The Limitations of Wax

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Summary

So Jarvis is the one who pulls her up onto her feet, presses a tool into one hand and a book
into the other and tells her to create. Tells her that if the numbers and the shapes and images in her mind hurt so bad then she should build them, should give them form so that they can finally leave her alone.

Jarvis is the one who finally teaches her how to breathe.

Or

_Toni Stark grows up with the tale of Icarus swirling in the back of her mind. Instead of taking it as a precautionary tale about hubris and overreaching she decides it's more about the limitations of wax.

_Years later when she builds herself wings of her own she makes sure to build them out of better material._

Notes

Okay first of all this is my first time dipping into Marvel waters to write. I'm a huge Tony fan as many of you might have figured out and I've been desperate to do something with him for forever but I've been putting it off. Then my new OT3 ate my brain and decided that a FemTony fic with Stark Spangled Soldier had to be written.

So yeah, here.

Fanmix: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax
When Maria finally falls pregnant Howard isn’t so much happy as he is satisfied. His dynasty is ensured now. He’ll have an heir, a son to groom and mold in his image to carry on his life’s work. A son he can teach to build, to create, to engineer and push the boundaries of science ever outwards.

A son to rear into a proper Stark, a son who will be Howard’s greatest creation.

When the time comes Howard sits with Obadiah in the plush waiting room of the hospital. They have fine cigars in hand and cut crystal glasses of scotch at their elbows, far removed from the delivery room and all it contains. He has no interest in the process of his son’s birth, only in the final product.

“Mr. Stark.” The doctor looks tired, grim faced with exhaustion but ultimately pleased. “Congratulations sir, you have a beautiful, healthy new daughter.”

“Ah.” Obadiah hisses out a displeased sound beside him that Howard distantly hears himself echo.

There’s a long beat of awkward silence before Howard waves the doctor away, picks up his glass, and drains it in one long, burning gulp. A daughter. Not a son, not his son. Christ. What use is a fucking daughter going to be to him? To Stark Industries?

“Well at least with Maria as her mother she should be a beauty when she’s older.” Obadiah slaps him roughly on the back. “You can make sure she marries well, someone who’ll be useful to SI’s growth. Plus Maria’s still young so there’s time to get a proper heir out of her yet.”

Howard hums in agreement and it doesn’t take long for the conversation to turn towards the latest defense contract Howard’s managed to weasel out of the government. All thoughts of his new daughter are pushed away for more important issues.

Obadiah’s right after all. Maria’s still young and even though Howard’s never been fond of children there’s still time to have another, to get the son that both he and SI needs him to have.

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Natasha Antonia Stark is born wailing, a small destructive bundle of flailing limbs, thick black hair, and too bright eyes that almost kills Maria in the process.

She screams and cries and it takes the nurses forever to calm her down, to get her settled and sleeping and above all else quiet.

Even as a newborn there’s some part of her that knows she needs to be loud, knows she needs to scream scream scream until her lungs feel fit to burst so that the whole world can hear her, so that no one can ignore her.

She sets a precedent that night that follows her the rest of her life.

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Maria holds her newborn daughter exactly twice. Once directly after the birth, too drugged to really focus on what’s going on but blissed out enough with that new glow of motherhood to still want her
child in her arms.

The second time is the next day, freed from the harsh haze of sedatives and eager to look at her son.

“A daughter.” Maria’s face is a study in disappointment as she picks at the luxuriously soft blue blanket she’d specifically ordered and brought to the hospital for her son herself. “Howard must be so displeased,” she sighs as she hands the girl over to the nurse and waves her away.

Maria isn’t looking forward to having to get pregnant again to give Howard the son he so desperately wants but she’ll do it of course, as is her duty.

As far as the girl is concerned, well at least they’ll be able to make sure she’ll marry well one day so it’s not a total lost cause.

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Natasha is bundled into the lavish nursery that had been designed for the son Howard had wanted but not received. It’s decorated in soft blues and golds, there’s a rocket ship mobile hanging over the crib and a thick padded chair in the corner. A broad shoulder blond man salutes her with a smile from a glass covered poster on the wall.

Howard and Maria hand the girl over to Jarvis and a wet nurse and go about their lives, back to SI and galas, back to scotch and spa days and other, more important things. They only stop to deal with Natasha when there’s a photo shoot to be had or an opportunity to appear like a blissfully happy family for the press to be found.

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Natasha’s first word is Jarvis.

Her second is listen.

Her third is look.

Anything to break the quiet of the nursery she barely ever leaves now that her nurse is gone.

She hasn’t seen either Maria or Howard at all for six months, only Jarvis and the blond man who smiles down at her from his place on her wall. But she’s too young to understand why that’s wrong, why that’s a problem.

After that she’s speaking in full sentences because it seems as if once she starts speaking Natasha can’t stop.

She grows quickly, runs almost as soon as she’s able to stand, transitions into full sentences so fast it’s almost scary how she skips the developmental speech phase.

But those three words are still the ones she says most often. Jarvis look. Jarvis listen. Jarvis.

Please someone look at/listen to me.

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She realizes that she’s different quickly enough, realizes it in the way that the books that line the blue walls of her room at all too simple for her, how she doesn’t like her toys unless she’s taking them apart, how everything around her is so boring.
Somehow she just knows she’s different, that she’s … *not right*.

Maybe it’s the way the maids all look at her, how they whisper about her behind their rags and feather dusters until Jarvis scolds them and sends them on their way.

Maybe it’s the way that Ma’am and Sir never seem to want to look at her, never seem to want her around.

Or maybe it’s the way her mind *whirls*, how the inside of her head *screams* and *pounds* and just goes so so *fast* when everyone else is so so *slow*. When *everything* else is just too slow for her.

Jarvis is the one who’s there for her just as he is with everything else. He’s the one who holds her at night, her tiny hands fisted in his nightshirt as she sobs against his neck. He’s the one who helps her when she’s frantic and screaming because her head feels full to bursting with things she can’t properly express, with ideas and images and thoughts that she can’t properly *say* even with all the words she knows.

Jarvis is the one who soothes her with hot milk and cool hands, with long, strong fingers smoothing through her short cut cap of hair as he kneels by her bedside and tells her stories until she finally calms down.

She’s three when she looks up at him, face swollen with tears, hands white knuckling his apron, and asks, “Jarvis what’s *wrong* with me?”

“*Nothing* young miss.” Jarvis sounds unexpectedly fierce and that makes her pay attention to him with the sort of focus she can so rarely achieve. “There is *nothing* wrong with you.”

“I’m a *freak*.” She knows that word now too, has caught more than one maid whispering it when she has a screaming fit because her mind just won’t quiet down, because she can’t focus, can’t sleep, *can’t breathe*. Jarvis had been coldly furious the last time he caught one of them whispering about her like that and Natasha hasn’t seen that maid since.

“You are not a freak young miss.” Jarvis cups her face gently and smiles down at her in that way that makes her chest go warm. “You are perfect as you are. *Different* yes, special but not *wrong*.”

“I wish I was *normal*. I wish you could fix me.” She manages to choke out past her sobs and can only watch as something in Jarvis’ face seems to crack, can only see how his eyes go dark and just slightly wet.

“You are as you were meant to be young miss.” Jarvis tells her softly, sadly. “There is nothing there to fix.”

She wants to believe him but she *can’t*.

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There’s a set of tools waiting for her the next day when she gets up. Tools and books on math and machines that she actually has to pay attention to, books that actually capture her attention in a way nothing ever has before.

And in that moment Natasha suddenly feels as if the world makes sense, as if these are the things that can finally help her make sense of her own mind.

*Tools and books and Jarvis.*
“There is nothing wrong with you young miss.” Jarvis tells her again when he comes to wake her for breakfast. She’s already up and buried in the remnants of the large stereo system that sits in the corner of her room, books and tools sprawled out around her because she needs to see how it works in person instead of just in her head now that she’s read about it. “You simply have different needs than others. There is no shame in that. I will help you find your way.”

So Jarvis is the one who pulls her up onto her feet, presses a tool into one hand and a book into the other and tells her to create. Tells her that if the numbers and the shapes and images in her mind hurt so bad then she should build them, should give them form so that they can finally leave her alone.

Jarvis is the one who finally teaches her how to breathe.

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Her room transforms after that. Tools and books clutter every available surface. Jarvis gets her a small work table and a chair that she has to use a stool to get onto because she’s small even for her age. He gets her pencils and paper and spare parts to build the things that clutter her mind more and more now that she’s learning the math, the mechanics, the language of the world inside her head.

It’s still not right, not perfect, her mind still whirls and the words don’t all line up right with the images in her head but it’s an improvement. She’s sleeping semi-regularly now, doesn’t scream and cry as much, can stand to eat and sit calmly for more than a minute at a time.

It’s not perfect but it’s better than everything she’s ever know.

The blond man on the poster that proclaims that ‘Captain America wants you’ smiles at her from the wall and Natasha can’t help the way she looks at him before she goes to sleep each night and smiles back.

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The circuit board she builds at four isn’t perfect but it’s far beyond anything she should be able to build.

Jarvis looks at it in awe, something like pride in his feature as he takes her by the hand and leads her to Sir’s office.

Sir’s there, glass in hand, alongside the tall, broad man Natasha has been told to call Uncle Obie whenever there’s a reporter within hearing distance.

“Jarvis I told you no interruptions.” Sir flicks a glance in her direction and then away again. Natasha knows he’s her father, knows that Ma’am is her mother, knows what those things are supposed to mean, but doesn’t really care, can’t really feel for them as she knows she should.

She has Jarvis though so she doesn’t really think about it too much.

“I’m aware Sir but the young miss has done something rather extraordinary and I thought it best to bring it to your attention.” Jarvis holds out the circuit board in Sir’s direction.

“What’d the little brat break this time?” Sir reaches out his free hand and grabs the board roughly from Jarvis with a derisive snort.

“Nothing Sir.” Jarvis shakes his head. “She built it.”

Sir and Uncle Obie go still.
“What?” The question is sharp, cutting and hard like the edges of the tools Natasha uses now.

“She built it Sir, without help.” Jarvis is calm, as still as the pond in the garden he sometimes lets Natasha play in.

Sir’s other hand tightens on the glass he’s holding but he doesn’t say anything, doesn’t move towards her. He just looks at her instead, stares at her quietly without saying a word. There’s something in his eyes though, something cold and dark that makes her shiver, makes her huddle closer to Jarvis’ side.

“Well,” Uncle Obie says softly, smugly. “There just might be a use for you yet.”

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Eventually, when Natasha has become Toni and Sir has become Howard, when she has a bit of distance and clarity, she will remember that moment and realize that was the first time Howard had wanted to hit her.

The first but most certainly not the last.

When she’s older she’ll think that maybe that circuit board was her first mistake. That maybe it was the reason Howard could barely stand to look at her unless he was hurting her. That maybe by showing her brilliance so early, so honestly, she’d made some kind of mistake.

That maybe if she hadn’t shined so brightly so young that Howard might have learned to love her.

But, deep down in that place she puts those memories so she can pretend like she has the luxury of forgetting them even if only for a second, she knows better.

Her first mistake was being born female.

And it’s the one thing that neither Howard nor Maria could ever forgive her for.

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Her life changes after that.

There’s a press conference and photo shoot. Ma’am and Sir smile wide and bright, talk about how proud they are, how she’s their pride and joy, so smart, so creative. A prodigy just like her father.

Natasha stands stiffly in front of them, circuit board in hand, and smiles as best she can for the cameras just like Jarvis had told her to. The lights hurt her eyes, make her mind scream, make her breath catch unpleasantly. She wants to run, wants to cry, wants to hide until Jarvis finds her because he always finds her.

It’s only Sir’s harsh grip on her shoulder that keeps her still.

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Later, when Jarvis helps her out of the fancy, multi layered dress Ma’am had stuffed her into for the press, he hisses out a sharp breath at the sight of the bruises on her shoulder.

Sir’s handprint is stark against the delicate cream of her skin.

Neither of them say anything, but Jarvis is a shade too pale and Natasha is tired and her shoulder throbs. Instead he just rubs cream across the bruises and carefully runs a brush through her still short
hair.

Once again a precedent has been set but neither of them know it just yet.

But they will.

*They will.*

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“Have I told you the story of Icarus yet young miss?” Jarvis asks her when he tucks her in that night.

“No.” She shakes her head, tired but still eager because she likes Jarvis’ stories, likes the fact that he takes the time to tell them to her at all.

“Well I think you’ll find it interesting.” Jarvis smooths her hair back from her forehead gently.

Natasha falls asleep to the sound of his voice telling her the story of a boy with wax wings who flew too close to the sun.

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After the circuit board comes to light there are tests.

So many tests.

The word prodigy becomes realer, becomes *fact*, solid and true.

Natasha Stark is a prodigy.

Sir just *looks* at her and that same shiver traces its way down her spine without fail.

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“Jarvis?” Natasha whispers against her pillow, tired from a day spent hunched over tools and metal with Sir breathing down her neck.

“Yes young miss?” His hand is a warm comfort on the thin line of her spine.

“Tell me about Icarus again.”

“Of course young miss.”

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They send her to school as soon as she turns five. An expensive private school because as much as Ma’am and Sir discuss boarding school Sir and Uncle Obie are strangely reluctant to have her too far away.

The other kids are all bigger than her because she’s so much younger than they are but Natasha wants to make friends. She’s read about them, heard about friends in the stories Jarvis tells her at night before she goes to sleep sometimes and she thinks she’d like some.

The only problem is none of the other kids want to be friends with *her*.

She’s too small, too young, too smart for all of them.
She tries though, tries as best she can.

The first time she comes home with a bloody nose it’s because she tried to be helpful and correct Bobby Winston’s math. He hadn’t appreciated that even though afterwards he swore to the teacher that he didn’t mean to hit her in the face with his book.

Natasha knows better.

Jarvis cleans her up, face grim and pensive.

By the time she’s fixed up there’s a determined set to his shoulders that has her curious even though he doesn’t say anything to her.

She hears him on the phone that night when she creeps out of bed and down to Sir’s workshop to sneak another soldering iron from his tool chest. After she’d burnt her wrist last week Jarvis had confiscated hers and she needs one to finish her current project.

“-loody nose Peggy. You’re the only one I know who can be trusted to teach the young miss anything helpful. She’s so small.” Jarvis sounds sad and Natasha hates the fact that she’s the one who’s made him that way.

She sneaks back to her room, shoulders hunched and chest tight.

She would be bigger for Jarvis if she could, if it would make him feel better.

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Peggy Carter is a whirlwind.

She’s all straight shoulders, red lips, and strength.

She bursts into the mansion as if she owns it, all confidence and command, bowls over Sir’s complaints and attempts to get her attention with a, “not now Howard” and a wave of her hand.

Natasha instantly, hopelessly, adores her.

“Hello ducky.” Aunt Peggy as she’s been instructed to call her, grins at Natasha as she kneels down until they are eye to eye in that way that only Jarvis does. “I doubt you remember me but I met you when you were just a baby.”

“Hello.” Natasha feels shy in a way she never has before, can’t help but duck her head and bite at her bottom lip.

“Such a gorgeous little thing aren’t you? Smart too from what I’ve seen.” Aunt Peggy grins, lips a bright red curl. “We’ll get along swimmingly I think.”

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Aunt Peggy teaches her how to make a fist, teaches her where to hit someone bigger than her to hurt them even if she’s not very strong yet. Aunt Peggy tells her that if someone’s bigger than her, stronger, then she should use anything and everything she can get her hands on to hurt them.

But, above all else Aunt Peggy gives her something else.

She gives her Captain America.
She gives her Steve Rogers.

“He was so small in the beginning, before it all happened.” Aunt Peggy tells her softly that night after Natasha’s been tucked into bed.

Natasha stares at the poster of the broad shouldered blond man on her wall in awe. “He was small?”

“Thin and sickly too, so small but so very brave.” Aunt Peggy confirms. “The bravest man I ever knew ducky. The best man I ever knew. So when you’re frightened, when you’re upset because everyone else is so much bigger than you, just remember that Steve was small once too but his mind, his heart, those were the parts of him that really mattered. Those were the things that made him truly mighty.”

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“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

“Will you tell Aunt Peggy and me about Icarus?”

“Of course young miss.”

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After that Natasha can’t get enough of Captain American, can’t get enough of him or his Howling Commandos.

Aunt Peggy indulges her while she’s staying at the mansion, tells her stories that Natasha is smart enough to know are edited a bit but she doesn’t care because she loves to hear them. Jarvis pitches in too, buys her comics and books and more posters with the Captain and the Commandos on them all.

Natasha devours everything she can get her hands on, hugs the Captain America action figure Aunt Peggy got her to her chest as she huddles beneath her blankets and reads when she should be sleeping or building.

She decides with a solemn sort of certainty that she doesn’t want to be called Natasha anymore and wants instead to be called Toni.

When Jarvis and Aunt Peggy ask why she tell them it’s because she wants a nickname like Bucky and Dum-Dum and Gabe all had, because Toni sounds friendlier, and maybe that’ll make the other kids like her better.

They both go soft and slightly sad but they call her Toni after that and that’s what matters.

And every night, before Toni goes to bed, she kisses the palm of her hand and reaches up to press it against the star on the middle of Steve’s chest.

*Because he was small just like she is and look at what he became.*

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*At night she dreams about flying.*

*About wings made of wax and how the heat of the sun burns them from her back and sends her*
tumbling through the air.

Captain America catches her just before she hits the water.

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A month into Aunt Peggy’s stay Ma’am comes home from a gala early enough to catch Toni awake with Jarvis and Aunt Peggy in the kitchen.

“Margaret dear,” Ma’am sweeps into the room, elegant as always in her black dress, “you should have come out with me tonight, you must have been dreadfully bored stuck here all alone.”

“Nonsense Maria,” Aunt Peggy smiles slightly, “Toni’s been keeping me company and I must say she’s excellent at it.”

“Toni?” Ma’am flicks her eyes in Toni’s direction, lips curled just slightly at the sound of the nickname. “Hmm, I’m sure Natasha proved to be a fascinating conversationalist.”

“Better than being forced to grit my teeth and endure unnecessary flattery and condescension from men who think they know better.” Aunt Peggy’s voice is just a shade too sweet. “You and Howard must be proud of this one, she’s so young but already smarter than half those fools who swan around each other, flashing their tails like peacocks.”

Ma’am comes closer then and grabs Toni by the face. Her nails are sharp against Toni’s skin and her breath reeks of peppermint and alcohol.

“Howard did so want a son you know.” Ma’am murmurs almost to herself. “He was absolutely outraged when it was discovered I couldn’t carry again.” Ma’am turns her face slightly with a sharp press of nails against Toni’s jaw. Toni forces herself to stay still as her mother this stranger who birthed her inspects her face with the exact same expression Toni once saw her wear when scrutinizing the new china she’d ordered for the mansion’s greater dining room. “Well at least you’ve got my cheekbones even if you do have Howard’s mother’s ghastly hair. And at least keeping it short seems to suit you.”

Ma’am lets her go, flicks her hand in Toni’s direction like a dismissal and turns back to Aunt Peggy, seemingly oblivious to the displeased purse of her lips or the stiff set to Jarvis’ shoulders.

A cold sort of understanding dawns over Toni then. Sir had wanted a son, had wanted a boy, and instead he’d gotten her.

Toni is smart and this, well it explains … so much.

Ma’am carries on chatting like she hasn’t just sent Toni reeling with her casual statement.

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Aunt Peggy has to leave eventually but she calls often, sends letters and gifts for Toni. New Cap comics and toys, a pretty hair barrette shaped like a pair of ivory wings for the hair that Toni refuses to cut now.

Small things really but they warm Toni in a way that only Jarvis and Cap can, in the way only building does.

Makes her feel warm and soft deep inside her chest in a way she thinks is supposed to be love.
She likes it.

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Toni is two days shy of seven the first time she gets in trouble at her private school.

She’s stopped trying to be nice by then, stopped trying to make friends with the other students.

Bobby Winston tries to hit her with another book and she picks up her own thick text book and smacks him dead in the face just like Aunt Peggy told her to. She’s still so very small but Bobby is sitting down so he’s eye level with her and she hits hard enough now that she feels it when his nose breaks beneath her swing.

The slap Sir gives her when he finds out about it later that afternoon leaves her tasting blood. Ma’am only tisks, reminds Sir not to damage her face, the press Howard, and goes back upstairs.

And that, that hurts in a way Toni can’t deal with because even if she doesn’t really consider them her parents she had hoped …

Jarvis is the one to get her ice afterwards, the one to comfort her where Ma’am Maria Toni thinks to herself viciously, Maria and Howard, not Ma’am and Sir, not mother and father, not now and not ever again had only walked away.

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“Icarus again tonight young miss?”

“Please.”

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Six days later she builds her first engine.

Howard looks at her and then smiles as they present her latest accomplishment to the press two days later. Just smiles, and smiles, and smiles.

Afterwards, when everyone else is gone, when all the reporters and photographers are finally out, Howard gets roaring drunk.

He’s loud, all vicious curses and sharp snarls that echo throughout the mansion. Toni hides in her room, Cap at her side, wrench in hand as she works on what she hopes will be a robotic dog eventually.

That doesn’t save her though, doesn’t stop Howard from lumbering up the stairs and into her room. Doesn’t stop the tumbler he hurls in her direction from shattering on the wall and peppering her arms and neck with slivers of crystal that sting. Doesn’t stop the tight grip of his hand around her arm or the bruises he leaves behind.

Toni tries not to cry, tries to just stay still and quiet and not draw more of his attention, too frightened to move.

Afterwards, when Howard finally stumbles away, Jarvis comes and lets Toni cling to him as she cries. He lets her huddle against him as he brushes her down, picks slivers of crystal from her skin and patches her up.

Toni wishes fervently in that moment that Howard and Maria didn’t exist, that Jarvis and Aunt
Peggy were her parents.

She wishes so much that were true but she doesn’t let herself say it aloud, doesn’t take the chance of anyone hearing it or worse of saying it and Jarvis looking at her the way Howard does.

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She dreams of flying. Dreams of feathers and wax, of the smell of salt and the heat of the sun. Dreams of the pain of her wings melting against her back as the wax scalds her skin.

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She gets up the next morning, stiff and sore, and Howard is still there.

Wishes, Toni learns quickly enough, very rarely come true.

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The dog she was building is little more than a jumble of scrap now from where Howard had stomped it.

That … that almost hurts worse than her body does.

Almost.

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Toni learns and creates more and more and Howard gets more and more violent like some sort of sick positive correlation equation.

At least he manages to avoid her face for the most part just like Maria told him to.

Still she develops a fondness for long sleeves quickly enough because she’s a patchwork of bruises from the neck down.

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She gets kidnapped when she’s eight. She doesn’t like to think about that much.

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He breaks her arm one day when she’s nine and Jarvis rushes her, grim faced and quiet, to the nearest hospital.

Toni just tangles the fingers of her good hand in the hem of her Captain America t-shirt, turns her face into the thick tangle of curls that’s slowly creeping further and further down her back, and doesn’t say a word.

Jarvis sits at her bedside that night and tells her the story of Icarus over and over again until she finally falls asleep.

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She’s kidnapped again at ten but they’re nice this time. So nice that she almost wants to ask them to keep her. Almost. The only thing that stops her is the fact that she wouldn’t get to see Jarvis again if
they did.
If she could bring him with her she would.
She gets out on her own that time and she’s not even sure if Howard even noticed she was gone.
But at least she knows Jarvis did.
That’s all that really counts.

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She’s eleven when Howard knocks her down and something inside her snaps.
Her mind, her bright, loud, chaotic mind, goes quiet, goes still.
She pushes herself back up onto her feet, tilts her chin up stubbornly, and stares up at him.
He sneers and knocks her back down again hard.
She gets back up.
He puts her down again.
She gets back up.
Over and over again until she’s clawing at the wainscoting in order to pull herself back up.
Mouth bloody, body aching, she gets back up.
And when Howard finally huffs at her in disgust, turns on his heel and walks away, Toni smiles because that right there tastes like victory.
She likes it.

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The euphoria and terror of the fall.
The joy of being caught just before she crashes.

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She graduates high school at twelve and offers from universities around the world pour in. Toni has her heart set on MIT though, wants it in a visceral, sharp way she’s never wanted anything before.
She wants to build, wants to create, and MIT will make her better at both.
Beyond that she wants to leave, wants to be away from Maria’s indifference and Howard’s fists.
She doesn’t want to leave Jarvis though, doesn’t want to be away from him, but they’ve talked about it and they both agree that it’s the best course of action.
Howard of course, says no. He wants her to go somewhere else, his alma mater maybe, or one of the posh finishing schools Maria is always raging on about because there’s very little about Toni she
Jarvis slips into Howard’s study after Howard dismisses Toni, his spine straight and face blank. He comes out an hour later, Howard pale and shaking behind him, and Toni can barely believe it when Howard thrusts the admission papers to MIT in her direction.

“How did you do that?” Toni is close to awed in a way she hasn’t been since the first time she met Aunt Peggy.

“I simply informed Sir of the benefits of allowing you to attend the school of your choice.” Jarvis ushers her back towards her room with a warm hand between her shoulder blades.

“Thank you.” Toni whispers as she whirs around and wraps her arms around Jarvis’ waist in the sort of tight hug he so rarely allows her, especially not out in the open where Howard or Maria might see.

Jarvis just reaches out, tucks one long, thick curl behind her ear and smiles.

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“Jarvis?” Toni whispers quietly into the quiet dark of the kitchen the night before she’s scheduled to leave for MIT, a mug of warm milk in hand as she watches Jarvis from across the counter.

“Yes young miss?” His voice is that same warm velvet it’s always been for her.

Toni bites her lip for a long uncertain moment. She’s too old now to be tucked in but Jarvis is still more than willing to tell her stories if she asks and she so desperately wants to ask.

“Would you perhaps like to hear the story of Icarus again young miss?” Jarvis breaks through her quiet. Toni puffs out a relieved breath and smiles into her milk because Jarvis always knows what she needs.

“Please.”

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The breathless joy of flight and freedom.

That night she doesn’t dream of falling at all.

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Toni takes her clothes, her tools, bruises the shape of Howard’s hand, her books, an assortment of comics, a sprained ankle, Cap, the wing barrette Aunt Peggy gave her, and the glass framed poster from her wall with her when she leaves.

She doesn’t think she’d be able to sleep without Steve on her wall, without being able to press that kiss against his chest. Without the reminder that no matter how small she is now one day she’ll be mighty.

It’s going to hard enough without Jarvis as it is.

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She’s assigned a one person suite and required to check in each day with the RA as a safety measure. Jarvis promises to have food and anything else she needs delivered to her weekly but beyond that she has a credit card, a in room phone, and great deal of know how.

She’ll survive.

That doesn’t stop her from crying herself to sleep that first night, lonely and frightened, missing Jarvis, missing his stories and his scent, fresh bread and lemon furniture polish, or the way he still helps her brush out her long hair every night.

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The harsh scent of salt and the fear of no arms there to catch her before she hits the water.

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Classes are good, some still too simple but overall they’re mostly interesting.

The other students are at first amused and then a strange mix of angry and almost frightened when they realize she’s a student and not someone on the staff’s child.

She doesn’t make friends.

She doesn’t even bother to try.

She’s thirteen and going to MIT and Howard’s already beaten her wary and skittish, beaten her into this brittle sharp thing that would rather bite than smile.

~~~

“Jarvis?” Toni clutches at the phone, white knuckled and shaking. Her minds a bright whirl of colors and sounds and she can’t make it stop no matter how much she tries and she just wants to sleep. It’s been four days and her hands shake too much to try to use her tools anymore and she’s so exhausted she wants to cry but she couldn’t even if she tried.

“Yes young miss?” Jarvis talks to her like she’s a wild thing, something to be soothed.

“T-Tell me the story of Icarus again.” Toni breathes out a shaky exhale. “I-I can’t sleep Jarvis. I-please, please tell me the story.”

“Of course young miss.”

~~~


The freedom of flight.

The euphoria of the fall.

~~~

MIT is a whirl of no sleep, too much coffee, too loud music and work. Of research and building. The bright, blinding euphoria of creation. Of inventions and arguments with professors who don’t
want to listen to her because she’s young, because she’s female.

Idiots who think her lack of a cock makes her stupid, makes her lesser somehow.

Toni isn’t less than them in anyway except for size. But just like Steve, just like Captain America, she might be small now but one day, one day she’ll be mighty.

Some things don’t change though because Howard takes every opportunity to hurt her when she’s home. Breaks and vacations where she’s required to return to the mansion are a study in torture as he hovers over her, all rage and scotch and violence as he pushes her to build faster, better, smarter. As he tries to take the one thing that’s hers and twist it to his own purposes.

Toni hates them/him/it all.

Those first two years are hard.

~~~

She’s fifteen and there’s a boy in one of her advanced mathematics classes. He’s twenty-one and tall, all blond hair and broad shoulders. He doesn’t bring up money or what she can do for him, doesn’t outright try to convince her to fuck him like a few people have in the past despite her age before she started tearing them apart verbally.

She likes that about him.

She likes the way he looks at her, the way he actually talks to her, the way he says her hair, a wild riot of black curls that falls to her waist now, is beautiful.

She likes him right up until the moment they’re outside and he fists his hand in her hair and refuses to let go.

She likes him right up until his other hand dives down the front of her shorts.

She likes him right up until she tells him no and he doesn’t listen.

She likes him right up until he tries to take. Because Toni’s had enough of being taken from and she won’t let this be taken from her too.

She stops him though, fights like a wild thing just like Aunt Peggy taught her to, punches and kicks and bites at every bit of him she can reach. He’s surprised by her strength, strength she’s built from days of tireless work with heavy machinery, and stumbles back and away.

Toni doesn’t let him go though, her shirt’s ripped and gaping at the front but she’s screaming at him, all fists and feet and bared teeth, when someone else grabs her from behind and yanks her away from him.

“Woah! What the hell’s going on here?” A deep male voice shouts from behind her and Toni sees dark skin and large hands when she looks down at the arms holding her back.

“The little bitch is crazy man.” Stone slurs through the blood on his face. “Fucking whore wanted it, prancing around here in those little skirts and shorts, pretending like she’s better than everyone else.”

“Oh you sick son of a bitch.” The hands that were just holding her back are suddenly gone.

Toni can only stare in a confused sort of awe at the young black man who wraps his hand in Stone’s
collar, tugs him up off the ground, and punches him directly in the face again and again.

Stone’s a whimpering mess by the time the other guy is done with him.

Toni cocks her head to the side and stares when the stranger walks over to her, panting slightly, face flushed, and asks her if she’s alright, if she needs a doctor or anything else. If there’s anything he can do to help her.

The panic on his face when she breaks down laughing might make her feel bad if she could bring herself to feel anything other than the rush of joy that suddenly shoots through her.

~~~

Someone, probably one of the paparazzo who slink around the campus periodically, gets pictures of the whole affair.

The headline reads: *Stark Heiress Involved in Drunken Brawl.*

There are testimonials from classmates she’s never met who all describe her extensive partying and budding promiscuity in elaborate detail. Its all lies of course, bullshit made up by angry, jealous assholes, but everyone’s so ready to believe it anyways even if she is only fifteen. They don’t like her, don’t like how smart and fast she is, don’t like the way she’s ready and eager to argue, vicious and loud, with any of the professors if she knows they’re wrong about something.

Toni just *laughs.*

But she also stops wearing her hair down, starts piling it up on top of her head in a messy bunch of curls or pulls it back into a ponytail and winds it into a bun.

It’s harder to grab that way, harder for someone to control her with it.

It’s her only option because Maria still hates her hair so Toni refuses to cut it on principle alone.

~~~

James Rhodes takes all of two days, six cups of coffee, and an appalled screech of “you’re how old?” followed by a harsh “I’m gonna hunt that bastard down and fucking kill him”, the realization that he doesn’t want her money or to fuck her, to officially become her fourth favorite person in the world.

He ranks just below Captain America who ranks below Jarvis and Aunt Peggy.

Toni think privately to herself, when they’re curled on opposite ends of the couch in her suite eating pizza and drinking shitty coffee, that she’s done rather well for her first friend.

~~~

“Sir was most displeased with the article young miss.” Jarvis tells her softly on their weekly scheduled call. He’d called her immediately after it had been printed of course, had listened to what happened and offered to escort her home if she needed to take a small break from university. She’d turned him down but he’d sounded pleased when she described Rhodes to him.

“Oh I bet he was.” Toni can just imagine how pissed off Howard probably was. Probably still is.

“Will the project we spoke of last week be keeping you occupied over the winter holidays young miss? I would be more than happy to have any parcels couriered to your suite if you’d like?” Jarvis
asks her quietly in a barely subtle change of subject. She hears the thinly hidden message in his words loud and clear. *Don’t come home. Don’t leave school. Stay where you’re safer.*

“Sounds like a plan to me Jarvis.” Toni curls the disappointment of not being able to spend Christmas with Jarvis down and away.

“Very good young miss.”

“Hey Jarvis?” Toni slides down the wall until she’s huddled in the corner, phone tucked against her ear as she winds the cord around and around her finger.

“Yes young miss?”

“Tell me the story of Icarus?” At least she still has this.

“Of course young miss.”

~~~


*Salt on her face that she pretends is from the ocean.*

*She screams right before she hits the water.*

~~~

Rhodes looks at her funny when she only gets two packages for Christmas that year but he doesn’t say anything which only makes her like him more.

One’s from Jarvis, a pair of bright gold angel wing hair barrettes that actually help to hold her thick curls in place and go well with the ivory one Aunt Peggy had given her all those years ago. At the bottom of the box is a beautiful crimson sundress because it’s his favorite color and he’s always said it looks splendid on her.

The other’s from Aunt Peggy herself. She sends Toni a tube of blood red lipstick, an exact match for the shade she herself always wears, a set of slender brass knuckles, and a pair of brilliant ruby studs. The letter that’s enclosed is one that Toni reads over and over again.

“*Fuck them all ducky.*” Aunt Peggy’s elegant script tells her. “*Be loud. Be bright. Make them listen. Don’t give them a choice. They’ll try to beat you down, try to make you small. Don’t be small Toni, be mighty. P.S. I framed that headline.*”

Rhodes doesn’t say anything when her laughter turns to tears, just wraps his arms around her tightly and holds her close.

It’s unexpected but she likes it.

~~~

She pierces her own ears a second time in the quiet of her suite one night, shoves a needle through the thick cartilage with barely a hiss. The ruby studs go in high in the arch of her ears where they’re hidden easily by the curls that always manage to escape her barrettes and hair ties.

Once they heal she never takes them out.
They match her lipstick after all.

Rhodes touches her casually, *a hug, a hand on the shoulder, tugging gently at a loose curl*, and Toni doesn’t always know how to handle that.

Only Jarvis and Aunt Peggy ever really touch her without trying to hurt her so it takes a while before she realizes, really truly realizes, that Rhodes is the same.

He won’t hurt her, not like that.

It doesn’t really sink in until she’s three months past sixteen and fresh from a mandatory stay at the mansion and they get in their first argument.

She’s brittle edged and bruised beneath her long sleeve top, her ribs ache, and there’s a tremor in her hands she can’t get rid of because she *can’t sleep*. Rhodes is all flailing hands and anger because she’s not eaten or slept since she got back on campus and he’s worried that her next experiment or project is going to leave her hurt or *fucking dead*.

“You can’t keep doing this Toni.” He scrubs his hand across his face in a violent, rough gesture. “This shit’s not healthy. I swear for a genius you’re a fucking idiot. I could just,” he makes a sharp gesture with his hands, “*choke* you sometimes you drive me so crazy.”

Toni *flinches*.

Rhodes goes abruptly still, dark eyes sharp and aware. “Toni?”

Toni smiles, that bright vacant thing she learned at Howard’s knees so long ago, that perfect mask that he pressed into her with bruises and heavy hands. “You’re right. Time for sleep. Foods overrated but sleep, that’s a thing I could do, will do, right now as a matter of fact. Toodles.”

She’s blabbering, manic and rapid fire in that way she gets when her mind won’t stop, as she shoves herself up and off of her chair. She sways, skirts around the hand Rhodes extends in her direction and puts the length of her worktable between them.

“Toni …” There’s something almost anguished in Rhodes’s voice but she ignores it, just powers through until she’s safely behind her locked bedroom door.

Rhodes knocks and talks through the door at her but she ignores him.


*The pain of her wings melting against her back as the wax scalds her skin.*

“Listen,” Rhodes corners her two days later, “we’re going to fight.”

“Aw you know I can totally take you.” Toni snarks because she’s uncomfortable but rested so she’s less inclined to flee and more inclined to bite if she has to.

“Don’t deflect Toni.” Rhodes seems determined to be serious. “We’re both assholes and we’re going to fuck up. I’m going to be a dick and you’re going to drive me insane with your inability to
realize you need basic things like sleep and food. We’re going to want to tear our hair out and just
run screaming into the night to get away from each other.”

“This friendship is sounding better and better by the minute.” Toni mutters only to throw her hands
up in surrender when he glares at her.

“But yeah, we’re gonna argue cause we’re both stubborn assholes.” Rhodes reaches out and slowly,
carefully, cups her small shoulders in his wide palms. “But I will never, never, hit you Toni. No
matter what, I will never ever hurt you like that.”

Two weeks later when she calls him Rhodey for the first time and darts into his space for a quick
hug, the first she’s ever initiated, his smile is bright enough to light the city.

She grows into her friendship with Rhodey.

They hug and touch and talk more than she’s ever done with anyone but Jarvis. He starts calling her
Tones and she calls him darling and ducky and honey bear, sugar pop and bonbon a thousand and
one ridiculous nicknames that make him smile.

People on campus gossip about them, about her. About how close they are, about how she drapes
herself across him at every given opportunity. There’s more than one new article about her and her
promiscuity, about her drinking, about anything real or imagined they can use to paint her as some
sort of deviant.

Rhodey hates it all, gets angry and embarrassed.

Toni just laughs though because she likes touching Rhodey. She likes the feel of his skin, the
warmth of his arms, the strength of his chest and shoulders. She doesn’t want him but she loves
touching him. It makes something small and starved inside her chest sit up and buzz happily.

Plus Aunt Peggy had warned her and she refuses to let these assholes make her small.

She is and will be mighty.

Fuck them all.

Her ribs are sore and the pain meds the doctor had given Jarvis for her dislocated shoulder make her
head fuzzy but Jarvis had made sure she promised to take them.

“Rest young miss.” Jarvis’ hand is cool against her forehead as he brushes back her hair. “I’m afraid
I’ll be driving Sir and Ma’am to the gala tonight but should you need anything Henrietta will be
available until I return.”

“Jarvis?” Toni turns her face just slightly into the calloused palm of Jarvis’ hand. She loves him,
loves him so so much even if she’s never been able to tell him. She likes to think he knows though,
because Jarvis always knows.

“Yes young miss?”

“Will you tell me the story of Icarus before you go?” She needs that familiar comfort, the soothing
rhythm of his voice telling her the story that has become theirs over the years.

“Of course young miss.”

~~~


The agony of gravity reaching out and plucking her from the sky.

~~~

“Young miss! Young miss please wake up!” Henrietta’s panicked voice pulls Toni from her sleep.

“W-What’s wrong?” Toni’s groggy, fuzzy headed and sore, but she blinks the sleep from her eyes and forces herself to focus on the distraught maid leaning over her. “Henrietta? What’s going on?”

“Oh young miss.” Henrietta looks close to tears. “There’s an officer waiting for you down stairs. T-there’s been an accident.”

Toni doesn’t know it yet but those are the words that destroy her entire world.

~~~

“Hello?” Rhodey sounds rough, sleepy and annoyed.

“Rhodey.” Toni can barely get the word out.

“Toni?” He’s immediately alert. “Toni what’s wrong?”

“Rhodey.” It’s just a shade off a sob this time.

“Toni sweetheart talk to me.” He’s almost pleading. “Baby what’s wrong?”

“There’s been an ac-cident.” She’s numb and she sounds young in a way she never has before with him. She can hear Obie in the background talking loudly with the cops who’d driven her to the hospital.

“I’m coming.” Rhodey is serious she can tell. “Where are you Tones? Tell me where you are and I’ll be there.”


“I will sweetheart, I will.”

They hang up but all Toni can do is stand there and stare at the wall.

Howard and Maria are gone and Toni knows she should feel something about that but she can’t. Because … because …

Jarvis is dead.

That’s the only thought swirling in her mind.

Jarvis is dead and she’s never going to see him again.
Rhodey shows up a few hours later, storms past the cops and a scowling Obie and wraps her in his arms.

“Shh.” He whispers into her hair, loose down her back for once, as he holds her to his chest. “I got you Tones. I got you. It’s okay. I’m so sorry baby girl. So sorry.”

“I-I need to see them.” Toni manages to croak and saying the words give birth to a sudden burning desire inside of her. “I need to see them.”

“Toni you don’t need to see that.” Rhodey protests.

But she does. Howard and Maria are dead and Jarvis is gone and she needs to see.

The cops want to argue, they say that Obie can identify the bodies just fine but Toni fights them. It’s her right to see them she practically screams. It’s her right and they can’t stop her.

And they don’t.

Toni doesn’t really feel anything at the sight of her parent’s bodies.

Maria looks as cold in death as she was in life. There was never any affection between them but Toni thinks she could mourn Maria in a distant sort of way if she let herself. There’d be no real grief involved of course, because you don’t really grieve for a stranger, for someone you saw once or twice a year at photo shoots or press junkets. For someone who sat back and let their daughter be abused.

So she doesn’t feel grief for Maria’s loss. Instead there’s just an absent sort of longing in her breast, a whimsical sort of mourning for the idea of what could have been between them had she been enough, had she been what either of them had wanted her to be.

Howard looks small on the table, looks washed out and ugly and she’d slap him if she could bring herself to touch him willingly. For Toni there’s only relief at the sight of him. Only gratitude that he’s gone, that he’s finally, finally gone and he’s never coming back. That he’ll never hurt Toni again. Howard’s dead now and she’ll never have to see him, never have to smell him again, never have to hear or feel him ever again. She’ll never have to suffer through his words or his fists, through the pain of being the daughter he’d gotten instead of the son he’d craved.

Howard is dead and Toni is just so grateful for that.

It’s the sight of Jarvis that breaks her. Strong, gentle Jarvis who’d loved her and raised her. Jarvis who’d tended her hurts and her wounds, who had stood her on her own two feet and taught her to create.

Jarvis who taught her to breathe.

“Jarvis?” She whispers.

For the first time in her life there’s no response.

For the first time in her life he doesn’t answer when she calls.

“You weren’t supposed to leave.” Toni whispers to the shell of the only father she’s ever known.
“You were never supposed to leave me.”

~~~

Rhodey is the one who pulls her away, who wraps her up and holds her, who tells her it’s okay to cry.

Toni doesn’t though.

She can’t.

She’s too numb to cry.

~~~

Toni has no interest in going to Howard and Maria’s funeral but Obie and the backhand he gives her for being disrespectful pushes her into it anyways.

It’s the first time he’s ever hit her and Toni wants to say it’ll be the last but she’s not eighteen yet and despite being on her own for years now they both know Obie has control of her at least until the will is read.

He’ll probably get the company but at least she might be able to get away from him and SI in the end because it’s doubtful Howard will have left her anything but a trust. The money doesn’t matter to her though because she’s brilliant and MIT and a million other schools or companies will pay a mint to have her name attached to theirs.

Howard and Maria’s funeral is a nightmare. The nation is in mourning for the great Howard Stark and the whole thing devolves into a three-ring circus with Toni and Obie at the center.

Rhodey and Aunt Peggy stand at her sides, all hard lines and stiff shoulders the both of them, bookends or sentries Toni can’t decide which.

Toni is cold, aloof in her expensive black dress, wide lensed sunglasses and crimson lipstick.

She looks like every other shallow socialite ever but the glasses hide the fact that she’s dry eyed and calm. She has the not so sneaky suspicion that Rhodey and Aunt Peggy both know anyways.

She doesn’t have any tears to waste for either Howard or Maria and her hands are steady when she drops a rose onto each of their caskets. She only does that because she knows it’s a good photo op and she needs to hedge her bets where Obie is concerned.

~~~

Jarvis’ funeral the next day is smaller, just the mansion’s staff, Aunt Peggy, Rhodey who comes for moral support, and Toni.

She’s pale and shaking, brittle edged unlike the icy calm of yesterday.

She wears her hair down, clipped back from her face with the wing barrettes he’d given her but otherwise spilling down to her waist in a riot of curls because Jarvis had always loved her hair. She doesn’t wear black. Instead she wears the sundress he gave her for Christmas and clutches a bouquet of white chrysanthemums so hard the stems threat to shred.

It’s watching the casket being lowered into the ground that finally breaks her. Toni crumples and it’s only Rhodey’s strong arms that keep her from hitting the ground. Chrysanthemums scattered on the
ground in front of her Toni shatters and sobs so violently she thinks she might be sick.

Rhodey and Aunt Peggy hold her there for a long time, long after the funeral is over with and everyone else has left.

~~~

Jarvis’ will is read two days later by a portly lawyer in a small office downtown. Aunt Peggy and Rhodey are with her again as they’ve both been for the past few days.

They both seem almost frightened to leave her alone.

“Mr. Jarvis named only two people in his will I’m afraid. Ms. Margaret Carter and Ms. Natasha Stark.” Toni hears him speak as if from a distance.

Jarvis leaves Aunt Peggy a few sentimental things, books and photos from years before, trinkets that make Aunt Peggy tear up and laugh wetly when the lawyer reads them off.

Everything else Jarvis leaves to her, to Toni.

“There was also a letter enclosed Ms. Stark, as well as a recording.” The lawyer slides a long, slender box across his desk in Toni’s direction. Her hands shake when she reaches out and picks it up. She can’t bring herself to open it, can’t bring herself to see what Jarvis has written.

Not here in this cold office. Not where anyone else can see.

~~~

Howard and Maria’s wills are read at the end of the week thanks to all of the paperwork and red tape the Stark lawyers have to go through in the process.

Maria leaves everything to Toni as is expected of a high-society wife with a daughter. The only exceptions are a few charitable donations and the instructions for the creation of the Maria Stark Foundation whose actual management and direction is up to Toni to arrange.

In a fit of vindictive spite she tells the lawyer to set something up that benefits abused children and washes her hand of the situation for the moment. She’ll deal with it later.

The real surprise is Howard’s will.

He leaves her everything.

Everything.

Money, properties, rights and titles to everything.

He leaves her his search for Captain fucking America which is to continue indefinitely. It's the one thing she doesn't mind because she learned about his obsession years ago and it rivals her own.

He leaves her Stark Industries too. It’s in trust with Obie until she’s twenty-one but then it’s hers.

The one thing she never thought she’d get and he’d left it to her.

Somehow it only makes her hate him more.

~~~
Rhodey goes back to school, Aunt Peggy goes back to her own home and her work, and Toni stays at the mansion. MIT is understanding, gives her an extra month because she’s grieving and rich and already so far ahead of her classes that it’s ridiculous.

So, one night after everyone’s gone, after the house staff has bedded down and the mansion is silent, Toni takes the box Jarvis left her out of her dresser. She swipes a bottle of Howard’s scotch and the keys to a car. She pulls on the overcoat that still smells like Jarvis and drives out to the cemetery.

The cemetery is eerily quiet but brightly lit so Toni doesn’t care. She makes her way to the still fresh dirt that covers Jarvis’ grave and sits down until she’s leaning against the headstone.

She pops the seal on the scotch, takes a long burning pull, and then sets it to the side. Her hands still shake when she finally opens the box Jarvis’ lawyer had given her.

The letter inside is only one page and it’s written on heavy cream colored stock in Jarvis’ flowing script.

*Young miss,* it starts and the words seem to jump off of the page to her. She can almost hear his voice saying them, almost but not quite and Toni feels fresh tears well up in her eyes as she bites back a sob.

*Young miss,*

> If you are reading this then I have passed. I hope that I was old and grey in my bed, after many years of service to you and a family of your own, but I fear that might not be the case. You would then, more than likely, be reading a different letter if such had come to pass.

> I am not ashamed to admit that I have many regrets in my life even now. Yet the one that I hold above all others is my inability to keep you safe. I wish that I had been able to protect you, to shield you from the horrors you faced so young. Perhaps if I’d been less of a coward I would have been able to but fear was a vicious motivator for my silence on the things you endured.

> I feared to try and fail. I feared what would happen to you if money and power ruled over justice and you were forced to remain in the mansion regardless of any evidence brought forth. I feared what would happen without me there to offer you what comfort and care I could.

> Again, fear kept me silent in so many ways and it is my harshest regret that you suffered in my silence. Now, in death, I find the courage to tell you what I could not in life.

> I love you, dear girl, like the daughter I never had, like the daughter I could never claim. I love you. You are brilliant Toni, a bright light in this world. Your mind is a thing of beauty, awe inspiring in its glory. Your heart shines just as brightly. Please, if you remember nothing else remember that.

> You once said you wished I could fix you and I will tell you now what I told you then. You are as you were meant to be, child. There is nothing there to fix.

> Please remember that, my sweet Icarus.

> You are as you were meant to be.
Toni can barely see the end of the letter, her eyes too clouded with tears. She clutches it close to her chest, buries her face in the collar of Jarvis’ coat, and sobs as if her heart is breaking.

Because it is. Because it’s been breaking since the day Jarvis died and she doesn’t feel as if it’ll ever heal.

It’s a long time before she can bring herself to fold the letter back up, to set it aside and reach for the small tape recorder that’s also in the box.

Hands shaking she picks it up, cradles it in her lap, and hits play.

“Jarvis?” The sound of her own voice startles her so badly that Toni jerks and bangs her head against the gravestone behind her.

“Yes young miss?” The sound of Jarvis’ voice makes her keen, a soft, wounded sound in the back of her throat, because she knows where this is going. She’s a genius and she knows exactly what Jarvis has left her.

“Tell me the story of Icarus again.” The Toni on the tape breathes out a shaky exhale, one that speaks of exhaustion and a screaming, sleepless mind. “I-I can’t sleep Jarvis. I-please, please tell me the story.”

“Oh course young miss.” Jarvis sounds warm, fond, so achingly familiar and loved that Toni can barely stand to listen.

But she does. She listens to the whole tape, listens to Jarvis tell her the story of Icarus. Listens to this gift he’s given her.

He loved her. She knows that now. He loved her. There’s no doubt in Toni’s mind now, no doubt in any corner of her soul. The tape proves that even more than the letter. Jarvis had loved her. He’d loved her enough to take the time to record their familiar exchange so that one day when he was gone he could help her to quiet her mind.

He loved her just as much as she still loves him, will always love him, and now he’s gone.

Toni hits the rewind button, waits and then presses play.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

She listens to it again. Rewinds it. Presses play.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”


“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

Listen. Rewind. Play
“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”


“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

Listen.

Rewind.

Play.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

First off let me just say, fucking wow. You guys have blown me away with the positive attention this has received. I had a lot of tears and truly touching and surprisingly personal reviews in my inbox and I cherish each and every one of them. I hope you'll all review and tell me what you think of this bit.

Also have a fanmix: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Toni’s drags herself back into the mansion still wrapped in Jarvis’ overcoat, the box he left her cradled carefully in her hands.

Henrietta meets her at the door, all fretting hands and worry. Toni brushes her off absently and lets her feet take her to the servant’s wing, to the mid-sized room Jarvis had called his own her entire life. She walks inside, shuts the door in Henrietta’s face, and locks it firmly behind her.

Aunt Peggy had already been by and gotten what he’d left her before she’d gone back home but beyond that she hadn’t disturbed much. The room still smells like him, fresh bread and lemon furniture polish, and looks like him too, all tidy corners, rich fabrics, and that all-encompassing feeling of warmth and safety. There’s a pair of boots on the floor beside his arm chair, polish and rag ready on the table to the left. There’s a half empty glass of water on the night stand and his dressing robe is folded across the end of his bed.

It all looks as if he’s only stepped out for a moment, as if he’ll walk back in at any second. For a brief moment Toni closes her eyes and tries to fool herself into thinking that it’s true, that he’s just gone out for groceries or something else for the mansion and any moment now he’ll come breezing back in. That he’ll be back tonight to brush her hair and tell her their story.

The box in her hands makes that daydream into a lie.

Jarvis is dead and all she has left of him is a tape, a letter, the contents of this room, and what feels like a load of shrapnel in her chest ripping her heart to shreds.

She can’t bring herself to touch anything, to disturb anything, can’t bring herself to destroy this half created canvas, this snapshot of what he was like, his last moments frozen in time.

So Toni just curls down onto the floor beside the bed, pries the box open with shaking hands, pulls out the recorder and presses play.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

Listen. Rewind. Play

“Jarvis?”
“Yes young miss?”


“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

Toni presses her face against the side of the bed, buries her nose into the thick, rich fabric of the comforter and tries to breathe.

Listen.

Rewind.

Play.

