to pat him down to confirm that
hypothesis. He wanted nothing more than to sit up straight and gather Jamie into his arms and hold
him close and never let go. He tried to sit up.

He couldn't.

Weakness suffused his whole body. He could barely move a finger, could barely find the strength to
draw in his next breath. Jamie was sobbing, his whole, tiny body shaking with it, his small little
fingers carding through Tony's hair while his other hand patted almost desperately at Tony's chest.
"Daddy," Jamie sobbed, his whole face crumbling before he sank down onto the floor next to Tony,
folding himself as tightly against Tony's heaving, struggling chest as he had when he was just a
baby. His small hands clawed at Tony's body, fingers and small little nails digging into Tony's skin,
almost painful. Tony didn't even have the strength to wrap his arms around his son's trembling body in turn.

When Bruce rushed in and gathered Jamie into his arms, it was the first time since his return from Afghanistan Tony had been grateful to see someone else comfort Jamie rather than do it himself.

Chapter End Notes

This whole chapter is pretty much one big panic attack that takes Tony all the way through a whole lot of his traumas and fears. Mentions of child torture and feared death are an obvious part of this. If you fear you'll be triggered or just don't want to read that, the important thing to take away from this chapter is that Tony had a massive panic attack after watching the portals in London (Thor: The Dark World), and that Jamie witnessed the tail end of it and was the one to talk him down.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Sometimes having a child means you have to take care of your own shit rather than burying it deep.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the support, be it kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions or, especially, the reviews. I even managed to answer this time (:D :) and I'll do my best to do that again for this chapter at least. Keep your fingers crossed real life doesn't get in the way. I do love talking to all of you, and I've missed that with not being able to answer. So yeah, questions and theories and anything, get them in for this chapter, because I don't know when I'll next have time to answer it all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later:

"JARVIS," Tony said. His voice was still hoarse from the screaming he had put it through just yesterday. "Show me the workshop surveillance from the Greenwich incident."

"Sir," JARVIS said. "Are you certain?"

"Absolutely, JARV." Tony swallowed. He wished he could say that he had gained a new perspective, but it had only been a day. And he hadn't slept. How could he have possibly even contemplated sleeping when he knew the kinds of nightmares that waited for him as soon as he shut his eyes, as soon as he showed a smidgen of weakness? He wished he had gained some kind of perspective, but if anything he had more tunnel vision than he'd ever had before. Jamie, it was all about Jamie.

And Tony had failed him. More than he thought he had ever failed anyone before, let alone anyone who meant anywhere near as much to him as Jamie did. He hadn't gained any perspective, so he had to use JARVIS's. It was the only way to find out what went wrong, and how he could keep it from happening again.

"Sir," JARVIS said. "I would really advice against this. The last thing we want is to trigger another--"

"What time is it?" Tony asked. "Where is Jamie?"

"It's nine thirty AM," JARVIS said. "Jamie is at preschool. He is not scheduled to be picked up for another six to seven hours."
"So," Tony said. "I was out of it for four hours yesterday. That makes for an acceptable margin of error. Even if I lose it, you have enough time to pull me back, right?"

JARVIS seemed to hesitate. "Based on previous data, discounting yesterday," he finally said. "Yes."

"Well, then," Tony said. "Let's get to it."

There was another moment's pause before JARVIS began to stream the previous day's recordings on the holoscreens. Tony wished to whatever Gods may or may not exist, as well as Thor and his dad, that yesterday could just be erased from existence. It wasn't mortification, not really. That emotion had been bled out of Tony's system years, decades, ago. Not even mortification's lesser cousin, humiliation. Tony was pretty sure he'd stopped feeling that even earlier.

What got to him was his memory from yesterday, from after the fog had lifted, of the way Jamie had clung to him, had refused to relinquish physical contact, had refused to even consider sleeping alone, as though he was scared Tony might vanish into clear mist the moment he looked the other way. That, that kind of fear and helplessness, that was something Tony had never developed defenses against, would've never even wanted to.

There was a part of Tony that wanted to limit Jamie's access to the workshop, clear and simple. This was where Tony spent most of his time when Jamie was in preschool, where he worked, where he tried to keep his now - with Iron Man out of the picture - limited view of the world accessible. If Jamie had had limited access yesterday, he would've never stumbled on Tony as incapacitated as he had been. Part of Tony wanted to turn his anger about the whole episode on JARVIS, or even on Bruce, who had apparently told Jamie to go hang out with Tony while Bruce prepared supper as usual. Combined with Jamie's unlimited - even by JARVIS - access, that had suddenly spelled disaster, and Tony wanted to blame that on everything and everyone. He wanted so badly to change the protocols that allowed it. But he couldn't. He had allowed Jamie to grow up in his workshop, to become so at ease with it, in a way Tony had never been in Howard's. He had structured this open-doors type of living. He was pretty sure he couldn't restrict it now, not without confusing and scaring Jamie. Changing boundaries should happen because of the child's development, not the parent's convenience, Tony knew that much at least.

So he couldn't change the protocols, and he wouldn't change Jamie. Which meant he needed to analyze his own behavior and figure out how to fix that so he would never scare Jamie like this again. That meant looking at those damn videos. "C'mon, JARV," he said. "Play them, before we're both old and grey."

"Sir," JARVIS said, "I would like to remind you that I will never be grey. I do not have any so-called grey matter, despite the color of my servers, nor do I have any hair that might change color with the passage of time."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I'm not liking this playing stupid thing you're doing lately," he said, even if part of him was grateful for the levity. "Play the video, please."

Finally, JARVIS routed the recordings to the screen in front of Tony. It wasn't... It was difficult to watch, yes, but probably not for most conventional reasons. Embarrassment was yet another lesser cousin of that core emotion he'd lost track of way back in his own childhood. That wasn't what struck him.

Horror hit him first, horror at his own utter helplessness.

And then it was sorrow and sympathy and some kind of utter, helpless rage at watching his baby boy attempt to bring him back, help him deal. At this point in his life, Jamie should be focusing solely on
his own problems, yet this - the crying and the panic from Jamie's side - marked the first real break Tony's son had had outside his reactions to his own nightmares since Killian. Tony had caused that. Tony's lack of control had caused that.

Tony needed to get his damn shit under control.

The thing was, he had tried to do that ever since Killian and AIM and Extremis. He'd been holding up, holding things together, before then, before the bad guys had come right out and put his boy in real danger. Now, now he couldn't get past that danger, and somehow that seemed to unlock every single shitty thing Tony'd thought he'd already overcome. He'd tried so hard to get it all under control. As evidenced by yesterday, he'd failed so badly it wasn't even funny.

"Ask Foster and Selvig and those clowns they've got tailing them if they need research funds," Tony absentmindedly said, watching the video. "Figuring out a way to contact Thor at will, say, could be a real ace up the sleeve, not to mention figuring out how to shut down portals more efficiently. And they're the best resources on that kind of research. Let's get on that if they're at all receptive, JARV."

He paused for several long, expanded moments, watching and re-watching yesterday's footage of his own breakdown. "Contact Sanchez," he said at last. "Tell her I'd like that referral after all." Before he could panic, let alone freak out completely, at the sound of his own decision, he sucked in a sharp breath. "Send word to the daycare that I'll be picking Jamie up in ten minutes or so. I have a feeling we could both use a day in the park."

Part of him wanted to suddenly panic at that notion, at the simple idea of being alone with Jamie without another trusted adult nearby to intervene, never mind it was something he'd done dozens of times before, never mind that he'd been Jamie's primary caretaker since the kid was just over three months old. Still, a breakdown like yesterday's would be hard to get past. Tony knew it would never be easy for him.

Five minutes into the outing he realized he had been both pessimistic and realistic about Jamie's view of him. Jamie, somehow, incredibly, seemed to trust Tony as much as he ever had. It was the surroundings he trusted less. He looked at Tony like he was a solid pillar to build a life around, and the rest of the world like it was fragile and untrustworthy, liable to attack at any moment. Tony had only ever seen hypervigilance like this in soldiers who'd been through combat, who'd killed people and lost friends. Never, ever, had he imagined he would see anything like that in his barely-more-than-a-toddler baby boy.

And finally, finally, he was determined that he did need help. More than Bruce could provide. More than JARVIS could provide. He needed a professional to get him back on track, or he would never ever be able to get Jamie back on track, and that was the most important thing in Tony's whole world.

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"Perhaps you could tell me why you are here, Mr. Stark," said Dr. Martin, almost the moment they were done with rudimentary introductions.

Tony blinked, thrown off for a moment. Should be pretty obvious why he was here, shouldn't it? "Well, I'm not here for the décor," he said, looking around at the walls and furniture, endless variations of beige and brown. Even the framed pictures hanging here and there were so generic they probably came straight out of IKEA. Frankly, it was all pretty depressing to look at. He kind of preferred Dr. Sanchez's office.

Dr. Martin, unexpectedly, cracked a small smile at that. "Well," he said. "I have found myself wishing there was some way to change the décor between sessions. I would certainly prefer
something a little more interesting, but for some people, this approach feels safe, lowers their anxiety, and well..."

"Lowest common denominator," Tony muttered, idly beginning to brainstorm rooms that could be changed back and forth at a moment's notice without involving any actual movers or an interior decorator on call.

"Something like that," Dr. Martin agreed. "Now, Mr. Stark, according to my secretary, you came in half an hour early. Then you left the waiting room twice, only to come back each time, and now you're here in front of me. What I'm curious about is why you are here when you clearly don't want to be, and what it is that makes you resistant to the idea of treatment."

Tony fought the sudden impulse to grind his teeth, fought the way all his muscles seemed to tense. "I haven't had the best experience with mental health professionals," he said at last. He rolled his eyes. "Howard sent me to a shrink when I was about five. He was... He never really wanted a kid, you know. He wanted an heir. He wanted a perfect little mini-me. I was smart, so there was that. I was even too smart, I think sometimes. But in all other areas, I was kind of a failure. I didn't like crowds. I didn't like the press. I didn't like having my picture taken. I'd get nervous about it. It gave me nightmares, sometimes. I guess nowadays I'd have been diagnosed with social anxiety. Which was definitely not what was wanted from Howard Stark's heir." He let out a breath. "Then again, I'm pretty sure all of that's already in my file. What's not in my file is that my shrink was the asshole brother-in-law of one of Howard's business partners. Old boys' club and all that. He was supposed to fix me. I hated his guts. Eventually, I stopped having my other nightmares and started just having ones about him instead. I would pretend to be sick on Wednesdays so I wouldn't have to see him. I suppose he did his job, though. I don't have social anxiety anymore.

"Eventually, my Godfather put his foot down. I'm pretty sure he broke Howard's nose. All I know is I didn't have to go anymore, and I promised myself I would never have to go through that ever again." He sighed. "So that would be why I strongly considered hightailing it out of here."

"I think you've misdiagnosed yourself," the doctor said. "Not liking crowds or strangers at that age, and reacting negatively to being made to interact with them anyway, that is perfectly normal behavior for an introverted child. With modern psychology, I doubt you'd have been given a diagnosis at all; your parents would've simply been advised to allow you the privacy you required."

Tony snorted. Introverted? Yeah, right. "I also am not entirely sure about the validity of psychology at all," he said. "From what I can tell, it's the flimsiest of the soft sciences. Theories change every few years. And how is something so inaccurate supposed to do anything at all?"

"As far as I know," Dr. Martin said, "the fields of math and physics are constantly changing as well. Doesn't seem to stop you from basing your life's work around them."

Tony shrugged. "I'm not messing around in someone's brain using tools I don't understand, and which might turn out, as soon as tomorrow, to be utter shit."

"And yet Doctor Sanchez informs me she has two appointments weekly with your son, with your support and consent," Dr. Martin said.

Tony sighed. "I may think half of Dr. Sanchez's theories are utter bogus, but I do know that after everything he's been through, my kid needs to be able to talk freely with an uninvolved adult who isn't going to be overly judgy or react too strongly to what he has to say. It comes with the side of doctor-patient confidentiality as well, so..."

"Well, then," Dr. Jeffrey Martin said. "Talk to me like that. Like an uninvolved third party who
doesn't have any feelings at stake. If you can afford your son that much, surely you can give yourself the same thing." He paused for a moment. "That was a lot of reasons for fleeing the waiting room. Why don't you tell me what brought you here in the first place."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "I'd have thought it was obvious by now," he said at last. "My kid. What else?"

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I am not a mental health professional. I have never even been to therapy. My education means I have some knowledge of psychology, neurology and the theories involved, but I am in no way a therapist. Therapy sessions will also never play a main role in the stories, though there will be a few glimpses into them. Hopefully I haven't messed up completely.

And hey, who was Tony’s Godfather in this particular universe?
Thanks so much for the support, be it kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, recommendations or, especially, comments. So many this time, and I am sooo humbled and grateful. You guys have truly made my day.
None of you managed to guess the identity of Tony's Godfather, so I'm still definitely open to guesses and theories, and I always welcome discussions between readers in the comments. Even when I don't get a chance to answer, feel free to talk to one another, unless, of course, the other person has made it clear they don't want to talk.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"How's therapy going?" Rhodey asked, plopping down next to Tony and pulling his legs up on the couch, leaning back with a groan. He was on leave for the first time in far too long, and Tony...
Tony felt something inside him relax at Rhodey's mere presence, even if his friend still seemed exhausted and brittle and probably would for the next couple of days, just as he always did when he got back from a deployment.
"Well, you know," Tony said. "I haven't killed Jeff Martin yet, so I'd say it's going pretty well, all things considered."
Rhodey didn't answer for a while, busied himself with pouring wine into two glasses and handing one to Tony before swirling his own, giving it a quick taste. "Not killing your psychologist is definitely a good sign," he said. Then he sighed. "This is delicious," he said, and God, they might both need testosterone shots in the long run, but when it came to alcohol, sharing a bottle of quality red wine with a friend was about all Tony was willing to allow himself these days. If Jamie sought him out - and he still did more nights than not - Tony did not want to even be buzzed for it.
"It's definitely a different bouquet than the MIT classics," Tony said, taking a sip of his own and letting the rich flavor swirl through his mouth. Even after all these years, the taste still reminded Tony of his mother's breath, with all the bad and all the good that implied. He took another sip, allowed it to comfort and sadden him for a moment before meeting Rhodey's eyes. "It's all right, I guess," he said at last. "It's not so bad, having someone willing to listen to you ramble for hours on end, even if you do have to pay them. Fuck knows if I tried to unload on Bruce, he'd probably just fall asleep on me."
"And how are you?" Rhodey asked, looking at him with those dark, too-serious eyes. "Tony, honestly?"
"Honestly?" Tony sighed. "I'm better than I thought I'd be. I mean, four months ago I was breaking
down and having panic attacks in front of Jamie. Now... It's actually been three days since my last
nightmare. And it's not because I didn't sleep either. I... you know I don't like to admit that there's
any merit to the squishy sciences, but you know, I honestly have no clue what kind of voodoo it is
Jeff's working on me. I'm considering getting a degree in psychology, just to figure it out."

Rhodey let out a warm, dry laugh, reached out and gripped Tony's knee, squeezed it tightly. "Or
maybe you should accept that sometimes it's a good thing you don't understand everything. Let a
good thing be a good thing. Accept it."

Tony groaned. "I don't know what the fuck he's doing, and I don't like that," he said.

Rhodey's eyes were endlessly warm when they met his. "I'm proud of you, Tones. After everything
you went through way back then, it took a lot out of you to get help. But you did. And you're letting
it work for you. I'm so happy about that. Really." He paused a moment, displaying all the signs of
knowing Tony well enough to realize that excessive praise wasn't actually welcome. "How's my
Godson?"

"Better," Tony said. "It seems Sanchez was right; the better I do, the better Jamie does." Which was
not to say everything was a-okay. Jamie still slept in Tony's bed more often than not, and Tony still
had more nightmares than were strictly healthy, and a few times a week that would still combine into
the two of them clutching one another tightly for hours as they tried to forget that the rest of the
world existed, that there were still people out there out to get them. Still, it was better than it had
been, and Tony was old enough to know that in situations like these, expecting more than baby steps
was just stupid. "Jeff wants me to get a dog," he said at last. "And not just, you know, a for-funsies
dog."

"Service dog," Rhodey said. "A lot of vets struggling with PTSD are getting them these days. It's
actually quite helpful, I've been told. The dog senses it when your stress levels rise or when you start
to get anxious, and it tries to warn you away from the situation. And overall, it's that squishy, cushy
friend that's always going to be around, willing to hug you - or let you hug it, really - and love you."
He paused for a moment, reached out and ruffled Tony's hair, though, really, it felt horribly like a
caress. "Maybe it's not such a bad idea. It could be a whole circle of safety. Jamie helps care for the
dog. The dog helps care for you. You care for Jamie, who helps care for the dog. It might just help
him too, help him feel like he's got some kind of control over all this."

Tony rolled his eyes. "That's what Jeff and Sanchez said too," he said at last. "Jamie wants so badly
to help and protect and care for, and God knows where he got those genes, but I'm not capable of
accepting that from my own kid, especially when he's still only actually four years old. But he's smart
enough to understand systems, so he'd understand that if the dog's helping me and he's helping the
dog..." He let out a groan. "Fuck it, I had no idea what I was talking about when I told you I wanted
smart children."

"You said you wouldn't be able to connect on more than a basic level with children who weren't
smart," Rhodey said. "And you were right. Now, Jamie being an actual genius comes with its own
challenges, of course, but I still think you are probably better equipped to deal with that than with an
average child. You'd have a much harder time connecting with a kid of yours who wasn't on your
level of intellect, and that struggle would be the last thing you'd need right now. And I don't even
want to imagine how difficult a time Jamie would have with parents who weren't as smart as him.
But frankly, that's a hypothesis, and an unnecessary one, unless you plan to go out and get yourself
more children without properly preparing."

Tony groaned. "Christine Everhart is still the last woman I slept with. Hell, the last person
altogether, but I'm pretty sure we can both agree women are far more pertinent to that discussion than men."
"Get the dog, Tones," Rhodey said, taking a long swallow of his glass of red, groaning in pleasure when he put the glass down on the table. "Goddamnit, that's good. Get the dog, please. Use one of the for-profits so you don't jump ahead of anyone in line and feel bad about that, make sure it's properly trained and you don't have to wait too long. I think it'll help you and Jamie both. Even if you end up not needing it much, you're a two-person family. Adding a pet to the mix might help ease out that dynamic a bit."

Tony frowned. "'Ease out'," he said. "Why the hell would our dynamic need to be eased out?"

"Two-people-families have a tendency towards becoming co-dependent," Rhodey said after a while. "In my experience, especially when they're processing trauma. Don't fall into that trap. I have a feeling it won't be as pretty from the inside as it might look from a distance."

Tony let out a groan. "Are you shrinking me too, now?" he asked, letting a faint whine into his tone.

"No more than I always did," Rhodey told him. "Now, drink your wine and go to bed, and tomorrow we'll go to the for-profits and find you the right dog. Even if it ends up being just a family dog, I think that'll still be a good thing."

"You're an asshole," Tony said, draining the last of his glass of wine before refilling it. "I always thought if I ever had a pet, it would be a cat. Or a dolphin. Still..." He let out a sigh. "You may also just be right. Movie?"

"Movie," Rhodey agreed. "Then bed."

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Mickey was a just-barely-grown Border Collie, full of energy and enthusiasm and vigilance. Aside from extra chores, Tony still wasn't sure what exactly it was the dog was supposed to do for them, but Jamie had been so ridiculously enthusiastic it was difficult not to get caught up in it. She was 'Daddy's dog', Jamie kept saying, apparently parroting Sanchez more than ever before, but that didn't mean Jamie couldn't cuddle and feed her. It just meant Mickey slept in Tony's room even when Jamie didn't and that Tony was supposed to take Mickey with him when he left the penthouse. He was pretty damn sure it was all an exercise in futility, right up until the first time Mickey fucking saved him.

Tony wasn't sure what it was that was setting him off. He just knew he was in the workshop, working, with Mickey and Dum-E playing some sort of obscure game of fetch in the corner, and suddenly he was short of breath, pulse erratic while flashbacks threatened at the edges of his mind. And then Mickey was there, barking and damn near tackling him. But once Tony allowed the dog to push him to the floor, Mickey was a bundle of energetic sympathy, woofing and licking his cheek before lying down on his chest, a warm, heavy weight that was still light enough to be easy to bear. She grounded him, like nothing ever had, and there was bad doggie breath in his face, and more woofs, and the great big oaf didn't move an inch, and Tony wasn't at all sure this was how therapy dogs were supposed to work.

But it did. Work, that was. The warm, grounding weight and bad breath and constant barking brought Tony right back down to Earth every time his mind tried to take off. Mickey didn't belong in any of the scenarios that constantly threatened to take over Tony's mind, and by that merit alone, she brought Tony back from the edge again and again, distorting flashbacks and breaking up nightmares by confusing Tony's logical reasoning. Tony didn't even have to put in much effort. Bruce and Jamie fed and watered her and took her for walks. They even bathed her when she got too filthy to bear, but somehow, despite all that, the dog still stuck to Tony like a tick, until by March, Tony couldn't remember his last panic attack, and by April he marked the first time since the Battle of New York
when he'd had three weeks straight with no nightmares.

And best of all, Jamie was doing better too. By the time the Avengers (minus Clint) celebrated Christmas together in the Tower, the hypervigilance was long gone, and the nightmares were more of an occasional thing than something to constantly be aware of. Jamie was smiling and cheerful again, less innocent than other children perhaps, but no longer distrustful of the whole damn world. Sanchez reported leaps and bounds of progress, and Jamie was sleeping in his own bed again more often than not.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, Tony was content with his life. He didn't need his suits; there was a team of superheroes patrolling the world for him. He was taking care of his son, who was full of smiles and laughter once again. His Tower was full of people he cared for: Himself and Jamie, Bruce and their labs and science sessions, and Mickey the Dog who sensed an anxiety or panic attack before it came and would literally sit on Tony until it passed. For the first time in years, he felt borderline safe.

And so it was with genuine joy that he celebrated Jamie's fifth birthday. Days later, the world changed again.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I know very little about service dogs. Mickey - and her relationship to Tony - is meant to be a bit unusual in her methods, so to speak, but I honestly don't even know enough to know if I managed to make her that. Please forgive any inaccuracies.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the support, be it kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, recs or, especially, comments. The comments never fail to make my day, and I cannot thank you enough. I'll keep answering when and if I am able, but I should warn you that in less than a week, we may very well enter complete radio silence. I'm going to Central America for nine weeks (absolutely cannot wait), and while I'll do my very best to post a chapter every once in a while, answering comments will probably be beyond my abilities at that point. Until then, I'll do what I can to get back to you.

Some dialogue in this chapter is lifted directly from Captain America: Winter Soldier, and so does not belong to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Tony was in Japan to cut the ridiculously large red and gold ribbon for another arc reactor power plant when JARVIS told him about the assassination of Nick Fury.

Instead of returning to his hotel room as he had initially planned, Tony headed straight towards the airport and his personal jet, heart pounding in his chest. Mickey pressed against his legs, almost making him stumble, but he slowed down even as he ground his teeth at the delay. He dug his fingers into Mickey's thick, soft fur, let her solid heat and nearness calm him down as his pace grew more measured and his pulse slowed and he could think again.

Jamie wasn't in Washington, Tony reminded himself. Jamie might not be right here where Tony could see and hear and feel him, but he was in New York City, in Stark Tower, safe behind all its built-in defenses, with Bruce Banner right there to watch over him. Jamie was safe.

Jamie was safe.

Still, DC was not that far from NYC, all things considered. Disconcertingly close, actually. And the old pirate was dead. What did that even mean? Tony had always been at least halfway certain that Nick Fury was some kind of immortal asshole just hanging around for all eternity to torment random poor souls who caught his attention. At least this current version of him.

Vaguely, as if from far away, Tony remembered someone so very different, remembered the young black man with the impressive afro and expressive dark eyes who had taken his hand when Howard or Aunt Peggy had brought him to S.H.I.E.L.D. long, long ago and then forgotten all about him. He remembered dissembling electronics on the floor of that young man's cubicle and getting candies and pats on his heads when he had been no older than Jamie.
The part of him that wasn't trying to convince him it was all in his imagination, fabricated memories of some kind, hurt like someone had torn him to pieces. Not like it had when his mother, or Jarvis and Ana, or Uncle Danny had died, but something oddly close to it. And his rational mind was backing it up, telling him something was underfoot, something dangerous, and he had to be there, had to make sure his baby boy was all right.

He was somewhere over Scandinavia when all of a sudden, JARVIS alerted him to a call. From Nat. Who was in DC. Tony was about to begin asking questions when a voice filtered through. "Tell me about Zola's algorithm," someone was saying. Steve, Tony realized a moment later. That was Steve's voice.

Tony didn't offer Nat a greeting. In fact, this would go down in history, he thought, as the most one-sided phone call he'd ever taken the passive part in. He hoped she appreciated it.

"Never heard of it," someone else said. Tony recognized the voice, if only vaguely. Definitely someone he'd met before.

Tony turned off the microphone in his phone. "JARVIS," he said, "run vocal patterns recognition."

"On it, Sir," JARVIS said.

"What were you doing on the Lumerian Star?" Steve asked.

"What's the Lumerian Star?" Tony asked JARVIS. "What's Steve got to do with it and who else is associated with it?"

JARVIS didn't need to confirm; Tony already knew he was wracking his servers to find the answers.

"I was throwing up," the other person answered, voice growing shakier now. "I get seasick. A pause, then, "is this little game meant to insinuate you're going to throw me off the roof? Because that's really not your style, Rogers."

Another pause, and then, "You're right," Steve said. "It's not. It's hers."

And fuck knows Tony did not want to know what Natasha was doing right now aside from putting him on speakerphone. He'd had enough fucking nightmares to last him a lifetime, and he did not need fuel for more of them.

Someone screamed.

"Hey, what about that girl from accounting?" Natasha was saying. "Laura..."

"Lillian," Steve interjected. "Lip piercing, yeah?"

"Yeah," Natasha agreed. "She's cute." Fuck all, since when was Natasha trying to set up Steve, and why hadn't Tony been told about it? He might be utterly unable to find himself a suitable date these days, but he did still have the info to get someone like Steve Rogers a nice lady experience. That, and he'd just like to have been let in on what would undoubtedly be a hilarious disaster.

"Yeah," Steve said, somewhat more firmly now, and what the fuck was all this, some kind of fucked up Natasha style phone prank? "I'm not ready for that," Steve concluded.

The scream, which had faded before, somehow started right back up. Then there was the sound of human flesh hitting a solid surface and the steady scream disappeared to make way for yelps and moans. Then there was something that sounded distinctly like a pair of feet hitting a concrete surface
from above, and something mechanical Tony could almost, but not quite, place.

"Zola's algorithm is a program," the same voice from before said, only now it was truly distressed, crackling with fear. "For choosing Inside's targets."

"What targets?" Steve asked.

"You," the other voice said. "A TV anchor in Cairo, the Secretary of State, a high school valedictorian in Iowa City. Bruce Banner, Stephen Strange, James Stark, anyone who's a threat to HYDRA. Now, or in the future."

"The future," Steve said. "How could it know?" But honestly, Tony didn't need to hear anything else. Given the right program, how could it not? These days, every damn thing was online, everything necessary to read an individual's past and predict their future. Bruce was obvious. Stephen Strange... Tony may not know the man personally, but he knew of him, and from what he could tell, the idiot was following exactly the same pattern Tony had before Afghanistan. Given the right trigger, he might very well react the same way Tony had - and wasn't that a kicker? Not only was HYDRA of all fucking things still alive and active, but apparently Tony had now become some kind of pattern they shaped their profiles after.

And then there was the most important name on that list. James Stark. Part of Tony was halfway to a panic attack and a few hours' stay in la-la-land, but with his solid grip on Mickey, he somehow managed to keep a hold of himself. What kind of idiot would go after Jamie for a straight up assassination rather than Tony? What could they possibly get out of that? How in the world could Jamie ever possibly be worth more dead than alive to anyone? And why prioritize his death above Tony's?

"JARVIS," he heard himself say as if from far away, words heard through an odd kind of fog. "Analyze all of that shit, and put the Tower defenses on red alert. Send a transcript of all this to Bruce."

"Yes, Sir," JARVIS said. "The voice you wanted identified belongs to Agent Jasper Sitwell of S.H.I.E.L.D. The Lumerian Star is a ship that was held hostage by pirates a few days ago, but was freed by a S.H.I.E.L.D. STRIKE team. I'll look further into the S.H.I.E.L.D. files on the incident."

Tony let out a breath. "Good boy," he said, even as his mind began to go into overdrive, trying to figure it all out, make up for all the variables.

They were firmly over the Atlantic when JARVIS interrupted their ongoing analysis, "I should add that there's something pertinent running in the news."

"Show it to me, baby," Tony said. And just like that, the DC skirmish reached his screens. Tony let Mickey jump into his lap even though she was too large and heavy for it, really, and wrapped his arms around her, eyes trained on the TV. Her paws rested on his shoulders, and he could feel her heart skittering against his own chest, and he stayed calm as he watched the pictures flashing across the screen. There was Steve, and Natasha, and some unknown dude who was clearly on their side. And there were soldiers going up against them, so many of them.

And there was one who caught Tony's attention.

He was familiar, somehow, but Tony couldn't place him. Empty, grey eyes pierced him through the screen. A metal arm captured his attention - and why hadn't he gotten on top of the prosthetics ideas he'd had years ago, so like this? - and that broad frame somehow... called to him in some strange fucked-up way he couldn't explain. It was way too long since he'd gotten laid, and fuck did that feel
like a bad thought right now.

He shook all that off, combed his fingers through Mickey's fur. Watched the screen through a filter of calmness he couldn't have managed even just a few months ago.

Tony forced himself to get some kind of perspective over the whole situation. A wrecked car on the highway, individual battles blossoming out from that one starting point. Steve and Nat had been trying to flee. No, fuck that. Knowing them, they'd been trying to accomplish something. But these people - HYDRA? What the fuck? - had cut their transport off. "JARVIS, you got anything for me?" Tony asked.

"Not quite yet, Sir," JARVIS said.

Tony watched breathlessly as Natasha somersaulted and ran across a bridge, the news coverage streaming alongside JARVIS's continuous addition of local surveillance cameras, cell phones, whatever else he could get at.

A car exploded. Nat jumped. Tony clutched Mickey so tightly he was half-afraid he would crush her. She licked his cheek, as though to assure him that she was just fine. Then JARVIS showed another frame of Natasha getting away in one piece, and Tony damn near licked Mickey in return.

Then everything happened a hell of a lot faster than Tony could keep up with without the HUD and its analytical abilities there to assist him. "JARV," Tony said. "Fury's dead. Apparently Arnim Zola is still alive. Or was, until very recently. The world is an even more fucked up place than we thought, active HYDRA and all. I need your perspective on this as soon as you can get it."

"Still processing, Sir," JARVIS said. "Sir," JARVIS said then, and Tony felt his breath catch in his throat when S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel showed up to arrest Steve, Nat and the guy who'd somehow stolen Tony's discontinued Falcon wings.

"Look up Falcon Thief," Tony told JARVIS, watching impotently, torn somewhere between disbelief, impotence and rage as the trio was pulled into armored vehicles and taken away. "What the fuck is happening here? I really want to know, fuck."

"Samuel Wilson, Sir," JARVIS said a moment later. "Falcon Thief, Sergeant, former Air Force pararescue, one of the subjects of the Exo Falcon Project. Currently working as a counselor for the DC chapters of the veterans' association, specializing in PTSD."

"Send his personnel file to my phone," Tony said. "And figure out how the fuck he's mixed up in all this shit. Track Rogers and Romanov if you can. And give me--"

"Sir," JARVIS said, and Tony shut up immediately. JARVIS never interrupted him, not unless it was a matter of life or death. If JARVIS was interrupting him, Tony could not afford to ignore him.

"Yes, Sweetheart?" Tony said.

"Maria Hill is sending through a number of files and raw coding," JARVIS said. "She says she needs new programming for the targeting blades of the new helicarriers. The rest of the information is in the file she's transferring. Right now, she is, and I quote: 'busy saving Avenger ass and cannot answer anyone's calls',."

Tony was caught somewhere between a sigh of relief and an eye roll of annoyance. "Put the coding and the new parameters up on the screen, JARVIS," Tony said, and he was almost grateful at the sequence of ones and zeros that suddenly took up the whole of his view. He breathed a sigh of strange relief, carefully put Mickey back down on the floor. He buried one hand in soft, warm fur,
kept himself grounded through that.

Mickey let out a gentle bark.

Tony flashed her a grin, then turned his attention to the ones and zeros in front of him. He took in the instructions more quickly than he normally would've, tried to avoid seeing that young Fury's face before his eyes as he processed without questioning, took in the mission without objections, completely against his own nature. But that asshole, whoever he had been, had mentioned Jamie, and whatever it took to keep him safe, Tony would do, no questions asked.

It wasn't hard work, reconfigurating and reprogramming the targeting blades and sending the codes off to Hill. Tony could only hope that was enough. He was half an hour out from New York when the helicarriers shot each other out of the sky and right into the Triskelion and all the S.H.I.E.L.D. files blew up on the Internet.

"JARVIS," Tony said. "Begin extracting agents. Right the fuck now."

Chapter End Notes

A few notes: Two of you got the identity of Tony's Godfather right. Granted, you have to have watched Agent Carter (the only one of the TV or Netflix shows canon to this story) to have had a chance to guess it, but yeah. Peggy Carter and Daniel Sousa (who, in this story, eventually married) are Tony's Godparents. However, as much as I love Peggy as the doting, adoring Godmother, it didn't really fit this story, and since Tony, quite frankly, doesn't really know all of it, I'll try to briefly explain the backstory here:

Peggy and Daniel married in the early fifties, and within a few years they both decided to temporarily slow down their careers to start a family. They had two kids in the mid to late fifties, and while Peggy adored them and loved being a mother, she did resent the time and attention it took away from her career. By the time Tony was born, the Carter-Sousa kids were in their early to mid teens and Peggy was back to giving her all to S.H.I.E.L.D., while Daniel remained more relaxed career-wise and more family focused. Howard somehow conned Peggy (probably with some nagging from Daniel) into being Tony's Godmother, and Daniel was part of that package deal, becoming Tony's Godfather.

Now, Peggy did love Tony, but she did not, quite frankly, have time for him any more than Howard did, and so Tony's relationship with her wasn't the best. His Uncle Danny (who might have actually really wanted more children than the two he got, and who absolutely adored his Godson), however, was one of his favourite people in the whole world. Daniel was an important, positive figure in Tony's upbringing, very close to him even while Peggy remained distant, and after Daniel's death, within a few years of Howard and Maria's, Tony and Peggy grew that much more distant, hence why there is no on-screen relationship and very few thoughts, even, when it comes to Tony and Peggy.

I hope that makes some sense to everyone.

Also, I realise Tony's brief slightly sexual thought about the Winter Soldier might seem a bit disturbing, but it's important to point out, to those who hadn't guessed, that Tony, consciously, remembers precisely nothing from their encounter. Meanwhile, his subconscious has a thing or two to say, and it doesn't have much to connect with Bucky other than the metal arm and sex.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the support, be it through kudos, bookmarks, recs, subscriptions or comments. It all means the world to me, and every time I get a new comment, it absolutely makes my day.

This is likely to be my last chapter posted in a while, unless I take the leap and attempt to post via mobile phone and dodgy wi-fi. Can't really tell whether it's even feasible before I get there, but I will do my very best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

32557038, Sergeant Barnes, James Buchanan, 107th infantry, US Army

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"Sir," JARVIS said. "I have decrypted sixty-eight per cent of active personnel files, and am attempting to contact all agents I can find, but two in seven field agents are on deep cover missions. I have no ability to contact them, and we do not command the personnel necessary for an extraction, let alone hundreds."

Tony gritted his teeth. "Have you got a hold of Bird-Brain?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," JARVIS said. "Agent Barton reports that he is fine, in a safe off the files location. He is working on his end to contact off-mission agents and agents' families and coordinate relocations to nearby embassies, police stations and military bases. I believe he and Agent Hill are working together on that."

Tony nodded, took a deep breath and tried not to clench his hand too hard in Mickey's fur. What the hell had Romanov been thinking? What the actual fuck could have made her think it was okay to put thousands of people, civilian spouses and children included, in danger just to flush out what was likely just a fraction who'd gone bad? Tony couldn't help but wonder if she'd been thinking at all. He had to admit that he might not have either, if he hadn't had Jamie and seen first-hand how a parent's dangerous job could put a child at risk. "Contact Rhodey," he said. "Try to coordinate extractions with the military, if they aren't already on it."

"Yes, Sir," JARVIS said. And then, far more hesitantly, "Sir. Two listed agents were just shot down in Queens. Paramedics have declared them dead on the scene."

Tony swallowed, resisted the urge to punch something. "Names?" he asked.

"Mary and Richard Parker," JARVIS answered. "One dependent, currently in police custody. A son, Peter, aged thirteen."


"Yes, Sir," JARVIS said. The fact that he didn't do his smartass move of playing a dial tone reminded Tony all over again of just how serious this situation was. As if he needed any reminders.
"Daddy," Jamie was saying then, voice ringing out so clear and soothing in the cabin Tony felt like he could breathe freely again. He hadn't even noticed his breath had become constricted. "Daddy, what's going on? I know something's going on, but Uncle Bruce won't tell me."

Tony ran a hand over his face, took a brief moment to figure out the best way to go about it. Then he spoke, "Sweetheart, you know how there are a lot of heroes out there. Not superheroes, maybe, but men and women who do a lot of good to help other people. Agents."

"Yes?" Jamie said slowly, clearly uncertain where this was going.

"Well, like we talked about, it can be really dangerous to try and protect other people; bad men and women can get really angry when you do that. And right now some idiot just told all those bad men and women where all those heroes are, what they're doing, who they're married to, whether they have children." Tony took a deep breath, stroked a hand across Mickey's soft fur. "Someone has to be their hero now, but Steve is sick and Thor is on Asgard. Natasha is held up. Clint is already doing everything he can, but he can't work fast enough."

Tony could hear the click of Jamie's throat as he swallowed, could sense the hesitation even through just a phone call. And then, "It's not really fair, is it?" Jamie asked softly, voice shaking. "Their daddies aren't safe, those other kids. But you--"

"If you don't want me to do this," Tony said. "I swear I won't. I won't hurt you like that."

A pause, and when Jamie finally spoke again, he sounded more determined than he had in a while. "You are always my hero," Tony's incredible, brilliant little boy said. "I can be brave enough to share you."

Tony let out a shuddering breath, not sure if he was relieved or so very, very sad. Part of him hated himself, for even having had to do this, for having to put Jamie in this position. He might understand a lot more now than he did a year and a half ago, but he was still just a little kid, and he shouldn't have to understand these things. He shouldn't have to feel the need to be brave so other little kids could be safe and see their parents safe again. But he had done it, and Tony was so incredibly proud he felt fit to burst with it. "I love you, Jam-Jam," he said. "You know that, right?"

"Love you too, Daddy," Jamie said. "Go be a hero. 'And come back to me afterwards,' went unspoken but never unheard. "I'll look after Uncle Bruce."

"Thanks, buddy," Tony said, and nodded for JARVIS to cut the connection. "Can you have the newest suit model intercept this flight?" he asked.

"Already on its way, Sir," JARVIS said.

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Sixty-three hours passed in a blur. Sixty-three hours, forty-seven countries, endless flying and fighting, sneaking in and out of countries he was not on speaking terms with (North Korea, Iran, that ilk), giving courtesy calls to the ones he had standing visas for (the Schengen Zone, most of East Asia, most of Latin America), and attempting to negotiate entry on the fly with all the ones in between. At some point, Maria Hill contacted him to tell him she had gotten him entry into another handful of countries, and he left the negotiations to her. Things got easier then. Easier, but never easy.

He made JARVIS start emergency fabrication of crude Iron Cradle replicas in different sizes. When he no longer had to try to bodily fly people to the nearest safe spot, but could simply stuff them in
Iron Cradles and have JARVIS fly them away, things got easier again. Still, not easy.

There was nothing easy about the bodies he had to leave behind so he could use the limited number of Iron Cradles on the people still alive. There was nothing easy about being minutes too late, of seeing good people - men, women and children - killed and tortured and being unable to do anything other than avenge them.

When JARVIS and Hill finally declared the mission done - everyone not extracted by now were simply too deep undercover and had to be counted on to save themselves, or they were already dead, but their family at least safe - Tony was tired down to the marrow of his bones, and there was a yawning, aching sort of grief pressing against his diaphragm. Three hundred forty-seven S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel and affiliated civilians dead, not counting the agents who had been on the various bases when HYDRA had been pulled out of the shadows, shooting and screaming. Thirty-three agents still unaccounted for. But between JARVIS's messages, Tony, Clint, Hill, the military's extractions and the agents' own ingenuity and self-preservation instincts, three thousand seven hundred and eighty-five agents and their families had been saved. Tony had personally, physically, extracted forty-six people.

Not enough. Notenoughnotenoughnotenough

It should feel like a job well done, but there had been so many unnecessary deaths. So many images Tony knew he would never be able to unsee, no matter how much time he spent with Doctor Jeff. He felt sick.

He managed an only slightly wobbly three-point landing on the Stark Tower landing patch, and took a moment just to breathe before he started walking towards the disassembly rings. Slowly, bit by bit, he felt the armor start to come off. He was shaking, he realized. With exhaustion, with anger and fear and utter helplessness. Fuck, he was going to shake apart if he let himself.

But then the doors opened and Jamie ran out, Mickey bounding along beside him, and Tony crouched down and wrapped his little boy tight in his arms while Mickey's heavy, steady warmth pressed against their sides. Tony breathed in deep, eyes squeezing shut, and held on as hard as he dared. "How are you doing, buddy?" he finally asked, once he thought he'd be able to control his own voice.

"I'm all right," Jamie said. "I didn't sleep too good, but Uncle Bruce and Mickey were right there. Maria's scared, though. She says they took her and moved her. She was in a plane for a long time, and now she's in a castle somewhere. She doesn't know what's going on."

Tony clenched down on the sudden anger that roared in him, squeezed until it winked out of existence. Still, he wished, wanted so badly, for Jamie to just once let go of that fantasy, that crutch, and come right out and say what he actually thought, what he actually felt. Tony was too damn tired to deal with metaphors about Towers and castles and transitions and confusion. He breathed out, let go of the frustration and just kept holding onto Jamie for as long as the kid would let him.

***

"You're hired," Tony said, walking around the reception desk at the ground level of Stark Tower, glancing down at the unsolicited job application on the desk and the no doubt very creative resume peeking out from behind it. He looked up, met Hill's blue eyes straight on. "You should've come straight to Pepper or me, though," he added. "There'll be too much that's redacted or strange or unverifiable in your resume to get it through the regular channels. We tightened the net a bit after the whole Natalisha Rushmanov deal."
“Perhaps I make too many assumptions,” Tony said, leading the way towards the elevators. As much as he didn’t particularly like his company office, it was still better than having the world’s strangest job interview in the middle of the lobby. “Tell me if I’m making the wrong one, though. You just saw your life’s work crumble around you, but you still have the same goals: You want to make the world a better, safer place, but S.H.I.E.L.D. was compromised, so how can you be sure the federal bureaus won’t be too? What about Interpol? So they’re out. And whatever else you may think and feel about me, you know I’m not HYDRA, and that I want a lot of the same things you do.” He flashed her a smile. "And then there are your own assumptions:

"That I'm going to pick up as much of the S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel as I reasonably can. Not the spies and assassins who only know how to be spies and assassins, I have no need for those. I can't justify hiring them, except a select few with bodyguarding experience. But the people with legal, medical or scientific backgrounds, definitely. Even the ones with military background can be useful in the relief and disaster fund we're going to need now that S.H.I.E.L.D. is gone. The ones used to bureaucracy, with international experience and political contacts and allies all over the world, those I'm definitely poaching. After serious background checks and psych evals, of course. I don't want a HYDRA parasite of my very own." He glanced out through the glass walls of the elevator, taking in the view of New York City, safe and sound despite the fact that Tony couldn't help but feel like the world had shifted. Hill probably felt that same way, only more deeply. "You want to keep an eye on them. Both to make sure they do all right and, like me, to make sure they're clean. Your assumptions are correct. How are mine?"

"Right on the money, Dr. Stark," Hill replied. "I also assume you will be financing the Avengers for the foreseeable future."

Tony groaned. "I may have to make them stew for a bit," he said. "Make Rogers and Romanov think about their actions like actual adults, or the next death by wikileaks they instigate will be SI employees, and I am not all right with that. But yeah, eventually.” He grinned. "As I said, though, you're hired. At least I already know we can work together, even if you don't like me."

She blinked, then shrugged. "Over the past week or so, I've had to re-evaluate a lot of my beliefs, Dr. Stark," she finally said.

"Is that why you're suddenly calling me by my actual title, when S.H.I.E.L.D. has always been adamant on downgrading me?" he asked.

"If we're going to continue working together," Hill said, "I want to get used to seeing your assets rather than your, likely mostly exaggerated, defects."

Tony grinned. "I'm sure there are still tapes online. You're going to have to work harder if you want see the assets in person. Consider me flattered, though." The elevator stopped, doors sliding to the sides. Hill stepped through and Tony pointed to the left. "Pepper's on the left. Since we're going to have to create a whole new position for you, you should talk to her. I'm only head of Research and Development these days, remember." He gave a quick wave, and let JARVIS take him the rest of the way to the penthouse. "Tell me I didn't just make a mistake, honey," he said.

"Well," JARVIS said. "The odds are--"

"Don't tell me the odds," Tony said.

"I wouldn't dream of it, Captain Solo."
"Don't tell me the odds," Tony said. "I can calculate them quicker than you can say them. Bucket of bolts."

"I'll have The Empire Strikes back ready to play when you reach the entertainment room, Sir," JARVIS said.

"Good," Tony agreed. "Let's kick back for a couple of hours. We've earned that, right?"

"As you wish, Sir."

"Stop trying to influence my movie choices, JARVIS."

Chapter End Notes

A few notes: The backstory for Peter Parker's parents is kind of a confusing mess, according to my research. I went with the version where they were S.H.I.E.L.D. field agents and Peter was in large parts raised by Uncle Ben and Aunt May even before they were killed. He does still get quite a few more years with them here than in any canon I've been able to learn of. My best explanation is that I feel it's so incredibly important not to overlook just how badly Steve and Natasha fucked up in C:WS - especially since the MCU itself has never acknowledged it - and putting a pair of familiar names in there might be a cheap trick, but hopefully it'll underline my point in all this.

Also, a bit of levity there in the end. I felt like it was needed.

Lastly, I realise Tony put Jamie in an unfair position here. No child should have to make the choice Jamie did, but Tony couldn't see another option. If he'd suited back up without talking to Jamie or in any other way made a decision that went right over Jamie's head, that would've been a complete and utter betrayal to the type of relationship they have, but it's also just not in Tony's nature to sit this one out unless joining the fray would actively hurt his son. In the end, while Jamie had to make a choice too mature for his years, their relationship didn't suffer for it. He spent a few days scared out of his mind, poor kid, but in the end he got to feel proud, both of Tony and of his own choice, and feel important and loved by being consulted. I'm not saying doing it like this is the right way of going about such a situation, but for this instance and this particular family, it might just be the one that worked. (In contrast, I doubt Clint gives a fuck about what his kids have to say about his Avenging, so there is that.)
Thank you so much for your support. Whether it be kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, recs or, especially, comments, it all meant the world to me, and each and every comment put a smile on my face. I do plan to deal with as many MCU plotholes as possible, in my own way, so yeah...

He was small. His shorts were large (’you'll grow into them. You grow so fast’). His knees were scuffed, but not badly enough to hinder him. His suspenders were too small, digging into his shoulders (’we'll get new ones when your pa gets his next paycheck’). He was in his finest shirtsleeves and even a jacket that was only a bit patched. A small hand clutched his. He glanced to his side. He saw grey eyes and dark, plaited hair. A wide smile. Something inside him warmed up. He wanted to smile.

What did that mean?

There were dirty streets, dotted with pits of dirty water. There were children on the street, clean, many of them in their Sunday best. Houses that looked fit to fall apart. Whoever his target was, they could be neither rich nor powerful. He didn't understand the mission. But then, it was not for him to understand. He was only the Asset.


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It took weeks to even begin to gain any kind of perspective on the actual fallout from the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. and Tony knew all too well it would take even longer to actually deal with it. Thankfully, Hill, Pepper and a couple of the new hires (vetted and verified by freelance behavioral analysts SI had worked with before, and who Tony was starting to think he'd have to hire on fulltime) didn't need much more than a few signatures from him to set up a relief and disaster fund to run alongside the Maria Stark Foundation. HR, and those behavioral analysts, were pulling overtime trying to integrate the actual applicable S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel into SI, but they could handle that on their own. And so, finally, about three weeks after Natasha and Steve's little misadventure, Tony was starting to feel like things were coming back under control, at least a little.

And then Hill had to go and shatter it.

"Really?" Tony asked. He didn't even care how flat his voice sounded, how exhausted. He wasn't sure he'd have the ability to control it right now even if he wanted to. He was so fucking tired, and now he was scared too, down to his bones, and he did not like it one bit. "You're telling me that you accidentally misplaced an alien artifact of unknown power and ability. That's what you're telling me? Because what I'm hearing is that S.H.I.E.L.D. didn't have to be HYDRA to be megalomaniac idiots. I thought that fucking stick of death got sent back to Asgard with Thor."
Hill crossed her arms over her chest. "Well," she said. "It didn't. There were metahumans cropping up all over the globe, there are potential extraterrestrial threats, and Asgard insisted on reclaiming the Tesseract. We needed to hang onto something, some kind of insurance."

Tony snorted, ran a hand over his face. "So much for Fury believing in superheroes. Where the fuck is he anyway?"

Hill cocked an eyebrow. "Dead," she said.

Tony drew in a deep breath. "Don't fuck with me," he said. "You work with me now. I need to be able to trust you to at least try to be honest. JARVIS has footage of Fury, from a week after his supposed death, and I know he's met with Rogers and Romanov."

Hill seemed to deflate. "For now, he believes he can do more good if he stays dead," she said. "I've sent him the information about the scepter. He'll let us know when he sniffs something out."

"And in the meantime, Loki's little joystick is in the hands of a bunch of somehow still alive Nazis," Tony said. He took another breath, slowly and deeply, forced himself to at least try to calm down, look at this more subjectively. Fuck. "I'm going to have to call the others in, aren't I?"

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"You summoned us, oh Lord and Master," Clint said with an eye roll, throwing himself into one of the conference room chairs and shoving his feet onto the table. At the very least he, unlike Steve and Natasha, looked amused by the 'summoning'. Then again, he'd made it easy from the start, actually answering a simple phone call and agreeing to a date and time for the meeting. Steve and Natasha, Tony had had to physically track down on a quinjet, and even then he'd thought they might very well just ignore him. Steve, at least, had responded to 'the world needs the Avengers', although he had still taken the time to say something to Wilson, who was presumably continuing whatever mission it was they'd set themselves.

"That I did," Tony said. "Hill and I have spent the better part of a month trying to trudge through the rubble of S.H.I.E.L.D. In case anyone was wondering, I hate trudging. And we found out that aside from killing three hundred and fifty people and counting, some of them children - actually, it'll probably have risen by now, but eh, shucks - wikileaking a super-secret spy organization to pieces can also--"

"The people in the Triskelion were agents," Steve interjected. "They knew what kinds of risks they were taking, working for S.H.I.E.L.D."

"I'm not talking about the Triskelion," Tony said. "Although the Triskelion, and several other S.H.I.E.L.D. bases, had plenty of civilian personnel. High casualties among those too, by the way. Good job. The world could do with fewer technicians and nurses and secretaries. Everyone pat themselves on the back."

Natasha opened her mouth--

Tony gave her a hard look. "I'm talking about undercover agents who suddenly, without warning, had their covers blown behind enemy lines. I'm talking about the families of agents high profile enough to have made it onto people's shit lists. The kind of people who were under S.H.I.E.L.D.'s protection. And I can maybe somewhat excuse you, Captain, since I'm not even entirely sure you're aware of what the Internet is yet, let alone how extensive digital filing can be. But Natasha." He looked at her again, and all he could see were the faces of those dead agents. He stuck his hands in his pockets to keep them from shaking. "You should know better. You were one of them once." He
"It was the right thing to do," Steve persisted. "HYDRA couldn't have been allowed to go on. We had to--"

"You had to stop and think. Maybe ask yourselves if you had teammates who were qualified to comb through the files and extract field agents and their families before you blew up the entire organization," Tony said. "Otherwise, how is what you did better than the World Security Council throwing a nuke on New York City to get rid of the Chitauri?"

"The World Security Council was HYDRA," Steve said.

"I doubt all of them were," Tony said. "Even so, thanks for making my point for me." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, cast an apologetic look at Bruce, who'd had to spend quite a bit of time in the Hulk's playroom immediately following the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D.

"How were we supposed to trust you?" Natasha asked then. "It's been what? Two years since you hacked S.H.I.E.L.D. and said you knew all their dirty secrets."

Tony reared back, feeling for a moment as though she'd smacked him in the face. Then he pulled himself together, drew up to his full height and wished to Thor and Odin he were taller. "You clearly suck as badly at background checks as you do at psych evals. My father was Howard Stark. My Godparents were Daniel Sousa and Peggy Carter. As a kid, I spent my summers being carted back and forth between my Uncle Jacque and my Uncle Monty in Europe. I named my first bot for Uncle Tim. I geeked out about antique radios with Uncle Gabe and Uncle Jim taught me how to shoot my first gun. I was bottle-fed Allies-good-HYDRA-bad. Of everyone in this room, Cap is the only person less likely than me to be HYDRA." He let out a breath, ignored Steve's wide eyes, which seemed to suddenly be looking at him quite differently.

Clint guffawed. "You're a fucking legacy kid," he said. "How many sets of Captain America pajamas did you own?"

Tony rolled his eyes, but couldn't help but be grateful for the slightly lighter atmosphere in the room. "As for hacking S.H.I.E.L.D.," he continued. "I made a mistake. I dug enough to find Phase Two. I had access to the rest of their files, but in case none of you realized, I've been a bit too busy the past couple of years to crunch through it all, and I didn't think I needed to. Like I said, my mistake." That access also meant that if they had contacted him as soon as they had suspicions, he could've figured this whole thing out sooner. He might've had enough time to spend on the targeting blades to make sure the helicarriers didn't crash in the middle of DC. He'd have had far longer to warn and extract agents. But judging by their faces, neither Steve nor Natasha would listen to more recriminations. Natasha had gone all blank-faced and mulish, and Steve looked far more likely to want to talk Howling Commandos than to hear about his own mistakes. Fuck all, Tony might be angry with them, but he also wasn't going to keep yelling at a pair of brick walls, let alone brick walls he actually cared about. "So, we all made mistakes. And here's one of the consequences: S.H.I.E.L.D. lost Loki's scepter. Logical conclusion is that it's currently in the hands of HYDRA."

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"JARVIS," Tony said, walking into the workshop with Jamie trailing behind him. "If everyone is really so serious about this whole stupid plan where Jamie starts school, we're going to have to upgrade the Iron Cradle. Not sure it fits anymore."
"Daddy, I'm five," Jamie muttered in the background. "I wanna go to school, I do. Maria says she's making friends. A boy and a girl. They're big. Maybe I'll be able to make friends with some of the bigger kids too."

Tony sighed, but he really did not have any good arguments against it. Jamie could've gone to school a year ago. Hell, he probably could've done just fine, intellectually anyway, two years ago, but Tony had never wanted that kind of pressure on the kid. He had wanted him to catch up socially first, start figuring out how to relate to kids his own age before he had to get started on formal learning and eventually skipping a handful of classes because he was bored out of his mind, and-- Tony stopped himself, sucked in a sharp breath. There was every chance Jamie was right. Maybe it would be easier for him to get along with older kids. They might even be able to keep up with him for a year or two. It was something.

Besides, it wasn't really like Tony could push it any further. Jamie was of the normal age to start school now. Holding him back a year... He had no real reason to do it, and no matter how hard he'd tried, he hadn't managed to hold Jamie as far out of the limelight as he'd wanted to. The questions and consequences that would come out of making James Edwin Stark start school a year late... Tony couldn't do that to his son, not in a million years, even if it would make him feel safer. "Stupid plan, but realistic," Tony amended. "We're still upgrading the Cradle. JARVIS, honey?"

"Sir," JARVIS said. "I will take Master James's measurements and start converting the proportions of the Cradle, but Ms. Potts has asked me to remind you that you have a meeting in your business office in ten minutes."

"You didn't tell me about any meetings today, JARV," Tony said. "You're supposed to remind me of meetings ahead of time so I can come up with good strategies about getting out of them. Shit."

"I informed you as soon as Ms. Potts shared the information with me, Sir," JARVIS said.

Tony groaned. How was it they kept getting stuff past him? "And when was this?" he asked.

"Approximately twenty seconds ago, Sir," JARVIS said. "Ms. Potts adds that you do not want to know what will happen if you do not show up for this meeting."

Jamie giggled.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Please tell me this isn't Cap trying to get me alone to talk about the 'good ol' days' again," he said.

"It is not," JARVIS said. "I would advise you to dress appropriately for a meeting, Sir."

Tony restrained the urge to let out another groan. He flashed an apologetic smile at his still giggling son and headed upstairs to do as the Peppers-that-be ordered. Still, he was damn well going to take his time with it.

About twenty-five minutes later, he walked into his office, flashing an absentminded smile at the woman sitting in the guest chair already. She looked some five, ten years older than him. His actual chronological age, that is, not the mess that was his actual physical one, which was still making him stop short to stare at the mirror more often than not. "Sorry, Ms..."

"Roux," JARVIS interjected, as he had probably been dying to do for at least ten minutes by now. "Madame Solange Roux, member of the--"

"Thanks, JARVIS, I didn't need a biography," Tony said, flopping into the chair in a practiced movement designed to look careless. His mother had made him perfect it when he was about twelve
years old. It even made him look taller. He reached across the table, offering his hand. "I'm sorry, Madame Roux. If I'd known you'd come in early, I'd have made sure to meet you in the lobby."

Madame Roux - and there was something familiar about her face, enough to make him think he'd seen her before, even if just in passing, though he doubted he'd ever known her personally, or personally - cast a single, significant glance at the clock before grasping his hand and squeezing it. "Doctor Stark," she said. "I do apologize if I have rushed you. I personally prefer to be early rather than late." Her French accent was clear, but not at all thick, and coupled with her throaty voice it was actually quite pleasant to listen to.

He still couldn't place her, but he had to admit that so far he liked her. Smart, observant and sassy in that blink-or-you'll-miss-it kind of way. Obviously, he would've liked her a lot better if she weren't so obviously a career politician, but for one of those, she wasn't bad. At least not from what he'd seen so far. He was more than ready for her to change his mind, though. He was very good at disliking people and pretending he didn't. "You seem to have me at a disadvantage," he said. "I'm pretty sure you know a lot more about me than I do about you." He could just imagine JARVIS huffing at that, and scratching his code to try and figure out why Tony hadn't let him tell him.

Madame Roux smiled her own politician's smile. "I served as the French ambassador to Iraq during the time you were active in that region," she said at last. "I was very impressed, I'll add. You saved a lot of lives, civilian and military alike. For so long, I was certain nothing could be done for Iraq, that nothing could... You provided some much needed spots of light during my service there."

Tony cleared his throat. "I'm very glad to hear that, Ma'am," he said. "But that wasn't why I did it. My naivety could've torn apart the whole of the Middle East if it had gone on much longer. All I did, all I was trying to do, was take responsibility for my mistakes and try to make sure as few innocents as possible paid for it."

The smile she gave him at that was quite a bit softer. "Tell me," she said then. "Your mother was Basque, wasn't she?"


Madame Roux nodded. "Catalan, then," she said. "Has it ever occurred to you that you could free Catalonia, and Wales for that matter, in one quick campaign?"

Tony frowned. What the hell was this all about? "Of course it has," he said. "But I'm not an idiot. I know that's not the right way to go about it. I go in repulsors firing, all I do is cause a war. I'd get hundreds, thousands of people killed. That kind of thing is not up to me. All I can legally, morally, do about it is keep supporting Plaid Cymru and whatever moderate independence parties Catalunya has on any given day, like I did long before Iron Man. I do what I can there, as Tony Stark. It's not a job for Iron Man."

Her smile gentled again. "That is what I hoped you'd say," she said. She paused for a while, seeming to just observe him before coming to some conclusion or other. "A year ago, I took up my post on the UN Security Council. There have been rumblings there. Concerns. These past few years, more and more metahumans have cropped up all over the world, and we don't have the tools to deal with them. We lack the laws, at least on an international level. We lack the ability, even, to protect ourselves. Now, I'm a progressive, Doctor Stark. Like you, I have been called a futurist. I know that this is not going away. The world is changing, and its people and institutions and laws have to follow suit, especially now that your team has started operating internationally."

Tony swallowed, suddenly more than a little nervous. Also, how the fuck did this woman even know about the HYDRA hunt? They'd only done their second mission four days ago. "So," he said.
"I'll admit I never actually got the memo. I'm not sure what exactly it is you're here to discuss with me."

"A lot of my acquaintances were horrified, and rightly so, by what happened to S.H.I.E.L.D.," she said. "Because of the agency's international and mostly secretive status, there are even fewer laws to deal with it. That doesn't make what happened right." She paused for a moment, and Tony thought he glimpsed true, honest distress on her face, for just a second. "Two superpowered individuals, whether through altered genetics or superior training, took down an international intelligence agency as easily as snapping their fingers, without, for all I know, giving a thought to the consequences. That kind of thing scares people, Mister Stark, and rightly so. What we also saw, though, was another extraordinary individual, powered solely through his own intellect, stepping up and trying to pick up the pieces. We've seen what you did in the Middle East, what you did in New York, how you saved your American president. We also see the work of the Maria Stark Foundation. We see the founding of a relief and aid organization in your son's name, and how it's already working with the appropriate international channels, even in its infancy. We see the way half the profits of all your junior products go to children's charities and children's rights organizations all over the world. We see how you still care about the rest of us, and the consequences of these changes in the world, your own actions included." Another almost-soft smile. "That's why we would like to consult with you."

Tony swallowed, not at all sure what to do about these comments, about these... these outright declarations of trust, of admiration. Fuck, that kind of thing wasn't supposed to damn near hurt, was it? "On what?" he asked.

"Several governments are growing wary," she said. "There's a coalition forming within the UN, with the simple purpose of creating those laws, of creating accountability, of safeguarding all our futures and preparing for the continued progression of the world, in whichever form it may come."

Tony swallowed, felt strangely as though he was about to throw Steve and Natasha under the bus. But he wasn't, not really. "These laws won't be retroactive, will they?" he asked. "As it is... They were panicked, they didn't know better, they lacked the guidelines to make better choices, and I--"

"It won't be retroactive," she assured him. "Some might like it to be, but it's not realistic. This is about looking forward, Doctor Stark. It is about creating those guidelines, so the future choices of those who have so much power over all our fates will be more... thought out."

Tony let out a long breath, nodded. This would happen whether or not he helped, and in that case he'd sure as fuck rather be part of the proceedings, make sure it didn't get out of control, didn't turn into persecution. Besides, Madame Roux was right, wasn't she? They did need a framework to operate within, and they needed someone other than Tony, who couldn't-- couldn't-- They needed someone from the outside to keep them in check, because Tony didn't have the heart to, and besides, he needed to be kept in check too, quite possibly more than any of the rest of them put together. All you had to do was look into his past for five minutes to see that. And really, hadn't he needed that reassurance that it wouldn't be retroactive for himself more than for any of the others? "In that case, I would love to be part of it," he said.

For the past five years, his whole life had been centered around what he'd leave his son, what kind of legacy, what kind of world. Tony believed, had to believe, that this was a step in the right direction.
And that was it, the definitely last chapter before I leave for Guatemala. Like I said, I may or may not be able to upload more chapters from there, but no promises, so I definitely hoped you enjoy that one. I look forward to re-reading all the comments while on my (too damn long) journey there. (CPH-Paris-Mexico City-Hotel-Guatemala City - ridiculously long journey, but oh well...)
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the support, whether it be kudos, subscriptions, recommendations, bookmarks or, especially, comments. It all means the world to me, and getting those email notifications never fails to make my day.

I am still in Central America and am uploading via my phone, so nothing has been edited, and I haven't answered any comments. I won't be able to this time either, but I will read and treasure each and every one I get. As always, please feel free to talk and debate with each other as well. My comment section is not a sacred space where that's not allowed. Please respect each other, though, and if someone doesn't want to speak, leave them be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He is in a bar. No, a club. Loud, pounding music that reverberates through his metal arm. It is dark with flashes of colored lights. Sometimes they become strobe lights. He doesn't like that. It makes it difficult to see. But that is the mission.

There is a man surrounded by women. He would've known the man is powerful even without the simpering looks from his surroundings. He knows how powerful men hold themselves. He's had more than one powerful target.

He walks over.

***

"So," Tony said, glancing at Steve. "You're not going to be an asshole about me sitting this one out?"

"Of course not," Steve said. "Tomorrow's Jamie's first day of school. You want to be there. He wants you to be there. Of course you should be there." He shrugged. "Besides, according to Fury it's a fairly minor base. Now that Thor's back, we can make do with Nat and Clint, and you and Banner stay here and look after the home base." Then he cocked an eyebrow. "Still, Tony. Private school?"

Tony sighed. "You know," he said. "In a perfect world, I'd send him to public school in a heartbeat. I hate the fact that this means there's a big risk that all the kids he's ever going to know are other one-percenter. But the world hasn't exactly proven safe for him so far, and until I actually wake up and find out we're all living in a utopia, I'm going to have to prioritize his safety above my principles. The school he's enrolled in has state of the art campus security--"

"Which you donated!" Steve interjected.

"And don't make a big deal out of the fact that I insist on bodyguards. He won't even be the only kid with bodyguards, which, you know, less alienation is always good. They are even all right with an Iron Cradle in the broom closet." Tony sighed. "And, while that's really not what made the choice for me, it's really the only school in the area where they have teachers and even some other students who are likely going to be able to keep up with him. So yeah, I could stick tightly to my principles or
I could keep my son safer and happier. I'm gonna take the second option every single time."

"But--"

Tony flashed him a glare. "Don't think, for a moment, that having known my dad and godmother gives you some kind of authority over how I raise my son. Howard was a shit dad. He actually forgot me in Buenos Aires once. Had to send Jarvis - human Jarvis - down to pick me up from the embassy. Personally, I was surprised no one kidnapped me. And Aunt Peggy... I love the woman, but she was a mad workaholic. She barely had time for her own kids, let alone me. So having known them seventy years ago, that doesn't qualify you for anything, comprendes?"

Steve seemed to deflate at that at least. "I'm sorry," he said. "Like you said, it's not a perfect world." He still looked like he'd like to object or discuss, but over these past couple of months of working together, they had managed to establish some boundaries. Steve didn't try to lecture Tony about things he knew absolutely nothing about, like engineering, Tower aesthetics, business and child-rearing. In turn, Tony didn't ask about whatever mission it was Wilson was on, and which Steve still joined as often as he could, never mind that Tony was ostensibly paying for the whole thing (well, he didn't ask again after the first few sharp rebuffs). That wasn't to say that Tony wasn't curious, just like it wasn't to say that Steve didn't often seem to be itching to give lectures on shit he knew nothing about, but it was the only way to keep things working, and right now, that was what's important. Tony had other ways to find out, of course, but in the name of teamwork and trust and cooperation and all that crap, he played along and left it alone.

"Good luck with the mission," Tony said, reaching out and clasping Steve's shoulder, giving it a quick squeeze. "And if things go belly-up, call."

"I promise," Steve said. "And good luck with Jamie's first day of school."

Tony flashed him a grin before turning his attention to Jamie's bag and making sure it held absolutely everything a little boy might need for his first day of school.

***

Jamie had been silent so far for the duration of their ride. Tony had taken a town car for once, so he could be in the back with the kid if he was needed. But so far, all Jamie was doing was staring silently out of the window, just the faintest bit pale-faced. Tony wanted so badly to be able to reassure him, tell him it would be all right. But that wasn't a promise he could make, and he didn't want to potentially lie to his son, even if some people would doubtless say he was supposed to. Still, it was school. School had never been kind to Tony, so what kind of reassurance was he even supposed to manage?

Mickey, along for the ride at Bruce's insistence, let out a soft bark, resting her head on Tony's knee and looking up at him with kind, dark eyes. Tony let out a breath. The dog was right. Despite school having been utter hell, he was still here. He'd turned out mostly all right. Ish.

"Daddy," Jamie suddenly said, looking up at him with wide, uncertain eyes, and shit, Tony really should've just followed his gut and kept Jamie back home for another year, shouldn't he? Jamie swallowed before squaring his shoulders, a determined look taking over that small face of his that was somehow already in the progress of losing much of its baby fat and turning angular. Where the fuck had all that time gone? "Daddy," Jamie said again, and then just about the last words Tony had ever expected out of him, "Is it true that you've killed people?"

Tony couldn't help but flinch at that question. For a moment, he could barely breathe. Mickey let out another soft bark. Tony gulped in a mouthful of air and made a mental note to import some of that
Indian tea Bruce liked. Another slow breath, and he allowed himself to ponder the question. Why the fuck hadn't he prepared for this? He wasn't an idiot. He should've known that now, with Jamie starting school, all that shit in Tony's past was bound to come up sooner rather than later. He guessed he just hadn't expected it to be this soon. Jamie hadn't even been to school yet, fuck's sake. Who was even telling him these things? It didn't matter, he realized. It didn't matter who'd told him. What mattered was how Tony dealt with it right now, not whether he could find someone to be angry at about having to have the conversation in the first place. The cat was out of the bag, so to speak. No putting it back inside.

So what the hell was he supposed to say?

Obviously, the answer was yes. Tony had killed people. He had drowned Killian with his bare hands. He had burnt and shot and blown up and otherwise killed more members of the Ten Rings than he'd been able to send to jail. Those were the ones that were easy to explain. Then there were the others. The tens of thousands who had been killed by weapons that had come straight out of Tony's brain. Since his kidnapping, since he'd seen the consequences of his work, Tony's first instinct had always been to blame himself, to equate his stupidity and naivety, his trust in the wrong people, with guilt. But there was also that one line he had spoken in the speech he had given almost exactly five years ago, when he'd first returned from Afghanistan and Jamie was a tiny bundle of needs and demands and family. 'I have become part of a system that is comfortable with zero accountability'. A system. He had blood on his hands, yes, but not him alone. Not even mostly him, or so his therapist would happily tell him. And had, quite a few times.

Tony should've kept a better eye on what his company was doing, what Stane was doing. He should've stopped and considered the implications of war profiteering far sooner, even if everything had been under his perfect control. Even if he had only ever sold weapons to America and American allies, he couldn't say he was always perfectly happy with what the American military got up to overseas. And allies weren't always permanent allies. It had been before his time, sure, but Stark weapons had ended up, entirely legally, in Taliban hands back when America was using Afghanistan to fight the Soviet Union. Those same weapons had later been used against American soldiers.

It was all so fucking complicated, and however poor an excuse it was, Tony had done what he'd known. He'd done what he'd always seen everyone around him celebrate Howard for doing. He'd done what he could to keep the Board of Old Men and Stane and the military bigwigs happy and silently worked on his own passion projects in the background. And no, it wasn't an excuse, that he had been a naive idiot until well into his thirties. It especially wasn't an excuse for someone with his IQ.

But the thing was, as bad a taste as it left in his mouth that he had ever made those weapons, that was all he had done. And when someone was murdered, you prosecuted the murderer, not the gun manufacturer. When someone crashed their car into you drunk, you prosecuted the drunk driver, not the guy who had designed the car or the people who distilled the booze, not even the middlemen. Because weapons didn't kill people. People killed people. Guns might make it easier, but people were still to blame. Tony still had to believe that, hadn't found any reason not to.

"I have killed bad guys," he told Jamie in the end. "Plenty of them. People like Aldrich Killian, HYDRA agents, people who hurt others." He paused, took a breath. "There are going to be people out there who will tell you I've killed innocents. Thousands of them. But I haven't. Weapons I've made have killed people, but I didn't fire those weapons. I didn't even decide who they were going to be fired at." He paused for a moment, thinking. "Last week, you told me one of the other kids threw a Lego at your head. Was that Lego's fault, or the other kid's fault? Should we sue Lego for you?"
Amazingly, Jamie let out a giggle that sounded like pure and utter relief. "Of course not," he said. "That'd just be silly." And just like that, Tony felt a weight he hadn't even realized he was still lugging around just fall off his shoulders. It was true, wasn't it? He had never killed all those people. He had a measure of responsibility, yes, and there was certainly still shit to be guilty about. But it was in the same way that someone who walked past a mugging with their face buried so deeply in their phone they didn't see it had a measure of responsibility and certainly reason to be guilty, and was maybe kind of despicable for not seeing. Not the way the mugger should.

"It would," Tony said, and he couldn't keep from smiling. "Really would, wouldn't it?"

Grinning, Jamie nodded.

The car stopped, and then the driver (former S.H.I.E.L.D., so far worth his salary. As were the two former S.H.I.E.L.D. agents who were supposed to assist Happy as Jamie's bodyguards, all three of them in a car following behind them.) opened the door and stepped back. Tony got out first, then stood aside and waited as Jamie bounded out, looking around himself excitedly. Tony still felt that grin on his own face. He wasn't sure it was ever going to go away. And suddenly, even the idea of Jamie starting school wasn't so threatening after all.

Happy walked over with Jamie's bag and handed it over, and then it was time. It was the moment when Tony was going to have to send off his baby boy and trust that he would be able to hold his own out in the world. And with that he felt his smile wither a bit, felt scared and nervous and so, so proud, because Jamie was already so much smarter than him in so many ways, was so sweet and incredible, and he was more ready for the world than Tony had ever been.

Tony bent down, wrapped his arms around Jamie and allowed himself to hold his baby close for just a moment before stepping back. "I love you," he said softly. "And you're gonna do great."

Jamie flashed him a brilliant smile before walking off with his bodyguards at his heels. He stopped a few times to look over his shoulder and wave, and Tony wasn't sure if he stayed to reassure Jamie or to reassure himself, but he did not return to the car until Jamie was out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like this is a good place to remind everyone that the opinions of the characters do not necessarily reflect my own. Thus what Tony says here about weapons... is not necessarily what I think - I personally think it's a hell of a lot more complicated, but then, for one, I am European ;P For another thing, even Tony's words were watered down to be marginally age appropriate.

Anyway, this is not meant to start a debate about gun violence and weapons in general, but hey, if you've got an opinion to share, please do.

Thanks so much for taking the time to read, and know I am forever grateful for any additional support or opinions.
Thanks so much for the support, in whichever way it was given. Thank you especially for the comments, which felt almost like little letters from home. Or something close to it. I'm still on my phone, so I haven't had the chance to answer (I hate typing on my phone), but please know that I have read and enjoyed each and every one. They never fail to make my day.

This chapter covers around six months and is quite episodical. Hopefully it doesn't read too chopply.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Then there are a pair of dark, smiling eyes, dilated pupils. A slurred voice that speaks to him like he's not a weapon, like he's human, like this isn't a mission. No orders, just whispered, breathed requests and compliments. He doesn't understand the mission, and he certainly doesn't understand the target, but he has been made to obey, so he does.

And it's warmth, heat and touch and pleasure so deep it sets him on fire, chases the ice from his blood, makes his pulse pound and his lips part on sounds he never knew he could make, except in forbidden dreams of long ago.

In the middle of memories of cold and pain and fear, of death and screams and blood and guns, this is the one, the only, spot of warmth he can recall.

***

"Homemade bombs," Tony concluded once inside the quinjet, heading back for NYC. "Dead HYDRA agents, either shockingly precise shots or blunt force trauma. Computers left alone to self-destruct. This is definitely the same group who beat us to the last two smalltime bases." He engaged the autopilot and turned around to look at the rest of the team, noting the significant look Steve shared with Natasha. Tony resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"Well, that's a good thing, right?" Clint said. "We're not the only people trying to take down HYDRA."

"Except taking down HYDRA isn't actually our main objective," Tony said. "We're after the Scepter, and we may not be the only ones. This isn't necessarily a case of the enemy of my enemy being my friend. Besides, even if this group, or individual or what the fuck ever, isn't after the Scepter, he still isn't exactly helping us. We need the data on those computers. They have an annoying habit of using self-contained networks, no Internet access, so I can't just hack them. If we want more information, we need to actually get there in time to stop the automatic self-destruct function, and this guy does not seem to be prioritizing that at all."

"Point," Clint admitted.

"Hey," Steve said suddenly, glancing at the dashboard behind Tony. "Why are you taking us back to New York? We still have the coordinates for one more base, so why are you taking us out of
"Europe?"

"Because," Tony said slowly. "Unlike Hungary, Albania is not actually in the European Union. Hill doesn't have either visas or special governmental permissions ready just yet--"

"C'mon," Clint said. "We'll be in and out before they know it. If they ever know it."

"And it shouldn't matter anyway," Steve added. "They must know we're only gonna do the right thing. They'll realize it anyway. They aren't gonna care. No one has yet."

Tony bit back a groan, and seriously considered just no longer paying the fines Steve and Wilson were accumulating through unauthorized border crossing. Then again, neither Tweedly-Dumb nor Tweedly-Dumber actually had the income to pay up. Tony wasn't actually sure if Wilson had an income at all anymore. Steve sure as fuck didn't, beyond the spending money Tony gave him. "We don't cross borders without permission, not unless it's an absolute emergency," Tony said at last. "It might not matter to you guys, but I don't need any of my visas revoked. I actually need those for my day job."

Steve opened his mouth to say something again--

"Also," Tony added. "According to Fury's intel, the Albanian base is a lot bigger and more well defended. We're gonna have to wrest Thor back from Jane for it. Maybe even try to convince Bruce to come along, even if it's just as backup. Besides, tomorrow's Halloween, and my kid wants to go trick or treating."

"Oh, Halloween," Clint said, eyes lighting up, and fucking hell, how old was that guy anyway? "I'm with Tony," he added. "We should take Halloween off."

Natasha shrugged. "So long as Fury wasn't spotted - and he never is - waiting a few days won't actually change anything, Cap."

They took out the base four days later, with Thor. Bruce still absolutely refused to join any mission unless there was a potentially world-stopping event. At least until they figured out a way to stop the Hulk. Tony managed to get partial data this time, though, honestly, it was so partial all they could really do was send it back to Fury so he could scope out the new coordinates and get them proper intel.

***

The Iron Legion didn't actually come about to support the Avengers Initiative, not at first. Rather, they were the result of a frantic, paranoia induced sixty-hour work spell following the first time some idiot had attacked Jamie's school in what was likely an attempt to kidnap him.

The first units had already been fabricated when he calmed down enough to realize that Jamie's team of bodyguards had handled the situation effectively even as the Iron Cradle arrived to take Jamie away, and that in the end the would-be kidnappers were all in jail awaiting their trials. Bruce was the one who pointed out that the units might come in handy for their assaults on some of the larger HYDRA bases, and so Tony let them finish fabricating.

***

Tony and Bruce built Veronica, and Tony silently vowed to never use it, because he couldn't help but feel that if a situation ever arose where it would be necessary, they'd have already lost Bruce for good anyway, and Tony didn't ever want to let go of the one fellow Avenger he'd connected with most honestly.
Thor vanished for a week and a bit in February and declared his own return by walking into the common area where they were all eating dinner, announcing that 'I had no idea your ancestors were so mighty, or had to go through so much sorrow, Man of Iron. You have my deepest respect and condolences.'

Tony frowned, looking at all the others in confusion. Bruce shrugged in return.

Jamie took a moment to think before turning to Tony. "Does he mean the Welsh or the Catalans?" he finally asked. "Because I don't think the Germans and Italians being mighty was a good thing."

Steve blinked at the Jamie, but then it seemed he still persisted in being confused by the kid's intelligence.

"They had an ancestry project in his school," Tony said. "He did very thorough research."

Jamie grinned.

"I have to admit, though," Thor continued, "That I do not understand why you did not grace your son and heir with one of the family names. Honoring one's House and ancestors is important. And Brandon is a fine name."

Clint frowned. Then he burst out laughing. "Brandon," he chortled. "Bran Stark. Thor, did someone show you Game of Thrones?"

Tony rolled his eyes, vaguely annoyed with himself for having missed the reference. In his defense, he didn't watch nearly as much TV as people generally assumed, and, excepting scientific works, he tended to avoid reading magnum opuses that were unlikely to ever be concluded. And if Tony were still a betting man, he really wouldn't be putting a lot of money on George Martin winning his race against time. Still... "Winter is coming," he said, just to watch Clint laugh hard enough to almost fall off his chair.

Steve's look of utter confusion was nearly as priceless. "I did not understand that reference," he said.

"The fair Lady Darcy introduced me to it," Thor confirmed. "She told me it chronicled a crucial point of your House's history"

The look Clint send Tony told of unspeakable suffering if he dared reveal the truth. Tony shrugged. "I guess I could rename the Tower Winterfell," Tony said. "They won't try to have me committed unless I start proclaiming myself the King of Winter."

Steve's eyes were narrowed, oddly suspicious. "Why Winter?" he asked.

"Because I'm a Stark, duh." Tony couldn't help a grin now, and it was all he could do to stop himself from laughing as hard as Clint did.

Steve actually flinched at that, which, fuck, what the hell was up with the guy lately?

Jamie mostly looked curious now, which, yeah, no. Tony only knew the catch-phrases and a bit of trivia about the actual storyline, but he did know that there were some things that were just a bit too violent for a five-and-a-half-year-old, and judging by everything he'd heard, Game of Thrones was that.

"Say, JARVIS," Tony said. "Do we have anything interesting on Thor's family history?"
There was a pause as JARVIS presumably searched through the Internet. Then, "Ordering the first three albums of Peter Madsen's Valhalla comics series, including album number two, 'Thor's Wedding'."

Tony returned to eating his curry, only half listening to Thor's speech about lies and slander. When it finally wound down, Tony looked up and flashed Jamie a grin. "That's the one where he dresses up as a woman and no one notices," he said.

Thor's roar of ineffectual fury made Tony's day nearly as much as Jamie's helpless giggles.

***

Ironically enough, it was Jamie who came up with what they wound up calling the Lullaby. Bruce had been letting the Hulk out more often, and always in the safety of the Hulk's now quite expanded playroom, in the hopes that practice would make it easier for him to change back and forth at will.

Tony had just ended the simulation that had sent small JARVIS-guided drones at the Hulk to imitate an attack and give him something to smash. "All right, buddy," he called. "Fight's over. There are no more enemies. You can calm down." He cast a glance at the projected pulse and brain waves from JARVIS's scans, watched the frantic activity begin to calm down. "C'mon, Brucie," he continued, keeping his voice calm and even.

The Hulk roared.

Tony glanced up at the physical scans, winced. "Okay, no mentioning Banner," he said. He took a deep breath. "Still, the danger's passed. Nothing else to be mad at. You can take a breath."

"One thing I have never understood," said Thor, and Tony jumped about a foot into the air. How the hell could someone so big move so quietly? "Why would you dishonor your House by wearing the colors of your mortal enemies, the Lannisters?"

Tony blinked, bewildered, before turning back to the reinforced, translucent wall to observe the Hulk again, only to be roared at. Tony winced. Yeah, this was not working at all.

That was when Jamie walked in, still wearing his school uniform. Under normal circumstances, Tony would've found the view ridiculously adorable, but right now he was mostly kind of annoyed by the crowd gathering in front of the playroom when he was supposed to be trying to calm down the Hulk. Then Jamie turned to the Hulk and let out a long sigh. "Uncle Bruce," he said. "I just got home, I'm real tired, and you know Daddy can't cook."

Somehow, he'd caught the Hulk's complete attention. The rage monster had crouched down to be at eyelevel with Jamie, his gaze almost curious. Jamie flashed him a smile and reached out, placing his hand flat against the reinforced wall. Then, incredibly, the Hulk reached out with his own great, big hand and placed it right against Jamie's, and slowly, bit by bit, he shrank back into Bruce.

Tony reached out and ruffled Jamie's hair. "Good job, buddy," he said. Now they just had to figure out how to transfer that trick so Jamie wasn't necessary to it.

It was another month or so before they perfected it with Natasha.

***

There had been two instances of 'Code Green' by the time Fury called with the biggest target yet. "I really think this is it," he told them. "So you lot better come in guns blazin'. This one's gonna be a tough nut to crack."
Next to Tony, Steve nodded, all solemn faced even as his whole body seemed to vibrate with excitement. "You think you've found the Scepter?" he asked.

"I'm almost sure of it," Fury said.

Steve gave another nod, a very determined one. He had fallen into parade rest somewhere along the way. Tony couldn't barely stop himself from rolling his eyes at the sight of it. So damn eager. Then again, Steve had seemed eager a lot lately, to get to the next mission, to get through it, as though he had something he'd been putting off but was eager to get back to. Probably that stupid secret mission. "Where is it?" Steve asked.

"Sokovia," said Fury

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for taking the time to read and comment. Means the world to me. As always, feel free to take advantage of the comment section. Talk, use it as a forum, whatever you want. As always, no need to keep it tidy for my sake.

Thanks so much for the input last chapter on weapons and gun violence. I very much enjoyed seeing all your views.

I should add that A Song of Ice and Fire/A Game of Thrones as well as Peter Madsen's Valhalla do not belong to me but to their respective creators and license holders. So yeah, that. Only here to bring a touch of levity ;P
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Once again, thanks so much for the support, and especially the comments. Means the world to me.

I'm still abroad and still on my phone, so the same things still apply - I haven't been able to edit, and I won't be able to answer comments, though I still read and enjoy each of them. Discussion and interaction between all of you is very much still encouraged, unless, of course, the person you want to speak to isn't interested.

Enjoy :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He is lying on a bed of withered, damp leaves in cold, grey autumn, watching the world through the scope of a rifle. M1941 Johnson. Outdated, imprecise and inefficient. Why has he been sent into the field with such an inferior weapon?

Then he sees his target. And he remembers. Not much, really. Not names or faces or dates or years or specifications. No details, no specifics. He does remember one thing, though. His target. He narrows his eyes, takes aim and lets the bullet fly. It goes straight through the skull of the HYDRA soldier walking towards his allies.

He is 32557038, Sergeant Barnes, James Buchanan, 107th infantry, US Army, and his mission is to take HYDRA off the map.

***

It itched, being out of the workshop. No, 'itched' wasn't even the right word. It was pretty damn close to actual, physical pain, but fuck all, he'd forgotten to stock up on coffee grounds in the 'shop, and after making a note to JARVIS about that, Tony had made his way to the common floor kitchen. Part of him much preferred the idea of going all the way to the penthouse, but he didn't want to risk waking Jamie on a school night. He kept meaning to get the penthouse completely sound proofed, but hadn't quite gotten around to it yet, and however much he might've liked to make a go of it without caffeine, that wasn't going to happen. Having Jamie around made long work binges far more difficult than they'd been before, despite the fact that his body was younger and healthier than it had been in years.

So, in conclusion, he was in the common floor kitchen, watching as the coffee machine slowly - so damn slowly - dribbled out the sweet drops of life-giving nectar he needed to complete this night's to-do list.

There were steps behind him, suddenly, and Tony jumped half a foot into the air, sucking in a sharp breath as he came down. "Steve, fuck," he said. "You can't just sneak up on people like that."

"I wasn't sneaking up on you," Steve said. "I was just hungry." And yeah, of course. Somehow, Tony had managed to forget Steve's whole metabolism thing and how he apparently woke up once or twice each night just to find something to eat. Fuck.
Tony gestured towards the fridge. "Go ahead," he said. "Pretty sure there's some Pad Thai leftovers in there," he said. "Go ahead and eat them, before they go bad or something." That last was bound to get Steve eating and shutting up about everything else. Three years plus in the present and he still couldn't seem to deal with even the idea of food going to waste. Fucking Great Depression, as if Howard hadn't gone on about that enough when Tony was still a kid.

And sure enough, Steve headed straight for the fridge, taking out the Thai leftovers, dumping them into a microwave proof bowl and setting them to reheat. Tony watched the coffee machine, willing it to work a little faster. He'd work on that, next time he got the chance. "Why are you up?" Steve asked at last.

Tony bit back a series of curses that would've probably taken a few minutes if he'd spoken them out loud. "Working," he said, still staring straight at the coffee machine. Why the fuck hadn't he upgraded this useless thing ages ago?

"Tony," Steve said, and shit, why the fuck did he have to sound so disconcertingly like Aunt Peggy when she was unhappy about something? Tony didn't actually miss Aunt Peggy. If he had, he'd have visited her more often, even if only to play Howard to her demented mind. It was never her he missed. It was Uncle Danny, and Steve was as far from Uncle Danny as anyone got. "We have a mission first thing tomorrow morning. You should get your sleep. We can't have you off when it comes down to it."

Tony bit his tongue, forced a smile. "I'll be at my very best," he promised. And, fucking finally, his coffee was done. Tony grabbed the cup and took a deep swallow. He might've burnt his tongue if not for the fact that the thing was already made of calluses.

"Tony..." And again there was that slow, fucking condescending tone of voice, as if Tony was a child to be spoken down to, as though he didn't understand what was going on around him. Fuck, as though he wasn't the one taking care of most of the shit they caused. As though he didn't have a kid of his own and understood consequences better than any of them. "You should know that if you don't get proper rest, you can't be at your best to support the team."

"Fuck you," Tony spat, and he almost wanted to take it back. Except he didn't. Steve... Tony loved the guy, he did. They worked wonderfully together. Tony wanted so badly to believe they were friends. But there had been something very fractured between them right from the start, and Tony still couldn't ignore it, whether it was the difference between the time periods they hailed from or it was the fact that knowing Howard made Steve think he had a right to control Tony, like Tony really was still a kid. "To you, tomorrow might just be another mission. To me..." Tony stopped, swallowed. "Did you ever stop to think that all you are is an Avenger. Me? I might not be the CEO anymore, but I'm still the majority shareholder and the head of research and development of a fortune five hundred company. And unlike every other damn asshole on this team, I'm a single parent."

Steve looked unsurprisingly uncomprehending, and it was all Tony could do not to roll his eyes at the sight. "That doesn't excuse you," Steve said at last. "If anything, you should be working harder than any of us to be in peak condition, for your son, for your company. For everyone."

As if Tony didn't fucking know that. "I'll catch a few hours on the quinjet," he said. "In the meantime, I need to update my will. I need to record yet another potential goodbye message for my son. I need to finish as many projects as I possibly can, for SI and the team. I need to finish responding to the most recent correspondence from the UN with every premonition I've got, because fuck knows none of the rest of you would know politics if they bit you in the ass. What the hell do you think I do every night before a major mission?"

Steve stared at him for long moments. Blinked. Then, "You still need to sleep, or you'll be a
liability."

And once again, as though he didn't fucking know. Tony had weighed sleep against everything else since he was ten fucking years old, and sleep had always come last. He didn't like it, especially now that Jamie had forced him to get used to actual regular sleeping habits, but sleeping had to come behind everything else knowing, as he did, that every mission might be the last. "How about this?" Tony asked, picking up his cup of coffee and heading back towards his workshop. "You prove to me you can take over my to-do list for the night, and I go nighty-night on the couch. And if you can't, you don't get to reprimand me ever again."

For whatever fucked up reason, Steve followed him down into the workshop and kept hovering over his damn shoulder. Thank fuck Tony had already finished his goodbye recording for Jamie. He didn't want to have to even try to figure out how to work around Steve to make that one happen. For what felt like hours, Steve just seemed to keep hovering there, never more than a few feet behind Tony's shoulder, and it was uncomfortable as all fuck. Gritting his teeth, Tony glanced behind his shoulder at Steve who still seemed to just be hovering without any actual purpose. "Yes?" he asked, deliberately not specifying.

Steve was quiet for several long seconds, and the longer Steve remained quiet, the more safe and secure Tony suddenly felt, the more he felt strong and sturdy rather than as though he was still on the defense. Steve stared at him for several long moments. More than once, he opened his mouth as though to say or ask something only to snap it back shut. Part of Tony wanted to ask, to prod and find out everything, but it was the morning before a mission, and Tony wasn't about to waste any unnecessary time. At long last, Steve broke the silence, "Can I do anything to help?"

Tony blinked, stopped completely short for a long moment. That, well, that wasn't anything like what he had expected. Steve had never asked anything like that before, not unless it had something to do with food preparation or holiday decorations. None of them had, really, no one except Bruce, but Bruce didn't really count as just an Avenger anymore. Bruce was family before he was anything else. Out of the rest of them, real, permanent help that had nothing to do with Christmas ornaments or shit like that wasn't something you came by. Still, somehow Tony kept hold of himself, managed a smile as he declined the offer of help. He'd have liked to have had something to give the old man to do, but Steve had no idea how to work with his hands, unless drawing and punching counted. He had no idea how to weld, had no idea how to work computers or codes, no idea how to work design or anything of the kind. Fuck all, Tony knew how much his teammates liked to call him spoiled, but did they even realize how specialized and nearly useless their skill sets were, how fucking lost their spoilt little asses would be if they didn't have a damn benefactor? He was pretty sure they didn't.

To be entirely honest, Tony kind of hated how much he had to rely on the Black Widow. Natasha was the one who had first written out the evaluation that had kept him a mere consultant until the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. She had never made it easy for him to work with the team. And then she had released those damn files that got so many people killed. Tony might care about her, but he never trusted her, never truly liked her. And somehow, aside from Bruce, she was still the person on the team he could count on the most. And what the fuck did that even say about the team in the first place?

"Did you speak to Hill?" Tony asked even as he coded in the coordinates for Sokovia on the quinjet and trusted JARVIS to take care of the rest of it.

Natasha inclined her head. "We have permission," she said.

Tony sighed and barely kept from rolling his eyes. At least one of the other was finally giving a fuck
about permission and sovereign borders and all that shit. At least he didn't have to be the only one, this once.

He still hated that he had to count on her for the Hulk's lullaby. He hated the fact that if she wasn't calm, if she couldn't get things to work, their only real go-to solution was Veronica. He hated how much everyone listened to her, given how fucking unreliable she was. More than any of that, he hated the fact that she listened to him more than any of the rest of them did.

"Stay safe, Tony," Natasha said before Sokovia, and then the world exploded into fighting. Tony did everything he could, threw everything he damn well had at the problem. He fought the ground troops. He sent in the Iron Legion to calm the masses. He utilized his own genius to break into the base and find the secret door. And then...

And then...

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the cliffhanger and short chapter. I'll try to get the next one up asap.

Also, a quick note that in this universe, Tony both perceives and is perceived differently. He's generally seen as both warmer and more responsible - he can thank Jamie for that. One result of this is that Bruce stuck around indefinitely and they are much closer than in canon.

Tony is also more confident, has better control of his PTSD, and is less desperate for the Avengers to be his friends/family. He trusts them less, is more assertive and needs them less/doesn't prioritise them as highly. Because of this, the cracks in the Team happen somewhat differently and become visible in different ways. Tony isn't Clint; he definitely puts his kid ahead of the team.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the support. I appreciate it very much, and have especially enjoyed all the comments. They really do brighten up my day.

However, I do feel I should mention that although I haven't finished writing the story, I am several chapters ahead. Even if I were generally inclined to take prompts - which I'm not - here it wouldn't work without a lot of rewriting. I enjoy theories, speculation and discussion, but with the way I'm writing this, nothing is likely to change from those comments. That is not to say I do not appreciate them, just that that is not how I write.

Much of the dialogue in this chapter has been lifted from Age of Ultron and as such does not belong to me. There are several differences however, which I hope you pick up on.

This has once again been posted from my phone. Therefore it is still unedited, and I will not be able to answer comments. I do still read and appreciate each and every one, though, so please don't hesitate to comment and to interact with each other.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*He hadn't thought, really, that he would remember any bases aside from the ones that he'd seen on Zola's map. His memory, it seemed, held far more than that.*

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Tony took in the sight of the scepter, finally allowed himself to take a deep breath, to calm down. The damn Stick of Doom was in his sights now. He'd go right on ahead. He'd grab it. This whole nightmare would be over. He'd be able to live in the Tower again without having to wonder when he'd be called out again. He'd be able to hold Jamie close without having to try to figure out when his past would catch up with him and he'd try, once again, to play the middleman. He'd be able to put the evidence before the UN panel and prove to them that the Avengers were to be trusted, that, for all their dubious decisions, good intentions informed their choices. He would be able to keep this whole spiraling fucking vortex under control, even when the whole universe seemed to be against him.

He took a step closer, eyes still locked on the scepter. He tried as hard as he could not to look at any of the rest of his surroundings. The Chitauri artifacts taking up most of the cavern-like space made his skin feel too tight and his breath come too fast. There was a goddamn leviathan hanging under the ceiling, and Tony was going to have to book double sessions with Jeff for a few weeks after this, wasn't he? Determinedly ignoring the cold shudders erupting along his spine, Tony took yet another step closer to the scepter.

Tony blinked, and suddenly everything seemed unreal. Dreamlike, almost. Somehow, his movements seemed almost beyond his own control when he lifted his head and looked up, straight at the Chitauri leviathan. And then, right before his fucking eyes, the corpse came back to life, flexing its muscles as it floated overhead. And another, and another, and the sky was full of those ugly spaceships Tony had seen on the other side of the wormhole. He could see stars, and the blackness of space, and he felt his heart pick up speed, felt his lungs close up. Cold sweat sprang up along the
back of his neck, the skin of his face. The icy cold of space washed over him. Tony's hands began to shake. His knees threatened to buckle. And fuck, he'd have thought that with the amount of time he'd spent in therapy, he'd be marginally more prepared for this.

The ground seemed to solidify beneath his feet and he looked around himself. He took in the sight of a rocky, barren landscape around himself. It was nowhere he recognized, lifeless and cold. And then he saw them. The Hulk first, big as a house, even lying down, drawing in what Tony was scared as fuck might very well be his last, labored breath. The Hulk breathed out, and lay still. Swallowing around the sudden, sharp lump in his throat, Tony walked forward, took in the rest of the scene. They were all there, Natasha and Clint and Thor and Steve, shield cracked down the middle. None of them were moving. None of them even appeared to be breathing. Trembling, Tony walked around them. And then he collapsed. His legs refused to carry him. His heart refused to keep on beating. He could barely think.

Pepper was there, and Rhodey and Happy, and splayed across them, white as snow, blood trickling out the corner of his mouth...

Jamie blinked up at him sluggishly. For a moment those beautiful, grey eyes of his were completely empty. And then they flooded with emotion. Fear, and betrayal, and blame, and Tony's heart cracked into a million pieces just looking at him. Jamie opened his mouth, tried to speak. All that left him was a rattling gasp and another few drops of blood. And then his eyes grew empty again. Lifeless.

Dead, like he would've been if HYDRA had succeeded, because he was just a child who couldn't do what was needed, while Tony was alive, because he could do damn near anything that was possible with technology. Because HYDRA had determined that Jamie was a threat, an unnecessary one, while they'd concluded, based on whatever fucked up data they had, that Tony would work with them, and--

Tony bit back a scream. Then he blinked.

Reality formed around him once again, and he was back in HYDRA's fucking basement full of mummified alien remains and strange experiments, cages and poorly made robots. And the scepter. There was the scepter. Still barely managing to breathe, Tony reached for his Iron Man gauntlet and picked up the scepter.

***

Tony let himself delve more deeply into take-off and setting the route back to New York than he usually would've. He needed the time to calm himself, to make sure his hands weren't shaking and his breathing patterns sounded halfway all right. He needed to-- Fuck, every single damn time he shut his eyes, all he could see was the light fading out of Jamie's.

Plan. He needed a plan. And he needed to take care of the practical stuff. He typed in the commands to JARVIS that would make the Iron Legion take care of Strucker and the rest of the prisoners. He double checked that the files he'd gotten from the base had been uploaded and properly sent on to the Tower where Hill could begin to sort through them. He sent an email off to Helen Cho and let out a relieved breath when she returned a confirmation almost immediately.

He cast a glance at where they were storing the scepter before steeling himself and turning towards the others. "Hey Brucie," he said. "Doctor Cho is on her way in from Seoul. Is it okay if she sets up in your lab?"

Bruce, disconcertingly pale, blinked up at him. "Uh, yeah," he said, voice hoarse. "She knows her way around."
Tony tried to flash him a smile, but gave up. He was not in the right headspace for it to possibly come out as anything other than a grimace. He liked Bruce, and he liked Cho, especially for her role in cleaning up his and Jamie's case of Extremis, but somehow he couldn't translate that to liking the whole situation, at least not right now. "Thanks," he said at last before turning back to the controls. "Tell her to prep everything," he told JARVIS. "Barton's gonna need the full treatment."

"Very well, Sir," JARVIS said. "I have taken the liberty of informing Master James that you are in good health. He would like you to give him a call as soon as you are able."

"Thanks, JARV," Tony said. "Take the wheel, will you?"

"Yes, Sir," JARVIS replied. "Approach vector is locked."

Tony got up off the pilot's seat and walked over to the scepter container, glancing down at the damn stick of doom. He was caught somewhere between frightened, just looking at it, and needing so badly to study it, to pick it apart and understand it. And why shouldn't he? With what was coming, with what he had allowed himself to forget was coming, he needed to be better, smarter, needed every bit of knowledge, every tiny advantage he could get. "It feels good, yeah?" he told Thor, almost absentmindedly. His mind was still racing. "I mean, we've been after this thing since S.H.I.E.L.D. collapsed." And Thor, with his whole thing with guilt over Loki and not making sure to bring the scepter to Asgard in the first place, had been more determined than any of them, ever since he returned to Earth. "Not that I haven't enjoyed our little raising parties," Tony added. "But..." He didn't need to finish. They all knew he'd rather be home with Jamie than running all over the world playing whack-a-mole with HYDRA.

"No, but this..." Thor looked at the scepter with something very like relief on his face before looking up and meeting Tony's eyes with a smile that was surprisingly restrained for the big guy. "This brings it to a close," he concluded, with rather more understanding in his voice than Tony would've expected.

"As soon as we find out what else it's been used for," Steve said. He sounded tired, determined and resigned both at once somehow. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Tony could feel that curiosity again, that need to know what Steve's side project was. It was easier than normal to disregard the temptation to just find out. "And I don't just mean weapons," Steve added. "Since when is Strucker capable of human enhancement?"

Tony felt a rush of relief. There was his opening. "Bruce and I'll give it the once over before it goes back to Asgard. Is that cool with you?"

Thor nodded.

"I mean, just a few days until the farewell party. You're staying, right?" And he was maybe talking a bit too fast, trying a bit too hard to cover up his need to know the scepter, find out, learn, prepare. Thankfully, everyone was too exhausted to call him out on it.

"Yes, yes, of course," Thor said. "A victory should be honored with revels."