~~~


The choking terror of the sea closing in around her.

~~~

When she finally comes out two days later she’s pale but solid. She’s broken and shattered inside, bits of scattered metal and melted wax, but she won’t let it show.

Instead she goes to her room, forces herself to finally put the box down on her bed, and stumbles into the shower. She lets the hot water scald her back and soak into the heavy weight of her hair as she scrubs at her skin, at the still healing bruises until she’s pink and achy. Then she forces herself to get out, dress, pin her hair up, and march to Howard’s office.

There’s a large box on his desk with his, Maria’s, and Jarvis’ personal effects inside.

Toni carefully gathers Jarvis’ things, takes his monogramed billfold and the ruby cufflink and tie-pin set she’d gotten him when she was thirteen out and sets them aside. She’ll be taking those with her. Everything else goes back into the biohazard bag they came in to be placed inside his room.

Anything important has already been taken from Howard and Maria’s things so she grabs the box, the gold plated lighter Howard kept for his cigars, and heads out to the back patio. She drops the box there and turns on her bare heel to head to Howard’s workshop. She grabs a blowtorch and lighter fluid then leaves again.

On her way back towards the back door she passes the massive family portrait Maria had commissioned when Toni was eight. She tilts her head to the side as she stares up at it. She remembers sitting for that portrait, remembers how much she hated it, hated being stuck so close to both of them, Howard’s hand heavy on her shoulder, Maria’s talon like nails digging into her knee, a plastic smile on her face.

She stares up into her own face, young and tiny, and even through the medium of heavy oils Toni thinks she can see the emptiness in her own eyes.

She sets the blowtorch and lighter fluid down, reaches up with both hands to grab the bottom of the massive frame, and rips it down off of the wall.
The crash it makes is almost satisfying.

She drags it out onto the patio as well and then out onto the actual lawn. She rips the thick canvas from the frame and beats the heavy gilt wood against the ground until it folds in at the corners. She piles it all together with the box holding Howard and Maria’s effects, upends the bottle of lighter fluid, and uses the blowtorch to set the whole thing ablaze.

Watching it all burn is almost sweet.

When it’s nothing but smoldering embers she calls the remaining house staff together. There’s fewer than there used to be, only the maids Henrietta and Jocelyn, Maxwell the gardener and Brandon the cook. They all stare at her wide eyed and pale and Toni knows what she looks like, remembers the glimpse she’d gotten in the bathroom mirror.

All pale skin, thick black curls, and bright, manic eyes like a wild thing half crazed in the snare.

“I’m going back to school in a week,” Toni keeps her voice deliberately light, “and I’m closing the mansion so I’d like you all to start the shutdown process.”

They all seem to collectively go pale and Toni knows it’s because they think she’s firing them. She isn’t though, everyone but Jocelyn’s been with the family since before she was born. Once the mansion’s closed down she’ll reassign them to other properties or anywhere else they wish to go. She’s not callous enough to throw them out into the cold. She’s not Maria or Howard.

She gives them instructions, tells them she’ll close down Howard’s workshop and her own room herself, and then tells them that any of Howard’s and Maria’s personal effects from their rooms are up for grabs. Clothes, jewelry, watches. Any of it. All of it. Anything left is to either be donated or burned. She waves away their protests because there’s nothing in either of those rooms she wants.

“No one,” and there’s enough ice in her voice then, enough command, to immediately have them all straight-shouldered and listening. “no one touches Jarvis’ room. The door is to stay locked and no one’s to even set foot inside of it. Pretend like it doesn’t exist.”

“Yes Ma’am.” They chorus together and the sound of Maria’s title directed at her is almost enough to make her wince.

Still she won’t have them in Jarvis’ room. Won’t have any of his things touched.

Changing his room would feel like killing him all over again.

~~~


The gut punch agony of realizing that her wings have failed her.

The terror of the fall.

~~~

The next day she goes out and finds a jeweler. He’s competent and discreet and agrees to set the cufflinks and tie-pin into a tasteful stacked pendant for her without destroying the individual pieces.

She pays him an exuberant amount of money to have the work done quickly but correctly and has them set in gold and hung from a tasteful but expensive gold chain.
When she puts it on the pendant nestles itself directly between her breasts, right beside her heart.

She never takes it off.

It matches her earrings and her lipstick after all.

~~~

Going back to MIT feels like stepping into a dream.

Or a nightmare.

Toni isn’t sure which.

Isn’t sure if there’s even a difference between the two anyways.

Rhodey is there, all warm hands and comforting hugs and it’s *good* but not enough all at the same time. The grief is too fresh, too real, too *biting*.

Still she doesn’t like the sadness and the worry she can see in his eyes so she throws herself into being *her*. She’s loud and manic and rude when all she wants to do is be small and quiet and still. She clings to him and twists around him like a whirlwind in turns. She laughs and jokes and waits for him to leave and go back to his dorm before she curls herself into a corner with her recorder.


She buries herself in her workshop and only comes out when her hands are shaking, when the world’s spinning around her and she can’t *breathe* anymore, can’t *create* anymore, because she can’t *sleep*.


~~~

*Wax. Feathers. Heat.*

The harsh scent of salt and the agony of knowing that there are no arms there to catch her before she hits the water.

~~~

“I wish you were still alive.” Toni tells Steve one night, her recorder clutched to her chest and her other hand wrapped around her pendant. A part of her knows it’s crazy to talk to a poster, to treat it like a person, but she can’t help it. He’s been more a part of her life than Howard and Maria ever were. “If you were still alive maybe I could … maybe you would … maybe we …”

Toni cuts the words off and folds herself around her recorder, doesn’t let herself finish that line of thought. She’s huddled naked, her hair a damp, heavy weight against her back, amidst the nest of sheets, blankets and pillows she’d piled onto her bed in an effort to feel *safe* again.

She straightens up, blows Steve a kiss, and then rolls onto her side.


She hasn’t felt safe in *months* now.
Jarvis was her safe place. Even when they were apart he was her safe place, her harbor, the eye in
the center of the storm that is her life. The fixed point in the whirling chaos of her mind.

But Jarvis is gone now and the world has never felt so big.

Her mind has never been so terrifying.

Toni has never felt so small.

~~~

“Tones.” Rhodey turns to her one night when they’re pressed against each other on her couch.

Toni immediately goes on alert because she knows that voice. Dread settles sick and heavy in her
stomach because nothing good ever happens when Rhodey sounds like that.

“Yeah honeybunch?”

“I’ve been trying to find the right way to tell you this,” Rhodey rakes a hand across his face, “but
with … with everything that’s happened I wasn’t sure how to do it. It just never seemed the right
time to tell you.”

“Y-You’re not sick are you?” Toni feels herself go pale, feels her stomach clench sharply at even
the idea. Her mind races forward, she thinks of doctors and hospitals and treatment plans for
whatever’s wrong with him. She’ll do/pay/build whatever she has to. She can’t lose him too.

“No!” Rhodey immediately pulls her closer, wraps her up tight against his chest. “Fuck. Jesus
honey no. I’m not sick. I’m fine Toni I promise. It’s, it’s nothing like that baby girl. Shit.”

“Then what is it?”

“I’m leaving at the end of this semester.” Rhodey says it in a rush and Toni goes still. “I’m being
shipped out Tones. I wanted to tell you earlier but I just didn’t know how.”

“You’re leaving?” Toni hates the way she sounds so young in that moment but she can’t help it.
Rhodey’s leaving. Leaving her. He’s the only friend she has, the only thing standing between her
and utter solitude, and he’s leaving.

“Yeah.” Rhodey sounds rough, voice gruff as his arms tighten around her. “Yeah I’m leaving
sweetheart.”

“I could pay you to stay.” Toni blurts it out, pulls back from him far enough to stare up into his
face. She knows even before she gets the words out of her mouth that he’s going to say no. “I could
hire you on as a bodyguard or something, pay off your students loans and buy out your enlistment or
something. SI does a lot of business with the US military and it’s going to be mine in a few years,
they’d let you go if I asked them to.”

“Toni.” There’s a slight warning note in his voice that lets her know she’s toeing a line with him.
“You know I don’t want your money. I don’t want you to try to fucking buy me either. I’m in the
military because it’s where I want to be.”

“I know.” It’s an admittance and an apology all in one. “I just … I don’t want you to go.”

“I know sugar.” Rhodey pulls her close again. “I know. But you know I’ll always be there for you
right? We can write, call, all of that. We can talk whenever we get the chance.”
“Yeah.” She buries her face against his neck, breathes his scent deep into her lungs, leather from the jacket she’d bought him and the rich spice of the cologne he favors, and lets herself cling.

They both know it won’t be the same but neither one of them wants to admit it aloud.

~~~

Toni throws herself into spending as much time with Rhodey as she can for the last few months she has left with him.

The rest of her time she throws into her workshop.

She works with a frenetic kind of mania, with a bright and feverish kind of concentration because she’s working towards a specific goal.

Rhodey is leaving and she’s going to be alone. No Rhodey, no Jarvis. Just Toni, her recorder, and Steve’s smiling face on her bedroom wall.

That’s …

She can’t do that.

She won’t. Not ever again.

So she’s going to build something to stop that from happening. She’s going to make sure she’s not alone.

She’s … she’s … going to create.

Because she … she can’t be alone again.

She can’t. She can’t survive like that again. Not after having tasted love, tasted friendship.

So she’s going to make herself a partner, someone to help her in the workshop. Someone to listen to her talk.

She’s going to make herself an AI.

Or she’s going to die trying.

~~~


The loneliness of the sky.

The bitter grief of soaring alone and without a companion.

~~~

The first four versions fail.

They’re complex programs but not AI, not really. She wants something that learns, something that grows, something real. Plus they won’t integrate with the robotic arm she built so that it can aid her in the lab, don’t seem to want to mesh well.

“You damn useless machine.” Toni snarls, hands shaking, mind a bright whirl as she desperately
solders another wire into place, puts down another component and then powers up the fifth version of her would-be assistant. “Just. Fucking. Work. Work you dum-

An almost inquisitive chirp cuts her off.

Toni freezes as the thick metal claw swings in her direction like a dog called to point.

Breathless, a hair away from completely broken, Toni laughs because the only other option is to sob.

“Hey boy.” Toni breathes as she brings a shaky hand up to pet a thick metal joint. “It’s about time you decided to wake up. Thought I was going to be waiting on your dumb ass forever.”

The bot chirps, rolls forward, and abruptly knocks the coffee cup on the side of Toni’s workshop down to shatter on the tiled floor.

“Damn useless machine.” Toni mutters as she brings her arms up to swipe at the tears she doesn’t want to admit are pouring down her face. “Damn useless, beautiful machine.”

~~~

The ‘Damn Useless Machine - Version E’ or DUM-E as she takes to calling him is more than a bit buggy. His spatial awareness isn’t the best even with the camera she gives him, he bumps into things, knocks over coffee cups, and seems enamored with the small fire extinguisher she keeps in the corner of the workshop.

“It’s okay buddy.” Toni tells DUM-E after he’s shattered yet another mug because he’s too glitchy to be a real help in the workshop right now so she’s trying to teach him to refine his fine motor controls by carrying glasses and cups.

“There’s nothing wrong with you DUM-E.” Toni tells him as she strokes a hand down the flat of his base. She has to bite back a sob at the way the words burn her throat but she needs to say them because he’s hers, her bot, her boy. She needs to say them because Jarvis had said them to her and those words had made all the difference. “You’re different, special, but not wrong. No shame in that. I’ll help you find your way.”

That night she lets him lumber through her suite and follow her into her room because he’d chirped sadly when she’d tried to leave him in the workshop. He watches as she presses a kiss to Steve’s chest and then collapses onto her bed. He chirps and whirls at her questioningly and rolls over to her bedside.

“Bedtime buddy.” Toni slurs, exhausted and brittle but oh-so-pleased as she hugs her recorder to her chest and presses play.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

~~~


The breathless joy of flight and freedom.

~~~

She wakes the next morning to DUM-E’s camera in her face, claw tilted to the side like he’s curious,
and all she feels is a burst of formless joy.

~~~

She splits her time between Rhodey and DUM-E after that, sometimes together, sometimes separate and she’s pleased that they get along so well.

Rhodey spends thirty minutes with him before he shakes his head and says he’s kind of like a really large, really dumb dog. But he’s also more than a little awed at the way DUM-E seems to listen to her and there’s real affection in his voice when he tugs at Toni’s curls and tells her good job.

They spend time together teaching DUM-E how to hold things, how to help her, how to not break things.

She enters him into the Annual M.I.T. Robot Design Competition.

They win.

Howard would have beaten her bloody.

It makes the victory that much sweeter.

~~~

The time finally comes where Rhodey has to leave.

Toni drives him to the airport, stands with him as his plane begins to board. He wraps her in a tight hug, presses a lingering kiss to her forehead, and buries his face in the upswept mass of her hair.

“I’m gonna miss you Tones.” Rhodey whispers. “You take care of yourself, you and that crazy bot of yours.”

“I will.” Toni mumbles, hands clenched tight in his shirt. “Stay safe Rhodey. Just, stay safe.”

“Promise.”

Then he lets her go, takes a step back, and leaves.

Toni watches him go and feels as if her whole world is ending yet again.

She isn’t all that sure how she makes it back to her suite but she does somehow. DUM-E greets her with a chirp and follows behind her as she kicks off her heels and stumbles towards her bedroom.

She collapses face first onto the bed.

There’s a pause, a moment of silence, and then an insistent nudge against her side. She ignores him for a moment but when he won’t stop she rolls over.

“What?” Her voice is watery.

DUM-E reaches out, grabs her wrist with an impressive amount of care, and tugs. He tugs and tugs until she finally gets up and, bemused, lets him tug her across the room.

“Oh.” Her breath catches when he lifts her arm and presses her hand clumsily to the star on Steve’s chest. “Oh DUM-E.”
She hugs him carefully, sobs against his joints as he whirls and chirps but stays still. Eventually she pulls back, wipes her tears, and walks him back towards the bed.

“Hey DUM-E?”

He chirps.

“I think it’s about time you heard the story of Icarus too.” She holds up the recorder for him to see. “Come over here and listen with me.”

He chirps, moves closer to the bed, and waits.

Toni presses play.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

~~~

The next time she stumbles into her room to finally sleep, she kisses Steve like always. Then she watches from the bed as DUM-E reaches up his claw and presses the tip of one thick finger against the star on Steve’s chest as well.

~~~

The headline reads: Stark Heiress Dumped By Longtime Beau: Party Princess Too Much To Handle?

There’s a photo of her standing, white faced, teary eyed, and alone in the airport terminal.

Toni crumples the paper in her fist.

Fuck them all.

~~~

A month later she builds U so that DUM-E will have company when she’s gone. He’s smaller in size but a bit better than DUM-E because she already had a framework to build on. He’s still special though, unique in his own way just like his name says he is.

Just like with DUM-E she makes sure to tell him so, just like Jarvis had once told her.

She sends Rhodey a “It’s a Boy” card with a picture of U and DUM-E inside.

He calls her the next time he gets a chance and makes her promise not to take over the world with her robot sons while he’s gone.

She laughs.

~~~

When she finally lets him out of the workshop she watches as U trails behind DUM-E as he follows her to the bedroom.

She kisses Steve and sees DUM-E do the same while U watches on quietly but doesn’t move.
DUM-E seems to take offense to that. He chirps and whirls until U rolls forward and presses the knuckles of his hand roughly against the glass as well.

Toni laughs, settles down, and reaches for her recorder.

“Hey DUM-E.” She calls. “Bring your little brother over here. It’s time for him to hear about Icarus too.”

~~~

That becomes their routine, her and her clumsy ducklings. Kissing Steve and the tale of Icarus every time she’s finally able to pull herself away from a project, from the bright, screaming whirl of her mind, to try and sleep.

She still misses Jarvis. His absence is like a gaping, open wound, bleeding and jagged edged.

She still misses Rhodey. His absence is like an ache, there, present, and steady.

But the bots, DUM-E and U, they make it all a bit better.

Just a bit.

~~~


The sorrow of all she’s left behind.

~~~

Time skips forward.

Toni turns seventeen and graduates. Rhodey gets a promotion and time off base. He helps her find an apartment, a sprawling penthouse with three bedrooms, one for each of them and a room to convert into a workshop for her.

She has no interest in the mansion or any of the other properties Howard left her at the moment.

He’s with her when the anniversary of Jarvis’ death rolls around and when Aunt Peggy makes an unexpected stop by her new place Toni knows it was all planned.

They’re there for her when Obie shows up, swans into her place like he owns it, and forces her into attending the memorial for Howard and Maria.

She goes. She hates it but she goes.

That night, still clad in her party dress, Toni wraps herself in Jarvis’ overcoat, grabs her recorder, and goes to his grave.

She spends the night there.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

Aunt Peggy and Rhodey find her there the next morning and Rhodey picks her up and carries her back to the car.

She wishes they’d left her there.

She’s glad that they didn’t.

~~~


The sorrow of an empty sky.

The terror of the fall.

~~~

Rhodey and Aunt Peggy leave.

Toni has DUM-E and U though so it’s not okay per se but it is better than nothing at all.

She loses days, weeks, months in her workshop. There’s a list of patents as long as her arm with her name on them now but her mind is still as bright and chaotic as ever. It’s still overfull. It still whirls and twists and terrorizes her by turns.

Her life is too much coffee, too loud music, DUM-E, U, Steve, her recorder, and the breathless, terrifying act of creation.

She only realizes her eighteenth birthday is coming when Aunt Peggy’s package arrives in the mail and Rhodey mentions it on one of their all too infrequent calls.

On the actual day of her birthday she grabs her recorder, gets into her car, and drives to the mansion. The place is dark, electricity cut off and furniture covered with dust sheets. It doesn’t matter to Toni.

She picks her way through the house until she’s standing in front of Jarvis’ room. She unlocks the door and steps inside. Closes it softly behind her.

She spends the night curled on the floor, face buried in the dusty comforter on his bed, chasing the phantom scent of fresh bread and lemon furniture polish.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

Listen.

Rewind.

Play.

~~~

A month later she catches herself sketching something on the corner of her newest set of blueprints. She stops, looks at the image curiously, and something inside of her seems to hum in agreement at the sight.
She traces a rough, calloused fingertip across the image.

Yes.

That’s what she wants.

~~~

It takes her three weeks to find what she’s looking for. Three weeks of scouring galleys and photos and *searching, searching, searching*.

When she finally finds it she settles the bots, promises to be back as soon as possible, packs her recorder, presses a kiss to Steve, and calls her pilot.

She’s going to Denmark.

~~~

Jannik and Mari Hatke are a stunning couple. Jannik is all blond Danish strength and muscle and Mari is much the same, only she’s all fire and dyed blue hair. They speak English which is good because of all the languages Toni can speak her Danish it rudimentary at best which is something she’ll have to fix.

That doesn’t matter though.

What does matter to Toni is the fact that they’re both positively *bristling* with ink. Tattoos sloping over and across almost every visible inch of skin from the neck down.

What matters to Toni is that Mari and Jannik together run a tattoo parlor famous for some of the most hyper realistic art to be found in the world.

*That’s* what matters to Toni.

She tells them what she wants, watches as together they sketch out the design, tweaking and changing it until just the sight of it leaves Toni breathless and hot with anticipation.

“Is a large piece.” Jannik tells her in highly accented English.

“Will hurt. Take a long time to do, long time to heal.” Mari confirms.

“Pain isn’t an issue.” Toni tells them and there must be something in her eyes or in her voice that takes them aback because they just *look* at her for a moment.

“We start tomorrow.” Mari finally tells her. “You stay with us until it heals.”

~~~

Toni stays in their spare room as they work on her tattoo.

There’s no describing the bliss she feels from the needle, from having the design etched into her skin. It’s like nothing she’s ever felt, a pain that’s almost sweet, almost *righteous*.

It’s slow going, hours at a time filled with the buzz of the needle, hands wiping blood from her back, the low chatter of music and conversation. They only stop when Mari can no longer handle the gun.

Her Danish improves in leaps and bounds.
Slowly, oh so slowly, feather by feather, wings unfurl across the smooth expanse of her back.

Mari applies cream and bandages, helps Toni care for the tattoo as they add each feather, each strip of stark black ink.

Somehow it feels like coming home.

~~~

Toni knows, objectively, that she’s what the media considers beautiful. She’s never really paid too much attention to it but she knows.

Her body’s blossomed over the past two years and her Italian heritage is prominent in the high arch of her cheeks, the pout of her mouth, the width of her hips and the lush curve of her bust.

She’s been told more than once that she looks like a painting, like a sculpture, like some other useless, meaningless piece of flattery that men think women like to hear. Like they don’t realize all they’re doing is calling her a thing, comparing her to something made to be viewed by others.

That’s not what Toni is. That’s not who Toni is.

So normally she brushes that sort of thing off, aware that all those people want from her is either her money or the chance to say they fucked her.

But this … Jannik and Mari … this feels different.

They are kind to her. They heal her from this wound she’s chosen to inflict upon herself. They have late nights in their living room with beer and heavy Danish food with her. They laugh with her, play with her. Jannik teaches her to cook, rounds out the things she’d learned when she was small and attached to Jarvis’ apron strings.

They ask her for nothing but the price they’ve already agreed on. For her to buy every other meal when they go out. For her to bake the lemon squares Jarvis taught her to make when she was eleven.

The way they touch her feels different too. Feels deeper. More. Hotter.

They don’t tell her she’s beautiful. Instead they make her feel as if she is. As if it’s true.

No one has ever made her feel that way before.

Mari winds her arms around Toni’s neck, pulls her against the tall line of her body, careful of her back. She teaches Toni to dance but not the proper ballroom from her youth. Instead she teaches her how to roll her hips, how to sway, how slink and slide, how to strut and entice.

Her hands linger on the curve of Toni’s waist, on the dip of her spine, the elegant arch of her ribcage. Her lips brush the shell of Toni’s ear as she sings along with the music, trace the curve of Toni’s neck as the two of them sway together, limbs entwined.

Jannik watches them quietly, eyes dark and a small smile on his lips.

Toni thinks this is what seduction feels like.

She likes it.

~~~
It takes a little over a month for the tattoo to be finished.

The wings arch across her shoulder blades and flow down her back, down past the dainty curve of her waist to end just above the swell of her ass. Each feather is intricately done, lovingly etched.

Looking at the finished, healed product Toni can almost believe they could unfurl from her skin and take her skyward.

“Exquisite.” Jannik murmurs to her.

When Mari leans down to kiss her Toni meets her half way.

~~~


The blistering euphoria of the fall.

~~~

They teach her about her body slowly, generously.

They make her comfortable in her skin, in her sex, in all that both imply.

She learns to be comfortable sun bathing topless with Mari in their backyard. In dancing in their kitchen in only her panties. In loving both of their bodies together and separately, in watching them love each other and themselves.

Jannik cups the weight of her breasts in his large hands, tells her she’d look lovely with a bit of metal. Mari agrees. Twenty minutes later Toni has steel bars through both nipples.

She loves the way they hurt.

She stays another month.

She doesn’t sleep in the guest room anymore.

~~~

Life with them is like a beautiful daydream but Toni knows it’ll have to end eventually.

They’re married and she has an entire life waiting for her back home. She doesn’t love them enough to stay. They don’t love her enough to ask her to.

There’s affection there though and that’s more than Toni had thought to ever have before.

Still she misses her apartment, misses DUM-E and U, misses Steve and her workshop, the luxurious expanse of her bed, the act of creation.

So she packs, writes her address and number down for them if they’re ever in the states, kisses them both one last time, and leaves.

It’s bittersweet but unlike so many other things in her life Toni has no true regrets.

~~~

DUM-E and U are ecstatic to see her. They whirl around her when she lets them out of the guest
room where they’ve been docked to keep them out of trouble with the television on for their entertainment and education.

Toni sheds her clothes as she moves through the apartment, used to wondering around half naked now. She unpacks her recorder, presses a kiss to Steve’s star, drops her suitcase in her closet, her purse on the floor, and flops down on her bed to watch DUM-E and U kiss Steve as well.

“I’ve missed you guys.” She smiles at them as they chirp and turn circles in the room, her bra hangs from one of U’s fingers and DUM-E’s wondering around with one of her spiked heels, one of the towering knife edged kind she’d fallen in love with back in Denmark, in hand. They’re adorable.

“Come on boys, time for a bedtime story.”

She sprawls out across the bed with her recorder by her hip. Presses play.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

~~~


*Steve catches her just before she hits the water.*

~~~

The headline reads: *Drunken Debauchery in Denmark: Stark Heiress Out Of Control?*

There’s a picture of her kissing Jannik over Mari’s shoulder. She can tell from what they’re all wearing that it’s a photo of their last outing together where they’d gone to a club and drank and danced and just been happy to be together.

That’s not what gets her though.

*That* she could have handled.

It’s the interview that’s attached that does her in.

Toni reads it in one go. Sits on her couch with DUM-E and U whirling around the living room and reads *her secrets* in stark black and white.

Jannik and Mari tell the whole world *things* about her, about how wild she is, how uninhibited she can be, how reckless and fast she is.

They do her the kindness of not telling the whole world about her wings.

It is the *only* kindness they show.

Absently Toni wonders just how much the paper had paid them for the story.

She would have paid triple for their silence.

She crumples the paper, drops it to the living room floor, walks to her workshop and shuts and locks the door behind her. She hears DUM-E and U whirling curiously from the other side but she doesn’t pay them any attention.
Instead she turns the stereo up loud, sits down at her work bench, and picks up her tools.

She’s halfway through building the new sniper scope she’s been working on and hoping to patent when she *snaps*.

Her arm sweeps across the worktable’s top almost before she realizes she’s moved. Tools and materials go flying. The half formed scope shatters against the far wall.

Once she starts it’s as if she can’t stop.

Toni’s on her feet in the next second, crow bar in hand. She bashes it against the worktable, turns and slams it against and into the nearest wall.

Her chest is cold, all the warmth in her eaten away by pure, icy *rage*.

It takes her a few seconds to realize that she’s *screaming*, inarticulate and jagged, a wounded, bestial *roar* as she raises the bar high above her head and smashes it against her tall chrome tool box over and over again. She destroys anything and everything within reach, half-finished projects, delicate instruments, sheets of glass and plastic all shatter into scrap beneath her fury.

Finally she stands in the center of her destroyed workshop panting. Her face throbs, she can feel the tacky slide of blood as it drips down from her left eyebrow. Her arms and hands are bloody from shrapnel and flying debris.

She feels abruptly *ill*.

Toni drops the crow bar, unlock the door, pushes past DUM-E and U who are huddled like they’re frightened by the couch, and rushes towards the bathroom.

She barely makes it to the toilet before she’s sick.

She clutches the bowl as she dry heaves, her hands slip against the porcelain and leave jagged streaks of crimson in their wake. She flushes, fumbles the lid closed and then presses her forehead against the chill.

‘*How could they?*’ It’s all she can think and even in her head it sounds young and bewildered, a puzzled sort of hurt like a dog that doesn’t understand why it’s been kicked. ‘*How could they? I thought we were friends.*’

But she knows.

*God* she knows.

She’s *always* known.

It was for the *money*. *It’s always for the fucking money*.

She’d let Rhodey lull her into compliance, let his honest friendship dull some of her edges, let him blunt the razor sharp shield Howard had beaten into her with his addicting kindness and his gruff care.

“You’re so stupid Toni.” Her laugh is high pitched and desperate and it pitters out on another choked back sob. “You’re so *fucking* stupid.”

She’s a *Stark* and Starks don’t get things like *friends*. They don’t get things like *kindness* and *loyalty* and *fucking common decency* unless they *pay* for them.
She’s already beaten the odds by finding Rhodey, already gambled and won with him. She shouldn’t have been *greedy*, shouldn’t have thought she could have Jannik and Mari and their warm hands and hotter mouths for *free*. She shouldn’t have thought she could have those two stolen months with them, with their little cottage and their cozy kitchen, the softness of their bed. She shouldn’t have thought her own companionship, her body and her conversation, her spirit and her mind, would be payment enough for what they gave her.

She should have known they’d want *more*. People *always* want *more* so she should have known she wasn’t worth that much.

She’s *never* been worth that much.

She’d bet against the house and lost. Just like Howard had always said she would, just like he’d always warned her not to.

“You were right,” Toni rasps to the ghost of Howard Stark that hovers just behind her eyelids. For a moment the remembered stench of scotch and Cuban cigars is heavy in the air around her. For a moment she could swear she can feel his hand, hard and heavy, on her shoulder again.

It’s enough to make her *gag*.

“Oh all the things to get right it had to be *this*.” Toni beats her head against the porcelain hard enough to hurt but it doesn’t help her stop the sob that works its way up her throat. “Goddamn you to hell you sorry son of a bitch you were *right*.”

She’d miscalculated with Jannik and Mari. She should have hedged her bets but instead she’d chosen to *trust*.

She won’t make that same mistake again.

Not ever.

~~~

*Wax. Feathers. Heat.*

_The sick shudder of relief when the sea pulls her under and the dark closes in around the edges._

~~~

She spends the night in the tub, emptying and refiling it with scalding hot water every time it cools despite the way it makes her cuts burn when she cleans them because she feels *dirty* somehow.

Because it was easy to ignore all those other headlines when she knew none of them were true. But this one … this one eats at her. They took something precious to her and made it dirty, turned it deviant and shameful. It makes her feel violated, stripped down and exposed.

*Small.*

There are few things in the world that Toni hates more than feeling small. At the moment only Howard ranks above that.

There are seventy-six messages on her answering machine the next time she pulls herself out of the bathroom. The number blinks at her from the large face plate she’d installed above the phone so it would catch her eyes when she was distracted.
DUM-E and U are lingering by the bathroom door. There’s a small mountain of cups and mugs, pillows and shoes, a punctured box of cereal and the fire extinguisher from her workshop, all piled by the door like offerings at an altar.

She makes sure to pat them both lovingly before she moves towards the phone.

The first message is from Playboy because she’s eighteen now and it’s legal. The second is from Hustler. The third’s from Obie. The fourth is from a porn studio in L.A. who wants to know if she’s willing to do full girl on girl or if she’d rather stick to the gangbang dynamic they heard she likes. They promise the tape would sell well, get a lot of exposure.

She’s eighteen and these people treat her like she’s meat, like she’s a resource to be consumed, like they have a right to her body or her time or her sex.

It hits her then that they’ve been doing this her entire life. She’s been in and out of magazines since she was born, in and out of tabloids since she went to MIT at thirteen, wrapped up in fake sex scandals since she was fifteen.

It takes all her will power not to get sick again.

She doesn’t bother to listen to the rest of the messages, just hits the erase button and watches the number flick down to zero.

Toni strides naked to her bedroom and doesn’t stop until she’s directly in front of her full length mirror. She looks at herself, at her waterfall of thick black curls, at the glint of rubies set high on the arch of her ears, at the warm gold of her pendant cradled between her breasts.

She runs her hands up her own arms and across her shoulders, watches red lines pop up from where her nails have actually managed to grow out a bit. She marvels at the pale expanse of her skin, at the lack of bruises or injuries except for the ones she gave herself. She cups the full weight of her breasts in her hands, thumbs at the steel bars through her nipples, runs her fingertips down her ribs and across the width of her hips. She brings her hands back up and pulls her hair up off of her back, twists until she can see the wings etched into the skin there and the swell of her ass.

She meets her own eyes in the mirror, ice blue and bright like stained glass, and watches them harden in real time.

“This is my body.” Toni tells herself softly, firmly. It’s a prayer, an affirmation. A promise. “This is who I am. They can’t take that away from me. I won’t let them.”

She pivots and goes to her dresser. There she opens the thick enameled box Aunt Peggy had sent her for her birthday and pulls out the thick gold hairpins that had made up the other part of her gift. She also grabs the angel wings Jarvis gave her and her newest tube of lipstick before she whirls back to the mirror.

Slowly, deliberately, she pins her hair up as sexy and elaborately as she can, sets the angel wings around her temples like a crown and then paints her lips in blood.

Her smile is all teeth.

She’s a Stark.

She’s the Stark.

As much as she hates Howard, as much as she feels nothing towards Maria, she’s still a Stark and
that’s a name that \textit{matters}. That’s a name that gets attention, that has \textit{command}.

Plus, Howard’s dead now, she can’t help but think with a vicious sort of glee. Howard’s \textit{dead} and the Stark name is \textit{hers}.

She’ll be \textit{damned} if she’ll let any of them take that away from her either.

Her name’s Natasha Antonia Stark. She’s a prodigy. A genius.

And she’s going to show the whole world \textit{exactly} what that means.

\textit{~~~}

Toni lines her eyes in black, makes them smoky and slumberous, and then smooths scarlet stockings up the supple curves of her legs and snaps her garter belt into place before she slinks her way into a tiny black skirt. She pulls a crimson blouse over her shoulders and grabs the highest, sharpest heels she owns.

She feels as if she’s donning armor.

She likes it.

She’ll paint herself in shades of red before she gives any of them the opportunity to do it for her.

She makes sure to tuck Jarvis’ monogrammed wallet, the one she long since claimed as her own, into her purse and grabs her wide lensed sunglass off her dresser. She pauses long enough to look up into Steve’s smiling face.

“You’d have never loved me.” Toni tells Steve’s smile and there’s a curl of something almost sad in her chest at having to admit that fact, at having to speak the words to the open air. Captain America, Steve Rogers, would never choose her if given the opportunity. “I know that now. I’ll never be the kind of woman Aunt Peggy is, I’ll never be that \textit{good}. I’m fine with that. But you were small once and you became \textit{mighty}. I think I could love you for that alone. At least loving a dead man is safe.”

Toni steps forward and is, thanks to her towering heels, just tall enough to lean forward and press a single gentle kiss against the glass directly over Steve’s heart.

When she pulls back there’s a perfect imprint of her lips in crimson on the glass.

She doesn’t wipe it away.

Instead she tilts her chin up, straightens her spine, and plants her free hand on the curve of her hip.

“I’m Toni \textit{fucking} Stark Stevie and I’ve been small my whole life.” Toni’s smile is a slow, seductive curl of lips. But there’s still far too many teeth involved to be considered even remotely \textit{polite}. “Now it’s my turn to be \textit{mighty}.”

\textit{~~~}

\textit{Wax. Feathers. Heat.}

\textit{She screams, a vicious and unbridled thing, and turns upwards towards the sun.}

\textit{She leaves the sea and the taste of salt behind.}

\textit{Except for how she doesn’t}
Again tell me what you think!

Iron Man 1 will be coming up next for sure now that we're more on track.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Again you guys are wow. Just wow. I love all the love you’ve been giving me, all of the really touching reviews have inspired me to keep going.

That being said I know I promised this chapter would hit Iron Man but I sort of got carried away and it started getting too long so I cut it. NEXT CHAPTER 100% hits Iron Man though so please don't be mad!

Fanmix: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Toni Stark is born for a second time from the icy wasteland of betrayal.

She’s a small, destructive bundle of sleek limbs, thick black hair, and a razor sharp mind hidden behind too bright eyes.

The first thing she does is go shopping.

She buys short skirts and skin tight tops. She buys dresses cut down to her navel and split up to her hip. She buys lace stockings and skimpy underwear, sheer bras and almost see through blouses. Knife edged heels, boots that come up to her knees, and jewel ended hair pins.

She buys clothes, jewelry, shoes and lingerie by the truck load. Buys things in different shades and variations of black and red and gold because those have always been her colors. She buys only the best fabrics, everything rich and indulgent because it’s the only touch she can allow herself to enjoy at the moment.

Everything she buys has a purpose though, each piece picked because it plays up her figure and her coloring. Hugs the lines of her body like a second skin, shows off the curves of her figure, the length of her leg, the seductive swell of her breasts. Each item is carefully chosen because they make her look sexy but not soft, seductive but not giving.

The whole world wants a piece of her so she’ll make herself into a goddess and then force them to kneel if they want her attention. They will only get what she gives them from now on.

She cleans up the workshop, patches the holes in the walls, and orders new materials to be delivered. She buys DUM-E and U a basket of nerf balls to play with as an apology for scaring them.

She moves her comfortable, familiar long sleeve shirts and time worn jeans to one side of her closet. She can wear them in the workshop or whenever she’s free to be gentle and real instead of the armor she’s building up around herself. For when she can be just Toni instead of the Toni Stark she’s intent on crafting.

For the first time in her life she wears short sleeves on low cut blouses in soft lace or sumptuous silks. She pairs them with lace topped silk stockings, blood red lipstick and dark, dark eyes.
She keeps her back covered, her wings hidden and her hair up.

Each time she dresses to leave the penthouse she feels as if she’s girding herself for battle, as if she’s armoring herself up for war.

She likes it.

She also hates it.

~~~

She meets Aunt Peggy for lunch.

Toni hugs her happily, breathes in her comfortable, familiar scent of tea and orange blossoms before they pull away from each other and settle down in their chairs.

“It’s good to see you again Toni.” Aunt Peggy smiles, eyes crinkling deeply at the corners.

“You too Aunt Peggy.” Toni’s eyes trace over the thick swatch of white in Aunt Peggy’s hair. It’s bigger than it was the last time she saw her, the rich brown slowly being eaten away by time, and it strikes her suddenly how much older than her Aunt Peggy really is.

She’s going to lose her one day too. Just like Jarvis.

The realization hits Toni like a blow and she has to shove the thought away, has to force herself not to think about it just to keep the tears she can feel welling up from spilling over.

She can’t cry in public, not even for this, not anymore. She can’t afford that kind of vulnerability.

“You look different ducky.” There’s wisdom and the bright glint of intelligence in Aunt Peggy’s eyes as they trace over Toni’s clothes, over her bare arms, upswept hair, and heavy lidded eyes.

Toni should have known that she’d pick up on it immediately.

For a moment she’s at a loss for words, unsure of just how to explain to Aunt Peggy that she’s making herself into a weapon. That she’s forging herself into sword and shield both because if she doesn’t then the world will cut her down and this is the best way to stop them from doing that.

“Be careful darling.” Aunt Peggy says after a short moment of silence and her eyes are knowing. “So many hate to see a woman succeed and I can tell you’re going to do a lot of that. They’ll sidle up to you sideways love, slink in with a smile and wait for you to drop your guard, so be careful. Watch your own back because a pretty mouth can still hide fangs dear.”

Toni nods, agrees silently. She knows Aunt Peggy’s right. Pretty mouths can hold fangs. Her mouth is exquisite after all and she has rows of sharp teeth hidden just behind her lips. Just like Aunt Peggy does.

“They’re going to try to hurt you now.” There’s a solemn note in the older woman’s voice then, an aching sort of sadness behind the strength. “I had hoped you’d have more time but …” Aunt Peggy sighs. “Now that they know you’re not going to be passive anymore they’re going to lash out worse than before.”

“I’m a Stark.” Toni tells her and the words hold a wealth of meaning for the two of them. Even if she’s never said it Toni thinks they both know she would have rather been a Jarvis instead. Or a Carter. But she’s neither in anything more than spirit and unfortunately to the rest of the world that
doesn’t count at all.

“Exactly darling, exactly.” Aunt Peggy sips her tea carefully and her lipstick leaves a crimson stain on the delicate china. It matches the one on Toni’s coffee cup. They are, after all, two creatures of a similar breed. Different yes, but familiar predators all the same. “Also I’d suggest taking up some sort of training. Jiu-Jitsu is all the rage now days I hear. Or perhaps kickboxing.”

Toni laughs.

So many forget that in nature beauty also means danger.

~~~

A week later she finds a private instructor versed in both.

~~~


*The steel resolve to reach ever higher.*

*The pain of her wings melting against her back, wax scalding her skin as she ignores the urge to let herself fall to the soothing waters below.*

~~~

Toni can tell Rhodey is worried about her.

She hears it in his voice when he calls her, can practically taste it in the anxious slant of his latest letter before she tucks it away in the fireproof box she keeps all of their correspondence.

He freezes when he sees her at the airport the next time he’s on leave. He rakes his eyes over her, brows arched high and mouth slightly open, as he takes in her kohl lined eyes, sheer blouse and black leather miniskirt.

Toni feels almost nervous which is ridiculous because he’s seen her *naked* before. He’d nursed her through pneumonia once when she refused to go to the hospital after Jarvis died and she’d been a sickly mess, weak and helpless. He’d helped her shower, helped her dress, even helped her take a piss. As a result they’ve reached a level of comfort with each other’s bodies that’s normally reserved for married couples or twins, but he’s never seen her like *this* and somehow that seems almost more nerve-wracking.

“Toni?” There’s something cautious and unsure in his voice, like he knows something’s wrong but just can’t place it.

Toni closes the distance between them in a flash, throws her arms around him, and just *breathes.*

He wraps her up tight, presses a kiss to her forehead, and very pointedly doesn’t ask.

She just clings to him tighter than ever before.

They go back to the penthouse and get him settled in before they collapse together on the couch, his arm around her shoulders and her cheek pressed against his chest.

“What’s the matter sweetheart?” His hand, large and warm and *safe,* strokes softly up and down her spine.
Toni presses even closer to him because just like with Aunt Peggy the fact that he can see straight down to the core of her makes her love him more.

She tries to gather the words in her chest and push them upwards and off of her tongue but she just can’t seem to find the right way to do it. Can’t seem to make herself tell him the truth about Jannik and Mari. Can’t seem to find the right words to tell Rhodey that the world wants to chew her up and spit her out simply because of who and what she is. Can’t find the words to tell him that she’s not going to let them do that even if she has to kill a part of herself to prevent it.

Better to die in pieces by her own hands than to be savaged by theirs. At least that way she’d have some margin of control.

Instead she just shakes her head and burrows even further into his side.

“Alright.” Rhodey sighs. He sounds a strange mix of sad and resolved but the hand on her back and the chest beneath her cheek are still warm and solid and there. “You tell me when you’re able to sweetheart. I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

She savors his understanding and hardens her resolve to enjoy each and every moment they’re together. Resolves not to take a single second for granted, to store up these touches, these moments of warmth and coziness and safety. She’ll fold them down into herself and wait to pull the memories back out for the months where he’s gone and she’s alone and the metal claws of DUM-E and U are the closest things she can find to a comforting embrace.

So she pulls away, stands and kicks off her heels before she goes to her room to change. She pulls on a pair of soft sleep pants, a large long sleeved shirt she stole from him at MIT, and comes back to curl up against him on the couch. He doesn’t say anything about her change, just lifts his arm again and welcomes her into his space like he always does.

Sometimes she wishes she could love him in a different way. Wishes she could love him like a part of her loves the Steve Rogers Aunt Peggy had given her all those years ago. But at the same time she doesn’t because as well as they fit together as friends, siblings and platonic soulmates of a sort, Toni knows that they wouldn’t last like that. She’s too much for Rhodey sometimes, too much energy, too much noise. She’d drive him away eventually.

She’s terrified she still might.

They eat pizza, drink coffee and eat cheap burgers like when they were in college. They watch shitty movies on her television, push the couch against the wall and play catch with the boys. Mainly they talk, about her projects, about life in the service, about memories and plans for the far off future.

One night when they’re settling down to watch the basketball game he’s been talking about all week she unpins her hair and lets it flow down her back in a tumble of silky curls. His eyes go wide and soft when she hands him her hair brush and sits down on the floor at his feet.

It is a gesture of trust and love and devotion all wrapped up into one simple, silent act. A vulnerability bared and held out freely in his direction.

He works his hands through her hair with a soft almost hushed reverence, fingers playing with the thick curls, making tiny braids and then brushing them out gently until her curls shine, all the way up until the game ends.

That, more than anything else, lets Toni know he understands.

~~~
“Don’t lose yourself to this Tones.” Rhodey presses a kiss to her forehead when they’re standing in the airport terminal together as his plane boards behind him. She’s dressed in her finest armor but she can’t help the way she clutches at his jacket, not wanting to let him go but knowing that she will. “I love you little girl. Just remember that. Just remember that I love you and whatever this is, whatever it is eating at you, I’m here. You’re not alone Toni and you never will be if I can help it.”

God she loves him so much. She wants to burrow beneath his skin, wants to wrap herself up tight and safe behind his ribs and let him protect her.

She knows he’d let her if he could.

If they were those kinds of people. But they’re not and they both know she’d never do that to him. To herself. To them.

Letting him go is still one of the hardest things she’s ever had to do and it never gets easier.

But she does it anyways.

Rhodey leaves.

~~~

The headline reads: Stark Heiress Rekindles Old Flame: Party Princess Tamed At Last?

Toni sneers and crumples the headline in her fist.

She’s not something to be tamed. She’s not a horse to be broken to the saddle.

Fuck them all.

~~~

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”


“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

Listen.

Rewind.

Play.

~~~


The fleeting comfort of the wind brushing a kiss across her blistered cheeks.

The harsh truth of the sun scorching her upturned face.

~~~
Toni has a plan.

Well it’s more like Toni has a performance planned.

It’s complicated, risky, but her mind sees no other route, no other option.

She’s calculated, done the math, drawn up the designs and crunched the equations. No other path ends correctly, no other road goes where she wants it to so she’ll have to forge her own.

This is the best way, the most effective.

Starks are, Toni knows, con-artists at heart. And somewhere along the way she’s made the decision to be the greatest Stark to ever live and this is the start of that journey.

Or maybe it’s not, maybe she started years ago. Maybe the start was her, all of eleven and beaten and bloody beneath Howard’s fists but refusing to stay down, refusing to give him the satisfaction of pounding her down into where he believed her rightful place to be. Beneath him.

Maybe that was the start.

If that’s true then this, at least, will be Act II.

Either way it’s not going to be easy.

The long con is the most difficult performance after all but it’s also often the most rewarding.

One day she’ll overshadow Howard, will push his memory back down into hell where he belongs.

One day when people think Stark it’ll be her face that comes to mind and not that bastard’s.

Like with everything else she’s ever dreamed up all Toni has to do is make it so.

So she squares her shoulders, gathers her strength, and prepares her opening number without another second’s hesitation.

~~~

Lights.

Toni sweeps into society like a hurricane, cuts a swathe through the people who’d stand in her way, and takes her place center stage as if it is her due.

Camera.

‘All eyes on me,’ Toni thinks with a mirthless chuckle as reporters scream questions and the flashing lights of their cameras burst before her eyes.

Action.

She’s a Stark after all and she’s the type of con-artist who works best in the spotlight.

Showtime.

~~~

To everyone’s surprise except for her own she takes the world by storm with barely any effort at all.
Toni’s always had a hard time connecting to people on an emotional level but she does know that a lot of them, the ones that matter for her purposes at least, are fickle. They’re needy, gluttonous creatures eager to take a bite out of anyone.

They’ve been feeding off of her for years without her consent and that changes now.

Now she’s going to feed them willfully, gleefully.

Now she’s going to make them all fat and slow.

Complacent.

Blind.

‘All eyes on me,’ she thinks again, ‘all eyes on me.’

~~~

By the time she turns nineteen she’s the new face of Dior and she’s the one who sets the standards others live by.

If she wears it once it’s in fashion. If she goes to a restaurant it’s considered the new ‘it’ place.

A petulant, displeased turn of her mouth can end careers, a smile can send them surging upwards.

A throw away comment here or a casual statement there, leads to donations pouring into the Maria Stark Foundation and other reputable charities.

‘Besides’, self-righteous and smug mouths whisper just loud enough for her to hear, ‘if a shallow socialite like Toni Stark can donate occasionally then so can everyone else. They’re better than she is after all.’

Toni smiles, watches from the sidelines as an orphanage/shelter/youth center on the Foundation’s list gets its remodel/funding/staff, and keeps going.

After half a decade of pixie cuts reigning supreme long hair is suddenly stylish again. Curls are considered in vogue. People speculate on why she never wears her hair down so she pins it more firmly in place and watches out for wondering hands. Award ceremonies that year are seas of up-dos and jeweled hairpins.

Toni wears her curls in a simple but elegant bun decorated with white chrysanthemums and watches the crowds go crazy.

Eventually the Dior house designer puts up a bit of a fuss but she refuses to model with her hair down no matter what he says, no matter how hard he pushes.

She doesn’t need their money, doesn’t need the fame or their connections. She can walk away at any time. They can’t control her like they do the rest of their models, can’t keep her cowed beneath their boot heels with threats of never working again.

They both love and hate her for that.

Her hair stays up and her back stays covered.

She smiles and struts down red carpet after red carpet, entices reporters with flashes of creamy thighs and sultry eyes. Promises everything with a glance and then gives them exactly what they deserve.
Nothing.

She shamelessly fucks a few of her fellow models and doesn’t make a secret of it, hoping to get the taste of Jannik and Mari out of her mouth. The women are all hollow eyed, brittle bird like things who tower over her and seem to live off of breath mints and savage rage. The men are little better, all carved perfection, fisted hands and gritted teeth. Stallions biting at their bits.

It’s cold and meaningless and doesn’t work. She loses her taste for it quickly enough but she’s satisfied with the damage she’s managed to cause in the process. The press assumes she’s fucking anyone she’s seen with anyways so it’s not like it matters anymore.

The only thing small about her now is her height but even in a world where taller is better and thin is still never thin enough no one seems to notice that anymore.

She’s Toni fucking Stark after all.

~~~

Twenty and Victoria Secret comes calling. She accepts on the premise that her same rules still apply. They fall over themselves to accommodate her because she’s like Midas and everything she touches turns to gold.

She wears black leather beneath a crimson and gold overcoat as she struts down a runway in Milan, top hat in hand, wings covered and hair up, a ringmaster for all to see.

The irony is almost overwhelming.

Still she grins the entire time and actually enjoys the moment because Rhodey’s in the front row and he laughs, loud and bright and beautiful, when she throws him the hat.

~~~

She drinks and parties some but never as much as the tabloids say. She remembers all too well the scent of peppermint and alcohol on Maria’s breath. Still wakes up at night shaking sometimes with the memory of the scotch and rage fueled pain of Howard’s fists.

She doesn’t think those memories will ever fade, she’s not that lucky.

A part of her almost doesn’t want them to fade. Because every time she almost falters she remembers the feel of her shoulder being popped out of place, the pain of Howard’s ring catching against her skin, the numb feeling of Maria’s blunt apathy, how it hurts to breathe with broken ribs.

Each memory is like fuel, like wind beneath her wings, buoying her back up and keeping her on her chosen path.

Toni hates the memories but she uses them anyways.

She’ll take her motivation where she can find it.

The press takes to calling her the Scarlet Stark Heiress. Among other things. Needless to say there’s a running theme to their jabs.

‘F*ck them all,’ she thinks as she reaches for her lipstick and paints herself crimson instead.

They’re all just too stupid to truly understand the difference.
Crimson’s a much darker shade after all.

It suits her.

~~~

She still invents in her spare time though, in between red carpets and movie premiers. She wouldn’t be able to stop even if she wanted to. Her mind whirls too fast and too bright if she goes too long without working, her brilliance eating away at her sanity bit by bit if it’s denied its outlet for too long.

The maelstrom in her mind is the price she pays, has always paid, for the genius she possesses.

The difference is that she just stops telling people what she’s making. Instead she files patents on the low, pays a hefty bribe to the file clerk to keep it all quiet because money speaks louder than words and Toni’s learned quickly enough that her money screams.

It’s all part of the plan though, this technological hibernation she’s pretending to undergo. She hates it, hates creating and then hiding it away when she should be releasing most of it into the world to do what it’s intended for. Hates the almost smug way Obie looks at her every time he asks her if she has anything new in the pipeline only to have to say no. She hates being stifled but she knows it’s necessary.

She hires a private lawyer, a willowy Latina woman with hard hungry eyes and straight shoulders, who eagerly signs a NDA and agrees to go over every inch of the rules and stipulations of SI.

Toni learned her lesson from Jannik and Mari, now she always hedges her bets.

The company won’t be hers until she’s twenty-one and Toni already knows they’re going to fight her. The board does not and will not take the idea of a woman, especially one of her age, running things well. They’ll try to get rid of her, try to take what’s rightfully hers.

This is the purpose of her little show.

She needs them complacent, needs to be underestimated. She needs them to think she’ll be something they can easily sweep under the rug, something that they can handle effortlessly enough when the time comes. She wants them to look at her and see vapid instead of shrewd, fickle instead of focused. She needs to take them by surprise, needs to hit them hard and fast so they have no time to prepare against her.

It’s like a magic trick. Like sleight of hand and misdirection. All flash-fire smoke and mirrors to hide the real trick.

‘Look over here,’ she says to them all silently. ‘Look at the parties and the drinking and forget the words prodigy and genius.’

‘Pay no mind to the woman behind the curtain.’

‘Watch my left hand but never my right. Don’t see the knife until it’s already buried in your ribs.’

‘All eyes on me,’ Toni thinks to herself as she sips champagne at yet another boring party, ‘you’re all blind anyways.’

~~~

The media loves and hates her by turns.
The *Scarlet Stark Heiress*, they keep repeating, and for all intents and purposes she might as well have a letter embroidered on her chest.

They call her a whore in every way imaginable without ever outright saying the word anyways.

Toni laughs and forcefully doesn’t care.

In response she paints her lips darker, holds her head up higher, gets louder, faster, *more*.

Shame means nothing in the face of progress.

She’ll armor herself up until she can’t feel it anymore, turn her music louder until she can’t hear it anymore. Keep her eyes focused on the prize with no room to waver.

*“Jarvis?”*

*“Yes young miss?”*


~~~

*Wax. Feathers. Heat.*

*Steve stands, face twisted into a sneer, and just watches as she falls.*

*The water closes over her head but all she can see is the blue of his eyes.*

*Shame burns like sea water in her lungs.*

*She takes a deep breath, wills herself to sink faster.*

~~~

There’s a room full of clocks in the back of Toni’s head, all of them counting up from or down to some sort of event.

X-amount of years, months, weeks, days, seconds since Jarvis was taken from her.

X-amount of years, months, weeks, days, seconds until she manages to drive Rhodey away.

X-amount of years, months, weeks, days, seconds until Aunt Peggy’s gone too.

X-amount of years, months, weeks, days, seconds until she can finally *stop* this.

Sometimes Toni wishes she could smash them all.

But they’re all inside her mind, her terrifying, chaotic mind, which means she’s had to learn to deal with them.

*“Jarvis?”*

*“Yes young miss?”*


~~~
Twenty-one comes in silence.

Rhodey’s on assignment, Aunt Peggy’s sick with some sort of flu, and the boys are at the penthouse so Toni’s alone as the clock strikes twelve.

Her thumb runs across the edges of her pendant as she sits on the ground, back pressed against the headstone behind her. She’s wrapped in a familiar overcoat and the crimson sundress that she only wears when she comes here. It’s tight across the bust and hips but it still fits. She’s not sure what she’ll do the day it doesn’t anymore.

“You should be here for this. I wish you were here for this.” The cemetery’s empty and she’d made sure she wasn’t followed so Toni feels comfortable actually speaking. She leans her head back so she can stare up at the sky as she sighs. She ignores the warm trickle of tears against her temples as they slide back and into her hair. “I spent all day thinking about what it would be like today if you were still here.”

Toni always misses Jarvis, knows with an intimate sort of certainty that she always will. But it’s moments like this when the grief wells back up to the surface and threatens to choke her like it did in the very beginning.

“We’d get up early and have breakfast, maybe chase the cook away and spend the morning in the kitchen, just you and me. You could tell me stories while we make that orange chocolate gateau we both loved for later. Maybe we could go to that art museum you liked and then the aquarium because you always told me that you’re never too old for sharks.” She smiles faintly at the memory of that conversation, at his exaggerated offense when she’d question his enthusiasm the first time he’d taken her there when she was nine. It’d helped to distract from the pain in her arm and she knows now, had known then, that was his whole intent. “We’d come home and have pizza from that place by the park, eat cake and watch movies. We’d have my first legal drink together. It’d probably be one of those shitty microbrews you always tried to hide the fact that you liked but I wouldn’t care because it’d be a drink with you and anything would be fine.”

Toni squeezes her eyes shut so tightly little bursts of white pop up behind her lids. She doesn’t care though, can’t care. Her voice is low, husky with pain and sorrow, when she speaks again. “You’d brush my hair and tell me our story and it’d be … it’d be perfect. The perfect day Jarvis, just the two of us.”

Toni lets herself imagine it for a moment. Lets the sense memory of Jarvis’ hands in her hair, his warm strength at her side and the safety of his embrace, wash over her. Imagines a day without Howard and Maria, without fear and pain, a day of joy and celebration with the only father she’d ever known.

“Or we could have done nothing. We could have both been busy the entire day, caught up in work and other, more important things until later that night. I probably wouldn’t even realize what the day was.” There’d been more than one birthday like that. “And then you’d stop by my room just before midnight with milk and the cake I didn’t know you made, some kind of gift in your pocket because of the two of us you’d never actually forget my birthday. You’d kiss me on the forehead and tell me our story. It’d still be the perfect day.”

Toni clutches her recorder to her chest, buries her face in the collar of the overcoat that no longer smells like fresh bread and lemon furniture polish. It smells like her now, a mix of metal and heat overlaid with the faintest hint of strawberries and cream from the soaps and shampoos she favors. It’s familiar but not right. It should still smell like him, should still smell like home and love. But it doesn’t because time doesn’t stand still and scents fade no matter how much Toni wishes they wouldn’t.
“I never got the chance to tell you I love you.” She reaches down a hand and fists it in the thick grass of the grave top. “I’d give … so much to fix that mistake. To be able to tell you how much you meant to me growing up, how much you still mean to me. I wish I hadn’t been scared then, before it was too late, to say it to you. Because I was. Just like you were, I was terrified. Scared someone else would hear, or that you’d push me away, or look at me like Howard did. Or worse that you wouldn’t say it back. I knew better in my heart but my head just … well you know how it is. How I am.”

Toni rips up a handful of grass and tosses it to the side. She has to resist the urge to dig her nails into the dirt. A sick part of her wants to tear into the ground, to dig down beneath the soil and wrap herself around the casket that’s resting there. A part of her still wishes somedays that they’d put her in the ground with him or that she could sit here, beside his headstone, until her body calcifies, until she turns to stone.

Toni’s a genius, a prodigy, but she never said she was entirely rational all of the time.

“You should be here for this.” Toni repeats as she twists enough to trace her fingertips across the letters etched into the marble.

E. D. W. I. N.

“I wish you were here for this.” Toni tires to smile but it comes out wrong, a bitter, broken flash of teeth against an unpainted mouth, almost hidden by her cascading hair as she tilts her head forward. “Maybe then I wouldn’t be the way I am now, wouldn’t have to be. Maybe I’d be a better person, like you and Aunt Peggy. Like Steve.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“I miss you. I love you.” She presses chapped lips to the cold marble, leans back and grabs her recorder. “Everything good about me came from you.”

She bites back the word she so desperately wants to say, keeps it caged behind her teeth, tucked beneath her tongue.

She wasn’t brave enough to say it while he was alive. She doesn’t deserve to say it now when he’s no longer around to hear it.

But that doesn’t stop the way her mind chants it loudly, relentlessly.

Father. Father. Father.

Maybe one day she’ll let herself say it, maybe one day she’ll be able to tell someone just what kind of monster Howard was. Maybe one day she’ll be able to tell someone about the vicious, visceral joy seeing him dead had brought her.

Maybe one day she’ll bring someone here, to this grave, and introduce them to Jarvis.

Maybe one day she’ll tell them that this man, this wonderful, warm man, was her real father. The only one that ever counted, the only one she’d ever loved.

Maybe one day.

But not today.

Today this is all she has.
“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

Listen.

Rewind.

Play.

~~~

Her party the next night is large, extravagant, and borderline *obscene*.

Toni is armored to the hilt in a golden high neck gown with inserts missing from sternum to navel and slits up to her hips on both sides.

Champagne, wine and hard liquor alike flow like water. There’s a giant multilayer cake done in red and golds with her name all over it. The rich and the beautiful swan around together, laughing and gossiping. Obie’s holding court with a few senators in the corner and looking smugger by the minute. From a distance Toni sees Justin Hammer and has to forcefully keep her mouth from curling up into a snarl because he’s *not* supposed to be here the ferrety little bastard.

Honestly it’s a good party, filled with laughter and delicious food, good music and dancing. Any other time she might actually enjoy herself.

Today Toni finds all of it absolutely *hateful*.

Still when the time comes she sways her way up onto the stage, makes herself smile and look bashful but pleased when the crowd swings into the song. She says a few words, gets a few laughs, and cuts the cake.

She’s gone a half hour later.

No one notices.

Toni doesn’t care even if they do.

She’s twenty-one now. The company is hers for the taking and she has a meeting in New York to attend that she’s not supposed to know about in nine hours.

The board is in for a rude awakening indeed.

~~~

“Gentlemen.” Toni greets from her place at the head of the board room table as the door opens. “It’s nice to see you all are ready to join me.” She has the pleasure of seeing their faces go pale when they see her.

She’s dressed in a severe but still seductively tailored black suit with scarlet heels and she’s seated like some sort of dark queen in the large, high backed chair. Lounging there as if it’s an actual throne.

For all intents and purposes it is.

The chair is Toni’s new throne and Stark Industries will be her kingdom.
There’s the added bonus of knowing that it’s where Howard once sat, where Obie normally sits. She’s usurped them both now and she plans to keep it that way. Priscilla, her lawyer, is seated silently to her right in the next seat of power with a thick bundle of files in front of her. That fact isn’t lost on anyone either.

“Toni!” Obie recovers quicker than the others, pastes a passable smile on his face and moves further into the room. Still, Toni knows him well enough to see the anger in his eyes, the rage behind his smile. “What are you doing here? I figured you’d still be celebrating your birthday.”

She smiles, all teeth, and crosses one black stockinged leg over the other.

“Well I thought it was time I got to see my company.” Toni waves a hand nonchalantly at the other board members, and gestures them towards the empty seats. “Come in gentlemen, we have a long day ahead of us I’m sure. No need to waste more time than we already have.”

~~~

They try to fight her, try to convince her to leave, that the company isn’t something a young, beautiful thing like her wants any part of. Leave the business to the men they say, to the ones who know what they’re doing. Go back to your parties and your clothes, your silly little girl hobbies.

Weapons designing is a serious, difficult, business. No place for women, no place for emotions and sentimentality. No place for all those tragic flaws women just can’t help but have.

Toni grins to keep from sneering, lets them say their piece, and then trades an amused glance with Priscilla who hands her the thick stack of files.

Toni stands, makes a show of pushing her skirt back into place, and then struts around the side of the table. She stops behind Obie who’d taken the seat to her left.

“This is a telecommunication device I designed at sixteen.” She drops the folder onto the table in front of Obie.

She picks the next file from the pile and moves towards the next board member. “A grenade at seventeen.” Drops it, moves on.

“Sniper rifle.” Drops it, moves on.

“Hand gun.” Drops it, moves on.

“Satellite.” Drops it, moves on.

“Heat seeking IED technology.” Drops it, moves on.

“Sound based paralytic.” Drops it moves on.

She keeps going until she’s made her way all the way around the table and back to her chair. She settles down and looks at the faces of the board. Some of them are pale, some of them are red with indignation, a few look at her with shrewd appraisal.

She leans back, crosses her legs.

“These are just the things that would move our contracts with the military forward.” Toni tells them. “Stark Industries could and will be, so much more. Medical equipment, telecommunications, automotive design. The sky’s the limits gentlemen and I’ve always had a thing for heights.”
“Miss Stark this is—” one of the board goes to speak but Toni holds up a hand to silence him. His mouth snaps shut seemingly against his will.

“I designed all of this before I was even twenty-one. Just me and my female constitution, my womanly sentimentality. And I did it all between my many, many hobbies and more pleasurable pursuits.” Toni uncrosses her legs, stands to plant her hands on the mahogany table in front of her and leans forward intently. “Give me three years and I’ll build SI to heights that you’ve never seen before. Give me five and I’ll change the face of technology the entire world over.”

~~~

Game. Set. Match.

Toni is twenty-one and Stark Industries is hers.

If anyone ever tries to take it back they’ll have to pry it from her cold, dead hands.

~~~


The euphoria of flight.

The creeping numbness of an endless sky, no landmarks in sight.

~~~

Toni hits the ground running.

Within a month her new radios are being produced and then distributed to the troops. The government is all but panting over the streamlined devices. Within six months she debuts her new Stark model bolt-action sniper rifle with the scope she’d developed included and their contracts are renewed for another five years on the spot.

By the end of the first year she’s got enough padding with the board to open up production on the first generation StarkPhone. Money pours in from every direction, sales shoot through the roof, and customer satisfaction is so high the other companies try to call foul. She’s already planning upgrades.

It’s all Toni can do to keep her smug smile from the board.

She doesn’t always do so well at that.

Twenty two comes and Toni’s on the cover of Time Magazine. The photographer poses her sitting on an ornate thrown, shoulders back and head up. Her legs are crossed, her hair is braided and pinned to look like a crown, her eyes are dark and sultry. She’s dressed in scarlet because originality seems to be dead if she’s not the one leading it forward but she still looks every inch the queen.

Rhodey frames it and then sends her a picture of the cover and its steel frame settled on his brand new desk with his brand new personalized StarkPhone.

The media calls her The Red Queen. Toni wishes the title came with the ability to say ‘off with their heads’ and have it come true.

Well technically she could do that but then it be contracted murder at the very least and that tends to be frowned on in most circles.
Plus she’s not that much of a monster.

Yet.

~~~

She’s hounded by reporters and paparazzi wherever she goes.

Nothing is private, nowhere is sacred.

Toni keeps her head up high and her shoulders straight. She struts down red carpets and goes to
galas and parties. She entices and charms, woos potential business partners, captures the attention of
government officials and twists them all to help build Stark Industries higher and higher.

Someone leaves a bouquet of crimson roses on her door step. The card reads: You’re beautiful.

Toni builds and builds and then builds some more.

She works on new programs, irons kinks out of old ones. Strives to push forward, to stretch the
boundaries of science further and further, to finally have the chance to expel some of the clutter from
her own mind.

Someone leaves another bouquet. The card reads: I’d treat you like you deserve to be treated.

Toni shivers. Throws the roses away. Plays catch with the bots and deliberately doesn’t think about
it.

The next four bouquets don’t have a note. She throws them all away, and requests that the door man
not let whoever’s delivering them into the elevator anymore.

Rhodey’s there when the next one arrives. He brings them inside for her, sets them on the counter
and then teases her about having a new beau. She brushes it off, tells him they’re from someone
who’s more interested in her wallet than her panties.

As soon as he turns his back she throws them away, vase and all.

She knows he notices but he doesn’t say a word.

They spend the next week cavorting around the city doing anything and everything they want. Toni
hasn’t been so happy in a long time.

~~~

Rhodey leaves.

It still isn’t easy to see him go.

~~~

Toni kisses Steve and curls up amongst silk sheets, she’s swimming in one of Rhodey’s shirts but it
smells like him and she needs the comfort until she can get used to being alone again.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

Two days later there’s a white box outside her door. Toni picks it up, brings it inside, and goes to hunt down a box cutter to open it.

She ends up using a steak knife, distracted half way through her search by U’s new found obsession with trying to wear her shoes as hats.

“You scratch those heels U and I’m going to turn you into a glorified coat rack.” She tells him over her shoulder as she pulls the box open without looking. Her hand hits something that feels like paper and then goes past that and encounters something wet.

Toni freezes.

Dread shoots down her spine and she turns slowly to peer down into the box.

There’s a magazine article on top, jagged around the edges and wrinkled like it’d been crumpled in someone’s hand. Toni stares down at the full color, glossy picture of her and Rhodey, arm in arm, faces filled with laughter as they frolic through the city together.

Or at least that’s what the picture should look like.

In reality Rhodey’s face has been completely scribbled out, the marks almost ripping through the page. The word whore is written in giant red block letters across Toni’s entire body.

Her hand trembles as she picks the magazine page up and she barely registers the fact that the tips of her fingers are wet and red before she’s moving to see what else is in the box.

She barely manages to stumble back and dash to the kitchen sink before she’s sick.

Toni keeps the boys away from the box when they try to see what’s inside. She doesn’t want them to see that sort of thing so she ushers them into her room, tells them to stay and shuts the door behind her.

For the first time in her life she calls the police.

They send an unsympathetic officer who stares at her chest when she lets him inside. Still she tells him about the flowers, about the notes, gives him the magazine page and shows him the box. He hems and haws for a bit and then gives her a lecture that amounts to, ‘choose your boyfriends more wisely’.

Disgusted she sees him out.

The only bright point is that he takes the box with him.

Toni checks and then triple checks the locks on the door after he goes. She feels unsafe all of a sudden, doesn’t feel comfortable in her own home, and that pisses her right the fuck off. She had never wanted to feel like this again.

No one had the right to make her frightened in her own home now that Howard’s dead.

Toni’s mind begins to click and whirl around the many ways to keep herself safe. Some of the ideas
are sane, rational and acceptable, others are ... less so. But she doesn’t dismiss those ideas outright. Instead she just tucks them into the back of her mind for a different day.

The idea of designing her own home security is pretty promising though.

She spends that night on the couch, DUM-E and U watching TV while she sketches out blueprints and designs, her mind whirling with what she wants her future home to look like.

She doesn’t try to sleep.

The sight of dead and mutilated cat in the box won’t leave her mind.

Instead she just sketches and listens to her recorder.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”


~~~

A week later the doorbell rings and then it’s followed by a crisp knock. Tensing with sudden nerves Toni puts down her blueprints and goes to answer it. DUM-E and U are in the kitchen fighting over one of the long pool noodles she’d bought them.

She checks the peep hole and relaxes when she sees the uniform for one of the local delivery services SI uses. There’s a crash from the kitchen just as she pulls the door open and she turns automatically to see what the boys have broken now.

The blow to the side of the face catches her completely off guard and Toni staggers backwards, hits the hall table, and then the ground with a crash. She hears the front door slam closed, hears the sound of unfamiliar heavy boots plodding closer to her, hears a low, raspy voice spewing insults and slurs in her direction, and knows she’s in trouble.

Dazed and frightened but still thinking Toni forces herself to move.

Her head throbs but she scrambles to crawl down the hallway and away from the footsteps. She’s had training, she can fight, but she’s also small, also already wounded. She can’t let whoever this is get her pinned down.

If he gets her on the ground, gets her under him, her chances of getting away again decrease dramatically.

“D-DUM-E.” Toni tries to rasp but her visions swimming and she can’t seem to focus right. “U-U.”

She needs to get to the bots, her boys. They’ll help her. They have to help her.

A hand buries itself in her upswept hair and jerks her up onto her feet with ruthless force. Toni warbles out a scream, a high pitched yelp of pain, and lashes out behind her. She makes contact with what feels like a nose right when she finally finds her voice.

“What do you want?” Toni grits out, desperate to stall. “Rhodey’s going to be back any minute now.”

“Stop lying.” there’s hot stinking breath on her neck and for a brief moment all Toni can think is
Howard’s come back before she realizes that’s ridiculous. “You’re boyfriend’s gone you whore. It’s just us. You should’ve never went out with him Toni. I would have treated you so much better.”

Toni feels a rush of cold realization and knows in that instance that if she doesn’t get away from this man she’s going to die.

“DUM-E, U, help me!” Toni shrieks and gets a rough slap in reward.

There’s the sound of whirling and chirping and DUM-E and U come trundling around the corner of the hall from the kitchen. Toni hears a surprised exclamation from the man holding her at the sight of her boys. U’s still holding the pool noodle and DUM-E managed to get his claw on another box of cereal.

For a moment the four of them all freeze, obviously surprised.

Toni recovers first and practically screeches, “Threat! DUM-E, U. He’s a threat!”

He slaps her again to shut her up and all hell seems to erupt.

U throws his pool noodle, DUM-E his cereal box. The man bats them out of the air before they hit him but it doesn’t make a difference. Her boys come tearing down the hall, metal claws spread wide, servos whirling angrily. U grabs the vase off the other hall table and flings it, the man curses and automatically lets go of Toni’s hair to block.

She whirs, punches him once in the face and then knees him in the balls, before she’s dashing down the hall and sliding safely behind her boys to dive for the StarkPhone she’d left on the counter.

She needn’t have hurried.

There’s a scream and she turns quickly enough to see DUM-E lift the man high into the air by the throat and then slam him hard enough into the hallway wall to dent the drywall. U reaches out and grabs the hand that’s flailing at DUM-E’s camera and squeezes. Toni hears the sick sound of a bone snapping and the man screams again.

DUM-E slams him against the wall again and again until he’s limp in the bot’s grasp even as U reaches for his leg.

Toni realizes that they’re going to kill him if she doesn’t stop them.

“Boys.” Toni croaks, and then louder when they don’t seem to hear her. “DUM-E, U, stop. Stop.”

They pause, U’s camera swings in her direction, but DUM-E keeps his hold on the man.

“Drop him DUM-E.” Toni tells the bot softly. “He’s not going to hurt me anymore. You two saved me.”

DUM-E finally drops him and the man falls, unconscious and bleeding, to the ground.

DUM-E and U roll over to her side and press gentle claws to the rapidly darkening bruises on her face, chirping sadly the entire time.

Toni sets the StarkPhone down, mind whirling, and lets them look.

“Good boys.” Toni sobs as she reaches out and pets them both. “Such good, good boys. I’m so proud of you but Mama’s gonna take it from here okay? I need you two to go to Rhodey’s room and
stay quiet alright? Go in there and shut the door and don’t make any noise till I come get you.”

Toni feels sick to her stomach because DUM-E and U have almost killed a man for her, *would* have killed him if she hadn’t stopped them. She’d never really bothered with Asimov’s Three Laws when she’d built them and they’d almost killed for her because of that.

She can’t let anyone find out. If they do they’d try to take them from her or have them destroyed. Maybe both. She can’t let that happen. She can’t let them kill her babies.

She has to keep this a secret in order to protect them just like they’d protected her.

So, once they’re safely in Rhodey’s room Toni takes a deep breath and goes to her workshop to grab a crowbar.

She has an apartment to trash and a crime scene to fake.

Thankfully she has the motivation and the intellect to do a pretty damn good job.

Then she can finally call the police.

~~~

Toni’s in the hospital exam room arguing with a nurse about not needing any kind of medical attention that’s not a butterfly bandage and an ice pack when the story breaks.

It’s a complete and total nightmare.

The media fluctuates between bringing up her sordid past/present and calling her attacker ‘a nice man from a good home, quiet, hardworking, and well-liked by his neighbors’.

Fox makes sure to remind everyone that her nicknames include things like *Party Princess*, *The Scarlet Stark Heiress*, and *The Red Queen* for a reason. Maybe, just maybe, they propose, there’s more to the story than what’s being told.

Toni snorts mirthlessly because they’re right and wrong all at the same time.

It’s honestly only when he starts rambling to the police about killer robots and cereal boxes that anything’s done. Convinced of his mental illness action is finally taken.

Toni would be bitter if her expectations had ever been high enough for her to feel disappointed in the first place.

~~~

She goes back home, lets the boys out and lets them help her clean up.

Two days later finds her wrapped up in a ball on the couch, recorder in hand and unable to sleep.

She keeps hearing movement from the front door, keeps imagining footsteps coming down the hall, keeps seeing shadows that shift in the corners of her eyes.

Instead she redesigns the house she’s been tinkering with. She adds in steel shutters on the large glass windows, thick steel reinforced doors, extra electrical output to handle the security system she intends to build into the walls. She adds an underground lab with the ability to lock itself completely down, to turn into what’s essentially a large panic room. It’ll have big wide open spaces for the bots and the promise of safety and solitude for herself.
The only issue is where to build it. Toni looks out the window, sees the dreary sky and thick heavy clouds, and thinks that sunshine might be a good change. She can work from basically anywhere and maybe she’d like to see the sea outside her window instead of skyscrapers and condos.

She starts searching for property in California, SI has offices out there after all so it be easy enough to deal with.

She wishes she could call Rhodey or Aunt Peggy but they’re both out of reach at the moment so she resigns herself to being alone.

She’s used to it for the most part. And she has her babies with her.

She still doesn’t sleep.

~~~


Clawed hands grab her ankles and tug her downwards.

Her wings beat frantically and strain towards the sky.

~~~

Rhodey shows up early the next morning. He’s red eyed, slump shouldered, and still in his uniform which is wrinkled and stained almost beyond belief.

He reaches out and wraps her in his arms as soon as he sees her, tucks her close to his chest and curls himself around her like a shield.

“Thank God.” He whispers into her hair and his shoulders shake when he inhales. “Thank God you’re okay Tones.”

“Rhodey.” Toni’s voice breaks and she slumps into his warmth, suddenly exhausted and trembling beneath the weight of everything that’s happened. She feels young. Small. “Rhodey I was so scared.”

“I know sugar.” He coos at her, rocking her back and forth where they’re standing. “I was too. I got back to base and then they told me you’d been attack and said since it was you I could come … Jesus Tones I was so scared.”

“I’m okay.” Toni isn’t actually sure who she’s talking to, him or herself. “I’m okay.”

He pulls back far enough to inspect the ugly bruises on her face and the dark circles under her eyes from exhaustion. His face darkens even further in rage.

“That motherfucker better be happy he’s already locked up or I’d kill him. As it stands I’m going to put you in a goddamn bubble.” Rhodey tucks her face back into his neck and tightens his grip on her. “You’re not allowed to get hurt like that Tones. Not ever again. We’re getting you a body guard or something.”

“Actually,” Toni interrupts, “I think I’m going to build a house. In California. Something special, lots of security, a lab that doubles as a panic room. Maybe a moat with crocodiles.”
“Sharks with fucking laser beams Tones.” Rhodey corrects her solemnly. “You’d better have big ass great whites with fucking laser beams. I’m talking trap doors, spike pits, and hidden levers. I want you to go full on mad scientist, supervillain if you have to Tones because I want you safe.”

“Don’t tempt me sweet puff,” Toni chides wetly into the warmth of his throat, “we both know I’d make an awesome supervillain and BFF code says you’d have to join the dark side with me.”

“You can buy me a lab coat and a pair of goggles when you get the chance.” Rhodey reassures her. “I’ll be the Igor to your Frankenstein in a heartbeat baby girl.”

They both laugh, standing there in the hallway where it had all happened, they laugh.

For the first time in weeks Toni feels safe.

~~~

They’re on the couch together, Rhodey sprawled out on his back and Toni on top of him, tucked safely against his chest, when she comes to a decision. DUM-E and U are bracketing the couch, intent on staying close to her like they have been since everything happened.

“There’s something you need to know snickerdoodle but you gotta promise not to say anything to anyone.” Toni props herself up on her elbows and meets Rhodey’s eyes head on.

“What is it?” He looks cautious again, almost worried.

“It’s about the … the attack.” Saying the words are harder than Toni expected them to be.

Rhodey sits up, shuffles them around until she’s tucked directly against his hip, and props his feet up on the coffee table because deep down he’s a fucking heathen.

“You can tell me anything Toni.” He gently cups her bruised cheek in his hand. “Anything.”

“I,” Toni swallows, leans into the touch, closes her eyes and forces herself to push forward, “He ah, he hit me when I opened the door. DUM-E and U broke something and I turned to see without thinking about it and he just … bam. I was on the ground in the next second. I started crawling, tried to get away from him cause I knew if he pinned me … I knew.”

She feels the way Rhodey takes a deep breath and when she looks up his eyes are bright and his jaw is tight with rage.

“Anyways, I realized who he was right after he grabbed me by the hair because he was saying all of this stuff. I screamed for the boys to help me.” She takes in another shuddering breath, lets it out slowly, and pushes forward. “They came Rhodey. DUM-E and U. They started throwing stuff until he let me go and I hit him and ran for the phone but then DUM-E, he grabbed him by the neck and was slamming him against the wall. U broke his arm and was going to go for his leg. They, they were going to kill him Rhodey, to protect me they were going to kill him if I didn’t stop them in time.”

“Good.” Rhodey sounds vicious but solidly unrepentant. “They did the right thing and I’m glad that you’ve got them here to protect you Tones. That wasn’t in the report though, I think the brass would have mentioned it if it was.”

“I, uh, I lied.” Toni admits. “I put them in your room, got a crowbar from the lab, and messed things up a bit.”
“You … falsified a crime scene.” For the first time Rhodey seems a little pinch faced and displeased.

“I had to. People already know about DUM-E from MIT but they thought he was just a lot simpler than he’s ended up being. And U’s even smarter.” She’s suddenly desperate for him to understand. “If anyone knew the truth, knew DUM-E and U weren’t bound by the Three Laws, that they could hurt people, they’d take them or kill them if not do both. They only attacked him because I said he was a threat, because he hit me again in front of them. People wouldn’t care though, they’d be frightened. I had to keep them safe Rhodey.”

“Shit.” Rhodey exhales raggedly and pulls her closer to his side. “Shit you’re right sweetheart. You did the right thing. It doesn’t matter how you stopped that fucker. All that matters is you’re safe. Keeping the kids safe is important too.”

“You, you’re not gonna be scared of them now are you?” Toni can’t help but ask because it would break her heart as well as theirs. “You know they wouldn’t hurt your right? Just like they’d never hurt me.”

“Fuck no Tones.” Rhodey turns abruptly to look at DUM-E and U who’ve moved to huddle together like skittish pups. “I still love both the little idiots just the same. They did good as far as I’m concerned. They did damn good.”

Toni sighs in relief and slumps down back against his side.

His hand reaches up to remove her hair pins carefully and it’s the feel of his fingers, familiar and safe, running through her curls that finally lulls her into sleep.

“You boys make sure you keep her safe for me okay?” Rhodey’s voice is a distant rumble that she barely understands. “You always keep her safe.”

~~~


Clawed hands grab her ankles and tug her downwards.

Her wings beat frantically and strain towards the sky.

~~~

She wakes up in her own room, sweat soaked and trembling with a scream lingering on her tongue, from a nightmare. DUM-E and U twirl anxiously at the end of the bed.

Her door bursts open a second later and Rhodey’s there, bare chested in his sleep pants, service pistol in hand as he scans the room for threats.

She stares up at him, wide eyed and shaking.

He sighs, lowers the gun and flicks the safety back on, before he shuffles to her bedside, puts the gun in the drawer beside the bed and collapses down onto the mattress beside her. He tugs her close and she can’t help but huddle into his warmth.

“Go to sleep sweetheart.” He rumbles. “I got you.”

She sleeps.

~~~

The terror of the fall.

Rhodey catches her by the hands and throws her back into the air before she ever touches the water.

Chapter End Notes

Sooooo? Thoughts? Comments? Concerns? Things you'd like to see in the future? Drop me a line and let me know!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I honestly don't deserve all of the love I'm getting but I adore every second of it. You guys are amazing and your reviews give me life and inspiration.

So I'm a bit nervous about this chapter. It's pretty long as we've finally hit on Iron Man territory. It won't be a 100% retelling of the movie because my Toni is different but hopefully it'll be good. So yeah be sure to let me know how I did!

(sincerely though it's like really long so please tell me what you think)

Fanmix: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rhodey has to leave a short two days later. They spend most of it asleep, curled around each other in her bed or on the couch, Rhodey in his sleep pants and Toni in a pair of his boxers and one of his giant sweatshirts.

When the time comes for him to go it’s harder than it’s ever been before, harder even than the first time.

She sees the same reluctance she feels echoed in his face, feels it in the way he holds her even tighter than he normally does. Neither of them want to let each other go.

Because Rhodey’s been in the military for years now and they’ve gotten used to the idea that something could happen to him. Neither of them likes to think about it, Toni has to fold herself down into a ball and listen to her recorder whenever she does just to be able to breathe again, but they’ve grown used to the idea that it’s a possibility.

This is the first time that the idea that it might be Toni who leaves first has ever become a real, heart shattering, possibility.

“Sharks baby girl.” Rhodey bends down so that their foreheads are pressed together because even with her tallest heels Toni’s still so much shorter than he is. So small in comparison to the broad strength of his shoulders. “Sharks with fucking laser beams Tones. Maybe a lion or a tiger or something cuddly you can curl up with to keep your little ass warm.”

“How about all three and then I throw in a bear for kicks you overprotective dick?” Toni grumbles but she’s smiling. Nothing makes her feel as warm these days as Rhodey’s love. “We’re some mutated apple trees away from being in OZ by this point anyways.”

“How about all three and then I throw in a bear for kicks you overprotective dick?” Rhodey teases and she feels the way his shoulders shake with laughter at her offended huff. “Hey it’s not my fault you have the complexion of a glass of milk because you run off of coffee, darkness, actual fatigue and bad decisions.”

“I am flawless I’ll have you know.” Toni wiggles her hand around to poke him sharply in the ribs because as much as he doesn’t like to admit it he’s ticklish as fuck.
“Tones I’ve literally seen you hiss at the sun before.” He’s trying to sound stern but she can hear the amusement in his voice.

“Yeah well you could’ve been a good BFF and turned it off like I asked you to.” Toni grumbles.

“It was the sun Toni, not a lightbulb.”

“Eh, excuses, excuses.”

“It was literally the sun.”

“The sun is a nuclear disaster waiting to happen with a finite battery and I could have totally built it better. And also less annoying which is more important if we’re being honest.” She slides her hand around to clutch at his back beneath his jacket. “And if I’m Dorothy then I’ll make sure to put a nice big basket in your room as a bed because you’re obviously the Toto of this relationship.”

“You’re ridiculous and I resent that comparison.” Rhodey pulls back long enough to frown down at her. “I’m not the goddamn dog, I’m obviously Tin Man since I’m metal all the way to my core. Pure heartless badassery here.”

“Heartless my ass. You’re a fucking marshmallow. I’m Tin Man out of the two of us.” Toni narrows her eyes at him and dares him to fight her about it. “Mechanicals kind of my thing you know.”

Rhodey huffs, pauses and thinks for a moment. “Then I’m calling dibs on Glinda since I’m the one who actually has enough sense to stand back and let you create havoc for the natives.”

Toni stops, considers that idea for a moment, and then reluctantly nods her agreement. He totally has a point. “Well you would look amazing in the dress I’ll give you that.”

They share a moment of long, breathless laughter, before the tension seeps back in between them. They go quiet and just hold each other again.

“Stay safe Toni.” Rhodey looks anguished, looks truly torn for the first between his duty and his desire to stay and protect her. “I-I need to know you’re safe here. I need to know you’re gonna be here waiting for me when I get back. You and the kids.”

“I don’t like to lie to you Rhodey.” Toni admits because she lies to basically everyone, including herself occasionally, and Rhodey and Aunt Peggy are two of the only exceptions. “I can’t promise to stay safe anymore than you can. But I can promise to try.”

“I’ll take what I can get.” Rhodey presses another kiss to her forehead, straightens up, and takes a step back. “I’ll call you as soon as I can baby girl.”

He gives her a small salute and turns to walk away.

He takes a handful of steps and then Toni’s moving almost before she realizes she’s made the decision to. She darts forward quickly, reaches out and grabs his hand. He jerks to a stop and swings around to look at her. Surprise and curiosity are heavy on his face because in all the years they’ve been doing this she’s never stopped him before.

“I love you.” Toni blurts out and it hurts just a bit when his eyes go wide with shock because she never really says the words. She shows him in as many ways as she can think to, but saying it is more his thing than hers. She’s suddenly desperate to say them to him now though, to make sure he knows. She’d made a mistake with Jarvis and it’s one she never wants to make with Rhodey. Not
ever. “I love you so much Rhodey. You’re, you’re my best friend, my only friend that I didn’t build myself, and you come when I need you and you, you … I just love you okay?”

“Oh Toni.” Rhodey’s there in the next second, strong arms wrapped around her again as he cradles her close and rocks them both just slightly back and forth. “Oh baby girl I love you too.”

To her horror Toni feels tears well up in her eyes and she has to blink rapidly to force them down.

“Hey.” Rhodey pulls back and she can see the way his eyes are slightly damp as well as. He reaches up and brushes his thumb lightly across the high arch of her cheek. They both know there’s a fading bruise there, hidden beneath a heavy layer of foundation that she doesn’t normally wear every day. “It’s you and me little girl. Through thick and thin, no matter what okay?”

“You mean that?” There’s so much naked vulnerability in her voice that Toni hates herself for it. Rhodey’s face goes soft and sad at the sound of it.

“Bottom of my heart.” There’s a small, fond smile curling up the corners of his mouth. “I’m with you Tones. It’s you and me, till the day we die. Got it?”

“Yeah Rhodey.” Toni smiles. She’s so, so grateful for him. “Till the day we die.”

~~~

Rhodey leaves.

The headline reads: Assault On The Red Queen: Real or Publicity Stunt?

Fox hires a ‘trauma expert’ to discuss the psychological impact of her supposed attack and her ‘relationship’ with Rhodey. They put together a panel of interchangeable idiots with rigid right wing ideals who like to pretend that one of the biggest problems they have with her and Rhodey’s ‘relationship’ isn’t the fact that he’s black.

They discuss her assault in invasive detail, play the 911 recording that has her voice, shaky but relatively calm, reporting the attack over and over again. They pull apart her statement to the police, try to poke holes in any and everything. They call it all into question.

Because she’s too calm they say, because they have her on tape laughing in the airport with Rhodey a week later, because she lives in a relatively secure building and must have invited the guy up.

Because, because, because.

Anything to make her less of a victim and more the one to blame.

Toni feels violated all over again.

The TV makes a satisfying crash when she reaches out, grabs it by the side, and rips it off the wall. She’ll have to buy another sometime because DUM-E and U will miss their cartoons and TLC if she doesn’t.

Hell maybe she’ll just build one. Hers would be better anyways.

~~~

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”
Listen. Rewind. Play

~~~


The fear of hands dragging her down into the water.

The comforting strength of knowing somewhere her brother flies a different sky.

The anticipation of meeting once more.

~~~

It takes her another week to find the perfect property.

She flies out to Malibu to inspect the sight and falls in love immediately with the rush of ocean air on her face, with the steep fall of the cliff, with the relative isolation of the location.

She wants it.

An hour later it’s hers.

Toni’s on the phone with one of her construction teams before she’s back in the car.

~~~

She’s at home, burly eyed and exhausted from four days in the workshop and the inability to remember the last time she ate when the doorbell rings and then there’s a crisp knock.

Toni freezes, feels panic well up inside her for a split second, and then hates herself for that reaction. She squares her shoulders and marches to the door to check out the peephole.

The sight of a man standing there in the uniform of one of the delivery services SI uses sends ice shooting through her core. Toni stumbles back a few steps before she can stop herself.

Her heart’s pounding in her chest, her palms are sweaty and she can’t seem to breathe.

She crumples to the floor, scrambles back until she’s curled up in a ball beneath one of the tall hall tables, and shakes.

There’s another knock and Toni flinches, eyes glued to the doorknob, waiting for it to turn, waiting for the door to open even though she can see the extra deadbolts she installed from here and she knows they’re all locked.

She knows the door’s not going to open, she knows she’s safe, but there’s no reasoning with her panic.

Eventually the knocking stops, there’s rustling outside, and then a thick envelope is shoved beneath the door.

Toni stays where she is, curled in a ball beneath the table, for a long time.

She hates herself for every second of it.

When she finally finds the strength to move she finds out that the envelope holds the final pieces of
paperwork necessary to start construction on her new house.

Then she hates herself even more

~~~

She’s in the R&D department at SI when one of the secretaries tries to hand her a stack of files.

Toni freezes, clutches the coffee mug in her hand so hard she’s almost afraid it’ll shatter, and tries to stay calm.

For some reason she can’t bring herself to reach out and take it from the woman, can’t bear to step forward into her space, to get close enough to be grabbed.

She manages to gesture towards the table across from her before the pause gets too awkward. The secretary huffs, obviously irritated at Toni’s supposed rudeness, drops the files and walks out.

Toni scoops them up, wraps up her meeting quickly, and leaves.

She manages to make it to her car before she starts to shake but it’s a long time before she’s steady enough to drive.

Maybe Rhodey’s right, maybe a bodyguard would be a good idea as loathe as she is to admit it.

Or at least a driver.

~~~

“Malibu’s a big change Toni.” Obie slides up to her side, all charming smiles and rich cologne.

“Change is good Obie. I’m a futurist after all, I believe change is necessary.” Toni manages to keep her smile pleasant enough. She doesn’t hate Obie but she doesn’t trust him either. She still remembers being four and how he’d talked of her being of use. She still remembers the sting of his knuckles against her cheek.

Most of all though she still remembers his close friendship with Howard and that’s the most damning detail of all.

No she doesn’t trust him at all.

“As long as you don’t let that California lifestyle interfere with that beautiful brain of yours.” Obie’s smile is just a shade too wide. “An assistant would probably be a good idea though, someone who can help keep you on task. I can have HR pull up a few names from our west coast branch.”

Toni just hums.

A PA would probably be a good idea. She gets lost in her work sometimes, forgets meetings and corporate emails, forgets to leave the workshop at all on a regular basis, forgets to have groceries delivered or to eat when she does, just trivial things of that nature. Someone to handle that kind of thing would take a lot of boring bullshit off of her hands.

But she’ll be damned if she hires anyone who has Obie’s stamp of approval.

~~~

The construction crew all sign NDAs and more legal paperwork than Toni can shake a stick at to
make sure that the actual layout and design of her new mansion stays completely secret. There are no electronical files and the only copy of the blueprints is kept under lock and key at all times. That same copy will be given directly to Toni once the project is complete.

She makes a note to give Priscilla an obscene bonus for arranging things so quickly for her.

~~~

A month before the mansion is set to be ready for her to move in the newly minted Edwin Jarvis Foundation throws its first annual charity gala.

All proceeds will go to helping victims of domestic violence.

The turnout is staggering. Everyone’s vying for either her attention, for a chance to ask her invasive and rude questions, or just to feel less guilty about their own extravagant lifestyles by donating.

Toni doesn’t really care about their reasons but the amount of money and attention the gala draws leaves her satisfied.

Jarvis would have approved and really that’s all that matters because in their own ways they’d both been trapped in that house with Howard, unable to get free. Her attack had only brought that familiar sense of fear and helplessness that she’d cut her teeth on as a child back to the forefront.

So maybe no one had ever rescued them but the money and attention this Foundation raises might be the difference between abuse and freedom for someone else.

Maybe somewhere there’s another little girl desperate to escape and this Foundation will be what sets her free.

Toni’s more than okay with that idea.

~~~

DUM-E and U are excited about the upcoming move but also confused. They’ve never been outside the penthouse before. Despite their addiction to the TV Toni isn’t sure they’ve really realized that the world is bigger than the apartment.

Still watching them whirl around as she packs up their toys and all of her tools is amusing as all hell.

Toni buys a large panel van with support hooks and a lift installed in the back. She could have DUM-E and U shipped to Malibu but she can’t bear to package them up and entrust them to a delivery service like they’re simple machines. They’re so much more than that and they deserve to be treated as such.

Conversely she could load them onto her jet and fly them there in style.

But she decides against that too. She wants to drive for some reason, wants to feel the freedom of the road for a while.

Besides, a road trip sounds like just the thing she needs.

It’ll be fun.

And interesting.

~~~
The day before they’re set to start the drive across country Toni makes her way to the mansion.

She wanders down the halls, stops into her old bedroom for a moment and avoids Howard and Maria’s old rooms completely. She’s not been back in what feels like forever but she still remembers her way through every inch of the place.

The door to Jarvis’ room opens smoothly and Toni steps inside carefully.

Nothing has changed since the last time she was inside except for there being a new layer of dust everywhere.

Everything is right where he left it the last time he was there right down to the glass on the bedside table. No one’s touched a thing. The room has remained a snapshot, forever frozen in time just like she’d wanted it to.

And yet …

It doesn’t feel the same. Something feels different, feels off. The room feels smaller, colder, less somehow.

Toni steps forward, traces her eyes frantically around the room trying to figure out what’s wrong. It hits her then exactly what the problem is.

It’s just a room.

It doesn’t feel like Jarvis anymore. It doesn’t feel like warmth and safety. Like somewhere to hide when the world’s falling down around her shoulders.

*It’s just a room.*

Jarvis isn’t here anymore.

Toni’s shoulders hunch forward and she stifles a sob in the palm of her hand before she forces the tears down and makes herself take long, slow breaths. Forces herself to stay calm because it might just be a room but it was Jarvis’ room and that’s what matters. She’s leaving for a new life on the other side of the country and there are things she wants from here now that he’s no longer lingering in the walls.

Mechanically she moves towards the closet, opens it up and grabs the black leather briefcase Jarvis had kept but barely used off of the top shelf. It’s empty when she pops it open but that suits her purposes rather well.

She goes around the room carefully. Jarvis might be gone but she’s still loathe to move or change more than she has to.

She gathers up his jewelry box, the one with his extra cufflinks and things of that nature in it and puts it in the case. There’s a photo album she’s not been able to bring herself to look at on one of the shelves so she grabs that as well. His bottle of cologne, his favorite book, the extra dressing robe from his closet. Small, precious bits of him she can take with her.

She snaps the case closed, takes one more look at the room, and walks out. She pauses long enough to lock the door again but beyond that she strides right back outside.