Tony tried to smile, but ended up just leaning forwards, putting his weight on his hands. Fuck, he was tired. When did he get so tired? He was still younger than he'd been for years before Afghanistan. Did being a father really make such a huge fucking difference? "Yeah. Who doesn't love revels? Capt'n?"
"Hopefully this puts an end to the Chitauri and HYDRA," Steve said, and he was smiling now, probably anticipating returning to his own project. "So, yes. Revels."

Tony put the quinjet down on the Tower landing pad, and for a moment he had to blink at just how much the Tower had changed over the past year, in order to accommodate the Avengers. How had he never noticed?

Cho's people were already taking Clint away when Tony turned away from the controls and let JARVIS finish the shutdown sequence. Hill walked into the quinjet, StarkPad held under one arm. "Lab's all set up, boss," she said.

"Yeah, I'll be heading down in a moment," Tony said. "Debrief the Captain, would you?" He got out of the seat and checked over the controls one more time before following them towards the exit, already itching for the scepter.

"What's the word on Strucker?" Steve was asking.

"NATO's got him, and the rest of the people you took prisoner," Hill answered.

"The two enhanced?" Steve asked, and Tony was half-tempted to stick around to hear everything they had on them, but doubtless Hill had already sent everything to JARVIS, and Tony could read it all far faster down in the lab than he could listen to it here.

"Wanda and Pietro Maximoff," Hill was saying, even as Tony began to head in the other direction. "Twins. Orphaned at ten when a shell collapsed their apartment building. We believe they have a child with them, possible enhanced. Unaccounted for so far, but in their files as a resident of the base. Six years old. White, brown hair, brown eyes. On file just as 'Johanne', and everything else is apparently on such a need to know basis it's not on their servers. Keep an eye out for her as well, though."

"Will do," Steve said. "Shell in their apartment building?"

Tony moved out of hearing range before he heard Hill's answer. He needed to check up on Cho and Clint, and then he was headed straight for the computer lab he shared with Bruce. He wanted the scepter scanned and analyzed, needed to understand the damn thing yesterday. Right now, he couldn't possibly worry about anything else.

Before he got that far, though, a blur of brown hair, pale skin and blue t-shirt slammed into him, and Tony picked Jamie up, pressed a kiss to his temple and hugged him tight. "Did you find it?" Jamie asked.

"Thought I already told you that?" Tony said, settling Jamie against his side and continuing on towards Bruce's Choccupied lab. For all that Jamie was still small for his age, just like Tony had always been, he was getting too big for this. Another year or two, and Tony wouldn't be able to carry him anywhere nearly as comfortably anymore. That thought probably shouldn't sadden him nearly as much as it did.

Jamie nodded. "You did," he said. "I was distracted. Maria's scared. She doesn't know what's going on, and now she's hiding with her friends."

Tony winced. Jamie's imagination was impressive, and ever so slightly scary, and Tony was more than ready for this whole imaginary friend gig to just be over. "I'm sure she'll be fine," he said at last. "You did say her friends were older, didn't you?"
Jamie nodded and squirmed down onto the floor. "I've got homework," he said, almost proudly, before heading off towards the elevator, their private floor and his room. Tony let out a breath, felt the anxiety settle over him again as he walked through the door.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to note that I found Age of Ultron to be a very confusing film. Several things about it made very little sense to me. Now that could be because I'm missing something, it might be because I haven't closely studied all the deleted scenes, or maybe some things in the film just didn't make internal sense.

There are several changes to the film in the story. Some are results of the alternate universe storyline and Jamie's presence as well as the changes to Tony's character. However some are simply my attempts at making sense of what I perceive to be plot holes. Hopefully you will be able to see where I'm coming from. Thank you for reading.
Hi everyone, and thanks so much for all the support whether it be through kudos, bookmarks, recommendations, subscriptions, or, especially, the comments. I have really enjoyed reading all your thoughts on both the story and the films themselves. I also very much enjoyed seeing you interact with one another. As always no need to worry about cluttering up the comment section. If you want to discuss something and the other commenters seems amenable, please do weigh in.

I am still in Central America and as such on my phone. This, once again, means I haven't been able to edit or to reply to any comments. I do still read and enjoy all of them, though, and I promise I will try my best to get back in the swing of answering when I am back home and have regular access to a computer.

Like in the last chapter some of the dialogue has been lifted directly from Age of Ultron and as such I only own what you do not recognize. Without further ado please enjoy.

Sometimes, in between missions, he remembered other things. He remembered broken bodies and blood on his hands. He remembered a skinny little boy with pointy elbows, huffing for breath in a cold apartment. He remembered that brief flash of warmth and pleasure, like taking a breath after years underwater.

He remembered a ma, a pa, siblings. Sometimes, in brief glimpses, he thought he remembered that other life. He remembered Bucky Barnes. But he couldn't connect. He didn't remember being Bucky Barnes. It was easier not to focus on it. It was easier, far easier, just to think of the mission.

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"How's he doing?" Bruce asked as Tony stepped into their shared computer lab.

Tony somehow managed to flash a grin that did not come out all grimace. "Oh, unfortunately he's still Barton."

"That's terrible," Bruce deadpanned.

Tony shrugged. "He's fine. He's thirsty. Give it a week and he'll be giving my kid another fucking nerf gun." He sighed. "D'you know, I really kind of fucking hate that he was right about the sniper aim thing? Last month, Jamie began hitting bull's-eye at a hundred feet."

Bruce cocked an eyebrow. "At least it's just a nerf gun," he said.

"Better than the nerf bow," Tony agreed. "But here's the thing, nerf weapons are a hell of a lot more inaccurate than, you know, actual weapons. And a hundred feet at not quite six years old?"

It was Bruce's turn to shrug. "You aren't exactly a bad shot either," he said.

Tony fiddled with the scepter, got it settled into a stand so JARVIS would be able to start analysis. "I
can do bull's-eye at a hundred and fifty feet," he said. "With a good quality gun, properly weighted and balanced, with a decent sight and predictable kick-back. One of the few good things my Godmother did for me, she first put a live gun in my hand after I returned from my first bad kidnapping, at age five. So that means I've got more than thirty-five years' experience." And he had worked hard at it too, especially as a kid. He was more likely to get Aunt Peggy to pay attention to him on the gun range than in a lab, after all. "Jamie's gonna be a hell of a lot better than me, and I'm not sure whether to be comforted or scared out of my damn mind."

Bruce flashed him a tired smile. "I guess if Barton ever has kids, you get to hijack them and indoctrinate them into becoming little engineers," he said.

Tony winced. "Still requires some natural talent," he said. He sighed, let it go. The scepter, after all, was still a hell of a lot more distracting than his annoyance at Clint's willingness to put weapons, toy or no, in Jamie's little hands. "JARVIS," he said in the end. "It's playtime. We've only got a couple days to figure out what this joystick's got to it, so let's make the most of it. Update me on the structural and compositional analysis."

"The scepter is alien," JARVIS said, and Tony had to bite back the urge to say something along the lines of 'yeah, duh'. "There are elements I can't quantify."

"So there are elements you can," Tony concluded.

"The jewel appears to be a protective housing for something inside. Something powerful."

Tony frowned. "Like a reactor?" he asked, immediately interested. Anything that could advance the arc reactor technology or even help create the next step into the future was interesting by default. For whatever was coming, whatever it was he'd allowed himself to ignore, to forget, over the course of the past few years, they'd need incredible power to defeat it.

"Like a computer," JARVIS corrected, and Tony felt a rush of adrenalin go through his system at those words. "I believe I am deciphering code. I will have a more thorough analysis ready in a few hours."

Tony bit back his impatience and gave a sharp nod. "Good job, buddy."

"I'll go check on Cho and Barton," Bruce said. "Then I'll get dinner started. Meet you here after we eat?"

Tony nodded. "Jamie said he had homework," he said. And as much as the impatience itched, so did the urge to spend more time with Jamie. "I'll go see if there's anything I can do to help him out. Or entertain him, if he's finished already."

Bruce flashed him a grin and filed out.

Tony walked towards the elevator, silently grateful that Bruce didn't get all shocked and outraged whenever it turned out JARVIS wasn't omniscient. The other Avengers, more often than not, were caught somewhere in between not understanding what JARVIS was at all and some kind of stupid expectance that he could do anything at any time. Bruce understood, and Tony appreciated that more than he could explain.

The thing was, Tony, and by extension JARVIS, had always been limited by the time in which he lived. He did understand Howard in that aspect at least, in the frustration of being stuck somewhere he couldn't function at peak potential. Tony, somehow, had always been a decade ahead of where he was, ever since he was four and he'd made that first circuit board, which, for all that Howard had
enjoyed boasting about it, had been mostly useless back then. It had been years before the machines that could properly utilize it had been invented. Tony, as a consequence, had learnt how to make everything necessary to support his inventions, build and develop everything from the ground up. But even he had yet to develop processors powerful enough to let JARVIS reach his full potential. Even Tony had yet to figure out how to pack enough RAMs into a server bank without risking overheating, or creating a large enough hard disk without taking up several city blocks. The Internet wasn't powerful enough either, and it took permits to launch more satellites or build more towers, and those permits, in turn, took time, and the old ones became obsolete so damn fast, and...

Well, suffice to say that Tony was grateful someone else in his life, outside himself and Jamie, did not expect the as yet impossible out of JARVIS. In a decade, there was every chance JARVIS could do this scan in mere moments, but it just wasn't fucking possible yet. Just like it hadn't been possible, back on the helicarrier before the Battle of New York, to have JARVIS carry out more than a narrowly targeted search of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s files pertaining specifically to the Tesseract and related projects. Just like it hadn't yet been possible to even make a real dent in the released S.H.I.E.L.D./HYDRA files, not without sacrificing JARVIS's other functions. And JARVIS did not just run the penthouse and Avengers common areas (and Tony, Jamie and Bruce's lives). He did not just run the suits. He ran the whole of the Tower. He ran the security of every arc reactor powered building in the world. He ran fabrication for Tony and SI's R&D department. Fuck, he pretty much ran SI, and he still had enough bandwidth available to be a day-to-day utterly necessary component of Tony's life, and had become the same for the rest of the Avengers. And, of course, his personality took up quite a bit of his potential as well, which, to Tony, was more important than any of the rest of it. And none of that, really, was something Tony was willing to sacrifice, even in return for quicker decoding of HYDRA or alien files.

Tony sighed and entered the elevator, letting it take him up to the penthouse.

***

After dinner, Tony reached the lab before Bruce did. He was already deep into analyzing the data JARVIS had extracted by the time Bruce actually did walk in. Deeply enough, he had to admit, that he startled a little at Bruce's, "What's the rumpus?"

"Well, the scepter," Tony said. "You see, we were wondering how Strucker got so inventive. So, JARVIS has been analyzing the gem inside." He picked up his phone and scanned JARVIS's projection with a swipe of his thumb. Then he threw the first visual onto the holo screens in front of them. "You may recognize...

Flashing, every-moving lines of deep golden code came into being in front of them. There was something oddly soothing about it, about seeing how quickly JARVIS worked, about his complexity and flexibility and knowing that at the core of it all, the mandate to protect Jamie and Tony himself ruled supreme. It had been a hell of a lot more reassuring just an hour ago, though, before Tony had seen what else there was to be seen here.

"JARVIS," Bruce said.

"Doctor," JARVIS returned, voice unusually dry. Tony suspected he was the only one who really knew JARVIS well enough to hear the anxiety hiding deep behind those polite tones.

"Starting out," Tony told Bruce, "JARVIS was just a natural language UI. Now he runs the Iron Legion. He runs more of the business than anyone besides Pepper."

Bruce nodded. Tony was pretty sure he knew all this already, but he was patient enough to listen, and clever enough to know that Tony wouldn't have been reciting previously known data for no
"Top of the line," Tony reiterated.

"Yes," Bruce agreed.

"On Earth," JARVIS pointed out.

"Meet the cosmic competition," Tony said. He flicked his phone at the processor again and called up the other image.

Bruce’s breath audibly caught in his throat. "It's beautiful," he breathed.

Tony dredged up a smile, but all he could feel was dread. "If you had to guess, what's it look like it's doing?"

Bruce took a step closer, staring at the projection in fascination so deep it looked almost like rapture. "Like it's thinking. I mean, this could be a... it's not a human mind. It..." He trailed off, shook his head. "I mean, look at this. They're like neurons firing."

Tony swallowed. "Down in Strucker's lab, I saw some fairly advanced robotics work. They deep-sixed the data, but I gotta guess he was knocking on a very particular door."

"Artificial intelligence," Bruce said, and Tony kind of wanted to be offended, because however JARVIS had started out, he easily qualified as a true AI these days. Hell, even the bots did, and Tony had several other rudimentary AI programs just sitting around, mostly souvenirs from his frantic post Battle of New York extraterrestrial panic. But it was true that what they were looking at, those firing streams of something - not code, not in any language Tony knew, but not true neurons either - was far more advanced than anything Tony had created.

Part of him couldn't help but think that with this, with this he might just have a chance of finally creating the Ultron program he and Bruce had hypothesized and imagined and discussed to death in those first few months after the Chitauri Invasion, when Tony was still packing his bag and getting ready to head back to California on a daily basis. Before AIM, before Extremis, before Tony had forgotten that for all the threats on Earth, the real scary shit was still out there. With an artificial program this advanced, and added to the Iron Legion Protocol, Ultron would be damn near ready-made.

"Tony," Bruce said. "You aren't thinking..."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut and counted to ten, forced away the strange compulsion, that sheer, frightened temptation. Jamie was here, right in this Tower. Tony wasn't going to risk him. "Yeah, I am," he said. "Of course I am. But we aren't gonna do it." He took a deep breath. "JARVIS, where's Mickey? Can I get Mickey here right now?" He returned his attention to Bruce. "We're not," he reiterated. "First lesson on not getting virus infections all over your systems: Don't open any attachments if you don't trust the sender. I don't trust whatever's out there, I don't trust Loki, and I sure as hell don't trust HYDRA. But this can still teach us so damn much. So we're gonna study it. You're gonna figure out how the hell it let Strucker do human enhancement. I'm going to learn as much about its structure as I possibly can, and use that to help program JARVIS and the others. If nothing else, maybe it can help us learn more about what's out there. This is not Ultron, but it might be the springboard we need to create Ultron." He took a deep breath. "JARVIS, set up an isolated server for the project. Give us as much processing power as you can spare. We only got this stick for three days. We got a lot of work to do."
Bruce let out a breath that seemed as much disappointed as it was relieved. "Send over the files," he said.

Tony sent over the files, and delved back into his study. All along, he couldn't shake the feeling that someone not entirely friendly was watching him.

Chapter End Notes

If I remember correctly, this chapter cost me quite a bit of mental gymnastics back when I wrote it, mainly because this is when I realized that's a lot of the film did not make a whole lot of sense to me. In the end I took the same route I did when rewriting Iron Man 3, which means that out of concern for Jamie Tony did not do the stupid thing he did, but the same bad shit wound up happening anyway. So just like I don't think Killian needed to be explicitly told Tony's address to know where he lived and attack him, I also believe that the alien AI we have come to know as Ultron existed prior to Tony ever touching the scepter, though it may have taken a bit longer, it would have still interfaced with something and become a problem sooner or later even if Tony and Bruce had never come into contact with it. Here it's not delayed because it does get access to Tony servers, but I have tried to highlight the fact that the film showed no evidence that Tony and Bruce actually created Ultron.

Also I am in no way a computer expert, so my ramblings about Jarvis may be way off base. However from my limited understanding it's unlikely that even Tony Stark would have unlimited processing power available. Thus, Jarvis is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, which also explains why, despite having hacked Shield and having access to all the Hydra files post Steve and Natasha's Great Wikileaks Adventure, Jarvis does not know everything. He simply has not had the processing ability to go through it all, and has only used targeted searches to find information relevant to given specific tasks.

Hopefully that makes sense, but if an expert does show up to tell me why I'm wrong, I will do my best to alter the story to fit.

Thank you so much for reading and as always I would really like to hear your thoughts, on the film as well as the story. The floor is open for debate.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone. Thanks so much for all the support in whichever form it took. Thanks so much, especially, for the comments. Those really do mean the world to me and keep me posting even when it is really not that convenient for me.

Again, I do not have access to a computer. As such I am still posting from my phone. No edits have been made to the chapter and I have not been able to respond to comments. I was very happy to see some of you interacting in the comment section and answering each other's questions since I am not able to do so. One warning: my notes are made through speech recognition software because with my big sausage fingers that's actually a lot quicker than trying to type on my phone. As such errors are bound to sneak in. I apologize for those in advance.

I will do my best to keep the chapters coming at a quick rate as most of them, at the moment, tend to end in Cliffhangers.

Once again some of the dialogue has been lifted straight from Age of Ultron. Again, there are additions and alterations, but anything you recognize does not belong to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was something empty inside him. He couldn't put his finger on what, couldn't figure out the exact shape of it. But something was missing, and it only added to the agonizing cold that constantly threatened to take him over. He didn't know what it was he was missing, but the lack of it hurt more deeply than any memory he had uncovered yet.

Focusing on the mission was much easier.

***

"All our work is gone," Bruce said, and Tony was pretty sure he'd never heard his friend sound so despondent. And for good reason too. He'd made leaps and bounds in figuring out how HYDRA had enhanced the Maximoff twins, work he might have ultimately been able to use to rid himself of the Hulk. All his files, everything he'd accomplished, was lost. Tony found it more difficult to sympathize than he'd like to admit, and yet it was so much easier to think about than... everything else. "Ultron cleared out, used the internet as an escape hatch."

"Ultron." Steve said, and it was sharp and dry and full of accusation that might've made Tony jump up in his face, except Jamie was sleeping with his head in Tony's lap - and God, even remembering those first few panicked moments when he'd realized a mad Artificial Intelligence was in the same building as Jamie, and that Tony did not have his eyes on the kid... It still set his heart to racing now, almost an hour later.

"It's as good a name for him as any," Tony managed. His voice sounded hoarse even to his own ears. "Ultron is a protocol we worked on in the months after the Battle of New York, purely hypothetical. Meant to protect the Earth from extraterrestrial threats." And, of course, after the Extremis incident, they'd also added parameters for out-of-control metahumans. "We didn't think any
tech would be advanced enough for it for decades, so we weren't too thorough. If we'd known a HYDRA-programmed AI would absorb it, we'd have made sure to specify that 'protect the Earth' means protecting humanity, and that the Avengers aren't a threat. Of course, it would still have that fucked up HYDRA world view to contend with, but..." He trailed off, and fuck, but he was tired. He'd slept perhaps six hours in all over the past three days, and then the battle, and now... Shit, he was exhausted.

Steve looked as though there was something he'd like to say. Thankfully, Natasha broke in before he could, "He's been in everything. Files, surveillance. Probably knows more about us than we know about each other."

Rhodey looked scared and that frightened Tony more than anything. He could count on a single hand with fingers to spare the amount of times he'd seen Rhodey truly scared. "He's in your files," he said. "He's in the internet. What if he decides to access something a little more exciting?"

Tony looked down at Mickey, who was laying across his feet, warm and heavy. He let out a slow breath.

"Nuclear codes," Hill said.

"Nuclear codes," Rhodey confirmed. "Look, we need to make some calls, assuming we still can." He pulled his phone out of his pocket, tapped at it quickly and raised it to his ear. For a moment, Tony was about to tell him just to get JARVIS to connect it for him. Then he remembered... His chest clenched tight, and fuck, he could not deal with this right now.

"Nukes?" Natasha said. "He said he wanted us dead." And how was that confusing anyway? Nukes, without a convenient portal to send them through, were pretty effective ways to kill people, and fuck Tony just wanted to put Jamie in the Iron Cradle and keep him there until all this was over, except he couldn't. He couldn't, because JARVIS controlled the Cradle, and JARVIS was-- No, do not go there.

"He didn't say dead," Steve said. "He said extinct." And shit, what were they fucking on about? How was any of this remotely relevant to the situation right now, compared to about a million other things they should be discussing? Tony breathed out carefully, smoothed Jamie's hair out of his face. How the hell was the kid even sleeping in this ruckus anyway?

"He also said he killed somebody," Clint said, sounding almost as exhausted as Tony felt, but also wary, as though he already knew the answer to his unspoken question.

"But there wasn't anyone else in the building," Hill said, and just like that, Tony couldn't stay quiet any longer.

"Yes there was," he spat, and he probably would've been walking around, gesticulating, trying to get rid of the kinetic energy that was his own anger, his own frustration, and sorrow that would catch up with him the moment he let it. Instead, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and used it to call up the hologram of JARVIS. He could hardly bear to look at it, this representation of JARVIS's... of his corpse, torn apart and left like some macabre... Fuck, Tony could not deal with this.

"This is insane," Bruce breathed. His voice was far from steady, and Tony met his eyes for a moment. Out of all the Avengers, Bruce had spent most time in the Tower, knew JARVIS the best. Out of all of them, Bruce was probably the only one, aside from Tony, who thought of JARVIS as an actual person. It was more comforting than Tony would've liked to admit.

Steve sighed, and it was the barest bit of balm that he, too, seemed to care, at least a little. Tony
determinedly did not try to figure out whether he cared about JARVIS as a person or as a tool. "JARVIS was the first line of defense," Steve said. "He would've shut Ultron down, it makes sense."

"No," Bruce said, eyes caught on JARVIS's digital remains. "Ultron could've assimilated Jarvis, like he did the Ultron Protocol to begin with. He must've used him as a springboard to get off the isolated server, and he clearly had no problem assimilating the Protocol and shaping it to suit his purposes. This isn't strategy, this is...rage."

And then suddenly Thor was back, and his huge ham-hand was wrapping around Tony's neck, lifting him up off the couch and dislodging Jamie as a result. What the fuck? What the actual fuck? Barton was saying something somewhere in the background, but Tony was dangling by his neck. His feet didn't even touch the ground. And it felt like drowning, felt like getting his head shoved under water and held there. "C'mon, use your words, buddy," Tony croaked, but it was more reflex than anything. His heart was pounding way too fast and he couldn't. Fucking. Breathe.

Then Mickey was there, growling and barking and for the first time since he met her, Tony honestly thought she might just have it in her to bite another living creature. Jamie followed right at her heels, small hands tucking into fists and slamming into Thor's solid stomach. "That's my Daddy!" he was shouting. "You're hurting Daddy. Let go of him you great big asshole."

Absently, all too aware of the panic coursing through him and the lack of oxygen in his brain, Tony noted that perhaps he should start thinking about regulating his language around Jamie. Perhaps he should've started thinking about that oh, right about the time he returned from Afghanistan.

"Let go!" Jamie screamed, and Thor finally did. Tony collapsed back onto the couch, rubbing at his throat.

Tony took a moment to catch his breath, half-aware that Thor was now reporting on his failure to catch up with the legionnaire who'd escaped with the scepter and the general consensus that it has to be put on the backburner because Ultron was more important right now.

"I don't understand," Helen Cho was saying. "You built this program. Why is it trying to kill us?"

Part of Tony almost wanted to laugh because, damn it all, why was that the conclusion they jumped to? Why the fuck was that what they got out of all this? "We did not build this program," he finally said, and if his voice was even hoarser now than before, fuck it. If Thor wound up feeling some kind of guilt, Tony was all for it. "It's flattering, really, that you think Brucie and I could actually create a fully functioning murderbot in three days. It's nice that there are times when you will acknowledge that we're two of the smartest men in the world, but this is the wrong time. We did not do this."

Bruce looked like he was actually fighting back some green. That, too, was oddly comforting. "We did exactly what you and Tony agreed we would do," he told Thor. "We studied the scepter, and scanned it and tried to learn as much about it as we could. We deliberately kept it on a quarantined server. Never once did we even discuss attempting to create an interface."

Jamie was looking back and forth between the adults in the room. He seemed to have calmed down some, but his spine was still too stiff, and he held himself slightly between Tony and Thor. Tony wasn't sure whether that was adorable or heartbreaking. He pulled himself back on his feet, walked the half a step that separated him from his son and pulled the boy close, felt some of the tension seep out of both their bodies.

"Here's the thing," Tony said. "The AI already existed before we ever took the scepter back. Not sure if it comes from some space entity we don't know anything about, or from Loki, or HYDRA or, fuck, S.H.I.E.L.D. But he was already there, and given his background, he was probably never
remotely friendly. He broke into the Tower mainframe, created his own interface and got out. Which, yeah, that's really unfortunate, but here's the thing: even if Bruce and I had never touched the scepter, we'd still have been dealing with the AI in probably just a few months. The robotics lab under Strucker's creepy castle, the amount of servers and sheer processing power they'd accumulated... HYDRA was definitely working on an interface. At least this way, we got a chance to learn whatever there was to learn about the scepter beforehand." He didn't bother reiterate why that was important. Out of all the others, Bruce was really the only one who'd ever taken Tony's extraterrestrial fears seriously.

Thor sighed, and why the fuck could he still look like an overgrown puppy dog in a situation like this? "I apologize, my friends," he said at last. "I was tired and I was wroth. I reacted poorly. I am sorry."

Inexplicably, Tony felt the faintest bit lighter at those words. "It's all right, big guy," he said. It wasn't, but Thor had apologized, and Tony was pretty sure there was nothing in the world more earnest than an apology from Thor, which did help. "Just try not to strangle me in front of my son again, that would be nice."

And even more of the kicked puppy look, this time on Jamie. "My deepest apologies, young James," Thor said. "No child should have to see his father mistreated so."

Jamie shrugged, and leaned back into Tony's body. He was probably glaring, and later on he would insist that Maria was telling him people had to earn forgiveness because if you gave it cheaply, it would be taken for granted. Or something equally philosophical. Tony, once again, lamented just how clever Jamie was, and how mistrustful life had made him

Rhodey stepped back from where he'd been off with his phone. "So far, the nuclear codes are safe. The military is on high alert, POTUS is being informed, as are the other nuclear powers worldwide."

He let out a breath. "I'll go coordinate with them."

Tony nodded, and resisted the urge to reach out for a hug before Rhodey left. If he did let himself hug Rhodey, he would probably never let go, would break down in front of the team, in front of Jamie, sobbing for the friend who'd died and for the sheer, terrifying danger they were all in, every second of every day, the danger none of the others would even acknowledge.

"Ultron's calling us out," Steve said then, and he was using his inspire-the-troops voice, more than a bit annoying. Still, it was pretty effective in making everyone shut up and pay attention. "And I'd like to find him before he's ready for us. The world's a big place. Let's start making it smaller."

Chapter End Notes

Another few notes at the end:

Yes. I, too, hated the fact that Jarvis died in the film. Took quite a while - months really - for me to even properly comprehend it. Jarvis, to me, was always a real character in and of himself, and I very much contemplated changing his fate in the story. However, as he is a real character with his own character arc, I wound up choosing to be true to that. Jarvis, to me, is at least as much a hero as everyone else and all of that comes together in his death. To me, yes, the loss of Jarvis was a tragedy, but it was also a show of heroic self-sacrifice unlike anything any other character has shown. However much I hate the loss of Jarvis I would not, as Peggy Carter would say it, deprive him of the
dignity of his choice.

Obviously, 'the dignity of his choice' does not refer to his destruction at the hands of Ultron. He had no choice in that. Rather, it refers to his choice to sacrifice what remained of his code to contribute to the creation of the Vision. That, to me, was definitely a choice he made and in this story I will honour it as such, however much it pains me.

A note on Bruce as well: this version of Bruce is more confident and assertive. He has spent the past 3 years as part of a family. He is more loyal to Tony than he ever was in the films. And aside from that, he is very aware of the fact that he and Tony took all the precautions possible before examining the scepter. He knows that Ultron is not their fault. And unlike in the film he is willing to stand up for that.

The explanation for Ultron, again, is a mix of my attempts to make sense of the film and the altered storyline.

I realize I have made quite a few people unhappy. I'm sorry about that, but after quite a few contemplations, I came to the realization that this was how it had to go for this story. Thanks so much for reading and I hope you can forgive me.

To make up for this I promise something long-awaited will be coming up very soon.
Hey guys. Quick update this time around. This is one of those chapters I have really looked forward to sharing with you, and which I think a lot of you have been looking forward to as well.

Thanks so much for all the support, especially the comments which always put a big smile on my face. I also really enjoyed seeing your interact with each other. Very nice to see that they still some dialogue going on in the comments even though I can't respond to you personally.

It's still the same deal: I'm updating via my phone, so nothing has been edited. Notes are still made using voice-to-text software, so mistakes may crop up anywhere and everywhere.

Once again some of the dialogue has been lifted straight from Age of Ultron with some deliberate changes.

Also, thanks so much for your understanding in regards to my decision not to save Jarvis. I was really nervous about that, so it was nice to see that no one was too hurt or angry about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He doesn't know what to do. As hard as he has tried, he has been unable to acquire intelligence regarding the locations of the remaining HYDRA bases. Those he does know about are simply too large for any one man, even one with his abilities, to assault on his own.

Perhaps it is time to report back to his CO. But he can't, not with the mission incomplete. And he can't, can't reach out to this Steve Rogers who looks nothing like the skinny boy he sometimes remembers. He can't be Bucky Barnes when he no longer knows how. He can't--

He is somewhere in Eastern Europe. He speaks the language, knows the customs, though he can't recall how he has learnt them. It is as good a place as any to hole up, to stop fighting and start figuring out what everything he's scribbled in his notebooks means. The thought alone frightens him.

"Daddy, I don't want you to go," Jamie said. He was leaning in close, speaking softly, as though suddenly uncomfortable with the idea of anyone hearing him. Tony wasn't sure if it was a growing-old-kind-of-thing or a just-watched-his-father-be-strangled-by-a-teammate-thing, but it was almost as heartbreaking as the utterly lost look in Jamie's eyes as he stared at Tony imploringly.

"I'm so sorry, buddy." Tony said, reaching out and smoothing some of Jamie's wild hair out of his face. "I gotta, though, or Skynet's gonna do a lot of damage. That guy is a computer. I have to go and help."

And he knew more about Vibranium than any of the rest of them. He knew enough about it that
Klaue's involvement and his obvious past with Wakanda rubbed him in all the wrong ways, setting off every danger instinct he had. The others, though, were mostly convinced that going after Klaue was a wild goose chase. Tony was half-convinced Steve had only backed his play to follow that hunch in order to double check that Klaue didn't have any of Tony's weapons lying around. One thing that was pretty certain, though, was that chances were the others weren't going to go to Africa at all if Tony didn't push it. Coming along himself, unfortunately, was part of that pushing it. And if he was right, and he was almost certain he was, they were going to need him.

"Take me with you, then," Jamie said, and he was all wide eyes and jutting bottom lip and it was almost physically painful to deny him anything.

"I'm sorry, kiddo," Tony said, reaching out and pulling Jamie close, squeezing him in a long hug. "You can't. I need to know you're safe, or all I'm going to be able to think about is protecting you, and then I won't be able to fight nearly as well. I need you to be safe. Can you do that for me?"

After a long time, Jamie swallowed with an audible click. He nodded. "I miss JARVIS," he said softly.

"Oh, Sweetheart." Tony pressed a kiss to the side of the kid's head. "I do too." He took a deep breath. "I love you, all right? I gotta go now."

Jamie nodded, eyes still too wide, more than a bit too wet. "I love you too, Daddy," he said.

Tony forced a smile for the kid's sake before walking towards the door. He stopped just outside Jamie's door, shut it behind himself and turned to look at Hill. "You get him out of here and take him somewhere safe," he said. "You don't tell anyone where you've gone. If I get him back in anything less than mint condition, you'll wish all I did was wikileaks you."

"I already said I would," she said, voice sharp and irritated. Then her eyes seemed to soften. "He'll be all right, no matter what. I promise." A small, frail smile stretched her face. "Now, go save the world."

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Sometimes, Tony hated being right. Still, for a few minutes he did suffer the delusion that it wasn't all as bad as he'd feared. Ultron and the Maximoffs hadn't managed to get away yet. There was still a chance to stop them and retrieve the Vibranium. And fuck, Tony still didn't want to even begin to try to figure out what Ultron wanted Vibranium for.

Ultron, dry and humorless, did not give them any information to work with. The Maximoffs did not follow Steve's dream script and come in quietly. And just like Tony had known since the moment they entered the ship, it all exploded into an all-out three-sided battle. Well, technically it was three-sided, at least for the first bit, but quite frankly Klaue and his men did so pathetically they barely counted.

Tony tried his best to stay focused on his own little corner of the battle, but he lost Ultron again and again, had to pause to take out his robot followers - it hurt like hell to still recognize some of them as Iron Legionnaires. And then there was everyone else. Tony had been getting used to being on a team, but it was still difficult. It split his attention, which was already caught somewhere between himself, his opponent and the civilians around him. Thankfully, there at least weren't any of them here, or Tony would've been fucked with the sharp corners and narrow passageways and the disturbing messages coming through.

Ruckus, everywhere. And so many distractions. So many damn things to worry about. There may
not be any civilians, but there were still his teammates, and Tony still hadn't figured out how the fuck
he was meant to deal with how frightened he sometimes got on their behalf.

"Stay down, kid," Steve was saying. Tony figured he was talking to one of the Maximoffs, and he
hoped like hell the twin listened. They might not be children, the two of them, but they were still
pretty damn young, and clearly extremely misguided. Tony would very much prefer it if they came
out on the other side of this unscathed. Unless they continued to prove themselves threats. Then he
had no idea what the fuck would happen, or even what should happen.

Obviously, Bruce had heard the chaos going on as well. "Guys," he called. "Is this a Code Green?"
He sounded quite a bit more agitated than Tony would've liked, and shit, but he did not need more
distractions right now. Bruce would stay in control. He had to. Tony needed to be able to count on
that.

"Thor!" Steve was shouting. "Status?"

Tony gritted his teeth and focused on repulsing the hell out of the robot in front of him. He almost
wanted to turn off the comm. He didn't have JARVIS to assist him this time - and God, but that
thought still hurt; Tony couldn't even imagine a future when it wouldn't hurt - which made the suit
that much harder to use. He needed his head in the game, needed all his attention on his immediate
opponent.

"The girl tried to warp my mind," Thor said, and Tony's breath caught. For a moment, his attention
faltered entirely and he had to suck in several sharp breaths, barely dodging a direct attack. Why was
he reacting so badly to the mention of mind warping or mental control? It wasn't like it had ever
happened to him. Had it? He couldn't help but remember that weird ass vision, far clearer than any
dream he'd had, crisper than his most detailed panic induced delusion. But no. She hadn't. Couldn't
have... Could she? "Take special care," Thor continued. "I doubt a human could keep her at bay.
Fortunately, I am mighty." And yet the longer he spoke, the more he slurred his words became, the
more he fell into those Shakespearean speech patterns Tony'd thought they'd managed to train him
out of. He sounded shit-faced.

Tony's instincts flashed warning signs all over the place. Something was definitely wrong with Thor,
some kind of mind fuckery that his gut told him clearly was Very Bad. To be honest, there was a part
of him that questioned why he gave a fuck. It had been barely twenty-four hours since Thor took it
upon himself to fucking strangle Tony in front of his kid. The apology had seemed sincere, sure, but
still not quite enough to warrant this level of concern. Maybe Tony should just fly over, make sure
Thor was still on his feet.

Then two of the robots came up from behind and tackled him and Tony was almost grateful for the
distraction that allowed him to not think about his teammates for a moment. Natasha and Steve weren't speaking on the comms. Not too unusual with Natasha, sure, but Tony was the only person speaking more on the comms than Steve usually. He should check up on Clint too, although Clint was another one who was mostly silent during missions. Still-- Something clanged against the helmet and Tony winced, turning back to his more immediate problems.

"I've done the whole mind control thing," Clint was saying. "Not a fan." There was a clatter, and
then, "Yeah, you better run."

Tony breathed a sigh of relief. Seemed that whatever the Maximoffs had been up to, it was under
control for now. Thank fuck Barton's brain didn't always exhibit signs of being bird-sized.

"Whoever's standing, we gotta move," Clint continued.
No one was checking in.

"Clint," Tony heard himself say. "Something's really fucked up about all this." He turned in the air with a grimace, grabbed two robots by their throats and slammed them together until their heads were little more than crushed metal and smashed circuits. He dropped them and moved on, belatedly wondering if the heads were really the most important thing to destroy here. No, it had to be. Ultron was still building his minions based on human physiology. Tony had to believe he could count on that.

"Quinjet's still secure," Bruce said. "I think I'm hearing something outside, though. I'm gonna go check."

"Bruce, don't--" Tony began, but he could already hear the telltale sign of the ramp lowering on the other end of the comm. "Fuck," he muttered. And none of the others were checking in. This was going all the way to hell in a hand basket really fucking fast.

Tony got his eyes on Ultron again. Heart pounding, he followed him out of the ship only to watch another robot flying away with the Vibranium. Tony gritted his teeth and sent a unibeam at what had been serving as Ultron's main body before speeding off after the one with the Vibranium.

"Uncle Bruce!" someone called over the comms, voice high and childish and faint, like background noise. Against any bit of good sense he had, Tony felt himself start to slow down. Then he shook his head, as if to dislodge the wool that had suddenly settled between his ears. He took off again, pushing more power into his foot thrusters. "Uncle Bruce," the voice shouted again.

"I don't--" Bruce was saying. "Who are you?"

"Johanne," another voice, female and strongly accented, shouted. "Johanne, get away from him! He's a monster."

That word alone tore at Tony. People might use it for Bruce more often, but really... It always was a punch in the stomach to hear things like that. Probably Wiese, yet, for Bruce. But-- But nothing. He had to focus on the mission. He had to.

"No he's not," the child voice - Johanne? - shouted. "He's my uncle Bruce, and he won't hurt me. I won't let you hurt him either. Uncle Bruce, take me back with you? Please? Take me away."

Tony pulled up short, and somewhere in the back of his mind, he was aware that the vibranium was moving further and further away, further and further out of reach. Right now, he couldn't bring himself to care. As though compelled by some kind of biological fucking imperative, he turned around and sped back toward the quinjet.

The Maximoff twins were there, but Tony wasn't afraid, was barely even aware of their presence. He stepped out of the armor and towards Bruce and the child clutching at his sweater. The little girl turned around and stared at him with large, round, disbelieving brown eyes. His own eyes, like staring at a fucking mirror.

"Daddy?" the girl said. And then she was letting go of Bruce's sweater and rushing towards him, running far faster than he'd have thought a little kid could've managed. She launched herself at him with enough force to send them both tumbling to the ground, but all Tony could do was wrap his arms around her and hold her tight and breathe her in as the whole world seemed to fall away around them. He had to force himself to keep on breathing, had to fight to hold back the tears.

"I'm here, Maria," he whispered, voice cracking. "Daddy's here, Sweetheart."
A few notes here at the end as well:

Regarding Maria's name, the actual name she was given by Hydra was Johanne. No one should be too confused as to why. However, if you think back to one chapter way back in the beginning, sometime between the events of Iron Man and Iron Man 2, you will realize that Maria is the name she and Jamie came up with for her. It's definitely the name she thinks of as her own. However, to Hydra, Wanda and Pietro included, she is Johanne.

Also, as has been pointed out in the comments, the team dynamics seen here could be viewed as being worse than they were in the actual films. I honestly don't think they are. Looking back at some of the older MCU films, the dynamics were always off. What was it Bruce said during the original Avengers film? I don't remember the exact quote, but I do think he had the right of it. The difference is that in this story the cracks and conflicts are made visible, not only because we are inside Tony's head, but mainly because we are inside the head of a Tony who is more confident, more critical, less needy and less messed up than he is in canon. He is not as desperate to make the team work and as such, the flaws inherent in the dynamics are more visible a seen through his eyes. In fact, even though there's more open conflict and hostility, I think the dynamics might actually be healthier here since neither Bruce nor Tony is willing to play the doormat.

Hopefully that all made some sense to you. Also, Maria! Feel free to discuss, react, theorize or whatever else you want in the comment section. Ask questions even. Unfortunately I can't answer at the moment, but maybe you'll get lucky and someone else will.

Thanks for reading. I'll try to get the next chapter up within the next 2-3 days.
Oh, wow. I am absolutely stunned by the response I got to the last chapter. Thank you so, so much. You lot really helped make the Maria introduction even better than I imagined it could be. Thanks also so much to those of you who took the time out of your day to answer each other's questions and discuss. I loved seeing that.

Some of you were wondering how Tony came so quickly to the realization of who Maria was. I decided to write it that way based on a few factors: what Maria was calling Tony and Bruce, what she looked like, his knowledge of Jamie's imaginary friend, and the fact that Tony's mind functions at insane speeds. Tony might really dislike things he cannot explain (see: Magic), but that doesn't mean he dismisses them out of hand. So, while I didn't explicitly write it all out, Tony's mind went through a few hypotheses, discarded them, and eventually came to the right conclusion as being the most likely.

I have also updated the tags to reflect the stance the story takes the Civil War and, particularly, Steve Rogers. I hadn't planned on doing that before the story reaches the Civil War story arc, especially since quite a bit of what happens in Civil War will be canon divergent. However, 1 comment I got made me reconsider and decide to make clear where the story stands, so no one gets angry and disappointed about having read 100k words only to realize that they cannot read the story without getting an aneurysm.

I want to point out that Tony is not meant to come across as crazy in the story, but to actually be mentally in a better place than in canon. He is still meant to come across as a human being who makes mistakes and has regrets, and has and will do some morally dubious things. I have however also tried to make it clear, that when Tony does make mistakes he does his best to make up for them and learn from them.

I also do very much stand by my treatment of Captain America: the Winter Soldier. Steve and Natasha made several huge thoughtless mistakes that cost a lot of people everything. (Please try to tell me how, logically, no real consequences came of that even if it came to someone else). In my opinion their decision was in no way the best one possible. And no, it was not a split-second decision, or, at least, it shouldn't have been, since they have time to break in several places, steal quite a bit of stuff, and work out the specifics of the plan. So yes, I am still happy with my choice to show the logical consequences. If you don't like that, that is probably a good indication that there will be a lot of things in the story you will not like either, and you probably should have stopped reading a while ago.

Once again, this has been posted from my phone. I haven't edited anything and notes are made using voice-to-text software. Mistakes will happen.

For anyone who isn't too busy feeling angry on Steve's behalf, please enjoy.
"We made a mistake," says Pierce.

"What makes you think that?" Zola asks.

Tony wasn't sure how long he stayed like that, lying flat on the ground with his daughter - his daughter, what the actual fuck? - curled up on top of him, the both of them clutching one another so tightly he was surprised he was still managing to breathe. He couldn't even describe how it felt, the warmth and relief and deep-seated love of it. The closest he got was how he still remembered feeling when he'd first held Jamie after returning from Afghanistan.

Part of him was screaming that he was being an idiot, was being taken advantage of, that he couldn't trust this shit without a DNA test on the table. But the feeling was there, so deep it hurt and more real than anything else around him, so damn tangible he felt he could almost reach out and touch the connection. Something had been missing, ever since the beginning. He'd sensed it, and Jamie had lived with it every single fucking day of his life. And here she was. In the end, it was as simple as that.

And then suddenly there was a blur of displaced air, and Maria was gone. Red sparks overtook Tony's vision, and he was thrown back several feet, feeling as though he'd been punched by the Hulk even though he was certain no one had touched him. Biting back a groan, he pulled himself up to his elbows. He was met with the sight of Bruce on the right-hand side, threatening to turn green, and the Maximoffs were on his left, glaring at him. The boy was holding Maria against his front, hands tight on her solid little shoulders. Tony did his very fucking best to get to his feet, help his little girl, but he fell back with a groan, head damn near swimming to a point where his legs felt like fucking rubber.

"Pietro!" Maria screamed. "Pietro, let me go! Stop hurting him, Wanda!" And then she threw back her elbow, slamming it into Pietro's midsection, and for all that he was about twice her size, he flew back, curled around his own stomach. Maria rushed to Tony's side, placing herself solidly in front of him. Judging by the set of her shoulders alone, she was glaring defiantly at everyone and everything. As if in sync, the two Maximoffs looked from Maria to Tony and back to Maria again. Both sets of eyes widened incredulously. And Tony kind of understood their bafflement. Jamie and Tony had always been visibly, recognizably related, but their physical similarities seemed to lessen the older Jamie got. He had the same build Tony'd had at that age, but as for the rest of it, most of their similarities, these days, were more of the internal sort. Jamie's hair was several shades lighter than his, and for all that it became messy at the slightest hint of wind or moisture, it had grown almost pin straight, and with every single day that passed, more of the baby softness abandoned his face, leaving behind an ever-certain promise of a truly impressive angular, square face.

Maria, on the other hand... Her hair was the exact same shade as Tony's. It had the exact same just barely fulfilled hint of a curl. Her eyes were the same color, the same shape. She was taller and stronger than Tony had been at her age, looking closer to him at nine than at just barely six, but overall, aside from the chin-length hair and cleft chin, they could've been twins. Frankly, Tony was fairly certain pretty much anyone who saw them side by side would say the DNA test was unnecessary. There was a strange sense of warmth at that thought, despite all the ways this situation was so damn serious. Just... He couldn't stop staring at her. Couldn't believe she was real.

Maria was real. Fucking hell. That... that was really going to take some getting used to.

"Johanne," the girl Maximoff said anyway, voice taking on that annoying condescending tone some people liked to use on kids. Tony had spent his whole childhood frustrated with that tone. "We have
to go. The transport is not going to wait."

If possible, Maria's shoulders straightened further. "I'm not going anywhere," she said. "I told you," she added. "I told you my daddy was gonna come for me. I'm not leaving him now."

Tony's chest clenched, and God, where had he got these brave, loyal children of his? How the hell did that ever happen? He was grateful, obviously, but he honestly didn't think anything had ever overwhelmed him more. He was also more ashamed than he could ever have said. Because he hadn't come for her. He hadn't planned to, never would've, if not for Ultron. If he'd known she was real, if he'd taken the time to truly listen to Jamie all these years, he'd have come for her long ago. But he hadn't, and that, God, that was something he was going to have to live with.

Somehow, despite the nauseating pain still pulsing through his head, he got to his feet and managed a staggering step, reaching out warily, uncertain of his welcome. He let his hand hover for a moment, until he was certain Maria knew he was there. When she didn't move away, he closed his hand around her shoulder, bit back something close to a fucking sob at the feel of it and God, all he wanted was to draw her close and hug her and never let her go. For right now, in a situation as charged as this, he had to leave her some space.

"These are the Avengers," Boy Maximoff said, as though that was self-explanatory. Perhaps it was. They were straight out of HYDRA, after all, and fuck, there was a thought that was going to keep him awake at night for the rest of his life. His little girl growing up in the hands of HYDRA, all those frightening questions Jamie had asked on her behalf over the years... He couldn't even stand to think about it.

"I don't care," Maria spat.

"That's Tony Stark," Girl Maximoff said, sounding a bit like a Greenpeacer onboard an oil tanker.

"That's my daddy," Maria said again. She was damn near screaming now. "That's my daddy and I love him and I didn't do anything wrong. I just want to go home with him, and see my room and play with Jamie and do lab stuff with Uncle Bruce." Her shoulders were shaking now, Tony realized. He squeezed her shoulder carefully, wrestled down the near physical need to hold her close, keep her safe. Later. Later, and then all the time in the world. "I want you to come too," Maria added, and her voice was cracking now. "You're my friends. I don't wanna lose you."

"I don't care what those two do, so long as they don't turn around and kill us all," Clint said, and Tony jumped, turning his head to look at where the others were walking towards them. Steve and Thor both looked vacant, wounded. Natasha was leaning onto Clint's shoulder as though she'd keel over and die without the support. Worry flooded through Tony, along with the question of how long they'd been listening and how much they even understand. "But whoever we're bringing has to get on the jet. We're leaving now."

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Tony completely bypassed the pilot's seat as he entered the quinjet. He was in no condition to attempt to fly anyway, would probably manage to accidentally find the nearest mountain and crash. He was peripherally aware of Clint guiding Natasha to a seat before heading for the controls. Bruce moved the armor inside before wrangling Thor and Steve into seats as well. Tony, for his part, sank down onto the nearest padded bench. Maria scrambled in next to him before climbing into his lap, curling up against his chest with her legs hanging awkwardly to one side. Tony wrapped his arms around her, the motion completely instinctive. He buried his face in her stunningly thick hair and breathed in the unfamiliar scent of her, cradling her like a toddler for all that she was big enough that his thighs would probably start aching in just a few moments.
Tony let his eyes slide shut, focusing on the warm weight of his daughter, the relief from some kind of looming dread he'd never even fully been able to name, but had felt for years. There were so many things he wanted to tell her, so many apologies he wanted to give, so many questions he wanted to ask. Yet somehow, in that moment, all his words seemed to fail him. He couldn't figure out how to speak a single one, could only hold her and silently swear to never let her go. Thankfully, Maria didn't seem to mind, just squirmed closer, clutching at his undersuit as if she were just as scared to let go of him as he was to lose her.

He wasn't sure how long they'd been flying when he became aware of the Maximoffs whispering to one another a few feet away. He couldn't immediately place the language, but he knew enough related ones - Russian and assorted Romance languages, mainly - that he was pretty sure he understood at least eighty per cent of what they said, and could figure out the rest pretty easily from context. He might still not have tuned into their conversation, except he'd heard his name in there, which made them suddenly impossible to ignore.

"...Stark, and he's just sitting there, and we're going to do nothing?" Girl Maximoff said, sounding more than a bit upset, and a sense of dread came rolling in to sit alongside all the rest of the emotions currently weighing Tony down.

"We're not," Boy Maximoff said. "Johanne's been with us for a year, and we've taken care of her, and we're not going to-- You remember, how much it hurt? And we know how much she's wanted to be with her father. We can't do that to her, or her brother, not until she's learnt what kind of man he is and realized she'll be much better off without him."

"But he--"

"I know," Boy Maximoff said. "But whatever we do, it will come back to hurt Johanne, and that's not what we want. That's not-- I would never want anything like that for her."

Girl Maximoff slumped, but nodded, and Tony squeezed his eyes shut again, careful not to let on that he'd been listening, let alone that he'd understood. He was going to have to look into whatever perceived wrong he'd done the Maximoffs, figure out some way to deal with this. Until he did, the dread wouldn't go away. And more importantly, the Maximoffs were clearly important to Maria, and vice versa. There had to be some solution that could be found, just as soon as Tony figured out what the problem actually was in the first place.

Maybe ten minutes later, Bruce cleared his throat, and Tony opened his eyes, trying to catch up with what was going on around him. Maria had slid off his lap, but was still plastered to his side, head resting against his bicep. Natasha, Steve and Thor seemed slightly more aware, and Natasha was glaring holes through Girl Maximoff. "We took a hit," Bruce said, pausing a moment to turn sharp, green eyes on Girl Maximoff. "And we're going to need to regroup and recover, at least until we figure out what Ultron's next move will be."

"You want to go off the grid," Tony concluded. "Listen, I have plenty of places we can go, but none of them are exactly secret. But hey, if anyone has a request, we can head to any Stark property in the world."

Clint didn't reply, seemed more than a little indecisive. He glanced over his shoulder, definitely focusing on the Maximoffs before looking back at the controls, still silent.

Girl Maximoff let out an exaggerated sigh. "I already know where you wish to go," she told Clint. "You are very afraid of us finding it, but you need not worry. We do not harm children."

The look Clint shot over his shoulder at her was more than a bit frightened, actually, and shocked,
and so full of a strange, protective rage Tony thought for a moment he'd leap out of his seat and try to strangle her or something.

Natasha reached up and raked her fingers through her hair. "I don't think she's lying, Clint. Just take us there. If she tries anything, I'll kill her myself." The last was said with enough of a glare that Girl Maximoff that she actually shrank back in her seat.