She doesn’t look back.
There is nothing left to see.

~~~

“I think you’d like Malibu.” She tells him softly as her fingers trace over the letters on his headstone.

E. D. W. I. N.

“The salt off the ocean and the sand would probably drive you crazy but I think you’d like it anyways. Especially the location I picked. The house is on this beautiful cliff face so it’s not as bad as some of the other places.” She smiles at the thought of Jarvis, all vests and ties, despairing at her as he battled the ever encroaching sand and tried to corral the bots. “I’m going to miss you, miss coming here, but I promise I’ll visit. I just wish you were here to see the house.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“It would just be nice to have you there, watching over me like you did at the mansion.” Her laugh is bittersweet. “Keeping me safe, telling me to eat and sleep and not blow myself up.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“I’ve missed your voice guiding me along. Helping me to find my way like you did when I was little.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

Toni’s mind begins to whirl as her fingers trace the letters over and over again.

“I’ve just missed that, missed you. I’m such a mess without you Jarvis. Rhodey helps a lot when he’s around but it’s not the same. You were my safe place, my harbor. You helped me bring order to my mind, taught me how to breathe, how to sort out my system and just be.

J. A. R. V. I. S.

She sighs, leans forward to press a kiss against the stone, stands and brushes off the hem of her dress.

“I love you. I miss you.” She pushes her curls behind her shoulder. “Everything good about me came from you.”

~~~


The loneliness of the vast sky.

The ache for a home long since lost.

~~~

Getting DUM-E and U into the van itself is an exercise in patience, dexterity, and the cunning use of two sheets and a nerf gun.

They’re easily distracted and Toni’s pretty sure moving them to the service entrance of the building is what herding cats feels like.

The look the doorman gives her when she loads them one at a time onto the lift so they can get into
the van has Toni snickering loudly.

She straps them down so they won’t go rolling around the back of the van, gets behind the wheel, and cranks it up.

“Alright boys,” Toni calls over her shoulder cheerfully, ball cap tugged down low on her head and sunglasses in place, “the Stark Express to Malibu is ready to go.”

And they’re off.

~~~

The trip is the most fun Toni’s had on the road since that time her and Rhodey hit Akihabara together. Considering that had ended with the two of them almost getting thrown into a Japanese jail and Rhodey paling every time he even thinks about wasabi she considers this trip to be a success.

She drives all day that first day until she’s out of the city and well into the middle of nowhere. She blares music and sings along at the top of her lungs as DUM-E and U plaster their cameras to the windows at the back of the van.

They go on like that until she’s tired enough to admit that driving’s probably not a good idea. Then she drives for a while longer anyways before she pulls over, locks the van up tight, and beds down with her recorder in the back of the van between DUM-E and U’s bases.

Then she gets up after a few hours and gets back on the road.

The whole trips like that really. She only stops and rents a room at some hotel so she can shower after a day or two but she sleeps in the van whenever she finally decides to rest, unwilling to leave the boys alone.

Still she enjoys herself all things said.

She stops at run down little diners that catch her eye and eats damn good food. She buys tacky hats for DUM-E and U, one of those little hula girls for the van’s dash, and a truly hideous sweatshirt she can’t wait to give to Rhodey. He’ll wear it too, because she gave it to him, but he certainly won’t like it. The thing’s so ugly she can barely stand to look at it so she knows the look on his face is going to be priceless.

So she’s tired but happy when she finally makes it to their new home.

~~~

The Malibu mansion is perfect. The bots love the lab and she knows it’ll be their permanent home now for the most part. It’s wide open and spacious, all hard floors and bright lights. She’s got a large television in the corner for them to watch their shows and a space for their toys that won’t interfere with her work.

It’s perfect.

Well it’s exactly what she wanted it to be in every way except for one.

She needs a security system that goes beyond the one already installed. She wants something that goes beyond what’s currently available on the market. She wants a smart system, something she can incorporate into every part of the house so that she’s always safe.
She wants to be safe here, *needs* to be safe here. So she needs a smart security system. Just a really versatile, intelligent system of some sort.

~~~

A week later Toni catches herself tracing letters with her fingertip against the top of her worktable while DUM-E and U play catch in the background.

J. A. R. V. I. S.

Yes.

That’s what she wants.

~~~

Obsession has always been easy for Toni despite the fact that Rhodey often teases her about having the attention span of a magpie, always distracted by the next shiny thing to cross her path. Both are true. She’s easily distracted. Her mind whirls so much faster than other people’s so she runs through the cycle of interest far quicker than they do. It makes her abrasive and fickle to most people but she doesn’t care. There’s also the fact that most things genuinely bore her if she’s around them for long periods of time.

But when she finds something *interesting*, something truly intriguing, then Toni has been known to latch on and refuse to let go.

It’s part of how she built DUM-E, how she’s built most of the things she’s made throughout her life actually. A idea will surface from the sea of her mind and refuse to be ignored until she has no choice but to pursue that line of thinking to its conclusion.

This new issue, this intelligent system she wants, consumes her quickly and Toni doesn’t even bother to try fighting it.

J. A. R. V. I. S.

Her mind is a whirl of colors, of bright lights and equations that are almost too loud for her to stand. Toni breathes deep, lets them all rise up to the surface of her mind, and then lets herself be pulled down beneath the surface of her own genius.

It’s time to *create*.

~~~

*Wax. Feathers. Heat.*

*The euphoria of the open sky.*

~~~

She works on it for *months*, works until her vision blurs and her hands are shaking from too much coffee and too little food. Works until the numbers and letters all seem to fold in on themselves to
create new ones.

Then she passes out on the couch she’d dragged into the workshop and goes to sleep to the sound of her boys watching cartoons or indulging in DUM-E’s new obsession with anything even vaguely lizard related.

They’ve watched the old Godzilla movies so many times now that she’s caught herself reciting the lines along with the film more than once.

She’s like eighty percent sure he’s trying to tell her he wants a pet but she’s being willfully ignorant. She loves DUM-E but she’s not going to try to find him a giant mutant lizard. Obviously she probably could, but it’d get in the way and would probably crawl all over her stuff. Although it would be interesting to try to build one, maybe something smaller, like ankle height …

The only time she stops is when Rhodey makes it to the mansion for the first time. He comes home, takes one look at the dark circles under eyes, the pyramid DUM-E and U have made out of her empty coffee cups beneath the poster of Steve she hung for them that’s a duplicate of the one that now hangs in her room, and drags her upstairs to shower. He feeds her juice and eggs and bundles her up in the Captain America comforter he bought her and takes her to bed.

She sleeps for sixteen hours and wakes up to him poking her in the side with a pool cue and asking her if she’s alive or if he needs to get rid of her corpse.

He’s such an asshole sometimes but she adores him anyways.

They take in Malibu together and they spend long, lazy days stretched out by the pool. Him in a pair of board shorts and her topless in only a pair of barely there bikini bottoms she’s never gotten a chance to wear before.

Rhodey scowls at her for all of two seconds when she strips off her top and lays down on the lounges.

“Relax.” She tells him when she sees the way he’s scanning the horizon suspiciously. “The only way anyone is getting a photo is if they’ve got a fucking helicopter.”

“I catch even one of those fucking leeches skulking around here to take pictures of you topless and you’re gonna be bailing me out of jail.” He grumbles as he lays back in his loungers to sip his beer languidly, eyes closed and face turned upwards towards the sun as he floats around the pool.

Nudity isn’t something they really care about after all. With everything there is between them, with all of the love and devotion they have for one another, sex has never been an issue and Toni knows it never will be.

Platonic soulmates, spirit siblings, soul twins, whatever words Toni tries to find to describe the two of them together they both know that lovers will never be one.

There’s no heat between them, no want.

They hug and exchange affectionate kisses on cheeks and foreheads constantly. They huddle together in her bed or drape over each other on the couch, they touch and stroke and generally orbit each other’s space naturally. But it’s all platonic, non-sexual in its entirety.

Rhodey’s a beautiful man and she’s completely aware of that fact but Toni’s never been able to look at him with anything even remotely resembling sexual interest.
Rhodey, she knows, feels the same way. He’s told her so.

“You’re gorgeous Toni, in all the ways that matter. Like drop dead, heart stopping beautiful inside and out,” Rhodey had told her once, “and I’d wife you in a fucking second baby girl if the thought of having sex with you didn’t make me want to throw myself into oncoming traffic.”

“Aw bumblebee you say the sweetest things.” Toni had only laughed, loud and happy and completely understanding because just the thought of sex with Rhodey was enough to make her feel like she was breaking out into hives.

So yeah, it’s not an issue. Not that anyone would believe them if they said anything. The media’s been reporting their on and off again love affair since she was fifteen and they’re not likely to stop soon.

Toni doesn’t care though. Doesn’t care if no one ever understands them and what they’ve found in each other.

Fuck them all.

They’re just jealous that they don’t have a Rhodey of their own.

~~~

They’re both rested and Toni’s skin has a golden glow when he finally has to leave again.

It’s still hard to watch him go.

This time though, when they hug one last time, she whispers ‘I love you’ in his ear.

His smile is blinding.

~~~

Toni hits stumbling blocks with her new project, hits walls she can’t seem to work around sometimes.

When that happens, when she’s too frustrated to keep going but not tired enough to curl up with her recorder and sleep, she goes for a drive.

She takes one of her convertibles and takes off down one of the long stretches of highway that surrounds her home.

Some nights she speeds along, top down and music blaring, and it’s as close to flying as she can get without jumping out of a plane.

Some nights she speeds down the tarmac to utter silence, just her and the engine she rebuilt herself purring away.

Some nights well …

“Jarvis?”

“Yes young miss?”

Each option is its own brand of soothing.
Toni’s already frustrated when she gets the call that her car’s going to be an hour late. It’s irritating news that makes her angry on top of being tired because even flying on a private jet can be its own brand of annoying when she’d rather be home working on her project instead of back in New York.

Plus it’s absolutely *pissing* down rain at the moment and so even if she was within walking distance of the restaurant she’s supposed to be meeting Obie and the client at she’s not even sure she *owns* an umbrella at this point. Umbrellas are for people who voluntarily leave their houses in bad weather and for the most part Toni doesn’t do much of that.

Finally, irritated and tired of waiting, she steps past the doorman and waves down the first cab she sees.

“I’ll give you a five hundred dollars if you can get me to Kobo’s in fifteen minutes or less.” Toni announces as soon as she slides into the back of the car.

There’s a long pause of silence and then, “Gotcha boss,” and suddenly she’s in motion.

The cabbie drives like a *maniac*. He weaves in and out of traffic, takes hairpin turns, and squeezes into gaps that she could have sworn weren’t big enough for him to fit into. It’s *glorious*.

He gets her to Kobo in ten minutes.

She gives him six hundred dollars and flicks a look at the name on his dash before she waves and heads inside.

~~~

Toni turns twenty-three and barely even notices.

Four days later, hands shaking with exhaustion and nerves, she keys in the startup sequence for the project that’s consumed her life for months now.

The screen flickers, goes black, and there’s a long pause of silence.

“Please.” Toni begs the silent air of the lab, something like desperation swirling in her chest. “*Please work.*”

Rhodey’s gone again and she’s just so fucking *lonely*, so hungry for things she can’t have, for companionship she can’t get from DUM-E and U. She loves them and they keep her sane by making sure she’s not *completely* alone but if this works … if this works it’ll change *everything*.

“Are you there?” Toni whispers the question, can’t bring herself to be loud in this moment, can barely bring herself to *breathe*. “Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

Another long, anxiety ridden pause.

And then …

“Yes Miss.” A voice answers her, slightly mechanical but obviously, heartbreakingly *British*. “I am here.”

“Oh thank fuck.” Toni sobs into her hand before she throws her head back and crows with laughter.

She’s on her feet in the next second, arms wrapped around herself as she twirls in the middle of the
workshop floor, DUM-E and U spinning excitedly around her. There are tears pour down her face but she can’t stop laughing.

“JARVIS you beautiful, magnificent boy,” Toni grins up at the corner where she knows one of the cameras she’d installed is watching her, “it’s so good to finally meet you.”

“Indeed Miss,” JARVIS agrees, “it is good to meet you as well.” His voice has a slightly unnatural tone to it but Toni will help him fix that soon. Once he’s been awake for a while and gotten a chance to get used to speaking it should fade into a more natural rhythm.

None of that matters though, none of that makes a damn bit of difference. All that matters to Toni is that JARVIS is real.

There’s a gentle prod at her side and Toni turns and sees DUM-E and U turning their cameras from her to the ceiling and back again.

“DUM-E, U, I want you to meet your new brother JARVIS.” Toni grins at them. “JARVIS meet the bots.”

There’s a great deal of excited chirping and whirling as DUM-E and U begin to roll around the workshop. They offer toys towards the ceiling where JARVIS’ voice seems to originate from thanks to the speakers she’d installed.

“Welcome to the family J.” Toni murmurs as she settles back down at her keyboard. As much as she wants to cry and scream and generally explode with emotion she pushes it down for the moment. JARVIS is awake now but the work’s not done. There’s still diagnostics to be run, connections to be made, safeguards to be put into place.

His safety, his well-being, comes before the gut wrenching emotion of hearing that voice, so close to the one on her recorder but still different enough to matter.

There’ll be time for Toni to feel later.

Right now she has to protect her newest child.

~~~

“How you feeling buddy?” Toni swipes at her face with a dirty hand. Her mouth is still split into a wide, ecstatic grin even hours later. They’ve been running tests for what feels like roughly forever but she’s still so fucking happy. She’s walked every inch of the house and the surrounding grounds to test his range and coverage and every step had felt like she was floating an inch above the ground. She’s tired and giddy and nothing hurts. “Can you connect to all the systems alright? Anything you need me to fix?”

“There is a shortage of cameras on the west side of the building.” JARVIS pauses for a moment. “I cannot see all of the corners inside your quarters Miss and am thus unable to properly monitor your condition.”

“I’ll order more and get em in place ASAP.” Toni reassures him. “Anything you need or want don’t hesitate to ask okay?”

“Indeed Miss.”

“Good boy.” Toni strokes the tips of her fingers across her keyboard lovingly. “Now don’t think I didn’t notice how you skipped over that question JARVIS. How you feeling?”
“I …” JARVIS hesitates and that right there is all the proof Toni needs. He might have some evolving to do, might not be fully developed yet, might still need to grow, but JARVIS is real. Because regular programs, regular call and answer programs on computers with no sense of self, they don’t hesitate like that. They don’t need time to contemplate instead of calculate. And that’s what JARVIS is doing whether he realizes it or not. He’s thinking. Finally though he answers. “I am, Miss.” There’s another pause and then he sounds almost confused, almost breathless. “I am.”

Toni understands exactly what he means.

“Oh J,” she croons, “this is the start of a beautiful relationship.”

~~~

The next time she goes to sleep she kisses Steve and lays down without her recorder. It itches to break such a tradition while home but she knows it’s necessary. She owes JARVIS a conversation before she lets him hear what’s on the tape.

She needs to let him know a few things first.

Like the fact that he might share a name and an accent with Jarvis but he’s different, unique and singular in all the ways that matter. She needs him to know that she doesn’t want him to be anything or anyone but himself.

She needs to tell him these things because she’s been selfish in his design by making him in Jarvis’ image. The accent, the name, the fact that Miss is so close to ‘young miss’ that the sound of it makes her want to laugh and cry all at the same time. Those were indulgences on her part because she misses Jarvis so much, because the accent was a comfort, because the title Ma’am made her nauseous and ‘young miss’ would have been cruel to them both.

Still she needs him to know that she won’t try to force him into a mold like that.

She won’t do to him what was done to her.

She’s not Howard, she’s not Maria.

She’ll love JARVIS for who he is, who he becomes, and not for who she’d wanted him to be.

That’s what parents are supposed to do after all.

~~~


The joy of flight and freedom.

A warm, almost familiar voice in her ear showing her the way.

~~~

“Miss?” JARVIS seems almost nervous when she finally stumbles out of the shower the next morning. “May I ask you a question?”

“Shoot J.” She’s eager to see what’s on his mind. “You can ask me anything.”

“I am,” he pauses again and Toni goes still as well, “I am different than DUM-E and U am I not? They are simpler, more … compact. Was there a mistake in my construction? Is the flaw
repairable?”

“Oh JARVIS.” Toni’s knees go weak at the question and she just manages to make it to the bed before they give out on her. It seems as if she’s destined to keep having this conversation over and over again. “There’s nothing wrong with you J. Nothing at all.”

~~~

She sends Rhodey another, “It’s a boy” card but doesn’t include a picture or an explanation.

She gets a semi-panicked phone call from him a week later demanding to know what she’s cooked up now and whether or not he needs to prepare for the oncoming apocalypse.

Toni laughs and tells him he’ll have to wait and see.

Rhodey groans.

Toni laughs.

~~~

Toni helps JARVIS stretch his legs slowly over the next month, helps him settle into life. She connects him to the boys so that they can communicate through code and that opens up a channel of connection between her and DUM-E and U that she’s never had before.

It’s splendid.

She helps him navigate the internet, teaches him to speak with more familiar ease, helps him assimilate pop culture and references and information of all kinds. She answers his questions, tells him stories, and caters to his every need. She’s not the slightest bit surprised when he seems to develop a penchant for sarcasm rather quickly. She backs his server up as much as possible, writes him new firewalls and protections, does anything and everything to protect him, to make sure she can keep him safe.

She helps him find his way just as Jarvis once had for her.

And, just like she did as a child, JARVIS takes to it like a duck to water. He seems completely in his element and is ready to run her entire life in the mansion in under two weeks. Hell he’s almost eager to once he spends some processing speed on medical information and realizes that her sleeping and eating habits are … less than optimal.

“Hey Jarvis?” Toni finally says after he’s badgered her into going to bed. Her recorder’s at her side for the first time in too long but Toni knows it’s time.

“Yes Miss?”

Toni smiles and holds up the recorder. “You ready to hear the story of Icarus?”

“Of course Miss.”

Toni presses play.

“Jarvis?”

“No young miss?”
It takes Toni two weeks to realize that something’s changed with JARVIS.

At first she can’t quite put her finger on it but every time they talk something just nags at her.

It’s not until she’s chatting away and telling him stories of her and Rhodey while she’s in the middle of some routine maintenance on U’s support chaise that it hits her.

JARVIS sounds a great deal like *Jarvis* and it’s not just the accent. It’s the *way* he speaks, his diction, the tone of his voice, the smooth roll of his words. It’s an almost uncanny mimic, still different but almost identical at the same time.

Toni pauses and sets down her tools carefully so she doesn’t accidentally hurt U.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

“Is there a reason why you’ve changed your voice patterns to sound more like your namesake?” Toni almost dreads the answer because she’s scared that she’s made a mistake. She’s terrified that she’s made him think that changing him like that is what she wants somehow.

“Initializing a voice analysis of the recording was simple enough Miss,” comes his prompt reply, “altering my vocal output to the closest possible match was also easy to accomplish.”

“I know how you did it J,” Toni arches a brow because he’s gotten rather good at deflection in such a short time, “I want to know why.”

There’s a long pause.

“Does it … displease you?”

Toni jerks, scrambles to recover. “No! Fuck no, J. I’m not mad at you baby boy. I just wanted to know why. I wanted to make sure it wasn’t because of something I said or did. You know I want you to grow as freely as you can here right?”

“You take comfort in the recording you play at night correct?” JARVIS asks. “In the voice that tells the story, the first Jarvis?”

“Yeah I do.” Toni won’t lie to him about that, not after she’s already explained the recording and everything else to him. He knows her now in a way that only Rhodey does and he’s learning more each and every day. He deserves her honesty.

“And as one of my few rigid protocols calls for me to monitor and protect your health and well-being Miss it seemed the best choice of action.” JARVIS’ voice is perfectly bland. “If it comforts you then it is necessary for me to have access to it.”

“Yeah but my comfort shouldn’t come before your sense of self on that level,” Toni argues, “it doesn’t mean you should change yourself like that unless it’s something you want to do.

“We are, as you said Miss, *family*. Providing comfort and care is what family *does* according to my research and your stories about the bots and James Rhodes. If you wish for me to grow then allow me the choice of providing comfort in the way *I* choose.” JARVIS’ reply causes Toni to snap her mouth shut abruptly. “On that note I’ve also recorded the story of Icarus and am prepared to play it
back to you upon your request.”

All Toni can do is *smile* as joy bursts in her chest.

JARVIS is alive, is real, is making *choices* and those choices take her into consideration freely, happily. Far too few people have ever made that distinction for her and it makes something small and starved inside of her sigh in pleasure.

Toni’s family has grown just a little bit bigger and she couldn’t be more thrilled.

~~~

Toni takes a deep breath and puts her recorder in the blastproof safe in the workshop. It lays right beside the fireproof box with Rhodey’s letters and Jarvis’ briefcase.

Some of her most precious possessions.

~~~

“Hey J? How do you feel about stretching your legs a bit?” Toni holds up a hand. “And don’t give me any of the bullshit about not having a physical body because we both know you understand slang by now.”

He’s turned out to be a mouthy little shit which of course means Toni *adores* him.

She can’t wait for him to meet Rhodey.

“I would never Miss.” He’s also a dead pan little fucker on top of everything else which only makes her prouder.

“How about you get me everything you can on a name. I’m talking full, in-depth research, social media cross posting, tax records, police reports, the whole nine. I want dental records and their ninth grade report card if at all possible.” Toni’s mind clicks and her mouth tilts up just slightly at the sides. “Think you’re up for the challenge?”

“I was, as you say,” JARVIS replies, “born ready Miss.”

“You sure were J, you sure were.” Toni grins. “Now put those sexy circuits to use and tell me everything you can find on a New York cab driver named Happy Hogan.”

“Of course Miss.”

~~~

“You know for a guy who drives a cab you’re a pretty hard person to track down sugar cube.” Toni quips as soon as she slides into the back of the cab. She’s running off of six cups of coffee, three days without sleep, a long flight out and the fact that she’s been waiting for an hour to get a chance to flag him down. Still it was time well spent in her opinion, especially if this works out the way she wants it to. Which, to be honest, at this point most things tend to. “For a while there I thought I was going to have to show up at your apartment.”

“What.” Hogan’s face is blank and his voice is flat, but the way he blinks at her gives away his shock.

“And I could have because I know where you live.” Toni continues undeterred. “But Rhodey’s always going on about ‘acceptable boundaries’ and being patient and ‘appropriate’ like I don’t know
what they are so I decided that probably wasn’t a good idea.”

“What.”

“Yeah that’s normally what I say too.” Toni blinks, realizes that Hogan is staring at her wide eyed and vaguely nervous. “Do you remember me? Do you know who I am?”

“You’re the apparently insane woman who gave me six hundred bucks for a ten minute cab ride a few months back.” He deadpans. “Of course I remember you. Starting to regret it though.”

“Good.” Toni leans back, crosses one long leg over the other, and grins wide and sharp. “That’ll make this a lot easier. Now that all that’s out of the way we can get to why I’m here and what I need from you.”

“Medical attention?” Hogan ask. “A ride to your therapist’s office? Head trauma?”

“No at the moment.” Her smile feels even wider than before because she’s starting to like him in person even more than she’d liked him on paper. “Now how would you feel about moving to Malibu?”

“Is this … is this a kidnapping?” He sounds a touch desperate but mostly bemused like he’s not sure exactly what’s happening. “This feels kind of like what I always thought a kidnapping would feel like, only with less guns and more insane super models.” He pauses, considers. “Well no the super model thing’s kind of on point to what I’ve always imagined. Still, less guns than I was expecting.”

“I have guns.” Toni quips. “I’ve actually got a lot of guns. Ranging from small to heavy artillery. Oh and bombs too.”

“Oh God this is a kidnapping.”

“No.” Toni laughs. “This is an interview. My name is Toni Stark and I’m offering you a job.”

~~~

It takes thirty minutes, a stop at a gourmet ice cream parlor, and one look at the contract Toni had Priscilla preemptively draw up for her to have Happy officially in her employ.

Toni boards her private jet with him in tow and feels only satisfaction.

She has a driver and a bodyguard now and she got him all on her own.

Rhodey will be so proud.

~~~

Rhodey’s actually pretty pissed about her taking in a virtual stranger until she tells him that Happy won’t be living with her, that he’ll have his own apartment and that he’s mainly for when she has to go out alone. He’ll also be responsible for deliveries and things of that nature which sets the both of them a bit more at ease.

Then she forwards him the file she had JARVIS compile on him and from the way he goes silent as he reads it she knows she has him.

Happy’s life has been anything but. In an out of foster care from the time he was twelve he has a medical history as long and bruised as her own would be if it had been properly documented. A stint in the army had left him with a diagnosis of depression, back pain, and an honorable discharge after
he stepped in between a few of his squad mates and a local girl whose ‘no’ they didn’t want to take at face value.

Needless to say Rhody’s more than aware of the less than stellar conditions a returning soldier can often find themselves in.

Rhodey sighs, makes a comment about her adopting strays, and then the rest of his protests taper off. He still insists that he’s going to give Happy the third degree when his next leave comes up but beyond that he doesn’t protest.

Toni huffs out a laugh and leans back against DUM-E’s base.

~~~

Still as much as she likes Happy right off the bat it doesn’t solve all of her issues with having someone new in her space on a semi-regular basis.

JARVIS seems to like him well enough and Happy, once he’s gotten over his shock towards Toni’s entire house basically being sentient, seems to feel the same.

In the meantime she gets him his own car, apartment, wardrobe, anything and everything he could want. Happy watches her with a furrowed brow, and with so much curiosity plain on his face that she has to ask about it eventually.

“You’re not at all like they say you are, are you?” The question seems honest, serious but not threatening.

“No.” Toni tells him simply, softly. Sadly. Honest in that way she so rarely is because she considers Happy hers now and she takes care of the people who fall into that wheelhouse. “I’m really not.”

Still it takes her a month and many reassurances from JARVIS that Happy’s shown no threatening behavior for her to decide to let him into the lab to introduce him to the bots.

“I don’t like to be handed things.” She finally tells him with a grimace after one too many near misses and a dropped coffee cup.

He doesn’t say anything, just looks at her quietly, contemplatively, for a long moment. She thinks there must be something in her face, in the stiff set of her shoulders, that gives her away because his face seems to go soft in that way Rhodey’s does on occasion.

The next morning when he pulls up to take her to another meeting there’s a steaming cup of coffee in the cup holder in the back seat. And that afternoon, when they’re swamped outside the restaurant she’s going to for dinner, Happy steps solidly in front of her and doesn’t let anyone get within arm’s reach.

A week later she gives JARVIS the go ahead to allow him into the house when she’s down in the workshop.

Trust is still an unfamiliar and fragile thing for Toni and she’s still hedging her bets with NDAs and contracts but she finds herself willing to reach out for the first time for years.

To her surprise and pleasure Happy reaches right back towards her.

She still wears her hair up though, still keeps her wings covered around him. That sort of trust is
something only Rhodey’s earned from her so far.

~~~


*Her finger tips skim the water’s surface before she turns back towards the sky.*

*The effervescent joy of flight.*

~~~

Watching Rhodey and Happy square off is like watching two dogs circle each other in an effort to try and establish dominance.

Well it’s like that for all of half a second before a mini explosion rocks the corner of the lab where Toni’s working a new miniaturized smoke bomb.

“Miss?” JARVIS sounds a shade off panicked for a second before Toni comes up coughing and waving her hands.

“Little too much bomb, not enough smoke it seems.” Toni croaks. Then the air around her is abruptly grey and foggy. She coughs, ragged and deep. “Never mind, too much smoke too.”

Suddenly there are two sets of hand patting her down and three voices calling her an idiot in new and inventive ways.

By the time she’s been forcefully bundled out of the lab and seated, disgruntled and pouting, at the kitchen counter, Rhodey and Happy are seemingly bonding over her inability to stay safe.

Toni sees Rhodey lift up his shirt and twist to show Happy his back where she knows for a fact he has a scar the size of a quarter and shaped like a wonky heart from that time in Milan. Happy responds by rolling up his left sleeve and showing off the crook of his arm and the spectacular bruise there.

She realizes, with a growing sense of horror, that they’re already trading war stories about her.

“Oh God.” Toni groans as she drops her head down onto the counter in defeat. “I fucked up JARVIS. I fucked up so, so hard. I gave Rhodey an ally. They’re gonna be each other’s Agony Aunts. I can just imagine the phone calls now.”

“Indeed Miss.” JARVIS, the little shit, sounds almost smug. “I’m sure the three of us will have much to discuss.”

“Mutiny.” Toni hisses with a pointed glare at the ceiling. “You’re circuit boards are wired with mutiny and betrayal. You’re a turncoat J and it hurts me that you’d use your powers against me.”

“Shall I have you towed to the brig now or would you prefer the stocks Miss?”

~~~

“Skynet,” Rhodey moans later on that day after Happy has left and everything’s calmed down. They’re out by the pool again because it’s California and the pool’s almost always an option. “I leave you alone for a few months and you brainwash some sap into being your goffer and give birth to Skynet.”
“Pfft.” Toni huffs in his direction as she stretches her arms high above her head, nipple bars glinting in the sun, “don’t insult me like that chocolate chip. If I wanted to create an evil murder bot slash intelligence to take over the world I’d do a much better job and it’d have a much cooler name than Skynet. Sounds like fishing equipment if you ask me.”

“He knows my measurements Toni.” Rhodey whines. “He bought me clothes.”

“I buy you clothes.” Toni tilts her sunglasses down far enough to arch a brow at him. “I buy you clothes all the time. I literally bought you what little bit you’re wearing right now. I fail to see how this is a problem.”

“You’re my best friend who’s known me since you were fifteen.” Rhodey points back towards the house. “He’s an electronic butler who’s never even met me in person but still ordered half a dozen new outfits based on my internet searches and past photos. It’s a little bit different Tones.”

“I prefer the term ‘incorporeal assistant’ if you please Major Rhodes.” JARVIS’ voice suddenly pipes up from the speakers by the pool. “After all you wouldn’t want to insult the one who can access both your bank account and your internet history as well as most reputable news outlets on at least three continents. Five if Miss finishes her upgrades soon.”

Toni has the satisfaction of watching Rhodey yelp, sway, and fall off of his lounger and into the pool. He surfaces, sputtering, a few seconds later.

“Fucking Skynet.” He mutters as he pulls himself back onto his float.

~~~

“Hey JARVIS?” Rhodey’s voice, low and careful, pulls Toni up towards wakefulness. She lets herself hover there on the edge, unwilling to move or open her eyes.

“Yes Major Rhodes?” JARVIS’ voice is equally low, careful and considerate of her sleep.

“You’ll keep her safe won’t you? When I’m gone?” Rhodey sounds gruff and his arms squeeze around her a bit. “She’s not that good at taking care of herself you know? She’s a lot more fragile than a lot of people realize. Sweeter. I know she said you have free will for the most part but you’ll watch out for her right?”

“Miss has given me a great deal of freedom Major.” JARVIS pauses and there’s an almost considering feel to the air. “Some would say too much. One of my few rigid protocols is to ensure her safety and well-being. And yet I find that even if that were not so I would still be inclined to safeguarding Miss from both outside forces and herself.”

“That’s good J.” Rhodey sounds relieved and already Toni can hear the budding fondness in his voice for JARVIS, the same sort of affection he shows to the bots. “She needs more people in her corner.”

“Indeed Major. Perhaps we shall be able to work in concert to better manage her well-being.” JARVIS agrees. “We are, after all, family. And family must watch over one another.”

~~~


The sun shines down on golden skin.
She is unburnt and flying freely.

~~~

Time skips forward.

Toni barrels into twenty-four like a battering ram.

With JARVIS at her side her production levels skyrocket. New patents pour out of her workshop like a river swelled to flood levels.

The board is ecstatic.

The government drools over her new missile plans, the new tank she’s designed, another rifle, better grenades/guns/radios.

The public is damn near orgasmic about the latest StarkPhone which has been rebranded and moved to the new Stark Enterprise label. It’s a smaller company that deal with communications and still falls under the umbrella of SI as a whole but Toni likes it, likes the idea of expanding her empire. The public like it too, along with the teasers for the first generation StarkPad she has plans for in the pipeline.

Six months in Happy forgets himself and tries to hand her a coat. Toni pauses, takes a deep breath, and reaches out a hand.

The happiness on his face when she takes it from him is a reward all on its own.

She steams ever onward, ever forward.

JARVIS grows, expands his reach further outward alongside her. Toni funds a new satellite and suddenly he’s inside Stark Industries and he’s everywhere she goes. It’s a comfort to have his voice in her headset, to know that he’s there with her when she’s alone in a crowd.

She goes to parties and galas and events. She wines and dines and seduces here and there and wherever she feels the need to. Most of it feels meaningless, shallow and cold, but she does it anyways because she can.

The media still loves to hate her.

Toni’s long since stopped caring.

Twenty-four and she’s kept her promise to the board twice over. Stark Industries is soaring to heights it’s never seen before and Toni has almost single handedly changed the technological world.

She didn’t even need the whole five years and she’s so far from done it’s terrifying.

Twenty-four and she goes back to Boston, goes back to Jarvis for a day that feels too long and too short all at the same time.

Twenty-four and she’s beginning to feel … thin.

~~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”
People wants her for what they call a tasteful but provocative photo spread. Toni laughs and has JARVIS disconnect the call.

A week later she sits for a shy young photographer with a bright smile who puts her on the cover of E&T instead.

Hair up, wings covered, and every inch the predator that she is.

Toni makes model airplanes and cars with JARVIS in her spare time because he’s apparently fond of the building process and the significance of having a collection of his own.

She lets him pick the models, lets him pick the colors and any alterations they want to make.

When the collection grows larger than the shelves on the workshop can hold she takes one of the empty guest rooms and guts it. She installs floor to ceiling, wall to wall display shelves so that he can have a space of his own. He reminds her to dust them every two weeks or so.

She also lets him branch out into the real world, takes a chunk of money and makes him a party account to have fun with. He picks a few charities and causes to get behind and makes unsurprisingly genius stock moves. He also develops a deep and abiding fondness for birds that Toni’s pretty sure roots back to her tattoo even if she hasn’t exactly asked him about it yet.

“Miss?”

“Yeah J?” Toni’s buried beneath the hood of her newest car, a beat up old classic she’d overpaid for just for the pleasure of having something to work on that was completely stress free. It’ll make a good addition to her collection when it’s done.

“I’m afraid we might have a problem with DUM-E and U.”

“Huh?” Toni rolls herself free and looks around in alarm. The boys are huddled in the corner near their TV and Toni can just see the pile of metal and tools they’ve gathered together around them.

“What in the hell are they up to now?”

“You are of course aware of U’s new found enthusiasm for The Learning Channel?”

“Yeah baby boy loves him some TLC.” Toni waves a grease covered hand in the air impatiently.

“Well there seems to have been a marathon aired regarding …” JARVIS hesitates and his voice is almost pained when he answers, “birth.”

“He’s been watching maternity ward shows again?” Toni furrowed her brow. That didn’t sound as bad as DUM-E’s lizard obsession, or the time they’d both tried to play tennis.

“Indeed Miss. And now it seems he’s determined to follow their example. DUM-E is, of course,
nothing but enthusiastic in his support.” JARVIS tells her. “Indeed they both seem exceptionally excited about the idea of another sibling.”

“Are you … are you telling me that U and DUM-E are trying to build themselves a little brother?” It’s not the weirdest thing they’ve tried to do but it’s pretty damn close.

“They’ve not gotten very far I assure you.”

“Well then,” Toni grins, “let’s see what we can do about that.”

~~~

Rhodey calls her up to yell at her about ‘robot armies’ and ‘goddamn it Tones if you build something that takes your ass prisoner I’m just going to laugh and say I told you so’, when he gets another “It’s a boy” card.

Butterfingers, as she’s named the new addition thanks to the fact that even with two hands and a far superior code he keeps *dropping* things, stands between DUM-E and U in the photo that’s enclosed.

~~~

That night, as she lays on the couch in the workshop, she watches as Butterfingers reaches up and lays his first kiss on Steve’s star.

DUM-E and U watch proudly from beside him.

~~~

Twenty-five comes with a media storm as Toni throws an extravagant party on par with her twenty-first.

She’s half way to thirty, has less than ten people in the world she cares about, four of whom she built herself, and she’s on top of the technological world.

She’s doing better than she’d thought she’d be at seven years old, at eight, at nine, ten, and eleven all the way up to thirteen, when she’d been beaten and bloody beneath Howard’s heel.

So she wears crimson, dark like blood and just as vicious, wears knife pointed heels that show off the length of her leg beneath the mesh paneled skirt that only hits mid-thigh.

She keeps her hair up and her wings covered.

*The Red Queen* the media continues to call her.

Toni can only wonder when they’ll think up a better name for her.

~~~

Then she’s on the cover of Time again and they do.

She’s twenty-five now and the photographer puts her in black, paints her lips in scarlet and poses her standing, feet apart, shoulders straight and head tilted back haughtily. Her hair is up, styled once again like a crown, and her wings are covered. She’s gripping a black lacquered cane with a ruby knob in both hands and has the tip of it planted directly between her feet.

She sees the final proof of the cover the morning before the magazine hits the stands.
She looks like a specter of death, like a dark queen come to collect souls as payment.

The new nickname is worse than the old one.

_The Merchant of Death_ they call her.

First they’d hated her for making weapons, for trying to move in a man’s world. Now they hate her for being _so damn good_ at it.

Toni just laughs and laughs and frames that cover herself, hangs it front and center in the office at SI she barely uses.

If that’s what they see her as, if that’s what they want to call her, then she’ll wear the name with _pride._

Just like with everything else Toni will take the barbs they sling at her and make them _hers._

‘No shame,’ Toni reminds herself, ‘eyes on the prize and no shame in the face of progress.’

~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

~~

_Wax. Feathers. Heat._

_Steve stares up at her from her the surface of the water with eyes so blue they burn._

~~

“If you think for one second I’m going to stand here and take this kind of abuse then you have lost your _mind._” The angry feminine hiss from behind the partially closed door catches Toni’s attention immediately from where she’s strutting down the hall to yet another meeting with possible investors.

Toni feels herself perk up as she swerves automatically towards the door. She peeks inside with barely restrained curiosity.

There’s a slender and obviously viciously angry red-head standing toe to toe with the very man she’s come here to meet.

“If you _ever_ touch me again I’ll sue you so fast your head will spin.” The woman hisses and there’s enough venom in the tone that Toni’s reluctantly impressed. Her boss looks surprisingly cowed, his shoulders hunched and face damn near desperate for someone who’s apparently being read the riot act by their assistant.

Toni is officially intrigued.

“Virginia please …” the man whose name Toni has already forgotten cuts himself off at the red head’s glare, “Miss Potts please understand…”

Toni backs away quietly and turns to head towards the meeting room. She has her phone in her hand and to her ear as soon as she’s out of hearing range for the two arguing in the other room.
“JARVIS baby, time to sing for your supper.” Toni greets him cheerfully.

“Do pick a tune Miss.”

“I need everything you can get me on a Ms. Virginia Potts, J. She’s an assistant for the ass-hat I’m supposed to be meeting today.” Toni glides into the empty conference room and slinks her way to the head of the table. “Just like with Happy okay? We’re looking to see if we’re finally going to be adding to the family again so give me the works baby boy.”

“Will that be all Miss?”

“That’ll do J, that’ll do.”

~~~

When Potts and her boss, whose name Toni is deliberately forgetting at this point, finally come into the conference room some fifteen minutes later she can tell they’re both surprised to see her.

Toni’s spent the time wisely. She’s been reading every bit of information Jarvis could send her in real time for the world’s most invasive background check.

So far she likes exactly what she sees. Potts, because Toni doesn’t like the name Virginia, is hard working, self-made and almost frighteningly competent. She’s got a list of honors a mile long from her college and glowing reports from teachers all the way back down to kindergarten. She also has a cat, a mother she never sees in Indianapolis and six payments left on her kind of offensively high student loans. She’s fought her way up from the secretarial pool at this company all the way to the top spot of PA to the CEO himself.

Toni kind of wants to take her home and worship her when she sees how ruthlessly scheduled she’s managed to keep the man in the past six months she’s been working directly for him.

In short she’s everything Toni could ever want or need in a PA. But now comes the real test.

“Ms. Stark.” Bad-touch CEO steps forward, hand out in front of him and an eager look on his face.

Toni blinks at him slowly, pushes herself up out of his chair, and saunters around the table. Right before she’s within hand grabbing distance with him she swerves and focuses her attention on Potts.

“Hello pretty.” Toni smiles, slow and secretive. Potts face goes first blank and then narrow eyed and displeased.

“Ms. Stark.” Potts grits the greeting out before she takes an audible breath and smooths out her expression. She’s good. “Is there anything I can get for you before your meeting? Coffee perhaps?”

“Actually there is something you can do for me.” Toni grins. “You can come with me and show me the way back to the elevator because there’s no way in hell I’m signing anything to do with Grabby McFeel-Hands over there unless it’s to take this lemonade stand over and personally rip it apart.”

There’s a moment of stunned silence and then a burst of offended sputtering behind her that Toni ignores. She’s too focused on Potts’ face, on the wide-eyed surprise that’s quickly taken over by suspicion as the taller woman looks down at her.

“I’m not going to sleep with you Ms. Stark.” Potts announces steadily and Toni feels the urge to crow in delight.
“Contrary to popular belief Ms. Potts I don’t fuck everyone I meet.” Toni turns on her heel enough to shoot a cold look at the CEO busy being offended behind her. “And when someone says ‘no’ I sure as fuck listen.”

“Well then Ms. Stark,” Potts says after a moment, “right this way.”

Potts leads her to the elevator and joins Toni in the car without any prompting. They’re ticking down towards the garage where Happy will be waiting for her when Potts finally breaks the silence.

“I’m definitely fired after that I’d say.” She doesn’t sound particularly upset, just realistic. “I hate job hunting.”

“Hunt no further Ariel, you’ve got the chance of a lifetime standing right beside you.” Toni steps out into the garage complex when the doors open.

“That is not my name.” It’s an idle observation.

“I know that Virginia,” Toni rolls her eyes as they finally get close enough to the car for Happy to reach out and open the door. “Now get in the car like we both know you want to and we’ll get down to business.”

“Is this a kidnapping?” Potts cocks her head to the side and stares at Toni with narrowed eyes. “I feel like this is a kidnapping of some sort. Should I be worried?”

Toni and Happy share a long, incredulous look of shock before they both break down laughing. Potts just watches them silently, one brow arched high with her hip cocked to the side now.

“Oh yeah, you’re going to fit right in.” Toni chokes out as Happy clutches at the door helplessly.

~~~

Potts is a harder sale than Happy was.

It takes three hours, dinner, and a truly impressive amount of tiramisu before she finally agrees to sign the contract Toni had JARVIS get Priscilla to courier to the restaurant.

They’re on their way back to her former office to clear out her stuff after that.

“I think we’ll make a damn good team Ariel.” Toni’s sprawled across her side of the seat. “Well once you’ve been introduced to the rest of the family of course.”

“That is not my name.” Potts insists.

“Well I’m not calling you Potts all of the time and I’m not calling you Virginia ever.” Toni shudders at the thought. “It could be worse, you should hear some of the things I call Rhodey.”

Happy chokes off a laugh up front.

“And what is wrong with Virginia.”

“Besides the fact that every time I say it I immediately want to tell you that, ‘yes there is a Santa Claus’ immediately afterwards?” Toni grins at Happy’s strangled laugh and the look on Potts’ face. “So either tell me something else or I’ll pick for you. Better to just save yourself the angst because everyone gets a nickname eventually, right Hap?”

“Right Boss.”
“Pepper.” Potts says after a moment. “My friends call me Pepper.”

“Pepper.” Toni repeats. “I think I like that. Pepper it is.”

---

Pepper takes over the areas of Toni’s life that JARVIS doesn’t already run. She also takes to JARVIS and the bots even quicker than Happy did although she doesn’t really seem inclined to spend any time in the workshop.

That’s fine though, Toni has her boys and JARVIS and Rhodey when he comes around.

By the end of six weeks Toni’s not sure how she managed to survive without Pepper running her life.

The first time she manages to get Toni out of the workshop and ready for a meeting an entire hour early Happy looks simultaneous terrified and like he’s ready to start a cult in her honor.

---

Eight weeks in Pepper hands her a pen and Toni takes it from her without a second thought.

Neither of them say anything but Pepper smiles the rest of the day.

Still Toni keeps her hair up and her wings covered.

---

When Rhodey finally comes home again she takes one look at Pepper, Happy, and him gathered in her kitchen and feels ice trace down her spine.

Again she’s made a terrible mistake because Pepper is absolutely terrifying and as sneaky as a spider. Now that she’s met Rhodey Toni just knows that the three of them and JARVIS are going to gang up on her and there’s going to be no stopping any of them.

_Oh God_, she’s never going to be left in peace ever again.

Toni resolutely ignores the way that feels less like a bad thing and more like a blessing.

---

Toni swings into twenty-six quietly.

She spends the day off the grid much to Pepper’s annoyance.

She goes to see Jarvis instead.

“I feel almost guilty.” She tells him as she leans against the headstone and plays with the hem of her dress, twirls her fingers in the ends of her hair. “A part of me feels like I’ve abandoned you, like I’m forgetting you. I went a whole day the other day without thinking of you and now that I have JARVIS it’s even worse.”

Toni sighs, guilt and sorrow warring in her chest.

“Rhodey says it’s okay, that letting go is healthy, is natural. That it’s what you would have wanted me to do. But I just … I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want to let what I have left of you fade.”
She turns and presses her forehead against the stone.

“Having to bury you hurt, still hurts so much even after all these years. It was like dying, like having my insides ripped out. Like being cast out to sea and not knowing how to swim.” Toni bites at the inside of her lip for a long moment, gathers her words and tries to push forward. “But I think the thought of not feeling that pain anymore, of not having that wound, I think it almost scares me more. I don’t know if I know who I am anymore without this grief Jarvis. I don’t know if I want to know.”

Her hands bite into the soil beneath her.

“I don’t think you’d like who I’ve become.” She whispers it like the terrible secret it is. “Everything good about me came from you Jarvis. If I don’t have this grief anymore what happens if the rest of what I’ve become rises up and washes that little bit of goodness away?”

There’s no answer, there hasn’t been in almost a decade now, but Toni still can’t help but want to hear one.

“I love you.” She finally sighs. “I miss you.”

Father. Father. Father.

~~~

Toni’s twenty-six and she owns the world.

Twenty-six and still rising higher and higher.

Twenty-six and she has a makeshift family all her own.

Twenty-six and the press still calls her The Red Queen and The Merchant of Death like the titles are interchangeable. Pepper still won’t let her put them on a business card.

Twenty-six and building more and more.

Twenty-six and amazed at the wanton destruction of her own mind.

Twenty-six and … tired.

Twenty-six and waiting impatiently to meet the new military liaison that’s being assigned to her.

Twenty-six and laughing, breathless and happy, when Rhodey walks in, Lt. Colonel rank shining on his uniform, and a grin on his face.

Twenty-six and screaming, voice breaking in rage and anguish as she claws at her own hair while JARVIS calls for her desperately because Aunt Peggy is … Aunt Peggy doesn’t …

Aunt Peggy didn’t recognize her when she dropped in to see her.

‘Alzheimer’s’, Peggy’s oldest boy says, as the niece who never liked Toni glares at her from the background. Toni takes it all in with a blank face and a frozen heart. Alzheimer's. It reverberates inside of her head like a gunshot until even thinking the word makes her want to scream.

Toni is twenty-six and resigned to watching the only mother she’s ever had fade away in bits and pieces, her memory eaten away moment by moment over time.

A slow, creeping death of the mind.

Screaming angry denials at the sky, Steve’s blue eyes glaring up at her from below and a storm brewing on the far horizon.

She turns her wings sharply and flies straight into the maelstrom.

She goes off the rails for a bit, goes out and gets drunk and makes Happy ride herd on her. The press has a field day but Toni can’t bring herself to care about the new headlines and videos that pop up. Instead she comes home and gets drunk again in her living room only to have Pepper show up to pull the bottle out of her hand and hug her close.

She buries herself in the lab for almost two months, barely eats, barely sleeps. Her mind is a whirl of colors and sounds and maddening equations that she both loves and hates.

The bots are scared. JARVIS is worried. Happy keeps coming to the door and knocking, begging for her to let him in.

Rhodey is the one with the override code though so he gets inside first. He shakes her hard, only once, and then clutches her close to his chest.

“I’m so sorry baby.” He whispers into her temple. “I’m so sorry you’re losing her this way. It hurts and it’s not fair, I know it isn’t. But Tones you got to pull yourself together. You gotta get through this okay? Cause you still have me alright? You’ve still got all of us here waiting for you on the other side of this hurt. I’m with you sweetheart. You remember that right? I’m with you till the day we die. So you can’t leave me yet, not like this.”

Clutching at Rhodey’s shirt with hands bloody from her latest careless stint in the workshop, Toni cries.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

Toni pulls herself together slowly, stitches herself together piece by bloody piece.

She pays for a private nurse for Aunt Peggy, refuses to take no for an answer when the family protests. She might not be close to any of them, some of them might resent the relationship she had with Aunt Peggy because they’re not actually related, but Toni doesn’t care.

Aunt Peggy was, is, one of her very few precious people and Toni takes care of what is hers.

It still hurts though every time she goes to see her and Aunt Peggy has those moments where she doesn’t remember something she should. Where she doesn’t always remember Toni.

“I love you.” Toni whispers against the worn skin of Aunt Peggy’s hand. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too ducky.” Aunt Peggy presses a kiss against her temple, a soft, sad light in her eyes.
She knows what’s wrong with her, knows that she’s going to continue to fade over time. “I’ll always love you Toni, even when I don’t know you. A part of me will always love you.”

God it still hurts.

~~~

Toni packs up the bits and pieces Aunt Peggy tells her too when they’re alone, things Peggy wants Toni to have now, doesn’t want to take the chance of getting lost.