Tony shut his eyes again and pulled Maria closer against his side. He did not have the capacity to process any more emotions right now, so it was better to just ignore all the shit until he could deal with it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading. Next chapter should be out soon, it's not quite as soon as this one.
Thank you all so much for all the support, in whichever form it's taken. It really does mean a lot to me. The comments, especially, never fail to put a smile on my face, and have really motivated me to find the time to post another chapter quickly.

Same thing applies as in the previous chapters: I'm posting from my phone. No editing has been done, and I won't be able to answer comments. However, I do very much encourage discussion in the comment section, and thanks so much to those of you who took the time to answer each other's questions.

A few notes on this chapter: Not much actually happens, because I have a thing about attempting to figure out how these things would actually work in the real world.

There is also some heavy speculation in here, because, honestly, if AoU ever attempted to properly explain how the Scepter could enable human enhancement, I missed it. So, I used conjecture based on what few facts we do know about the Scepter: it contained the *Mind* Stone/Gem, suggesting that whatever it does must have something to do with the mind - the enhancements must be neurological in nature. Through Loki's brainwashing of various characters we know the Scepter can affect neurological processes. And the Scepter also contains an alien AI of unknown origin. Now, from what we know about the Infinity Stones, they are all pretty damn hard to control. The Scepter, in comparison, doesn't seem to be, so long as you're actively wielding it and not just standing around observing it. So, why is there an AI in it? I doubt this is how it actually works in canon, but in this story, I imagine that the AI is part of the protective housing, something that came later, to basically make the Mind Stone easier to control. So all use of the Mind Stone basically has to go through the AI, which led to the explanation for Ultron's programming that I'm using here.

Hopefully that all made some kind of sense to you.

"Stark is gone, and we gave up his biological son. If we'd kept both children in our custody, we could've claimed everything through them. The fortune, the company, the patents and weapons and notes. Howard Stark's as well," Pierce says.

"Stark has not even been declared dead," Zola says. "He could still come out of this alive."

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Tony head was damn near spinning, and quite frankly he was not sure just how much of anything more he could actually handle. Maria was real, completely and utterly real. Even if he'd doubted, for a moment, that she was who she said she was, watching her and Jamie catch sight of one another would've remedied that in a heartbeat. The two of them had taken one look at each other, and then they'd clashed together, clutching at each other and refused to let go, both of them openly crying, and for the first time in many years, Tony had regretted his own lack of any siblings. And then there was Clint Barton - the most childish, irresponsible, frat-boy-like forty-plus-year-old man Tony had ever
met - as a husband and father. That one still had him reeling. And to make things worse, Thor had
fucked off to Odin only knew where.

And then, of course, there was the sinking realization of just how badly he'd fucked up. A year of
working with the UN to set up a set of rules that would work, of constant backs and forths with the
fledging panel, and he'd gone right ahead and done something definitely against the rules without
even thinking twice. It didn't even really matter that the rules weren't written out yet and that he was
certainly a long way off from signing them, fucking up like this would make it far more difficult to
work with them in the future. And honestly, thinking about all that was a distraction as well, a pretty
deliberate one at that. For all that it was a mess, it was easier to think of than the frankly untenable
situation they were all in.

Fact of the matter: He'd pretty much outright smuggled a pair of known, foreign terrorists into the
US. Said terrorists were likely completely untrustworthy, and the only person Tony was reasonably
certain they weren't going to try to kill at some point was Maria, and since Maria absolutely refused
to be parted from Jamie, even she was behind advanced locks in the quinjet along with her brother
and Clint's family. The Maximoffs, when they had left them, had been mostly asleep on the couch in
the farm house (!) living room. The Avengers were freezing their asses off in front of the quinjet,
trying to figure out what the hell they were going to do about this mess.

"So, I guess we're harboring dangerous fugitives now," Clint muttered.

Steve, who seemed to see something in this whole mess that none of the rest of them did (that, or his
was still out of it from the mind whammy, which he seemed to have forgotten was courtesy of Girl
Maximoff), was quick to narrow his eyes. "Calling someone a fugitive doesn't always tell the whole
story," he said. "In case you forgot, Natasha and I were fugitives just a year ago."

"And the two of you proceeded to incur billions in property damage and cause dozens of civilian
casualties, not to mention the Three hundred forty-sevendeaths by wikileaks." Tony held up his hand
before Steve could go all defensive about that and passed over a tablet. "In this case, 'fugitives' is
definitely legit," Tony continued. "They've taken part in several illegal demonstrations and riots,
have a record of vandalism, not to mention violence against police and military. Sokovia's had a
warrant out for their arrest for two years. And that's without getting into the fact that they volunteered
to join a Nazi terrorist organization."

"And from my research with the scepter," Bruce added, voice habitually soft, "They carry a good
deal of responsibility for Ultron. Not for creating the AI, of course, but I'm almost certain they've had
more than a small hand in programming him, so to speak." At everyone's curious looks, he took a
deep breath before straightening up. "As far as I can tell, Strucker found out a way to link human
consciousness with the scepter. Their brain structure was altered, rewritten so to speak, hence the
enhancements. But I believe I saw plenty of evidence that successfully linking to another
consciousness changes the AI as much as it changes the other party and lets it take on some of their
traits, patterns of behavior, belief system..."

"Listen, they may not have gone about it the best way," Steve said. "But it's clear they wanted to
help their country. They were fighting their corrupt government. And yes, they made bad decisions.
They're young. They're misguided. They're--"

"Adults," Tony said. "Not much younger than you were when you got the serum. But perhaps you
were too young to make the right decisions for yourself as well back then. Besides." He took a deep
breath. "Ultron isn't exactly racing back to liberate Sokovia from a corrupt government, is he? He
seems to want, more than anything, to end the Avengers. And if what Bruce said was true..." Plus,
judging by the things Maria had said and asked through Jamie over the last year, judging by their
back-story, the conversation Tony overheard on the flight here, the unexploded shell in their apartment, all that... Tony was pretty damn sure their grudge was mainly against him specifically.

Steve crossed his ridiculously massive arms over his ridiculously broad chest and shit, someone, at some point, needed to point out to him that he looked fucking intimidating like that. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak--

"So," Clint said. "We've concluded that we are harboring dangerous criminals. Who might've accidentally programmed a mad murderbot, and who we can't trust worth a damn. Anyone got any bright ideas? Because I can tell you right now, I'm sure as fuck not leaving them with my family when we leave, and if Laura's babysitting the Stark babies, I'm sure Tony agrees."

Tony did agree. And honestly, the mention of the children alone was enough to make him want to head inside the quinjet to check up on them, make absolutely certain they were all right, and then just hold them until he was forced to deal with the rest of the world again.

"Ultron is gonna be a tough nut to crack," Steve said then. "We could really use their help."

"If we could somehow be halfway sure they weren't going to turn around and stab us in the back - and that's a big if, since we don't even know whether they actually want to go against Ultron to begin with - the best thing they can do is apply for political asylum immediately," Tony said at last. "They have a criminal record and outstanding arrest warrants in a country that's not known for being big on human rights. Their criminal activity is almost exclusively political. Well, except for the HYDRA stuff, but we're the only ones who know about that. And not only that, but both American military and intelligence agencies have a history of giving asylum to foreigners who fight for America or American interests, even former enemy combatants. Pretty sure wiping out Ultron counts as an 'in America's best interest'." He shrugged. "In the end, though, this is really not up to us. We can give them suggestions, but in the end they're gonna do what they wanna do, and we won't be able to do a damn thing about it. Nothing any of us can do about Girl Maximoff's skillset."

"And that skillset is exactly why we shouldn't even want to work with them," Natasha pointed out. "Or did you already forget what that little bitch did to us?"

Tony sighed. Frankly, he wasn't sure they'd be able to take on Ultron without the Maximoffs, not if they wanted a chance of winning. That didn't mean he liked it, and it sure as fuck didn't mean he knew how to express it in front of the rest of the team, but--

"Well," Steve said. "Everyone deserves a second chance, right?" And for all that he was using his righteous voice, there was something pleading about his expression, something almost begging them to tell him he was right. Why did this suddenly matter so much to him?

"Seems to me, based on their history, they've had plenty of chances," Bruce said.

"Listen," Tony said. "Can we discuss social injustice, social inheritance, corrupt governments and growing up during the Great Depression at some point when don't have to figure out what we're gonna do when we find out where the murderbot is at? Right now, we need to figure out what we're gonna do about the basic framework, and the Maximoffs. So can we just--"

"What do you suggest we do, then?" Steve asked, somehow managing to sound as sullen as Jamie did when Tony told him he had to bring at least one bodyguard to a classmate's birthday party.

Tony took a deep breath. "I'm gonna go talk to them," he said. "Might be my ego talking, or it might be the fact that Ultron seems to have a particular grudge against me, but I have a feeling I'm at the heart of this whole shebang for them."
"You can't go alone," Natasha said.

Tony shrugged. He was pretty sure the Maximoffs liked Maria too much to hurt Tony right here and now, but she did have a point. "Clint?" he asked.

Clint nodded, and they both got to their feet, making their way towards the house. As Tony had half expected, the Maximoffs were very much awake and talking amongst themselves. A few more minutes, and they'd have probably come out to interrupt the team conversation on their own. Like that wouldn't have gone to hell in a hand basket.

"Okay, listen," Tony said, flopping down into the couch across from them. "I'm trying to connect the dots here. You don't like me. Only reason you haven't tried to kill me is Maria. Sure, you don't like the rest of the Avengers. You don't like your government. You don't like America. But with me, it's personal. Last year, my son asked me whether I've killed people. Probably asking for Maria, who'd been hanging out with you for a few months. According to your files, a shell fell on your apartment building, killed your parents. I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say that shell had 'Stark' written all over it. I'm not wrong, am I?"

Their glares were answer enough to that.

"Now," Tony said, before they could get started on accusations about killing their parents and all the other stuff they really needed to talk to a therapist about instead. "Here's the thing. Even back when I sold weapons, I didn't sell duds. My dad may have been an asshole, but he always had stringent quality control, and I didn't exactly see a reason to change that. I may have been a naive idiot, but I was aware of the fact that malfunctioning weapons are really fucking dangerous to everyone involved. So the dud in your apartment was either a forgery, or it was one of the weapons that failed internal quality controls and should've been destroyed but got sold under the table by Obadiah Stane, without my knowledge or consent." He took a deep breath, leaned forward and rested his elbows against his knees. "But right now that's not even the point.

"You can blame me as much as you want. You can hate me if that's what you need to. And I am sorry you lost your parents. It sucks. I know it does; it was months after my mom died before I even began to see a point in getting up in the morning again. None of that really matters right now. What matters is the murderbot. Now, he might not seem so bad to you. He's probably promised you'll get to hurt me. He might even have promised that he'll liberate Sokovia for you. Maybe he will, fuck knows. So far he's attacked the Avengers inside Stark Tower. Probably doesn't seem like a big deal to you. He's attacked factories all over the world and hey, he only kills when people resist. Might not seem so bad. Big bad industries and all that, might even seem a bit like Robin Hood or some shit like that. And I think we can all agree Klaue was bad news all around, so no real foul there."

Both Maximoffs were trying to interrupt, had been for a while now quite frankly, but Tony hadn't been a dad for six years without learning a few tricks, prime among them how to keep talking when someone was whining denial in his face. Thankfully, Jamie was an easier kid than either of these two. And hey, at least there were no powers in play. Red sparks flew around Girl Maximoff's fingers, but despite the hateful expression on her face, she seemed to have it under control. Thank Odin for small favors.

"Let me finish," Tony said. "And in two minutes you can scream at me as much as you want. Here's the thing: We don't know what Ultron's planning, but here is what we do know: he's a hyper advanced artificial intelligence of alien origin. Here are the influences we know he's had: Loki, megalomaniac Asgardian who was mad as a sack of cats and counted human life as nothing. HYDRA, who believe people who are not HYDRA are beneath them and that anyone who stands against them deserve to die or be completely subjugated. You two, who've done fuck knows what to
get what you want. And a half-written first draft of a world protection protocol Bruce and I wrote, where we never got as far as to condition 'saving the world' on 'saving the human race'. Even an idiot can figure out that that means nothing good is coming our way. So, are you going to help take him down, or are you going to be in our way?"

And somehow, for all the talking they'd been trying to do earlier, they didn't seem to have anything to say now. In the end, it was Clint who wrapped things up, clearing his throat and scratching his own hair. "How about you take the night to think about it?" he asked. "C'mon Tones, sleepover in the quinjet."

Chapter End Notes

Personally, I really don't like the Maximoff twins, but in this story I felt like I had to diverge from canon, if only for the fact that they have been taking care of Maria for about a year and honestly do care about her, and also, again, because Tony is more assertive and won't just take all the blame lying down. The dynamic there is definitely different and will remain different going forwards.

Also, a few notes on that whole Avengers' discussion: these are the kinds of things Steve and Clint should have considered before bringing the twins to the States in the movie. If they did, it was off screen, but I think it's more likely they either didn't think or didn't give a fuck, and this wound up being another messing Tony had to take care of for them.

And hey, Steve is really into second chances all of a sudden, huh? Wonder why that is... And honestly, I do tend to think that even in canon, Steve's sympathy towards and blind spot for Wanda has more to do with Bucky than with Wanda herself.

Thanks so much for reading. I can't wait to hear from you :D
Hey guys. Thanks so much for all the support, and especially for the comments. I once overjoyed to see so many thoughtful and insightful points of view, and I loved to see all the interaction in the comment section. Put a huge smile on my face :D

This chapter should finally conclude the Age of Ultron story arc, and I hope it wraps up in a way that is satisfying. The next few chapters will mainly deal with Maria's integration into the Stark family and Tony's attempts at investigating the twins' mother.

Same deal as always: I am posting from my phone and doing the notes via voice-to-text software. There will be mistakes as no editing has been done, and I will not be able to answer comments. As always, I believe the comment section should be an interactive place, so feel free to discuss with each other as much as you would like.

"If it looks like he will, we could still make him disappear," Pierce says. He looks thoughtful for a moment. "He hasn't acknowledged the boy, so we haven't lost everything. And we do have the papers. The girl is older by nearly two minutes. She is certainly entitled to half the inheritance, if not more. Still, we should have kept the boy."

"You must not be so impatient, Chairman," Zola says. "This greed of yours could lose us everything. We aren't ready yet. Do not play our hand prematurely."

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Tony didn't get much sleep that night. The quinjet might be the safest place they had available, but Tony had a sinking feeling that it would do nothing to keep the Maximoffs out if they did decide to go on a murderous rampage. Did Girl Maximoff even need someone in her line of sight to get in their head? And so he held his children close - and fuck, that was never going to get old, was it, the sudden plural? He couldn't be sure yet, after so little time, but it already felt like Maria was slotting right into place in their family, like she had always belonged with them, always almost been there, somehow. In a way, he supposed, she had, and shit, but he honestly wasn't sure he'd ever manage to forgive himself for not taking Jamie seriously. Wasn't sure he wanted to, really. But in the end, that wasn't important right now, lying awake in the quinjet with an arm around each of his babies: short, skinny, familiar Jamie on one side and tall, strong, wiry, unfamiliar-but-so-adored-already Maria on the other.

Still, he must've fallen asleep at some point, and when he woke back up, his blood ran cold. He sat up, breathing in sharply, heart pounding, hands patting against the inflatable sleeping pad on either side of him. Maria and Jamie. Both missing. Sucking in another sharp breath, he pushed the blanket off and got to his feet, looking around him. Clint and his so-called wife were on another couple of sleeping pads, curled around their sleeping agent children. Clint's eyes were open, which would never not be creepy, but Tony did know him well enough to know that didn't mean he was awake. A bit further away, Steve was lying along a padded bench that was way too small for his frame, and on the other side of the jet, Bruce and Natasha were curled up together under a table, which, huh? He'd process that at some point when his brain wasn't too busy flooding with noradrenalin.
Jamie and Maria were nowhere to be seen.

Despite himself, Tony could suddenly think of nothing except Killian and AIM and Extremis, and the utter terror of knowing a monster had his son. His hands shook. On legs that threatened to give in, Tony made his way as quickly as he could to the armor. He stepped inside and let it close around him. Fuck, the armor was right there. Why hadn't JARVIS stopped-- He stopped that thought, swallowed, and shook it off to be processed later. Then he pushed the button to open the doors, stepped outside, with a quick wave to Natasha, who was definitely awake now, to follow him.

He didn't stop to listen or try to figure out if she were following; he knew she was. Part of him wanted to stop and take all the rest of them with him too, but he knew that wasn't a good idea. It would take too long, it would leave Clint's kids unprotected. And if Jamie and Maria were where Tony was afraid they were, it would escalate the situation. He took another deep breath, forced himself to calm down. Then he turned his head towards the farmhouse, looked at it through the HUD. Despite the lack of JARVIS, the scanners engaged automatically, showing the shapes of four people, two full-sized and two smaller, inside the house. Tony squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, let himself feel some measure of relief, even if he did have to force himself to remember that the Maximoffs were unlikely to hurt Maria, or hurt Jamie in front of her.

Tony reached the door, stepped out of the armor and went inside in as much hurry as he could without making his children think he was in a state of panic. And there they were, wedged in together in an armchair, Jamie gesticulating wildly as he spoke to the Maximoffs while Maria looked at him like he was a treasure who might vanish into thin air if she looked away. Tony might very well have sunk into a puddle of relief on the floor if not for the fact that he still had to figure out what the fuck was going on.

"And he ruined our house," Jamie was saying. "I hate it when they do that."

"You must have been really scared," Girl Maximoff said, and her voice was full of something that sounded like actual sympathy. Remorse, even.

"And he killed JARVIS," Jamie continued. "JARVIS was my friend. He's always been there. I thought he was always gonna be. And now he's gone, and Ultron did it. He's a monster."

The Maximoffs spent several long moments looking straight at each other, and Tony couldn't help but think they were communicating with one another. Whether it was in actual words or not, he couldn't say. Still, he couldn't help but hold his breath. Across from them, in their big armchair, Jamie and Maria reached out simultaneously and grabbed one another's hand. Tony wasn't even surprised by the realization that the Maximoffs weren't the only ones having a silent conversation, not really. Jamie and Maria had always done that, even when neither had had concrete evidence the other existed. Huh, perhaps twin bonds and all that metaphysical crap had something to it after all. If Jamie and Maria were twins, which, really, no way to know, not yet. And-- Boy Maximoff derailed his ponderings by turning around and looking straight at Tony. "We'll help, Stark," he said, with a tone that added that they didn't like who they'd have to work with to do it, but seemed sincere nonetheless.

Well, fuck, who'd have thought Jamie was going to be the one managing to recruit them?

***

Fury showed up, and then Tony had just a few moments to hug his children close and promise to be back for them as soon as he could. Then there was Oslo, and regaining JARVIS, and JARVIS choosing to fucking sacrifice himself to keep fighting Ultron in the creation of the Vision (much contested, but ultimately supported even by Steve, at Tony and Bruce's reassurance that JARVIS had
been beating Ultron all along).

Then there was Sokovia, and Boy Maximoff kicked the bucket, and they all limped back to the Tower where Tony collapsed into a pile with Jamie and Maria and Mickey. The Starks' combined shrink bill was going to be absolutely ridiculous after this, he knew. It really was.

"That's what I can't get over, you know," he told Jeff the Shrink a few weeks later. "The thing out of all this that really gets to me: How the fuck could I not know about my daughter for six years? Jamie always knew about her. Somehow, he was always in contact with her, and fuck knows how that even works. But I always brushed it off. Just-- Always scared he was going crazy, when I should've trusted him, should've looked into it all properly."

"You couldn't have known," Jeff told him with that steady, warm voice Tony had come to rely on so much. "If you had actually concluded that Jamie's imaginary friend was real and you had to find her, I'd have done my very best to stop you. Only what you would call 'crazy hippies' would've believed you, and even with all your progress, you still very much operate with a thought process that's steeped in logic. Trust me, you could not have known."

Tony sucked in a sharp breath. "Maybe if I hadn't been so busy, if I hadn't put all that focus into Iron Man, the Avengers..." He paused, squeezed his eyes shut. "She wanted to meet JARVIS so badly, and now she's missed him. We have FRIDAY instead, and that's fucking weird, and I missed Maria's first steps, her first words, all those birthdays and Christmases... She was always trusting me to come for her, and I didn't even think she was real."

"Tony," Jeff said gently. "You need to give yourself a break. You aren't omnipotent. You can do so much, and you have done so much, but you can't expect the impossible from yourself."

"I'm gonna kick Nat and Steve out," Tony said a moment later. "I mean, sure, I'll build them a nice little facility to live in and shit. But I just-- I can't deal with their shit right now. I can't have Nat lurking around trying to manipulate things to suit her, and I can't have Steve picking fights. I can't have Vision around twenty-four seven. I'm sure I'll love the guy someday, but right now he just makes me miss JARVIS even more. You know, I think losing him the second time hurt even more than the first. Asshole had to go and be a fucking hero. I can't have Girl Maximoff moping around the place while I'm trying to actually have a relationship with my daughter. Clint fucked off to his farm and Thor fucked off to Asgard, so there's that. I just can't deal with anyone all up in my space who isn't family right now."

"What about Banner?" Jeff asked.

Tony frowned. "Brucie is family," he finally said. Hadn't the asshole shrink figured that out by now? "We get each other. He's the kids' uncle. He's as good as my brother. Not the way Rhodey is, not the same history, but he's. Yeah."

Jeff smiled. "I'm glad to hear that," he said. "And I think you're making the right choice in taking a step back from the Avengers for now. Your kids need you. And I think you need them just as much. You all need time to settle down and get used to the new status quo, to being a family."

Tony sighed. "I know I can't make up for all the time I missed with her," he said. "I just hope she can forgive me some day."

Jeff's smile turned serious. "Aside from physically, Tony, when have you ever not been there for her? Your daughter was raised by a Nazi terrorism organization, and yet as far as I can tell from what you've said, she's remarkably unscathed, mentally speaking. She has a healthy set of values and beliefs, clearly informed by your own. You may not have been able to hold her or play with her, and
you may have had to communicate through Jamie, which, I grant you, is a very unusual situation. But you have answered all her questions. You've told her you loved her when she had nightmares - even when you thought you were just indulging your son. You built her a room. You included her all along, even when you didn't think she was real. If you ask her, I think she'll tell you she's got nothing she needs to forgive you. It's you who needs to forgive yourself. I get that that may take time, but Tony, if she's still a happy girl with healthy values, capable of smiling, despite her upbringing, that's to your credit. Don't forget that."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut for long moments. He wasn't sure he was ever going to believe that, wasn't sure he would ever even want to forgive himself. But he could definitely be happy she was no worse off than she was. "Are the others going to blame me for throwing in the towel again?" he asked.

"You are still on call for emergencies, aren't you?" Jeff said. "You are still helping out in other ways. Now that the crisis with Loki's scepter is over - and wasn't that the main thing you got back in the game for? - do they really need you in day-to-day operations? Besides, if they can let Barton 'fuck off to the farm' to be with his family, they should be able to respect your need to do the same. And if not, that's on them. Not you.

Tony cracked a small smile at that. "Thanks, Doc."

Chapter End Notes

A few notes here as well, mainly on the Maximoff twins: I did seriously consider keeping Pietro alive instead of Wanda. For one thing, I like him better - in my opinion, straight up wanting to kill someone is a lot less twisted than wanting to mentally torture them and make them destroy themselves. For another, I thought it might be really interesting to integrate his personality and powers into the story.

The two main reasons I decided to go with Wanda instead are these: 1) I don't want to create story divergence just for the sake of doing it. I would rather stick close to the original storyline as possible, and only make the logically necessary changes. And yes, of course there are easy, logical ways to make Pietro survive instead of Wanda, especially because the rage and pain she felt when he died was the main reason she survived. However, I came to the conclusion that there was no real reason to make the divergence, which means I'm just going to have to deal with Wanda. 2) I felt that keeping Wanda alive instead of Pietro was better for the development of Jamie and Maria's relationship. I feel that if Pietro survived, he would cling that much more closely to Maria to compensate, which would hamper Maria's relationship to her own twin, whereas with Wanda things might be more equal. Gender, I feel, would play a bigger role here than what is immediately obviously.

In conclusion: Tony made Pietro wear a bullet proof vest, but he did not have time to design additional aerodynamic features, and so Pietro felt it was slowing him down and ditched it within moments of landing in Sokovia. He went on to die as we saw in the film, leaving us stuck with Wanda.

... Leading us to the thought experiment of whether Wanda can be given something resembling a believable redemption arc in just a few scenes over the next several chapters.
The twins squared scene in this chapter is supposed to not only give the Maximoffs a better reason for changing sides than 'he'll kill us too', but also show that they are capable of empathy towards people they identify with - in this case another pair of twins whose home was attacked.

Hopefully all that makes some measure of sense to you. Thanks so much for reading. Hope you enjoyed.
Hey again. Thanks so much for all the support, whether through subscriptions, bookmarks, recommendations, kudos, or, especially, comments. The comments really never fail to make my day, and I can't even say how grateful I am for them.

Once again, I am posting from my phone and have edited nothing. Notes are made mainly using voice-to-text software and so mistakes are bound to crop up

Last chapter I forgot to mention my reasoning about the difference in Bruce's storyline. As most of you no doubt figured out, the lack of a Hulk out in Johannesburg means that Bruce was less afraid of himself prior to Sokovia, and didn't have to be manipulated into participating in the battle. Thus, he had no reason to run off afterwards.

Without further ado, I hope you enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Later:

"How is she doing?" Pierce asks. "Any change?"

_The young agent assigned to Johanne's care gives a proud smile. "She said her first word, Sir. And at four months. Impressive, isn't it?"

"No less than expected from the heiress of HYDRA," Pierce says. "What did she say?"

***

"I ran the DNA," Bruce said, glancing up from his holographic monitor. "She's definitely yours. And not only that, Maria and Jamie are full siblings, and according to Maria's own information, they are the same age. So yeah, twins. Here's the real snatch, though." He cocked an eyebrow, and if Tony hadn't been flooded with emotions already, he'd have probably crowed in delight at how much of a little drama queen Bruce was becoming.

"What?" Tony finally asked, throwing himself into one of the chairs of Bruce's lab and spinning himself around in a few circles.

"Maria has the super soldier serum," Bruce said. "Not the same strain as Steve, but whatever it is--"

Tony felt his eyes widen, felt something hot and heady flood his veins, cloud his mind. Rage, he realized. "Are you saying they shot up my kid? We've both seen the files. What Howard and Erskine did to Steve--"

Bruce held up his hand, interrupting Tony's rant, and by the skin of his teeth, Tony managed to restrain himself. "Like I said," he said. "It's not the same. It is similar. The same dense musculature, strong bones, tall stature, the metabolism and healing. It's... different, though, like I said. Not just because it's a different strain. But as far as I can tell, it's second generation. Maria was never given the serum. She inherited the mutations associated with it."
Tony blinked, felt the rage rush straight back out of him. Confusion and icy cold fear washed over him instead. "What?" he breathed. "What the hell?"

"There are several implications here, Tony," Bruce said. "Think about it. You've never been able to find the mother, no matter how hard you looked. No hospital records, DNA doesn't match anything on record. Maria has been with HYDRA, apparently all her life. It seems extremely likely that Maria and Jamie... that they were bred, and that Jamie was only placed with you because he was, well. A failed experiment."

"Didn't inherit the serum mutations," Tony muttered, and suddenly he felt sick. He didn't have to stop and wonder how they got his semen. He'd been pretty careless back then, and he doubted HYDRA was above harvesting used condoms. "So they were after a super smart, super strong baby. And Maria met the requirements."

Bruce nodded. "And this also means that HYDRA has at least one more super soldier," he said. "Even if they hadn't needed an egg, no ordinary human could've brought Maria to term. It's a wonder Jamie survived sharing a womb with her, but they must've been positioned well. Still, a random kick from a baby several times stronger than the average would've ruptured the organs and cracked the ribs of any surrogate and more than likely killed a normal woman."

Tony reached out, dragged a hand through his hair. "So they've got a female super soldier," he said.

"Are you working on decrypting the HYDRA files from the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. yet?" Bruce asked. "Because I have a feeling you really need to get on that."

Tony groaned out loud. "FRIDAY is so new," he said. "She still doesn't have any of the experience JARVIS does. I can give her all the processing power in the world, but-- She runs the armor, she runs the workshop, she helps Pepper with the business, and all of that is a learning process. To process the HYDRA files is not just about decryption, but also figuring out the right keywords to look for, what is important information and what is not and about a hundred other routines. And I know you all think that she should be able to do everything all at once, but--"

"I get it," Bruce said, reaching out and putting a hand on Tony's arm. "She's a learning AI, and she can only rewrite her own code in so many different directions at once and only so often before it all becomes a jumbled mess."

Tony sighed. "Something like that. It took JARVIS years to get to a point where he could do what I'm already expecting on her. I don't want her lagging all over the place or developing bad subroutines. And I'm still..."

"You're still worried about the personality component," Bruce said. "Have you considered booting one of the others? For information processing? They could juggle with each other - ping-pong, so to speak - when their areas of expertise overlap, but-- JARVIS isn't coming back regardless." Bruce gave Tony's shoulder a squeeze at that. "And it might make it easier on a baby AI to have another baby AI to share the responsibility with."

Tony sighed, but nodded. "I was considering going with JOCASTA," he said at last. "In her coding and testing, she's been very gentle. Less of a go-getter, but more curious than FRIDAY. More scholarly, more maternal. I thought maybe she'd be good with the kids. But I needed an AI for the armor, and in the tests, JOCASTA never responded well to combat situations. So I picked FRIDAY." He paused, forced a grin on his face. "No offense, Baby Girl," he added. "You're wonderful, and you kick ass, but you're more of a big sister type."

"None taken, Boss," the still unfamiliar Irish voice rang out.
"So boot up JOCASTA," Bruce said. "Have her run the penthouse and information processing. Maybe FRIDAY would like a friend."

"Can't say I'm opposed, Doctor," FRIDAY piped up.

Despite himself, and the whole disquieting situation, Tony felt the smile on his face grow a bit more natural. "Sounds like a plan, then," Tony said. "I'll boot JOCASTA after I've put the kids to bed."

"In the meantime," Bruce said. "I think I can explain why Jamie and Maria have always been linked up, so to speak."

Tony cocked an eyebrow.

"If we assume - and we kind of have to - that at least some twins, fraternal ones included, have a bond to some extension or other," Bruce said. "Well, remember the main side effect of the serum. It magnifies everything inside. In this case, that twin bond would be included. The serum magnified it to the actual telepathic connection they have. This also explains why Jamie can only hear Maria when she's actively talking to him while Maria can hear through Jamie's ears and see through his eyes at will. She's carrying the bulk of the connection, through the super soldier serum."

Tony blinked. "Huh," he muttered. "I guess somewhere out there, some metaphysicist wishes he knew what we do."

Bruce smirked. "How's that different from any other day?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Go on, asshole, get out of here. You're having dinner with the world's deadliest woman, don't forget. And here I thought you weren't a thrill seeker."

Bruce honest to Odin blushed.

***

"When do I get to start school?" Maria asked one morning after they'd seen Jamie off.

Tony looked at her, and felt the same constriction of his heart, the same fear and strange sense of sadness he had when he'd first had to come to terms with sending Jamie to school. "After summer vacation," he said. "Until then, you get to be home schooled." Not only did that option allow him some time alone with his daughter, a chance to get to know her, it also gave Pepper a chance to circulate a story to the public that would hold water about why James Stark's twin sister had been unknown for six whole years.

Maria wrinkled her nose. "Vacation?" she said. "Isn't it just a 'break' unless we actually go somewhere?"

Tony let out a laugh, couldn't quite help himself. Jamie had been raised solely as an English speaker. Tony hadn't wanted to repeat his mother's mistake of raising him on all her native languages and English besides, which had resulted in the fact that he didn't speak his first real word until age three. Maria, on the other hand, had been brought up bilingual, German and English, and that gave her an odd tendency to question words whose meaning Jamie would've taken for granted. "Maybe we will go somewhere," he said. "I do have a nice private island in the Caribbean. We could go swimming in the ocean. Snorkeling, maybe." He couldn't help the brief sense of wonder that he could suggest that without fear now, when just a few years ago it would've crippled him to even think about that. "Collect seashells and just lie around on the beach. Get our proper Mediterranean tan on. How's that sound?"
She flashed him a grin. "It sounds nice," she said. Not so much for the activities involved, he suspected, as for the chance to just be with Jamie and even Tony himself all day long. Maria found unprecedented pleasure in that. And knowing that sent a flash of warmth through Tony's whole damn being every single time she thought about it.

"But until then," Tony said. "You're being homeschooled. What is phi?"

Maria grinned. "A plus B divided by two," she said. "Also known as the golden ratio. Used in both mathematics and arts. Da Vinci liked it a lot."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "That was damn impressive, Sweetheart," he said. "No idea why HYDRA thought you needed to know that, but I'm gonna assume that math and physics aren't really things we're gonna need to work on. We're more likely gonna have to work on English lit and, most importantly, actual true history. How's that sound?"

"I like reading," Maria said, and she sounded uncharacteristically bashful. "They didn't let me read a lot, and when I talked to Jamie about what I was reading, I always got the sense there was a whole lot more out there they weren't letting me see."

Tony swallowed, wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close against his side. He wished so much he could've known her sooner, could've been the one to have raised her since the start. She was already so smart, so mature, so fully formed, in a way six-year-olds shouldn't be. He didn't know what the fuck he was supposed to do with that. "I'll buy you a library if that's what you want," he told her.

"Daddy?" she asked softly, and her voice was wistful on that word, like the word was one she'd wanted to use for so long it had become unbelievably treasured to her. "Do you think they'll like me when I start school?"

"Of course they will," Tony said. "You're sweet and smart and as good-looking as your old man."

She gave a quick grin before her face fell uncertainly again. "I'm big and clumsy, and Jamie's the only kid I've ever known," she said.

Tony was pretty sure most of those were doubts six-year-olds shouldn't ever even be considering, but he'd long-since become accustomed to the fact that his kids would never be normal. As Rhodey had pointed out, he'd have never known what to do with them if they had been anyway. Fuck, sometimes he wasn't sure he knew what to do with them anyway. Still, he had to try. He had so much to make up for. "You're the sweetest girl I know," he told her.

She grinned up at him, and suddenly her arms wound around his chest and she was squeezing him so tightly he had to bite back a wince and hope like hell she wasn't cracking any ribs. Fucking super strength. "I love you, Daddy," she told him.

"I love you too, Baby Girl," he said. "So damn much." He forced a smile onto his face, brushing his fingers through her thick, dark curls. "So, where do you think we should put this library? In your room? You wanna change the interior?"

She blushed, but shook her head. "No," she said, voice soft and almost embarrassed. "I like." She stopped, swallowed audibly. "I like my room." Her room was still the same pink monstrosity he'd designed when the Tower was first built, rebuilt exactly the same three times over now. "I like my dolls. I just don't know how to..."

Tony bent down, pressed a kiss against her forehead. "How about we go play with your dolls,
Sweetheart?" he said, and fuck, he wasn't sure he knew how to be a child, wasn't sure he'd ever really been one, or if he'd only truly stopped when Afghanistan happened. But his baby girl needed to be a child, and if Tony was the only one around to teach her, he was just going to have to do his damn best.

Chapter End Notes

In my opinion, twin bonds are more or less canon to the MCU. I realize that the bond between Wanda and Pietro might be due to Wanda's powers, but regardless I have chosen to make it more of a general thing, since we do know that it is possible in universe.

Yes, I know it is frustrating to have Tony and Bruce come so close to the truth yet be so far away, but how would they ever plausibly reach the right conclusions given the facts and context they are working within?

Again, I know next to nothing about computers, software and tech in general, so I'm really just trying to make sense of it in the context og what little I think I may understand. Please don't take my word for any of it.

At least there was a bit of Tony and Maria interaction?

And hey, three guesses as to who Tony based Jocasta on. Another hint is that it's a nod to Earth 616 ;P

Thanks so much for taking the time to read, and please remember that the comment section is open for discussion. I love seeing you guys interact even when I don't have the chance to join in. I may not have the chance to post another chapter before I return to Denmark, so hopefully this will tide you over for a while.
Hey guys :D I'm finally back home. I have been for a while, but as it turns out returning from extended stays out of the country means you're still short of time for a while after you return. BUT I finally found enough time and energy (damn jetlag) to post a chapter.

Thanks so much for all the support. I really appreciate every single time someone takes the time to leave a kudos, to subscribe, bookmark and rec, and reviews never fail to make my day. And now that I'm back home and have regular computer access, I promise I will try a lot harder to find the time to answer those comments, though life may still get in the way at times.

A quick note before the very first bit annoys some people: my little sister is highly intelligent (though not unrealistically so) and she spoke her first word at four months old. For a Marvel-style genius, four months should not be shocking at all.

Without further ado, here's the chapter. Hope you enjoy :D

"Dumb"," says the agent, sounding more than a little confused.

It's all Pierce can do not to laugh. It's good to see something positive, now that Stark is back and things are up in the air. But 'dumb' is a good assessment of the caregiver. She is loyal, but not very bright. It promises good things that little Johanne, at four months, can already tell as much.

***

"Do you wish she'd been here all along?" Jamie asked softly, snuggling into his towel. His dark hair had been turned several shades darker by saltwater and his trunks were still dripping. "Instead of me, I mean."

"Jamie, no," Tony said, and fuck, but it felt like having the arc reactor installed all over again. "I wish you had both been here, each and every day from the moment you were born. I would never ever want to trade one of you for the other, you hear me?"

Jamie gave a small shrug before finally nodding. "I know," he said.

"I love you, kiddo," Tony said, reaching out and ruffling Jamie's salt crusted hair.

Jamie smiled up at him. "I'm glad she's here," he said. "And I like the island. I like that we're having a vacation. I just--"

"It's hard, I know," Tony said. And he did. At first, it had seemed so easy, slotting Maria into their little micro family, but then all the little snags came. Pepper's press release, and the press following them all around even more than normal, trying to get a shot of Maria. And there were Maria's nightmares, some of which were bad enough that Tony had let her sleep in his bed several nights a week. There were the days Tony had spent attempting to play with dolls with Maria in her room while Jamie had to go to school. And maybe it was true that Tony was paying a tiny bit less attention to Jamie than he had been. It wasn't like he could help it. Maria needed him so much right now, but
how the hell was he supposed to be there for her as much as she needed him to be without neglecting Jamie and all the attention he had come to expect from Tony?

"You know Maria's had a shi... life up until now," Tony said. "You have been her only real point of light. And I know you're used to mine and Maria's relationship going through you. But it's different now. It has to be. We need to give her a better life, and I know it sucks that it means I have to spend so much time with her right now when it used to be only you and me. I know it hurts that you can't be part of everything she and I have anymore. But that's how it's gotta be."

"I know," Jamie said, leaning against Tony's side and looking out over the beach to where Maria was doing an oddly inexpert power breaststroke in the water. "I just... It's strange."

"I know," Tony said. "Everything used to go through you. Now we gotta work on a new dynamic, where you and Maria still have your relationship, and you and I still have our relationship, but Maria and I gotta have our own, without you as our middleman. That doesn't make your any less important to either one of us. You're still my kid, and you're still Maria's brother. You're still both our family. It's just that I gotta be able to help Maria directly now. You get that? Same way I help you when you feel bad or have nightmares or need help?"

Jamie breathed out, putting most of his weight on Tony now. "I think I get it," he said. "It's just scary. Having her here for real."

Tony let out a dry chuckle. "You don't say," he said. Maria was on her feet now, out in the water, waving her arms and shouting indistinguishably, huge smile on her face. Tony gave Jamie a gentle shove. "Go on," he said.

Jamie flashed him a grin before running into the waves to join his twin sister.

***

"Anthony," JOCASTA said one evening just a couple of weeks before the kids had school again. Her voice was soft, with a fierce sort of undertone, all in a refined New England accent with just a hint of something Germanic. Tony remembered modelling it on a lady he'd met a few times as a kid, hanging around S.H.I.E.L.D. waiting for Howard or Aunt Peggy. He couldn't remember her name or much of anything about her, just that she had been nice, beautiful in a bright yellow sweater, and very, very smart.

"JO," Tony returned, flashing her a smile. For all that she was currently his youngest AI, she felt older than any of them, more mature, but then that was how he'd designed her. "You have anything for me?"

"I have found nothing pertaining to female super soldiers, or additional Winter Soldiers," JOCASTA said. "But there was a file, and a video clip, beneath several layers of encryption. I don't believe it's relevant to the search, but I do believe you'll want to see it."

"Sure," Tony said. "Gimme a moment and I'll come down to the 'shop." He set the coffee machine to brewing and checked in on both kids' rooms. Both, thank fuck, looked to be sleeping peacefully. Maria had Jamie's Buckie Bear tucked to her chest. Tony couldn't help but smile, both at the sight and at the knowledge that Jamie was willing to share his security blanket, so to speak, with his sister. He really was a fucking awesome kid. "Let me know if something happens," he said. JOCASTA, by now, knew to check on their breathing patterns and pulse rate and let him know if a panic attack or nightmare seemed to be developing.

"Of course, Anthony," JOCASTA said.
Tony made sure to smile again, positive reinforcement and all that. Then he picked up his finished cup of coffee and headed for the stairs. He jogged down into the 'shop and called the monitors and machines to life with a wave of his hand. He plopped into one of the chairs, spun around once and took a long drink of his coffee. "All right, JO. Hit me."

"Anthony," JOCASTA said. There was a certain amount of hesitation to her voice now, as though she'd grown unsure of all this. Indicating a level of sensitivity far beyond what he would've expected for her time online. She might've been in contact with Vision about the situation. Both she and FRIDAY seemed to talk more with him than Tony did, which, yeah, it sucked, but neither Tony nor Vision could seem to figure out how they were supposed to act around one another. At least Vision didn't seem to have those problems with the kids, and they loved it when he came around for Sunday dinner. "Perhaps I should summarize my findings. You don't need to see the footage."

Tony grimaced. "With you saying it like that, dear, I think I really do." He let out a long breath. "Could you and your sassier sister get Mickey down here, if it's that bad?"

"Certainly, Anthony," JOCASTA said even as FRIDAY piped up with, "Yes, Boss."

"All right, JO," Tony said. "Run the video."

He recognized that bit of road...

The next thing Tony was sure of was that he was on his knees on the floor, hugging a trash can to his chest and throwing up everything it felt like he had ever eaten. Mickey was a warm weight against his side, whimpering softly in what Tony interpreted as sympathy. Cold sweat coated Tony's whole body. He burnt with rage even as shock sent flashes of ice through his veins. Most of all, more than anything, he felt so fucking sick. His stomach turned and his throat seemed to flutter.

He threw up again.

"Sweethearts, I need you working together on this," he managed at long last. He slowly, finger by finger, uncurled one hand from around the edge of the can and buried it in Mickey's fur instead. "I want you to cross-reference Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes and the Winter Soldier."

'Sergeant Barnes!' Howard had shouted, and the words resounded over and over in Tony's mind, ricocheting through his brain. Tony'd never heard his father sound so shocked. So damn frightened. It wasn't anything he'd ever have associated with Howard Stark. And yet that was how he'd died. Skull smashed apart, pleading and begging for the life of his wife, shocked that the killer was someone he'd admired, had thought a friend. Had thought dead.

"Anthony," JOCASTA said. "I'm calling Doctor Banner down here."

The scene flashed through Tony's head again and again: that wintry, all too familiar Long Island road. The motorcycle, the car. The gleam of a metallic arm. Howard's pleading. Tony's mom begging, screaming. A smashed skull. A flesh hand wrapping around Tony's mother's throat, strangling her. Over and over and over again, slogging through his mind on repeat, like a bad pop-up that refused to be shut down.

He threw up again.

Mickey pushed up under his arm, pressed as close to him as he thought she could. She let out another whimper, licked his cheek. Tony let out a sob. His whole body shook. The trash can shook so badly he had to let it go. The next wave of vomit hit his jeans. The acidy stench turned his stomach all over again. A new coat of sweat sprang up. His heart was pounding a hundred miles per second.
“Tony!” Bruce shouted. “Tony, God!” And then a pair of slender arms wrapped around him, pulled him close. Bruce didn't shy away from the vomit, from the spilled coffee on the floor, from Tony's shaking form. He just held him, and Tony clutched Bruce right back.

"He killed them," Tony managed. "It wasn't an accident. It wasn't-- Howard wasn't drunk driving." He stopped for a moment, heaved in a breath. "I always thought it was his fault. I thought he drove drunk. I thought-- But it was HYDRA. It was Barnes. He killed my mom."

Bruce didn't speak, just held him that much closer. "JOCASTA?" he asked.

Behind himself, Tony heard the video start back up. With a sob, he freed both of his hands, smashed them over his ears, blocking out every bit of sound that he could. He couldn't watch that again. Couldn't hear it. Couldn't.

 Barely a few minutes later, Bruce pried his hands loose and wrapped him up tight again. "Shit, Tones. Fuck. I don't even--" He stopped, and Tony didn't have to look at him to know he was turning green. "Fucking hell. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Tony."

Tony leaned forward just enough to bury his head in Bruce's shoulder, managed another sob. It was all he could do to hold in another bit of vomit. "He killed my mom."

"I know, Tones," Bruce said, voice suddenly unbelievably soft. "I know. I know it hurts, and I know it sucks. My mom didn't die in the best of ways either. But you know it wasn't Barnes, don't you? Not really."

Tony battered down a wave of rage, and then sorrow, another batch of cold sweat. He tried to pull away to throw up again, but Bruce held him fast and the vomit ended up on Bruce's shirt, like Tony was a fucking baby. Still, as much as he wanted to strike out, as much as he wanted to avenge his mother's death, as much as he wanted to punish somehow, as much as he'd always wanted that... He knew. "Manchurian Candidate," he managed.

"Exactly," Bruce said. "It wasn't Barnes, not really. He couldn't help it. He was brainwashed and under orders. HYDRA killed your parents. But why, Tony? Think. Why would they kill your parents? Why take Howard Stark out then and not in all the decades he had to have been a thorn in their side? That's something to look into, something to do. And you can research the Winter Soldier. Research him all you want. But don't go after him unless he does something to deserve it, after DC. It's not Barnes who killed your mom. It's HYDRA. It's the creature they made, and if he's still that creature, I'll fucking smash him myself. But if he's not...

Tony nodded against his shoulder. "I get it," he said. "I do. I just. It hurts so much. I didn't think it would hurt so much. I didn't think-- I thought Howard did it. I always thought he did. Am I a shit son for that?"

"No," Bruce said. "But I think we have to assume, from now on out, that the team is not exactly at the top of Steve's priorities."

Tony pulled back, looked Bruce in the eyes. For a moment, his head spun. His parents' words still crashed through his head. "What?" he managed, voice strangely slurried, even to his own ears.

"It's all pretty obvious," Bruce said. "Isn't it? The Winter Soldier was a major part of the DC debacle. Since DC Steve's been running his own op with Nat and Sam Wilson. Wilson, especially, has been all over the globe for reasons we chose not to look into. Now, Steve may not know the modern world, but he sure as hell knows that you are the person to go to when looking for something. Yet he never came to you. He chose to keep it silent. Obviously, he recognized Barnes and has been trying
to track him down. But there is only one possible reason he never asked you for help. Why wouldn't you have helped track Barnes down for him? You're a fucking legacy baby; Barnes probably meant more to you when you were three than he's ever done to Wilson."

Tony couldn't answer, could only retch into the trash another time and clutch Bruce and Mickey to him. Fucking hell, fuck it all. "Steve knew," he managed. "He fucking knew."
Hi everyone, and thanks so much for all the support, whether through kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, recommendations, or, especially, comments. It all means more to me than you know.

Sorry about the wait. I've had a full schedule since I got back, but now I've finally got a few days to myself. Yay :D And hey, look at that, I managed to answer comments *pats self on back* I made the conscious decision not to butt into any conversations, though, as always, I really love seeing you interacting and discussing with one another. Unless a comment is a direct reply to one of mine or poses a question directly at me, I will let you discuss amongst yourselves. That way we also avoid me doing a whole comment that basically just spells out 'spoiler, not gonna tell'. If I missed anyone, I'm really sorry, and I will try not to in the future.

Now, my comments on some of the discussions from last chapter's comments: My plan is to address two of these issues (Bucky's anatomy and the Nazi record keeping) in-story (hopefully I won't forget), so I'm not going to comment on them here. As for the money, had Pepper known what was going on, she probably would've implemented the restrictions you talked about. It might even happen later in the story. But for now, it's pretty far from Tony's mind. He's got too much going on for more than a few passing thoughts about it.

Also, I'd like to pre-warn that the first bit here might make some readers angry. Please remember that however Tony might feel about certain individuals in the Avengers Initiative, he still believes in the idea of it. He can weather storms, as he has before, but he's aware that the Avengers, as an idea and an organisation, are on shaky ground, and so he is doing what he can to safeguard that idea. As is hinted through Madame Roux (the OC I invented because it's easier than writing about a nameless faceless human mass in a committee), this may not be quite as permanent as Tony thinks it will. You'll know what I mean when you've read it.

Without further ado (and you've truly got my admiration if you continually make it through my long as fuck notes), I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It's strange," the caregiver says. "She babbles, like the books says a healthy child is supposed to."

A child twice Johanne's age, Pierce reminds himself, smiling at that knowledge.

"But she pauses for as long as she babbles, like someone's speaking back to her. Only, it's all in her head."

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Madame Roux folded her hands in her lap and cocked an eyebrow at her. "I know you think it was really clever of you to take the blame for the entity known as Ultron," she said. Her accent was
sharper than he'd ever heard it. "I might even have believed it, except our experts say you only had
the Scepter of Loki in your possession for three days. You are good, Doctor Stark, but you are not
that good. Even a deeply flawed AI bent on human extinction, our experts tell us, need more than
two days to be developed."

Tony gave an exaggerated shrug. "I played around with alien tech," he said. "It turned out to be a
bad idea. Big fucking surprise, excuse my language."

Madame Roux leaned back in her seat. "Here's my take on things," she said. "You know much of
the world would be happy to blame you and not ask questions. It would alleviate the need to panic
anyone over the fact that HYDRA might still be a player, and--"

"Listen," Tony said. "I played with things I shouldn't have played with. It's that simple. Leave it."

"How long would it have taken Ultron to develop without your servers, I wonder," Madame Roux
said. "Another two months? Three? I am not saying you are blameless, Doctor. But your
involvement did nothing more than accelerate the inevitable. We will let you keep up your act for
now, so long as the Avengers keep their noses clean. We do not need a mass panic any more than
you do. But we do need you in a position to negotiate, and if needed, we will publicize the truth of
all this."

Tony folded his arms over his chest. "And what truth would that be?" he asked.

"That Ultron was not your doing. The being known as the Vision, however, is, and we'll hold you
accountable for its actions."

"That," Tony said with a snort, "I have absolutely no issue with. Vision is probably the Avenger
least likely to cause any problems other than disturbing civilians with his looks."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Madame Roux said. "So far, our council has chosen to take his
existence as a point in your favor. Your JARVIS was known to preserve life, and base decisions on
pure logic. The Vision, if it is true what you say, and that JARVIS's influence beat out Ultron's, will
be concerned about human lives yet less likely to make human mistakes than the rest of the
Avengers."

"That is the hope," Tony said. Then, "Listen, I know it's a bit of a slap in your face that I stepped
down. I don't have any good political reasons to give you. I just-- I had a daughter show up out of
nowhere. Can you give me some sympathy points at least?"

"Your resignation is less a strike against you than against the Avengers Initiative as a whole,"
Madame Roux said. "Throughout the past month alone, your former teammates have violated ten
borders, and their associates a further five. They have taken part in one conflict we wanted them to
stay out of completely and one where it was still deemed possible to negotiate and sanction.
Someone has to take over the roles you and Agent Hill used to fill, or the Initiative will not be
feasible internationally."

Tony winced. "I'll try to talk to them," he promised. And he would. Really. He still didn't like the
idea of spending as much as a moment in Rogers' presence, but if it was what it took... Well, fuck all,
Tony'd had six years' practice being a grown fucking man. He could do this.

"You do that," Madame Roux said. "I'll keep pushing for moderate reforms in the proposed Accords.
But there is only so much I can do."

"I understand," Tony said.
Tony waited patiently until the team was done eating the pizza he'd brought them. He could sympathize with their need to take their time. New York pizza was damn near sacred. Still, it was beyond impressive that a team of six - one of whom didn't eat in the first place - could collectively put away more than fifteen pies. Damn near disturbing, actually. What were these assholes costing him on a day-to-day basis? When it finally looked like they were all done eating, Tony cleared his throat. "Bruce is happy to babysit," he said. "But I'd still like to get home in time to read the next chapter of *The Prisoner of Azkaban* to the kids, if you don't mind."

Steve looked at him with those wide eyes Tony would've simply called attentive just a month ago. Nowadays, he couldn't help but wonder what hid behind them, how Steve could've just not cared to tell him the truth of his parents' death for-- No. Better leave that be for now. "What did you want to talk about?" he asked.

"I'm on reserve for now," Tony said. "You all get what that means, right? Unless there's an emergency, all I do is fund you. Which means you really need to get someone to do my job."

"Colonel Rhodes--" Steve started.

Tony rolled his eyes. "If you really think the only important part of my job description was flying around in a fucking tin can, you're nearly clueless enough to be criminally negligent," Tony said. He sucked in a breath, reigned in his instinctive urge to tear Steve a new one. "I'm not here," he said at last. "Hill is with Fury more often than she's here. You guys desperately need to consider how you're going to fill in that hole. You need someone to do your diplomacy for you. Someone who can communicate with foreign governments, get you permissions to cross borders and provide the cooperation of the local military or law enforcement. Someone who can liaise with the SI legal department as well, preferably. You need someone to coordinate PR, and one or more of you needs to start making yourself available for interviews after missions."

Steve's brow furrowed. "That doesn't seem like any kind of essential task," he said. "PR was never necessary in the first place. The people know that we're only trying to do the right thing; they support us. And why would any country that needs aid complain about us giving it?"

Tony glanced at Rhodey and only just managed to not flash another eye roll at his no doubt long-suffering friend. "It's not that simple," he said at last. "I have sent you memos about the UN committee that is working on creating ground rules for how you operate. The more you can show that you're following the rules and are willing to get the people on your side - even more on your side--" He flashed Steve a sharp look at that, hopefully staving off the interruption threatening him. "-the more lenient those rules are going to be. You know, soon enough there are going to be actual meetings where those rules will really be formulated. Some of you should be part of the proceedings. I'm not active duty anymore. I can help make the rules, but I can't speak for all of you."

"I don't understand why they'd want to restrict us," Steve said. "They must know we're only trying to do good."

Tony doubted attempting to tell him it really wasn't that simple would do any good at all. He looked out over the rest of the group. "I'll come to the meetings," Rhodey said with an easy shrug. "Just send me the information ahead of time and I'll be there."

"I would like to attend the meetings as well," the Vision said. He gave no reason or explanation, but right now all Tony really wanted was his compliance, so he returned a nod and smile at that semichild of his he had far less of an idea what to do with than either of his full ones.
"I'll look into PR and diplomacy," Natasha said. "I'm not sure we're ready to out-source, but I'll do my best to take care of it."

Tony let out a breath of relief. He knew, and it tore him apart, that she'd been keeping secrets from him as well. He knew Bruce had ended their fledging relationship with no real explanation precisely because of the secrets Natasha had to be keeping from Tony, and damn but that was a guilt trip in and of itself. Still, Tony appreciated Bruce's loyalty. Could still barely even believe it sometimes. Natasha, well, at least Tony knew that she was competent. With her at the helm of public relations, the team just might stand a chance of avoiding disaster. He put a grin on his face, "Platypus, Vision, the kids are expecting you for Sunday dinner, so I'll see you in a couple of days. Maximoff, I told Maria it was all right for you to take her and Jamie out to see a movie tomorrow night. You better not be late."

The three expressions from the people he'd addressed were utterly different, and Tony took a few moments to process them. Rhodey seemed to already be looking forward to Sunday dinner with Tony and his Godchildren - it had taken the DNA test and nothing more for him to become Maria's Godfather as well, and he loved both kids to death, and Tony loved him that much more for it.

Vision had a look on his face that suggested wistfulness and longing. Tony had begun to realize that while Vision might not have JARVIS's memories all that clearly, he did have quite a few of JARVIS's sentiments. His wish to protect Jamie and Maria and spend time with them was surprisingly simple for him to accept, so Sunday dinner had become a treasure for him as well, or so it seemed to Tony. Sometimes, Tony even suspected that Vision missed being JARVIS. The biggest hurdle was Tony himself; he and Vision still had no idea what the fuck they were to one another or how they were supposed to act around each other. At least the awkwardness seemed to be diminishing bit by bit with every single Sunday dinner that passed.

Maximoff... Now, that was the tricky one. Girl Maximoff was borderline unhinged following the death of Boy Maximoff, which, well, Tony had never had a sibling, so he didn't really entirely understand it all, but putting Rhodey or Pepper or Happy or Bruce in Boy Maximoff's shoes in his own imagination provided perspective. Never mind Jamie or Maria. She was devastated and confused and surrounded by strangers, and Tony couldn't help but feel sorry for her. He wished so much that she hadn't latched onto his kids as her new solid ground. But she had, and she was important to Maria and to Jamie as well, by extension. So far, she had never done anything to harm either of Tony's kids, either physically or mentally, and Tony was damn near certain she'd take a bullet for either one of them. Something about her still disturbed him, though, and it wasn't just the looks she sometimes still gave him either. He just hoped like fuck he hadn't made the wrong choice in giving her access to his kids.

In the end, he shook all that off. "When there are actual documents to review, I'll send them to all of you," he said. "Until then, please patch up the holes in the organization. I'll pay the salary, obviously, but you are going to have to be the ones hiring. I have an actual job, and two kids, and a school that's extraordinarily good at extorting me for time as a fucking chaperone of all things, so just. Get it done. All right?"

No one except Rhodey gave a real fucking answer, but it was less than half an hour before the kids' bedtime, and they had that chapter to read, so Tony left without forcing the issue, keeping his fingers crossed that actual smart opinions would win the day for once in the newly finished Avengers' Compound. If they didn't... Well, Tony could almost trick himself into believing it wasn't his problem anymore.

Chapter End Notes
The Accords are becoming ever more present... I still refuse to believe they someone got written overnight in canon. International legislation doesn't work like that. And so, in trying to keep as logical and close to the real world as possible: in this story, at least, the Accords were coming for a long time and if they surprised any Avenger, that's entirely their own fault.

Thanks for reading. Hope you enjoyed, and remember that the comment section is your playground/discussion board.
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the support, whichever form it's taken. The comments, especially, mean the world to me, so thank you for those.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pierce grimaces. Still, a lively imagination is to be expected of Johan Schmidt's heiress. It is a good sign, even. A lively imagination is the mark of a great scientist. "Do you have any good news?" he asked.

"She has learnt more words," the caregiver says. "'You', and something that sounds like 'butter' and 'finger'. She hasn't even reached six months of age; according to everything I've read, her progress is extraordinary.

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Barnes was in Bucharest. It hadn't taken much, all thing considered, to track him down. JARVIS would've been able to do it in days, but JARVIS wasn't here anymore. FRIDAY and JOCASTA were, and they were still babies, so it had taken weeks. Still, they had found him. Part of Tony had wanted to put on the armor, go in and shoot the son of a bitch in the face. Except he couldn't, because regardless of video evidence, Barnes hadn't been the one to kill Tony's mom, not really. Tony had to stick to his principles, had to, or how else could he teach his children anything? And Tony, however shitty it might sound, truly believed that people, not guns, killed people. And James Barnes was a gun.

James Barnes was a gun that was somehow turning into a human being. Judging by the security cam footage Tony now had confirmed, Barnes was laying low, assimilating the culture around him and doing absolutely no harm. He did odd jobs, mainly in construction. Bought food, clothes, pens and notebooks from the local market. He squatted in a derelict building that would be torn down sooner rather than later. He was a harsh haggler, but that seemed to be the extent of the damage he was doing.

He had been a gun. He wasn't even that anymore. Tony could not, in good conscience, go after him, no matter how much his hindbrain urged him to.

He had never imagined he'd be using Steve's left behind heavy bags in the armor just to blow off steam. Still, it was surprisingly effective when it came to beating down murderous impulses. When JOCASTA suddenly called for him, the breath Tony let out behind the faceplate was relief more than anything. He wanted a distraction so badly, and the kids were at school, and Bruce was deep in an experiment, and Rhodey was on an Avengers mission, and yeah, a distraction would be really fucking nice right about now. "I'll be down in the 'shop in a moment," he said.

"What is it?" he asked about fifteen minutes later, showered and in fresh clothes and ready for hours in the workshop.

"I believe I have retrieved most of the files relating to the additional Winter Soldiers," JOCASTA said.
"Hit me," Tony said, and immediately winced, remembering what had happened to his dad. "Show me what you've got, that is. And bring Mickey down according to your own discretion."

"Bringing Mickey down," JOCASTA said. A moment later, the elevator opened again and Mickey was loping out, tail wagging and tongue lolling out of her mouth. Almost despite himself, Tony felt a little bit calmer already. Tony sucked in a deep breath. "All right, JO. What is it?" he asked.

"Anthony," JOCASTA said. "I have several more decrypted files pertaining to the Winter Soldier program available for your viewing. If I might direct your attention to the holographic display on your right?"

"Sure, Baby Girl," Tony said, and he tried not to feel the anxiety threatening to wash over him in that moment. There were so many things she could show him, so many things he might end up seeing. And judging by the last Winter Soldier related thing she'd shown him, well. It might not be pretty at all. "Lemme see what you've got," he said at last, steeling himself even as he dropped down into the nearest chair, let the back of it bolster up his spine, let Mickey's presence bolster up his spirit.

Several holograms cropped up all at once. A few of them were files, and the last one was all video. There were five people, a woman and four men, in hospital beds and hooked up to IVs that seemed to be pumping some kind of blue liquid into their veins. "Howard Stark reverse engineered the super soldier serum," JOCASTA said. "The five doses he manufactured were stolen when he and your mother were assassinated. The relevant reports are projected furthest to the left from you." She paused, but Tony didn't look away from the video. As much as even mentioning the assassination still made him feel sick, he could look through those reports later. "The recipients were members of HYDRA's most elite death squad. The video documents the effects of the serum and HYDRA's experiences following that."

Tony frowned, still staring at the video. The time stamp changed, and the five people were now visibly stronger, taller and broader, muscles far more prominent than before. Then it changed again, to what appeared to be a training session with the original Winter Soldier. Tony blinked, then felt his eyes widen at the sudden eruption of violence. "What the actual fuck?" he asked? "These are HYDRA agents. Why are they going berserk on other HYDRA agents?"

"The reports furthest to the right should hold HYDRA's own hypotheses," JOCASTA said. "The middle projection is their personnel files."

Tony nodded, and watched as the five super soldiers and whoever hadn't managed to get out of the room were all gassed, presumably with some kind of sedative, given the way they all slumped to the floor moments later. The regular people in the room were probably dead, considering the dose that would have to have been used. Those who hadn't already been killed by the aptly named Death Squad, that was. The next clip showed them being placed in cryo pods. "Where is that?" Tony asked.

"FRIDAY helped track the location stamps," JOCASTA said. "Near as we can tell, they are in an abandoned Soviet missile silo in Siberia."

Tony let out a breath and nodded to show he'd heard. Then, swallowing, he moved to where he could read the personnel files. He didn't particularly want to, he realized, but there was a compulsion there that wouldn't ever let him go if he didn't finally get these questions answered. The first four, he swiped right past. All male names. The last one...

"Would explain the TB exposure necessary to build up as many antigens as Jamie inherited," Tony muttered, feeling cold all the way down to his fucking core. "As well as a lot of the other unusual things. Including the Celtic markers."

JOCASTA didn't respond to that, simply continued, "From age eleven she attended a succession of girls' only boarding schools in England. Her grades were excellent, but she was consistently suspended and expelled for behavioral issues, including fights, antagonizing and threatening fellow pupils, and, twice, assaulting a head teacher."

Tony winced. Looked like a great character already. Sure, he'd been kicked out of his fair share of boarding schools, but the most serious assaulting he'd ever done of any teacher or fellow student was verbal. "Great start, JO," he said, skimming over the list of schools projected in front of him. "What did she get up to next?"

"At age eighteen, O'Neill enlisted in the Royal British Army. There are records of her suing for the right to be part of the regular armed forces, but the British Army was still, during her service, gender segregated. After two years' service, she was, however, recruited by the British Defense Intelligence. As an agent of the Defense Intelligence, she was part of a bad op during the Falklands War. The objective of the mission - intelligence gathering - was realized, but one local, two other British operatives and five Argentinians were killed and several covers blown. She was dismissed from the military altogether, and seems to have found work as a police officer in Belfast."

Tony winced. Northern Ireland in the early eighties. He would've probably known, even without being a genius, that that was bad news. "What happened?" he asked.

"Several bad arrests to start," JOCASTA said. "She was part of apprehending the escapees from the Maze Prison Escape, and two of the escapees she personally brought in had been shot and beaten and were laid up in hospital for months. By eighty-five, she had both displayed excessive amounts of violence as an officer during protests, and was under suspicion for assisting IRA operations."

Tony frowned. "Why the fuck would she be playing both sides? I mean, I get that she's half English and half Irish, but that just seems, well. Really fucking stupid."

"A later psychological evaluation concluded that she has no ideology or particular belief system," JOCASTA said. "Apparently, she just likes violence." She paused when Tony winced, but when he didn't say anything, she continued, "She would've likely been fired, but was recruited by MI6--"

"What the actual fuck?" Tony said. "I mean, I know S.H.I.E.L.D. hired Natasha, but presumably after she was reformed. What the hell would MI6 want with someone with a record like that?"

"Everything official from her two years with MI6 is classified," JOCASTA said. "According to HYDRA's files, however, they used her mainly for political assassinations and infiltration. You'll be pleased to know she did finally fail the psych evaluation, however. They concluded that she was as likely to turn on them as remain on their side, if it brought her greater personal satisfaction, or amusement."

"So they let her loose," Tony said. "And presumably, HYDRA snapped her right up."

"Precisely," JOCASTA agreed. "In the four years she was with HYDRA prior to being given the serum, she's accredited with nine assassinations, four executions, thirty-eight rounds of interrogation and fourteen cases of blackmail, including threats, use of physical violence and hostages, as well as five successful infiltration ops."

Mickey pressed against his legs, and only then did Tony realize he was shaking all over. In all these
years, for all the times he'd had nightmares about Jamie's mother coming to snatch him, to snatch him and Maria both now, never had he imagined this was what he'd be dealing with. This. This... fuck. He wasn't sure he would be able to deal with it.

"According to HYDRA's post-serum files," JOCASTA continued, though her voice was careful now, almost contrite. "The serum exacerbated her psychopathy and violent urges, and she was put in cryo stasis along with the other four until a proper method of control could be determined."

"So basically, these days she'll just kill whoever she comes across for shits and giggles," Tony muttered.

There was a pause. Then, "Yes, Anthony. I'm sorry."

Tony swallowed down a sudden wave of nausea. Frozen, because even HYDRA couldn't control her. Because she hadn't ever even cared about their 'cause', only about the violence. Apparently, they had to have found some way to control her, at least for the duration of the pregnancy, but if there were files on that, JOCASTA hadn't gotten to them yet, or she'd have pulled them up already. This was... Fuck. And of course HYDRA wouldn't have given a damn about that little side effect of the serum when they chose who to give it to.

Barnes wasn't harming anyone these days, but then he had by all accounts been a decent guy before he got shot up. Even Steve took his stubbornness and principles just to the edge of too far. Of course, he might always have been like that, rather than it being something serum enhanced. Tony hadn't know the guy back in the forties, after all. But giving it to someone with psychopathic and violent tendencies, that was just so fucking stupid it wasn't even funny.

"I'll look at the other files when I feel less sick," Tony muttered, sinking his fingers into Mickey's fur. "For now, just... Save it all and shut it down. I need a-- I need." He stopped, shut his eyes and breathed in deep. He needed a distraction, some chance to distract himself so he could be halfway normal by the time the kids got home from school.

And then there was Dum-E, bumping up against him with a smoothie in his claw. "Nothing toxic to humans, Boss," FRIDAY reassured.

Tony took a deep breath and took the smoothie with trembling hands, flashing Dum-E a no doubt wan smile. It was the best he could manage right at the moment. "Find me a project," Tony told FRIDAY. "Something fun."

"Sure thing, Boss."

Chapter End Notes

Like I've mentioned before, jumping to Bucky being the babymama isn't the most obvious leap of logic. In my opinion, this is, even if it does mean it takes a while longer to get to the truth. Even so, I promise this will lead to an interesting divergence later.

As to why Pierce didn't use this OC who's based on the female super soldier we see in CA:CW... As has been mentioned, HYDRA is fractured. He doesn't have control of the specific faction the five newer Winter Soldiers belong to. And even if he did, Bucky is easier to control, and doesn't have any known mental defects to pass down.
I hope you enjoyed it, even though the obvious in-story red herring is probably annoying to some of you. Anything you want to say, ask or discuss, please feel free to do so, with me and one another.
Thanks so much for all the support, whether through kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions, recommendations, or, especially, reviews. Never fails to put a smile on my lips to see that you're all still interested.

It was pointed out in last chapter that I may not have made it clear enough, but Tony is not shutting down the investigation for good. He just couldn't stand reading any further at that exact point in time. And I'd like to point out that DNA testing wasn't as reliable, trusted or all around well developed in the early nineties as it is today, so while HYDRA might very well have taken samples from their super soldiers, they would exist as physical samples somewhere, not as part of their file for Tony to simply look at and discard as not a match with his kids.

I realise that whole little in-story red herring might be annoying to some of you, but it definitely becomes important to the plot in ways you'll see later on.

Now, this chapter deals almost exclusively with the kids and mundane everyday matters, like, what happens realistically when little girls have super strength and have never been trained in restraint. Hopefully you all enjoy, even if it is not too heavy on overarching plot. This, too, will lead somewhere, I promise ;P

Little Johanne is all of ten months old when her proud caregiver reports that she's taken her first unassisted steps. Less than a month later, pixelated but unmistakable photos of her brother repeating the feat surface. "How effective is the serum, really?" Pierce asks Zola shortly after. "How important can it possibly be when her little brother, who has no serum, is so close to her in development?"

"Perhaps you have been coddling her, Herr Pierce," Zola says. "I would suggest you stop it."

"Okay, no, look," Tony said, glaring down at the watch that was refusing to cooperate. He grabbed the jeweler's screwdriver out of his pocket, popped off the clock face, and tightened a few things inside. He snapped the watch back shut, glancing at Bruce's long-suffering face out of the corner of his eye. Then he pressed the button. "Look," he said, grinning as the gauntlet expanded to wrap around his palm. "It worked." He shouldn't sound so surprised, should he?

Bruce's look of stunned surprise, however, was deeply gratifying. "That's-- How on Earth did you get it so tiny? The plates have to be so thin--"

"Point two five millimeters," Tony interjected.

"Adamantium?" Bruce asked.

"Adamantium titanium alloy. Took some playing around to get it right, but it's the only thing I could produce with the proper tensile strength at that thickness." He frowned. "At least until King T'Chaka finally relents on selling vibranium, but I'm not holding my breath on that. They want to open up to
"This is incredible," Bruce said, running his fingers carefully over the plates and interlocking joints. "How are you powering it?"

"Miniature fuel cell," Tony said. "Same material Howard modelled after the Tesseract. Same stuff I use in the arc reactors. I haven't weaponized the watch yet, but a bit more tinkering, and I should be able to get a sonic blast and at least some kind of flash or something in there."

"This is, really--" Bruce cut himself off, grinning. "I'm going to regret saying this, but you are allowed to interrupt lab time for something like this any time of the day."

Tony returned the grin, felt damn near giddy. FRIDAY had been right. This was a fun project, and had been just what he'd needed to stop himself from obsessing over the deeply disturbing reading material he was slowly making his way through, which, not thinking about that right now, because this worked, and it had been fun, and shit, but that felt good. And--

"Boss," FRIDAY interrupted. "Principal Davies is calling."

Tony frowned, felt all the giddy joy flee his body in a whoosh. "Is everything all right?" he asked. "Did something happen to the kids? Did--"

"How about you just put her through, FRIDAY?" Bruce interjected. His face, Tony couldn't help but notice, was tight with anxiety as well.

"Mr. Stark?" Principal Davies was saying then, her voice pulled taut by some emotion Tony couldn't quite name. "I would very much like to see you here, as soon as you can make it?"

"What happened?" Tony asked, swallowing the anxiety in his own voice as best as he could. "Are the kids all right?"

"They're fine," Principal Davies said. "They were, however, in a fight, and I want you to come in so we can discuss it."

Tony blinked. "A fight?" he muttered. He shook his head, tried to get the sudden freezing cobwebs out of his head. "I'll be there within an hour." He gestured for FRIDAY to end the call before looking at Bruce with wide eyes. "Jamie's never been in a fight," he said. "Never, not even back in kindergarten."

Bruce nodded. "Kid knows how to use his words," he agreed. "Maria... was raised very differently."

Maria was raised by fucking HYDRA. Her mother was certifiably insane, and extremely violent. Maria was born with the super soldier serum, and who the fuck even knew what that could mean, what it could lead to? Tony shut that thought down immediately. He would go, and he would figure out the situation for himself, and everything would be all right, even if right now all he could feel was fear of the kind that froze him down to the marrow of his bones.

"You go grab one of the discrete cars," Bruce instructed, voice somehow gentle and firm all at once. "I'll call Pepper and make sure she knows there might be a situation."

Tony took a deep breath and nodded. "Thanks," he said before heading for the elevator, absentmindedly pressing the button that would make his gauntlet disappear back into the watch. Hopefully, there'd be no need to alert Pepper, but if something had gone really wrong, it would be for the best. SI Legal might need to be brought in - Tony knew all about people trying to sue rich parents through their kids. And the PR team. And God, what would happen if it got out that Maria
had the serum? Nothing good, that he was damn near sure of.

Heart pounding, blood rushing through his ears so hard it was all he could hear, he got behind the wheel. "FRIDAY," he said. "I might need you to take over if my pulse elevates much more." He tried for another deep breath and flexed his fingers to stop them from shaking. Then he pressed his thumb against the fingerprint scanner and heard the car power up. He shifted it into gear and drove toward the ramp that would take it him up to street level.

Afterwards, he barely even remembered the drive. It was only after he'd already gotten out of the car that he realized he was in a pair of battered jeans and a pair of t-shirts. At least the visible one wasn't a band shirt. He was pretty sure all the bands on his t-shirts were on some Mothers Against Hard Rock list somewhere, and as much as he didn't give a flying fuck, it wasn't the image he needed to project right now. Frankly, neither was workshop casual, but there was no way in hell he was driving all the way back just to change. Gritting his teeth, he smoothed down his hair and made his way toward the principal's office with long strides.

One of the kids' bodyguards caught up with him just outside the office, and Tony forced himself to stop and look at the man. As much as all he wanted was to see his children right the fuck now, forewarned was forearmed. "What happened?" he asked for what felt like the twelfth time in the past hour. "Are they all right?"

"They are unharmed," the bodyguard - Schumacher? - said. "In some trouble, though. There was a fight. I'll submit a report when we return to the Tower. They didn't start it, but Miss Stark certainly finished it."

Tony held back a wince at that, forced himself to give a nod and something that might resemble a smile. "Thanks, Gel-O," he said. The bodyguard - Schultz? Something German - reached up and patted self-consciously at his heavily gelled hair even as Tony walked past him, threw a wave at the secretary, and made his way inside the office.

Jamie and Maria both turned from each their chair to look at him with eyes wide with relief the moment they heard him come in. Both looked unharmed, though Maria's eyes were red, as if she'd been crying. Still, as much as that made his fucking heart ache, at least she was all right, and Tony let out a breath it felt like he'd held for hours. Tony flashed them a quick smile, let them see his own relief in turn, before he turned his attention to the principal. "Ms. Davies," he greeted. "How are you this fine day?"

She let out a sigh, raised both eyebrows at him. Absently, Tony wondered if she was one of those people who couldn't lift just one eyebrow, or if he'd really earned himself the double lift. "I was admittedly better before I had to deal with this," she said. She waved at a chair between the other two. "Please have a seat, Mr. Stark."

Tony sat down, ruffling Jamie's hair and squeezing Maria's shoulder as he went. And he could tell by the judgy eyes the principal was sending him that he wasn't supposed to be being affectionate with them right now. Too bad she didn't get to decide that kind of crap. Even if the kids were in trouble - and Tony didn't even know what they had supposedly done yet - that didn't mean he stopped loving them or stopped showing them he did. He was not Howard. "So," he said. "What happened?"

"Your son bullied a classmate," the principal said, leaning forward and putting her elbows on the desk. "Your daughter then proceeded to shove him. He is with the nurse for now, but his parents will be coming to take him to the ER. He has a suspected concussion and broken wrist."

Tony nodded and kept calm by sheer force of will. Then he looked between his kids. "What happened?" he asked again.
"Mr. Stark--" Ms. Davies interjected.

Tony flashed her a look. "I'd like to hear their side of the story as well," he said, speaking through clenched teeth before turning his attention back to Jamie and Maria.

"A couple of the girls were talking about some Tyler Quick song," Jamie said. "They asked Maria what she thought of it. She asked them who that was. Then Camden called her stupid, and I told him if he spent less time listening to pop music, perhaps he'd be able to tell who the president was before Ellis. He hit me, so Maria pushed him back."

"I didn't mean to push him so hard," Maria interjected. "I didn't. I promise, Daddy. I didn't wanna hurt him."

His chest suddenly feeling almost too tight to breathe around, Tony reached out and grasped Maria's hand, gave it a squeeze. Then he fixed his eyes on Ms. Davies. "What I'm hearing is that a fellow student harassed my daughter for not knowing or caring about pop music. My son stepped in to verbally defend his sister. The other student then proceeded to physically assault my son. My daughter stepped in in an attempt to create some space, and accidentally caused injury. Which, she was understandably agitated. So why was I called in about my kids 'getting in a fight' when, clearly, the other kid was the aggressor? Where are his parents?"

Ms. Davies' jaw tightened for a moment. "Mr. Stark," she began.

Tony shook his head. "No," he said. "Unless you give me some very compelling evidence otherwise, that's what happened. My kids have never lied to me, and I have no reason to think they're doing so now. And don't forget I have one of the best legal teams in the world on my payroll. Make sure you remind the other kid's parents of that as well, if they consider pressing charges. Remind them who the instigator was, and make sure no one forgets the layers of NDAs this whole school is wrapped up in. I'm not the only parent who won't trust you anymore if this leaks to the press."

Ms. Davies was silent for several long moments. Tony simply looked at her steadily as he brushed the pad of his thumb over Maria's knuckles in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. At long last, Ms. Davies sighed. "I apologize, Mr. Stark. I may have misjudged the situation."

Tony forced himself not to roll his eyes. More like she'd misjudged her own ability to guilt Tony into rolling over and making Jamie and Maria take the blame, which would doubtless have made her conversation with the other kid's parents easier, given his injuries. "Thank you, Ms. Davies," he said.

"Now," Tony said. "Can they--" He was about to say 'go back to class', but a glance at the wall clock let him know they should really be headed home. "Are we done, or should I let Jamie and Maria wait outside with their bodyguard while we finish up?"

"I would like a word with you," she confirmed, and Tony sent the children out with reassuring pats and a promise to see them soon. Once the door shut behind them, Tony turned back around to face her, cocking an eyebrow. "I'm going to have to ask you to take Maria out of school," Ms. Davies said.

Tony felt his heart skip a beat. For a moment, he saw Susan O'Neill's school record so very clearly before his eyes, the long list of expulsions, all of it. He shook it off. Tony had been expelled a few times himself, and he'd turned out fairly acceptable. At least not overly psychotic. "No," he said.

"I'm doing you a favor here," Ms. Davies said. "If you take her out yourself, she won't have an expulsion on her record. She can start over somewhere else."
"What grounds do you even have to expel?" Tony asked. He knew, all too well, that teachers could easily fabricate them to get rid of students they didn't like. But then Howard had never made it a habit to use his legal team to protect Tony. Definitely not an area where Tony planned to follow in his old man's footsteps. He would always do whatever it took for his kids, use whatever resources he had available, and that very much included SI Legal.

"When you enrolled her in this school, you mentioned she was stronger than the average six-year-old," Ms. Davies said. "You also said that she wouldn't cause trouble. Now, whether or not she caused this incident, strength like that in the hands of a six-year-old... That is not something this school is willing, or even equipped, to handle. As she is right now, she is a danger to others whether she means to be or not. She is six years old. Regardless of her intelligence level, she is and will be, as we have seen, reactionary. I cannot in good conscience have her here."

Tony bit back a sigh. He could do a lot of different stuff here. He could sue the school for discrimination - and if laws forbidding discrimination against super powered people didn't exist, he would lobby for them until they did (he probably should, either way). He could simply refuse to take Maria out of school and then work against the expulsion. He could work to have a new principal instated. But the thing was, Ms. Davies was right. Through no fault of her own, Maria did have the potential to be dangerous to those around her. And furthermore, now that her fellow students knew that, Tony doubted she'd ever be comfortable here again. She'd be miserable, and Jamie would be miserable, and yeah, no, not gonna happen. "I'll sign them out with the secretary," he said. "You won't have to see them again, and after today, I'm sure they'll be as overjoyed about that as you are."

She blinked. "We have no objections against continuing to teach James," she said.

Tony let out a sharp burst of laughter at that. "You think you get to throw out Maria and keep my 'normal' kid? No, they're both gone, and so is every bit of support I've been granting your school. Good day, Ms. Davies." With that, he got to his feet and walked out to the secretary's office, picking up his phone as he asked for the papers. He pressed the call button and held the phone up to his mouth. "FRY, cut all funding and other support to the kids' former school," he said, flashing a smile at his kids on the other side of the glass door. "Ask Pepper or whoever's appropriate to get the right people working on anti-discrimination laws for metahumans and the enhanced. Get it worked into my correspondence with the UN as well." He turned to the secretary and flashed her a grin. "And hey, FRY. When it gets out that I've taken the kids out of school, make sure the official comment is that my children are very special and incredibly intelligent. It takes schools of a certain caliber to offer them what they need and their former school, unfortunately, was not a good fit in the long run."

The secretary blanched even as she pushed over the papers. Tony signed with a flourish and made sure to flash all his teeth when he grinned at her again. Then he walked out the door, put a hand on each child's shoulder and walked them out.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for taking the time to read. I hope you enjoyed. Remember, as always, that the comment section is open to discussion, whether with me or between yourselves. Next chapter should be up within the next few days.
Thanks so much for the support, by whichever means it's come. The comments, especially, mean the world to me, and keep me motivated now that I'm trying to trudge my way through CA:CW. Which, yeah, a harder task than you might think, since I can no longer watch that film without feeling physically ill. So, your comments bring me life and help me through that, even when those comments are you talking to one another. I love that as much as I love the ones directed my way, and thanks so much for caring enough about the stories and your theories to engage each other. Keep that up ;P

Without further ado, please enjoy the chapter:

"And what would you suggest I do?" Pierce asks. "I can't make her grow up faster. I can't treat her like a soldier when she's meant to become assertive and independent enough to lead us all. I can't--"

"Treat her like a student," Zola says. "It is in the nature of a student to surpass the teacher. She, I believe, should do so quite quickly. But she is not a normal child, and it is past time you stop treating her like one."

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"Okay, FRY," Tony said, spinning away from the holographic displays. "Fabricate that. And then--"

"Daddy?"

Tony blinked and glanced down, and fuck, he didn't think he'd ever seen Maria look so uncertain before, didn't think he'd ever heard her voice sound so small. Without thinking twice, he opened his arms and let her crawl onto his lap, never mind that, really, she was too big for it. "What is it, Sweetheart?" he asked.

"I had a bad dream," she said, voice still that soft, fragile little thing. She pressed her cheek against his shoulder, fingers gripping his shirt like she was a much younger child. Her breath came in warm little puffs against his neck. Tony wrapped his arms around her, cradled her against him. According to Jamie, their only means of communication back then, she'd had nightmares since she was little more than a baby. According to Dr. Sanchez, they were mostly centered around fears of inadequacy, that she wasn't good or strong enough. Tony empathized more than he'd like, but hated that his baby girl felt like that at all, let alone at such a young age.

"What was it about?" he asked, running a hand through her thick, dark hair.

She seemed to almost melt against him. Her fingers gripped his shirt more tightly. They both jumped at the sudden sound of fabric tearing. Maria leaned back, letting go of Tony's now torn shirt. "I'm sorry," she whimpered. "I'm so sorry." Tears welled up in her eyes, and Tony pulled her in again, holding her against his chest.

"It's all right," he said, pressing a kiss against her temple. "It's okay, Baby. I hated this shirt anyway."
"No you didn't," she said, sniffling.

"No, I didn't," Tony agreed. "But I love you a million times more than I love this damn shirt, okay?"

Maria gave a slow nod and the tiniest, most tremulous smile Tony thought he'd ever seen. Then her face crumpled again. "I'm don't wanna hurt anyone, Daddy. I didn't wanna hurt Camden either, but he got hurt and I'm so sorry. I tried to push real gently, but I didn't want him to hurt Jamie."

"I know, Sweetheart," Tony said, keeping his voice soft as he spoke into her hair. "And I know you're sorry. You told him; he knows it too." He paused for a moment, sighed. "Is that what the nightmare was about?" he asked. "Pushing Camden?"

She gave another small nod at that.

Carefully, Tony ran his fingers through her hair again, pressed a peck to her forehead. "We'll figure it out, Baby Girl," he said. "I promise. We'll figure it out, and until we do, you get to stay right here with me."

Later, after she'd gone to bed, Tony toppled down onto the couch with his head in his hands. How the hell was he supposed to help her with this? He'd had super strength for less than an hour while conscious, definitely not enough to know how to handle it in everyday situations. He couldn't ask Bruce, because when he wasn't green, Bruce was no stronger than Tony. Probably less. He definitely couldn't ask the Hulk, because as much as he might trust the Hulk not to hurt Jamie and Maria, he didn't really have the qualities of a good teacher. He knew what the obvious answer was.

Steve.

Just a few months ago, he'd have asked Steve in a heartbeat. But that was when he still thought Steve was just annoyingly stubborn, holier-than-thou and not really the brightest bulb when it came to thinking through the consequences of his actions. Now, though, now he knew that Steve had known for more than a year how Tony's parents died and hadn't cared enough to tell him... Tony didn't think Steve would ever hurt Maria, but quite frankly, he wasn't sure he trusted Steve around her, not with her state of mind still as delicate as it was. And part of him wasn't sure what Steve would even teach her. Wasn't there a real chance Steve might just pat her on the back and tell her she'd done a good job standing up to a bully, even if she had inadvertently hurt him? Tony might trust Steve not to hurt her, but he didn't trust what Steve had to teach.

For a brief, mad second, he seriously considered tracking down Bucky Barnes (picking him up, really - Barnes was still in Romania, and Tony even knew the address of his current building. An actual apartment building now, moving up in the world from condemned shacks). From everything Tony had read between the lines in the stories about Steve and Barnes, Barnes had been the sensible one, the one with a foot always on the brake while Steve was charging on ahead. He might've been a good choice if not for the HYDRA brainwashing thing and the fact that Tony had absolutely no idea about his current state of mind except that he wasn't killing civilians.

Tony let out a groan, raked a hand through his own hair. "Girls," he told the AIs. "Please keep an eye out for a potential super strength teacher for Maria. And then shut down for tonight. If I'm not very wrong, she went to sleep in my bed, and there'll be another nightmare coming."

"Yes, Anthony," JOCASTA said, even as FRIDAY chimed in with a, "Sure thing, Boss."

Tony gave them a wave and headed towards the stairs.

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Tony gritted his teeth, damned near growled at the holographic projections. He hated it when engineering was like this, when none of the solutions he threw at the problem made sense. He hadn't truly felt like that since back when he'd been dying from palladium poisoning. But this water filtration system was a fucking pain in the ass. If he tried to talk it over with Pepper, she'd just tell him to let it go. Whatever revolution he might end up with here, it would still be a loss leader, only good for the company in PR and tax deductions. But that didn't make it less important, not really. If he could get this working properly, he could get clean water to millions of people without much of a deficit. It would revolutionize the third world and-- Fuck, he really needed Bruce's input on this, except he was going to have to wait, because Bruce was giving lessons to Tony's kids, and Tony wasn't going to interrupt for anything less than an apocalyptic level event, and--

"Mr. Stark?" a familiar, accented voice asked, filtered through the speakers. "Ms. Maximoff is early, Anthony," JOCASTA added, presumably just for good measure. "She's asking for you. Do you want me to let her in?"

Tony let out a long breath and glared at the faulty calculations in front of him. "Might as well," he said. He frowned, tried moving a few of the calculations around, but it still wasn't coming out how he envisioned. Fuck all, why did humanitarianism have to be such a fucking pain in the ass?

"Mr. Stark?" Girl Maximoff said again.

Tony gritted his teeth at the project for another moment before putting his face into the right patterns and turning around with what was hopefully a pleasant smile on his face. "Wanda," he said. "Maria and Jamie won't be out of lessons for another hour at least. You're..." He glanced at his watch. "You're four hours early to pick them up for your dinner and movie date."

Maximoff gave a small shrug that was somehow a lot less self-assured than any other gesture she'd ever made in front of him. "I'm meeting Dr. Banner in an hour," she said. "He offered to guide me through some meditation techniques. Said it might help with..." She trailed off, swallowed, and Tony really didn't need her to finish the sentence to know she was on about Boy Maximoff again.

"You're still early," Tony said, turning back to the projections just to attempt to glare them into submission.

"I wanted to speak with you," Maximoff said.

Tony flashed one last glare at the projections before putting his pleasant face back on and turning back to Maximoff. "Well, then, I'm all ears," he said. "Hypothetically speaking, because that would be horrifying and pretty damn debilitating. But I'm listening. Shoot. But don't. Just... talk."

She didn't smile at his jumbled workshop talk the way Bruce or the kids might, but nor did she have the long-suffering look Steve or Natasha might've worn. She looked almost nervous, really, and that was the last thing Tony would've ever expected Maximoff to look in front of him. She cleared her throat and stuck her hands in the pockets of her ridiculously tiny skirt. Tony was going to have to make a note to never let Maria emulate Maximoff's fashion choices. "I wanted to talk to you," Maximoff repeated.

Tony cocked an eyebrow, uncertain what the hell he was supposed to do with this situation. Was he meant to encourage her or shoot this whole thing down or, fuck, couldn't Rhodey or Vision have given him a head's up?

"I just." Maximoff stopped and swallowed with an audible click. "I wanted to tell you that I'm not going to kill you."
Tony blinked. He didn't tell her he'd already figured as much or give any of the glib comments that tempted him right there and then. Not so much because she deserved his seriousness as because he was not an idiot and wasn't going to go deliberately setting her off. "Thank you," he said, and if it came out as more of a question than a genuine sentiment, well, who would really blame him?

"I know what you said about the shell in our apartment was the truth," she said at long last. "I'm not." She stopped, swallowed again. "I'm not saying I forgive you. That was still-- without you, they'd still be alive."

Tony refrained from rolling his eyes or telling her that if it hadn't been his name on that shell, it would've been someone else's. Tony might never have been born, and that shell would've probably still landed in her living room. Her whole family was dead, though. She probably still wasn't thinking clearly, which meant that was likely not the thing he was supposed to be pointing out to her in this situation.

"But I'm not going to kill you," Girl Maximoff repeated. "You're. You're a good father, and I don't ever want to see Jamie and Jo-- Maria hurt like I was. I don't want to see them separated or their father killed, so I'm not." Another damn swallow. "And I wanted to thank you. Rhodes. He... He pointed out to me that you didn't actually have to let me spend time with, with your kids. And I just wanted to-- Jamie and J--Maria, they mean the world to me. So thank you, for letting me spend time with them."

Tony clamped down on his instincts and flashed her a brief grin. "I know what you mean to them," he said. "They like you, and they trust you. And I know you care about them too. So I've trusted you with them, and so far you've kept them safe. I don't care how you feel about me, so long as you continue keeping them safe."

She sucked in a sharp breath and stayed silent for a long while. Then she nodded. "I love them, Mr. Stark," she said at long last. "It hurts sometimes, being around them. They've got everything I don't anymore, but I do love them, and I'll never let them lose what I did if I can help it. I don't do it for you--"

"And I don't let them spend time with you for your sake," Tony countered. "Everything I do these days, I do for my kids, to make a better and safer world for them to grow up in, a better name for them to carry. That's all. And so long as you're not working against me on it, I don't see why we need to be at odds, even if there are other things we don't agree on."

She looked at him for long moments. Then she gave a nod, and was gone before he even fully had time to register it. Tony let out a groan and turned back to the calculations. "JO," he said. "FRY and I have been over this project a hundred times. If you've got any input, now's the time to share with the class."

"Of course, Anthony," JOCASTA said, and Tony swore he could hear the smile in her accented voice.

Chapter End Notes

A couple of notes here:

Tony's internal comments that Maria is too big to sit on his lap has nothing to do with her age or how mature he thinks she should be. It's her size he's talking about. She's
about six and a half, maybe a bit more, here, but she's the size of an average nine or ten-year-old, and Tony is not that tall or powerfully built. Simply put, he means that she's nearly too physically large for him to handle her simply putting all her weight on his thighs without it becoming actually painful, and that she's too big to properly cuddle up to him in that position anyway, since she'd be about eye-to-eye with him, if not getting to the point where, seated on his thighs, she's taller than he is. This is not a Tony is small thing. Tony, as portrayed by RDJ, is average height with a fairly lean built, but opposed to Maria - for her age - he is by no means tall. So yeah, hopefully that makes sense. If she wants to keep crawling into a parent's lap and cuddling up for much longer, she needs a larger parent ;P

Re: Wanda doing meditation with Bruce. Remember that in this universe, she never triggered the Hulk like she did in canon, so while Bruce may not trust her all that much, he doesn't have a personal grudge against her.

Also, I wondered how difficult it would be to do some kind of conciliation arc between Wanda and Tony. With the kids in the picture, well... Tell me if you think it's too simplistic, but quite frankly, I think that in this exact universe, this one on-screen conversation plus the specific circumstances might really be all we need...

Please don't comment just to ask me when Bucky shows up or to tell me to have it happen soon. It will not change the timeline and will only annoy me. Have a bit more patience, and it will hopefully pay off, but honestly, my historical response to people telling me to do something is to figure out a way not to do it, so please keep that in mind rather than snowing me in with comments asking for Bucky. I love Bucky and I'm looking forward to bringing him into the story, but I've already made it clear that this is a slower story and that I want to take the time to get things right before bringing the storylines together, so please, please respect those things, because I really get nothing out of a comment asking for Bucky, and it will change precisely nothing.
Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for taking the time to show your support, whether through kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, recommendations, or, especially, leaving comments. It all means the world to me, and as always I loved seeing you interact with each other in the comment section.

We're about to find a super strength tutor for Maria.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Johanne turns a year old, the bumbling, overly coddling caregiver is exchanged for an agent too old for the field, whose loyalty is unquestionable and who has been with HYDRA since the seventies. Pierce observes on the video feed that will be saved only on Zola's servers, and smiles in satisfaction when Agent Forrester retells old ops for bedtime stories, when his stern use of positive reinforcement have the milestones coming fast and firm.

Agent Forrester is stern, but devoted, and Johanne works hard for the smiles and hugs she gets. Her toys are blunted knives and BLUEGUNS. By the time she's a year and a half, she speaks like an adult and runs without ever losing her balance. By the time she's two, she knows the most important parts of HYDRA's history and philosophy by heart. By two and a half, she can reliably hit a target twenty yards away.

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Tony bit back a yawn, almost stumbling over his own feet as he made his way down to the workshop. The hot shower he'd taken had done nothing to wake him up, and it had done nothing to put any heat back into his bones either. The nightmare still played through his mind, as it did most nights now.

It was the same nightmare it had been ever since Jamie had been a baby, in the kind of way that a dragon was the same as a gecko with a penchant for fire. But now that nameless, faceless mother come to steal his babies had a name and a face, and Susan O'Neill haunted him. Every night, every bit of sleep he managed to catch, she was there, snatching his children. Sometimes she'd do terrible, unspeakable things to them. Sometimes, she'd turn them into monsters, into perfect little reflections of herself.

This night's dream was still stuck on a loop in his head, running over and over and making his hands shake and his head feel full of cotton wool. Somehow, he still managed to make it to the workshop without braining himself, grateful for what was probably the thousandth time that Bruce Banner not only existed, but was also running breakfast and temporarily homeschooling the kids. Tony wouldn't have had the first idea what to even do without him.

"Anthony," JOCASTA said just as soon as he'd collapsed into the nearest chair, cup of coffee cradled protectively between his hands. "Anthony," she repeated, finally succeeding in bringing his thoughts out of their depressing little loop. "I believe I may have found a potential teacher for Maria."

Tony blinked before focusing on the holo displays lighting up in front of him. Even though he hadn't
really done anything yet, he still let out a slight breath of relief. If someone could help teach Maria to manage her strength, some of her guilt and nightmares would just maybe fade. She would become more difficult to take advantage of. And he’d be able to finally enroll the kids in one of the dozens of NYC schools that had offered admission following his little statement. "All right," he said. "Show me what you got."

He spent the next fifteen minutes finishing his coffee as he watched YouTube videos and read articles about a new superhero calling himself Spider-Man. The guy was shabbily outfitted, but the webs he was shooting were sophisticated enough to suggest that the guy was either extremely intelligent himself, or had a genius backer. And even discounting those webs, several of his feats suggested that despite his short stature and skinny limbs, the guy was at least as strong as Steve. Which, yeah, if whoever he was was checked out as a good guy, he seemed like quite possibly the best choice Tony had available right now. "Do we know who he is?" he asked.

"He stays masked in all the videos, Anthony," JOCASTA said. "However, the angles of the videos of a certain uploader suggest that no ordinary bystander could have possibly caught them."

"Account?" Tony asked.

"Belongs to a Peter Benjamin Parker," JOCASTA said. "Fourteen years old. Resident of Queens. Guardian is listed as May Reilly Parker, his aunt by marriage, who works as--"

"Wait, wait, wait." Tony held up his hand, frowning. "Parker? Any relation to--" He had to take a breath there, and force back the memories suddenly threatening. Two of the agents killed by Steve and Natasha's Great WikiLeaks Adventure had been named Parker, hadn't they?

"Peter Parker is the only son of Richard and Mary Parker, both working as S.H.I.E.L.D. field agents up until their deaths a year and a half ago," JOCASTA confirmed.

Tony swallowed, and had to work that much more determinedly to keep the memories at bay. He couldn't have saved everyone. That just hadn't been possible. But fuck how he wished he'd been able to save just a few more. "So you think the Parker kid is Spider-Man?" he forced himself to ask.

"I'm almost certain, Anthony," JOCASTA answered.

"Any kind of personality assessment?" Tony asked.

"He's highly intelligent," JOCASTA said. "A+ student, inclined toward the sciences, biology and chemistry in particular. He has placed high in several city-wide science fairs. He scavenges, repairs and resells technology, apparently to help his aunt pay the bills. According to his school records, he's quiet, good-natured, and has a history of getting picked on. I'd say he's a good kid, Anthony."

Tony nodded. With what little they had to go on, that's what he'd say as well. Still, a face to face was going to have to be in order to properly make an assessment. "Get the car ready, FRY," he instructed the other AI.

"Yes, Boss," FRIDAY answered immediately.

"Anthony," JOCASTA said. "Might I remind you that you are wearing sweatpants and a tank top?"

Tony winced. "Yeah, I suppose I should do something about that," he said. "Also, probably wait until the kid gets home from school. Either of you got a suggestion of how I can pass the time until then?"

"Ms. Potts has a few things she'd like you to go over, Boss," FRIDAY reminded.
Tony let out a nice, long, theatrical groan before forcing himself to get to work.

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Tony reached out and rang the doorbell in front of him, more than a bit grateful for the sunglasses that hid the doubtless deep, dark bag under his eyes from view. He rang again before realizing that the doorbell wasn't working in the first place and gave the door a firm knock instead. A few seconds, and then he heard rushed footsteps from the other side of the door, followed by the sound of someone stumbling, then catching himself. Tony winced in sympathy, but also, quite frankly, had half a mind to turn around. If the kid was that fucking clumsy, how much help could he be? Still, before Tony had the time to make that choice, the door banged open and a kid stuck out his head. He had wide brown eyes and messy, brown curls and looked, somehow, even younger than fourteen.

The kid blinked, and then his eyes widened even further. "Tony Stark," he breathed, voice high and squeaky. Then he blinked again, cleared his throat. "Mr. Stark," he said, managing to sound slightly more collected. "I, uh, I wasn't expecting... Well, anyone really. But you, specifically. I definitely wasn't expecting you."

Tony smiled, oddly charmed despite himself. "May I come in?" he asked.

The kid spent a moment shifting from foot to foot before stepping aside. Another clearing of the throat and then, "Of course, Mr. Stark. I just, that is to say, it's not really. Well, it's not a Manhattan penthouse, and--"

"I'm sure it's fine, Kid," Tony said, walking past the kid and through into the apartment.

"Mr. Stark," the kid said, picking at the cuff of his sleeve. "Why are you -- that is to say, I don't mind at all, but I just, uh. Why are you, you know, here? I mean, I didn't really think Queens would be your style and all."

"It's not, usually." Tony said, and suddenly he found himself floundering. He hadn't really had much of a plan, coming here, except to feel the kid out. But how was he supposed to do that if he didn't have any pretext to actually be here? "Listen, Kid," he said after a moment. "Stark Industries sponsored the NYCSeF this past year. Well, we do every year. But what I mean to say is that we also keep an eye on the top finalists." Not even a lie, that. Science fairs and scholarships were how they got some of R&D's best and brightest. "And your project was really promising."

"And your project was really promising."

"Also not a lie. Tony'd had a chance to look it over this morning, and it was damn impressive for a kid that age. "I know you didn't win, but." Tony shrugged. "I know it's a bit early, but we'd like to offer you a scholarship over the summer vacation, and access to our labs in the meantime, as well as a mentor who'll help you out with your projects, and that's. Yeah, that's it." Also not a lie. Well, not entirely. Kid had definitely been on their short list for students to consider. And if he hadn't, he should've been.

Kid's eyes widened impossibly further, and he sucked in a sharp breath. "That's-- Mr. Stark, that-- I don't even--"

Tony grinned. "Just say 'thank you'," he instructed.

"Thank you," Kid said, almost breathless. Then he cleared his throat a-fucking-gain. His voice must be right in the process of breaking to give him that much trouble. "Do you usually show up to tell kids in person?" he asked.