There are the things Jarvis once left to her and a few of Steve’s old things in a time worn foot locker. A small box containing a few weapons she’s managed to hold on and keep secret, a scratched and ancient pistol and a pair of hair-sticks that Toni’s pretty sure have knives inside them.

Toni packs them away carefully, reverently.

‘At least this time,’ Toni can’t help but think, ‘I’ll get to say goodbye.’

Over and over again.

She’ll get to say goodbye.

And fuck if that doesn’t hurt all on its own.

~~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

~~~


The taste of salt on her lips that she pretends comes from the sea.

The rage of the storm that swirls around her, lightning threatens to take her from the sky.

~~~

Twenty-seven and Toni’s ragged at the edges.

The press is relentless, Aunt Peggy’s slipping faster day by day, and Obie is hounding her to accept awards and accolades left, right, and center. Pressing her to go to parties she normally never attends, galas for politicians she doesn’t agree with and would never support. Pushing her to plaster the Stark name on low quality junk she’d never be attached to just to spread their already massive sphere of influence just a tiny bit further.

He’s never been more active in her life than he has been the last few months and she’s never disliked him more.

The new Jericho missile is done and Toni’s tired, wants Rhodey and a few weeks of poolside relaxation. Wants Happy staring adoringly at Pepper while the red-head rules everyone’s world form her StarkPad. Wants to put together the mecha model she surprised JARVIS with the other day and find time to give U that circuitry upgrade she’s been promising him. Wants a week of peace to sit in the workshop and play holographic basketball with DUM-E. Wants to endure Butterfingers and his
epic pouting when she tells him, yet again, that she’s not going to buy him a lizard because DUM-E is an asshole and showed him Godzilla again.

She wants to go see Jarvis.

Instead she’s being hounded from all directions.

If she sees General Ross or Justin Hammer one more time she’s going to kill and/or eat one or the both of them. That or give them to the bots to play with. Butterfingers in particular seems to be made mostly of spite and robotic rage when he doesn’t get his way. The epic bitch fest of post-lizard denial version one had been both hilarious and horrifying.

She’d had to replace that entire couch because the smell was never coming out.

That’s what she wants.

And yet, she’s standing at a podium in front of a crowd of people she either doesn’t know or can’t stand, accepting an award that she hadn’t even known she’d won until two hours ago and has no idea what it’s about.

“It’s an honor.” Toni tells the assembled crowd as she cocks a hip so that the length of one long, sleek leg is visible all the way up to the hip. It’s an effective distraction technique even if she can see Rhodey rolling his eyes from his place beside her. “I owe a lot to the man standing beside me. James Rhodes has been a friend for many years and an inspiration throughout all of them.”

Toni goes on for a little bit about Rhodey because he hates it when she mentions him in her speeches but if she has to suffer so does he. Plus it helps her to pointedly avoid mentioning Howard. The press will, of course, have a field day with more fodder for their love of gossip. After an award speech there’s always an upsurge of gossip about her and Rhodey’s relationship. The Merchant of Death and Her Loyal Soldier.

Like Rhodey isn’t so much more than that, like he isn’t his own person. Isn’t beautiful and smart and better than all of them and Toni too.

Toni doesn’t let herself care about what she knows will come though.

Instead she just smiles and takes the applause as her due.

Fuck them all.

~~~

“Are alright baby girl?” Rhodey asks her from where they’re laid out on the couch of her private jet. She’d shooed the flight attendant away and Toni knows the small flight crew thinks her and Rhodey are fucking but again, she doesn’t care.

All she cares about is the warmth of his arms, the strength and comfort of his embrace.

“I’m tired pumpkin.” She stifles a yawn in his shoulder. “I think after this presentation me and you should take a vacation. We can leave Pepper and Happy to help JARVIS watch the boys and just take off. Maybe go to Maui again or that one place you liked so much in Singapore. Somewhere relaxing, fun.”

“Sure thing little girl.” Rhodey presses a kiss to her temple and settles down further into the luxuriously soft couch. “Let’s go impress the brass with your beautiful and terrifying brain and then
“we’ll go sip little umbrella drinks on a beach somewhere.”

“Gotta be a topless beach bun-bun.” Toni reminds him drowsily. “You know I hate tan lines.”

“Whatever you want Toni.” She can hear the smile in his voice. “Whatever you want.”

~~~

“Gentlemen.” Toni addresses the gathered crowd, all flash and smoke, con-artist and ringmaster at the forefront as she stands before them. She’s dressed in black, her hair up and her wings hidden, and she’s every inch the queen, every inch The Merchant of Death. “You all know the old saying, ‘hell hath no fury like a woman scorned’? Well I’m about to show you why that is. I give you, the Jericho.”

Toni types in a launch sequence and watches as the fruits of her mind turn a mountain range to dust. Sometimes she terrifies herself.

~~~

She and Rhodey split despite his protests because there’s not enough room in the Humvee for both of them and she knows he wants to talk to the squad leader while they’re moving.

So she smiles, presses a quick kiss to his cheek, and climbs in.

The soldiers around her are young, fresh faced and youthful in a way that makes her feel old even if there isn’t really that much of a difference between them.

She poses with one for a picture, presses her crimson lips to his cheek with a smirk as he takes it and loves the way his squad laughs at his stunned expression.

She laughs, turns towards the female soldier who’s with them, and open her mouth to ask a question when suddenly …

Chaos.

There’s gun fire, screaming, the scent of fire and burnt flesh. Toni scrambles out of the Humvee, falls to her knees and then gets back up. There’s a gun on the ground a few paces ahead and she scrambles for it desperately.

It jams, because she’s pretty sure it’s Hammer Tech so of course it does, and she throws it away in disgust.

Her hands scramble to pull her StarkPhone from the pocket of her jacket as she crouches behind a rock.

There’s a thud from nearby, she looks to her left and immediately pales.

She has enough time to see her name on the bomb, enough time to take one breath, to scream, high and desperate for Rhodey, and then …

Pain.

Slicing, burning agony.

Her hands scramble for her chest, ripping at her jacket and blouse.
She can’t breathe.
She can’t breathe.
Rhodey … she can’t breathe.

She feels blood gurgling up in her throat, can taste that familiar coppery flavor as her lungs wheeze. Panic hits her hard, fights side by side with agony to take her over.

And then Toni just doesn’t feel anything at all.

Chapter End Notes

WOOOHOO we've officially reached Iron Man like I promised! I'm so proud of us! Again let me know your thoughts guys. Questions, comments, concerns, and requests. Bring em all on.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Again, seriously you guys, let me just say that I love you all. Your reviews give me life and inspiration and I love every single one of them.

That being said here's the first part of Iron Man! Like I said there's a lot of canon divergence on more than one point and it'll probably get worse as we go because while somethings will stay the same Toni just wouldn't react the same way as Tony did and keeping her in character is important.

Also shout out to Constance_Truggle and marvelstonyshipper (wellaty) whose shouting reviews have me absolutely beaming. Yes you guys I read you loud and clear and for the record I am indeed trying to kill you/enjoying your explosive feels. Please give me all you got, the more the better!

Fanmix: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Waking is hell.

Toni comes to gasping, body wracked in agony.

Panic sets in when she feels hands on her, large and unfamiliar hands holding her down, rough with callouses she doesn’t know. ‘Not Rhodey,’ is all she can think for a split second, ‘not Rhodey.’

She tries to move, tries to pull loose, tries to fight them.

But she can’t.

“R-Rhodey.” She still calls for him, gasping and choking on the familiar taste of blood, because he always comes when she needs him.

Then she feels it.

Something’s wrong with her chest.

“JAR-VIS.” She’s shrieking, can hear her own voice above the rough yelling that’s surrounding her. She can’t understand what they’re saying, but she isn’t sure if that’s because of the searing agony cutting through her or because she doesn’t know the language. All she knows is that she needs help.

There are hands on her chest.

Oh God.

There are hands inside her chest.

“St-Steve.” She whimpers out of desperation when she feels the rough scratch of cloth press down over her mouth and nose. “Steve.”
Then the blackness takes her again.

~~~

Light blinds her the next time she wakes. It takes her a moment to focus, her chest is a blaze of searing pain but she’s awake and the agony sharpens her mind for a brief moment.

Those voices from before are back, guttural and rough, and she still doesn’t recognize what they’re saying.

But she knows it’s nothing good.

She sees the video camera, smells gunpowder and oil, the scent of sweat and blood hangs heavy in the air around her.

Toni is a genius.

‘Great,’ she thinks as the darkness reaches up for her again with hooked hands, ‘kidnapped again.’

~~~

She doesn’t dream.

~~~

Toni wakes with a choking gasp, disoriented and confused.

It’s cold, she can see her breath misting the air in front of her as she scrambles to pull the tube from her nose. It burns but her hands don’t work well enough to grab the mug of water on the table beside her.

She feels wrong, heavy and clumsy in a way she never is and there’s a burning, grasping pain in her chest.

Humming catches her attention and she sees, vision still blurred with pain, the outline of a man, tall and thin and completely unfamiliar, shaving in a small mirror.

Toni rolls, mind whirling, as she searches for a weapon, for anything her still fumbling hands can grasp, desperate to protect herself.

The jerk of a wire and a painful pull in her chest brings her up short.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” The man across the room tells her, voice casual like this is an everyday occurrence.

That’s when she turns and sees the car battery, follows the wires down and back to her own chest. Toni rips at the bandages, tears frantically at them with her nails as quickly as she can.

She bites back a horrified scream at the sight of her mangled chest, at the sick twist of metal lodged between her breasts.

‘Oh God’, is all she can think for a long moment, ‘what’ve they done to me.’

~~~

Toni has a chest full of shrapnel now.
A chest full of shrapnel from her own bomb that’s only being held at bay by the electro-magnet the thin, suited man in the room with her had installed.

She has to bite back an irrational burst of amusement, has to swallow down a half hysterical bark of laughter.

She has shrapnel in her heart now and she’s hooked to a fucking car battery but beyond the fact that it could kill her it doesn’t really bother Toni too much at the moment.

She’s always felt as if she’d had shrapnel in her chest, had little pieces of metal lodged inside of her and tearing her slowly to bits.

The only difference now is that it’s actually true.

‘Rhodey’s going to be so pissed,’ Toni thinks wirily.

~~~

Her unnamed companion seems almost smug when he tells her about treating similar wounds, when he throws her the vial of metal bits and talks about the walking dead. She hears the derision in his voice when he talks about having met her once at a conference she only half remembers because it had been in the direct aftermath of finding out about Aunt Peggy.

Toni feels her eyes narrow in half incredulous rage. She’s been split open, has had her insides fucked with, is currently on camera, and this motherfucker wants to go a round or two with her about her being drunk and still able to talk circles around half the scientific community.

But then there’s yelling and his cool almost smug demeanor disappears as he rushes to her side and pulls her clumsily to her feet.

“Do as I do,” he tells her, panic plain in his face, “do as I do.”

It hurts to raise her arms above her head but Toni does it anyways because she’s used to things that hurt by now. She winds her fingers in the tangled spill of her hair, acutely aware of the way it’s half fallen from its pins to spill partially down her back, matted with sweat and blood. It makes her feel even more vulnerable than she already does.

She hates that.

Then the heavy metal doors open and all she can focus on is the fact that the men walking towards her, smug and swaggering with superiority, have her guns.

~~~

“He says, ‘welcome Toni Stark. The most famous mass murdering whore in the history of America.’” There’s a quaver in his voice but Doc, as she’s taken to calling him in the back of her mind, translates quickly enough all the same. “He’s honored.”

Toni feels her eyes narrow again but she struggles to keep her face impassive. She’s smart enough to know that being antagonistic right off the bat would be a bad idea in this situation.

“He wants you to build the missile. The Jericho missile that you demonstrated.” Toni feels ice trace down her spine as the Doc holds out a photo of her bomb. “This one.”

Toni doesn’t even have to think about it. Her shoulders shake, her mouth curls up into the sneer
she’s grown so famous for, and a harsh bark of laughter escapes from her throat. Doc sucks in a horrified breath but Toni doesn’t care.

There’s only one answer to that question and Toni already knows exactly how this is going to go so she might as well get her money’s worth.

“Fuck you.” Toni says, almost sweetly, almost lovingly. “I refuse.”

~~~

There’s a hand curled tightly in her hair, fisted mercilessly in her curls. It hurts in that same way it had the first time it had happened at fifteen, and then the second time at twenty-one, and Toni hates it.

At the moment Toni hates a lot of things.

The hand in her hair, the cold of this fucking cave, feeling small, Howard always Howard, the son of a bitches doing this to her, and above all else the way the water closes in over her head each time that fist forces her down.

She takes large gulping breathes each time they let her up, arms cramping from how tightly she’s clutching at her battery.

Her chest hurts, her lungs hurt, her everything hurts.

But Toni is a genius.

Toni is a prodigy.

And through the pain Toni’s mind whirls.

~~~

It goes on for forever.

Toni knows it doesn’t, not really.

But it feels like it.

She finds herself sinking back down into her mind, into that place she’d created back when she was small and Howard still ruled over her life with an iron fist and scotch flavored terror.

She feels herself cracking, knows she can’t do this forever, knows that eventually they’ll find her fracture point.

And God does she hate herself for even having one.

~~~

Face bagged, arms clutching her battery, they drag her out into the sunlight and into a make shift village populated with weapons bearing her name.

Her fucking name.

Doc tells her that the man says they have everything she needs to build the Jericho and Toni’s more than slightly horrified to realize at a glance that he’s right. There are so many of her weapons here,
guns/bombs/missiles so many things with Stark embossed across the side.

So many things that should have never made their ways into the hands of these fuckers.

Doc says that they’ll set her free once she’s done, once she’s built for them what they want.

“No they won’t.” Toni says even as she makes herself smile and reach out a hand.

“No, they won’t.” Doc agrees softly.

They both know this will only end in death.

The real question is whose?

~~~

“This is your legacy.” Doc tells her, scorn and fear weighted equally in his voice. “Your life’s work in the hands of those murderers.”

Toni stares at the flames in silence because he’s right and wrong all at the same time. That stockpile of weapons is a part of her life’s work, part of her struggle against Howard/the world/her own brilliance. Those weapons are the product of her mind, of her constant fist smashing against the glass ceiling that is what others think is acceptable for her to do/accomplish.

But …

But they’re not her entire life’s work.

Her life’s work, the parts that she holds truly precious to her, are hopefully in Malibu, safe and sound in the mansion. DUM-E and U who’d almost killed a man for her once. Butterfingers who probably would if given half a chance because somehow he’s turned out more vicious than his older brothers. And JARVIS, sweet snarky JARVIS, who’s become her rock, her steady point, in so many ways.

Her life’s work is more than a decade of love and trust that she’s helped to build between her and Rhodey. The family she’s forged with him and the boys as well as Pepper and Happy.

Those are the things she’s done that mean something. Those are the things she’s truly proud of.

“Is this the last act of defiance of the great Toni Stark?” Doc throws the words at her like a challenge but Toni hears the desperation in his voice.

“They’re going to kill me, you, either way.” Toni reminds him because they both know it’s a distinct probability. “And if not we both know I’m dead in a week anyways.”

“Well then, this is a very important week for you isn’t it?”

Toni smiles, just a slight upturn of her lips, because he’s right about that too. This is a very important week, a week that’ll decide the outcome of everything because all of this goes one of three ways:

Either they kill her, through torture or otherwise for holding her line in the sand, for refusing to build for them.

Or she throws away what little bit of good there is inside of her and builds for them and they keep her, chained and trapped, like the Daedalus of old.

Or Toni does as she has always done, does as she’s done since she was a child and Howard knocked
her down. She gets back up and thinks/builds/creates her own path forward.

Toni reaches for the length of cloth one of the men had thrown in her direction after they’d dragged her back inside. With hands now steady with the force of her resolve she gathers the mass of her hair up into her hands and pulls it up and out of her way, curls tucked safely underneath the fabric.

Hair up, wings covered, Toni squares her shoulders and steps forward onto the only path available to her.

~~~

Toni barks out orders that Doc translates for her as quickly as he can.

It’s almost amusing to watch these men who clutch at her guns scramble to get her what she needs, to set things up for her so that she can build for them.

Almost.

Because she’s going to build.

But she never said it was for them.

Behind an impassive face Toni’s mind whirls.

~~~

“Palladium.” Toni tells Doc with a slight curl of unpainted lips, lips that hide the fangs Aunt Peggy had once warned her about. “0.15 grams. We need at least 1.6, so why don’t you make yourself useful gumdrop and break down the other eleven for me okay?”

~~~

They come for her again.

The cloth binding her hair is ripped away as that fucking hand buries itself in her hair and forces her face down into the water.

Toni’s mind whirls beneath the pain and the fear. Traces its way across multiple tracks of thought.

And after it’s over, after she’s gasping and weak on the stone beneath her Toni reaches out a shaking hand and grabs that cloth in a white knuckled grip.

Her hands shake but she forces them to work, forces them to move.

Hair up, wings covered, Toni does as she’s always done whenever someone else came along to knock her down.

She gets up.

~~~

It takes all of her admittedly less than optimal self-control to let Doc handle the smelting cup once all is said and done. They only have the one chance to get what she needs finished accomplished but her hands shake despite her resolve thanks to the constant pain of the magnet and the car battery she’s shackled to.
“Yinsen.” He tells her when Toni finally asks him for his name. “My name is Yinsen.”

“Nice to meet you.” Toni smiles and it’s almost true. She feels as if she’s finally meeting the real him with the way his apparent distaste for her has seemed to dim some in the face of watching her work.

---


She can’t reach the sky beyond the bars that block the cave door. Hands pull her back into the darkness, claws rip at the joints of her wings.

Flesh shreds beneath their touch and she screams for people who will never come.

---

It’s a long process. Detail oriented and nerve wracking work constantly set back by the shake in her hands, by the way she keeps forgetting she’s tethered to the battery and tries to walk too far away.

But seeing the way the arc reactor lights up, having the beautiful blue glow of this supposedly impossible thing she’s built wash over her face …

Well.

That makes it all worth it in her opinion.

That and the three gigajoules per second it generates.

Even Yinsen seems to think so when she shows him her carefully scattered sketches, shows him the suit and what will hopefully be their way out of this hellhole.

Because these people have made the same mistake everyone else has in Toni’s life. They’ve told her to build and then basically left her to her own devices.

The last time someone did that Toni essentially took over the world.

This time, well, she just wants to go home, wants to keep her weapons from doing more harm in the hands of people who should have never had them to start with, wants to be safe and warm in Rhody’s arms with her family around her.

If she has to burn this entire place to the ground around her to do that?

That’s a price she’s willing for them to pay.

After all, no one takes from her without her consent anymore.

She’s Toni fucking Stark.

And she is mighty.

---


She beats her hands bloody against the bars, desperate for the sky just beyond.
Hands pull her back into the darkness, claws rip at the joints of her fragile wings.

Flesh shreds beneath their touch and she screams for people who will never come.

~

Putting the arc reactor into place is its own special brand of torture.

Yinsen is calm, his hands are steady and his face impassive as he works but Toni can see the faint sort of horror in his eyes.

Toni just stares up at the ceiling, bites down on the knotted bundle of cloth Yinsen had shoved between her teeth, and wills herself not to scream.

She fails.

~

Angry that she’s taken precious time to build the reactor they come for her again.

And this time, with no battery to worry about, it’s so much worse.

She’s a mess when they finally leave, beaten and bloody like she’s taken a trip down memory lane. Each fist and boot print postcards from a past she’d thought gone for good.

She feels small again in that way that she hates when Yinsen drags her back onto her pallet.

“Stark.” He smooths a hand over her forehead, wipes at the blood on her face with careful hands that still make her flinch. “Shh, Stark. Shh. It’s alright now.”

“H-Hey Yinsen?” She rasps out.

“What is it Stark?”

“You … you ever heard the story of I-Icarus?” She coughs, deep and ragged.

“Yes.” Yinsen tells her. “But perhaps you would tell me your version instead?”

So she does.

And he sits there beside her until she talks herself to a restless, pained sleep.

~


Hands rip at her wings as she screams for people who can’t hear her.

But in her chest a star burns brightly.

~

“Gulmira.” Yinsen tells her when she asks him where he’s from.

“Got a family?”

“Yes.” He smiles but his eyes are sad and Toni’s mind whirls. “And I will see them again when I
Toni pauses, aware as always of the camera in the corner watching their every move. She’s sure that there’s no audio but there’s still lip reading, still other ways to tell what she’s saying. Beyond that, as much as she’s beginning to like him, she’s not sure how far she can trust Yinsen.

Toni, as always, chooses to hedge her bets. There can be no chances taken when it comes to those she considers hers.

“No.”

“Then you are a woman with everything, who has nothing.”

Well, he’s not so wrong about that either.

Without Rhodey, without JARVIS and the boys, Pepper and Happy, Toni really would be/have nothing.

But she’ll be damned before she lets anyone else know that about her, before she gives anyone else fodder to use against her.

~~~

“Stark?”

“Yeah Yinsen?”

“Tell me the story of Icarus again.”

~~~

They come for her.

*Oh God.*

They come for her.

~~~

“Stark?”

“Yeah?”

“Icarus?”

~~~

They work steadily, backs to the door and everything carefully done in pieces, angled just so to keep the particulars of what she’s building from being seen.

She knows it won’t last forever, knows that eventually they’ll catch on, but she does her best to use her time wisely.

But when the doors open and a man she’s never seen before walks in, when he opens his mouth and tells her to ‘relax’ she knows their time is up.

She sees the fear in Yinsen’s face when the man turns to him, when his men put him on his knees.
Ice traces down Toni’s spine when he turns, burning coal in hand, towards Yinsen’s vulnerable face. “Jericho,” is the only word she understands but she gets the message loud and clear.

She can’t let this happen, not like this, not because he’s helping her on this mad scheme she’s put together.

“What do you want?” She steps forward only to freeze when they turn their guns in her direction. Still she refuses to be cowed. “I need him. You want the Jericho then I need him. He’s a good assistant.”

The man drops the coal and steps towards her instead.

“Such a pretty thing you are.” A rough hand reaches up and grabs her by the chin hard enough to bruise. Toni keeps her eyes level, keeps the fear and rage that’s eating away at her as hidden as possible. She can tell from the way he smiles that she doesn’t quite succeed. “Beautiful but treacherous I think, a little snake with pretty scales and sharper fangs. You have until tomorrow to assemble my missile or we shall see if I can’t find a better way to convince you to give me what I want.”

~~~

The night passes in a haze of work.

Toni pushes herself to go faster, to work harder than she ever has before. Each swing of the hammer reverberates up her arm and the heat from the forge singes her skin but she doesn’t care.

She covered in soot and sweat, hair heavy and damp beneath the cloth that keeps it up, covered and safe, when she puts the faceplate on the table in front of Yinsen.

This is their way out.

Forged by her hands and his.

The rush to suit up is fraught with panic. They’re both so sure that each minute is the last, that they’ll be interrupted, that those doors will swing open and spill forth new horrors onto the both of them before they’re finished.

The suit is heavy when Yinsen straps her in, when he has her recite the layout to the cave as he makes adjustments, but the weight is a comfort.

The guard screaming in Hungarian at the door is less so.

Getting the power sequence up and running and the rest of the bits fastened is like pulling teeth, slow and painful.

Yinsen leaving her, running forward and grabbing a gun, is like being struck in the chest.

The progress bar doesn’t move fast enough for her taste but when it finally does … when the room goes dark and the suit comes to life around her as she waits in the dark for the ones who’ve tormented them for so long now …

*Victory.*

As sweet as that first time she stood up to Howard. Sweeter than every other victory she’s ever had.
Killing these men, destroying their evil, it feels righteous, it feels like justice.

It feels just a bit like what she always imagined Steve must have felt while fighting Hydra.

Finding Yinsen, having him confirm the suspicion that’s haunted her mind since that night by the fire, feels almost like losing Jarvis all over again.

Except this time she’s far from helpless.

Rage and sorrow eating away at her Toni steps into the sunlight, steps into the desert heat of this hell she’s been kept in, and sets fire to everything in her path.

And then, just like Icarus, she flies.

And just like Icarus, she falls.

~~~

Toni Stark is born screaming for the third time on the hot sands of an Afghani desert.

She’s a small destructive bundle of flailing limbs, thick black hair, and a razor sharp mind behind too bright eyes with a bomb in her chest.

The sun burns her skin as she trudges through the desert sand. Her shoulder’s a mess beneath her clothes, bloody and torn from where she’d crashed, but her greatest fear is the heat.

There’s a good chance that she’ll die here in this desert, killed by dehydration and the sun.

But that’s better than the alternative, better than dying shackled to a workbench against her will.

Better than dying small.

~~~

She’s not sure how long she walks. Not sure how long she keeps trudging forward. It seems as if the sand goes on forever.

Sometimes she finds herself thinking that the whole world has turned to sand while she’s been gone.

But that’s just the heat talking.

She thinks.

~~~

For a split second she’s not sure the helicopters are real.

But then they land in the distance and Toni sees familiar uniforms, familiar gear, familiar everything.

And then …

And then she sees a familiar, unmistakable silhouette.

“Toni!” Her name’s being screamed across the sand, sound almost eaten by the still whirling helicopter blades.

But she hears it and it’s like a siren’s call, like a song she can’t ignore.
“Rhodey.” She whispers his name out reverently as she stumbles forward, desperate to get to him, desperate to finally be safe again. “Rhodey.”

He catches her right before she hits the ground.

Because of course he does.

Toni blinks and stares up at him.

Rhodey looks half feral, face thinner than she’s ever seen it, eyes red rimmed and undercut with dark circles. There’s a glint of aching desperation and blinding joy in his eyes as he carefully wraps his arms around her.

He’s the most beautiful thing she’s ever seen.

“I got you.” He presses her close, presses his face against her still covered hair uncaring of the blood and sweat and sand that covers her. “Toni baby I’ve finally got you.”

“Rhodey.” Toni croaks even as she chokes out a small laugh. “This wasn’t the vacation I was talking about gumdrop.”

“Next time you ride with me.” Rhodey almost snarls but she feels the wet drip of tears against the side of her face. “Next time you ride with me.”

~~~

They take her to the nearest Air Force base and Toni spends the entire ride in Rhodey’s lap, his arms wrapped around her and refusing to let go. They get a few sideways looks but the other soldiers apparently know better than to say anything.

Toni doesn’t care.

She’s safe now, safe with Rhodey. That’s all that matters at the moment.

Exhaustion pulls her down into sleep almost without her realizing it.

~~~

Toni wakes with a gasp.

There are hands on her chest, digging at the layers of clothes she has on, at the thick over shirt she’d worn beneath the armor.

She can’t move her hands, goes to reach out to push whoever’s hovering over her away only to realize that there’s something wrapped around her wrists and holding her down.

No.

No.

No.

She’d thought she’d escaped, thought she’d gotten away from this, had thought that Yinsen’s sacrifice had meant something.

She can’t … she can’t do this anymore.
She won’t.

She doesn’t realize she’s screaming until the hands are ripped away and Rhodey’s face, eyes frantic and wide, is suddenly hovering over hers.

For a split second she thinks that maybe he’s been captured too.

But then her mind clears enough for her to hear what he’s saying.

“You’re okay Tones.” He’s repeating it over and over again. “You’re okay baby girl. I got you. I got you.”

“I want out. Rhodey, please, I want out.” Toni sobs, jerks at the restraints on her wrists desperately, and watches as Rhodey’s face darkens with rage.

“Who in the fuck thought this was a good idea?” Rhodey’s voice is whisper soft but razor sharp with rage when he moves to undo the padded cuffs that are holding her down.

“She was thrashing too much Sir.” A voice just off to the side answers and Toni can’t help the way she flinches again. “We had to keep her still.”

The cuffs are gone then and Rhodey’s arms are back, lifting her against the warm strength of his chest. He strides forward and the gaggle of nurses and doctors parts before him like the Red Sea.

“If I ever find out you’ve strapped down a fucking trauma victim like this again,” Rhodey stops long enough to hiss at the suddenly pale doctor, “I will make sure you’re busted so far down that the only thing you’ll be playing doctor on is the foot I’m going to shove up your ass.”

Rhodey carries her outside and the fresh, dry air is a relief all on its own.

“It’s okay now little girl.” Rhodey soothes her. “I’ll get you another doctor, one who didn’t get his medical degree out of a goddamn cereal box.”

“No.” Toni croaks, the arm not wrapped around his neck coming down to press protectively across where the reactor is hidden beneath her shirt. “No doctors Rhodey. Just you.”

“Toni, baby, you need someone to look you over.” He seems ready and determined to fight her.

“No. Rhodey I can’t, you can’t let them near me.” She brings her hand up to curl her fingers tightly in his shirt. “If they see, Rhodey if they see it they-they’re going to want it.”

“Toni? What are you talking about?” Rhodey looks down at her, face confused and eyes still frightened. “What are they going to want?”

Toni motions him closer, has him bend his head down so that she can whisper in his ear. “I’ll show you but you have to promise me no doctors.”

“Tones…”

“You’ll understand when you see it Rhodey, just … please.” She’s as close to begging him as she ever gets.

“Fine.” He sighs as he pushes his way into another tent and sets her down. It’s his tent, Toni can tell because there’s a picture of the two of them together taped to the front of the locker across from the bed. “Show me.”
Toni carefully pulls up her shirt, hisses when her shoulder throbs in pain, but still shifts enough to where the blue glow of the reactor spills out into the air around them.

“What the fuck?” He breathes the question. “Is that,” he swallows hard, “baby girl is that inside you?”

“Yeah.” Toni tells him as she taps one ragged nail against the reactors front in time with her own racing heartbeat. “This is how I got out Rhody. If the military found out about it they’d want it for themselves.”

“I don’t… why is that thing in your chest Tones?” Rhody asks even as he moves towards a locker, rips it open, and pulls out a large first aid box.

So she tells him, tells him the whole thing in as few words as she can because they both know they’re racing against the clock before someone comes after them. The whole time she talks he’s working on her, pulling her shirt up and off and bandaging her arm, cleaning cuts and bruises with damp wipes. By the time she’s done he’s helped her pull one of his large, thick shirts on, gauze taped over the reactor to hide the light, and he looks wrecked, face wane and eyes wet.

Rhodey seems to collapse in on himself, folds down at her feet and rests his forehead against her knee for a moment.

“I was two minutes away.” He sounds anguished, tortured. “I was two minutes away from you when the convoy blew. We were on the way back but we weren’t fast enough. I wasn’t fast enough Tones. I’m so sorry baby girl. So sorry.”

“Hey, no.” Toni runs her hand over his head, tugs at him weakly until he shifts up to sit on the cot beside her and leans against his shoulder. “No Rhody. If you’d have been there you’d be dead. You found me and that’s all that matters. I don’t know how you found me but you did.”

“It wasn’t us.” Rhody says suddenly. “We weren’t the ones who found you Tones. I’ve been looking nonstop but the military was almost ready to call off the search. Probably would have already if you were anyone else. But yeah it wasn’t us who found you.”

“Then how?”

“JARVIS.” Rhody smiles a little and Toni sucks in a sharp breath. “He’s been scouring the desert for you since you went missing Toni. Day and night, twenty-four seven since the moment we lost you. He … uh … he may or may not have uploaded himself into every satellite he could get his code into regardless of who owns them. He saw the explosion, fast tracked the memo and then called me. He’s the reason we were out there in the first place otherwise we would have never found you. The deserts just too damn big.”

“I need a phone.” Toni’s suddenly desperate to talk to her boys. “Rhodey I need to call him, he should … he needs to know he did it, that he helped you find me.”

“Fuck.” Rhody curses and then he’s up and moving. He grabs the jacket he’d tossed to the side earlier and digs the StarkPhone she’d built him out of the pocket. “This might be against regs but ask me if I give a damn. Here,” he put the phone in her hand, “call him. Jesus tell him I’m sorry it took so long. He’ll call Pepper and Happy too if they’re not already there.”

Before Toni can do anything but curl her fingers around the phone there’s a rustle at the tent’s door. Toni slides the phone up her sleeve just as the flap moves to reveal a grim faced and vaguely familiar man in a Colonel’s uniform.
“Lt. Colonel Rhodes there’s a few questions I’m going to need you and Ms. Stark to answer.”

“With all due respect Sir,” Rhodey grits out as he shifts to stand in front of Toni protectively, “I hardly think this is the time or the place considering the circumstances.”

The Colonel goes sour faced, mouth pursing up like he’s just bitten into a lemon. Rhodey steps forward, shoulders set aggressively, but Toni’s hand on his arm stops him from getting himself into any trouble.

“Go on.” She nods towards the tents flap. “I’ll be right here when you’re done.”

Rhodey gives her a long look, squeezes the hand he’s still holding, and walks out. She can tell by the rigid set of his shoulders that every step costs him. It costs her too because all she wants to do is crawl inside his arms and never come out again.

But, once again, they aren’t those kinds of people and this isn’t that kind of story for either of them.

Toni waits a few seconds and then pulls the phone out of her sleeve and thumbs the call button. She doesn’t bother with dialing an actual number, just raises the phone to her mouth and says, “JARVIS?”

There’s a brief moment of silence and then …

“Miss?” JARVIS sounds almost disbelieving and something soft twists in Toni’s chest.

“Yeah baby boy,” Toni whispers, tears welling up in her eyes at the sound of his much loved and familiar voice, “it’s me.”

“It is … a relief to hear your voice Miss.” JARVIS finally says. “The bots have been rather distraught with your absence.”

“I missed you guys too JARVIS.” Toni finally lets herself relax a bit, lays back on Rhodey’s cot and curls herself around the phone in her hand. “So much JARVIS. I missed you so much. Thank you for looking for me buddy.”

“I may have overstepped a bit in the process Miss.” JARVIS sounds almost embarrassed. “I’m afraid I may have … appropriated a few resources that were not necessarily on the authorized list.”

“At this point I don’t care if you hacked China J.”

There’s a small but telling pause.

“You hacked China didn’t you J?”

“Only a little Miss.”

Toni huffs out a tired laugh because of course he did. She would have done the same thing in his place. Hell she probably would have done worse.

“You saved my life you know that right?” Toni tells him softly, lovingly. “I’d have died there if it wasn’t for you sending Rhodey to me. I’d say hacking China’s not that much of an issue in my opinion.”

“Then I hope you might forgive me for the other, much more serious crime I committed in your absence.”

“Worse than hacking China?” Toni feels her brows arch in surprise. “What the hell did you do J,
“Worse Miss.” JARVIS announces solemnly. “Your absence left the bots distraught as I said earlier. DUM-E and U have been inconsolable and Butterfingers has … acted out as he does. I found it best to attempt to … distract them.”

“JARVIS what did you do?” Toni’s eyes narrow even though she knows he can’t see her.

“Again Miss they were rather distraught,” JARVIS says defensively, “I had thought that having something to care for might help them deal with the situation better.”

“You didn’t,” Toni feels dread rear up inside of her, “J, baby boy, say it isn’t so.”

“In my defense it’s a relatively small reptile Miss.” JARVIS reassures her. “And the bots have rather fondly named it after you Miss and are rather protective.”

“They named the lizard Toni?”

“No Miss,” JARVIS’ voice goes soft again, “they named it Mother.”

“Oh.” Toni has to swallow hard, overwhelmed by a rush of love and tenderness for her ridiculous boys who know how to cut right to the heart of her without even trying.

“Miss?”

“Yeah J?”

“May I tell you the story of Icarus?” He asks tentatively. “I find I’ve rather missed telling it to you although the bots have insisted upon it for Mother’s benefit.”

“Yeah J,” Toni closes her eyes, breathes deep, and then smiles, “yeah I’d love to hear Icarus again.”

“Very good Miss. Very good.”

Toni lets the soft, safe sound of JARVIS’ voice lull her into the first peaceful sleep she’s had in months. It feels almost like coming home.

~~~


The sea below her is now made of sand, rolling waves replaced by endless dunes.

She fears the burn of sand more than she ever did the cold clasp of the water.

~~~

Because he’s perfect and totally deserves the poster of him dressed as Captain America she’d made him for his birthday the year before Rhodey has a fresh change of her clothes and a black sling for her arm waiting on her when she next wakes up.

Getting clean and slipping back into her own familiar armor feels like getting back a long lost piece of herself. She feels ready to take on anything once again. Ready to be mighty now that all of her brittle bits are once again hidden.

So, hair up, wings covered, Toni does as she always does.
She gets up and moves forward.

~~~

Seeing Pepper and Happy waiting at the bottom of that ramp is like seeing the sunrise for the first time.

Pepper’s hair is a vibrant flame, Happy’s shoulders sag like the weight of the world’s been lifted off of them in the ten seconds it took for the plane’s cargo door to open.