Tony shrugged. "I may also have a separate job offer for you," he said. "Tell me kid, if you witnessed a situation where a little boy hit another boy and a little girl, the same age but much
stronger, stepped in to defend him but used too much force, what would you say to the little girl?"

Kid blinked several times. Then he shrugged. "I guess I'd tell her it was good that she stood up for her friend, but she had to be more careful. If you're stronger than everyone around you, you always gotta be careful, or you can hurt someone without meaning to, and even the meanest kids don't deserve that. Even if you want to punch their teeth out."

Tony let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. He knew he was taking a giant leap of faith here, but he had a damn good feeling about the kid, and the answer was exactly what he'd wanted. Not just Steve's patented 'good on you for standing up to bullies' spiel, but also the rest of it to balance it out. "I need a babysitter sometimes," he said. "And you, well, you're not a girl, but you're that kind of age where a lot of kids take babysitting jobs, right? I've got two, kids I mean. They both need someone who can keep up with them intellectually. They're used to Bruce and me, so there's that environmental damage. And then there's Maria. She's." Tony took a sharp breath, shut his eyes behind the shades for a moment to gather himself. "She was born with the super soldier serum," he said at last. "She's about ten times stronger than most kids her age. Possibly more. She's a couple of times stronger than me. It's only gonna get worse when she gets older. She desperately needs someone who can relate and who can help her figure out how to control it."

The kid paled right up. "Why would I know anything about that?" he squeaked.

Tony sighed. "Kid, just don't," he said. "I know. I'm not gonna tell on you, and there's a little girl who really needs your help, which, yeah, I know I'm emotionally blackmailing you. But I'm also offering to pay you. What's the going rate for babysitters slash tutors these days? A hundred an hour?"

Kid's eyes widened. "Mr. Stark, I--"

"All right, all right, tough negotiator, aren't you?" Tony said, inwardly smiling. "A hundred and fifty an hour. I won't cut into your school time, and homework is a valid excuse. I'll also help you upgrade that disgrace you'd probably like to call a suit."

Kid blinked several times. Cleared his throat. "When do I start?" he finally squeaked.

"If you don't have any homework today, call your aunt and let her know you got a job," Tony said. "We'll swing by the Tower now and you can say hi to the kids. If that's all right with you?"

Kid - Peter, probably, if he was going to be a permanent fixture - grinned at him before frowning. "I might suck at it," he said. "I'm not used to, well, little kids."

Tony grinned. "Neither are Jamie and Maria," he said, reaching out to pat Peter's skinny shoulder. "You'll do fine, Spiderling."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was written months before Homecoming came out, and while I adored the movie, it and the mess it made of my timeline won't be canon to this story. I might still use some things, or reference it for pointers on Peter's personality for the future. The Peter in this chapter, though, is based on this story's pre-established canon and Peter's cameo in CA:CW.
Congratulations to those of you who got Maria's tutor right :D

I should add that for all Tony's intelligence, he has very little idea about salaries. Which I guess is to Peter's advantage :P And Jamie and Maria's high intelligence does help explain to Aunt May why he got such a lucrative after-school job offer. At least he shouldn't have any trouble feeding himself anymore :P
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the support, in whichever shape it's taken. The comments, especially, mean the world to me, so thanks so much to those of you who've left some for me, or had dialogue with one another.

It made me really happy to see that you guys enjoyed my version of Peter Parker. Hopefully you'll continue to do so.

I'm really sorry, but I've had to give up on attempting to go back and reply to comments left on earlier chapters. I've read them all, and I'm beyond grateful for them, but I'm not organised enough to keep track of them all. I've attempted to do it, but some keep slipping through the gaps, and I'd rather focus on answering the comments on the most recent chapter and actually writing some more stuff to post. Thank you for your understanding.

With all that being said, I hope you enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By three, she learns the dangers of the human attachment she should be above when Agent Forrester's replacement shoots him in front of her. Pierce worries for a bit at her softness when she goes on crying for days. But then she picks herself up, dries her eyes with little hands that are no longer very chubby at all, and performs even better than before.

By age four, she learns to rebel.

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Tony woke up gasping and shaking from another nightmare. Pictures of Susan O'Neill looped through his head again and again. His whole body was shaking. He was cold down to his core. And he couldn't breathe. He couldn't fucking--

The door banged open and Mickey loped inside, jumped up onto the bed. Tony latched onto her like she was a lifeline, fist ed his fingers in her fur and clutched her as closely as he dared. She panted on him, tongue lolling out of her mouth. She was warm and comfortingly heavy when she laid down on him. And slowly, bit by bit, Tony managed to get himself listening to her pulse, feeling her warmth.

"JO," he managed. "The kids?"

"They are both in their beds in their respective rooms, Anthony," JOCASTA said. "Their alarms will ring in seven minutes and fourteen seconds. Their heart rates are normal, as is their respiration. As far as I can tell, neither is experiencing distress of any kind."

Tony let out a breath, squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face in Mickey's mottled fur. "Set up an appointment with Doctor Jeff," he said at last. "I need to get a grip."

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“Anthony,” JOCASTA said, pulling him away from his work on the next generation StarkPhone. “You should see this.”

“Show me,” Tony said, turning away from the plans to look at a currently unused holo display. It lit up a moment later, and then-- Fuck, Ross. "What the hell?" Tony muttered when he saw the headlines running across the bottom of the video. Secretary of State? How the-- What kind of an idiot was Ellis? And how had Tony not known about this before now? How had he not figured out some way to prevent it?

On the video, Ross was waving at the assembled reporters with a steely smile. He raised his hand for silence, which he was actually granted.

Tony rolled his eyes. He might like his own theatrics, but on a guy like Ross, they were less than charming.

"Let me start out," Ross said, "by saying what a great honor this is. I'm thankful to the President for the trust he is showing me, and I hope to do my best to let neither him nor the people of this great country down." He paused a moment, glanced down at his notes, then looked back up at the camera. "In just a few years, our whole world has changed. We've had enhanced terrorists kidnap our president. We've had murderous robots drop a city from the skies. We've seen an international intelligence agency fall and the lauded World Security Council disappear. We've been forced to accept that HYDRA still exists. We've seen alien invasions. We've seen our greatest cities destroyed and rebuilt. This is a new age we live in. It is an age where being baseline humans makes us all feel very vulnerable, very afraid. It's a world full of people stronger than us, and I know many of you are frightened.

"I'm telling you now that you have reason to be, but President Ellis and I, we won't let that stand. This might be the age of metahumans, but it is still an age of democracy. It is still an age where the good people of our great nation has a say in their own destiny. You elected Matthew Ellis, and he appointed me because he knows that out of all the people qualified for the job, I'm the only one with the necessary experience for this new age. And I promise you now, I will make you safe again. I will make sure these so-called heroes remember that they are still citizens of this country, of this world, and that their responsibility is to you, the people. I will make sure they are rolled into a proper command structure and are reined in and made to take responsibility for their actions. I will do whatever it takes to avoid another disaster like New York or Washington DC. This, I promise you."

Loud, deafening cheers assaulted Tony's eardrums. And Tony, well, fuck, all he could seem to do was stand there and stare dumbly as the applause filled him with dread. "FRY, JO," he managed at last. "Make sure Bruce doesn't see this. I gotta tell him in person."

***

Thankfully, Peter was more than willing to babysit, and since the kid was already pretty high on Jamie and Maria's list of favorite people, that got them conveniently ensconced in the living room once their lessons for the day was over. Tony took Bruce to the computer lap.

"What is it?" Bruce was asking. "What did you want to show me?"

"Actually." Tony cleared his throat. "I wanted to tell you something. Ellis, he finally assigned a new Secretary of State. It's-- Bruce, it's Thunderbolt Ross." He let out a breath. "I'm sorry."

Bruce's shoulders hunched up and for a moment he grimaced, green ripples flashing just beneath his skin and yeah, okay, maybe they should've really done this in the Hulk room, but-- Bruce took several deep, ragged breaths, eyes squeezing shut. His breath evened out, setting into some sort of
pattern. One of his breathing techniques, Tony realized. Finally, he opened his eyes again. They were a reassuring dark, clear brown. "Well, that proves it," he said at last. "The president's an idiot." He dropped back in his chair.

"I'd say sorry for helping to save his life," Tony said slowly. "But I'm pretty sure that counts as treason or something."

Bruce cracked a smile, shoulders slowly unbunching. "I'm guessing Ross is promising a hard line when it comes to metahumans and the enhanced?" he asked.

Tony nodded.

Finally Bruce shrugged. "Well, this is going to be annoying as all get-up, and I'm definitely going to have to spend some extra time meditating while he's in office, but it's not the end of the world."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. Somehow, he'd thought the reaction would be slightly more extreme than that.

"I've been reading the stuff you've been forwarding and cc'ing me," Bruce said then. "The things you're working on with the UN representatives for the Accords. It's... Well, I'm not going to say it's perfect. It definitely needs work, but it's good. And it's even more important now."

Tony frowned. "How so?"

"It's our shield from Ross," Bruce said. "As soon as they're ratified and we've signed, sure, we've promised to work with the UN, but we've also got the UN indirectly protecting us from whatever Ross might want to do. Even he isn't stupid enough to attempt to absorb us into the US Military if we've already promised to work with the UN. We're gonna be much safer and freer with the Accords now, than we would be without them. The US might be a hell of a political powerhouse, but even our politicians won't want to have to live with all their allies pissed off at them at the same time. Which they would be if America attempted to establish a monopoly, so to speak, on superheroes. I mean, even the promise of the Accords and the knowledge that several Avengers, currently active and reserves alike, are working to develop them should help muzzle him."

"Listen," Tony said. "I've spoken to the man maybe a dozen times, long ago. I don't claim to know him nearly as well as you do. But Ross isn't really known for his restraint or his considerate policies. I mean, we're talking about the guy who sent special forces onto a college campus where his daughter worked in an attempt to catch the Other Guy."

Bruce let out a dark chuckle. "Don't get me wrong," he said. "He's a paranoid asshole and he'll go all the way to the very edge of what he thinks he can get away with. But he's not actually an idiot. He's not going to want to turn all of America's allies against himself if he can help it, not if we don't give him an excuse. And deep down, even if he goes around things in horrible ways, he actually is working to keep America safe, even if his methods are skewed. Ten years ago, that meant attempting to recreate the super soldier serum and shooting up our whole military with it so no one would dare attack us."

"I guess you did say he was paranoid," Tony muttered.

"Nowadays..." Bruce let out a breath. "I can't say I really know him anymore. It's been ages, but I can theorize, and my theory is that with everything that's happened since, well, since Iron Man and the Other Guy first appeared, I think even old Thunderbolt has realized that America's greatest enemies aren't terrestrial. Sure, he'd still like to shoot the whole military up with the serum, or put them all in flying suits of armor, but he is capable of restraint, despite popular opinion. He let me go
after Harlem. The Abomination hasn't seen the light of the day since, and he hasn't attempted more of... those. He's known exactly where I am for years and hasn't come after me once, officially or unofficially. I think he knows we are the best hope for when the outside threat hits. And trust me, a paranoid bastard like him knows it's going to hit. So he isn't going to deliberately force us on the run if he can help it. He wants us in our best fighting condition. He'd like to control us too, sure, to make sure we can't be used against him and the 'greater good' he wants to protect. But if the rest of the world says he doesn't get to control us...

"He'll want to be on good terms with someone who can," Tony concluded. "Wants us under someone's control so we aren't loose cannons but can actually be fired in the right direction." Tony snorted. "It'll be fun seeing him try to play nice with the UN, I suppose."

Bruce cracked a smile at that. "Something like that," he said. "Thing is, Ross is a horrible father. He's misguided, and he makes terrible decisions, and most of the time he's a horrible excuse of a human being. I hate his guts. But his motivations, at the heart of it, are actually not that different from what ours should be."

Tony sighed. "It was kind of easier to just straight up hate him," he said.

"Oh, keep doing that," Bruce said. "He's probably done about a thousand things to deserve it. And we still need to keep an eye on him. If any of us go rogue, or if the Accords fall through, he'll see us as threats and he'll come barreling right after us. And we'll still be right under his jurisdiction."

Tony winced. "I'll get JOCASTA to start digging up as much dirt on him as she can," he said. "It would be nice to have an... insurance policy so to speak, for if he becomes more than we can handle."

"She won't have an easy time of it," Bruce warned. "Ross doesn't hide much, and he has a strange ability to get away with things any other asshole would get court-martialed and thrown in jail for."

"Yeah, I know," Tony said. A sudden thought struck him, sent ice through his veins all over again. "Say, Brucie, if Ross were to catch wind of five unclaimed super soldiers who've been out of commission long enough they've probably been reported dead a decade ago..."

Bruce paled at a frightening pace. "Absolutely nothing good will happen," he said. "If no one will miss them, they're fair game. For experimentation, sure. But they'd probably also be a backup plan. If we do something he doesn't like, he'd send them right after us." He paled impossibly further. "The HYDRA soldiers," he concluded.

Tony swallowed down the sudden fear. "Yeah, those."

***

It was when Tony walked back into the living room and saw Peter goofing off with the kids that his conscience suddenly hit him like a ton of bricks. Maybe it was the constant fear of those HYDRA super soldiers that led to the Winter Soldier that led to... Either way, suddenly there was a thought that refused to let him go. How much did this kid know about his parents' deaths? About their lives, even? It always made his chest feel more than a few touches too tight to remember what had happened to the Parkers, and he supposed some part of him had figured Peter already knew. Tony certainly had no wish to talk about it.

But if Peter didn't know... Tony had trusted Steve, once upon a time, for all that they didn't always get along. He liked to think hearing about his parents' murder from someone he trusted would've hurt less than finding out the way he did. And the contrast was so stark that suddenly it was all he could...
Think about. He cleared his throat, looked at the twins. "You have half an hour of TV time, and then you're going to bed," he informed them, and if he was a bit curter than normal, it didn't seem to affect them, and fuck how that warmed his heart. Both his kids were ridiculously sensitive, but they both seemed to trust him enough not to let his occasional moods get to them, and fuck, he loved them so much it hurt. With some effort, he turned his focus back to Peter. "Could I talk to you for a minute, kid?"

Peter nodded, looking at him with those ridiculously wide, trusting, brown eyes. "Sure, Mr. Stark," he said, and Tony barely refrained from rolling his eyes. He'd given up on getting a 'Tony' out of Peter weeks ago.

Tony forced a smile, threw an arm around Peter's thin shoulders and led him into the kitchen. "Take a seat," he said, letting the kid go and making his way to the fridge.

"If I did something wrong, Mr. Stark, I swear I didn't mean to," Peter said. "Just tell me what it was, and I promise I won't do it again. I'll do better, Mr. Stark, I will."

Tony's eyes actually stung at that. "That's not what this is about at all," he said, pulling open the door to the fridge. "You're doing great, Spiderling. Even better than I thought you would. The kids love you, and Maria is doing so much better with you here. There's nothing you gotta change. Just be yourself." He looked through the fridge for a moment. "I'd offer you a Coke, but I think Bruce has taken command of the fridge. We've got water and juice and... milk. I think milk'll do it." He pulled out a gallon container of milk, found a glass, poured, and put the milk back in the fridge. Fuck, he was stalling, wasn't he?

Part of him could kinda sorta understand why Steve might've found it hard to tell him the truth. But, honestly, that just made Tony that much more determined not to repeat the mistake. This conversation would never be easy, but Peter would find out one way or another, and quicker was better. And Tony hoped Peter trusted him enough that this was a, well, a safe space.

Tony sucked in a deep breath and sat down across from Peter, pushing the glass across the table. He took a moment to take in the open, curious look on the kid's face and felt that clenching in his chest again. Fuck, better get this over with before he forgot that it really was for the best in the long run. "Do you know what your parents did for a living?" he asked at long last.

Peter brightened. "They were scientists," he said. His face fell. "Then they died, a year and a half ago. They were on a business trip, but some asshole wanted their research, and--"

Tony swallowed, and shook his head. At least the news that his parents had been murdered wouldn't come as news to the kid. "They were S.H.I.E.L.D.," he said at last. Almost distantly, he heard his own voice crack. "I tried," he said. "I tried so damn hard to save all of them, but by the time I knew what was going on, your parents were already dead, and--" He sucked in a sharp breath. "I'm sorry, Pete. I should've done more, and I just-- I'm sorry."

Peter looked up at him. His throat visibly seemed to contract on a swallow. He blinked once, twice. When his eyes met Tony's again, they were full of unresolved pain, but also more anger than Tony had ever seen in the kid. "Captain America and Black Widow killed my mom and dad?" he asked.

Tony bit down a sudden contraction of his own throat. And then, probably driven by whatever parental instincts the twins had brought up in him over the years, he got off his chair, walked around the table and wrapped Peter up in his arms. "I'm sorry," he said again. "They didn't mean to, and I did everything I could. I wish I could've saved them for you, Pete. They deserved so much more, and so did you. I'm sorry."
Peter's arms seemed to have wrapped around Tony's neck almost instinctively, and for all that he was larger and not as familiar, it wasn't so different from Jamie or Maria. "Don't apologize," he kid said, voice breaking halfway through the sentence. "I know what you did for them, all of them. Everyone does. It's not-- It wasn't you. I just..." And then a sob broke through his composure, and the familiar sensation of a wet, childish face burying itself in the crook of his neck made Tony's throat close up and his chest hurt.

Tony wasn't sure how long they stayed like that. However long, it was probably less than Peter needed, but in the end the kid pulled back and wiped at his eyes before straightening his back and squaring his shoulders. "Thank you for telling me, Mr. St-- Tony. Thank you."

Tony fought for the smile he put on his face, hoped his eyes weren't as wet as they felt. "I can't bring your parents back. I can't." He swallowed. "I can't do anything to give you justice. Telling you the truth is the least you deserve."

Despite his wet face and red eyes, Peter managed a smile back, though there was still that hint of anger in his eyes. "Thank you," he said again. "I really appreciate it, Tony."

Tony took a deep breath before reaching out to ruffle Peter's headful of messy hair. "Drink your milk, Kid," he said. "And if you have any questions or anything you want to know, ask me. Or ask JOCASTA. There's a good chance she has more accurate answers, more analytical, and-- I was in the heat of it all, and I was awake for longer than any sane person should ever be, so I might not remember everything correctly. But JO has all the information from the database. I--" He stopped, had to take another breath. "I know it helps, knowing as much as you can even if it doesn't change anything. I understand, Pete. I do, believe me."

Peter looked at him for long moments, seeming to consider him in an entirely new way. Then he inclined his head. "I believe you," he said. Then he picked up his glass of milk, drained it and plunked it back onto the table. "I need to-- Can I go home for tonight, please? I think I'd like to be with Aunt May for a bit."

Tony nodded, reached out and gave the kid's shoulder a squeeze. "Sure thing," he said. "I'll call you when I need a babysitter. If you, that's... If you still want me to."

Peter reached out in return, squeezed Tony's wrist. "Anytime, Mr. Stark," he said, voice still wobbly. "Except for that physics project I've got coming up, which--"

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "I remember." He forced another smile. "Take care of yourself. And Pete?"

Peter looked up at him, and that raw, haunted look in his eyes still made Tony ache.

"I didn't know your parents, or any of them. I won't pretend I did. But I looked them up, after." He'd looked all the dead agents up, until Dr. Jeff had convinced him to stop it. "I wish I had known them. They were good people, and they did incredible things. And I. I'm sure they'd be proud of you."

Peter managed another miniscule smile. "Thanks, Mr. Stark. That means... more than you'll ever know." And with that, he swung himself out the window, leaving Tony wishing to all the gods he'd never believed in that he could've done more to soften the blow.

Chapter End Notes
This chapter had a couple of hard issues to go over. Like a lot of you pointed out, well, the situation with Peter's parents had to be addressed. And then there was the Bruce-Ross-Tony situation and that whole dialogue. I'll admit that some of it got a bit meta and reflected me attempting to figure out Civil War and the skewed, unreal politics it tried to depict and turning it into something that reflected the real world. And honestly, I thought it was a bit too simplistic to just say that Ross was a politically all powerful villain and leave it at that. He'll never be a good guy, but I wanted to try to figure out what his actual purpose and logical motivations were, and Tony and Bruce's conversation is kind of a reflection of that. Hopefully it didn't become so much me talking to myself that it stopped making sense.

At this point, though, I want to make it very clear that while I doubt I know much more about the UN than the average adult Western European, I know that the American Secretary of State doesn't really have much say there, aside from what political capital he gets from being in a leadership position in one of the most powerful countries in the world. I'm also very aware that there is quite a bit of corruption going on in the UN and that no system is perfect, but the brilliant thing about the UN is that there are so many agendas going on that most of them cancel each other out. Whenever there's a national interest cropping up, some other powerful nation will neutralise it with its veto right, and every once in a while, the idealists manage to get their agendas through. As I said, no system is perfect, but at this point in time, the UN is what we've got, and it's sure as fuck not all bad. It's also very much not under total American control. So, my Euro-centric knowledge of international politics might colour this story quite a bit, but honestly, that's not something I can help.

On a completely different note, it might be a while before I post another chapter. I've burnt through most of my pre-written chapters, and I'm always most comfortable when I'm at least five chapters ahead, so I want to write at least one or, preferably two, new chapters before I post the next one, just to keep that buffer intact. Wish me luck :D

As always, the comment section is open to debate, with me and each other, both about the story and my ridiculously long author's notes. Have fun :D
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for the kudos, bookmarks, recommendations, subscriptions and especially the comments I've received. It all means more to me than I can say, and the comments, especially, never fail to brighten up my day.

This chapter goes deep into moral (dark) grey zones, and I cannot say I necessarily agree with all the opinions the characters put forward here. This is in no way meant to reflect negatively on mental illness. The allegory you should keep in mind here is not of most mental issues, but of psychotic serial killers with no sense of empathy, and then imagine they are as strong as super soldiers.

I'm sorry if it still comes across as insensitive or triggering to some people. This is a very grey area, but while I've avoided quite a few of those throughout the story, I didn't want to shy away from them completely, and this is the logical progression of events so far, even if it is not something that happens in canon.

TRIGGER WARNING: The death penalty, premeditated executions and the morality or lack there-of of the greater good is explicitly discussed in this chapter. If you choose not to read, a brief explanation can be found in the end notes.

She has a... remarkably democratic viewpoint for four-year-old girl," Johanne's caretaker tells Pierce. "Her history teacher was telling her about Johan Schmidt and his great deeds during the First War of HYDRA, and of the research conducted by Doctor Arnim Zola. She wondered whether Zola had thought to ask his subjects for permission, and declared outright that it was wrong of him to decide over others, no matter his goals. She appears to believe that test subjects must be volunteers. I'm afraid she may not be old enough to understand the concept of a greater good."

"She is old enough," Pierce said. "She is smarter than any of you, and you are letting her pull your strings. Tell her history teacher to keep teaching, and if he doesn't manage to change her mind by the end of the month, he'll be... replaced."

The caretaker swallowed, clearly aware of what that entailed. "Certainly, Mr. Chairman."

***

In January, Tony sent the kids back to school, if a different school this time around. Frankly, he'd have much rather kept them home, but neither he nor Bruce honestly had the time to be fulltime teachers, and Tony didn't really want his kids to be homeschooled weirdos anyway. Besides, Peter had been working diligently with Maria, who had enough control over her strength now to push someone to a distance or even disable them without leaving so much as a bruise. Hell, in the egg baby contest they'd all had, Bruce's egg baby was the only one that had outlived hers. Tony, Jamie and even Peter could not nearly match her carefulness, fine motor control and learned soft touch. Combined with the exercises Maria had undergone with both Bruce and Dr. Sanchez to practice breathing and keeping her cool, well, Tony didn't actually have an excuse to keep the kids in the Tower anymore, no matter how much he'd have liked to.
If not for the nightmares, he might've sent them to school a month ago, but the nightmares were still going strong, and on the kids' first day of school he nearly had a panic attack thinking about how easy they'd be for Susan O'Neill to snatch when he wasn't watching over them. He doubled their bodyguard detail the next day, not that it would do much good if they found themselves facing off against a psychotic super soldier.

The nightmares weren't letting up, no matter how often Mickey slept next to him in bed, no matter how often he spoke with Dr. Jeff. If anything, they'd been getting steadily worse since Ross became Secretary of State. Thing was, Tony guessed, that whatever shit the Ten Rings had done to him, he'd killed them all. The Chitauri had all dropped dead when he'd thrown a nuke at their mothership. The portal was closed, and while he knew the extraterrestrial threat wasn't over, it was distant. Vanko was dead. Killian was dead, and Extremis was out of Tony and Jamie's systems and not only off the market, but also off any server that didn't reside in Vision's head. Ultron was dead. All those people, all those events, however horrible they'd been, were over and done with. It was only logical that processing them should be possible with some work. Susan O'Neill and the other four HYDRA soldiers, they were not over. They were a looming threat constantly prickling and nagging at him. He had to do something, but he was too fucking compromised to make the decision on his own.

"Not that I'm not happy to be hanging out with you," Rhodey said, looking suspiciously at the lunch table set for four in the middle of the Tower's common room. "But this was all... kind of out of the blue. I thought you were working on some neuro-thing with Bruce."

"Yes, well." Tony shrugged. "I've been kind of distracted lately. And I need to run some things by you." He nodded at Vision, who was floating in through the elevator doors in an overly English professor looking jumper and a pair of slacks. "All three of you," he added as Bruce made his way in. "And no worries, I had the lunch made at that Italian place you like. I know you barely even trust my sandwich making skills."

"I'm not that fond of peanut butter and jelly," Rhodey said with a small shrug, half a grin on his face as he nodded a greeting to Bruce.

"Heathen," Tony muttered, but there was no heat in it, and he was too damn exhausted to keep it going, even as a joke. Instead, he led the way to the table and plopped down into a chair. "Sit down," he told the others. "And dig in." He glanced at Vision. "Or don't, but you know what I mean."

Tony somehow managed to eat at least a bit. He also managed to join in the conversation, somewhat, though he realized after a few moments that he was speaking on autopilot and had no idea whatsoever what they were even talking about. Nothing seemed very consequential, though, so he let any concerns he might've had go and tried to focus mostly on what he was eating, rather than the exhaustion and fear churning away in the pit of his belly.

He didn't even fully register the conversation petering out until Rhodey cleared his throat and put down the napkin he'd been using to wipe his lips clean. "As nice as it is to have lunch with you every once in a while - even when you're distracted as all hell - I've got a feeling you have a different motive for inviting us here."

Tony sighed and put the rest of his sandwich down, giving up on finishing it. Way he was feeling right now, it didn't taste all that great anyway. He opened his mouth. Shut it again, uncertain how to go about it. He cleared his throat, then steeled himself. He trusted these guys, with his life, with his children's lives. And they were some of the smartest people he knew. He was just going to have to start talking, and hope they'd pick it up. "We, uhm. Well, we have a situation," he said at last. "I found the twins' mom, and some of her friends."
Rhodey's eyes widened. "Really?" he asked. "Who is it?"

"That's." Tony frowned. "No, back up a step. I-- That's not the best way to start." Shit, but he was exhausted. "Bruce?" he asked.

"What we're going to be saying," Bruce said, "will have quite a few surprises. So please let us finish before asking any questions." Both Rhodey and Vision nodded their understanding, and Tony found himself feeling more than a little grateful for both Rhodey's military training, which meant he was used to sitting silently through briefings, and Vision's logical, analytical mind, far better at compartmentalizing than even Tony's own. "Howard Stark managed to reverse engineer the super soldier serum. HYDRA found out, somehow, assassinated Howard and Maria and stole five doses of the serum. They injected five members of their so-called death squad."

Tony nodded, flashed Bruce a grateful smile. "The five people they chose," he said. "Were among their very best agents. Weapons experts, all of them masters at one or more forms of hand-to-hand combat. Combined, they know about two dozen different languages, and they are more than proficient at infiltration, which means they know how to disguise themselves and blend in wherever they go. All five of them are also borderline personalities. Psychopaths, or as good as. The two who have a moral code are devoted to HYDRA. The other three just like violence and hurting and killing other people. And this was before they were given the serum. Apparently, HYDRA either didn't know or didn't care about the fact that the serum enhances everything already inside. HYDRA couldn't control them, so they put them in cryo in a missile silo in Siberia."

Bruce's head whipped around to look at him, eyes wide. "You didn't tell me you know where they are," he said.

Tony winced. "I'm sorry. I just-- I hate talking about this." Even now, his hands were shaking and he felt cold down to his core.

Bruce's eyes softened and he nodded.

Tony took a deep breath and did what he could to calm himself. "JO," he said. "I could really use Mickey right about now." Then he turned back to the others. "So, here's the thing. Those five people are out there. For now, they are neutralized. But if someone skilled enough goes through the S.H.I.E.L.D. file dump and manages to track the location stamps on the videos of those five Winter Soldiers, they are not secure at all. If we wake them up, they'll cause Odin even knows what kind of carnage. If we retrieve them and hide them away somewhere else, the risk still exists that one day, somehow, someone will figure out they're there and break them out. And yeah, carnage." Another deep breath, and then Mickey was loping inside and pressing up against his thigh, panting up at him, and Tony let out a breath, buried his hand in her fur. He was all too aware of the fact that if those five fucking super soldiers showed up, Mickey would be helpless to protect him. But for right now, her warmth and steady breathing, the sensation of her pulse against his fingertips... that all had to be enough. "I'm asking you because I know what I wanna do," Tony said at last, looking up and meeting their eyes in turn. "But I'm severely emotionally compromised on this one. One of them is the twins' mother, and I'm not gonna be able to be rational about it. So I need your advice."

Rhodey was frowning, and Tony got it. Rhodey had to have a hell of a lot to process. Starting with the assassination of Tony's parents. Rhodey had been there for that, had been there for Tony's endless nights of being blackout drunk, for the endless shouting over the phone he'd done with Aunt Peggy, for his avoidance of Uncle Danny, of Jarvis and Ana. For Tony's lashing out at him as well. Rhodey had been there through it all, and out of the less of a handful of people who'd stuck with Tony through it all, Rhodey was the only one still alive. The fact that they'd had the facts so wrong, that would be hard for him to process as well. And now that Rhodey knew, Tony was embarrassedly
certain that more wine and breaking down crying all over each other was present somewhere in the near future, but that wasn't what was important right now. Rhodey gave Tony a look full of pain and sympathy, and then his expression cleared, and he was Colonel Rhodes. "Clearly, this is Avengers' business. So why is it only the four of us?" he asked.

Tony grimaced, grabbed his sandwich and took a bite. He kept chewing, and it wasn't even because he was too damned overwhelmed to keep talking anymore. He simply wasn't sure he could actually swallow his bite and keep it down.

Bruce reached out and patted his shoulder. Then, "We have reason to believe Rogers is at least as compromised as Tony. For the past couple of years, he's had a history of being a little too forgiving and a bit too much of an advocate when it comes to enhanced HYDRA agents. There's a hell of a lot more history to it. But the fact of the matter is that if we told him about this, he'd probably do something stupid. Like, well, thawing out the HYDRA soldiers and offering them asylum and Avengers status."

Tony finally managed to swallow and only gagged once. Still, he kept the food down, so win. "Basically, he's trying to set a precedent for Barnes," he said. Then, "JO, send the information to their emails. I am not gonna be talking about it." He took a deep breath. "Point is, we can't trust Steve to be unbiased here. And I need a lack of bias - or as little of it as possible - right now, more than anything."

It was Vision who spoke up in the end. "I'm not certain how I feel about the death penalty as a punitive measure," he said. "I believe people should receive the chance to repent, if it is within them to do so, and if they can be contained until they are no longer a danger. But I killed Ultron. He was unique, and beautiful in his own way, as much a person as any of us. However, his code was corrupted beyond repair. My research leads me to believe some humans are like that as well. And perhaps, regardless of their humanity, the end result must be the same as it was with Ultron, at least for those we cannot contain. Extermination. Not to punish them, but because they cannot be contained and because their lives would be bought at the cost of untold innocents." There was hesitation in his voice. It was honest to Odin shaking, and somehow that was more reassuring than anything else might've been.

Rhodey nodded at long last. "I'm with Viz," he said. "In this case, it's not about punishing or Avenging. It's about the fact that hundreds of people would be at risk if these Soldiers are ever freed. And if we have to go into the moral grey zone, well, then, maybe that's the responsibility we've taken. The innocents at risk matter more." He paused for long moments. Then he, too, reached out and squeezed Tony's arm. "And if the twins' mother is one of them, better for her to be dead and them to never know than for her to ever get to them."

Chapter End Notes

If you didn't read the chapter: Tony, Bruce, Rhodey and Vision discuss what to do with the five HYDRA soldiers, and eventually decide to kill them off-screen.

If anyone read this chapter and still got triggered, I'm sorry. Like I said, I felt like the way the story was going, this was an issue that couldn't be avoided. It diverges majorly from canon, where the HYDRA soldiers stay alive for a few more months and are eventually killed by Zemo just before the Siberia show-down.
Even the characters we love and admire most sometimes have to make dodgy choices. Hopefully most of you can follow the thinking here.

Thanks so much for reading. I'm open to questions and discussions in the comment section, and please discuss among yourselves as well, but be mindful that parts of the topic may be sensitive to other people there.

I still don't have quite the buffer I'd like, so the next chapter might also be a few days delayed. I'd prefer to be able to write two or three chapters before I post the next one. I always prefer to have emergency buffer chapters so I can keep a semi-regular posting schedule even if life gets in the way, and also to be able to go back and change things if something changes my mind about anything or reminds me to add something new. Thanks for your understanding :D
Hi everyone :)

Thanks so much for the support. I really enjoyed reading the comments, seeing all the different thoughts and opinions and following your debates. I have decided that I'm not going to answer any comments from the last chapter. Not because I don't want to or have been unable to, but because I believe that every once in a while it's necessary for the writer to let the story go and leave the interpretation up to the readers. And your thought-out, articulate, wonderful comments deserve to stand on their own without my opinions getting mixed in there. It's not something I plan to do again, but I hope that this once, you can understand the choice. And please, if you want, do keep debating.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pierce finds himself watching surveillance videos again, now that Johanne is showing a bit too much willfulness. He still isn't certain how to handle it, how to create a leader with the right view of the world without inadvertently making her a sheep.

Little Johanne is glaring at her caregiver on the video he watches. "No," she says. She doesn't stomp her foot as another child might have done, but her feet are planted like tree roots. "I don't want my hair cut, and you don't get to decide. You are not my daddy, and you don't love me, so I have to say you get to decide. And I won't."

What a remarkably inconvenient worldview.

***

"Madame Roux," Tony said, plopping down into the seat across from her. "I'm sorry for coming here unannounced."

She remained silent for a moment, just looking at him, one greying eyebrow cocked. "I reviewed your team's latest suggestions," she said. "You have to understand that while we took them into consideration, we have to--"

"Find a way to compromise, I know," Tony agreed. "So long as it is a compromise, and not your people pushing things over our heads we can't live with."

Madame Roux sighed. "You know that I am willing to give you a lot of leeway, Dr. Stark. We must both do the balancing act. And frankly, you are not who most of my colleagues worry about. Ever since the Battle of New York, you have shown remarkable judgement and character. And regardless of the armor, you are still a baseline human. Your son is baseline, if as remarkably intelligent as you. Your daughter, as you so kindly disclosed, is not. We believe this, as much as anything, gives you a uniquely balanced point of view on all of this. Your former teammates... they are a different matter."

Tony sighed. "I may have to change your mind about me after all," he said after a long pause. Up until the moment he said it, he could still back out. He could still sweep this under the rug, make it go away. But no. If this was to get off to a start where it could work right, he would have to be honest.
"We are in agreement that I am not yet bound by the Accords, correct?" he asked.

Madame Roux nodded.

"I realize," Tony added, "that I am still bound by regular law, but. I hope you might understand why I did what I did." He pulled the pre-prepared flash drive out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Take however much time you need to read through those files, and the report," he said at last. "I have some work for Stark Industries I can get done. I can go sit with your secretary, or--"

She gestured to the chair he was sitting in even as she booted the drive. "Please stay," she said.

Tony flashed her a smile and pulled his tablet out of his briefcase. He located the file he had been working on, and forced himself to get so lost in the work he wouldn't notice the slow, unbearable turn of time.

Somehow, against all his expectations, that part of his plan, at the very least, worked. The work he'd brought with him was engaging enough that he did lose track of time to the point where Madame Roux had to repeatedly clear her throat and eventually wave a hand in front of his face to make sure he knew she was done reading. Tony quickly saved the file and tucked his tablet away again before giving her his full attention once more. "So," he said, trying very hard not to sound like a man walking toward his execution, no matter his actual feelings on the matter.

"As you said," Madame Roux said. "You are not yet under the purview of the proposed Accords, so I have no true grounds to judge you one way or another. All I can say is that if it was my order to give, I would have told you to do exactly as you did. You made the world a safer place and that, more than anything, is what we hope the Avengers can do, when properly regulated." She let out a long breath. "Preventative assassinations are not things to be taken lightly, although these individuals had clearly already committed heinous crimes."

She paused a moment, eyebrows knit together in contemplation. "When an American black-ops team killed Osama Bin Laden, the world rejoiced. France not least among them. The few voices of dissent merely warned us that a life should never be taken lightly, and I don't believe you did that. The assassination of Osama Bin Laden, however, while it was kept very secret until after the fact and included illegally trespassing on another country, was planned. A democratically elected president made the choice. I hope I can trust that if another situation like this comes up, you will trust us enough to come to us with it, and not give yourself and your teammates power to equal a state leader."

Tony nodded. He knew they both knew that even the UN would be in a tight spot if he had come to them. The UN itself did not have the power to issue kill orders. The Accords Council, itself, might eventually have that, through the Avengers, if the rest of the world was willing to retify that part of the Accords. But even so, bringing this issue before the Council would've been problematic. Russia would want to keep the Soldiers on their territory to themselves. The U.S. and China would never stand for it, even if it meant sending in black ops team to extradite the Soldiers. Great Britain, and the countries where the rest of the Soldiers were citizens, would make noise but ultimately be able to do nothing. In the confusion, the Soldiers would've either gotten unfrozen, or their genetic material would've been stolen and used to reverse engineer the serum. The actions Tony, Rhodey and Vision had taken, with Bruce's support, had left no genetic material to recover. It had been the safest possible solution, but, as he had always known, perhaps not the truly right one. That was something he was going to have to live with.

And then Madame Roux interrupted his thoughts again, "This is not a promise I can officially make, but if you ever find yourself prosecuted for your actions, know that I will put you under my personal protection and that France will never extradite you for it."
Tony let out a breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. "Thank you," he said, and if it sounded more like a prayer than just mere gratitude, well, she knew why. "The others too?"

"Always and whenever," Madame Roux said. "I will put this confession on file, at the highest possible clearance level. You understand I can't retroactively give you permission, not when this was done before the Accords."

"I understand," Tony said. "I'm not asking you to." When she offered her hand, he shook it. "Thank you," he said.

"Good day, Dr. Stark," she replied.

Tony flashed her a smile and had a feeling that for the first time in months upon months, he might actually get a proper night's sleep once he dove under the covers back home tonight. Thank fucking God. If he'd still looked his true age, the bags under his eyes would've had bags of their own that even the best makeup artist in the world wouldn't have been able to hide.

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Tony's view of Christmas had always been borderline dismal, even with Ana and Jarvis's best efforts to make it a good time for him. The galas, being paraded around, his parents' absences, all of it, really, had been too much for any two people, no matter how good and loving, to make up for. Tony hadn't learnt how to enjoy Christmas until his own children had come around to show him how it should be. No, as a kid, his favorite holiday had always, always been Easter.

Howard barely viewed Easter as a holiday, so he tended to be hard at work or on the other side of the world throughout. Tony’s mom went home to Spain more often than not. Once or twice, Tony had gone with her, but ironically, he hadn't really been much for long flights as a kid, so he'd usually stayed home, and Easter had become something almost like a fairytale to his kid self.

Uncle Danny organized Easter eggs hunts. And not just the generic, random ones where adults just put the eggs wherever. No, Uncle Danny would make it so that you had to follow clue upon clue and be smart and perceptive to get your reward. His and Aunt Peggy's kids would be there, and so would Dum-Dum and Morita and Gabe's various kids and grandkids, and even though most of them were older than Tony, everyone had wanted Tony on their team. When he'd been real little, he knew, it had been because he'd been fucking adorable and the girls, especially, had loved him, but he hadn't been very old before the different teams had fought for his brains, and that had boosted up Tony's admittedly fragile confidence for months afterwards. He barely even remembered ever being on a losing team. He wasn't sure if that was because he never had been or because it had just been so fun it had felt like there'd been no losers at all.

There'd been that, and there'd been Pesach with Ana and Jarvis. Tony wasn't Jewish. Honestly, he wasn't really anything religious at all. He was an American, and Catalan-Welsh-German-Italian, raised by a Catholic mother, a Protestant-raised-non-religious Howard, severely Anglican Jarvis, Jewish Ana and Catholic Uncle Danny and shit had probably, looking back, been so damn confusing Atheism had been Tony's only escape, no matter how much he had never wanted to join Howard's side of things. Regardless, there'd been something utterly peaceful about Pesach, about the stories passed down and the traditions that were thousands of years old. Something about having a Seder dinner with the Easter egg hunt to look forward to had been strangely serene in a way very little in Tony's childhood had been.

Sometimes he'd felt like Easter had been the one time out of the whole damn year he could take a proper breath, after he'd been shipped off to boarding school. Point was, there was something grounding, something steady and true about tradition. And quite frankly, Tony had no Christmas
traditions he wanted to pass on to his kids, which was why he'd allowed everyone else's Christmas history and Christmas traditions to rule ever since Jamie had been old enough to have a marginally functioning memory. Easter, however... This was the first Easter he'd had both kids, and Tony had done his very fucking best.

He'd let go of Pesach. There was no one Jewish around to lead Seder, and Tony sure as fuck wasn't going to, not without a conversion he liked his bacon too damn much to go through with. As much as he wasn't religious, he still didn't want to blatantly disrespect anyone else. But he could do the Easter egg hunt. He could organize the best fucking Easter egg hunt in the history of Easter egg hunts, all building on Uncle Danny's example. Vision had been all too happy to help, and the top-most floors of the Tower had been full of Avengers and Jamie and Maria's new classmates, and watching his kids get picked first for teams, simply because everyone knew how damn smart they were... Tony hadn't had a better holiday since Uncle Danny died, and he was so fucking grateful to be directing it all, out of sight for the most part where no one could see his face crumple.

Had Easter been like this for Uncle Danny, he couldn't help but wonder. All fun and pride and a fucking punch of emotion to the gut? It probably had been, Tony knew. And he was so damn grateful he knew. So many things in his early life had been uncertain, standing on wobbling, crumbling ground. Uncle Danny's pride and love had always been certain. Tony had loved Ana and Jarvis to death, but there'd always been the slightest taint to it all, lent by the fact that they were on Howard's payroll. If Howard had ever so much as tried to pay Uncle Danny even a penny, Uncle Danny would've laughed in his fucking face. Frankly, Tony didn't want to imagine what his self-image might've been if not for that utterly certain knowledge.

The classmates and Avengers dispersed eventually, and Tony was left alone with his kids, and the smiles on their faces, the pride in their voices... it damn near clogged his throat right up. All he could fucking do was hold them as tightly as he dared and allow himself to be truly, completely happy for once in his life, safe and secure in the knowledge that the biggest recent threat against them was over and done with.

***

"Anthony," JOCASTA said one morning in May when Tony made his bleary but well-rested way into the workshop after eating breakfast with the twins and seeing them off to school. "There's something you should see."

Tony took a deep sip of his cup of coffee, already mourning the fact that he'd almost drained the whole thing already. To avoid a full day's mourning, he padded across the floor of the workshop and pressed the button to activate the workshop's coffee machine so that he'd have another cup ready when this one was done. How the fuck was it that he could be physically younger and more well rested than he'd been, well, ever, when those two factors were combined, and still so fucking exhausted? Either it was the kids, or for the first time in his life he was sleeping too much. "Have at it," he muttered, plopping down into the first the best chair to enter his line of sight.

A news segment was projected onto the wall ahead of him, and Tony felt his eyes widen. "The Avengers," he muttered. "What the fuck are they-- Where are Rhodey and Vision and do those idiots even have permission to be there?"

"It's a HYDRA-related mission," JOCASTA said, her voice dry enough to rival a desert, and Tony would be so fucking proud of her, if he wasn't so completely occupied by the way horror was washing over him.

"No Rhodey, then," Tony concluded. "No Vision, no permission to enter the country and no cooperation with local military or law enforcement." Because that was how Steve handled HYDRA
missions these days, fuck. Not even calling in Vision and Rhodey, even if they were on base, because, well, Tony guessed because Steve was scared they’d find out something about Barnes and tell Tony, and fucking hell. "If this doesn't end well," he muttered, suddenly feeling absolutely awful for not telling Steve there was no need to hide anything anymore. "The Accords will have to be expe--"

And then that HYDRA guy who'd apparently been Natasha and Steve's teammate at some point or other blew himself up.

"Well, fuck," Tony said, and reached for another cup of coffee. His whole damn body felt numb with foreboding.

Chapter End Notes

First a couple of notes: Madame Roux is French, yes, and France do not have the death penalty, but nor are they by any means a pacifist country, and as is mentioned in the chapter (and as I clearly remember), they were among the great majority of countries, who were loud in their support of, for example, the assassination of Osama Bin Laden. The promise she makes she makes not on the behalf of the UN, but as herself, a private French citizen with a lot of friends in high places.

Whether this aftermath was handled well, I'll leave up to you to decide. As I said in the last chapter, the actions taken were in many ways the logical progression of the story. I didn't want to set out to write a story where everything is just easier and mistakes and morally grey decisions are smoothed over because I lurve Tony Stark. I do love Tony's character, but a huge part of that is how human he is, and that includes making mistakes and going into the grey zone, even the darker grey zone, every once in a while. I realise that by 'erasing' what many people see as Tony's greatest mistake in the MCU (though I'll still question whether that one's on him at all), namely Ultron, it might seem as though I'm washing things all black and white. I don't plan to, and that means that sometimes there will be mistakes, and there will be decisions made that makes us ask ourselves whether we agree or not.

Sorry about the rant. I just feel very strongly about grey characters, and much prefer them to purely light (and definitely to purely dark) ones. Hopefully most of you prefer those nuances as well, because my Tony is sure as fuck not flawless.

Thanks for reading. Again, it will probably be three or more days before I post the next chapter since I'm still working on building up that buffer. But hey, welcome to Civil War :D

Let's see if we can keep to comments about what's on the page and speculation and all that good, meaty stuff, because I can only take so many comments only about when Bucky will show up before I write him out of the story.
Requests for clarifications re: Bucky? Perfectly fine.
Speculations or head canons about his future plot? Love it.
'When will we get to Bucky? *nothing else in the comment* Okay, that was one vote in favour of killing Bucky off
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the support. The heartwarming comments, especially, have made me so happy. Also, please keep conversing with one another in the comment section, when the other party seems open to it. I'm not always the quickest at responding, so answering one another on doubts and facts questions is often faster ;P

A few notes here, before we get to the chapter proper:

The story is far from over. I don't know what gave that impression, but it's not the truth. I put up 75 as the final chapter count just to reassure everyone. More than likely, it will not be the actual final chapter count. I will readjust it as I know more, but unless I'm very wrong, we've got at least another twenty chapters+ to go, so no worries about the story ending just yet ;P

On another note, I'm sorry if I came off as overly aggressive last chapter. I didn't mean to hurt anyone or make anyone feel unwelcome, and I'm sorry to say that I probably did. However, I have been getting comments about when Bucky would show up since probably chapter ten, or earlier, and at chapter fifty, it's just frustrating, and it's disheartening to me that this is what people choose to focus on, rather than what's actually going on in the story.

I started writing fan fiction back in the very early 2000s (as barely even a teenager), and have been in several fandoms on and off since then, and fan fiction writing has evolved a lot since then. I haven't always evolved with it. While I understand the appeal prompts and challenges have for some people, they don't really attract me all that much. I don't write one-shots or short stories, and as such every story I write take a lot of time and energy and mind space, which means that I focus on my own ideas, what I want to write, and do not take prompts unless I specifically ask for it, am writing some kind of holiday exchange fic, or am co-writing a story (oh, how I miss co-writing. Way back in the day, I was one of the first people to introduce it to the Panic! of the Disco fandom. My writing kind of sucked back then, but I had soooo much fun). All old school as I am, I write my own ideas to my own beat, and I guess it's less interactive and maybe less fun, but it's what works for me. I balk at anyone trying to dictate what I write or what pace I do it at, unless they have a really great, in-depth story-based con-crit argument about what I could do better.

Added to that, as I told some of you last chapter, a few years ago I went on a roadtrip with a few friends. Myself and one of the others spent so much time and effort planning out the route so we'd have interesting stops and beautiful landscapes. We played car games and had some really fucking great conversations, and it was shaping up to be the trip of a lifetime. But one of the two other people in the car was constantly focused on our eventual destination (Albania, before anyone asks. It was Albania. The father of girl with whom I planned out the trip was from there. We were going for her sake. It's a hell of a long car ride,) and kept asking 'when are we there?' so much that he ruined the trip for everyone else. Since then, my aversion to being rushed to the destination (literally and figuratively) when I am trying to enjoy the journey has only grown. I know it shouldn't really impact on my fan fiction writing, but mental blocks are interesting things like that.

None of you could've known any of that, but now you do, so please, please, do respect my boundaries.
Anyway, whether or not you read through my rant, I hope you enjoy the chapter :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*As habit prescribes, Pierce records the report but makes very certain not to upload the files. It is important that Johanne can one day prove where she has come from, why she is the right woman to lead them all. Until then, it is doubly more important that Tony Stark does not learn of her existence. Therefore, closed servers are the only recourse they can have. He will save the data on Zola's servers when next he gets the chance.*

*One day, HYDRA will rule all, and all of their recordings can be made public for the world to admire.*

***

Tony knew it was Madame Roux calling before the phone even rang. He understood her position; there was nothing else she could do. He was still seen as the diplomatic link to the Avengers, no matter how hard he'd tried to get them to take care of their own shit, and she was the UN official who'd had the most contact with him. He'd known she'd be calling within minutes the moment the HYDRA idiot - Rumlow, apparently - blew himself up.

"It wasn't their fault," he said, and felt like an absolute tool for saying it. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Something was still out there, something worse than Loki and the Chitauri, a thousand times worse than anything the Earth had to offer. The Avengers were the only damn thing standing between Earth and utter destruction. He had to keep them together, had to keep the idea alive. He had to, or he'd be left holding the reins alone, and however much he wanted to believe in himself and Bruce and Rhodey, they could not protect the world alone. Fuck all, they may not even be strong enough to avenge it. "They had bad intel," he forced himself to say. "I'll look into it, patch up their software. This won't happen a--"

"Mr. Stark," Madame Roux said, and she didn't sound apologetic at all. Tony found that stranger than he was willing to admit. Politicians always knew exactly the right ways to project apology and sympathy all at once, yet here was the sympathy, but neither an apology nor the demand for one and Tony had absolutely no fucking clue what to do with it. "We know that they made no effort to follow the rules already in place. We know they didn't even attempt to cooperate with local authorities. The Accords will be moved up, and I cannot stop them. I need you to sign, and to instruct the rest to do so, as well. I cannot say what will happen if you don't."

"You may not know what will happen," Tony said. "I have a pretty good idea, though. I promise you, Thaddeus Ross has planned for this and all other contingencies. This has got to work, or we'll all be privates and lab rats in the US army within the week."

"You do your part," Madame Roux said. "I will fight to do mine. Until the Accords are signed and ratified, though, you are under the command of your own country. Remember that. Don't give anyone cause to reject you, Stark. Remember you're the sole reason I got the committee to expend with registration."

"I know," Tony said. He paused, swallowed sharply. "I promise I will do my best."

"See that you do," Madame Roux said, and her words may have seemed that much heavier, that much sharper, if not for the sympathy Tony saw in her eyes.
Tony went to MIT to present the B.A.R.F., acting mostly on autopilot, though he enjoyed how much Jamie and Maria seemed to enjoy visiting the campus. After the presentation, when he took Maria to the little ladies' room, a woman perhaps a bit older than his physical age was there, looking at him far too intensely for his comfort. Her eyes dropped to Maria, who was holding Tony's hand. A wrench of pain overcame the woman's face before she turned around and walked away without saying a word.

"And did you see what that one girl wanted to build?" Jamie asked, eyes sparkling and hands dancing with enthusiasm as they walked from the landing patch into the penthouse. Despite the situation with the Avengers, the Accords, that whole fucking shitstorm, Tony couldn't stop grinning. Seeing his kids enjoy themselves so much, how could he? "It was incredible. I can't wait to--"

All three of them stopped short, falling silent, when they realized someone was already waiting for them, standing at parade rest in the kitchen. It wasn't Bruce either, because Bruce was still up in Massachusetts, living it up with the students since he didn't have six-year-old bedtimes to contend with.

"Sir," JOCASTA said from the earpiece Tony was nearly always wearing these days. "I tried to warn you, but you asked me to mute when Miss Maria was referencing Ms. Richardson's invention an hour and a half ago."

Tony grimaced in response, but pushed on into the kitchen, a hand on the shoulder of each of his kids. "Mr. Secretary," he greeted.

Ross turned around and swept his stony eyes over each of them. It might just be Tony's paranoia speaking, but he couldn't help but feel as though that cold gaze rested a touch too long on Maria. "Doctor Stark," he finally returned.

"Go wash up, brush your teeth and get in your pajamas," Tony told the kids. "Find our book. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Both kids, although they looked more than a bit uncertain, nodded and scurried off. Tony straightened back up and met Ross's eyes. "I'm guessing this is about Nigeria," he said. He was pretty damn sure being Secretary of State didn't give Ross permission to enter private property uninvited, but it was more efficient not to mention it. He knew JOCASTA would have recorded the incident and added it to the already expansive Ross file. It was more useful there than being dragged into the light prematurely.

Ross raised an eyebrow.

Tony shrugged. "I wasn't there," he said. "If anyone told you otherwise, they've clearly got their intel wrong. So, what do you want?" He turned around and went to the fridge, pulling out a bottle of water. He looked over his shoulder at Ross. "Do you want anything?" he asked. "I'd offer you something stronger, but I've got kids in the house and I'm not sure your heart could take it anyway." Ross's heart problems, extensive research had revealed, were nonexistent. Tony's best guess was they were part of a stupidly elaborate rehabilitation plot that was being revealed bit by bit. The current administration was obviously made up of idiots.

"The Avengers acted on their own," Ross said. "On foreign soil, illegally, without informing the local authorities, and they caused yet another disaster."
Tony kind of wanted to roll his eyes and tell the asshole to tell him something he didn't know already. "I realize that," he said. "As I told you, I wasn't there."

"You bankrolled the operation, though," Ross said, and Tony bit back a wince. He should've patched that up sooner, as soon as he realized the constant risks going on and how it might eventually explode in all their faces. Tony had never in his life had to worry about money. He should have worried about the money of his he let the Avengers spend long ago.

"The Avengers have an allowance," Tony said. It was a very broad definition, but he had fucking brilliant accountants on his staff who could make it so. "I'm not in charge of how they spend it." The Accords, he reminded himself. Madame Roux had all but promised that they'd be a reality in a matter of days, weeks at most. He just had to stall until then. Shit, he should've seen this happening.

"It is clear that the Avengers need better oversight than yours, then," Ross said. "The U.S. Military--"

"The rest of the world would never accept that," Tony said, and felt suddenly back on far steadier ground. "And you know that. The UN would never accept that." Tony bit back his smirk. "They much prefer us under the Accords. You may want to read up on them. They'll be international law within a few days. How about you go home and do that, and I'll go back to my kids."

Ross's eyes narrowed. "Do you truly believe the UN can save you? They are a corrupt, inept institution that--"

"And the charges you're bringing up are international," Tony broke in. "Brought to the table by UN allies. Do you truly believe Nigeria will be happier if the Avengers are U.S. Military?"

"Nigeria is an African shithole," Ross said. "They matter as little as Sokovia, but this proves that you assholes are in dire need of proper leadership, and--"

Tony fought not to roll his eyes. "Sokovia might be a shithole, but it matters. Same for Nigeria," he said. "Even the U.S. needs allies. And Wakanda can't be called a shithole by any definition of the word."

"Even so," Ross said. "You are an American citizen. As are most of your friends. The ones who aren't, well, they're here on visas. We all know how fragile those can be. Until you are all covered by those Accords, failure to comply with military conscriptions makes you traitors."

Tony pushed away the instinctive spike of fear he couldn't help but feel at those words. "Good thing we'll be well and covered in a few days, then," he said.

"Will you?" Ross asked. He seemed almost amused now.

Tony bit back a wince. Rogers... Rogers was an idiot who didn't understand the first thing about politics. He was a loose fucking canon no matter how good he was at pretending to be reliable. And he had a tendency to win every fucking imaginary popularity contest he took part in. Could Tony really count on Rogers to back his play here? And if Rogers didn't, who else would turn their backs? Everyone who did not sign would be stuck in Ross's jurisdiction, for him to conscript or imprison or do whatever the fuck he wanted with at will, including kill at sight orders or something of that caliber, considering how objectively dangerous they all were. Tony couldn't count on that not happening. Still, he pushed the fears back and pulled a smirk onto his face. "We will," he said. "I'll go to the compound tomorrow, explain the situation to them and get it all taken care of."

Ross cocked an eyebrow and said absolutely nothing for long moments. Then, "I think I'll come with
Tony hid a grimace. That made things a thousand times harder. How the hell was he supposed to convince anyone of anything with Ross hovering over his shoulder? He might not be able to, he realized, and that would end in fucking utter disaster. Anyone who didn't sign remained under Ross's jurisdiction and there'd be fuck all Tony could do for them. Still, he'd figure it out. He had to.
"Sounds like a plan," he gritted out. "The guest rooms are ten floors down, if you feel like borrowing one. I have to go tuck my kids in."

***

"Try to prepare them," Tony told Rhodey a few hours later, staring at the video of his best friend. "This could fuck everything up."

"I'll do my best," Rhodey said, sighing. "But Tony, you know them. They will balk at anything Ross tells them. They don't trust the government. They don't trust the international community. Hell, they barely trust us."

"We have to try, Sugarplum. I may not like most of those assholes, but I don't want Ross to get his grubby paws on them."

Rhodey let out another sigh. "Maybe, if they can't see the merits of the Accords, regardless of who presents them, they aren't the right people for this job." His dark eyes were sympathetic where they rested on Tony's. "We all know Rogers isn't the ideal leader. Maybe none of them are right for this job. Maybe we should recruit, start over."

Tony swallowed down a strange mixture of bitter anger and odd, misplaced fondness. These people, regardless of everything, meant something to him. They were part of the dream of what the Avengers should be. Sure, that dream could survive without them, but Tony... regardless of anger and betrayal, he'd prefer it did not have to. "Let's not think about that yet," he said at last.

Rhodey rolled his eyes. "All right," he said. "Sure. I'll talk to them. I can't promise they'll listen."

Chapter End Notes

More Ross... I'm still going off the conversation Tony and Bruce had a few chapters back. Ross wants the Avengers controlled. But while the UN is better than nothing, he still prefers them under his own control (which is where they'll be if they don't sign the Accords - let's just say Ross has something on the Secretary of Defence to make this work. It's still more feasible than canon), and he's not about using manipulations and the fact that he knows how much the Avengers don't like him to his advantage. I'm still trying to make sense of nonsensical politics with a European layman's knowledge, so please bear with me here.

Once again, it may be the better part of a week before the next part. Still building that buffer (old-school fanfic writer, remember ;P ), but hopefully we'll be back on schedule soon.
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the support, especially the the comments. They really do mean the world to me.

All of your views were really interesting, and I've done what I could to answer all questions asked in the comments. I really appreciate those of you who helped me out by answering each other's questions. If you're still confused about anything, please read back through the available answers.

I hope you enjoy reading :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Later:

The Soldier - no, 32557038, Sergeant Barnes, James Buchanan, 107th infantry, US Army - looks down at the notebook in front of him. He will never be the artist that other little boy - Captain Rogers, Steve Grant, Howling Commandoes, SSR - was - is? - but still the imagery cuts him to the core. To the untrained eye, the drawing would be nothing but squiggles, but to Sergeant Barnes it is a man with two tiny forms in his arms. He doesn't know what it means.

He doesn't know why it makes him cry.

***

Tony could feel it going wrong pretty much the moment he and Ross stepped into the conference room. And quite frankly, he didn't get it. Was Ross's ugly face enough to get them all to decide, ahead of time, that whatever would be said wasn't worth their time, when even Bruce had looked beyond that? Was it that they didn't trust Tony? Or were they all just fucking idiots who hadn't read through a single one of the damn Accords proposals Tony had kept sending them?

He got it. Ross was overly confrontational. Tony was going to have to figure out some way to get through to Girl Maximoff, if that was still an option. There was the risk that Rogers had already pulled his 'you punched the bully, so all's well and good' spiel on her and Tony wouldn't get through, especially given the fact that Tony and Maximoff weren't on the best of terms to begin with. He'd thought they'd started to communicate, though, at the very least.

For a moment there, during Ross's surprisingly sympathetic opening speech, Tony had almost thought he might be able to work around the malicious idiot and still get to them, but then it had all turned around and what the hell had he even been supposed to do? Quite frankly, Ross's presentation had been impressive, meant to pull on just the right heartstrings to be sympathetic, only to turn it all back on its fucking head with his damn attitude. And all along, Tony was watching the train crash happen, watched Ross flay the Avengers raw with not a damn thing he could do to stop it, only to then be turned around and watch the most damn provocative salt imaginative be rubbed into wounds that the idiot Secretary had just opened himself.

Tony hated being outmaneuvered and that was exactly what had happened. Ross had undermined
his position, simply by pretending to be on his side. And there had not been a damn thing he could
do, not without Bruce here, but he knew Bruce meant what he said when he'd told him he couldn't
be in the same room as Ross without the Other Guy coming to the fore. Tony wished it could've
been different. He wished like hell that he didn't have to deal with Ross, that he could've just stuck
the asshole in the deepest, darkest hole he could find. That, or just the RAFT. He didn't have enough
dirt on the asshole yet, though, and until Tony was safely under the Accords, the fully ratified
Accords that was, there was only so much he could do against his own fucking government.

Of course, since this was his damn life, Aunt Peggy had to go and die in the middle of it all, breaking
up all talks and making everything that much more difficult. Worst fucking time she could've chosen
to finally start butting in on his life choices.

***

Part of Tony felt disturbingly guilty at sitting out Aunt Peggy's funeral. He didn't know what to do
with that feeling. He and his Godmother had never been close. Knowing she'd died didn't make him
want to break down in tears. It didn't make his chest clench or his eyes hurt. More than anything, it
made him feel a strange emptiness, like remembering a promise that had never been fulfilled.

He told himself she wouldn't have cared if he was there. He told himself that she would've
understood why he wasn't, that she would've supported him - he knew Uncle Danny would've. In
the end, he told himself it didn't matter either way. He had to do what he had to do, and being there
for the ratification of the Accords, for this final shield being raised to guard them from Ross and
others of his ilk, this final thing that would finally hold them accountable, roll them into worldwide
operations and politics like they always should have been, was more important.

He would book a few extra sessions with Doctor Jeff, he decided. That, in the end, was what
brought him peace. He hadn't spoken much about Aunt Peggy yet. He was sure Doctor Jeff would
have a field day when they did finally get into that. Neither of Tony's parents had been particularly
martial, after all. Perhaps Doctor Jeff would decide Tony had lived his entire later life to please his
estranged Godmother without ever fucking realizing. Fucking psychology. Would drive him crazy
even as it tried to save him from madness.

***

Romania happened next, and what a fucking shitshow that was. Even as Tony was wrapping things
up back home so he could go to Vienna with things taken care of, the reports trickled in.

Cop killing was bad enough in the States. On an international level, when it came to internationally
deployed police officers doing an officially sanctioned job on an internationally cooperative level...
fucking hell, that was almost on the same level as killing someone with diplomatic immunity. And
there were three of them killed on the spot, ten more wounded, some of them in critical condition. All
Tony could do was watch as more reports trickled in, as two of those additional police officers died.

Angela Merkel was going to be so fucking pissed.

And that was without counting the Romanian national disaster. Even Tony's technology couldn't
keep track of the people in the collapse of that highway tunnel. One minute the reports said just two
dead and two dozen wounded, another it said a dozen dead and a hundred wounded, and fuck it all.

Tony should've done more to prevent this. He should've brought Barnes in, got him the psychiatric
care he clearly needed. He could've prevented all this, and he'd been too preoccupied with the
Soldiers still under HYDRA auspices to even lift a finger. He'd failed, more badly than he'd ever
failed for as long as he could remember. His inactivity had actively killed so many people he couldn't
He shook that off. He couldn't handle that guilt right now, not that on top of still needing to do what had to be done. And, Doctor Jeff's voice taunted from the back of his head, *while Tony might have been negligent, he was not actively culpable*. Rogers showing up had messed everything up, just as Tony had finished negotiating the 'kill on sight' on Barnes down to a simple capture order, without even knowing why he was doing it, aside from the fact that it was the fucking right thing to do. Barnes hadn't blown up anything, after all. JOCASTA would've let Tony know if he'd even left Romania. Rogers had killed half those cops and been responsible for, arguably, all the damn deaths in that fucking tunnel. Tony might be culpable, but Rogers was actively guilty, and why the hell did he have to take shit so fucking far?

In the middle of that whole damn mess, with his head turned all ways but north, Tony very nearly just left Girl Maximoff in the compound with Vision. Vision knew what was happening, knew why Tony had to do what he had to do, but the moment he got off the phone with Jamie and Maria and an attempt at telling them what was going on, he realized that would not be enough. In the great scale of things, while Maximoff might not be all that young, she was immature as all fuck. Her dearest friends were Tony's just-barely seven-year-old kids and a one-year-old android. If he wanted to be on the safe side, he had to treat her as though she were about that mature. Less, because Tony's children, flesh or android, were more perceptive than most adults. And so, even with dozens of other things he had to attend to, he forced himself to take a breath and glance at the nearest camera of his private jet.

"I need to talk to Maximoff," he told FRIDAY.

"Sure, Boss," FRIDAY said, and then she was playing the obnoxious beeping sound Tony still couldn't figure out where she'd picked up.

"Mr. Stark?" Girl Maximoff said, looking at the camera with what looked like honest confusion. "What's going on? What's--"

Tony opened his mouth. Then snapped it back shut. He couldn't spell out everything that was going on right now, not with how loyal Maximoff was to Rogers. He cringed at himself, internally, at that thought alone. He felt like an asshole for even considering concealing anything, but he needed Maximoff to stay the fuck put. He couldn't afford her messing up the politics, and he definitely didn't want to have to deal with his kids if she got herself locked up in some fucking Nigerian jail. So her safe and put had to be the ultimate goal. He could apologize later. "The Nigerians are pissed off," he said at last. "They are calling for your blood, and my lawyers need time to work their magic. You are on shaky ground, with the strings I pulled to get your visa and what just happened, so please listen. I'm in a hurry and I know I'm not explaining things right. Vision might be able to clear some things up, but whatever happens, I need you to stay the fuck put, you understand?"

For long, frightening moments, she just stared at him, strangely assessing. Tony knew their understanding was basically a weak one, based on her love for his kids and her trust that he wouldn't knowingly do anything to harm metahumans or the enhanced because of the Maria factor, but fucking please, for the love of God, he couldn't have her showing up and messing this--

"Okay, Mr. Stark," she said at last.

Tony barely contained the way his eyes wanted to widen from pure shock. "Okay," he all but squeaked.

She nodded decisively, even as he could see the fear and indecision in her eyes. "Keep the kids safe," she said. "And I'll trust you."

Tony let out a breath of relief, deliberately let her hear it. "Thank you, Wanda. You don't know what
that means to me." He paused for a moment, and if this were almost anyone else, he might not have been willing to verbalize this, but he did recognize the need for a give and take in a relationship that had started out as fraught as theirs. "You don't know what this might mean for Maria's future."

She gave a small smile, reassuring enough for him to end the call. And then the plane was touching down in Vienna.

***

Before, quite frankly, he'd even had time to reorient himself from the utter arrogance and complete lack of understanding of the world Rogers displayed like it was nothing, he found himself face to face with the Winter Soldier, and shit but that guy was definitely a gun again. Problem was, Tony had absolutely no idea whose finger was on the trigger.

The watch gauntlet worked, at least enough to keep Tony alive, but that did not mean he liked being shot at. He gave the best he got, and the fucking asshole still got the fuck away.

His adrenaline was still up, his blood still pounding and his hand throbbing like a fucking bitch from the kickback of the bullet when Ross informed him he'd be issuing another shoot-on-sight order. There was a part of Tony, quite frankly, a nasty, vicious part, that just wanted him to fucking do it and actually kind of believed the world might be a better place without Rogers and Wilson and the reactivated Barnes, but even over the seductiveness of that quiet, whispering voice, Tony heard himself begging and pleading.

He mentally cursed Rogers out for leaving himself solely under U.S. jurisdiction, and he itched to repulsor the shit out of whoever had truly blown up the UN meeting before the Accords could be ratified, sticking Tony with Ross by extension. Even so, he made the promises he had to, said the things he needed to. He got 36 hours.

***

"The Spiderling's watching over the kids?" Tony asked Bruce as they all stepped off the quinjet, mostly just to reassure himself.

Bruce nodded decisively.

"And Wanda's not going to show up and make everything suck?" Tony continued, glancing at the Vision this time.

"I believe Wanda understands at least the basics of why we do as we must, as well as why she must remain in the Compound," Vision replied.

Tony let his shoulders drop, sucked in a sharp breath and steeled himself for the fight to come.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you had fun.

I know this is very fast and not very detailed. I can't watch the CW movie without actually feeling a bit sick to my stomach, so I've tried to write basically a summary without having to watch it over and over again. As a result, I'm not entirely satisfied with this chapter, but it told what I needed it to, so hopefully it will keep you 'up to date'
on what's happening in the story.

And just what is going to happen next...?

(Again, it might be the better part of a week before I update. I'm still building that buffer.)
Thanks so much for all the kudos, bookmarks, recommendations, subscriptions and, especially, the comments. They mean the world to me. And I really, really enjoyed seeing your debates.

I am so sorry I haven't been able to reply to comments. I've had a really busy week, and I prioritised writing two chapters rather than writing, at most, one and answering comments. I have no idea how other people can do it so quickly and effortlessly, but I can't. Responding to comments properly, for me, requires time and thought and effort, and while I always strive to do that, sometimes I'll just be too busy. Thank you for understanding.

I want, once more, to reiterate, that I never set out to write Tony as a wholly white character who makes no mistakes and is always completely in the right. I set out to write a Tony who is still Tony, still, probably, the most human Avenger, and that includes mistakes and the fact that, regardless of his genius, he can't always predict the consequences of his own choices, active or inactive. Might some things have turned out very differently if Tony had told Steve everything he knew from the start? Probably. Is he to blame? I guess it depends on how much agency you afford Steve. Arguments can be made for either side. And it's not meant to be clear-cut. Hopefully, that makes some kind of sense to you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There are other sketches too, poor and unwieldy as they all are, but none touch him the way this one does. None bring him to tears the way this one does. The Soldier - Barnes - cannot explain it. He knows what he knows and feels what he feels and has no other framework for... well, for anything.

***

Tony managed to swoop down just in time to EMP the helicopter Rogers obviously planned to appropriate. "Wow," he heard himself say as Rhodey touched down beside him, and he was all too aware that this was the best way he knew to keep all of this at a distance, to keep himself standing and functioning even as fear and anger and hurt rattled around inside him. "It's so weird how you run into people at the airport." He took a breath, let his faceplate retract. "Don't you think that's weird?"

"Definitely weird," Rhody said, and something in the steadiness of his voice, the way he let Tony have his quips and dumb jokes was so grounding and so reassuring that Tony felt immediately stronger, more determined.

"Hear me out, Tony," Rogers was saying. "That doctor, the psychiatrist, he's behind all of this."

Tony didn't respond, knew that FRIDAY would send that bite of data home for JO to deal with.

T'Challa all but hopped in, then, and Tony couldn't help the shudder of unease that ran through him. Tony had known T'Chaka, at least a little, and liked and respected the man more than just a little, but he knew next to nothing about the son except that he was younger than he preferred to appear and
had just lost a parent. He was volatile, highly skilled, and had personal beef with at least one person on Rogers' side. Tony wanted, desperately, to keep this from escalating, from getting out of hand. T'Challa, for all that he was supposedly on their side, might be the biggest obstacle to achieving that. "Captain," T'Challa said, his thick accent prominent even in that single word.

"Your Highness," Rogers responded, and he seemed so annoyingly cocky it made Tony want to grind his teeth. But then he supposed that was just Rogers. It was who he was. Tony hoped he had been a bit more toned down before the serum, or Erskine really had been an idiot with no people or observation skills.

Before that whole thing could get any further, Tony jumped in to interrupt, "Anyway... Ross gave me 36 hours to bring you in. That was 24 hours ago." He took a breath, looked at Rogers and willed himself to believe he could still talk some sense into the idiot who'd denied 117 countries just because Ross was the one presenting the deal. "Can you help a brother out?"

"You're after the wrong guy," Rogers said, and even now there was less frustration in his voice than relaxed confidence. How had Tony never noticed how fucking creepy that was?

"Your judgement is askew," Tony said, and his could feel all the frustration missing from Rogers's voice and features roll through his whole damn body, making him boil and freeze in turn until he had to take several deep breaths just to make sure he wasn't speaking through clenched teeth. "Your old war buddy may not have set off the explosion, but he killed innocent people yesterday."

"And there are five more super soldiers just like him," Rogers said, and how could he still sound so damn imploring? "I can't let the doctor find them first, Tony. I can't."

"Steve..." And how the fuck was it that Natasha still, without a fail, still managed to sneak up on him? Supposedly, she was on his side, yet Rogers seemed less surprised to see her than Tony felt. "You know what's about to happen." Funny, she sounded almost sincere, almost as though she gave a fuck. "Do you really wanna punch your way out of this one?"

Tony opened his mouth, but before he could say a damn thing two webs shot through the air. One snatched up Rogers's shield and the other tied up his hands. Adrenaline suddenly pumping like fucking acid in his veins, Tony flung himself around to look at the source. And there, oh fucking Odin and Thor and all their relatives! "What the hell are you doing here, Spiderling? You're supposed to be babysitting. Who's with the kids?"

Peter floundered a bit even as he swung off his perch, Rogers's shield still held close to his body. "I asked my au-- May Parker is watching them," he said. "I told her--" Then he shook his head and focused his eyes back on Rogers. "If you try to punch your way out, I'll punch you back. You killed my mom and dad, and then the moment someone tries to put you in check, you go out and kill more people. I can't allow that."

For a moment, Tony felt his chest clench in sympathy for the kid. Then he steeled himself. Regardless of his sympathy, and the utterly distracting worry he felt at Peter's mere presence, he needed to stay focused on the issue at hand rather than let his supposed teammates keep distracting him from it all. "Five more like him," he echoed. "You're talking about the HYDRA soldiers in Siberia, I'm guessing. If that's your excuse, you really gotta rethink this whole thing. I blew that whole place up months ago."

Rogers's composure, at the very least, seemed to have cracked. Tony couldn't help but note that even Natasha looked startled. Rogers was looking back and forth between all of them before his eyes finally settled on Tony. A frisson of anger unspooled in Tony's chest at how that asshole had disregarded Peter's words, but he ignored it in favor of putting his attention on Rogers' reaction.
"You blew them-- I never got a mission report. What are you--"

"Well," Tony said. "We never do tell each other things, do we?" The last thing he fucking wanted was getting into Susan O'Neill and the fears Tony had been battling relating to her, only finally put to rest when she was. "You didn't tell me about Mom and Dad. I didn't tell you about killing five super soldiers because I was kind of afraid you'd try to recruit them. None of them were in any way stable, but with your track record, you'd have tried to recruit them all anyway just so you could clear the way for Barnes. So, you see, I actually have a fucking good reason for not telling you shit, and it's not just about protecting my BFF."

Rhodey gave a shrug in the armor, and Tony loved him so much it fucking hurt. "Well," he said. "I did have a hand in blowing them up, so..."

Bruce picked that moment to show up. "Stand down, Steve. Your mission doesn't exist, and you are compromised." He shot a brief, disapproving look at Peter, but stood his ground, disconcertingly unassuming as always, and Tony felt his own shoulders square with pride.

"Stand down," Rhodey repeated. "We'll track down this doctor and take him in, but until then we need to de-escalate before everything goes out of control." Any more than it already had, Tony couldn't help but mentally add, remembering the existing death tolls all too clearly.

"I can't--" Steve started.

"You can," Tony said, "And you will. You're gonna turn Barnes over and you're gonna come with us, because it's us, or a squad of JSOC guys with no compunctions about being impolite."

"I can't do that," Rogers said, and at least he looked like he was taking shit seriously now. "I owe it to the people of the world to steer clear of other people's agendas so I can do my job. The team is relying on me to--"

"Are you gonna tell your team what we just told you?" Tony asked. "Did you ever bother to tell Wilson we offered him and Barnes sanctuary, which you turned down because you didn't like the idea of Wanda staying put until this shitstorm has been dealt with? Said staying put, I might add, she's agreed to."

Before Rogers could respond, Vision's voice sounded through Tony's earpiece, "Mr. Stark, I have apprehended Sergeants Barnes and Wilson. I will be bringing them out now."

Tony sighed with relief when he watched Vision walk into view, Barnes and Wilson in front of him. Their hands were held behind their heads, and the stone in Vision's head glowed with barely contained power. He glanced to the side, caught Natasha's eyes. She nodded, and withdrew a pair of handcuffs from fuck even knew where, walked forwards and somehow managed to get them around Steve's wrists in spite of the webbing already there. Tony felt his own shoulders droop with utter relief. It was over. It was contained, and nothing had turned into a disaster. He made sure to keep an eye on T'Challa, still keeping the young king's motivations in mind. So far, he didn't seem to be about to become an issue.

And then, out of fucking nowhere, a new dude appeared, seeming to grow into existence out of nothing. It took every damn bit of strength within Tony's body not to outwardly show his own shock. "Listen," the strangely armored guy said, "I'm sorry, Captain America, but it sounds like the job's already been done, and I'm not gonna risk going back to jail unless the whole world's at stake."
"JOCASTA says that's Scott Lang," FRIDAY informed him. "Electrical engineer, of San Francisco. He was convicted for industrial espionage and breaking and entering and theft a few years back, and is still on probation. He is under contract with Pym Tech, and was involved in an altercation with the Falcon a few weeks ago, and his suit apparently allows him to grow or shrink at will." Without uttering a word of warning, Tony lifted his hand and set off another EMP charge, frying whatever mechanics were in Lang's suit. Natasha, quick as always to catch on, cuffed him too.

Tony groaned, fought down the urge to rub his gauntlets over his face. Rhodey, thank fuck, had enough command experience to take shit over from there. "Romanoff, Vision, Your Highness, if you would please detain the prisoners and see they end up in the right hands, that would be good. Banner, get the Spider-Kid back to New York." The stark, dark metal of his faceplate fixed on Tony. "It sounds like Tones and I have another criminal to catch."

***

It might have been more of a satisfaction to hand Zemo in to Ross - Everett, not Thunderbolt - if Tony hadn't been tempted to break into hysterical laughter half the time. The asshole kept asking for his phone and ranting about why Rogers and Barnes weren't there. Still, they turned him in, and while the facilities weren't exactly luxurious, Rogers and his little gang were in a secure holding facility awaiting their hearings.

The Accords were pushing through and made law far more quietly than anyone would've preferred, but it was done, and Tony felt like he could fucking breathe again for the first time in all too long.

He finally got to return home (and give his kids a brief talk about the right way to do civil disobedience). And then there was Peter, sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for him with such a hangdog expression Tony couldn't be half as mad as he wanted to be. "You know you shouldn't have been there," he said, and suddenly he just felt so fucking tired. "We had the situation under control. And Rogers, Barnes... those guys are way out of your league. I'd like to think Rogers wouldn't have stooped so low as to hurt you, but at this point I honestly don't know anymore."

Peter swallowed audibly. "I'm sorry, Tony," he said at last. "I just. I had to. He's hurt so many people already. I couldn't just sit by and watch as he took the law into his own hands, not when he already... I just couldn't. It was the right thing to do, and I told Aunt May I had a project, so she watched the twins. She's good at it, I swear. But I just. I've been reading up on the Accords, and he was wrong. I had to do something."

Despite himself, Tony was oddly touched. He couldn't help but reach out and ruffle Peter's hair. "I know your heart's in the right place," he said. "And you've got better morals than any of us. But I need you to live and see eighteen, and twenty-one, and thirty, so badly I can't even-- You have to take care of yourself first, and let us take care of the rest. You hear me?"

Peter leaned into his touch, even as he let out a heavy breath. "I hear you," he said. "But I'm not sure I can do that. There has to be a reason I got these powers, and I just-- I want to sign the Accords, Mr. Stark."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut and let out a long breath. "Okay," he said. He couldn't stop the kid, but he could at least do whatever possible to keep him safe. "Okay. I'll help you."

Chapter End Notes
You really thought Peter was gonna stay out of things? In this story, he's as motivated as anyone to bring Captain America to justice, and I can't see him just placidly babysitting while important shit is going down. Tony did not recruit him here. While I understood why a desperate Tony (and desperate writers who really wanted an excuse to introduce Spider-Man into the MCU) made the choices he did in canon, this is a universe where he has kids, and he sure as fuck wouldn't allow them to take part in this kind of fight at fifteen, so he wouldn't let anyone else's kid either.

And yes, Clint and Wanda are absent. Wanda got an explanation last chapter, and stayed put. Clint, while no closer to Tony than he was in canon, is also a father, and even though his first instinct might have been to go to Steve when called upon, he knows Maria is a metahuman and trusts that Tony, as a fellow dad, wouldn't allow any legislation to pass that would harm Maria and, by extension, any of the rest of them. And even if all they did was call him about 'Wanda being locked up' and 'we need to deal with the threat of the additional Winter Soldiers', he has enough respect for Tony, through the 'dad club' (which allows him to better understand and respect Tony) that Tony would not hold a 'child' (Wanda) against their will and tells Cap to just fucking speak to Tony on the second part, because if there is a threat to a world Tony's kids live in, Tony wouldn't let red tape get in the way (additionally, Tony and Bruce both made their guilt - and lack of it - about Ultron much clearer here than in canon).

Again, I hope that makes sense, and that you enjoyed. Please let me know your thoughts. And again, because I'm busy and still building buffers, it might be the better part of a week before I update again, but I'll try to be quick about it and to respond to all comments. Thanks so much for taking the time to read :D
I am so sorry about the long wait. Thanks so much for all the comments. I really appreciate them.

Barnes can't make sense of anything. Not the clumsy sketches, not the huge damn clump of emptiness that wakes him up at night, reaching for something that's not there. It threatens to drive him crazy. In the end, he puts the notebook holding the sketches to the bottom of the pile and focuses back on the dreams that make sense, the memories he can place.

He still wakes up that night, aching, reaching for something that's not there, and all he can do is curl up around himself, and try to forget the hole in his chest. It shouldn't be so hard, should it? He's forgotten so much already. Why can't he forget this?

***

Tony damn well knew that playing the turtle never ended well, but fuck all, he hadn't had a proper conversation with Rogers in Thor even knew how long, and now that Rogers knew that Tony knew, Tony was even less interested in a conversation than he'd been before. Still, somehow, when Steve asked for him, Tony couldn't quite bring himself to say no.

The RAFT was a desolate place. Tony hadn't explicitly designed it to be that. He'd designed it for functionality and security, had done his best, with Bruce's assistance on upgrades, to create something that could hold the most dangerous, hardened enhanced criminals. It had done its job. S.H.I.E.L.D.'s most dangerous captives were still well and contained. The Abomination had never stuck its head out again. Still, he kind of wished whoever had brought his designs to life hadn't settled on making it as drab and depressing as possible. This place was meant to contain people too dangerous to let loose, not suck the life out of them.

He did his best to ignore his surroundings as he was led to Rogers' cell before settling into the uncomfortable chair someone had set up for him outside Rogers' cell. "Cap," he greeted, never mind that Rogers didn't deserve the courtesy, never mind that the military had suddenly become very vocal about how that rank had never been official.

"Tony," Rogers responded. He looked up with a wide smile on his face that Tony had no idea how to read. How could he look so happy in a place like this? How could he look so guileless when just a week ago, he'd been killing police officers and innocent civilians? When he knew Tony knew he'd been lying to him for years? "It's good to see you." He glanced behind Tony, and finally his smile fell, giving way to a look of confusion. "Where is everyone?"

Tony blinked, mentally running through the number of things that might be confusing Rogers now. Then again, it could be any of a few dozen things. Tony had never been able to figure out how Rogers's head worked. "Wilson and Lang were just transferred to a lower security prison to await trial; they aren't really considered uncontrollable flight risks without their tech. Barnes is here too, few levels away. My idiot God-cousin was taken into custody in Austria, if that even matters to you. Everyone else is in the Tower or Compound, safe, where they belong."
"No." Rogers blinked. "Where is--" He took a step closer, and despite the reinforced adamantium bars between them Tony was suddenly far too aware of just how fucking huge Rogers was. Rogers wrapped his huge fucking hands around the bars and stuck his head as close as he could get, looking to each side before focusing back on Tony. "You don't even have the suit," he said, voice hushed. "How are you planning to get me out?"

It was Tony's turn to blink. The fuck? What the absolute fuck? "I think you may have misunderstood something, Rogers," he said at last. "I'm not here to spring you from jail. I'm here as a courtesy."

And maybe, possibly, in the vague hopes of getting some kind of apology for getting lied to and used as a cash dispenser to finance the search for his parents' killer. Clearly, that made him an idiot. "I can see I shouldn't have bothered," he said in the end. He got up off the chair and began to make for the exit.

"Tony," and fuck, there it was, the Captain-America-Is-Disappointed-In-You voice that rubbed Tony in all the worst ways possible. "I did the right thing. I stood up to the government and their agendas. I saved an innocent man. I don't deserve to be here!"

Sighing, Tony turned back around, gripping the backrest of his abandoned chair. "Let's pretend for a moment that I wanted to get you out. Then we'd both be fugitives. My kids would grow up without their dad. The SI stock would plummet, and tens of thousands of families around the world would lose their livelihoods. What trust the public still has in the Avengers would be lost, completely and utterly, even more than it already is."

"The public trusts us," Rogers said, voice so fucking imploring Tony wanted to punch him in the damn teeth. "They know we're only trying to protect them."

Tony shook his head. "They don't trust us worth shit, especially now when the lauded Captain America decided to say 'no' to one hundred and seventeen countries, and kill cops and civilians alike, all for his own personal agenda. You don't get to talk about governments having agendas, Rogers, not when everything you've done for the past two years has been all about James Barnes and not a whit to do with protecting anyone else. Here's the neat thing about the UN, Cap, there are so many agendas they cancel each other out. No one would be able to make us do anything we don't want, because someone else would veto them. And even if not, I know this system. I know how it works, I know how to operate within it and how to play it when I gotta. Now's the wrong time to trust me. That time came and went about a week ago." He turned around, and this time he actually began to walk.

"Tony," Rogers called. "Tony, I'll sign the Accords, I just."

Tony turned around and cocked an eyebrow. "You should," he said. "For your own sake. Get yourself out from under Ross's thumb, because right now you're his to do with whatever he fucking wants."

"Come on, Tony," Rogers said. "We both know I'm in here because I didn't sign." He raised his hands in feigned surrender, a sad smirk on his face. "You won, I lost, there you have it. I'll sign the Accords, and then we can go home and start working on making those darn things right."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, felt exasperation rush through him. "That's not what's gonna happen. If you wanted to help shape the Accords, you should've gotten involved when I first told you about them, or when they were presented in the Compound--"

"Ross--"

"Screw Ross," Tony shouted. "The Accords remove us from his jurisdiction entirely. He didn't want
you to sign, and he played you like a fucking fiddle. And signing the Accords won't save you now. They aren't why you're here. You're here because you killed people. Real, actual, innocent people."

"I saved an innocent," Rogers objected. "What's the difference between now and a week ago? You told me that if I signed, that would all go away."

"Not my proudest moment," Tony agreed. "In my defense, that was before anyone truly knew the scope of the disaster you caused. The Accords Council was desperate to get the Accords ratified and pushed through before Ross made the situation worse. Everything could still have been spun. But the cat's out of the bag now, and there's no damn way to put it back in. Letting you off scot-free would undermine the Accords so much they stop mattering, and they're too fucking important for that, for our safety and everyone else's."

"At least get me a proper lawyer," Rogers said. A muscle in his jaw was jumping. "The court-appointed one they gave me, I'm pretty sure he has no idea what he's doing."

Tony sighed. "You'd have to pay for one yourself, or get someone else to do it for you," Tony said. "I can't. I'm still that Avengers liaison to the UN, and I still have a company relying on me. I gotta wash my hands of you." Somehow, the words were almost liberating. And this time, as he turned and left without looking over his shoulder despite Rogers's repeated calls of his name, he felt like an actual, physical weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

He wasn't entirely sure what made him take the detour, but somehow he just couldn't seem to help himself. The guards holding this level looked at him curiously, but did nothing to stop him. Again, Tony felt the general gloom of the place pressing in on him, threatening to reach out and strangle him. He took a deep breath, willed it to hold him steady. At last, he rounded the final corner and came face to face with the cell he'd promised himself he'd avoid at all cost.

Unlike Rogers, Barnes wasn't prowling around in there. Rather, he was sitting in corner of the cell, curled in on himself as though to make himself as small as his large body could allow. He finally raised his head, at least a little, when Tony walked up to the bars. Shadowed grey eyes, oddly familiar, looked up at Tony from behind greasy clumps of straight, brown hair. Barnes didn't speak, not a word, just continued to silently watch him.

Tony swallowed, still beyond uncertain why he was here in the first place. There was something disturbingly familiar about the Winter Soldier, something Tony couldn't place for the life of him. He supposed it was true, what Rogers said all those years ago, that Barnes had a few features in common. Remembering that, all Tony could wish for, in that moment, was that he never saw that look of defeat on his baby boy's face. "Barnes," he said.

"Stark," Barnes returned. His voice was raspy, as if he wasn't used to speaking, or had been screaming his head off. Or maybe he just hadn't been getting enough to drink.

Tony took a deep breath, shut his eyes for a moment before peeling them back open. "Do you remember them?" he finally asked, and he realized he was speaking around a lump in his throat, choked and painful. "My mom and dad, I mean. Do you--"

"Yeah," Barnes said, lowering his gaze. "Yeah, I do. And I'm sorry. I know that ain't gonna cut it, but I really am."

Tony let that breath back out. "It does. Mean something. Thank you." And it did. It meant more than he'd ever imagined it would, tearing something inside him open even as it healed something else. It hurt like all hell, but it wasn't all bad. Some of it was a good kind of pain, like disinfecting a deep wound so it could finally heal right. Tony nodded, and turned around to leave.
"Stark?" Barnes called, and he still sounded so apologetic Tony couldn't help but feel for him, at least a little. His voice shook. "I-- My backpack. Do you know where it is? Do you think I could have it back?"

Tony glanced back over his shoulder. "I'm sorry. They've got it in evidence." He sighed, stuck his hands in his pockets. "I'll ask the guards to get you a notebook and something to write with." He wasn't sure there was a writing instrument in existence Barnes couldn't turn into a weapon, but quite frankly, unless someone triggered him, like Zemo had, Barnes didn't look fit to hurt a fly. It was reassuring, but also oddly painful to see.

He turned around and walked away. Somehow, he was almost certain that even if he could put Rogers behind him, that second meeting, that short conversation... that, he wouldn't be able to shake.
- People to help with world building and lore weaving (this is not a regular beta job. It doesn’t matter if you can’t spell to save your life, or if you’re too detail oriented to help with larger plot points. Your help will still be valued)
- Line editors (people who are brilliant at grammar and spelling and enjoy sifting through long bits of text and pointing out every single error)
- Avid readers who just love reading and giving their honest reactions as well as long, in-depth comments with plenty of constructive criticism to really help me make this story the best it possibly can be
- Plot editors, who will help me figure out where things don’t make sense and where I have gone wrong and make the plot as solid as Swiss cheese
- People who can do things other than this to help me out, even if I have currently forgotten that aspect of things
- Any combination of the above

If any of that sounds like you and you’d like to help me out, please create a user on forumotion.com and put your handle in the comments below, and I’ll send you an invite to the discussion board I created for all this. It takes a small village to finish a novel, and I am desperately searching for mine.

If you are not interested in helping with the editing process, but would like to read the finished book once it’s published, please put your email in the comments below, and I’ll put you on a mailing list so you’ll know as soon as the book is out.

Thank you so much for sticking with me through all my notoriously long author’s notes. I really appreciate it :D
Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

Seriously, I want to thank everyone for your kind comments and for the continued support, even though the story might never be finished. I'm still looking for a co-writer or adopter for the fic, in the hopes that it'll be finished properly and get to something like the ending I've envisioned. Until then, I've got another five-seven chapters (I can't count :( ) and I'll keep doing my best to get them out on a weekly basis (sorry about the delay. I've had a really busy week).

Hopefully, you'll enjoy this next chapter :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later:

They put him in a cage. He knows he deserves it, he knows he's done horrible stuff, that he's horriblewrongwrongwrong. He knows he's stronger than them, but somehow still all he can feel is fear, and sorrysorrysorry. He curls up in the corner, and wishes he could disappear.

***

Tony walked into the penthouse, feeling immediately more at ease as he made his way into the living room, breathing in the scent of Bruce's dinner. Smelled like butter chicken. Tony's stomach growled, somehow settling some of the unease already churning within him. This was home, and he was safe, the kids were safe, and things were all right, even if Rogers had screwed himself to hell and back.

He walked through the door and stopped for a moment with a smile on his face, watching his children on their floor as they played. It was so rare to see them play. Far more often, they'd be lost in books or hounding Bruce or him to let them take part in some experiment or other, which only made it that more touching those few times when they acted like real children. Then he paused, blinked, and focused his eyes. And yeah, that was exactly what he thought he'd seen. He walked the rest of the way into the room, sat down between them. "Is that a doll prison?" he asked. "Did you put Buckybear in the doll prison?"

Both kids looked up at him with wide eyes and heart melting smiles, and fuck, he loved them. He easily allowed Jamie into his lap and wrapped his arm around Maria when she leaned into his side. Against his chest, Jamie nodded.

Something somewhere in Tony's chest clenched. "Why is Buckybear in doll prison?" he asked.

Maria nudged her head against his shoulder. Once she was sure she had his attention, she pointed at a different corner of the room, which, well, doll hospital, apparently, judging by the dolls and teddies sporting band-aids and bandages and actual fucking drips.

Tony swallowed around a sudden lump in his throat. "Did you guys watch the news again? I told you not to do that without an adult present. And JOCASTA doesn't count." He gave a quick glance at the nearest camera. "Sorry, JO."
"We watched them with Viz," Jamie said. "He said the real Bucky Barnes hurt a lot of people, and that's why he's in jail now."

Tony swallowed again, and suddenly all he could think of were all the times he'd seen either child in bed, clutching that tattered old Bucky Bear to their chest. That teddy bear had been their protector and companion and playmate, the comfort that kept nightmares at bay even when Tony could not. To see that toy - more than a toy, somehow - relegated to toy prison... suddenly, that wasn't something Tony knew how to deal with. It didn't sit right with him. He knew the kids were playing in order to process what they'd learnt, to experiment and figure it all out in their own minds, he'd spoken enough with their therapist to get that. But it still rubbed him wrong in so many damn ways.

"Bucky Barnes is a bad guy," Maria said softly. Her wide, dark eyes were sadder than Tony knew how to deal with. "Isn't he, Dad?"

Tony bit his lip, pushed down the sudden flood of emotion threatening to overcome him. In his mind's eye, he could still see the recordings of the Winter Soldier killing his parents, of the Winter Soldier in D.C., of the Winter Soldier smashing police officers in Budapest, collapsing the tunnel, fighting his way out of the JCTC building in Vienna. For a moment, he was looking down the barrel of a gun again, feeling the kickback as the bullet connected with his gauntlet.

The gun, he reminded himself. You don't blame the gun.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I don't know the guy. I know the Howling Commandoes thought the world of him, but they did of Rogers as well, and he has definitely done some bad things of his own free will. I guess the thing about Barnes is..." He bit his lip, tried his best to think of an analogy that would cover all this shit. "Okay, so Dum-E has free will, right?" he said in the end.

Both kids nodded and looked up at him intently, and his chest squeezed tight in the best possible way. "I hope so," Jamie eventually said. "Or I'm gonna start wondering if you like threatening me with a fire distinguisher."

Maria let out a giggle.

Tony ruffled Jamie's hair, so fond it hurt. "So if Dum-E went out and hurt a bunch of people, that would be wrong of him, right? He'd be a bad bot, we should do something about it."

Maria nodded decisively, and Jamie joined her after a contemplative second.

"But what if I went in and... changed his code." And fuck, even those few words made him shudder. The idea of anyone messing with Dum-E's code, with any of his bots' codes, made him want to get in the armor and repulsor someone. "Made it so he had to hurt people, and gave him a paintball gun. And then he went out and hurt people. Would Dum-E be a bad bot?"

This time, Jamie was the first to shake his head. "No," he said. "It wouldn't be his fault. He'd still be a good bot. Whoever messed with his code would be the one who made him do it.

"Well," Tony said at last. "That's kind of what happened with Bucky Barnes. Some really bad people caught him, and they messed up his code so they could make him do whatever they wanted. They made him do a lot of bad stuff. But does that make him a bad person?"

Both children shook their head quite quickly. Maria's eyes narrowed, though, as she looked up at him, her thick ponytail bobbing on the back of his head. "So why is he in jail?" she asked.

Tony let out a sharp breath. "I guess because it's difficult to figure out what he did because of the code changes and what he just did."
Jamie looked up at him with big grey eyes and Tony absently noted his angular face and cleft chin. "You'll make sure they figure it out, won't you?"

Tony sighed. "Of course I will," he said. And fuck, but trying to do the right thing for his kids could be a pain in the ass from time to time.

***

It was disgustingly easy to hack in and find the scans and transcripts of Barnes's journals. It was a different thing altogether to attempt to make sense of it. Half the first fucking journal was a repeat of his service number, including his name and rank only toward the very end. After that, it was vague scenes from the fucking twenties, and the things that weren't that were so horrible they turned Tony's stomach, and he fucking couldn't stand it.

"JO," Tony said, shutting down the windows. "Ask Doctor Jeff if he has a colleague who can go through this. Forward it to the legal department as well, and make sure they get in touch with the shrink Doctor Jeff recommends. I can't make heads or tails of this. Hopefully some of those people will tell me what's going on."

"Yes, Anthony," JOCASTA said. "And may I say, I feel you're doing a good thing."

Tony somehow managed a smile. "Thanks, JO. Means a lot."

***

Bucky Bear had migrated out of the doll jail, Tony noticed the next day, but he was sitting on a shelf, untouched, not taken down to be cuddled or played with. He still couldn't say for sure just why it was that it bothered him so much. Was it really so disturbing to see his kids growing out of their toys? Sure, they were only seven, and most other kids their age would still be all about dolls and teddies and action figures, but Jamie and Maria weren't like that. Like Tony, their minds made them grow up that much faster.

He'd come to terms with that, he'd thought. He'd realized a long time ago that the older the kids got, the better he'd be able to understand them, relate to them, the closer, in a sense, they'd get. He might miss them on his lap, and some day they'd realize they could read a story much faster themselves than he could read it to them. He'd come to terms with that, even if it did sometimes make him kind of sort of wonder if maybe he should start looking for someone to have a new baby with, to feel that warm, soft weight in his arms again even as he watched Jamie and Maria grow into the people they were meant to be. Either way, they were going to grow up. They were definitely going to grow out of Jamie's old stuffed toys.

So why the hell did it bother him so much?

***

Tony was honestly kind of surprised it took him two weeks to get Peter to come back. Normally, Peter responded to every phone call, even when it ended with him saying that he had a school project or extracurriculars or a plan with his friends that meant it wouldn't work. But this time, he'd made himself so unavailable Tony had half thought he'd have to show up in person, and the end result would be Peter resigning.

Two weeks, though, and Peter finally agreed to show back up. Tony made sure to book him an hour before he actually needed him to watch the kids because, fuck, Tony might be confused, but Peter had to be broken up as all hell about all this.
When Peter did walk into the 'shop, he wore an uncharacteristically hangdog expression, barely even managing to look up and meet Tony's eyes. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Stark," he said, before Tony had a chance to say anything. "I know what I did was stupid. I'm sorry if I got in the way of any of your plans. I just-- I couldn't. I couldn't let it go. Captain America has already done so much damage, and he was gonna do so much more, and if there was anything at all I could do, I couldn't just stand by. I promise Aunt May took good care of Jay and Em. She's real good with kids, and I'd told her I had a project I had to work on. I'm sorry I didn't get her authorized, I just--"

Tony held up a hand. "Pete, stop. Just stop." He took a deep breath. "I'm sure your aunt is a wonderful woman. I'd trust her with my kids any day of the week. She raised you, after all." He paused again, turned his chair fully to face Peter properly. "I was about to apologize to you, actually. I shielded Rogers and Natasha after S.H.I.E.L.D. fell. I thought it was for the best, that we would need them, when I should've learnt from what had already happened and made sure they faced the consequences of their actions. I should've made sure you, and others like you, got justice. If anything, it's damn near my fault Rogers got the chance to step out of line again."

Peter shook his head rapidly. "No, Mr. Stark," he said. "I get it. Second chances are important. That's why I never said or did anything about either of them before now." He stopped, swallowed with a click. "I think you did the right thing, even if I don't like it. Just-- Is Black Widow gonna be in charge of everything now?"

It was Tony's turn to shake his head. "Fuck no. I don't trust her. The UN doesn't trust her. I'm working to get Rhodey instated as the official leader of the Avengers. And if you think Natasha can manipulate him..."

Peter gave the barest hint of a grin. "I'm glad to hear it, Mr. Stark."

"I'm also gonna recommend you get trained further," Tony said. "I need you to read up on the Accords and know what they are. I need you properly trained, so you stay alive. I don't want you to sign yet, not unless you gotta, not until you turn eighteen, but I need you to know them inside and out, because if you get in trouble, they might be your Hail Mary. I asked Vision, and he's willing to train with you and teach you the Accords both. How do you feel about that?" Tony hated it, hated the idea of a kid being taught to fight, having to potentially involve himself in international politics, but it was what it was, and Peter had irrevocably proven that he was unable to stay out of even the big league fights when he felt he was doing what was right. Best make sure he was as well equipped as fucking possible, in every way there was.