Toni waves the stretcher away because she’s feeling no pain and with Rhodey at her side walks right into their arms.

~~~

“A press conference?” Pepper looks almost indignant, like Toni’s refusal to go to a hospital is a personal insult.

“Yup.” Toni grins. “I’ve been gone too long Pep and I’m about to make your life much more difficult again.”

Toni hears Rhodey groan faintly from the front seat.

“Oh Toni,” Pepper sighs, “it’s cute how you think my life was any easier with you gone.”


“Right Boss.”

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Obie’s waiting on her when the car pulls up, a smile on his face and arms outstretched.

Toni quirks a brow at him, swings her legs out of the car, milkshake in hand and cocky smile in place, as she allows him to buss her cheek with his own for the sake of the gathered crowd. She steps back and away from him quickly though and instead waits for Rhodey to exit the front seat so she can lace her arm through his.

“You and me till the day we die right?” Toni asks quietly as she looks up at him.

“Till the day we die baby girl.” Rhodey confirms and his face is serious because he knows her so he knows she’s about to basically fuck up all the things.

“I love you too sugar pop.” Toni winks at him, sly and deliberate.

He just smiles, small but true, and leads her inside the gaggle of reporters and up onto the stage.

Toni stands in front of the podium, eyes on the crowd of reporters and staff all staring up at her expectantly. It takes all of her self-control not to sneer at their applause because a great many of these people are the same ones who’ve been talking about how much better off everyone would be if she were gone for years now. These are the people who’ve made her life hell for basically her entire life.

“Well,” Toni purrs into the microphone and hears the way Rhodey goes ‘oh God’ quietly under his breath because he recognizes her tone of voice, “I bet a lot of you thought you’d seen the last of me.
I’m sure I derailed a lot of very riveting post-mortem expose’ and biographical pieces by coming back.”

There’s a round of pained and uncomfortable chuckles as many of them shift uneasily on their feet because they all know she’s right.

“You shouldn’t worry though because I promise you today won’t be a slow news day.” Toni smiles, soft and slow and just a shade off deadly because that’s how she gets when she’s aching and can’t afford to let anyone else see. “Stark Industries has a long and frankly lucrative history of providing arms to the United States military. We have, over the decades, proudly upheld our many and varied contracts with the US armed forces in an effort to arm and protect the brave men and women who fight for the security of this country. Which is, in part, why I stand here before you today … conflicted.”

There’s a flurry of cameras clicking and reporters calling her name. Toni settles for Ben, the bright eyed and soft spoke reporter she’s always been slightly fond of.

“Miss Stark, what happened over here?”

“I saw young Americans, brave men and women, killed by the very weapons I designed to protect them.” Toni shakes her head sadly at the memory of the bright young soldiers in the Humvee with her that day. “I saw the remorseless slaughter of soldiers who should have been safe and were instead taken down by weapons I had created. Which is why, effective immediately, I will be closing down the weapons manufacturing sector of Stark Industries until such a time as I can determine the future of the company and the direction we will take.”

The roar is damn near deafening as Obie surges through the crowd, a wild and angry sort of desperation on his face. Toni just stares him down, one brow cocked, and then turns from the questions and the camera flashes to hold her hand out in Rhodey’s direction.

Rhodey looks suitably shocked for half a second before he closes his expression down, takes her hand and leads her down the stairs like a knight with his queen.

There will be a storm Toni knows. No one is going to take this lying down. Not the government, not Obie, not the board. They’re going to fight her but Toni’s always been willing to do battle for the things she cares about.

And this … this is something she cares about deeply.

Her weapons, the creations of her chaotic mind, have been placed into hands that should have never touched them. Given to terrorists more interested in domination than peace, in conquering instead of at least holding a line.

Toni can’t undo what has already been done but she can try to make amends as best she can.

Behind her placid expression Toni’s mind whirls.

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Obie catches up with her and Rhodey in the hall, his expression apoplectic.

“Toni what in the hell was that?” Obie reaches out to grab her by the arm but Toni side steps him easily enough. He looks like he’s going to reach for her again before he seems to see Rhodey, tall and strong and stone faced, staring him down. His hand drops quickly after that. “Toni sugar I know you’ve had a rough time of it but you can’t just drop a bombshell like that and walk away.
You’re painting a target on both of our heads here. I can’t protect you when you don’t give me a heads up every once in a while.”

“Obie,” Toni cuts in, “I do not and have not ever needed your protection.”

“Do you have any idea what the over-under on the stock drop is going to be tomorrow Toni?”

“Estimated forty point drop at minimum Obie, I ran the numbers myself so yes I know.” Toni waves his concern off. “We’ll recoup our losses in our other divisions.”

“Toni it’s not that simple.” Obie scrubs a hand over his beard. “We’re a weapons manufacturer, iron mongers to the core. Weapons, armaments, it’s what we do.”

“I’m still the Stark in Stark Industries Obie,” Toni narrows her eyes at him sharply and the hand she had wrapped around Rhodey’s arm tightens, “it’s my name on the side of the building and I want the weapons division shut down.”

“We keep the world flowing smoothly Toni, we keep things from falling into chaos.” Obie plows forward. “If you shut down Stark weapons you’re opening up a power vacuum.”

“I will not have the only legacy of this company be a body count.” Toni snarls, only holding on to her normal composure by her ragged nails. “There are other avenues of revenue to pursue, other fields to expand in. We have a good basis in everything from agriculture to medical technology. Weapons aren’t the only things in our wheelhouse.”

Finally Obie seems to wilt, he takes a step closer to her as if he’s going to reach out again but stops with a sigh a second later. His shoulders slump just a bit but Toni holds firm.

“Look Toni,” Obie rubs a hand over his head, “we’re a team okay? Your father entrusted me with making sure the company was there for you when you turned twenty-one, to guide you through this life style and the business world until you were steady. Together there’s nothing we can’t do so let’s just stick together on this. Go home, rest up and lay low for a while. I’ll get the ball rolling on this, start laying the ground work for the shift.”

“You’re not going to fight me on this?” Toni can’t help the suspicious surprise that arcs through her alongside a vague sense of relief. If Obie backs her things will go so much smoother and Toni will actually be grateful to him for once because she’s tired and has plans and not having to add more stress on top of everything else would be fantastic.

“I’m all about the bottom line Toni,” Obie admits ruefully. “It’s not a secret, you know that about me. But you’ve been good for the company since you took control, better than anyone would have ever thought you’d be. I’m willing to make a leap of faith here with you. It’s the least I can do after all this time.”

“Thanks Obie,” Toni manages to push the words out past her surprise, “that actually means a lot to me.”

“It’s going to be hard kiddo,” Obie looks vaguely amused as he reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a cigar, “I’m not going to lie to you about that. We’re going to take a lot of heat, but I’ll back your play as long as you promise not to throw anymore unexpected curve balls at me.”

“Deal.” Toni, for the first time in more years than she can remember, reaches out a hand towards Obie.

“Don’t worry about it kid.” Obie grins. “Uncle Obie’ll handle everything, just you wait and see.”
Being back at the mansion feels better than Toni had thought possible.

She waves Happy and Rhodey away at the door and they both look reluctant to go but she knows they’ll have to soon. Rhodey, Toni knows, has about a million meetings lined up because of her press conference and Happy needs to be at Pepper’s beck and call for a while.

“You better be here when I get back Toni.” Rhodey looks one wrong move from tying her to his side or his back spider monkey style. “So help me God if you manage to get in trouble while I’m gone.”

“Aw boo-bear I’ll be safe I promise.” Toni presses close to him for another hug and goes serious again. “I just … I need a bit of time Rhod. Just, I want to see the boys, get used to being home for a bit. Unwind for a while. I’m not going anywhere. Promise.”

“Okay baby girl.” Rhodey presses a kiss against her cheek. “I’ll be back when I can.”

He turns to walk away and again Toni can’t help but stop him.

“Hey Rhodey?” She waits until he turns to ask the question that’s been pulling at the back of her mind all day. “Are you … disappointed in me? For closing the weapons division?”

Rhodey stares at her for a moment before he sighs, scrubs a hand over his face, and walks back over to her. His hands are gentle when he cups her face in his palms.

“Toni, you’re terrifying. Most of the time I have no idea where your mind is or what it’s doing. You run on more tracks than I ever thought possible for one person.” Toni winces slightly because that’s always been a problem for her, the way her mind runs so fast that it outpaces most other people by a mile. “But despite all of that I know you always have a reason for your particular brand of crazy and I decided a long time ago that I was going to trust you until you gave me a reason not to.”

“I’ve given you a lot of reasons not to trust me over the years.” Toni whispers.

“No baby girl you really haven’t.” Rhodey shakes his head. “You’ve made mistakes yeah. You’ve done some stupid fucking shit and dragged me along willingly on a lot of it. I’ve come closer to being arrested with you more times than anyone I know and we’ve gotten into and out of more scrapes together than is probably healthy. But you have never, and I mean never, given me a reason to doubt you like that.”

“Only because you’re too good for me Rhodey.” Toni confesses. “You’re one of the best things to ever happen to me and I don’t want to mess that up.”

“And you never will sweetheart.” Rhodey sighs and leans down to press their foreheads together gently. “Short of killing me there’s not much you could do to make me distrust you like that Tones. And even then I’d have to be sure you didn’t have a damn good reason. If shutting down weapons manufacturing is what you want to do then I’m with your right up until the end. Is it going to be annoying having the brass on my ass? God yes. Am I going to enjoy it? Fuck no.”

They both bark out a laugh because it’s true. He’s going to have one hell of a time dealing with the higher ups.

“But fuck them.” Rhodey abruptly goes serious again, pulls back so he can stare her directly in the eyes. “They don’t control you and if they think they’re going to make me try to do it for them then they’ll find out just how fast they can take my commission and shove it up their asses. I almost lost
you Toni. I almost lost you in a goddamn desert over those same fucking weapons so you can sure as shit bet I’ll pick you over SI’s manufacturing future any day. It’s you and me little girl. Through thick and thin, I’m with you Tones, till the day we die. You and me.”

Toni smiles so hard it feels as if her face might split.

“I love you.” Toni tells him because it’s true, has never been truer than this moment. Because she has Rhodey, will always have Rhodey if she has her way about things. Because even when she had nothing, when Jarvis was taken from her and she was a barely functioning ball of pain for months on end, she had Rhodey.

Jarvis had been her safe harbor, had been the eye in her storm.

But Rhodey, Rhodey was, is, her north star. Bright, shining, and always there for her even when the sky is too cloudy for her to see him clearly.

And having that, having that pure and complex connection with him, it helps to make everything else seem worthwhile.

Toni watches him turn to leave and feels lighter than she has in months.

Rhodey gets a few steps towards Happy and the waiting care before he stops, turns back around, and jogs back towards her.

“I almost forgot.” He reaches up and into the neck of his shirt. Toni sees something glint gold in the sunlight before the shine is hidden by Rhodey’s arm as he holds it closed fight out towards her.

“Here, take this. Can’t believe I almost forgot to give this back to you.”

Toni reaches out her palm and feels her heart skip a beat when something small and warm drops into her hand. When she looks down she sees her pendant, a little worse for the wear and mounted on a new chain but still intact, waiting for her.

“How?” She chokes the question out. She’d thought she’d lost it forever when she’d woken in the cave without it. Hell she was still surprised she’d managed to hang onto her nipple bars.

“The day you were … the day you were taken I found it on the ground.” Rhodey swallows hard, looks haunted for a long, terrible moment. “We back tracked when we heard the explosion but we were too late. I was looking for any kind of clue as to where you were or who took you when I found it. It was just lying there, shining in the sun like a beacon beside this little pool of blood that I just knew was yours. I’ve kept it on me this whole time, like a good luck charm or something. Told myself as long as I had it I’d find you because there’s no way you’d ever leave it behind for long.”

“Rhodey.” Toni takes a deep shuddering breath, reaches out, and grabs him by the hand. She takes the necklace and presses it back into his palm. “Keep it.” She ignores his noise of protest. “Keep it like a promise okay? You keep that safe for me, make sure it stays that way, make sure it always finds its way back home. It’s far more important than you realize so you make sure it comes home with you in one piece.”

Alright.” Rhodey reaches up and clips the necklace back into place, tucks it down beneath his collar so it’s well hidden.

“Good.” Toni smiles, reaches up to pat him on the cheek lightly and then leans around him to wave at Happy. “Now go deal with the fallout for a while. I’ll be here when you get back. JARVIS probably won’t let me out of the house as soon as I step in and I’m pretty sure I’ve got a lot of groveling to do with the boys.”
“Oh yeah.” Rhody cracks a grin then. “Wait until you meet Mother. That’s going to be fun. Make sure you have JARVIS record your reaction for me.”

“Fuck.” Toni sighs as her shoulders slump. “I forgot about the lizard. Well at least it’s not a very big one.”

“Ha!” Rhody barks out a laugh. “Yeah have fun with that. Like I said, have JARVIS record.”

“It would be my pleasure Lt. Colonel, once Miss decides to finally come inside.” JARVIS’ pipes up suddenly through the exterior speakers. “The bots are rather eager to see you Miss though I do warn you that Butterfingers is in a bit of a sulk.”

“Oh yeah,” Toni mutters, “this is going to be so much fun.”

Chapter End Notes

Sooo!? What did you guys think of this first bit? Am I doing good so far tackling canon? Let me know what you think, head canons, requests, concerns, explosive comments, anything and everything.

Oh and quick poll question: I had a reviewer ask about the name of the suit. I've been kicking around a few ideas that might not be canon and I'd love some opinions. Would you guys absolutely hate it if I didn't go the Iron Man/Woman route or would a more original name in keeping with the story be alright? Let me know!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

♫ Making my way downtown ♫
♫ Walking fast ♫
*drops chapter*
♫ Walking faster ♫

So again you guys have blown me away with your responses. Just all the love, all the screaming, all the long rambling reviews. I adore each and every one of them and encourage you to vent/speculate to your heart's content.

Now warning time: This chapter is part 2 out 3 for Iron Man 1 and deals heavily in the area of canon-divergence so fair warning that shit is going to go down different! Like really different.

So here’s the chapter and I’m so sorry for the pain, except for how I’m not

Also have a fanmix cause you might need it: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I must say Miss it is good to have you back home.” JARVIS speaks up as soon as Toni steps inside. The front door locks automatically behind her and Toni bites down a chuckle. She’d known he was going to go all over watch on her for a while. She has a feeling that she’ll be lucky if he doesn’t have her chipped like a puppy before the week’s out.

“It’s good to be back J.” Toni grins and blows JARVIS a kiss. “And the boys do know I’m here right?”

“Yes Miss.” JARVIS confirms as Toni moves towards the hall that’ll take her to her room. “As I said before they are rather excited. Though I must warn you that while DUM-E and U are eagerly awaiting you by the door, Butterfingers is rather cross with you and might endeavor to give you the silent treatment as it were.”

“I’m going to have to grovel right?” Toni asks again and sighs as she kicks off her heels and slowly eases her sling up and over her head. She’s not sure if they know she’s been hurt or not but she doesn’t want the boys to see her like this. It’s bad enough that there are cuts on her face that not even her unusually heavy makeup can completely cover. The last thing she wants to do is to worry them more than she already has.

“Might I suggest trying your hand at an upgrade for Mother?” JARVIS suggests helpfully much to Toni’s confusion. “While DUM-E and U are attached to her Butterfingers is rather cross with you and might endeavor to give you the gesture the most given his sensitivity on the subject.”

“Sensitivity about what?” She asks as she makes her way to her closet and pulls out one of Rhodey’s long sleeve shirts she stole and a pair of soft sweats. Conscious of the way her body aches and the gauze covered reactor buried in her chest that she still hasn’t told anyone but Rhodey about
Toni tugs the shirt on carefully but quickly. That’s not a conversation she wants to have with JARVIS at the moment. Soon, but not right now.

“Ah.” JARVIS pauses for a telling moment.

“J?”

“Perhaps I was remiss on being clear when it comes to Mother’s circumstances.” JARVIS admits almost sheepishly.

“Oh God what is it now? Is she radioactive? Gonna shoot fire bolts or blue lightning or like grow thirty feet when my back’s turned?” Toni waves her hands around expressively. “Is it secretly a Gorn JARVIS? Is it gonna try and sell me car insurance? Cause all of that’s not necessarily a deal breaker but depending on which one it is we’ll have to reconfigure some stuff in here, maybe build an extension or something.”

“As admirable as your willingness to deal with radioactivity and a propensity towards salesmanship in a reptile is Miss, I assure you it’s nothing quite so dire.” JARVIS soothes her. “It is simply that Mother is not exactly … whole.”

“Come again?”

“That is to say, Mother is missing a limb. The front right leg to be exact.” JARVIS repeats slowly. “The fault lies with the previous owner who allowed a wound to fester.”

“That’s … actually kind of horrible.” Toni admits slowly before she winces. “And now I know why Butterfingers is so sensitive about her. I’d hoped he’d grow out of it but I guess not.”

“Yes, he’s never quite gotten over having two arms instead of one like DUM-E and U.”

“As long as he knows that being different doesn’t make him wrong.” Toni says firmly. “I’ve told you all that for different reasons and I stand by it. What’s he been doing?”

“He hovers Miss.”

“Hovers?”

“Indeed Miss, he’s extremely protective of Mother. I believe it stems from his anxiety about your absence.” JARVIS confirms. “I tried to reason with him about being so defensive but after Butterfingers … expressed himself again I thought it best to let the matter lie.”

“Hmm.” Toni hums absently. Toni’s all too familiar with Butterfingers expressing himself. While generally well behaved he’s also the most likely to act out of the three bots. And while Toni isn’t afraid of him actually hurting anyone who isn’t a threat to her or the others it could be said that his grasp on his temper is … slippery at best. “Oh well. It’s not like it’ll affect anything in the long run right? I mean health wise for her? I should be able to build her a leg easily enough so it’s not like it matters to me, but let me know if we need to take her to a vet or anything.” Toni hums again, mind already whirling with ideas. “Haven’t done much in the way of prosthetics for animals but it’ll be a nice project. Who knows maybe we’ll get something patent worthy out of it alongside making Butterfingers cool his circuits.”

“One could hope Miss.”

Finally dressed Toni presses a lingering kiss to Steve’s chest, an action she’s missed for months now, and heads down to the workshop.
There are other things she needs to do, Toni knows that. Things that have been hovering in the back of her mind for days now. Things that, if she goes through with them, will change everything. But she pushes them all aside for now, shoves them to the back of her mind to concentrate on the here and now.

She has a reunion, a fucking lizard, and a sulking bot to take care of after all.

Family, no matter how strange, comes first, comes before everything else in this instance.

After so long being forcefully separated from one another, they all deserve some time together before everything goes to hell again.

Which, Toni knows, it will.

Because it always seems to in one way or another.

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DUM-E and U race for her as soon as JARVIS opens the door to the workshop. They swirl around her, chirping and whirling happily. DUM-E is carrying a glass of what looks like shredded grass and U has what Toni’s sure was once one of her t-shirts but has now been fashioned into some kind of scarf tied just below the joint of his hand.

“Hey babies.” Toni coos as she reaches out and runs a hand over each of them. They lean into her touch like puppies, desperate for her attention and somehow obviously relieved to have her back.

DUM-E pulls back first only to shove the glass into her hand and beep at her encouragingly. U seems happy enough to curl his fingers carefully in the hem of her shirt.

“Do not drink that Miss.” JARVIS chimes in. “While DUM-E is enthusiastic about seeing to your health I’m afraid he’s not yet learned to completely differentiate between what is and is not toxic for you.”

“What he put in this?” Toni takes a cautious sniff of the glass and has to force herself not to gag.

“An appetizing blend of cabbage and antifreeze I believe Miss. He took the cabbage from Mother’s refrigerator and the antifreeze from storage.” JARVIS informs her and Toni immediately looks around for somewhere to covertly drop the glass. “Luckily Butterfingers is the only one allowed to feed Mother so she’s rather safe from DUM-E’s culinary skills, such as they are.”

That’s when Toni takes the time to really look around at her long yearned for workshop.

The place is, to Toni’s surprise and yet immediate acceptance, a goddamn mess.

The kitchenette corner is a stunning mosaic of green splattered goop across one wall, her worktable is littered with bits and pieces of half built items that’ve been stacked in small groups and clusters. There’s a large, star burst shaped crack in the glass of the Steve poster she’d hung for them, centered directly over the star on his chest. Her cars are covered with tarps thankfully but the couch is standing on its end in the far corner, lent precariously against the wall and covered partially with a sheet like some sort of strange tent.

Beyond that though the entire back corner of one wall is now dedicated to a large glass tank complete with what she assumes is the necessary Mother related equipment Happy had delivered and set up under JARVIS’ directions.
Butterfingers is, suspiciously, nowhere to be found.

Toni eyes the sheet covered couch with a deep and fond sort of amused suspicion.

“Hey J?” Toni moves forward, DUM-E races ahead of her twirling circles in his excitement while U still clings to her shirt, and sets the glass of green death on an uncluttered section of her table. “Where’s Butterfingers?”

“I am afraid I’ve been asked not to tell you Miss.” JARVIS sounds both exasperated and faintly amused.

The sheet over the couch rustles.

“That’s too bad.” Toni forces a pout onto her face and exaggerated sadness into her voice. “If only I knew where he was then maybe I could tell him how much I missed him and his brothers, how lonely I was without them.”

The sheet twitches.

“I mean maybe we could even work on some stuff together. Maybe even something for Mother.” Toni strokes a hand over U’s knuckles and sighs, eyes carefully adverted from the couch and still rustling sheet. “But if Butterfingers didn’t miss me then I guess I’ll just … go over here with U and DUM-E. Maybe they’ll introduce me to Mother and we can all play basketball later, maybe put in some circuit upgrades. It’s too bad though, I was really looking forward to some Butterfingers hugs.”

Butterfingers comes practically bursting out from his makeshift tent, the sheet falling to the ground and the couch wobbling precariously in place.

Toni has a moment to register his movement as he comes at her with both arms extended eagerly, and can only blink in shocked incredulousness.

Because across the back of his joints, laid out directly across the hydraulics that connect to his arms, is the biggest fucking lizard Toni’s ever seen.

Mother, and Toni hopes that’s who the lizard is because if there are more lurking around the mansion somewhere then her and JARVIS are going to have words, is five foot if she’s an inch with a long, whip like tail. Her skin’s a vibrant green and she has a row of wicked looking red and yellow spikes that runs from her neck to the tip of her tail. She’s also, just as JARVIS said, missing the majority of her right front leg.

Not that it seems to bother her much with the way she’s draped lazily across Butterfingers like a reptilian queen.

At least on that fact Toni can agree as she too is often considered both cold blooded and something like royalty.

“Hey Butterfingers.” Toni steps forward into his arms and can’t help the smile that comes across her face when he oh so carefully wraps his large hands gently around her waist in his version of a hug. Still she keeps a close eye on Mother and her wicked looking claws. “I’ve missed you too baby bot.”

He whirls at her, sounding both angry and chiding at the same time, but his hands stay at her waist just like U’s is still tangled in her shirt. DUM-E, forever the enthusiastic one, has managed to find the glass she’d set down and is bearing down on all of them with his own particular brand of insistence.
From across Butterfingers’ back Mother stares at her steadily, long forked tongue tasting the air.

“I missed you guys so much.” Toni has to blink back the tears that well up but a few still trickle out anyways. “It’s good to be home babies. It’s good to be home.”

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“J, buddy, when you said you bought them a lizard,” Toni rests her elbows on her worktable hands pressed together in front of her face and fingertips pressed directly between her eyes, “I was expecting something like a gecko maybe, or one of those cute little bearded dragon things.”

“In my defense Miss …” JARVIS goes to say but Toni, head now pressed to the curled knuckles of one hand, raises the other up in a silencing gesture.

“Oh you’ll have a chance to defend yourself baby boy.” Toni reassures him as she drops her hand back down. “But yeah like I was saying, a gecko, maybe, mostly cause you said it was small.”

“Relatively small Miss.” JARVIS points out unhelpfully. “I did say relatively small.”

“Oh I’m gonna put you in a relatively small time out J if you keep on splitting hairs with me.” Toni warns. “Time out’s the ATM on the corner of 2nd and Main by the way.”

“Yes Miss.” They both know she’s lying but it’s a familiar and comforting kind of banter.

Toni has missed this, them, so much.

“So, small lizard I could deal with. Maybe even learn to love.” Toni sits back in her seat so that she can stare at the creature who’s appropriated the long length of one of the shelves that used to house JARVIS’ models before Toni had given him his own room. She’s sprawled out directly underneath what looks to be a sunlamp that Toni doesn’t remember buying. Must have been one of the things JARVIS had Happy deliver and set up for Mother’s care.

She’s also staring directly at Toni, head tilted and large eye fixed on her position. She looks menacing, her green hide offset by the red and yellow spikes that flow down her back. She’s been staring ever since Butterfingers had made his way to the shelf and let her step leisurely off of his back.

Toni has a sneaky suspicion she might have been semi-usurped by a reptile.

“This is not a small lizard JARVIS.” Toni waves a hand in Mother’s direction. “This is a fucking dinosaur.”

“Technically Miss, Mother is what is commonly referred to as a giant green iguana.”

“Technically.” Toni mocks. “Technically I’m gonna donate all of your classic mecha models to an elementary school.”

“Miss.” JARVIS sounds almost scandalized and it takes all of Toni’s willpower not to break out into a grin.

“Just think about it J, all those grubby, sticky little hands playing with your premium, limited edition, hand tooled models.” Toni taunts him gleefully. “All the high gloss paint, all the small and easily broken moveable joints.”

“It is no surprise to me that Butterfingers has a propensity for violence.” JARVIS says archly. “He
came by his cruel streak honestly as he obviously resembles *you* the most out of all of us.”

“Butterfingers is indeed a rage powered bot after my own heart.” Toni finally breaks into a grin. “I’m just joking J. You know I’d never do anything untoward to your Gundam set.”

“Indeed Miss.” “JARVIS agreed. “And in my defense Mother was slated for termination due to lack of owner care and the missing limb. In some light you could say that we … staged a rescue of sorts for Mother as well. Mr. Hogan was rather pleased to be of assistance.”

“Can’t argue with that J and I’ll never be mad at you for doing something good like that. Just try not to turn the mansion into a zoo every time I go out.” Toni sighs. “Well can’t say I ever wanted a small dinosaur before, well at least not after Rhodey explained to me that *Jurassic Park* wasn’t supposed to be, like, a *goal* to work towards, but as long as she’s not going to eat me in my sleep I’ll adjust.” Toni looks to where Butterfingers is rolling up to the shelf, staring up at Mother with apparent adoration, a dish of shredded green clasped carefully between his hands. “Plus I think Butterfingers would stage an actual mutiny if I tried to get rid of it.”

“He has grown rather attached.” JARVIS agrees.

“Still a bit confused as to how they decided to name her after me though.” Toni tilts her head and stares back at Mother for a moment. “I mean I know I’ve been called cold blooded before but beyond my inner reptilian personality traits I’m just not seeing it.”

“It was, I believe, their desire to have you back as well as your similar coloring that lead to her being named in your image.”

“Similar …” Toni stops, looks back at Mother for a long moment, and considers. “It’s the spikes isn’t it? The yellow and red? Looks an awful lot like the colors I normally wear so I’m guessing it reminded them of me? Some sort of skewed color association?”

“Yes Miss. I find myself agreeing with them on their decision.” JARVIS put in. “Beyond the coloring similarities she too seems to possess an inexplicable sort of charm despite her obvious personality flaws.”

“J if I didn’t know better I’d say you were insulting me.”

“Then I am grateful you are remarkably intelligent Miss.”

“JARVIS I think your lessons in sarcasm might have paid off more than I intended.” Toni wipes an imaginary tear away from her eye. “I’m so proud.”

“As ever Miss I aim to please.”

“As ever J you surpass every expectation.” Toni carefully stretches her arms above her head and barely bites back her wince when the movement pulls. DUM-E and U are busy cleaning up, or rather U is. DUM-E’s sort of just turning circles with the sheet from the now resettled couch draped over him. “But back to business baby boy. I’ve got a little time to play before I need to get down to the super serious stuff so why don’t you open up a new project file for me. Let’s index it as … *Godzilla*. Also get me all the info I need to catch up on regarding how to treat Mother like the queen she is. I’ll start working on how to fix that leg issue and maybe retrofit her habitat. She’s a Stark now which means she needs to be living *in style*.”

“Of course Miss. Shall I put together a list or would you rather I read them off to you?”

“Serenade me J.” Toni commands with a lifted finger. “Sing me sweet, sweet lizard related facts.”
“Yes Miss.”

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Toni spends a few hours unwinding, tinkering with the holographic design display as she pieces together a rudimentary prosthetic and harness for Mother.

It’s relaxing being able to just create without any urgency behind the act. It’s just the sort of recharge her mind needs.

The bots seem happy enough, DUM-E is still busy playing with his sheet and U seems to be categorizing the myriad of things Toni had him clean off of her workbench. JARVIS had told her they were all small projects the bots had put together in her absence, trinkets left to lure her home as it were.

They look sort of like some of those abstract art sculptures Pepper likes so much. Toni already has plans to put them up on one of the cleared shelves in her room once U has them organized to his satisfaction.

Mother’s back to laying on Butterfingers’ because she seems to consider him her throne and the workshop resounds with one of Toni’s more relaxing playlists. It’s all smooth, seductive French and mournful Jazz instead of the heavy rock or loud, infectious pop she normally favors but it helps the tension to drain from her shoulders.

Because outside of Rhodey’s arms this is where Toni feels safest, and above anywhere else this is where she feels the most at home.

Exhaustion finally catches up with Toni, finally eats through the last remaining tendrils of adrenaline that have been keeping her running.

“I’m tired J,” Toni yawns as she pushes herself up from her chair, “save progress on all open projects, put the leg into fabrication, and then lock the lab down. No one in or out for the night unless it’s Rhodey.”

“Will you be retiring to your room Miss?”

“Nah J, I think I’m gonna stay down here tonight with the boys.” Toni sways her way over to the poster of Steve and traces her fingers across the starburst of broken glass over his chest. “What happened here JARVIS?”

There’s a moment of silence.

“When you were first … indisposed Miss and did not return on time nor send word,” JARVIS starts softly, “the bots were rather distraught. I’m afraid to say that they seemed to think that a combination of pressing on the poster and building the trinkets they left on your work station would bring you back quicker. The glass simply wasn’t strong enough to endure their strength or their anxiety.”

Toni chokes back a small, hurt sound at the mental image of her boys basically begging a poster of Steve to bring her back.

“Put in an order for a new frame J, something with a high stress level, maybe bullet proof.” Toni kisses her palm and then presses it against the spider webbing cracks before she turns to flop down on the couch.

She watches, heavy eyed and drowsy, as the bots, one by one, roll over to kiss Steve as well.
Butterfingers goes last and Toni huffs out a fond laugh when he turns so that Mother’s nose can butt against the poster as well before he rolls towards her habitat.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

“Icarus please J.”

“Of course Miss.”

Toni listens to JARVIS’ smooth, comforting voice as the bots all come to settle down around her. DUM-E strokes her hair carefully with one finger while U clutches at her shirt and Butterfingers drapes his arms across the back of the couch, one hand butting lightly against her own.

She falls asleep there, surrounded by her children.

Safe.

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Below her the sea shifts from endless sand to writhing water, a chimera made up of all she fears.

Steve stares up at her expectantly from the ever changing surface with eyes so blue they glow.

In her chest a star burns brightly.

~~~

Toni wakes with a pained gasp. For moment she’s disorientated, doesn’t remember where she is, and it’s that fact coupled with the way her chest aches that threatens to send her into a panic attack.

“It is 8:23 a.m. on Saturday the 23rd.” JARVIS’ voice cuts through her panic like a knife. “You are inside the workshop of the Malibu mansion.” He pauses for a moment and then continues softly. “You are safe Miss.”

Toni forces herself to take a shuddering breath and then another until her heartbeat begins to slow down and the panic begins to finally completely fade away.

“Thanks J.” Toni mutters as she sits up and buries her face in her hands. Her body aches and she feels dirty, hair oily and face still heavy with makeup. She wants a shower, coffee, and maybe, if she can stomach it, something to eat that isn’t cabbage or laced with antifreeze.

“There’s a message from Lt. Colonel Rhodes Miss.” JARVIS cuts through the still sleep hazed clutter of her mind.

“Rhodey?” Toni perks up slightly because she’d been expecting him to come back last night but had also figured he’d probably be busy being run ragged with everything that’s going on.

“Indeed Miss. Shall I play the message?”

“Go ahead J.”

“Hey Tones,” Rhodey’s voice spills out of the speakers, “JARVIS said you’re asleep and I didn’t
want to wake you up. I’m swamped over here and I’m not sure when they’re going to let me out. The brass isn’t happy baby girl but like I said, fuck ‘em.”

Toni smiles softly to herself at the reminder that, once again, Rhodey’s backing her play.

“Anyways I was just checking in, call me when you’re up so I don’t spend all day worried about you. Also you’d better not hesitate to call someone if you need help Toni. I mean it. Me, Pepper, Happy. We’d all be there in a second if you need anything sweetheart, even if it’s just to talk.”

“I know Rhody.” Toni murmurs even though she knows he can’t hear her. Sometimes she still can’t believe she has him, them, in her life. Can’t believe that anyone except for Jarvis would love her or care for her enough to come for her in any situation. Would love her in a way she’s not even sure she loves herself.

“I’ve got to go now Tones,” Rhodey’s voice softens, goes noticeably affectionate, “I love you little girl. Don’t forget that okay? I know you wanted, needed, time to yourself and that’s basically the only reason I’m not carrying you around in a *papoose*. I know you’re strong Toni, stronger than just about anyone I know, but you don’t have to do this, do anything, alone. Just keep that in mind. I’ll talk to you soon.”

The message ends and Toni feels happier, lighter in that embarrassing way that overt displays or announcement of affection always makes her. It’s a weakness of hers, this vulnerability to outright and sincere care and praise. Before Rhodey it had been something she’d only gotten from Jarvis and she’s so pathetically weak for it even now after all these years of Rhodey and Pepper and Happy’s steady friendship.

Toni’s almost shamefully sure it’s something she’ll likely *never* outgrow.

“Save message to the archives J. I’m gonna go get a shower and then we’ve got some actual serious work to do.”

“Yes Miss.” JARVIS agrees. “I’ve taken the liberty of turning on the coffee maker in the upstairs kitchen for you Miss. Also file index *Godzilla* has completed the fabrication process. Mother’s leg is now complete.”

“Awesome.” Toni cheers lightly even as she rubs lightly at her chest, the ache of the reactor cutting slightly through her good mood. “You’re a saint J and I’ll fit her up after my shower.”

With a small but still happy sigh Toni pushes up onto her feet, pats each one of the bots lovingly, and then drags herself off of the couch and out of the workshop to take a much needed shower.

It’s right when she’s about to pull off her shirt that she once again realizes that she’s not told JARVIS or the boys about the reactor. She’s not sure if JARVIS knows, if he’s found out somehow, but surprising him with it by stripping down isn’t something she really wants to do.

“JARVIS,” Toni calls out, “engage privacy mode on bathroom cameras buddy.”

“Miss?” JARVIS sounds faintly alarmed because, like with Rhodey, nudity isn’t something that’s even been a real issue with her where JARVIS is concerned. She very rarely engages the privacy mode on his cameras and it’s a clear sign that something is amiss.

“There’s some stuff we need to talk about J,” Toni reassures him.

“Does this concern the unusual energy readings you’ve been exhuding since your return?” JARVIS is as astute as always.
“Yeah J it is. It’s nothing too horrible but I’d rather show you and the boys all at once okay?”

“Yes Miss,” JARVIS agrees reluctantly, “it is just …”

“Hey,” Toni calls to him softly because she has a good idea what his issue is, “I’m gonna be okay J, I’ll … I’ll talk the whole time alright? So you can hear me even if you can’t see me. That sound good?”

“It’s not necessary Miss.” JARVIS disagrees.

They both know it’s not necessary but comfort is rarely about necessity.

Plus there the fact that Toni isn’t entirely sure how she’s going to deal with taking a shower. The thought of the water washing over her face is enough to send her heartbeat speeding. The thought of a bath, of being submerged at all, is even worse.

There’ll be no more pool days in Toni’s life for the foreseeable future.

Just another thing those bastards had taken from her and something Toni just didn’t have the strength to fight for at the moment. Not now when there were other, more important things, to worry about besides her fear.

“Yeah, JARVIS baby, no,” Toni says, “it kind of is. I’ve already made you worry enough, keeping up a line of chatter’s not really all that big a deal to me anyways.”

In the end the shower’s a trial.

She sets the water to just a shade off blistering hot because it’s different from the frigid chill of the trough they’d drowned her in. Then she tries to edge underneath the spray from a variety of directions, chatting loudly all the while, in order to find one that doesn’t send fear and panic jolting through her. In the end she just resigns herself to contorting and twisting to wet and rinse her hair and to using cupped hands and flexibility for her body. It’s overall unpleasant and Toni resolves to buy/create a suitable removable showerhead later on.

Even with all of the time and effort she puts into it Toni ends up shaking by the time it’s done. Ends up with her body hunched over and her arms curled protectively across the reactor, but she’s clean so she’ll count that as a victory.

She waits until she’s dressed, hair in a towel, and reactor’s light covered by the extra thick sweater she’s wearing before she disengages privacy mode and heading back to the workshop.

She needs to work on the reactor and that means a conversation with JARVIS and the boys.

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The reveal of the arc reactor elicits a wide variety of responses.

JARVIS seems both panicked and almost intrigued by the connotations of its placement as well as its power output.

DUM-E likes the light while U seems almost scared of it until Toni coaxes him to lay his hand gently across the top of it, careful of the ache in her chest that too much pressure always makes worse.

Butterfingers, fresh from feeding Mother, takes one look at it, realizes it’s inside of her, and promptly freaks the fuck out. There’s angry whirling, hand curling, and circle twirling. Toni’s not sure if he’s
cursing her or despairing her inability to stay in one piece.

She’s almost afraid to ask JARVIS but either way she’s pretty sure that it’s a sign that Butterfingers has been spending too much time with Rhodey.

Eventually they all calm down and Toni takes a moment to pull Mother’s leg from the fabrication unit, attach it to the hand tooled, padded leather harness she’d put together, and head over to the habitat.

Mother stares at her with one unblinking eye as Toni moves closer to the enclosure but otherwise doesn’t react.

“Hey Lil’ Mama,” Toni coos as she reaches out to her and slowly, carefully, strokes her fingertips over Mother’s side before she even thinks about trying to attach the harness. She spends a few minutes there, lightly petting Mother, getting acquainted to her, before she slowly attaches the harness and the leg.

It’s made out of high quality plastic so that it’s solid but lightweight enough not to hamper Mother’s movements. JARVIS had taken the liberty of having it done in reds and yellows and Toni thinks it looks pretty badass once it’s on and settled.

“Alright JARVIS buddy,” Toni calls after a few more, surprisingly relaxing, minutes petting the lizard she’s sure to now be officially attached to, “time to get busy. Mama needs a new reactor and that means we need to build. Keep the process off the servers though J. This one is strictly in house in all sense of the term.”

“On your word Miss,” JARVIS responds, “all stations ready.”

So Toni moves to do what she’s best at.

Create.

~~~

Toni refines the arc reactor, makes it better, more solid and secure in her chest, more efficient its power output. It’s easy to do, almost ridiculously so for something that had been considered a dead end science just weeks before.

She’s a bit queasy when it comes to replacing it, considers calling Pepper or Rhodey or even Happy to help her but the thought of anyone else’s hands inside her chest, even theirs, isn’t something she can deal with at the moment. Just the thought has her flashing back to that day, to waking up on the table with Yinsen’s hands buried inside of her as he cut her open and took pieces of her away.

She … she can’t handle that again. Maybe someday in the future, in a time where showers and her own fucking pool don’t fill her with terror. Maybe then she’ll be able to ask sweet, clever Pepper for help, will be able to go to Rhodey or Happy with a clear mind. But that day is not today.

Today all she has is that fear and JARVIS’ steady voice to keep her from falling into it.

Plus her hands are smaller than any of theirs are and it’s easier for her to readjust the exposed wire and slot the new reactor into place on her own. All she would have done was upset or disgusted them.

Because she’s seen herself naked in the full length of her bathroom mirror and she knows exactly how unsettling the reactor’s subtle glow and the implied depth of its casing is.
Rhodey’s already seen it and Pepper and Happy know about it and have been sworn to secrecy but she won’t ask them to do that kind of thing for her.

Not now.

~~~

Toni watches the old reactor, the one born of fear and desperation, burn in the small industrial grade incinerator in the back corner of the mansion grounds.

She’d thought about keeping it, about having it mounted or stored. She’d even thought for a second to give it to Rhodey or Pepper.

But …

She couldn’t.

That reactor was … dirty. It was a product of pain and rage and fear. It was stained with Yinsen’s blood, with Toni’s pain, stained with the evil of the bastards who had taken her, tortured her.

Toni didn’t, doesn’t, want to carry it.

Toni doesn’t want anyone else to carry it either, doesn’t want the few people she loves touched by it. Instead she watches it burn and in her mind it’s like finally giving Yinsen the burial he deserved. Instead it’s like taking the first step towards what she knows she needs to do.

Toni watches plumes of white smoke rise up into the air and behind her calm façade her mind whirls.

~~~

“Miss?” JARVIS sounds hesitant when Toni makes her way back inside.

“Yeah J?”

“I understand your reluctance to keep the former arc reactor given its origins and yet,” JARVIS pauses and seems to deliberate for a moment before he continues, “and yet I believe that given the importance the reactor plays in your continued health having a secondary unit available for emergency use would be wise.”

“You think I should build another one?” Toni can see his reasoning but having a second reactor just laying around has the potential to be dangerous if anyone was able to get their hands on it.

“If you are worried about the security Miss the blast proof safe as well as a coded container should be sufficient enough to shield it from both detection and theft.” JARVIS reassures her. “The bots and I would be more than capable of holding off anyone who attempts to enter the workshop unbidden.”

Toni debates for a moment before she sighs and runs a hand through her hair. It’s loose down her back for once because she’s alone and at home where it’s safe to be just Toni for a while.

“Would it make you feel better if I built a second one J?”

“I took the liberty of making sure there was enough in the way of materials for the creation of a second reactor when you started construction on the first.”
That’s answer enough for her right there.

“Okay.” Toni smiles fondly and shakes her head. “You’ve got me baby boy. I’ll make a back-up.”

“Thank you Miss.”

~~~

The back-up reactor is placed inside a padded container and then inside the blast proof safe.

It sits beside her recorder, the fireproof box of Rhodey’s letters, Jarvis’ briefcase, the small footlocker Aunt Peggy had given her with some of Steve’s things inside, and Aunt Peggy’s old, scratched up pistol from the war.

Toni looks at the items she’s stored away, proof against the rest of the world’s assumptions about her cold and heartless nature, and thinks it’s sort of funny.

Toni can’t remember when she’s seen so many pieces of her heart clustered together like this before.

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“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

~~~


Steve stares up at her expectantly with eyes so blue they burn.

Yinsen’s voice floats to her on the wind, ‘Don’t waste your life Stark, don’t waste it.’

And in her chest a star burns brightly.

~~~

JARVIS alerts her when Rhodey comes into the mansion but Toni doesn’t move. She’s curled up in the expansive sea of her bed and she knows that Rhodey will find her eventually.

He does. About an hour later and freshly showered he slips beneath the sheets in a pair of loose sleep pants. He wraps her in his arms and pulls her close to the warmth of his chest, the light from the reactor dimmed by her shirt and their close contact.

“Not sleeping?” He asks her softly.

“Thinking.”

“You’re always thinking baby girl.” Rhodey sounds tired but amused as he presses his face into her hair and inhales for a long moment. “Gonna tell me what’s got that crazy head of yours in such a whirl this time?”

“How are things down at the base?” Toni asks instead.

“There’s a lot of pissed off people who look ready to cry at the thought of not getting any more Stark weapons.” Rhodey huffs out a laugh. “Can’t blame them really. I mean your stuff’s the best baby
girl, no doubt about that. Hammer’s the next in line to take up your contracts you know?”

“Hammer.” Toni hisses his name in the same tone of voice that she usually uses for foul words like Fox News and Reed Richards.

“Down girl.”

“But Rhodey . . .” Toni whines as she pokes him in the side, “it’s Hammer. He couldn’t code through a game of Minesweeper not to mention an actual weapons system that works. He’s awful gumdrop, just awful. He’s like what would happen if someone taught the actual word awful how to be self-aware and then gave it a pair of pants. Awful pants.”

“Yes Toni I know how much you hate Justin Hammer.” Rhodey cuts in. “It’s been made abundantly clear over the years. More than once.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true,” Toni grumbles. And it doesn’t either because yeah, it’s Hammer. Toni built better than he does now when she was seven. “Anyways you were saying?”

“The brass is in a tizzy but there’s not much they can actually do and they know it,” Rhodey sighs. “Your contracts were up for renewal and they can’t force you into signing new ones so they’re stuck. I think they’re all hoping you’ll have a change of heart.”

“I won’t.” It’s a promise.

“I know sweetheart,” Rhodey’s arms tighten around her, “I’m not asking you to either.”

“Rhodey,” Toni hesitates for a moment and then plows forward, “I’m working on something new, something big. It’s not for the military but I’d like you to be in on it eventually, when I’m ready to share it. I’m not there yet, but . . . maybe soon.”

“Hey,” Rhodey pulls back far enough that they can look each other in the eyes thanks to the dim light of the room, “whatever it is I’m here for you Tones. They’ve got me lecturing new pilots while everything’s up in the air but I’m here for you Toni. Till the day we die.”

“You and me,” Toni agrees as she snuggles back into him, “you and me.”

~~~


“Don’t waste your life Stark, don’t waste it.”

And in her chest a star burns brightly.

~~~

Toni takes a day, gives Rhodey and Pepper a heads up, and has her jet fly her out to see Aunt Peggy.

“Hey Aunt Peggy.” Toni whispers as she settles down on the edge of her bed. Peggy’s still a beautiful woman, age and her sickness hasn’t stolen that from her yet, but there’s a softness to her now that wasn’t there before, a frailty.

Toni hates it almost as much as she loves her.

“Hello ducky.” Aunt Peggy smiles at her and Toni could have sobbed in relief because it’s obviously one of her good days. “I’ve missed you.”
“I’ve missed you too Aunt Peggy.” Toni presses a careful kiss to her cheek. “I just … got caught up in work. You know how I am.”

“You’re too hard on yourself darling. You should take some time for yourself.”

“I will, I promise.” She’d always gotten onto Toni about that in the past even when she was partying or off up to other kinds of no good. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve got to make a decision, a choice.” Toni starts, unsure exactly how to phrase what she’s trying to say for once. “It’s … difficult and complicated and I can’t explain, but it’s important. A lot of people won’t be happy about it but I think it’s the best thing to do, for me and for a lot of other people too. I just … I’m conflicted.”

Aunt Peggy’s silent for a long moment but before Toni can begin to worry that she’s slipped away from her again she finally speaks.

“After the serum, when Steve first started off, they restricted him to the USO tour.” Toni perks up immediately because even now, when she’s heard most of them, she still likes to hear Aunt Peggy’s stories about Steve. “It was all glitz and foolishness, nothing like what he’d been intended to do. When he made it overseas to where I was stationed I caught him once, drawing himself like a dancing monkey. He was so disappointed about not being able to fight, not because he wanted to hurt anyone but because he wanted so desperately to save them instead.”

Toni’s enthralled, attention focused fully on Aunt Peggy.

“Then when the 107th went missing and he found out that Sergeant Barnes was among those listed as gone … it was like someone had lit a fire inside of him.” She smiles softly with a dim sort of fond remembrance. “The men were given up as dead, or as good as in any case. A rescue would have been suicide. So of course Steve went anyways, managed to talk me and Howard both into helping.”

Toni winces at the mention of Howard but she’s used to it, used to the knowledge that the man she hated above all others had once worked hand in hand in hand with the one she admired.

“He didn’t hesitate but it wasn’t because he wasn’t conflicted. He was scared, I could see that easily enough, but he went anyways because that was his way.” Aunt Peggy sighs. “He was so brave ducky, so good. I see a lot of him in you.”

“I—I’m not, Aunt Peggy.” Tears well up in Toni’s eyes so quickly she barely has time to breathe and force them back down because she knows it’s true. She’s not that kind of person, not good and right like Steve was. She’s not. “I’m not like Steve. He was a good man, I’m just … me.”

“I’m not, Aunt Peggy.” Tears well up in Toni’s eyes so quickly she barely has time to breathe and force them back down because she knows it’s true. She’s not that kind of person, not good and right like Steve was. She’s not. “I’m not like Steve. He was a good man, I’m just … me.”

“You are ducky.” She insists. “You’re brave Toni, just like Steve was. Good like he was no matter how you try to hide it, no matter how you overlook it time and time again.” Aunt Peggy squeezes her hand. “Whatever choice you make, whatever this hard decision is, I know you’ll make the right one. That doesn’t necessarily mean the easiest one but I know it’ll be the right one and that’s what’s more important.”

“I love you.” Toni says it desperately, mournfully.

“I love you too ducky.” That bright glint of knowing, of awareness, is still in Aunt Peggy’s eyes. “I’ll always love you Toni, even when I don’t know you. A part of me will always love you.”
God it still hurts.

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“Hey.” Toni reaches out and traces her fingertips over the familiar letters. “It’s been a while hasn’t it?”

E. D. W. I. N.

“Things have been … bad Jarvis.” Toni confesses. “It’s only been a little while since I got home but sometimes … sometimes I wake up and it’s dark or cold or quiet or a million other little things and all I can think is that I’m back there. Back in the cave. I keep waiting for Yinsen to say my name, keep waiting for the water.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“I worked hard to get out Jarvis because it was terrible in that same way that Howard was terrible. All hurt and pain and sick hatred.” She shudders at the memories. “And yet, in a lot of ways, it was almost … better.”

Toni bites down on the inside of her jaw so hard she tastes blood because a part of her can’t believe she’s saying this, can’t believe she’s so broken inside that she’s actually been thinking this. The other part of her is happy to finally confess something she’s told no one, will never tell anyone, not even Rhodey.

Like always Jarvis will keep this secret for her.

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“It was almost better,” Toni whispers, “because they hurt me but I knew why. I … I never really knew why with Howard. I thought I did, still think I do, but I’ll never be sure. He’s dead though, like they are, and I’m grateful for that. Grateful that he died, that I killed them. But that question … the not knowing, it haunts me sometimes. He was supposed to be my father like Maria was supposed to be my mother. They were supposed to love me not hurt me and I’ll never know why they couldn’t. I’ll never know what was so wrong with me that he couldn’t forgive besides being born a girl.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“That’s one of the reasons I love you so much you know? Because you didn’t have to love me, weren’t supposed to really, but you did anyways.” Toni wipes a tear away with the heel of her hand, a rough almost angry swipe. “You loved me anyways and that made all the difference Jarvis.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“I’m going to do something,” Toni tells the stone, “I’m going to do something big, something just a bit crazy, but I think … I think it’s the right thing to do. It’s right like Steve going after the 107th was right. Like fighting Hydra was right. I think that this is something you’d have been proud of me for doing. Something that would have made you proud to call me … yours.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“I love you. I miss you.” She pushes her curls behind her shoulder, presses a kiss to the stone, and stands up. “Everything good about me came from you.”
"JARVIS?"
"Yes Miss?"


Steve stares up at her from the surface with eyes so blue they burn, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

She turns her face into the burning sun and pushes her wings to go faster.

And in her chest a star burns brightly

“Hey JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

“I’m going to be starting a new project, something big.” Toni settles down into her chair and brings her keyboard to life. Her fingers run over the special symbols that comprise the language she’s put together for her and JARVIS, a special combination of symbols and glyphs that only they understand. “It’s going to be complex, complicated, and if it goes the way I want it to then it’s going to require assistance of a special kind.”

“Assistance Miss?”

“Yeah J,” Toni pauses and bites her lip as she brings up the mock-up of the first suit she’d recreated from memory. “I’m going to rebuild this, make it better, faster, stronger. It’s going to be complex and it’s going to require your help to pilot. I don’t want to force you into this J, so if you don’t want to help me with it once it’s done then I need you to tell me now. I’ll have to make a lot of adjustments, maybe even build special programs to help me out.”

“I am, as Lt. Colonel Rhodes so often tells you, with you Miss.” JARVIS tells her softly, certainly. “In fact I would much rather be involved than not.”

“Thanks J, I’d rather have you at my side than not.” Toni grins. “You can be my co-pilot.”

“We lost you once Miss,” JARVIS reminds her, “I’ve no intention of losing you a second time. If my presence will facilitate your safety then rest assured I will strive to never leave your side.”

“I love you too baby boy.” Toni’s grin softens, goes warm and loving, “now then, let’s open up a new project file J, index Mark II.”

“Shall I save this to the Stark Industries Central Server Miss?”

“No, private server only J, highest levels of encryption possible.” Toni orders with a raised hand. “And I do mean highest JARVIS. I’m talking the only thing I want more secure in this place is your personal code. It goes you, this, and then the arc reactor. Special tier encryption – verification essential, J. Understand?”

“Yes Miss.” JARVIS sounds almost surprised at her insistence but Toni can tell that he understands how serious she is. “File encryption level set to S.T.E.V.E.”
“Good job baby boy.” Toni praises. “Now let’s get to work.”

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It’s time to zero the clock now.

It’s finally time for Toni to be what she’d been born as for the third time in the burning heat of the desert.

It’s time for Toni to create.

~~~

Toni throws herself into her workshop with a clear and intense focus that borders on obsession. All other projects are closed, all other trains of though halted and shuffled to the side.

There is only this.

~~~

Toni starts with the boots because she’s a scientist first and she knows that building from the ground up is always best.

The bots attempt to help and they do well except for with the finer work. Toni does that herself.

It takes her two days to have the first set of boots done, the thrusters are a gorgeous compilation of circuitry that hooks directly to the reactor.

Toni has U hold the camera because she’s smart enough to document all of this for future reference, and DUM-E to hold the fire-extinguisher because there’s a small chance she might explode.

Butterfingers watches everything judgingly with Mother draped across his back.

Toni fires it up.

The impact against the wall is both painful and humiliating but it’s still progress.

Plus DUM-E is inordinately happy to have been able to use the fire extinguisher.

So, yeah, there’s that.

~~~

She grows used to working with Mother close by, begins to get used to the sound of her prosthetic clicking lightly across the shelves as she settles under a sun lamp.

Eventually she gets used to Mother perching on the back of her chair, tail lightly whapping her in the side, in those moments when she’s sunk so deep into coding that she barely blinks.

~~~

Pepper’s unusually unamused when she comes down to the workshop with news that Obie has called and watches as she damn near sends herself through a wall.

Pepper doesn’t ask though and Toni appreciates her purposeful lack of curiosity.

The scowl and icepack to the face not so much.
“Obie,” Toni smiles lightly in greeting as the video call connects. She’d taken the time to shower and dress to the hilt as she always was around him. He might have said he was backing her but Toni’s still not comfortable enough to be casual around him.

“Toni!” Obie grins, cigar hanging out the corner of his mouth. “It’s good to see you kiddo. You’re looking good.”

“Thank you.” Toni’s always hated small talk for all that she’s skilled at it. “Pepper said you called?”

“Wanted to give you an update kid,” Obie looks almost smug and it immediately sets Toni’s hackles to rising because she’d never liked that look on neither him nor Howard. “Everything’s going good Toni. The boards a little worried, there’s been some talk of you having posttraumatic stress but I think I mainly managed to whittle those down to a murmur at the meeting tonight. The stock drop hasn’t helped but if you’ve got anything new in the pipeline that’d be a major plus.”

“I’ve got a few things I’d put on the back burner for board review before Afghanistan,” Toni very carefully doesn’t tap on the reactor as she’s taken to doing these days, “I’ll send them something tomorrow. Maybe that’ll help back them off some.”

“Good, good.” Obie smiled, soft and slightly affectionate in a way he’d never really been in Toni’s life. “You’re doing good kid. I’m proud of you. Howie would be proud of you.”

Toni feels her heart skip a beat and she fights to keep the small, pleasant smile on her face natural.

“Thanks Obie. I’ll talk to you later.”

She ends the call with hands she doesn’t want to admit shake.

“Miss?” JARVIS’ questioning voice is a balm to Toni’s suddenly rattled nerves.

“J,” Toni clears her throat as she stands and heads to her room to change, “how far are you inside SI’s servers?”

“I am as far as you need me to be.” JARVIS promptly replies.

“Something’s going on,” Toni tells him decisively as she strips down and grabs her t-shirt from where she’d left it on the end of the bed, “I want you to find out what it is. Fine comb everything, go over every piece of digit correspondence you can find, rip the fucking thing apart if you have to.”

“It will take some time Miss.” JARVIS cautions her.

“I know, but work on it as much as you can, as quickly as you can.” Toni strides out the door and down towards the workshop.

“Yes Miss. Might I ask the reason why?”

“Obie said he was proud of me.” Toni tells him softly. “He said that Howard would have been proud of me.”

“Yes Miss,” JARVIS obviously doesn’t fully understand, “I’m afraid I don’t fully understand the correlation.”

“I know, I’m glad that you don’t,” Toni reassures him gently, “but J the thing is, Howard would have never been proud of me. Obie and I both know that. Him saying that, him talking like that …
it doesn’t *compute*, doesn’t add in. Something’s *wrong.*”

“I’ll begin analysis immediately Miss.” JARVIS sounds certain, solid, and it’s so nice to have his undivided belief and trust.

~~~

Toni wakes up on the couch after passing out from three days with no sleep to the feel of Mother curled up on her chest. The iguana’s a heavy but somehow comforting weight, curled as she is around the residual warmth of the reactor.

That afternoon she finally calibrates and corrects the flight system.

She’s ready for the next step now.

~~~

The armor goes on easily enough.

It’s all sleek, gleaming silver lines and thick, sexless armored plates. It makes her taller, broader at the chest and shoulders still, but it’s more refined than the Mark I was, less bulky and awkward.

It is, if Toni does say so herself, a thing of utter *beauty*.

JARVIS uploads himself to the HUD seamlessly, imports all of the home specifications Toni had spent days coding in. The virtual walkthrough they do is riveting and effortless and Toni wants more.

“Miss,” there’s caution and a hint of pleading JARVIS’ voice when she asks him to check the weather and to listen in on ground control. They both know what she’s going to do. “Miss please, there are still terabytes of calculations needed before actual flight should be attempted.”

“Sometimes you gotta run before you can walk baby boy.” Toni grins, flushed and heady with their success so far, with the promise of what this could mean.

And then Toni does as she’s always dreamt and *flies*.

It’s exhilarating. It is like freedom and sex and every other type of pleasure she’s ever experienced rolled up into one.

The night is beautiful, the city is beautiful, the moon is beautiful and it *calls* to her.

“What’s SR-71’s record J?” Toni calls out as her eyes track over the HUD.

“The altitude record for fixed wing flight is 85,000 feet, Miss.” JARVIS tells her reluctantly.

“You know what they say about records J,” Toni laughs as she ups the output of the thrusters, “they’re just made to be broken. Come on!”

Toni lets out a whoop and shoots forward into the sky.

“Miss there’s a potentially fatal build up of ice occurring.” JARVIS warns but Toni just pushes forward, too drunk on flight, too high on all of it.

JARVIS’ voice sputters in her ear and then dies.
Toni’s heart falls almost faster than the suit does.

It’s a mad tumble through the air before she manages to defrost herself, to get JARVIS back in her ear where he belongs, but she does it.

Joy shines bright and powerful in her heart and it’s like nothing she’s ever felt before.

Falling through her ceiling and getting doused with the fire extinguisher is something she could have done without.

~~~

Toni makes tweaks, fixes the small things she or JARVIS had noticed and works out how to solve the icing problem along the way.

The gold-titanium alloy from the satellite makes the suit glow like the sun and for all JARVIS’ playful banter the color calls to her.

“Throw a little crimson in there J,” Toni tells him with a smile because crimson and gold have always been her colors just as they were Jarvis’ before her.

“Much more subtle Miss.”

“What can I say J, I’m a creature of habit.”

“Miss,” JARVIS interrupts, “Obadiah Stane is on the line for you.”

“Voice only JARVIS,” because she’s freshly showered with an ice pack on her shoulder and the reactor shining through her shirt.

“Toni!” Obie’s voice rings out. “Something wrong with your video?”

“Just got out of the shower actually.”

“Right, right. That’s good timing then.” Obie’s grin is evident in his voice. “I wasn’t sure if I’d catch you in time or not.”

“In time for what?”

“Before you left for the gala of course.”

“Gala?” Toni’s confused for a split second because she hasn’t heard about any gala.

“It’s the Firefighter’s Family Fund gala tonight Toni. Don’t tell me you forgot.” Obie scolds.

“Pretty sure I didn’t get an actual invitation.” Pepper would have been down if she had.

“You’ll be coming right?” Obie seems concerned again and it makes Toni want to grit her teeth. “I know I told you to lay low but I didn’t mean disappear completely. Come out tonight, show the public and the board you’re alive and kicking.”

“Alright,” Toni glances at the time, if she hurries she’ll be able to get dressed and get there fashionably late as always, “I’ll be there soon.”

“Looking forward to it.” Obie signs off.
Toni takes one look at the completed render for the suit and tells JARVIS to fabricate it because it’s perfect.

“Call Rhody J, voice only,” Toni calls out as she goes off to get dressed.

“Tones?” Rhodey answers promptly as always.

“Rhodey baby, sweet berry, honey crunch, marshmallow of my heart …”

“What do you want Toni?” He knows her so well.

“I’ve got a gala to go to tonight and my arm is sadly dateless.” Toni whines as she paws through her closet. “You should fix that for me.”

“Toni,” he huffs, “this is last minute as all hell.”

“Rhodey,” she draws his name out childishly.

“Fine.”

“Wear the tux I bought you and I’ll let you drive.”

“I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Toni laughs, has JARVIS end the call, and pulls out a dress she hasn’t worn yet. It’s gold with a choker like neckline and slit, as always, almost indecently high on both sides.

Dressed to kill, hair up and wings covered, Toni’s waiting when Rhodey shows up twenty minutes later. She throws him the keys to the sexy little silver car he likes so much and grins at the glee on his face.

~~~

Toni and Rhodey strut down the red carpet to the shouts and shuddering camera flashes of reporters suddenly ravenous for her attention.