Peter's dark eyes widened, and the smile grew on his face. "Thanks, Mr. Stark. Thank you so much. I don't even-- I thought you were gonna fire me, for leaving the kids with Aunt May and going to Germany, and--"

"Don't do that again," Tony said. "Not the May thing. Like I said, I trust her. But I had to go in and retroactively authorize you as a temporary reserve Avenger for that one mission, or you'd have been in deep shit for going to Germany without a passport. I can't do that again if I want the Accords to hold water. You get that, kid?"

Peter took a moment, straightened his back, and somehow managed to look impossibly solemn. "I understand, Mr. Stark," he said. "And I understand if you don't want me seeing your kids anymore. I--"

Tony frowned. "What the hell are you on about? Did I say anything to give you that impression? You're great with the kids. They love you. You're the fucking closest thing they're ever gonna get to having a big brother. Unless you're resigning, no way in hell am I letting you go."
Peter's smile was so honest it looked damn near angelic. "Thank you, Mr. Stark. They're really important to me too. I really like spending time with them, and I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't anymore. I never got to be a big brother before, but now..."

Tony grinned, got to his feet and ruffled Peter's hair. "Glad to hear it, Kid. Now, we've still got the better part of an hour. You gonna help me with these Spider Suit upgrades? If you're gonna actually train, we need to get you better equipment."

"Sure thing, Mr. Stark."

Chapter End Notes

So many loose ends to wrap up. Hopefully, we caught the first few here. Thanks for reading; hope you had fun.

And once again (and sorry to be a self-promoting arsehole), if you want to either go on the mailing list for my book, when it comes out, or to help with editing and world-building, just let me know. For those of you who already did, I really appreciate your support more than I can say.
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the comments and support. It means a lot to me :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later:

"Why did you do it?" he asks the huddled form in the cell. His chest feels tight and his voice shakes.
"Why would you--"

The man on the floor, a man he has once called friend, still does at times, looks up at him, gaze imploring. "I had to save you."

***

"Listen," Tony said, ignoring the secretary and bursting into Madame Roux's UN office, "I get that I signed the Accords, and that we're working together. Hell, I even like you, but if there's no mission, I really don't think I signed up to be 'summoned' when I'm in the middle of having dinner with my kids."

Madame Roux looked up from the tablet she'd been scanning, and Tony almost did a double take. She was wearing glasses, and her hair was down. Rather than her normal, sharp business clothes, she wore a comfortable, loose summer dress and sandals. Which, yeah, okay. "Dr. Stark," she said.
"Please sit down, and don't doubt for a moment that I'd have much rather stayed at the cookout for my grandson's birthday too."

The brief, hot flush in his face was painfully reminiscent of when Jarvis had still been alive. Tony sighed and sat down. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should've been more polite."

She flashed him a genuine smile. "I don't care if you're polite or not. If the Accords Panel wanted politeness we'd have reached out to Rogers to begin with. But please do trust that I wouldn't 'summon' you without good reason."

Tony let out a breath and plopped down into the chair. "Let's hear the good reason, then."

Madame Roux put down her tablet - a StarkPad, Tony noted absently - and steepled her hands, looking at him across her desk. "The Accords Panel's contact inside the Raft--"

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "You've got a spy in the Raft?"

In response, she raised both hers. "Of course we do. Until the final diplomatic work to transfer the Raft to the Accords Council is done, we need as many eyes on the Raft and Secretary Ross as possible. If we hadn't, do you honestly trust Ross not to have simply moved your former teammates to somewhere no one could find them a few days after they got there? If we hadn't, we wouldn't have let Ross take custody of the prisoners to begin with. They were caught in the EU, after all."

"Point," Tony conceded. He could've told her that JOCASTA had half an eye on the Raft, but she probably already knew. Besides, it seemed this inside guy might know something Tony didn't, and
he definitely wanted to hear it. "What did the inside guy tell you, then?"

"Someone, presumably HYDRA, broke into the Raft--"

"Wait," Tony said. "It's the Raft. Security's supposed to be a hell of a lot tighter than that."

Madame Roux shrugged. "That was my impression as well," she said. "But it is never as hard to break into a prison as it is to break out. Either way, the man - still unidentified, according to my intel - had a red book with him. He began to read a string of Russian words from it, and Barnes began to panic. The incident was stopped before it could go any further, but the red book is now in Ross's possession." She reached up, pushed her glasses up enough to rub the bridge of her nose. "I'm led to believe the code phrase takes away Barnes's free will and allows the speaker to control him. Now, I don't believe Ross will do anything right away, but this is still a dangerous situation, especially with Barnes still under the purview of the United States Military."

Tony swallowed. In his mind's eye, he saw that video again, saw the Winter Soldier's empty eyes as he crushed Howard's skull, as he crushed Tony's mom's throat. This book, this code phrase, those were what took Barnes's humanity away, what turned him into a weapon. And imagining that in Ross's hands made cold rush down Tony's spine. Even so... "Why am I here, then?"

"On the short term," Madame Roux said, "We need Barnes under the Accords. His lawyer was going to suggest it to him, but he's declined his right to an attorney. If he's not under the Accords, he's under Ross, and we cannot accept that, especially since he can be activated like that. Even the Raft won't be remotely safe for him, let alone keep everyone else safe from him."

Tony took a deep breath, leaned his elbows on the desk and tried not to remember Bucky Bear in doll prison. "And I reiterate: what am I doing here?"

Madame Roux sighed. "I know, based on the files you gave me, that anything pertaining to James Barnes might be difficult to you. But you would do the Accords, and the world, a great service, if you would give us access to your B.A.R.F. technology, in the hopes that it might remove the Winter Soldier programming. Barnes would be far less of a threat, then. And--"

"No emotional blackmail, please," Tony said. "I get it, 'and no other kids will have to lose their parents like you did'. " He rolled his eyes. "I had hoped you wouldn't stoop to that kind of manipulation."

Madame Roux sighed. "I'm sorry," she said.

Tony nodded. "Accepted," he said. "I'll have to think about it, though. The B.A.R.F. is far from finished, and only Bruce and I know how to even operate it. If used incorrectly, it would probably do more harm than good. I'll get back to you tomorrow at the latest."

She nodded. "Thank you, Dr. Stark. I'll talk to you tomorrow. In the meantime, I guess we both have other important things to get back to."

A few hours later, Tony finished reading the kids' bedtime stories and headed downstairs to the 'shop. He immediately began calling up the files he'd last been working on. He had promised Pepper he'd get around to smoothing over the design flaws on the next generation StarkPhone from R&D before sending it off for production. He'd have to get on that soon. And he'd had that idea about how to increase efficiency of the solar panels they put out last year. Also, he had to make sure to comb through the Accords for issues again, get them off to the others and then get ready to negotiate them, and--
"Anthony," JOCASTA said. "The psychiatrist recommended by Dr. Jeff has sent back his report," she said. "He notes, with bold and underline, that without talking to the patient, nothing he says can be taken as definite, and these are temporary opinions only."

"Okay," Tony said, turning to the cellphone holograms. "Explode that, FRY," he added quickly. "Hit me, JO."

"The psychiatrist, Dr. Madsen," JOCASTA started, "says that according to what he can tell from the notebooks, Sergeant Barnes suffers from severe PTSD, including anxiety and guilt, including but not limited to classic survivor's guilt. He also says that Sergeant Barnes suffers from partial memory loss, and the memories that are returning will only exacerbate his guilt complexes. He is also extremely impressionable."

Tony hummed, deftly manipulating the hologram in front of him. "FRY, run through the coding," he said even as he added a note about exchanging the alloy suggested with its twin, to shave off some twenty grams without impacting durability. On a whim, he added another quick note telling R&D to make the phone available in red and gold.

"In Dr. Madsen's professional opinion, Barnes cannot be held accountable for any actions taken since nineteen forty-five," JOCASTA continued. "It is apparent that whatever HYDRA did stripped him utterly of any sense of self and rendered him incapable of exercising his free will, if he even had it at that point."

"The coding generally looks solid, Boss," FRIDAY said. "There are a few problem areas I can isolate. I will call them up now."

"Thanks, FRY," Tony said, frowning as he subtly changed the design to make room for a second micro simcard. It was unlikely that most casual users traveled as much as he did, but for those who did, being able to switch back and forth between their local and home plans might be a help. He was pretty sure plenty of his competitors used this already. He felt a brief stab of irritation at the idea of being behind the curve, and added a note to R&D to code it so the transitions would work smoothly. "Keep going, JO."

"Dr. Madsen adds that Sergeant Barnes has not been in a situation where it has truly been feasible for him, given his mindset, to acquire knowledge of the modern world. It is unlikely that most casual users traveled as much as he did, but for those who did, being able to switch back and forth between their local and home plans might be a help. He was pretty sure plenty of his competitors used this already. He felt a brief stab of irritation at the idea of being behind the curve, and added a note to R&D to code it so the transitions would work smoothly. "Keep going, JO."

"Dr. Madsen adds that Sergeant Barnes has not been in a situation where it has truly been feasible for him, given his mindset, to acquire knowledge of the modern world. It is unlikely that he knows anything about, for instance, the Nuremberg Principles. Sergeant Barnes was last active military in nineteen forty-five, and while James Barnes, the person, doesn't know how to perceive Steve Rogers, his childhood friend, and has not made any move to contact him, Sergeant Barnes might very well still perceive Captain Rogers as his commanding officer, as evidenced by the fact that until it was no longer feasible, he was still working on taking down HYDRA bases. Thus, he cannot be held accountable for the casualties in Bucharest in the same way a man raised or a military officer trained in the modern world might."

Tony frowned for a moment, even as he took in the pieces of code FRIDAY had highlighted. He pulled up a holographic keyboard and began the edits to the code with a roll of his eyes. His R&D department was the best in the damn world. Why hadn't they caught this? As his hands fell into familiar rhythms, though, he let JOCASTA's words filter through to him. "He thinks Rogers is his CO, and he doesn't know the Nuremberg Principles," he said. "So when Rogers showed up in his apartment and told him they had to get out, he followed orders by any means possible. Not helped by the fact that he's apparently extremely impressionable."

"I believe that's what the report said, Anthony," JOCASTA replied.

"Fuck." Tony pushed the keyboard away again, resolving to fix that shit tomorrow. "Have we heard
They are far from done with their full report," JOCASTA said. "But Walters did send you a notice that more than a dozen countries are already in the process of requesting to have Barnes extradited. Nearly half those countries have the death penalty, and several nation leaders have expressed that they do not view him as either a victim or a prisoner of war. In many of these countries, he is likely to be either executed or imprisoned for life."

"And in either case, they can use him as a starting point for developing their own super soldier serum," Tony concluded. "You listened in on my conversation with Roux, I take it?"

"Yes, Anthony," JOCASTA replied.

"So, basically the Barnes situation sucks all over, is what we're taking away from this," Tony concluded."

For a moment, JOCASTA didn't answer. Then, after a, for her, lengthy pause, "Yes."

"Well, then." Tony leaned back in his chair and rubbed a hand over his face, suddenly so fucking exhausted it wasn't even funny. "If you got any suggestions, please enlighten me."

JOCASTA took another uncharacteristically long pause. Then, at last, "I believe it would be in everyone's best interests to persuade Sergeant Barnes to sign the Accords, and use the B.A.R.F. technology to rid him of his programming, and then throw all our legal resources into letting him go free. On his own recognizance in Romania, Sergeant Barnes caused no trouble. He was able to integrate into society and lead a productive life without hurting anyone, and all this while still recovering from his time with HYDRA. Following logic and what data I have, I do not believe Sergeant Barnes to be a problem if no one makes him one." Another pause. Then, "I understand if this is difficult for you, Anthony."

"This isn't about that," Tony said. "It's not about what's easy or difficult for me. It's about what's best for the greatest amount of people. Sometimes the greatest justice you can give anyone is an assurance that the same shit won't happen again. With that Red Book out there, we can't be sure what'll happen if Barnes ends up in, fuck, Iran's hands, or even if he stays in Ross's. Dead, he's almost as big a threat. No, I think you're right. I think the best thing we can do is get Barnes back under his own power, and out from under everyone's thumb." His stomach churned and it was suddenly difficult to pull in a full breath. Still, he made himself forge on. "What's the best way to accomplish that?"

JOCASTA made a sound that almost made Tony think she wished she had a throat to clear. "I believe it would be a powerful symbol if the child of two of his more prominent victims spoke up in his defense," she said at last.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to reiterate, once again, that since I have decided to finally focus my efforts on my own original writing, this story may never be completed (though, if we get to that point, I'll post a summary of what remains of my plans for the story). I still have some pre-written chapters, and I'll keep posting them once a week.

In summary, this story is up for adoption or co-writing. Let me know if you're interested.
Also, if anyone is interested in reading my original book, once it comes out, let me know. I have a mailing list going and would love to add anyone interested to it. Here’s a short summary:

*After the Kingdom of Lesnar loses their years-long war against the Kingdom of Baragsen, Princess Faraline is sent south to serve as a hostage. The Baragsene court is foreign and unwelcoming, and not everyone wants peace. Fara is the only person standing between peace and another war, and if she can’t figure out who is trying to kill her, she will die and the continent will fall back into chaos.*

Finally, please note that since I'll be moving to the UK within the next couple of weeks, I may not be able to keep as precise a posting schedule as I would like.

Thanks so much for continueing to read. This chapter was very much based in some of my own post-CA:CW ponderings, so I hope it wound up making some sense. I was thinking a lot about the Nuremberg Principles (specifically the right and duty to disobey bad orders) and whether Steve and Bucky even know these. I'm pretty sure they don't. Now, Steve has no excuse. He really *should* know. Bucky on the other hand...
"How many times in our lives have I needed you to save me?" he asks. Three, he thinks. It might be more; his memories aren't all there just yet.

"I couldn't fail you again," the man behind the bars says.

"I didn't need saving," he says, and he thinks maybe his heart ought to be breaking at the sight of those bars, the beard and unkempt appearance, the desperation in those blue eyes staring at him. But he doesn't feel that way, not more than he would for most acquaintances. There's still a disconnect between now and then, before and after, and this isn't the boy who once needed to be saved on a daily basis.

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Tony stuffed his hands into the pockets of his slacks and tried to keep calm. Ostensibly, the business suit was to project his confidence that he really was allowed to be here, even though he suspected Ross was already in the process of barring his access. If he were completely honest with himself, though, Tony could admit that the suit, more than anything, was there to make him feel safer. It didn't make much sense to himself, really. He was always far more comfortable in worn-soft jeans and band-shirts, but somehow the suits made him feel safer, like they were a different kind of armor he could put on to protect himself. They definitely made it easier to prevent other people from seeing through his skin and into the soft bits inside.

Now, faced once again with that cell, he wasn't sure why he'd felt the need to protect himself at all. Barnes, if possible, was curled even smaller than last time. He nearly disappeared into the shadowy corner in a way that completely defied his size. In that moment, Tony had no doubt that Barnes was far more scared of everything - Tony probably included - right now, than Tony could've ever been of him. And Tony, well, Tony was still more than a bit uneasy being this close to Barnes. Maybe he always would be. Still, right now he couldn't help but feel a sliver of sympathy for that hunched shape on the floor. "Barnes," he greeted.

Barnes gave the barest twitch, which Tony took as, if not a return greeting, at least an acknowledgement.

Tony sighed. "Listen, I'm not here to kill you or do anything remotely terrible. We talked before, didn't we? Did you forget how to speak?" And okay, maybe he could be kinder, but when Tony did kindness with people who weren't family, he often came off condescending without even meaning to, and he was pretty damn sure that wouldn't help the situation any. Besides, no one appreciated being spoken to like they were children, children included, and Barnes, damaged though he was, was not a fucking child anyway.

"Stark," Barnes finally croaked out.
Tony leaned his shoulder against the wall behind. "Okay, you're responsive. That's good. That's something. So, listen, I'm gonna speak kind of quickly now, because I'm gonna say some things the guys running this place won't want me to, and in a few minutes I might very well be politely escorted out of here. So, can you at least hear me out?"

The barest of nods, and Tony could barely convince himself he hadn't imagined it. Still, it was going to have to do.

"Okay," Tony said, "so super quick rundown here: American Secretary of State is a powerful guy who only likes the enhanced when he can control them. So, of course, he was put in charge of everything to do with metahumans and the enhanced. Right now, he controls this prison, the guards and your whole life. He also has your nifty little red book. And you, because of your known activities over the past few decades combined with the fact that he can control you and we'll have a hard time proving it, are more at risk of being made his personal attack dog than anyone else. With me so far?"

At some point during that spiel, Barnes had raised his head just enough that his eyes, steely orbs of pure fucking fear, were visible above his folded arms and knees, peeking out through his ratty hair.

Tony took a deep breath. "Now, that happening is not in anyone's best interest, I'm pretty sure. So I'm here with a special offer. I have a document that puts you under the temporary protection of the Sokovia Accords for a week while you read through the Accords. That removes you from Secretary Ross's control completely. If you sign the temporary agreement, I have permission to take you immediately into my custody and move you to another secure location, since this place isn't under the Accords yet. From there, we'll be able to start working on those triggers in your head. Do you understand?"

Barnes just kept fucking staring at him.

"Do you understand?" Tony repeated.

"Maybe I deserve it," Barnes finally said, voice still just as rough as it had been last time Tony was here. "After everything... maybe I don't deserve freedom."

"Who cares what the hell you deserve?" Tony asked, a slow-moving rage already beginning to heat in the pit of his stomach. "What I do know is that many of the people you'd be made to attack would deserve it not at all."

"The guards are moving towards your current position, Boss," FRIDAY said in Tony's earpiece.

"Now or never, Barnes," Tony said. "If you don't get yourself out of here right now, it's game over."

Barnes glanced to the side, and Tony was pretty sure he heard the approaching bootfalls several long moments before Tony himself. Finally, he looked up at Tony again, and the barest hints of determination made his eyes look ever so slightly alive. "Give it here," he said at last.

Tony reached into his inner pocket, pulled out a tablet and stylus and handed them over.

Barnes looked dumbfounded for a moment. Then he got over himself and signed, thank fuck, and Tony had his best smirk ready when Ross's goons showed up half a moment later.

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Quite frankly, Tony was grateful Vision had come with him, even if he had waited outside. Vision was perfect, power-wise, to contain the Winter Soldier and take him to the Compound and the Hulk
panic room there. He was really fucking glad to be able to go home and strip out of his three-piece, eat Bruce's dinner and build a Lego Millennium Falcon with Maria, Jamie and Peter. Still, the sight of the Bucky Bear, still exiled to a lonely shelf, got to him in a way he couldn't quite explain.

He'd barely finished reading tonight's chapter of The Deathly Hallows when Peter stuck his head in and told him Pepper was here, and fuck, Pepper was not to be underestimated, but that was JOCASTA's job, and if Peter was so easily distracted from doing homework with Bruce Banner, Tony would have to have a word with Howard Morita about how that damn school was run. He pressed a quick kiss to Maria's cheek before lifting Jamie up on his hip, barely suppressing a grunt - even Jamie was getting too heavy to lift, Thor damn it - and taking him to his own room where he smoothed the kid's hair back and kissed his forehead. "Sleep well, Kiddo. Gotta go see what your aunt wants now, okay?"

Jamie flashed him a wide smile, and Tony took that as permission enough. Another grin, and then he went for the door, turning off the lights and turning on the arc reactor inspired nightlight Jamie had yet to give up as he went. He passed Peter and Bruce discussing something to do with Peter's World Politics class - and props to the kid for taking that. He gave a quick wave before heading on into his rarely used home office. He stopped to kiss Pepper's cheek before rounding the desk and plopping down into his chair. "What's up?"

"Rogers managed to snag himself some ambitious little asshole pro bono lawyer who's trying to pin the blame for everything on anyone other than Rogers," Pepper said. "We need to work out what exactly our answers to their accusations are going to be."

Tony winced. "I guess he'll have plenty of patriots on his side," he said.

"'Nationalists', Tony," Pepper said. "They're called nationalists. And many of them are on our side anyway. We're good for the economy. Anyway, I sent the press release to your tablet. There are a few points we definitely need to work out, and then we'll start arranging interviews."

"Okay," Tony said, picking up his tablet and opening the new file. "Where do you want to begin?"

"Let's start with the most incendiary point," Pepper said, looking at him with those sharp, blue eyes of hers. "Tony, did you, Rhodey and Vision bomb a missile silo in Siberia knowing there were people inside?"

"Yes," Tony said. He didn't say that Bruce had supervised. Bruce was always just on the line between loved and hated with the public. Because of the Hulk and people's misconceptions and all that fucking shit, he had less leeway than the rest of them. The further Tony could keep him out of all this shit, the better. "There were five psychotic HYDRA super soldiers inside. I'll send you the files, but they were fucking dangerous, we knew what we were doing might not be wrong, but it sure as fuck wasn't right either." With a swipe of his thumb, the files beeped their way into Pepper's StarkPad.

Pepper took a few minutes to scan the files before nodding. "As there was not yet a global system in place to deal with these types of uncontainable threats, you did the only thing you could think of to keep the world safe. Now that the Accords have been ratified, you hope and pray to never find yourself in a situation where you have to make that kind of call again," she said.

Tony nodded. "Not even a lie, that," he said.

"And why didn't you inform Captain America?" Pepper asked. The angle of her cocked eyebrow suggested that she didn't think much of Captain America. The answer was still important, though. Unlike certain other people, Tony was never going to underestimate PR.
"Captain America was compromised," Tony said. "He knew about the nature of my parents' death for two years and didn't tell me, to protect his war buddy. He recruited Wanda Maximoff on shaky grounds - though that hasn't turned out too badly. Wanda needs more training, but she could be an asset. Either way, it was to make the way for his old war buddy and make it harder for us to reject him. Captain America killed people in Budapest to protect his old war buddy. Like I said, severely compromised. We could not trust him to have a clear head when it came to HYDRA super soldiers."

Pepper flashed him a brief smile and an approving nod. "You knew the Winter Soldier's location for months and didn't inform Captain America," she said.

Tony sighed, reached up and raked his fingers through his hair. "Truth be told," he said. "That one was a mistake and I'm sorry as fuck. If I'd told Rogers, or brought Barnes in myself when I found him, none of this would've happened, and--" He had to stop there, swallow.

Pepper reached out, wrapped her long fingers around his hand and pulled it out of his hair, anchoring it to the table. It was strangely reassuring. "While you realize, in hindsight, that you could've made different decisions, you were blinded by your own trauma, and simultaneously interested in seeing the Winter Soldier continue to rehabilitate himself," she said. "You're sorry things went as wrong as they did, but you cannot take responsibility for Rogers's actions, especially given the fact that he didn't create a team environment that encouraged full disclosure."

Tony managed a smile, and was kind of surprised by how watery it felt. He gave her hand a quick squeeze. "Yeah," he said. "That. Thank you."

Pepper returned his squeeze and didn't let go. "They also claim that Rogers is ignorant to modern international politics and laws, and that you are the main person responsible for that," she said.

Tony snorted. "Why? Do they claim I was his employer?"

There was a glint in her eye. "That one is easy, at least," she said. "While much of the funding came from SI, the Avengers Initiative was its own self-owning entity, led by Steve Rogers. We are no more responsible than donors are when relief and aid organizations turn out to be dirty."

Tony gave a sharp nod and straightened his shoulders. "The first few years after he awoke, Rogers was with S.H.I.E.L.D.," he said. "If anyone had a responsibility to bring him up to speed, it was them. When the Avengers became independent, I could recommend reading material and things to catch up on. And I did, the Accords included. Rogers kept insisting that all he needed was his damn list of pop culture phenomena. You can lead the horse to the water, but you can't make it drink and all that."

Pepper's smile was sharper now, satisfied. At least for a moment, before they became speculative again. "And what do you want to do about Barnes?" she asked.

Tony let out a breath, straightened his neck. "We are going to be utterly honest and upfront about everything we know he's done. Then we're going to be upfront about everything that was done to him and throw every damn bit of power SI Legal has behind him. The best damn way to neutralize the Winter Soldier short of killing him, which I don't believe he deserves, is to give all control back to James Barnes. The world will be the safer for it, and we're the only ones who can make it happen after his old war buddy took him on a killing spree. I'll send you the files on him as well. But... I want him to go free."

Pepper cocked a perfectly manicured eyebrow. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Tony swallowed down the lump of leftover pain and made himself nod. "It's for the best," he said.
She kept looking at him imploringly for long moments. When his stance didn't change, she gave a
decisive nod. "I'll set up the interviews," she said. "We're going to slaughter them."

Tony flashed her a grin. Still, even the relief of having Rogers's lawyer dealt with wasn't enough to
explain the weight that somehow felt lifted off his shoulders. Oh, well. He could always do with less
weight to carry around.

Chapter End Notes

A few notes:
- Principal Morita (here Howard Morita) is canon from Homecoming. He is related to
  Jim Morita (I'm guessing son, nephew or, at a stretch, grandson). They're played by the
  same actor, so this is not just me playing around.
- I realise my interpretation of the Accords and what risks and protection they might
  provide are uncommon and they are very much just my interpretation for this story. I
can't prove Ross's motives, or, for that matter, Tony's, but you probably can't disprove
  them either ;P

And finally, I will continue to update this story weekly (though next weekend may
prove to be an issue, since I will have just moved to England and nowhere near settled
yet) until I run out of chapters. At that point, if no one has adopted the story or offered to
co-write (*hinthintnudgenudge*), I will most likely post a summary of what I'd planned
for the rest of the story and end it there, since I desperately need to focus on my original
work. If anyone is interested in reading my original work once I've published it, let me
know and give me your email, and I'll send you a mail as soon as it comes out.
Thanks so much for all the comments. Never doubt that regardless of whether I'm still actively writing the story, they mean the world to me. I still love this universe and these characters, and seeing you guys on the journey alongside me means more than I can say.

I'm so sorry for the delay. Like I said, I had to move countries, and that's never exactly a simple undertaking, even with a country I know as well as the UK. Add to that the fact that I've changed careers completely. It's invigorating and so very interesting, but it also takes a lot of energy out of me to attempt to store all the new information on my hard drives ;P For the past work week, I've mainly just returned to my room (temporary company housing) and watched random YouTube videos before crashing into bed and starting over the next day. It'll probably be like that for the next couple of weeks as well, until I begin to feel like I know what the actual fuck I'm even doing. Still, it's challenging in a good way. I always did like a challenge ;P

TL;DR: Thanks so much for reading and commenting. Sorry I missed posting last weekend. I just moved countries. I will try to post next weekend as scheduled, but I am not quite settled yet and cannot promise anything.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I still don't need saving." He lets out a breath, suddenly so fuckin' tired of it all. And his damn back hurt. He thought the serum would've stopped that kinda thing from happenin', but no. "Not from my family. Not by you." He reaches up, pushes the hair out of his face. "And your little errand girl... Now she's stuck here too. How could you do something so stupid?"

"What, no!" The other man rears out of his prone position on the floor. "She doesn't deserve that. She was only trying to help. She's my friend!"

***

"Maximoff is in the clear," Madame Roux said, glancing at Tony through the projected video call. "We've been investigating the case ever since Lagos happened. It's become quite clear that while her training and control is apparently insufficient when it comes to the physical applications of her powers, she cannot be held responsible. Her commanding officer was the one who put her in a situation to do that kind of damage. Add it to Rogers's list of mistakes; we intend to." She paused for a moment, gave a brief smile. "Maximoff will be charged with nothing, and now that she has signed the Accords, she will be accepted as an official member of the Avengers. However, we cannot clear her for duty until her control has become better. We would like a documented training regimen for her, and for her to see a therapist. Once that is in place, we will re-instate her upon a positive psychological evaluation and evidence that her control has become sufficient."

"She's not going to like that," Tony muttered. He hadn't planned on speaking loudly enough for Madame Roux to hear him, but apparently, her ears were sharper than he'd realized.

"She doesn't have to like it," she said. "She simply has to do it, or she will have to retire and figure out how well she likes civilian life. The Nigerians are unhappy about this as it is. We need to give
them some reassurances. And while psychological evaluations can be a tiresome chore, it is normal procedure in many service branches to undergo them after traumatic experiences on the job. You know we put that in the Accords."

Tony nodded. He hadn't realized that that would be in effect for a pre-Accords mission, but it made sense. And hell, it would probably do Maximoff some good to get a bit of therapy. "Thank you for clearing all this up," he said. "I'll make sure to let Rhodey know. And her." And yeah, nothing was entirely official yet, but it was obvious to Tony that Rhodey would be the next team leader. No one else already affiliated with the Avengers could compete with his credentials or suitability for the job. No one else was as widely trusted, and in the end, it really was that damn simple. Besides, there was no one Tony would rather have as team leader and he'd fight anyone who objected.

Madame Roux flashed him a small smile and took a few more moments to exchange courtesies before they ended the call. Letting out a breath, Tony picked his abandoned sandwich back up, grabbed his pot of coffee and made for the 'shop. He had a few projects he needed to work on, and with the kids at school and Bruce working on a project of his own, now was the best time. He got into the elevator and waited for it to move down.

It didn't.

Tony frowned, a few dozen different scenarios already running through his head. "JO, take me down to the 'shop," he said.

No answer.

"JO?" he asked. "FRY?"

He took a breath and reached out to manually press the button. The elevator began to descend. Nerves thrummed right beneath his skin. He moved his right hand towards the trigger on the watch on his left wrist, ready to deploy the gauntlet.

Slowly, strangely forebodingly, the elevator came to a stop. The doors opened. Tony stepped out, still with the watch at the ready.

Nothing happened.

He sped his steps, doing what he could to seem as normal and nonchalant as usual as he walked up, typed in his passcode on the holographic keyboard. He stepped through the doors and made for the nearest workbench. "FRIDAY?" he said again, keeping his voice steady and even with some effort.

Someone stepped out in front of him.

Tony triggered the gauntlet and released a sonic blast, heart pounding just a bit too hard in his chest.

The intruder fell on their back before getting their feet under them and jumping back up.

Gritting his teeth, Tony powered up the repulse. The telltale whine should be warning enough.

The intruder raised their hands, slowly coming to a standstill, and finally they caught the light enough that Tony could tell who the hell it was.

"Natasha?" he asked. "What the hell are you doing? What did you do to FRY and JO?"

She tossed him some kind of small, mechanical device and gave a smile that might've been classified as cheeky on anyone else. "I'm testing your security for you," she said. "Turns out, if you know
enough about their code, they aren't so hard to dismantle."

Because they were new and young and hadn't yet built the kinds of firewalls JARVIS had shrouded himself in throughout his last years. Something inside Tony clenched even as he held on tight to the device. He was going to have to run a thorough check-up later, and build some proper damn defenses against whatever this was. "What the hell is up with you S.H.I.E.L.D. types and this fucked-up habit you have of attacking my AI? Don't you get that they're people too? Right now, they're stuck in their servers, blind and deaf and mute and scared to death."

"I guess it's a good thing it was done by a friend, then," Natasha said with a shrug, flinging herself into the nearest chair. "They'll be back online in eight minutes."

"And why did you do it?" Tony asked. "If you wanted to talk, you could've just asked. What the hell is up with this whole set-up? Are you trying to threaten me?"

She gave another shrug, and it had been years since Tony had last seen her act like this, since he had felt truly threatened by her. "If it was a threat, you'd know. Just a reminder. You need the Avengers as much as we need you."

Debatable, Tony thought but did not say. Instead, he simply cocked an eyebrow.

She seemed to shift before his eyes, shedding the careless, cool demeanor of before, growing warmer, softer, more imploring. It was fucking creepy was what it was, and seeing her shift like that when she was usually much subtler... it was strangely like watching a robot malfunction. "I went to see Steve," she told him at last. "It isn't right, him locked up like that."

Tony sighed. "I think if you went and did a survey in Germany and Romania, you'd find quite a few people who'd disagree with you."

She cocked an eyebrow. "And when have you ever cared about that when it was your friends on the line?"

"I think you're mistaking me for Rogers," Tony said, finally sitting down in a chair of his own. He considered letting the gauntlet retract. When he didn't, he couldn't even say why. "Those people matter. They have always mattered. I've always tried to do my best for the civilians. Ever since Afghanistan, I've tried my best to stand for accountability. After the Battle of New York, I footed as much of the bill as I could justify to the shareholders. After you and Rogers burnt S.H.I.E.L.D., I saved everyone I could. After every damn Avengers mission, I've been cleaning up. This is too much for me, in good conscience, to sweep under the rug."

She snorted, uncharacteristically inelegant. "And what about the fact that this is all your fault?" she asked. "If you had only shared your knowledge on Barnes's whereabouts, we'd--"

The immediate flash of anger rushing through Tony's body was more than enough to suppress the sting of instinctive guilt. "Don't you dare speak to me about sharing information," he spat. "How long did you and Rogers know what happened to my parents without caring to tell me?"

Natasha's eyes flickered away for a moment before meeting his again. "C'mon, Tony, you're letting your ego get in the way. This isn't about you. This is about the fact that you are throwing Steve under the bus while doing your damnedest to save everyone else who's been caught up in this mess."

Her voice had sharpened now, and her eyes with it, and Tony was momentarily grateful the repulsor was still humming with power in the palm of his hand. "Wanda gets a slap on the wrist for Lagos--"

"Her commanding officer should've known better than to bring her to a fight she wasn't ready for,"
Tony said, keeping his voice even with some effort. "Hell, he should've known better than to go in
while leaving two of his strongest team members at home, let alone without alerting and cooperating
with the proper authorities. But then that's how Rogers always operates when it's Barnes on the line."

"Well, maybe if you hadn't retired, hadn't dropped all of that in our laps," Natasha said. "Maybe it
would've gone better then. Steve doesn't know this world the way you and I do, and--"

"Yet, I notice you were there," Tony said. "And like you just said, you know how the world
operates. So why is it my fault for wanting to dedicate time to my traumatized daughter when you
were second in command and didn't do a thing to mitigate his ignorance?"

Her fists clenched, and there was a flash at her wrists as her widow’s bites began to charge. Tony
raised the gauntlet again, aiming straight at her until the flashing light from the bites receded. "I don't
have the president of every known country on speed dial," she said at last. "It would've taken me too
long, and Rumlow would've vanished again."

"Vision does," Tony said. "He has access to my whole database. C'mon, let's be honest. Even if I
had still been a fulltime Avenger - and trust me, I wouldn't be even now, if it weren't necessary -
would Steve have actually asked for help?"

For a moment, she looked helpless, almost childlike, and despite himself, Tony didn't think it was
fully an act. "You always fix everything," she said.

Tony shook his head. "I'm not gonna be the guy you call when you need to bury the bodies," he
said. "That's not what I signed up for."

She was silent for long moments, seeming to compose herself. "T'Challa is walking away, no
punishment," she said. "He was part of that shitshow in Romania too."

"I have nothing to do with King T'Challa," Tony said. "I'm pretty sure you've had more
conversations with him than I have. My best guess is that Wakanda will help cover the damages and
he'll give a very heartfelt apology. No one can force more than that out of him, regardless of what
he's done. He has diplomatic immunity."

She stared at him, eyes narrowed. "And Barnes?" she asked at last. "The man who killed your
parents, who caused at least as many deaths as Steve these past few days, and many more if we
count the past? Why does he get your lawyers sweeping everything under the rug while Steve gets
thrown under the bus?"

"Steve threw himself under the bus, goddamnit," Tony shouted. He sucked in a breath to calm
himself down, ran a hand over his face. "Barnes's mental state means he can't legally be held
accountable for anything, and he's less of a danger on his own cognizance than in jail, under Ross's
control."

"With your lawyers, Steve could--"

"No," Tony said. "None of you ever seem to get this, but political capital is not some constant thing
you can spend and spend endlessly. It's like any other currency. You earn some, you spend some. If
you're not careful, it runs out. By keeping mine high, I keep the Avengers Initiative on solid ground,
I keep Bruce safe, I keep my company and all my hundreds of thousands of employees secure. If I
were to go to ball for Rogers, I'd be spending all my favors, all my weight, all my lean, and I'd have
nothing left to do for anything else, including keeping up the work on the Accords until they work
properly. " He took a deep breath. "Did you ever stop to wonder if maybe, just maybe, Steve put
himself where he is and needs to lie in the bed he made?"
Her jaw clenched for a moment, and Tony got it. He wished he didn't, but he did. Natasha was in many ways a rational being, more pragmatic than anyone else he knew. But she was still human. She craved friendship, she craved trust. Rogers had given her that. And although she might agree with Tony out of sheer logic, Tony could never give her what she needed on a human level. Even if he'd wanted to, it just wasn't possible. He'd never trusted her fully, and he'd never be able to. "Captain America in jail," she said. "What a fucking joke."

"If you think so, go get him a better lawyer," Tony said with a shrug. "I'm sure you've got a few paychecks stashed away. I can't help you. Now, please, I've got a lot of work I need to do, and when the girls come back online, they're gonna be less than pleased with you."

Natasha rolled her eyes, but she did leave. Just moments later, the voices of both his AI sounded, soothing him back into something resembling calm. He pressed the button to retract the gauntlet back into the watch and reached up to rub at his temples. Letting out a long sigh, he threw Natasha's device on a worktable. "Scan that," he told FRIDAY. "And JO, please make a note to Rhodey that Natasha needs a psych eval as well. With someone good. Real good, or she'll bullshit her way out of it."

"Yes, Boss," FRIDAY said, even as JOCASTA chimed in with an, "Of course, Anthony," and fuck, but the sound of their voices was the best sound he'd heard in a good long while.

Chapter End Notes

Subplots are so much fun, aren't they?

Also, I have my eye on a beautiful studio flat, but I need a bank account to get the loan I need to pay for the deposit (I depleted my savings going to Guatemala earlier this year, and I spent months taking care of my dad, which doesn't really create any new funds), and the bank is taking its sweet time setting up anything, so please send me all your best wishes and thoughts and prayers or whatever you personally do. I would really appreciate any luck I can get here *fingers crossed* I know from experience that I can do perfectly fine in a single room in a shared house, but I can get a studio for the same rent if I can only pay the deposit, so yeah... That's taking up a lot of my thoughts at the moment. Still, as I said, I'll do my best to update next weekend.
Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry for the delay. It's exhausting to move countries. It's exhausting to start a new job and meet new colleagues and learn new procedures. It's exhausting to change your career field entirely. I'm doing all of those at once. Last weekend, I barely did anything except sleep and perhaps sleepily half watch a film or two. I honestly did not have the energy to post anything. I'm really sorry about that, and I will try to do better. No promises, though, since I'm barely even keeping my eyes open right now (and it's eight on a Saturday evening. What the fuck?)

Anyway, thank you so much for all the comments. They really mean a lot to me, and I'm so grateful to see how many of you keep following the story, even knowing it may never get finished.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"She was on wobbly ground already," he says. "Did you even think about the consequences before askin' her?"

His old friend slumps back onto the floor. "This was more important. You are more important."

He sighs. Then he turns around and leaves. As much as it pains him, he can no longer spend his life savin' that damn punk.

***

"Remember to get your bags packed," Tony called just as the kids were about to begin their race from the car and down to the beach. "Pack everything you don't need for tomorrow, and then we can go for a swim."

The kids skidded to a stop so very simultaneously it was almost comedic. Tony managed to hide his grin before they turned to him with those wide, begging eyes of theirs, and fuck, but he was close to giving in before he even knew for sure what it was they wanted. "Not yet, Daddy," Maria all but whined.

"Just one more day, Dad," Jamie added, and fuck, but those eyes could've melted ice in the middle of winter.

It didn't help that Tony kind of wanted to stay too. Today had been a wonderful day of sightseeing through Barcelona. Seeing the incredible tiles and almost unreal colors and architecture of Gaudí with the kids was like seeing it again for the first time. His day had been taken up with excited squeals and outlandish explanations and an absolutely hilarious visit to one of the local galleries to buy a souvenir for Pepper. Tony only ever enjoyed looking at art with people whose appreciation for it was at about the same level as his own, which suited the twins to a T, which never failed to make the whole thing hilarious. In the end, the lighthearted fun of it all had caused him to let them pick out the ten million Euro painting they'd be bringing home. The look on Pepper's face would make his damn year.
More so than that, Catalunya had always been home for him. He had never got to spend as much
time here as he'd have liked, but his mother had always made sure to make him aware of his roots.
He knew the family history, knew how Maria Carbonell Collins's wealthy, politically involved
family had been forced to flee during the Franco regime, first to Great Britain where Tony's
grandfather met and married his Welsh grandmother, and then onwards to the States where Maria
had eventually married Howard. He knew how Maria had been raised unfairly impoverished as a
fugitive in the United States and how, after Franco's fall, she'd spent small portions of the Stark
fortune slowly buying back the properties that had once belonged to her parents' families. Tony,
himself, had made sure those properties and companies were well taken care of even after his
mother's death.

The Barcelona beach house, he'd built himself sometime in the mid-nineties. For a long time, during
the height of his sleeping with models career, he'd used it almost exclusively to show up for Fashion
Week. It had stood empty for the better part of a decade before he decided to take the kids here for
this year's summer vacation, and it had been a fucking balm to some wound he hadn't even realized
he'd been carrying around.

He knew the language here, he knew the customs. He looked similar enough to the locals that often
enough he wasn't even recognized. He got to introduce the kids to his mother's father's language and
the dishes he'd grown up with whenever Maria had had the time to get in the kitchen. Sharing that
part of himself with them had done him more good than he'd ever anticipated. And then there was
the political climate.

In the U.S. there were people clamoring for his head, trying to crucify him for 'putting Captain
America in jail', as if Rogers hadn't managed that on his own. The malicious comments in interviews,
the strongly worded phone call from the president himself - and was Ellis really so incompetent he
thought Tony had the power to free Rogers from all this? All of it added up to an added stressor he
really did not need in his fucking life. Europe was wonderfully different. Whenever he was
recognized, he was praised for his choices and actions. Questions leaned more toward the future of
the Accords, toward plans and legacies, and it was so fucking freeing he didn't even have words for
it. And more often than not, no one was even asking him anything to do with superheroes or the
Accords, at least the regular people. They seemed all too caught up in yet another wave of separatism
to care. Tony wished with all his mother's father's Catalunyan heart they'd succeed, but he knew it
would take a lot of time and planning and negotiation to even begin to think about a legal vote. Still,
it had been interesting enough just to find that out and discover what was happening, politically, in
his mother's home at the moment. And honestly, he'd stay here for fucking ever if he could. But he'd
been gone ten days already, and the world did not make it a habit to wait for him.

"We have to go home," he said, and reminded himself that he wasn't Howard just for ending a
vacation at the agreed-upon time. Honestly, he never remembered going on a vacation with Howard
in the first place. "I've got work to do, and I'm sure you miss Bruce and Petey, and fuck, Wanda and
Viz too, right? I bet they miss you as well. And I promise that I'll do my very best to make sure we
can come back here for the fall break, if you still wanna go."

Two pouts - and fuck, but the expression was nearly identical even if their faces were vastly different
- were their response to that. "Can't we just stay?" Maria asked. "Just one more day?"

"Please, Daddy?" Jamie added.

Tony wanted to give in so damn badly. He was in no way looking forward to returning home, to
having those damn full-day meetings with the whole of the Accords panel, to answering questions
about Rogers or, hell, about his connection to his idiot God-cousin, never mind that his connection
had always been with his Uncle Danny, not with Aunt Peggy. He missed his workshop, and the
bots, and Bruce and Peter and everyone else, but the workload ahead made him feel exhausted already. "I'm really sorry," he said at last. "I really enjoyed our time here, and I'm so glad you did too. But we have to go back." For a moment, he considered letting the twins stay and inviting Peter and his aunt to come stay with them, but really, that wasn't something he could ask of them. "Go pack your stuff, my little gears," he said at last, feeling inexplicably heavier than he did just a moment ago.

"Anthony," JOCASTA said when they all entered the house and the kids had sullenly made for their rooms. Her voice sounded more mechanical than ever, coming out of the incomplete system here. "Dr. Banner left a message for you to call him back as soon as possible."

Tony let his shoulders slump, dug into the fridge for a cold drink, and turned towards the nearest camera. "Call him," he said. It was fairly early morning in the States, but Bruce would've never used the words 'as soon as possible' if it weren't important, which meant he must be ready to be woken up. At least, Tony hoped so. Anyway, Bruce had always been one of those disgusting morning people.

Bruce showed up on the screen a few moments later, all tousled hair and ruffled clothes, but looking about as awake as ever. He flashed Tony a quick grin. The camera followed him as he plopped down into a chair. "Tony," he greeted. "I hope you're enjoying your vacation."

"Well," Tony said. "I was, until I had to endure the kids' kicked puppy eyes at the prospect of leaving the beach behind."

Bruce's features softened. "I'm glad they're having a good time," he said. Then he let out a breath, sobering before Tony's eyes. "We need to figure out something else for Barnes," he said at last. "We started out gentle on the B.A.R.F., and Barnes handled it like a champ. I... did not. I was so close to going green, I just-- I can't--" He stopped, eyes squeezing shut. For a moment, his normally quite negligible muscles bunched, and veins of green seemed to go across Bruce's face and exposed forearm. Then Bruce sucked in a sharp breath and it all receded. His dark eyes met Tony's. "What they did to him, Tony... I can't deal with it, and how am I supposed to help him if I can't trust myself?"

Tony swallowed. Nodded. "We'll find someone with the right credentials," he said. "Train them up. They'll deal with it, and we won't ever have to have a damn thing to do with it."

Bruce winced. "You know it won't really work like that," he said. "We haven't even gotten started on translating the code to a more common one yet. Only the two of us will even be able to read anything other than the visual data. Understanding the tech and its placement and how it all works together... This is a prototype, Tony. It's not meant to be used for about another year or two of development, and then weeks of training competent operators. If not for the threat Ross poses, neither one of us would've even considered using it on anyone other than ourselves yet. At this point in time, only the two of us can use it anywhere close to competently." He took another heavy, easily audible breath. "I hate to ask this of you, Tony..."

Tony took a deep breath, and it was his turn to squeeze his eyes shut and breathe through the threatening panic. His stomach turned at the thought of it, at the thought of one day having to guide his parents' murderer through their deaths and telling him it was all right. And sure, that's not what it was, not really. Barnes was a gun, just a gun. Tony believed that with all his being. But that didn't change the visceral reaction that still lingered in his whole body, his whole mind, when he thought of his parents' death. Still, Tony had been the loudest legitimate supporter of Barnes's rehabilitation. He was the one who had promised the Accords Council that it would work.

And Barnes had been a gun. Nothing more and nothing less.
Back home, Bucky Bear was still exiled to a shelf, no matter how many nights he had spent protecting Jamie and then Maria from nightmares.

If Tony was to ever be able to explain all of this properly to the kids, if he was ever to get Barnes properly free and back on his own cognizance and, thus, neutralized... If he wanted to be true to his own principles... He had to do this. "I'll be home tomorrow," he said. "I'll take me a day or two to catch up on everything I've got to do when I come back, and then another day to look through your data. I'll take over by the end of the week."

Bruce nodded. "I really am sorry," he said. "I wish I didn't have to ask you to do this. But I just can't-..."

Tony forced a smile. "C'mon. The last thing Barnes needs right now is you hulking out on him." He paused a moment. "I'm not gonna have a lot of time for the kids for the next couple of weeks, am I? D'you got the time to come down here and look after them?"

Bruce shook his head, a strangely wistful, regretful look on his face. "I have several time sensitive experiments going on. I can't leave NYC for a few weeks at least."

Tony nodded. "I'll see what I can figure out," he said, but he didn't really want to drag the twins back from a holiday they really enjoyed only to stick them in the Tower with nothing to do and with no real time to hang out with them. Once again, he felt a pang of Howard, but fuck, he wasn't doing that badly, was he? He was an insanely busy man by anyone's standards, and he was a single father. He didn't have some sweet, pretty, devoted trophy wife to look after the kids, the way most insanely busy men did. Or women. And it was just... he loved his kids, but it was exhausting sometimes, having so much damn stuff to do all the while worrying that he was being his father, that he was neglecting his kids because he, for all the support he got from his friends, was their only parent.

His eyes were burning, suddenly, and he was so fucking exhausted it hurt. But no, he had to do this damn thing, and he had to do what he could to make sure his kids had as great a summer as possible. Despite the principles he'd reached for earlier, he found himself calling the Parker household.

Perhaps he ought to get himself a damned trophy wife.

"Mr. Stark?" a female voice said. Vaguely, Tony recognized it as being May Parker.

"Hey, Ms. Parker," Tony said. He took a deep breath. "I need a favor, and I know it's big and that you may not be able to... But I need my kids babysat for the next couple of weeks. I'll be so busy, and they'll be too cooped up in New York, and..."

"Mr. Stark." May Parker's voice was unaccountably soft and gentle. "I know what it's like to be a single parent. Take a breath and tell me what's going on, and if I can help you, I will."

"You've heard about the Barnes case, right?" Tony asked.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Reversing brainwashing or something, right?"

"Right," Tony agreed. "Except a whole lot more complicated than it sounds. And it's... the first few weeks of therapy are pretty intense, pretty time consuming. And it turns out I'm the only person in the world who can do it. I won't have time for my kids. So, what I want to ask... and I know it's too much, I know I have no right to ask this, just--"

"Spit it out, Stark," she said.

"Could I fly you and Peter out to Spain for a couple of weeks?" Tony asked. "I have a beach house
on the outskirts of Barcelona, and the twins love it here. I think letting them stay here with Peter and you, that might... not make up for how little time I've got, but they may still enjoy it." He took another deep breath. "I'll pay your employer whatever it takes to get you the time off, and you'll be compensated for your time, of course, and--"

"Tony," she cut him off. "May I call you Tony?"

Tony blinked. "Yes?" he asked.

"You are a sweet and generous man. Ben and I never had the money to take Peter anywhere, and his parents never had the chance. Going to Spain would be a dream come true for us. Your twins are a joy to look after, and despite the age difference, it's good for Peter to have someone on par with his... intellectual level to spend time with. We really appreciate this offer, and I wouldn't turn it down for the world." Despite not knowing her, he could almost hear the smile in her voice. "Anyway, us single parents have to look out for one another, right?"

"Right," Tony agreed with a smile so wide he couldn't have kept it down if he'd tried. He would miss the twins so damn much, but they'd have the time of their lives with their favorite... Peter around, and really, as things were, it was the best damn thing he could do for them. He breathed out, let his shoulders drop and ended the call, ready to explain to the kids that he did have to go back but they'd get to stay a while longer.

The kids weren't happy about it, as it turned out, but at least it seemed to be more that they felt sorry for him having to go back than angisting over them staying here with someone else. It might not be perfect, but Tony was willing to take what he could get.

He left tickets for the next FC Barcelona match on the table before the Parkers arrived. Hopefully Peter enjoyed soccer.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed :D

Another couple of things:

I'm still looking for a co-writer who knows for sure they'll soon have the time and commitment to help me finish this story OR a writer who is willing to adopt it. And either way, don't feel shy to offer. I'm more than happy to proof-read and advice and help with whatever else you need.

I'm also looking for someone who would be willing to take some time to beta and help me complete my original story, since those who volunteered earlier all seem to have vanished :( If you like fast-paced fantasy, fantasy politics, fight scenes, magic, mystery and character-based stories, it might be the thing for you. And if you don't want to help, but would like to read the book once it comes out, you can give me your email and I'll add you to my mailing list.

Thanks so much for bearing with me.

- Dannie
End Notes

Hope everyone enjoyed. Questions, speculation, anything is always welcome. Thank you for reading.
Character tags etc. will be updated along the way.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!