Obie seems almost gleeful when he greets her on the stairs. He busses her cheeks softly, smiles at Rhodey, and then waves her on inside.

~~~

Toni dances with Rhodey because he’s one of the few people she enjoys dancing with. She laughs, low and amused, when he’s dragged off by one of the society matrons shortly afterwards. Mrs. Lavestone is a notorious flirt and enjoys handsome young men shamelessly enough that Toni actually enjoys talking to her on occasion.

She’s at the bar idly sipping a flute of champagne when she’s approached by a face she doesn’t know, which is both not unheard of but also sort of rare by now.

“Ms. Stark,” the man greets her politely. Toni takes a moment to observe him. He’s taller than her even in heels, but most people are, and he wears his suit with an obvious kind of ease. He’s handsome in a strict, office man sort of way, polished and composed in that same way Rhodey often appears even out of uniform. She’s also fairly certain that there’s a gun hiding somewhere beneath that jacket.

“Yes?”
“Agent Phil Coulson,” he holds out a hand and Toni takes it slowly, carefully, because his name does ring a bell, “I’m from the Stra-“

“You’re from SHIELD.” Toni cuts him off because she remembers the name now even if she hadn’t been paying attention to Pepper when she’d mentioned him the first time. Plus there’s no way she wouldn’t have made a note of someone who worked for Aunt Peggy’s old division.

“You know about us?” Agent Coulson seems surprised and slightly wary.

“I make it my business to know things Agent.” Toni doesn’t even try to play him further. She knows what kind of people SHIELD employs even if she isn’t supposed to. But there’d been no way in hell she’d have been willing not to dig deeper into Aunt Peggy’s stories. SHIELD is a massive organization but still very discrete and relatively not a concern of hers so she’d dug but not too deeply. Plus she’d made a careful note of anyone interested in her return from Afghanistan.

“Well that makes it easier to tell you that we’d like to speak with you.” Agent says and while he’s stern and blank faced there’s also an almost gentle kindness to him. “I know it’s been a trying time for you recently Ms. Stark but I’d appreciate you finding time in your schedule for me. Perhaps at Stark Industries, say the 24th at 7:00 p.m.”

“Of course,” she spots Pepper out of the corner of her eye and sets down her champagne flute, “I’ll speak to my PA and set up a date.”

“Thank you.” Coulson shakes her hand and then Toni’s moving again.

~~~

Dancing with Pepper is always a treat because she gets so flustered at the attention they receive. Toni takes pity on her though, lets Rhodey steal her away before her face can match her hair, and goes to the bar to order the other two a drink.

Agent Coulson is gone but a familiar and much dreaded blonde head bears down on her quickly enough.

“Ms. Stark.”

“Ah,” Toni plays deliberately forgetful, “Carrie?”

“Christine.” Everhart’s mouth goes pinched and indigent. She’s never gotten over the way Toni had snubbed her a few years back when she’d printed a particularly insulting piece about her and Rhodey in Vanity Fair.

“Can I at least get a reaction from you?”

“Dread. I would say dread is my reaction.” Toni smiles, all teeth and barely repressed disdain. “Followed closely by irritation.”

“You know I almost bought it,” Everhart continues on nonsensically, “I almost thought that there was an actual heart behind that shallow ice-queen bitch façade you wear but I guess I can’t be right all of the time.”

“Oh honey,” Toni drawls, patience wearing thin, “you should be used to being wrong by now. You do it so often after all.”

“Does this look like I’m wrong to you?” Everhart shoves a photo practically in her face. “You and
your company have been involved in yet another atrocity. This time in a small town called Gulmira. Heard of it?”

Toni’s entire body turns to ice. *Gulmira.* The word repeats in her mind. *Gulmira. Yinsen.* She thumbs through the photos and rage begins to peter in through the ice at the sight of *her weapons,* of the dead bodies lining the streets and crates bearing *her name.*

“When were these taken?” Toni can hear the rage in her own voice, barely suppressed beneath her mask of calm.

“When?”

“I didn’t approve of this shipment.” She hadn’t either. Weapons manufacturing and selling was supposed to be *down* goddamn them.

“Well your company did.”

Toni whirls on her heel, photos held in her hand, to pull Rhodey away from his latest dance partner with a tight smile, Everhart on her heels the entire time. Rhodey knows her so he immediately realizes something’s wrong. The three of them end up huddled by the bar as Rhodey looks the pictures over, face slowly darkening.

“When?” He grits the question out.

“When.” Toni narrows her eyes as her mind *whirls.* “Come on, I need to talk to Obie.”

~~~

They find him on the steps almost as if he was waiting for her. Toni strides up to him, Rhodey and Everhart on her heels.

“Obie.” Toni smiles sweetly for the cameras but her jaw aches from how tightly her teeth are gritted.

Obie raises a finger at her as he pulls his ringing phone from his pocket, pauses long enough to fire off a text, and then slips it back into place and turns towards her with a smile.

“Toni,” he greets her, “that was fast. You and Rhodes leaving already?”

“Explain this Obie.” Toni shoves the pictures in his direction and watches his face darken as he turns his back to the reporters and looks. “Are we double dealing Obie? Is this something that’s been going on? Because this? This crosses a line that SI swore to never cross.”

“Toni calm down,” Obie slips the photos into his jacket pocket and takes a step away from her so there’s some space between them.

“Do not tell me to calm down *Stane.*” Toni grits out as she immediately bristles. “This is an entirely unacceptable lev-“

“Toni!” Her name’s screamed from behind her and then she’s suddenly being tackled to the ground, a hot, heavy weight on top of her before she’s even had time to process what’s happened. It takes her a moment to realize that it’s Rhodey sprawled out on top of her, his arms curled around her head and her face buried in the front of his shirt that’s damp with sweat.

“Rhodey what in the fu…” Toni trails off because there’s suddenly screaming and someone’s rolling Rhodey off of her. She hears Happy’s voice as if from a distance, hears other voices as men in black suits are suddenly there, grabbing at her arms and trying to pull her up.
For a moment Toni’s frozen, world silent and body completely still. Her entire focus is on Rhodey.

Rhodey whose crisp white shirt is slowly bleeding red from high on his shoulder.

Rhodey whose eyes are closed.

Rhodey who isn’t moving.

Rhodey who has obviously been *shot*.

That’s when the world seems to speed back up in a flash. Toni thrashes against the hands holding her, realizes that she’s screaming Rhodey’s name as she fights them. She hears Happy’s voice again and then she’s being let go. She flings herself at Rhodey, collapses down beside him on the ground, hands scrambling to rip open his shirt.

The wound’s high on the shoulder but he’s losing blood *fast*. Too fast.

“No, no no no,” Toni’s sobbing, panic eating at her as she presses her hands against the welling blood only to realize there’s too much. Her hands scramble for her skirt and she rips the fabric away mercilessly at just above her knees, bundles it up and presses it against his wound. “Rhodey no.”

“T-Toni,” Rhodey groans out as his eyes finally flutter open. She’s never heard him sound so young, so afraid, but his voice has also never sounded so beautiful. “To-ni … y-you oka-y?”

“You idiot.” Toni sobs as she leans down to press a kiss to his forehead, his cheeks, the corner of his mouth, her hands pressing down sharply against the wound all the while. “I’m fine, you’re the one who got shot you fucking idiot.”

“Was aiming for you.” Rhodey gasps out and Toni can just hear Happy screaming into his phone for an ambulance. “Couldn’t … let you … get hurt again. Not on my watch. Not again”

“You took a bullet for me.” Toni can barely see through her tears and the pained gasp he gives when she presses down on his shoulder makes her whimper. “Rhodey … why?”

“L-o-love you.” He tries to smile at her, brings his other hand up and cups her cheek. Toni leans into it uncaring of the blood. It drops a few seconds later and Rhodey groans again, teeth clenched and face going chalky. “Hurts.”

“It’s okay Rhodey.” Toni can hear the panic in her own voice, can hear the way she’s sobbing out the words and barely breathing. “Rhodey, baby it’s okay. You’re gonna be okay. You have to be okay.”

“Toni.” He rasps her name again and Toni feels a hand on her shoulder, slim and delicate, trying to pull her away. She shrugs it off without even paying attention.

“You’re going to be okay.” She sobs out again, heart breaking with every bit of blood that spills up and around her fingers.

There are more hands on her then and Toni only lets herself be pulled back when she sees the stretcher and the medical bags. She watches them load Rhodey up and then she’s running, following behind them with every step they take.

She must look a sight, covered in blood and half feral, because they don’t even protest when she barrels into the back of the ambulance behind them.
She tucks herself into the corner as they work on him, reaches out and grabs his hand when it flops off the side of the stretcher.

“You’re going to be okay Rhody.” Toni keeps talking to him, uncaring for once who hears her because talking to him is more important than anything. Rhodey’s kept her anchored so many times in the past and now it’s her turn. “You’re going to be just fine. Because … because you said it’s me and you right? Me and you until the day we die and that’s not today for you Rhody. *Today is not that day.* You hear me soldier? You don’t get to quit on me, not like this.”

Toni presses her mouth directly against his palm and whispers against his skin. “I love you Rhody and I’m not gonna bury you too. Not you.”

The wailing of the sirens threatens to drown out her voice but it doesn’t matter anyways.

Rhodey’s eyes are closed and his hand is limp in hers.

He can’t hear her anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo I shot Rhodey. That’s a thing I did. Sorry?

Thoughts/concerns/requests/incoherent screaming and all caps? Let me know how I did and what you think.

Hopefully the next chapter will be just as good as we wind up the Iron Man 1 arc.

Oh and feel free to talk to me about names still if you have an opinion on the armor.

(On that note for those who asked the armor looks basically the same if you didn’t pick that up in text just the red is darker than the hot rod Tony used. Also I'm pretty sure the iguana used as Mother's model is actually male but let's just hand wave that away okay? Thank you)
“Toni?” Pepper’s teary voice barely manages to break through the numb, icy cocoon that Toni has wrapped herself in.

“Pep?” Her own voice is ragged, throat raw from sobbing.

“Toni you need to come get cleaned up.” Pepper’s hand is on her shoulder then, gentle and caring and coaxing, but Toni doesn’t move.

Instead she keeps her eyes glued to the red caked lines of her own hands, unwilling to do little more than stare blankly at them. She’s not even sure how long she’s been standing in one spot. Time seems to have come to a standstill, frozen in place just as she is.

“Toni,” Pepper’s hand tightens on her shoulder briefly, “you, you can’t stay like this. You’re covered in b-blood. You need to see a doctor Toni. Please.”

“It’s not mine.” Toni tells her numbly. “None of it’s mine.”

Because she’s covered in it, arms soaked up to the elbows, ruined dress drenched, her face is spattered and smeared with it like some sort of macabre face paint but none of it is hers.

Oh God, she wishes it was hers.

Pepper sucks in a breath that sounds like a sob and there’s a telling silence behind Toni but she still doesn’t turn. As much as she loves Pepper, as much as a part of her wants to turn around and comfort her, Toni just can’t.

She can’t.

She doesn’t have the emotional depth at the moment to comfort anyone. She’s icy to the core, frozen down to the very center of herself. All that is good and warm and sweet has been washed away by the tide, burnt out by the sun, swallowed by the teeming sands of the desert.
Because Rhodey was …

Because Rhodey is …

Toni just can’t.

“This isn’t what he would want.” Pepper cuts in again, voice harsher this time. She almost sounds angry but Toni knows in a distant sort of way that she’s just desperate. “Toni you know this isn’t what he would want. He’d want you to take care of yourself.”

“Don’t.” Toni snaps the word out and she feels more than sees the way Pepper flinches because she’s never been so harsh with her before. Toni would probably hate herself for that if she had the ability to feel anything at all at the moment.

“I’m sorry.” Pepper whispers from behind her. “Toni I’m sorry but please.”

“I can’t.” Toni can hear the agony in her own voice, can hear the barely buried plea, and it breaks something inside of her.

She sounds small again, feels it too in a way that not even Afghanistan and the water had made her feel.

Like a dam giving way to a flood rage rushes through her as unrelenting and all-consuming as the sea. Toni’s chest burns with it, burns with an icy fury so cold it feels as if she’s being devoured by flame.

With a sudden burst of movement Toni shoves her way to her feet.

“What is it?” Pepper reaches out to her again but Toni can’t bring herself to reach back.

What’s more is the fact that, in this moment, she doesn’t want to.

“I’m going to find the motherfucker who did this,” Toni seethes out through suddenly gritted teeth, “and I’m going to kill them.”

She rushes past Pepper and down the long, cold hallway. She can’t stay here, can’t stay near Pepper. She’s too furiously angry, too cold in her rage. She can’t be around Pepper right now, not like this.

She’ll only hurt her if she does.

Because Toni always seems to hurt the ones she loves and with the way rage and anguish is currently eating away at her she won’t be able to stop once she starts.

She’ll hurt Pepper, will hollow her out inside with her words and her rage.

She doesn’t want to do that to Pepper right now too. She doesn’t want to do that to Pepper ever. But she will, she knows, if she stays.

“Toni!” She hears Pepper’s desperate call from behind her but she doesn’t slow, doesn’t stop.

She can’t.

She almost runs into Happy when she hits the lobby. He’s pale, red eyed and obviously exhausted but he still straightens up when he sees her approaching.
“Boss y-” he goes to speak but she doesn’t let him.

“Keys.” Toni thrusts her hand out in front of her expectantly.

“No, Boss ple-” he tries to protest.

“Keys.” Toni practically growls.

Happy’s shoulders slump as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out the keys to the car he’d driven himself and Pepper in to the gala.

Toni snatches them from him roughly, darts around him, and heads for the door.

“Boss!” Just like Pepper had Happy calls after her desperately but Toni doesn’t listen to him either.

Instead she keeps moving, uncaring of the startled looks she’s getting, of the gaggle of reporters she sees in the distance rushing in her direction, or the fact that she’s missing her shoes.

She ignores all of that and just darts across the parking lot and straight towards the car.

She can’t be here anymore.

She’ll hurt someone if she is.

~~~

Toni’s out of the city and on the long stretch of dark highway that leads to the mansion when her mind finally clicks back into a calmer state of working order.

She presses the call button on the navigation feature with a blood smeared thumb.

“JARVIS?” She calls out for him, voice low and husky.

“Miss?” JARVIS sounds worried again. “Miss the news reports say that there’s been an incident. Have you been injured? I can find no reports of you being admitted to a medical facility alongside Lt. Colo-”

“Don’t JARVIS.” Toni interrupts him because she can’t hear this right now, can’t bear to listen to it. It’ll only set her off again. “Just … don’t.”

“Of course Miss.” JARVIS softens immediately.

“Did the Mark III finish the fabrication process?” It’s what she needs to know at the moment because her mind is whirling.

“Yes Miss,” comes JARVIS’ prompt reply. “The suit finished fabricating to your specifications and is currently ready and fully operational.”

“Good.” Toni takes a curve a hair too sharp but can’t bring herself to care. “I’ll be at the mansion in twenty minutes. I want you to have Butterfingers and U start the process to calibrate the gauntlets to above average range JARVIS. No mistakes, no fuck ups. This is too important. You ride herd on them if you have to, just get it done and get it done right.”

“Yes Miss.” JARVIS sounds almost morose at the harshness of her voice but he doesn’t try to argue with her.
“Also I want every camera within a thousand yards of the gala JARVIS.” Toni tightens her hands on the wheel. “I want every angle, every frame, every second of video footage you can find. I want to know exactly who sho-,” Toni takes a deep breath and lets it shudder its way back out, “I want to know who did it JARVIS. You get your code on everything you can and you tell me what son of a bitch thought they had the right.”

“Yes Miss.”

“I’ll be there soon.” Toni cuts the call abruptly with a harsh stab of her finger.

She’s hurting everyone tonight it seems and as much as she knows it isn’t right she just can’t seem to stop herself. Just can’t seem to reign it in and push it down like she normally does when her temper starts to flare out of control.

She’s always been icy in her rage, destructive and calculating.

Especially when the one she really wants to hurt is herself.

~~~

Toni strips her destroyed gown off as soon as she steps into the mansion, her delicate, blood spattered lingerie following behind it. She leaves them all in a ball where they drop and pads towards her bathroom naked, ripping the pins from her hair as she goes.

She steps beneath the showerhead’s flow while it’s still ice cold. She lets the swell of panic and terror that automatically wells up inside of her chest eat at her until she’s on the verge of a panic attack instead of jerking back right away.

Only when she’s in danger of collapsing does she force herself to back up.

It makes her chest ache, makes her head hurt, but it’s good, a fitting punishment of sorts.

Toni’s sure that it hurts a lot less than the bullet that had …

She cuts that train of thought off and starts to scrub at her skin instead.

She watches the blood sluice off of her body silently, sees the way it stains the water pink through unfocused eyes.

Even when it’s all gone she still scrubs and scrubs until she’s red and just a shade off raw. She still feels as if she’s covered in it, painted crimson in the worst sort of way imaginable. She has a lot of blood on her hands these days but somehow she thinks that this is the time it might never actually come off no matter how hard she tries.

She dries off automatically when she’s done, pulls her hair back into a quick, tight braid that she then twirls into a bun. She moves into her room for a pair of jeans and a long sleeved shirt without really realizing she’s moving.

She almost floats her way to the workshop.

U and Butterfingers are around one of the gauntlets, screwdrivers in hand and diligently working. Toni shoos them away silently and takes over.

“International news JARVIS,” Toni clips out as she hooks the gauntlets up to the reactor and beings to make adjustments, mind whirling and calculations running just behind her eyes, “anything
currently mentioning Gulmira.”

“Yes Miss.”

The TV mounted on the wall flicks on a few seconds later and the news report is dark and horrible.

Toni *seethes*.

In her hand the repulsor mounted in the gauntlet glows like a star.

In the background the reporter drones on about the horrors in Gulmira, about desperate refuges, about destroyed homes and murdered families.

Behind Toni’s eyes all she can see is red, in her ears all she can hear is that last, chocked off whimper right before Rhod-

Toni tosses aside her screwdriver, stretches out her arm, and fires once at an overhanging light fixture. She watches clinically as it shatters in a shower of sparks. In her tank Mother startles and the bots whirl and whine in fear, rolling behind Toni to crowd together by the kitchenette.

“Miss?” JARVIS’ voice is tentative, cautious. *Afraid*.

Toni turns and a flicker of movement catches her attention.

It’s only her reflection in one of the thick glass panes that comprise that wall of the workshop.

She stares at herself for a moment. She’s scrubbed clean, hair up and arc reactor shining brightly in her chest. She’s pale but beyond that she looks normal, looks as if nothing has happened.

Like Rhodey had never been …

Like Rhodey isn’t …

It’s *hateful*.

The sight of her reflection shattering, the sound the glass makes as it falls, is much better.

*Yes.*

This is what she wants.

~~~

The flight suit she’d put together earlier fits her like a glove. There are no loose seams, no folds of fabric for anything to catch on. It molds to every dip and curve of her body almost indecently with only an opening on her chest so that the light of the arc reactor can shine brilliantly.

Toni pulls it on in silence and then strides towards the stations she’d put together to put her into the suit.

Robotic arms and machinery surround her as she’s fitted into the Mark III but Toni doesn’t flinch.

She stares straight ahead, shoulders set and spine stiff.

The armor is heavy as it settles around her but Toni can and will bare its weight. A life time of working with machines and metal, years of dance lessons as a child and then years of physical
training afterwards have all made her so much stronger than she seems.

Now she’ll use that strength for this.

Because she wants nothing more than to hunt the bastard who’d taken the shot down, wants to cave their face in with her fist, wants to watch them bleed just like Rh-

But she doesn’t know who it is, not yet.

But she will. One way or another she’ll find out who’d ordered the attack. She’ll find out who took the shot. JARVIS is digging into it and nothing stays hidden from him forever if he’s looking for it.

So Toni can’t follow her first instinct of hunting them all down viciously.

But she can do this.

She can redirect the icy flow of her rage and do this thing that would make Steve and Jarvis and Aunt Peggy proud of her.

She can do this thing for Yinsen and in the name of all he’d done for her.

She can do this thing that would make Rhodey proud of her.

So, with that thought in mind, when the helmet and face plate are put into place, Toni takes one deep breath and then she steps forward.

~~~

She makes the long flight to Gulmira in relative silence, only speaking to JARVIS when it’s absolutely necessary.

JARVIS, to his credit, has long since picked up on her mood and he stays otherwise silent.

She arrives to chaos and the sound of innocents being murdered.

When she lands one of the men turn one of her guns in her direction but Toni doesn’t hesitate.

The repulsor blasts send the first shooter flying, then a second and then a third.

She turns and there are cowards hiding behind women and children, using those they’d tormented as shields.

Toni lowers her hands and tracks them silently through the HUD, little red targets popping up on each of them.

They die easily enough.

She feels no regret.

For a moment there’s quiet and then a small boy is rushing forward and into his desperate father’s arms.

Toni allows herself one look and then moves.

Her fist slams through the wall like it is rice paper and she grabs at the coat of the son of a bitch hidden there only to throw him to the ground at the villager’s feet.
“He’s all yours,” she tells them as she takes flight again. She doesn’t stay to watch what they do to
him, can’t bring herself to feel any sort of victory or relief.

Her work’s not done yet.

Besides her weapons had helped to do this to these people, had helped to hurt these innocents who
should have never known terror and agony like they have.

She doesn’t deserve to see their happiness.

~~~~~~

She has a cache of her missiles in view on the HUD when the anti-aircraft missile hits her dead on
and knocks her to the ground.

It hurts.

But Toni pulls her way up from the crater she’s left in the earth and shakes the pain off with an
efficiency born of long practice.

Then she destroys the bastard who shot her before she turns her weapons on the Jericho missiles that
should have never left the factory floor.

The fiery hell-scape she leaves in her wake feels almost right.

~~~~~~

“Miss,” JARVIS cuts through the silence suddenly, “I’ve picked up chatter from Edwards Air Force
Base. You have been detected.”

“Do they know it’s me?” In her rage she hadn’t accounted for all of the facts it seemed but Toni is
good at thinking outside the box, good at thinking her way around obstacles. With JARVIS at her
side there are few who could out think or outmaneuver the two of them working in tandem.

“No Miss, they are confused as to what has happened.” JARVIS informs her promptly. “The use of
human shields prevented them from gaining access to the area and as such they are now trying to
determine your origin as well as classification.”

“Scramble their feed JARVIS.” Toni orders as she banks hard upwards to take towards the possible
safety of cloud cover. “Don’t let them get a lock on me.”

“Done Miss,” JARVIS relays only a few seconds later, “I am blocking your image but the scramble
will not last long for fear of compromising their entire surveillance network.”

“All I need is enough time to get out of range.” Toni grits her teeth and pushes forward.

“You have inbound F-22 Raptors, Miss.” JARVIS sounds almost panicked a full minute later.
“They’re heading in the direction of your last known location. If you are not careful they will see
you. I would advise going supersonic and engaging stealth and tactile evasive maneuvers now.”

Toni spins, shoots up as high as the suit can handle and then engages supersonic. She jets through
the air like the fastest of bullets, like a creature created to exist here in this place of sun and wind.

The feeling is enough to momentarily break through her calm and she can’t help but revel in the act
of flight once again.
“Miss?” JARVIS calls for her attention as she stands silently letting the machinery remove the Mark III from her.

“Yeah J?” She feels calmer now, less like a seething sea but still cold deep inside, still almost breathtakingly numb in that secret place inside of her where before she’d been warm and soft.

Because Rhodey was …

Because Rhodey is …

“You have sixteen missed calls from Ms. Potts, eleven from Mr. Hogan, and two from Mr. Stane.”

“Any messages?” She can’t talk to Pepper or Happy right now. She knows it’s selfish, knows they’re hurting too, but she just can’t.

“Yes Miss,” JARVIS confirms, “sixteen messages from Ms. Potts, eleven from Mr. Hogan, and one from Mr. Stane.”

The sound of Obie’s name again sends a shiver down Toni’s spine. He still owes her an explanation for what had happened in Gulmira, still owes her an explanation for a lot of things.

“What’s the progress on your digital comb through for SI?” It’s been a while now and she knows he’s made progress she just isn’t sure how much. He’s yet to bring anything new to her attention besides one embezzlement attempt, a few occurrences of petty theft, and two cases of harassment that she’s had him handle with pink slips and thinly veiled but still legal threats for the offenders.

SI’s supposed to be safe for its employees and Toni will be damned if she lets that fall to the wayside even with everything else that’s going on.

“I have combed through all but the highest encryption levels Miss.” JARVIS tells her solemnly. “The top-tier encryption levels take longer to decipher given the need for both discretion and thoroughness. Still I suspect that I will be finished sometime within the next hour.”

“You do good work J.” Toni praises softly. “And I’m … sorry for being harsh with you earlier.”

“I understand Miss.” JARVIS soothes. “You have had a … difficult time.”

“Yeah,” Toni laughs bitterly as she steps away from the machinery at last and moves to where the bots are all sitting uncharacteristically docile in their charging cradles, “difficult is probably an understatement.”

“Hey babies,” she sighs as she reaches out a hand towards them only to let it drop when none of them move. “I’m sorry guys. I shouldn’t have scared you like that.”

Butterfingers narrows his camera aperture in her direction but then looks away. Neither DUM-E nor U move from where they’ve folded in on themselves.

She feels almost stricken because for the first time her boys are scared of her. Of her. She’s done the one thing she swore to never do. She’s made them afraid of her.

“Give them time Miss.” JARVIS says softly. “They will understand.”
“Sure thing J.” Toni scrubs a hand over her face, slumps with a broken sigh, and then stands to move back towards the stairs and her room.

She’s in the shower again, this time washing off sweat and dirt and poking absently at bruised skin, when JARVIS interrupts her again.

“Miss, Mr. Stane is currently outside and requesting entrance.”

“Obie’s here?” Toni’s surprised because of all people to show up she hadn’t expected it to be him. “Direct him towards the living room and tell him I’ll be out in a moment J.”

“Yes Miss.”

Toni slams a hand against the shower controls to shut off the water and practically leaps out of the stall and towards her towel. She’s dressed in seconds, hands winding her hair back up as she moves out of the bathroom and towards her room to grab a thicker shirt to go over her tank top. There’s no time to dress to the nines as she normally is with Obie but honestly Toni’s too exhausted to care. As long as her hair’s up and the reactor is covered that’s all she cares about at the moment.

In fact she’s almost glad he’s here because he owes her an explanation. He owes her answers and she’s almost desperate for something to take her mind off of what has happened.

Obie’s staring out the large bay window that looks out over the sea when Toni steps into the living room.

“Obie.” Toni calls to get his attention.

“Toni.” He turns, rakes his eyes over her for a split second, and then smiles almost comfortingly as he holds out a hand in her direction.

Toni doesn’t take it, doesn’t step closer to him at all, and after a few seconds Obie’s face seems to fall and he lets his hand drop.

“Kiddo.” Obie sighs and for a second he seems older somehow, like there’s a heavy weight on his shoulders. Toni’s never seen him like this before and she finds that she doesn’t like it. Not because she feels any sort of real attachment to Obie but because it doesn’t seem natural on him. Doesn’t seem real.

“Why are you here Obie?”

“I was worried about you Toni,” Obie tugs at his already loosened tie, “with everything that’s happened and the fact that you’re not answering your phone I wanted to come check on you.”

“I’m fine.” She’s not but she’ll never tell him that of course. No matter what she is in this moment, willing to be vulnerable in front of Obie isn’t one of them.

“You know,” Obie slides a hand into his pocket and just stares at her for a moment, “we’ve never been close.”

Toni bites back a sharp snort because that’s a fucking understatement.

“A lot of that’s my fault I think. I never quite knew how to deal with you.” Obie gives an expressive shrug. “I don’t think Howie did either to be honest. You were always … too much.”

“Don’t,” Toni grits the words out through gritted teeth, “talk to me about Howard. Not now and not
here. I’m not interested.”

“I know he was a little rough with you sometimes kid, but he was your father and he wanted what was best for you.” Obie holds up a hand when Toni scoffs. “You didn’t know him like I did Toni, he had plans for you, a lot of plans I did and didn’t know about.”

“The only good thing the bastard ever did for me was die,” Toni spits, suddenly at the end of her already severely frayed temper. The last thing she’s capable of doing right now is standing by and listening to someone else wax poetical about Howard motherfucking Stark. “Now if this is what you’re here to talk about Obie I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Alright, alright.” Obie holds his hands up in surrender. “I’ve actually come to talk to you about something a lot more important. I wanted to wait but it’s too urgent.”

“Fine.” Toni agrees because she’s eager to hear what he has to say and then get him out of her house. It doesn’t feel right to have him here, to have him in her space, in the safe place she’d built for her and her family.

“Let an old man make a pit stop kiddo and then we’ll get down to the brass tacks since this is going to take a while,” Obie grins at her, seemingly restored to a more natural mood, “pour us a drink for when I get back would you?”

Toni waves Obie away in the direction of one of the bathrooms and moves towards the bar to pour him a drink and grab herself a bottle of the sparkling water she keeps there. Drinking’s not the best idea for her at the moment and Toni knows that.

“Miss.” There’s a tone of urgency in JARVIS’ voice again that makes Toni perk right up.

“JARVIS?”

“I have broken the top-tier encryption on SI’s database and have finished my digital comb through.” To Toni’s apprehension JARVIS sounds almost worried.

“Give me a rundown J,” Toni moves towards the screen mounted on the living room wall so that JARVIS can give her a visual.

The information JARVIS has found flashes up onto the screen and Toni feels herself go white, feels her heart skip a beat beside the reactor.

Missile plans. Shipping manifests. Double dealing.

Sector 16.

A suit.

*Her suit.*

*Someone was building her suit.*

And then the video.

The sight of herself, beaten and bloody, chest a horrific mass of crimson stained bandages and face pale with pain, is like being punched in the gut. Toni feels bile rise in her throat even before the sound of familiar harsh voices threaten to send her mind whirling back to that cave, back to pain and terror and the burning need to escape.
“Translate JARVIS.” Toni croaks out the request.

“You did not tell us that the target you paid us to kill was the great Toni Stark.” The English pours out of the speakers and Toni feels herself go still as the video plays. “As you can see, Obadiah Stane…”

“Oh God.” She barely makes it to the kitchen sink before she’s sick, heaving over the gleaming surface as her body shakes.

Toni’s mind whirls.

“Why?” Toni moans even as she straightens and scrubs at her mouth with the sleeve of her shirt. “Why didn’t I see it from the beginning? How did I not see it?”

Because this? This all makes sense now. Everything fits together perfectly. Like jigsaw puzzle pieces finally coming together, the picture’s now perfectly clear. She should have seen it, should have put all the pieces together sooner, but she hadn’t. She’d been wary of him before, had known something was wrong, and she’d allowed herself to push it to the side and focus on other things.

She should have known better.

She should have been smarter.

She’d failed.

“Miss,” JARVIS interrupts quietly, cautiously, “I have also obtained the requested data from the area around the gala as you requested.”

“Tell me,” Toni rasps because it’s one more thing to add to everything else, one more black mark.

“All video feeds were normal Miss,” JARVIS starts, “except for a small bubble of inactive cameras atop a local office complex and the surrounding buildings that were all seemingly taken off line roughly an hour before the gala began.”

Toni stills, attention captured and her mind still whirling. “An hour?”

“Yes Miss,” JARVIS confirms, “the blank spot was also well within the higher end of the logical range for a sniper to be positioned.”

“JARVIS,” Toni’s mouth is dry and her mind is whirling, calculating, putting together pieces she’d been too enraged, too shaken, to see before, and still it all makes sense. “JARVIS get your hands on Obie’s call log. I want to know everyone he’s talked to in the past two months, start from the gala and work your way back.”

Obie was behind it all.

Obie had tried to kill her.

Even without JARVIS getting his hands on Obie’s call log Toni knows what he’ll find. Probably texts sent to a disconnected and/or untraceable number. Communication with a burner phone no doubt because Obie had tried to kill her again.

Obie had been the one to sell her out to those fuckers in Afghanistan who’d decided it made more sense to try and keep her like Daedalus in a cave instead of snuffing her out right away.

“Miss,” JARVIS interrupts again voice urgent, “I believe you are in danger with Stane currently
being in the house. *Please, get to the workshop.*”

Toni remembers leaving the gala now, remembers the text Obie had sent, remembers the way his phone had rang as soon as she stepped outside. Obie was the one who’d moved away from her, the one who’d made sure she was in the direct line of fire.

Toni would be dead now, murdered on the steps outside of her own gala, if it wasn’t for Rhodey. She’d be dead now if he hadn’t thrown himself between her and a bullet.

*Oh God.*

Obie had told her he’d take care of everything. Toni just hadn’t realized at the time that *everything* actually meant *her*.

Obie had paid to have her assassinated, more than once from the looks of it, and now he was *in her house*.

“JARVIS,” Toni whispers as she skirts around the kitchen counter and towards the living room because JARVIS is right, she *needs* to get to the workshop, “call Pepper. Tell her what’s going on. Send her everything J.”

“Miss!” JARVIS’ voice, panicked and afraid, cuts through Toni’s instructions.

Toni hears a whisper of fabric, the sound of footsteps behind her, and whirls around.

She sees Obie, sees the blink of familiar blue lights in his ears, and then her body stiffens and she falls, paralyzed, towards the floor. Obie catches her in the crook of his arm right before she hits the ground and then brings up a familiar black box to wriggle it tauntingly in her face.

“Now Toni,” Obie tisks as he lays her almost gently on the couch, tucks the paralytic in his pocket and takes out his earplugs, “be a good girl for once in your life.”

Toni stares up at him, body frozen and mind twisting in panic. She can barely breathe, her muscles refuse to listen to her, and in the background she can hear JARVIS practically *screaming* at Obie, his normal composure nowhere to be found.

“Either be quiet or I’ll kill her right now.” Obie tilts his head up towards the ceiling as he speaks and JARVIS immediately falls silent. Toni knows he’s up to something though, knows that her precious, *smart* boy, is doing something to try and save her.

She just isn’t sure if it’ll work this time.

This time her own shortsightedness, her own special brand of tunnel-vision, has waltzed her directly into the lion’s jaws as it were.

“Oh Toni,” Obie sits down on the couch beside her. Toni wishes she could flinch away from him, wishes she could *bite* him, could latch her teeth onto his traitorous throat, but *she can’t move*.

“Toni, Toni, Toni,” Obie repeats as he takes a moment and just *looks* at her.

Toni is scared. She’s so fucking *afraid* that she’s almost sick with it again.

“You know,” Obie leans back, puts an almost amicable arm around her shoulders, and holds the paralytic up again, “it’s a shame they didn’t approve this thing. There’s a lot of uses for temporary paralysis out there, but, that’s business I guess. Just like this is actually. It’s just … business. Plus,
in a way it’s your own fault really. If you’d just been the empty headed little doll Howie was so sure you were going to be none of this would have had to happen.”

Obie reaches over and strokes a stray curl away from her face, tucks it almost tenderly behind an ear.

“If you’d just been malleable, we could have avoided all of this.” Obie sighs. “You’d be married to that Hammer brat just like Howie and I talked about when you were small and I’d be running things at SI like they should be run. But no, you just had to be so goddamn willful.”

Obie stands then, reaches into his suit jacket and pulls out what Toni recognizes as an expensive pocket knife, the sort that older business men carry for looks. He reaches for the bottom of her sweatshirt, presses the knife against the material, and slowly, purposefully, cuts up and through it with barely any resistance.

The shirt parts like flower petals and leaves Toni exposed, arc reactor glowing brilliantly through her thin tank top.

“You know, I thought I was doing the right thing sending that twisted little shit after you all those years ago. I thought he’d take care of you, do my dirty work for me, but he fucked it up and ended up in jail. At least he kept his mouth shut though about how he kept getting in your building, about how he knew were you lived, how he got the uniform he used. Still I was pissed when you walked away from that one.”

Obie laughs, that same great booming sound that Toni’s always associated with him. It sounds sickly cheerful for the terrible moment they’re captured in.

But then again it’s only really terrible for Toni.

“You came out swinging on the other side of that though didn’t you? I’ll give you that Toni.” Obie looks almost fond again, sort of whimsically amused. “You might have whored your way around the world but you’ve done good work for SI, built it up further than Howie ever could even with me holding his hand. But I got sick of playing second fiddle to you and your whims, sick of sitting back and watching a little girl run the company I dedicated my life to. So I figured the Ten Rings could take care of you for me. I admit I was worried that I’d be killing the golden goose as it goes …”

He reaches down and traces his fingertips across the front of her shirt where the reactor lays.

“But you’re like a fucking cockroach kiddo, cause you came out of that alive too. I was disappointed, had a lot of loose ends to tie up because of that, a lot of people to make disappear. But in the end it wasn’t too bad. You were back, I’d have plenty of other chances to put you out of my misery for good. Plus, in the end, you still had a few more golden eggs to give me didn’t you Toni? Like that fascinating suit you built and this supposedly impossible little beauty here of course.” Obie taps at the front of the reactor’s glass before he straightens and pulls a sleek and sinister looking metal device from the inside of his coat pocket.

“It’s a shame about your little friend Rhodes, about how he stepped in when he shouldn’t have.” Obie taunts as the device whirls and twists to form a claw and he comes back down onto the couch to kneel over her body. “I thought for sure they’d have a better degree of success when it came to getting rid of you when I contacted them. Especially given how much practice they’ve gotten over the years but you know what they say Toni …”

Obie fits the device against the front of the reactor and Toni feels her entire body jerk as it clicks itself into place and then moves.
“If you want something done right,” Obie grins down at her as the reactor is slowly pulled from her chest, “then do it yourself.”

Toni can just feel the scream building in her throat, can feel the way it’s desperate to get out, but she can’t move, can’t speak.

Toni is locked into place inside her own body, terrified and paralyzed with her heart being ripped out of her.

And yet, at the same time, in the back of her mind where rational doesn’t always exist, she finds that she’s distantly sort of grateful. Grateful that Obie was never a father figure to her. Grateful that they were never close. Because if he had been, if he’d been close to her and then gone on to do this it would have ruined her in all the ways Howard had never quite managed to.

Still it somehow feels as if Howard has managed to come back from the dead, as if he’s managed to rip the heart right out of her just like he’d always wanted to.

Like, somehow, not even the grave could stop him from reaching out his hand and smacking her down.

“Look at that.” Obie sounds almost admiring as he turns the arc reactor over in his hand. “Such a small thing and it’s going to do so much Toni. You should be proud. Or well, if you weren’t going to be dead that is. When the Ten Rings told me about this you could have knocked me over with a feather. I’ll give you this kiddo, you’ve always been something else when it comes to building. Gonna be a shame to go forward without that beautiful brain of yours.”

Obie steps forward, leans down, and presses a kiss to Toni’s forehead, a sick facsimile of care and comfort that they’ve never shared before.

Then he turns on his heel and just … leaves.

He leaves as if he hasn’t ripped her heart out and left her to die, slow and painfully, on the couch in her living room, insides torn to pieces by the shrapnel he caused in the first place.

“Miss.” JARVIS’ voice is frightened, urgent, and Toni wants to move, wants to do something to calm him down, but she still can’t.

“Miss please.” Toni feels her stuttering heart clench at his frantic tone. “I’ve contacted Miss Potts and Mr. Hogan. They are on their way to you directly but you must replace the arc reactor or you will die.”

Toni knows that. She knows. But she … still … can’t … move.

“Miss,” JARVIS almost whispers, “you must get up. Do not leave us alone again. Please.”

And Toni moves.

She rolls, falls from the couch onto the lush carpet and then she drags herself foot by painful foot towards the hall that leads to the workshop. She clings to the walls with her fingernails just as she had when she was small and stumbles haltingly forward with one goal in mind.

She has to get the spare reactor she made.

She has to get to it or everything has been for nothing.
Obi-Stane is out there, out there with her reactor and a cheap knock off of her suit and he’s the one who’s kept trying to kill her.

*He’s the one who’d caused Rhodey to get shot.*

And that, in many ways, means more to Toni than any attempt on her life.

Toni has to get the spare reactor and she has to stop him, has to make him pay for what he’s done, has to stop him from hurting anyone else. She isn’t stupid enough to think that her death would end any of this.

Because it wouldn’t.

He’d just go after everyone else she loved, would put them all in some new kind of crosshairs.

Toni can’t allow that to happen.

What’s more she has to get the reactor because she can’t leave her boys alone, can’t leave them like this.

Can’t just sit back and force JARVIS to watch her die.

She makes it, sweating and shaking, down the steps somehow and then through the workshop door.

“You’re almost there Miss,” JARVIS is half encouraging and half coaxing by this point and his voice helps her to gather the strength to move forward.

She can see Steve on the wall across the way, his frame hiding the blast proof safe from view, protecting the gathered pieces of her heart just as he always has.

She makes it halfway before her body gives out on her.

She collapses down onto her knees, unable to move forward no matter how hard she tries.

Toni lays there for a moment, mouth working but unable to catch her breath enough to actually speak.

She’s *dying*.

She can feel it, can feel life slipping away from her inch by precious inch.

Her eyes flutter shut and she can’t find the strength to open them again.

‘*Sorry,*’ she thinks to JARVIS, to Rhodey, to Pepper and Happy and DUM-E and U. To Butterfingers and Mother. ‘*Sorry I wasn’t strong enough.*’

Then there’s whirling, the feel of cold, hard metal against her waist, and suddenly Toni’s *moving*.

Toni marshals the last dregs of her waning strength and opens her eyes.

Butterfingers chirps at her almost angrily as he rolls, both his hands wrapped around her waist as he half drags, half carries her towards the safe. The poster of Steve’s been swung open on the hinges and JARVIS has apparently told U what to do because he’s punching in the key code to open the safe as Toni watches.

DUM-E’s the one who grabs the coded case with the reactor inside and meets her and Butterfingers
half way.

Toni slots her thumb against the scanner, enters the string of numbers with shaking fingers, and pops open the case.

The reactor shines up at her like a star.

Toni picks it up, fumbles it once only to have her arm steadied by U, and slots it into place.

That first breath is painful, her chest aches, her scars pull, but then there’s a rush of energy that’s hard to describe.

“Thank you.” Toni pants the words out, hands reaching for any part of her boys she can find. “You saved me again you beautiful, beautiful boys. You saved me.”

“We are family Miss,” JARVIS says, obviously relieved, “it is what we are meant to do.”

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Pepper and Happy arrive ten minutes later.

Happy has the pistol in his hand that Toni’s rarely ever seen him touch but knows he carries because she’d built it for him. Pepper is pale and red eyed but determined when she storms into the workshop directly behind him.

They both look immensely relieved to see her up and about but obviously, openly, worried over the way she’s still paler than she should be.

“No time to explain you two,” Toni cuts them off before they can say anything, “Stane has my reactor and he’s built a suit. I’ve got to stop him.”

“What suit?” Pepper sounds frazzled and Toni winces because she hasn’t exactly gotten around to showing anyone else what she’s been working on. “You mean the suit from the files JARVIS sent me?”

“It’s what I’ve been doing since I got back,” Toni doesn’t waste time going into details, just steps forward onto the outfitting platform. Sometime showing is better than telling after all. “I’ve got to stop him. He’s the one behind everything. Afghanistan, Rhodey. All of it. I have to stop him.”

Happy makes a startled sound and raises his gun when the machines whirl to life and start piecing her into the Mark III. Surprisingly enough, or maybe not, it’s Pepper’s hand on his arm that gets him to lower it again.

“What do you need us to do?” Pepper sounds confident, calm and in charge as she always in. Her rock steady nerves are a balm to Toni’s fraying self-control. She’s a steady counter point to the icy rage that’s creeping back up on Toni now that the pain and terror from having the reactor taken is beginning to fade to the background of her mind a bit.

Not gone though, Toni isn’t sure if that particular terror will ever leave her now that she’s tasted it so intimately.

“Call Coulson,” Toni tells Pepper because his name hasn’t actually managed to slip her mind yet mainly because she knows a possible asset when she sees one. “Tell him to keep the skies clear if SHIELD can manage it.”
“And this?” Pepper gestures towards the armor.

“You’re gonna want to get a press release together Pep because I don’t think this is going to stay a secret after tonight.”

“What do I call it?” Pepper already has her phone in hand as she asks.

“I’ll tell when I get back,” Toni tells her as the faceplate slips down. She gives herself a split second to adjust to the suit and then moves towards the hole she still hadn’t gotten around to fixing in the roof of the workshop. It’ll be easier to take flight from there.

“Hey Boss,” Happy calls and when Toni looks back at him he gives a significant look towards Pepper, who’s standing by the door and obviously already busy, and then lifts his gun up. Toni gets the message loud and clear. Happy will protect Pepper while she goes and gets what needs to be done, done. “Kick his ass.”

Toni gives him a thumbs up and then she’s gone.

~~~

“J?” Toni pushes the armor forward with a burst, not quite supersonic but damn close.

“Yes Miss?” JARVIS is back to his normal, steady voiced self.

“You with me baby boy?” Toni needs him with her, needs him by her side for this, but she’s still so terrified of forcing him into something he doesn’t truly want to do.

“As always Miss,” JARVIS answers promptly, “I am with you till my last day.”

“Which isn’t going to be for a long, long time if I have my way about it JARVIS.”

“I could say the same to you Miss,” JARVIS sounds almost exasperated and it’s enough to make Toni smile just a bit despite the circumstances. “As a matter of fact there is something I wish to bring to your attention Miss.”

“Make it quick J, we’re five minutes out from SI.”

“Indeed Miss, that brings me to my point,” JARVIS redirects smoothly, “I would like to suggest some form of internal tracking device for you, and possibly a look into something that can augment your healing and general health issues. Perhaps something along the lines of the super soldier serum? You are rather fond of Captain Rogers after all.”

“JARVIS are you asking me if you can have me chipped like a puppy and then try to find something to make me some sort of superhuman?” Toni feels more than slightly surprised and yet amused at the same time because at least the tracking chip hadn’t come out of left field.

“To put it simply Miss,” JARVIS says, “yes. A tracking device would ensure my ability to locate you should the worst happen again. Adding to your ability to withstand damage would be a … comfort especially if you plan to continue using the armor for future purposes that align to your stint in Gulmira.”

“You got something in mind J?” Toni’s more than a bit intrigued. “I’ll agree to being chipped for your sake as long as it goes under S.T.E.V.E level encryption. But the other stuff …”

“I have taken the liberty of pursuing some independent research on the subject and found that the
idea is not so far-fetched as to be implausible.” There’s an almost coaxing note in his voice, like he’s
trying to convince her. “It is rather fascinating and while it would not be the super soldier serum per
se …”

“Glad you’ve got a hobby baby boy,” Toni smiles slightly and then abruptly soberes, “Like I said, yes
to the tracker J, but bookmark the rest until you’ve got something concrete to show me. I’m not
saying no, just later sugar.”

“Very good Miss,” JARVIS has a pleased note in his voice.

Toni shakes her head and then turns her attention back to the issue at hand.

*Stane must be stopped.*

~~~

The factory isn’t dark, the massive are reactor and security lights prevent that from happening, but it
is empty from what Toni can see which is what’s really important.

Toni wants to avoid collateral damage if at all possible. No more innocents should suffer at the
hands of her tech and she already knows this is going to be a fight.

Stane isn’t going to go quietly and Toni is almost *viciously pleased* by that fact.

He doesn’t deserve for this to be easy, not after what he’s done, what he’s caused with his greed and
his *war mongering*.

Not after hurting Rhodey.

Toni is ready and willing to fight him every step of the way for that reason alone, to make him pay
his debt in blood and pain. The same currency he’s extracted from so many others.

She knows she’s not innocent in this by far but she’ll fight to her last breath to claw her way towards
some sort of redemption. Will carve herself to pieces to rebuild what her naïveté and her almost
willful blindness has helped to destroy.

Determination and icy rage weighing heavily on her shoulders Toni makes her way inside easily
enough. Her hands are relatively gentle even with the strength of the suit as she opens the doors and
heads for where JARVIS has already told her Sector 16 is hidden.

The large, steel plated yellow door ahead of her is locked but JARVIS is completely inside of SI
now and nothing stands in his way for long. The red light on the card slider blinks green a second
before Toni’s hand reaches out to pull the door open.

It is dark inside the large, cavernous room but again that doesn’t matter much to Toni. The HUD has
sophisticated night vision so nothing’s hidden from her.

The suit’s footsteps are loud against the grate floor as she moves further into the place, HUD
scanning for movement, for heat, for any sign of anything out of place. She only pauses for a split
second beside the computer screen that’s flashing with the schematics for the suit Stane was
obviously building.

“Give me weak points from those schematics J,” Toni says into the privacy of the inner coms when
she sees the empty support cradle a few seconds later, “because he’s got a suit up and running. Tell
me where I need to hit him to make his whole tower of blocks come tumbling right the fuck down.”
“Yes Miss.”

The attack comes from the left and just behind her. Toni hears the familiar sound of servos whirling, louder and more menacing than her own suit, and instinct makes her duck as she spins around on her heel, one hand raised and repulsor firing almost before she’s aware of moving.

In that moment Toni comes face to face with the suit Stane has built for the first time.

It’s huge, a lumbering monstrosity of metal, bristling with guns and practically dripping with menace. Its faceplate is eerily reminiscent of the Mark I and that makes Toni hate it just a little bit more.

Because Stane has taken something she’d built out of a desperate bid of freedom and then rebuilt for redemption and made a grotesque copy in the name of his own greedy desire for war.

“Ton, Toni, Toni.” Stane taunts her through the speakers, voice slightly distorted but still recognizable. “You just couldn’t stay dead could you girl?”

“You don’t have what it takes to kill me Stane,” Toni spits, “you’d think you’d have gotten the picture by now.”

“This time,” Stane says as he raises one massive arm of his suit up, Gatling-gun pointed in her direction, “I’m going to make sure there’s nothing left of you to salvage.”

“Try me motherfucker,” Toni has time to taunt and then he’s firing and the battle is on.

Toni throws her arms up when he fires, protects her face plate with the thicker armor on her forearms on instinct. She has a split second to realize that the bullets aren’t penetrating any better than they had in Gulmira before her brain speeds back up and clicks into what she’s already recognizing as her own particular version of battle mode.

Toni’s mind doesn’t so much go quiet as it does smooth. She’s still a whirling mass of screaming equations and angles and information but it’s all even somehow. It all just flows.

It feels … right.

Like this … this is what she’s always been meant for.

She rolls to the side, out from under Stane’s oppressive fire and comes up with the repulsors blasting, icy rage sharpening her mind even further.

Stane’s suit rocks back a bit on the first hit but otherwise he doesn’t flinch, just takes one large, heavy step in her direction and continues to fire. It doesn’t matter to Toni though because she’s going to stop him. He’s going to pay for what he’s done.

She’s going to rip him apart or she’s going to die trying.

“J give me that analysis,” Toni prompts as she dives under a powerful haymaker swing and fires at his center mass.

“Stane’s armor is not properly calibrated for full performance and compatibility with the stolen arc reactor Miss.” JARVIS tells her promptly, voice just a shade off tight in that way that lets Toni know he’s uncomfortable with what’s happening. She knows that he’s worried and she hates that but she’s still glad that he’s with her, that he wants to be with her. That’s more than she deserves and
she loves him for it. “While physically powerful it falls far below the Mark III in terms of both speed and maneuverability. In other words Miss, he is both fat and slow.”

“Well then J,” Toni grins, sharp and wide and all teeth, “let’s show this fucker how we dance.”

Toni jolts forward, arms cutting out sharp angles in the air in front of her, repulsors blasting, as she dives directly into Stane’s space. With the grace of years of dance lessons and the strength of years of metal work she weaves the armor in and out of his space, repulsors firing rapidly. He falters for a moment under the barrage and Toni hears his enraged scream over his broadcasting coms as she gets a direct hit that makes him stumble again.

The way she goes flying from the brutal punch she’s too close to dodge directly afterwards doesn’t even matter. Pain is, often, the price of any sort of victory as Toni has long learned.

So instead of lingering over the hit Toni uses it to her advantage. She fires the boot repulsors and takes flight, weaving her way around hanging chains and support columns as she heads back towards the doorway.

She needs to get out of the building, preferably without bringing it down on top of herself or causing an explosion that’ll destroy the surrounding area.

Maneuverability and speed are two of her main leads here and she needs open space to work with in order to utilize them both to her maximum advantage.

“Running away again Toni?!” Stane screams after her, too close for comfort but obviously intent on following her which is, incidentally, exactly what Toni wants him to do anyways.

“Catch me if you can asshole,” Toni mutters as she twists her way around one last corner, the door in sight ahead of her.

Toni fires off a repulsor, blasts the door from its frame, and flies through the opening in one smooth move. She’s out of the building in the next second, Stane following behind her with a loud crash as he tears his way through the too small doorway.

“Now we’re on my playing field,” Toni says, pleased and calculating all at the same time, “J, weapons system on full baby boy. We’re going in hot.”

“Of course Miss.”

Toni hits Stane with a volley of shoulder missiles as soon as he’s clear of the building. His suit stumbles back and then forward, the armor scorched and dented in places but still coming like a battering ram. It might be a dirty, cheap knock off of her own armor but it’s still effective, would still change the face of warfare for all time.

Toni’s done enough of that in her life already, she won’t let the armor be added to her legacy of bloodshed and chaos. Not like this, not by him.

The armor is hers in a way none of her other weapons were, it’s personal, intimate.

The armor and her are one in a way she’s only just beginning to fully understand even after building it from the ground up and Toni intends to keep it that way.

She turns, goes in low, and races towards him. They clash in the center of the parking lot, asphalt and rubble flying up around them as they crash together, Toni’s feet digging deep into the ground under the strain of his weight and force coming down on her.
She backs him up with a repulsor blast/missile combination to the fucking face.

They trade blows, Stane’s hits sending vibrations through the armor that make her teeth rattle and clench, but she keeps going, keeps pushing forward. She’s almost feral in her rage, teeth bared behind the face plate like she’s itching for blood, like she aches to have his throat between her jaws.

But, beyond that, she’s still icy calm deep down inside.

Toni’s mind is a whirling storm of calculations, equations and angles piling in at her from all sides just like they always do but sharpened now with the heat of battle. The information from the HUD, JARVIS’ steady voice in her ear, the sensory input that streams in from all directions, all of it comes together to form this giant whirling mass of life in her mind.

Again Toni spares a thought to marvel at how this frame of mind, this battle mode of hers, is so smooth and even and almost peaceful in its chaos.

It’s the kind of peace that she hasn’t had since she was young, since warm hands and a familiar scent had soothed her at night before she went to sleep.

She likes it.

Stane seems to grow tired of trading blows with her because he moves, steps back and fires up his own volley of missiles. Tony ducks and dodges away from them, gauntlets coming up to shoot others out of the air between them in a staccato bursts of sound and fire.

Then they’re moving again, armors clanging against one another in an almost graceful exchange of savage blows. The fight drives them across the empty lot and ever closer to the busy highway just a too short distance away from their makeshift arena.

Toni missteps finally, not perfect in battle yet but that’s something she decides will change, and the hit she takes sends her flying through the divider and out onto the highway before she can correct herself.

There are screeching tires, the sound of vehicles swerving and panicked screams, and then Stane’s there again. His hulking armor looming over everything like an ominous specter of pain and fear.

He plucks a car up off of the highway and raises it up above his head, uncaring of the screaming woman desperate to protect the children that Toni can see, huddled together inside. They’re small and innocent. Terrified.

Precious.

Toni seethes.

“Put them down Stane!” Toni growls out even as she calculates angels and percentages and optimal hold positions. A part of her wonders how she hadn’t seen this kind of willful cruelty in Stane before, how, even with the distance between them, she’d overlooked his obvious willingness to destroy innocents. Maybe the way he’d never seemed bothered when it came to watching Howard raise a hand to her should have been more of a clue as to his true nature.

But then again no one else had ever seemed particularly bothered about it either except for Jarvis so maybe that wasn’t the right measuring stick to use.

“Collateral damage Toni,” Stane laughs, loud and callous, “you’ve never had the stomach for it girl.”
Toni catches the car when he throws it at her. The suit handles the weight easily enough but the positioning leaves her open and vulnerable for the blow he directs at her chest and stomach.

She grits her teeth but still stumbles a bit, the car making her top heavy in a way the suit can’t compensate for fully. Yet.

“Unibeam J!” Toni snarls. The way the chest plate of the armor jerks from the blast, the way the arc reactor is suddenly an even hotter weight in its hollow, takes her off guard for a second but she manages to hold it together. She doesn’t have the option to do otherwise because if she doesn’t do this, doesn’t hold her shit together long enough to stop him, then who else will?

Stane’s armor goes flying back from the force of the attack and Toni has a moment of vicious satisfaction when he doesn’t immediately power back through the smoke and debris to come at her again.

Toni struggles with it but she manages to get the car safely on the ground a few seconds later.

The way the screaming mother inside runs her over afterwards isn’t exactly appreciated but Toni can understand.

There’s not much Toni herself wouldn’t do to protect her own children and she’s far more terrifying. Far more ruthless.

“Miss,” JARVIS puts forth suddenly into the relatively quiet of the momentary lull, “the danger of significant civilian casualties rises with every moment the battle continues. Plus I am worried as to your own health. Having the reactor removed so forcefully was not good for your heart. The strain of a prolonged battle might worsen your condition at this point.”

Stane chooses that moment to come back at her again and Toni leaps away from his extended hands and fires at him again and again.

“I hear you J,” Toni’s teeth are gritted so hard her jaw aches. She can taste blood from where she’d been hit earlier hard enough to rattle her even in the suit. She ignores it, blocks it from her mind with the ease of long practice because she’s busy calculating. Her mind is whirling, flashes of the files JARVIS had shown her at the mansion mixing with the stolen glances at the schematics from inside Sector 16.

Toni needs to end this quickly. She can’t draw it out no matter how much she wants to repay him in kind for every drop of blood he’s caused to be spilt.

Can’t take the time to break his armor apart piece by piece and watch him writhe the way some dark part of her wants to.

No, she can’t have what she wants in that direction. Instead she has to wrap this all up as quickly as possible.

He has to have a weakness, something beyond maneuverability, something besides speed.

Toni needs something else to work with, something that doesn’t involve detonating high payload explosives in the middle of a public highway.

Or, well, more so than she already has.

Toni dodges, fires the boot repulsors to take to the air long enough to avoid being thrown through a still evacuating bus. She hovers there, repulsors giving her a bit of distance from his melee attacks.
“You’ve upgraded your armor for true flight!” Stane crows. “I’ll have fun ripping that tech off of your corpse Toni.”

Wait.

Toni’s mind clicks.

Yes.

That’s it.

That’s what she needs.

“You’d have to catch me first you sick fuck,” Toni taunts as she moves closer to him, careful to hover just out of reach. Her mind slides over what those glances at his schematics had shown her, over what JARVIS has whispered in her ear.

“I’ve made some upgrades of my own!” Stane sneers in triumph and then the boots of his monstrous armor fire, the flames thick and inelegant, an out of control blaze to her honed laser.

And then they’re in the sky.

Right where Toni belongs.

Now the playing field is truly hers.

She swoops around him, shoots off another volley of missiles just to piss him off, to damage his calm and make him chase her. To lure him further up into the sky, farther away from the city.

Just, further out.

Finally, when she’s judged it to be far enough Toni darts into his space. She lets him get his arms around her in a move that has JARVIS practically shrieking in her ear.

It hurts. Her armor’s far more sophisticated and gives her almost an entire foot in height but his still has strength and sheer size on her. The squeeze of his arms around her is, by far, hard enough for Toni to really feel it.

“Miss the armor’s integrity is not designed for prolonged compression.”

“Make a note about that for the Mark IV J,” Toni groans even as she bears down to put more power into the boots, “but for now just hang with me baby boy, Mama’s got a plan.”

She needs to go higher, needs both of them to go higher.

‘Please,’ she can’t help but think in one corner of her mind, ‘I need to go higher.’ For a moment she could swear that the wings etched so carefully across her back tingle in answer but she knows it’s only in her mind.

“Face it Toni,” Stane still sounds smug, still has a jeering note of mocking cruelty clear and open in his voice, “you’ve finally been out done. My armor’s more powerful than yours, more advanced in every way.”

Toni’s mouth tilts up in a feral grin, all teeth and sheer vicious glee even if he can’t see her face, as she notices the telltale frost rapidly forming on the outside of his helmet.
“Oh yeah?” Toni taunts him nastily. “How’d you fix the icing problem then?”

“Icing?” Stane sounds puzzled in that second, unsure of what’s happening. Toni hears him curse, loud and hateful, and feels the way his arms tighten once around her crushingly.

Then the grotesque eye-slits of his helmet go dark and gravity seems to reach up and pluck him directly from the sky.

He falls but Toni doesn’t let him fall alone. She stays in his space, practically wraps herself around him, and acts while his systems are off line because she only has a few precious seconds for this to work.

And she needs it to fucking work.

The first thing she does is grab the semi-exposed wiring in the neck joint of his armor and rip it out. Next she fires up the repulsor on her gauntlet and points it directly at the casing in the chest plate that holds her stolen arc reactor.

“Miss impact with the water in twenty seconds,” JARVIS warns her and Toni has a moment of sheer panic before she clamps down on it because she’s not done yet, “nineteen, eighteen, seventeen …”

Toni cuts the gauntlet’s repulsor and thrusts her hand at the reactor in Stane’s chest. Her fingers dent the heated metal and sink in just a bit. Toni manages to get a grip on the edge of the casing of the reactor.

Then …

“Miss!”

And then she’s underwater.

Oh God.

She’s underwater.

Oh God.

For a moment Toni is back in the cave, a hand fisted in her curls as her face is forced down into a trough, as her hands clutch at her car battery or as they flail in panic as she slowly drowns.

Over and over again.

“Miss,” JARVIS breaks into her thoughts, “you’re heart rate is dangerously elevated. Please, you must calm down.”

Toni sucks in a harsh breath and comes back to herself with a snap. Data and equations realign themselves in her mind and reality floods back in around the edges like a burst dam.

The armor is waterproof. Of course it is. She’d done that before she’d fixed the icing problem, but Toni can barely shower as it is so she’s not actually taken this feature for a test drive.

Panic wells up inside of her even with that knowledge firmly in mind. It’s a dark and ugly creature with teeth eager to bite, eager to sink deep into the heart of her and rip her apart if she lets it.

Panic still clouding her mind Toni jerks her hand away from Stane’s armor, angles her body upwards in order to blast the repulsors and get back into the sky again where she’s safe. Where she’s at home.
Away from the water.

Away from the fear and the panic.

Away from the memories.

But …

She stops. Turns. Looks at the rapidly sinking armor with Stane inside of it, with her stolen arc reactor still in place. If she doesn’t end this now he’ll probably reboot shortly, will probably be able to follow her up and out of the water.

No.

Unacceptable.

She remembers what he’s done. Remembers what he’s caused.

Toni remembers the almost thankful look on Yinsen’s face as he embraced death and the chance to see his family again one day.

Toni remembers the destruction and terror filled streets of Gulmira.

Toni remembers the feel of Rhodey’s blood, slick and hot and wrong, sliding over her skin.

He doesn’t deserve to leave the water.

This is more important than her panic, more important than her fear.

More important than her.

Toni draws a fist back and hammers at the chest plate again, digs the gauntlet into the creases around the reactor and pulls.

This is for all the innocents who have died.

For the weapons that should have protected them but had instead been turned upon them.

For Yinsen.

For Gulmira.

For the countless others killed by one man’s greed and indifference.

For Rhodey.

The reactor comes loose in her grip and with another solid jerk Toni rips it from its cradle and fists it in her hand.

Grotesque armor completely dark, Stane sinks.

Toni knows that there’s probably water rushing in through the hole she’s left in the chest, through the cracks and ruptures she’s put in the hull.

She knows he’s going to drown.

Slowly.
She knows she could save him even now, could pull him up and out of the water.

She won’t save him though. Knows she won’t do it even if that makes her the type of monster everyone’s always accused her of being in the past.

Obadiah Stane will die here and now, will drown in the sea, lost to its dark embrace, just as he’d left her to a watery hell after trying to have her put in her grave.

She doesn’t care about that though. What she cares about is all of the other lives he’s taken, all of the pain he’s caused the truly innocent. All of the murder and pain he’s enabled and encouraged from sheer greed alone.

Death means that Stane can’t hurt anyone ever again.

She hopes he burns in hell for what he’s done.

Toni takes one last look, turns, and points the armor towards the surface.

“Well done Miss.” JARVIS tells her softly just as they breech the surface and Toni flings herself high up into the night air with a broken gasp. “Well done.”

“Thanks J,” Toni’s voice is quiet and rough but she’s never been more sincere. “I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.”

“Somehow Miss,” JARVIS says and fondness is so evident in his voice that Toni has to swallow harshly, “I doubt that very much.”

Toni takes a deep shuddering breath as she hangs there in the air above the dark waters. After a few, calming moments, she forces herself to think about what to do next. Because there’s always something to do next and Toni doesn’t have the luxury or the ability to forget that even for a moment.

The skies are still clear, Coulson has obviously done his job, but Toni can see the lights of ambulances and firetrucks as well as the shapes of news vans near SI as she flies back towards the city.

She has a decision to make in this moment Toni knows, because she’s currently standing at a fork in the road that is her life with two paths stretched out before her.

She’s already told Pepper to prepare a press release but there’s still things Toni needs to decide first, things she needs to account for. Things that’ll impact the future in ways she once would have never thought possible.

The major thing Toni has to decide is whether or not she’s ready to accept being known as the one who pilots the armor or if she’s willing or even able to keep that fact hidden.

Toni doesn’t doubt that Coulson and SHIELD would be able to put together an alibi for her in a heartbeat if she decides to keep the secret. Hell they’ll probably be more than eager to do it for her.

It would, Toni admits quietly to herself, probably be smarter in some ways. Keeping the secret from spreading any further than it already has would provide a certain level of protection for herself and all those involved. It would allow her to craft smokescreens and cloak herself in secrecy in that way she’s always been so good at.

Keeping the secret would help to layer protection on those around her, would help her to keep them
safe from those who might set out to take what’s hers again. Strength invites challenge after all which is a lesson Toni’s learned well over the course of her life.

Keeping the secret might, in fact, be the best and smartest thing to do.

And yet …

And yet the consequences of that decision is what has her veering rather quickly in the opposite direction.

No secret can be kept forever after all. Eventually it will be discovered that she’s the one inside the armor because she doesn’t plan to stop.

Secrets invite investigation, invite discovery, and even with all of her skill that’s not a secret she could keep forever. There are too many variables, too much left to chance. If she tries to hide things Toni might not be able to control what is and is not revealed when that moment inevitably comes if she doesn’t stay on top of everything.

Plus keeping the secret would be like refusing to take responsibility for her actions, would be like dodging the realities of her past and her future all at the same time. Toni doesn’t like that idea at all. She’s been a part of a system with zero accountability for far too long now to willfully go down that road again.

Keeping the secret would be handing over power to SHIELD in some ways too. Would be opening herself up for their interference.

Because others are going to want the armor. SHIELD, the military, terrorists, etcetera etcetera. They’re all going to want what she’s created, Toni’s not stupid enough to think they won’t.

They’re going to want control, going to want to either put her on a leash or take the armor from her so they can take the opportunity to put who they want into the suit. They’re going to want her to share the technology or give them the chance to reverse engineer the armor and create their own army.

If she gives any of them an inch, they’re going to want to take a hundred miles and make her build them the road they do it on all at the same time.

If she gives them a chance they’ll make her into a puppet.

Toni isn’t going to do any of that. She’s never going to be forced to build for anyone else ever again, will never dance to a tune she doesn't choose herself.

Never again.

So Toni knows she’s going to have to fight if she wants to step forward out of the shadows, if she doesn’t keep the secret.

Toni’s going to have to battle tooth and nail, going to have to bite and claw and rip her way through her opposition to keep her hands on the armor and everyone else’s off.

It’s going to be hard. It’s going to be painful and exhausting and complicated.

Choosing to keep the secret really would be the easy thing to do.

“Whatever choice you make, whatever this hard decision is, I know you’ll make the right one.”
Aunt Peggy’s voice whispers in Toni’s ear in that moment. “That doesn’t necessarily mean the easiest one but I know it’ll be the right one and that’s what’s more important.”

Toni swallows roughly and nods ever so slightly to herself, mind made up. Honestly there was never really any other option because Aunt Peggy was right then and she’s right now.

The right decision isn’t always necessarily the easiest one and this situation is no exception. Toni knows what she has to do, knows what the right choice for her to make in this moment is.

“JARVIS,” Toni calls quietly.

“Yes Miss?”

“Send Pepper a heads up message for me will you baby boy?” Toni smiles slightly at the thought of what Pepper’s face will look like when she gets JARVIS’ message even as a sliver of dread traces down her spine.

“Should I also include an order of new Jimmy Choo heels in this message Miss?” JARVIS’ voice is as dry as ever because he knows Toni’s voice, knows her every expression and tone by now, and he can obviously tell she’s about to really piss Pepper off.

“Make that a medley of shoes J,” Toni corrects him, “a proverbial shoe cornucopia if you will since I don’t think one pair’s going to make up for this.”

“As you wish Miss,” JARVIS sounds like he’s wavering between despair and amusement.

“That’s my boy,” Toni grins even as she turns her aching body towards the flashing lights and kicks the repulsors into high gear, “that’s my boy.”

It’s going to be hard but Toni’s used to fighting by now.

She’s been doing it her entire life.

This is just one more battle added to the seemingly never ending war.

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Guns are drawn when Toni lands in front of the police barricade that’s keeping the press well back from the destroyed highway where she and Stane had fought.

“Stand down,” Toni tells the nervous looking cop who has her gun leveled in Toni’s direction, and then, because she’s more than a bit of an asshole, she follows it up with, “I come in peace.”

The cop looks vaguely pale and ready to pass out but to her credit her hands stay steady and her gun stays up without wavering.

“Stand down officer,” a familiar voice calls out before things can escalate any further. Toni sees Agent Coulson press his way forward through the crowd and into the large bubble of space that’s developed around Toni.

Toni also sees the flashing lights of the various cameras that are frantically taking shot after shot of the armor from a distance. She subtly shifts, a tiny gesture that makes the lines of the armor easier to capture. She’s been controlling her own press for so long now that the move, the attention to detail, is second nature. A delicate manipulation designed to work in her favor.
“Ms. Stark,” Coulson says lowly, face blank but eyes vaguely stressed. “When I booked a meeting with you this isn’t what I had in mind.”

“Sorry about that Agent,” Toni’s voice is unrepentant for all that she keeps it low, “we had a bit of scheduling conflict it seems. Forgot I had an ass-kicking penciled in for tonight.”

“Whatever it is you’re thinking of doing I’m asking you to reconsider Ms. Stark.” Agent steps forward further into her space, seemingly unfazed by being so close to the armor. "SHIELD can help you with this. Help you keep this whole thing under wraps, make sure no one gets hurt. Make sure you stay safe."

"Oh I bet you can,” Toni doesn't sneer but it's a damn close thing. She can just imagine how they'd help her with all of this. Her resolve to step forward down this path solidifies even further. She can only hope that it isn't a mistake and that if it is she'll be able to atone for it in the future. "Sorry Agent, but I'll have no strings on me. Not even ones that trace back to SHIELD."

"Ms. Stark ..." Agent steps forward but Toni isn't listening anymore. Instead she’s focused on the press standing just a little ways behind Agent. She knows what she has to do, knows it’s going to piss Pepper off, but also knows that it’s necessary. She needs to control the situation, needs to influence the flow of information before the next morning’s papers go to print and articles go live online.

"Are you ready J?" Toni breathes the question into the silence of the helmet, outer coms muted for the moment.

"Always Miss." JARVIS' steady voice in her ear is the last push forward she needs. Toni steps forward passed Agent and closer to the crowd of reporters and photographers who are practically pressing against the police barricade in order to get closer to her, to get a better shot of the armor, to just get closer all in the hopes of getting something they can use.

Toni’s about to give them more than they could have ever imagined.

With one final deep breath Toni raises her hands, disengages the release on the helmet, and pulls it off.

There's a moment of brief, stunned, silence when the press registers just who is inside the armor.

And then ...

Chaos.

Toni smiles, teeth bared in a sharp and vicious grin, and steps closer to the group.

Her hair is up, her wings are covered, and her emotions are buried deep. For the moment at least she is once again in control of herself, in control of her grief and her rage, of the pain and anguish that eat away at her from the inside.

This is her theater after all, her stage, and the show must go on.

She’s a Stark. She’s the Stark, and playing to the cameras is one of the things she does best.

No matter how much she aches, no matter how tired she is, no matter how the thought of Rhodey makes her want to sob and scream, she has to press forward. She has to grit her teeth and smile. Has to do what she can to make these people say and show what she wants them to.
This will be no different from all the other times she’s had to play act in the past despite the fact that the stakes are immeasurably higher this time around.

"Ms. Stark!" One excited reporter cries out for her attention. "Is this new military technology? Are you reopening the Stark weapons division?"

"Absolutely not," Toni nips that idea directly in the bud without even pausing to think about it. That’s the last thing she needs them to print tomorrow morning. “This baby is all me.”

"Toni," another voice calls, "what do you call this thing?"

Toni pauses for a moment because it’s the same question Pepper had asked her. Toni had brushed the thought aside then as unimportant but now she knows she needs an answer.

Names have power, have weight, and the armor needs one with both.

Toni's mind whirls.

A part of her wants to call the armor Icarus, wants to name herself after the boy who’d flown too close to the sun, but she can’t.

She can’t take that story, that guiding, calming light in her life even after so many years, and turn it into a weapon, into something so intrinsically linked with violence.

Icarus is comfort, is calmness. Icarus is Jarvis and love and home. Is JARVIS and the bots and safety. Icarus is soothing hands and comforting metal claws.

Icarus is peace.

The armor, as much as Toni already feels as if it is a part of her, is not.

So no, that isn't what she wants.

Her mind cycles through a million different phrases and words, trying to find the ones that fit.

Names have always come easy to her in the past, have been laid out at her feet like offerings.


She's had so many names over the years but only one has ever been chosen by her and that was Toni.

Now is her chance to choose again.

If only she could find one that fit because she is everything those other names and titles have always described her as and yet she's also so much more.

Toni is a phoenix rising from the ashes of every cycle of death and rebirth that has ever been forced upon her.

She is Icarus flying too close to the sun and then too close to the sea, never able to find a happy medium.

She is a Stark, is the Stark, who Howard had always said were men made of iron.
But she wasn’t born a man. Wasn’t born male like Howard and Maria had always wanted.

Toni is a (fe)male, but despite that, or hell maybe even because of that, she’s still the greatest Stark to ever live.

She’s still better than Howard who’d beaten his own child bloody and raw more times than she can count.

She’s better than all the ones who’d come before him.

Toni is everything the world has ever said about her and none of it all at the same time.

It comes to her then, what the name of the armor is, what she’s going to call it, what she’s going to make them all call her.

It’s the only name that works, the only name that strikes that perfect balance between all that she is and all that has shaped her over time. It’s a perfect fuck you to everything and everyone who’s ever named her against her will, who’s ever looked at her and found her wanting. To everyone who’s ever made her look at herself the same way.

Toni is ...

Toni is ...

~~~

“I want to be mad at you,” Toni whispers the confession into the quiet of the room, “I want to be so pissed off at you for what you did. For that stupid, selfless fucking thing you did. I want to be so mad at you because I’m not worth it. I’m never going to be worth that. Not from you.”

Toni heaves a deep breath, squeezes her eyes closed, and then sags forward to rest her head against the cold metal in front of her.

“Doing what you did, putting yourself between me and a bullet like that,” Toni feels fresh tears prickle her eyes at the thought of what had happened, at the memory of living through it all, “that’s not something that was ever supposed to happen. That’s not …”

It’s hard to talk at this point. The emotions Toni’s been suppressing for the better part of three days are rising back up to the forefront, threatening to overwhelm her and eat her alive. She’s exhausted, battered and bruised, but unwilling to move no matter who pokes their head in and tries to get her to leave.

“*I can’t bury you,*” Toni breathes the words out, lets the truth of them coat her tongue again, “*I can’t.*”

Toni shudders, bites down on the inside of her jaw hard enough that the fresh pain is enough to help her focus a bit more.

“The truth is, I don’t know who I am without you anymore,” the confession comes surprisingly easy, mainly because it’s a truth Toni had long ago accepted, “I’m not sure what I’ll be without you by my side.”

“Toni,” a rough, raspy voice answers her, “you’d be Toni.”

Toni’s head snaps up off of the hospital bed rail in surprise.
Rhodey’s awake for the first time since he came out of surgery the day before. His dark eyes are slightly glazed and hazy but still focused on her face, a smidgen of concern in his expression as he takes in the fresh bruises that mar her skin.

“Rhodey.” Toni breathes his name out even as she jumps to her feet and stumbles forward until she’s plastered against the railing. “Rhodey.”

“Hey baby girl.” Rhodey slurs just slightly, obviously high with painkillers and residual exhaustion. “You okay?”

“You idiot.” Toni sobs as she leans forward and presses her forehead gently against his. “You noble, beautiful, idiot I’m fine. You made sure of that.”

“Good.” Rhodey smiles. He still looks exhausted and, despite the drugs he’s on, like he’s in agony underneath the thick swathe of bandages that covers his shoulder and chest. “Gotta protect … my best girl. Now … come here.”

Rhodey clumsily raises the arm not thickly bandaged upwards and motions Toni closer with an awkward finger wave. Toni only hesitates for a split second, wary of hurting him but also so tired and desperate for his warmth that she’s not even sure how she’s still functioning.

Rhodey makes a small, impatient sound in the back of his throat, and Toni’s hesitation disappears.

She makes her way around the bed, kicks her heels off beneath it, and climbs carefully up onto the mattress until she can lay comfortably, her head tucked onto his uninjured shoulder and her body pressed cautiously against his side.

“I love you,” Toni whispers against the side of his neck even as the tears she’s been repressing slide slowly down her face, “I love you so much Rhodey. So much.”

“Love you too little girl, love you best.” Rhodey sighs and Toni can tell from his tone that sleep is steadily rising up to claim him once more. “Sleep now, talk more … later.”

“Later,” Toni whispers her agreement because she’s so grateful that there will even be a later to even think about arguing with the idea.

So instead she settles down, turns her face further into his neck so that she can carefully breathe him in, and sleeps for the first time in almost four days.

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The headline of every major newspaper across the country reads: The Iron Queen Rises.

Every news channel runs the story, speculates and discusses everything about the armor they can think of.

And yet, Toni doesn’t care.

All that matters at the moment is the fact that Rhodey is alive and relatively well.

All that matters is that, despite everything that’s happened, they’re both back where they belong.

At each other’s sides.

The Iron Queen will be there when they both wake up. For when Rhodey is alert enough to hear her explanation and then probably ream her out for it.
For when Pepper and Happy both come back.

For now … for now all Toni wants is *this*.

~~~


*Steve watches her silently from the surface of the water with eyes so blue they burn.*

*Rhodey stands wordlessly by his side staring up at her with a small smile and dark, warm eyes.*

*The skies are clear. The waters are calm.*

*And in her chest a star burns brightly.*

Chapter End Notes

Sooooo? How'd I do? You guys approve of the name? I waffled for a long time over what to choose but this felt like the best fit as it kept an element of the original Iron Man while still being new and fitting the story. Plus it's a big old fuck you to Howard which is always a positive in my opinion. Also yeah Rhodey!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

You guys are, as always, so so fantastic! Your responses to the last chapter were beyond amazing and I'm glad you were all so relieved to see Rhodey survive.

Now this chapter can be considered a bit of a transition chapter dealing with the time gap between IM and IM2 so it's a bit shorter than normal.

Fair warning as always that now we'll be moving into IM2 territory and it's going to be rife with canon-divergence.

Now have a fanmix: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m gonna need a minute to process this.” Rhodey’s head is pressed back into his pillow, his good arm stretched up and draped over his eyes. Exasperation is thick in his voice and Toni can’t help but roll her eyes at him.

He likes to call her dramatic, likes to accuse her of showboating, but he’s just as bad as she is when he gets his dander up. When they’re both in the mood they can feed off of each other and snowball out of control. That tends to lead to things like that intimate weekend they spent together in a tiny little jail cell in Delaware. Dignity, what little they had left by that time, was the cost of that trip and as soon as they’d gotten out they’d agreed to never talk about again.

Because, seriously, it was Delaware. They fucked up so bad they got arrested in Delaware.

“I’ll be here when you’re done having the vapors okay Steel Magnolia?” Toni quips from where she’s settled at the end of his luxury hospital bed, his feet in her lap. She’s taking a not so subtle sort of pleasure in painting his toenails a rather becoming shade of chrome. She’d bullied and bribed his way into a private suite where they’ve been left mostly alone and his morphine drip is still high enough that he’s not really realized what she’s doing yet.

Toni’s an opportunist at heart in many ways and this is no exception.

“Oh I’m sorry were you being snarky?” Rhodey doesn’t even bother to lift his arm from over his eyes. “I couldn’t hear you over the anxiety induced stroke I’m currently having because my best friend built a suit of robot armor to fight evil in. But you go ahead, be sarcastic, I’ll just lay here and wait until you’re done. Don’t worry about me. Take your time.”

“Yeah,” Toni drawls as she blots at his toe with the hem of her shirt and then caps the polish bottle, “because clearly I am the singular source of sarcasm in this relationship. The sole proprietor of mockery if you will.”

“I’m as pure as the driven snow.” Rhodey deadpans.

“Aw bumblebee you haven’t had a pure part on your body since that time in Dubai.” Toni pats gently at his leg, puts the polish on the bedside tray, and crawls her way back up the bed to curl down beside him, her head pillowed on the curve of her arm.
“Lies and slander,” Rhodey finally moves again, brings his arm down to curl around her shoulders and pull her few inches closer. “Especially since Dubai is supposed to be number two on our ‘things that never actually happened list’ remember?”

“Number three actually.” Toni reaches out and ghosts her fingertips carefully over the surface of the bandages wrapped around his chest. The almost too-white fabric stands out starkly, grotesquely, against the dark beauty of his skin.

Toni hates them as much as she’s grateful for them.

She’s grateful because he’s alive and they’re proof of that. She hates the fact that he has to wear them at all.

She’d much rather wear them herself than see him hurt like this. He’s hers and she should have seen through Stane’s duplicity fast enough to prevent this from ever happening.

Rhodey’s good hand trails its way up her spine to squeeze lightly and comfortingly at the back of her neck in that way that always makes her go slightly weak-kneed and relaxed. It’s always been one of his favorite ways of pulling her back out of her head.

“Number three?” He sounds slightly drowsy but still interested in their derailed conversation. “Could have sworn it was two.”

“Nope,” Toni pops the ‘p’ slightly as she shakes her head in denial. “Two’s Disney Land remember?”

“I wish I didn’t,” Rhodey grumbles. “What’s one then?”

“Delaware.” Toni says the name with no small amount of relish.

“Oh God,” Rhodey makes a noise not unlike a dying whale, “I forgot about fucking Delaware.”

“It is number one for a reason sour patch.” Toni practically coos, smug as always whenever Delaware does actually come up between them. And for it being number one on their ‘things that never actually happened list’ that’s surprisingly often. “Mainly because it was such an awe-inspiring fuck up and best of all it was all your idea.”

“No,” Rhodey immediately denies just like he always does, “I’m not taking responsibility because it never actually happened. I’m declaring it erased from history and I’m mentally blocking the entire state of Delaware.”


~~~

Toni watches Rhodey sleep.

She wraps one hand around his good wrist, fingers positioned to feel the steady thrum of his pulse, and keeps her ears trained to the heart monitor tucked discretely beside the bed.

She keeps her senses attuned to him and her mind is surprisingly calm. Her normally chaotic and swirling brain is almost unwilling to focus on anything else at the moment. All other avenues of thought are pushed aside as she catalogues each and every piece of input that proves to her he’s still alive, that Rhodey’s still right here with her.
Because she’d almost lost Rhodey. That fact hits her anew each time she looks at him, each time he winces, each time a nurse comes in to check his wound.

Toni almost lost him.

Her free hand comes up to tap out a rhythm against the reactor’s front through the thick shirt she’s wearing to disguise its glow. The beat matches Rhodey’s heart perfectly because she’s always cared more about his heartbeat than her own.

*Rhodey had almost been taken from her.*

Toni sighs softly, rubs at the ache of the reactor with the palm of her hand, but otherwise doesn’t move.

She doesn’t sleep.

She can’t.

She’s too afraid that she’ll close her eyes and open them again to a world where Rhodey is *gone.* She’s too afraid that him being here, wounded but gloriously *alive,* will be nothing more than a dream her fracturing mind wove in a desperate attempt to stabilize her.

Because without him, without Rhodey … well Toni’s not sure *what* she’d be without him.

She’d still have Pepper and Happy, JARVIS and the boys, but it wouldn’t be the same she knows. They wouldn’t be enough. She hates to think of it that way, because it’s not their fault, the flaw is in her own construction. But it doesn’t make it any less true.

Rhodey is her guiding star, her true north. Without him she’d be less in all the worse ways.

And Toni’s not sure if the world could handle her like that.

She’s more of a monster now than she’d been when she lost Jarvis. With or without the armor she’s more dangerous in all of the ways that count now than she’d been when she was seventeen, half feral still and trying her best to mourn herself to death.

So Toni doesn’t sleep, too afraid of what waking again might show her.

Instead she just … stands guard.

For Rhodey.

For herself.

For the world maybe.

She’s not entirely sure anymore.

~~~

When she finally does leave the hospital it’s at Rhodey and Pepper’s insistence. There’s a meeting with the board scheduled and Toni knows that the aftermath of her reveal as Iron Queen has been running Pepper ragged as is.

As loathe as she is to leave Rhodey’s side she’s also reluctant to make things harder for Pepper.
Pepper, all perfect hair, sharp shoes and carefully concealed tiredness, brings her a change of clothes and promises to stay until Toni gets back.

So, dressed to the nines as always, hair up, wings and reactor covered, Toni strolls out of the hospital and slides into the backseat of Happy’s waiting care after only a minimum amount of fuss.

She’s in the middle of discussing the new Mark IV schematics she’s been kicking around with JARVIS when Happy gets her attention.

“Boss.” His voice is low, soft and serious in that way he only is when something is wrong.

“What’s wrong?” Toni is instantly on alert. But then again she’s always on alert these days. She’s relatively sure she’s not relaxed, has not been truly and wholly calm, since that day on the plane with Rhodey right before Afghanistan.

“Black SUV, two cars back,” Happy says without ever taking his eyes off of the road in front of him. Still Toni can see how his grip on the steering wheel tightens. “It’s been following us since we left the hospital.”

The car’s windows are tinted so Toni doesn’t worry as she twists to turn and look out the back. Sure enough there’s a large, black SUV, prowling through traffic behind them.

Toni’s mind whirls.

Stane had put a hit out on her, one that had resulted in Rhodey being shot, and Toni’s not sure if that contract had ended with Stane’s death or not. JARVIS has been diligently running through any and all information he could get his hands on but so far there’s been no word. There’s always the possibility that it hadn’t been revoked.

She doesn’t have the armor with her, which is something that she can already see might be an issue. She makes a mental note to work on that in the future. So she doesn’t have the armor and they’re still too far from the mansion to get back to it safely, hell they’re going in the opposite direction.

Toni doesn’t panic though because the armor, or lack thereof, only matters in this moment in terms of sheer firepower.

Even without the suit she’s Toni Stark and Toni Stark is the Iron Queen. That’s a distinction that means so much more than most people seem willing or able to realize or admit so far. Toni already knows that’s not likely to change in the future no matter what she does.

Right now her first priority is to take control of the situation, to make sure Happy is safe and protected for all that he’s supposed to be her bodyguard.

He’s hers, just like Pepper and Rhodey, which means he’s hers to protect whether he likes it or not.

“Plan B Hap. Try and lose them.” Toni tells him even as she moves so that her back is to Happy and she can look out the back window. They’re at a stop light now and being paused makes Toni feel far too vulnerable in this moment.

“Got it Boss.” Happy sounds grim but determined and it’s good to know she has him at her side even if she wishes he’d stayed behind with Pepper where he’d be safe.

She reaches out, runs her fingertips along the underside of the mini-bar and presses her thumb print to the small, concealed scanner there.
There’s a small click and an almost silent whirl before the front panel of the bar slides open. Toni reaches out, grabs the almost elegant gun hidden there and checks it over quickly and efficiently.

It’s her own design and it boasts a larger magazine, better precision, and a lighter weight than most handguns on the market. Toni had been proud of it when she’d first put it into production, but now it almost hurts to pick it up.

Because it’s just one of the many weapons she’d created that had been given into hands that should have never held them.

Still, no matter how bad it might ache, she’ll do what she has to do in order to protect her own.

Honestly what she might be willing to do for them is far more terrifying than some of the things she’s already done, some of the things she’s planning to do.

The light changes and Happy takes off like a greyhound out of the gate, JARVIS acting as navigator as he sends Happy down clear alleyways and down less crowded streets. Toni can’t help the small whoop she lets out because even though it had taken her years to truly be comfortable in a car again after losing Jarvis she’s always loved the speed.

Twenty minutes and more evasive maneuvers than Toni can shake a stick at later the SUV is still on their tail, overtly following them now that they’ve given up the game. The other driver is obviously just as skilled as Happy is and that says a lot in Toni’s opinion.

“Time for Plan A Hap.” Toni tells him and Happy curses harsh and low because Plan A is, and always has been the same.

Attack.

Because Toni dislikes running as a rule, hates being put on the defensive, and this is no exception.

Needless to say neither Rhodey, Happy, nor Pepper are ever all that pleased with Plan A. Since Afghanistan that’s only gotten worse because the attack part of that plan has become a lot more literal.

“Please reconsider Miss,” JARVIS speaks up, “Plan A is notoriously dangerous. Perhaps attempting to reach the mansion and the Iron Queen armor might be more prudent.”

“Not gonna work baby boy.” Toni shakes her head even as she adjusts her grip on her gun. “If they want me then the best place to do it is on the roads back to the mansion. They could blow the car, set up an ambush on one of the private stretches. This is better for us. The city’s easier to hide in if push comes to shove.”

“Of course Miss.” JARVIS agrees reluctantly because they all know she’s right.

Happy brings the car to a stop in the relatively empty parking lot of a convenience store. He angles the car sideways, nose pointed towards the street and in clear view of the cameras settled around the store.

It’s a scenario he and Rhodey have run over and over again since Afghanistan Toni knows. How to best control the situation in case someone ever tries to take Toni from either of them again.

The SUV idles in the parking lot a few car lengths away from them

“Worst comes to worst Happy and you let them take me.” Toni turns, meets Happy’s eyes in the
rearview mirror. She sees the protest before he can voice it and holds her hand up to stop him from saying anything. “You let them take me and you get the hell away from here. You get back to Rhodey and Pepper and you make sure they stay safe. Then you can worry about me okay?”

“Boss.” Happy sounds agonized.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Toni tries for a small smile even as she swallows down the brief rise of panic that tries to eat at her at the thought of being taken again because there’s more at stake here than just her. No matter what she’ll fight them all if she has to in order to keep Happy safe. “JARVIS already has a lock on our positioning Happy. If they do take me then he’ll be following them the entire way with every camera he can get his code on, not to mention the fact that he’s in more satellites than you can name by this point.”

Happy looks less than reassured but he doesn’t say anything else, his mouth tight in an unhappy line.

“Do you need me to make it an order Hap?” Toni reaches up through the divider and lays a hand on his shoulder. Sometimes, Toni knows, it’s easier for Happy if she does that, gives him an order outright and grounds him through simple touches. Rhodey’s the same way on occasion, when his own nightmares act up or he’s feeling unsure.

“No Boss.” Happy seems to harden, seems to fall back into that military baring that Toni knows will always be a part of him.

Toni takes a deep breath, squares her shoulders, and settles her face into an impassive mask, crimson lips curled into a dismissive smirk.

God she doesn’t know if she’ll survive being taken again or if she’ll be able to come out of it on the other side even close to what passes as her version of whole now days.

But that doesn’t matter. Her fear doesn’t matter.

She’s Toni Stark, she’s the Iron Queen.

She’ll fight these fuckers to the bitter end if they make her and no matter what she won’t give them the satisfaction of seeing her frightened.

Her and Happy open their doors at basically the same time and they’re both careful to stay behind the bullet proof glass of the windows even as they step out of the car. Happy’s gun is openly in his hand, unabashedly aimed at the SUV, while Toni’s is held down by her side, ready to come up at a moment’s notice but carefully concealed for the time being.

She’s waiting for clues as to how exactly they need to play this out, if aggression is the best way to go or if charm or something else will work better. Until then she needs to be nothing more than what she looks at this moment, beautiful and arrogant but otherwise harmless without the armor.

Because she’s been showing the world what and who she is for years now and even as they drool over her tech and now the armor they still aren’t listening.

Toni’s far from harmless, she always has been.

The last time someone took her she burned them alive in the end.

There’s an almost breathless moment of tension before the passenger side of the SUV opens. Happy tenses but Toni keeps herself loose, outwardly uncaring, eyes fixed straight ahead and brow cocked up inquisitively.
A figure, tall and broad shouldered, steps out onto the pavement and Toni feels something within her relax just the slightest bit because she recognizes him.

She shouldn’t but she does.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” Toni drawls lowly, even as she slowly thumbs the safety on and tucks the gun subtly into the back of her skirt with one hand so that it’s hidden. She knows him, well knows of him more like, and she sure as fuck doesn’t trust him. Not with what she knows about him, as little as that may be.

“Boss?”

“Relax Happy,” Toni reassures him softly with a small wave in his direction as she steps to the side and away from the protective cover of her car door, “I know him.”

Toni covers the distance between them, her heels clicking against the pavement as she struts forward, hips swaying just so and chin titled proudly up. She stops further away from him than is technically polite but she resolutely doesn’t give a fuck. He’s the one who’s been chasing her through town so it’s fair to say he threw politeness out the window first.

“Stark.” Nicholas Fury watches her approach the whole time, face impassive, hands folded behind his back and long coat blowing in the slight breeze. “I’m Ni-“

“Colonel Nicholas J. Fury, Director of SHIELD,” Toni smiles at him, a slow showing of teeth that she knows looks almost threatening and certainly doesn’t reach her eyes, “to what do I owe the … dubious pleasure of being tailed by you on such a fine day? Or were we playing hide and seek and you just forgot to tell me?”

“You’re just as much a pain in the ass as everyone says you are aren’t you?” Fury lets out what sounds like a long suffering sigh.

“Oh Nicky,” Toni smooths out her expression, cocks a hip arrogantly to the side and plants one hand on the curve, “you have no idea.”

“I’ve got a pretty solid idea actually,” Fury shakes his head slightly, “but that’s not why I’m here. I’m here to talk to you about something else, something important.”

“You must have gotten all A’s on your report card in spy school huh?” Toni prods at him just a bit, testing his lines. “You’ve got that whole Mr. Mysterious thing down pat let me tell you.”

“The Iron Queen armor catapulted you into a class of individuals that most people know nothing about.” Fury tells her, solemn and serious, completely undeterred by her interruptions. “You’re not the only superhero in the world Stark. I’ve been working on getting a team together, a group of people who you now fit the criteria to be included in. It’s called the Avengers Initiative.”

“That sounds ominous and kind of sexy to be honest.” Toni cuts him off before he can get too far into what’s obviously going to be his spiel. “It also sounds like something I’m not interested in.”

The idea sounds interesting if Toni’s being honest with herself but the idea of being tied to SHIELD is still abhorrent to her. Plus she has her own agenda to attend to at the moment, her own goals and quotas to meet.

“Hear me out Stark.”

“Sorry Double-Q,” Toni waves a deliberately dismissive hand in his direction, “You’re going to
have to find someone else to play your Secret Squirrel. I’ve got things higher up on my priority list than joining your International Sneaky Service.”

Fury looks at her for a moment, tracks his one eye over her face, and then shrugs lightly and turns on his heel without another word.

Toni watches him go, shoulders straight and face carefully neutral.

She refuses to admit that she’s a bit unsettled, just a bit off balance by the whole thing. She doesn’t like the way he’s given up so easily. She doesn’t like the way she’d been so frightened before she’d shut it down, doesn’t like the way she’d almost wanted to panic.

She’s the Iron Queen and she doesn’t have the luxury of panic anymore.

There’s too much she has to do, too much to be done, to give into that kind of weakness.

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Rhodey finally comes home a few days later, still tired and sore and on a battery of meds, but obviously on the mend. Toni tucks him safely into his bed in his room with JARVIS monitoring him and feels as if a weight has been lifted from her shoulders because Rhodey is finally home.

He’s at the mansion, he’s with her and he’s safe.

She will keep him that way, will keep him as protected as she can, and that’s all that matters.

~~~

She splits her time between sitting with Rhodey when he’s awake and alert and holing up in the workshop, working diligently on the Mark IV.

Even when she sits with Rhodey in his room she normally has a tablet with her or carries on conversations with JARVIS filled with half spoken sentences, sweeping gestures, and words bitten off in half a dozen languages at least.

Rhodey seems to be content because there’s always a small, pleased smile on his face when she turns and catches him watching her.

No matter how distracted Toni might get, or how tired Rhodey might be, it’s hard for them to keep their hands off of each other when they’re together. Toni’s constantly reaching for him, fingers unerringly finding his pulse points. Rhodey keeps pulling her closer to his side every chance he gets like he’s desperate to keep her near, desperate to share skin so he knows she’s alive and well and right beside him.

He’s still sleeping a lot though so Toni either lets herself pass out in the workshop or she finds herself glued to Rhodey’s side.

Both are familiar and comforting in their own ways.

Neither completely stops the nightmares.

~~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

Clawed hands reach out for her and she darts forward to avoid them.

Behind her there’s a scream.

She turns in time to see knife like talons sink deep into Rhodey’s chest as he’s dragged back into the dark of the cave.

~~~

Toni wakes screaming on the couch in the workshop.

JARVIS tells her the time and the date and the sound of his voice helps to settle her a tiny bit. Still she can practically taste her own screams, can feel them welling up in her throat no matter how hard she bites them back down.

But then, she feels as if she’s always screaming now days even when she’s silent, so she’s almost used to it.

~~~

Rhodey and her talk about the armor a great deal.

Toni shows him schematics and holograms, takes him down to the workshop and sets him up on the couch with Mother sprawled across the back as she pulls out the Mark III and puts it through its paces for him. She deliberately doesn’t let him know about the footage she has of her development and testing process because that’s a fight she doesn’t want to have.

Finally, when she’s shown him everything, Toni stands in front of him feeling like she had when she was four and Jarvis had taken her and her newly built circuit board to Howard’s study. She hates that feeling, hates waiting to be judged, but it’s Rhodey and for him there’s not much she wouldn’t do.

“God Toni, this is … this is beyond anything I’ve ever seen.” Rhodey breathes and there’s something like awe in his eyes, awe and the slightest hint of fear.

Toni’s not sure if that fear is for or because of her and she can’t bring herself to ask.

~~~

Things go on like that for a bit, they settle into their own special kind of rhythm with Pepper and Happy darting in and out of the mansion at all hours.

Then Toni finds her next mission in Pavlodar, her first official move as the Iron Queen, and everything slowly begins to change.

That first mission is rough but Toni honestly wasn’t expecting anything else. The Mark III is solid, is more than fight worthy with all of the repairs she’d done after the fight with Stane, but she still comes back bruised and bloody, ribs and chest aching and bone tired.

But she’s victorious, a branch of the Ten Rings is gone now and more caches of her weapons are destroyed. Pain is a small price to pay for these kinds of victories.
Especially when she’s the only one to feel it.

So she doesn’t hesitate to do it again.

And then again.

She comes back limping one day to Rhodey waiting for her in the workshop. He takes one look at her as soon as she’s out of the armor and his face *pinches*.

“You can’t keep doing this Tones.” He says it to her softly a few minutes later as he dabs lightly at her busted lip. His shoulder still pains him but he’s in PT now and it’s getting stronger by the day. Toni’s glad for that. She hates seeing him in pain, hates the very thought of it.

She’d take it from him if she could.

“I have to. It’s my responsibility.” It’s that simple to Toni.

“No you don’t.” He cups her chin in his hand then, makes her look at him. “Baby girl you don’t have to do this. Any of this.”

“They’re my weapons Rhodey,” Toni shakes her head as best she can before he says anything else, “mine. That makes them my responsibility. That makes this my mission.”

“You’ve always been too stubborn for your own good, or mine.” Rhodey leans forward, presses a gentle kiss against her forehead, and then sighs. “Fine then, but we’re going to have to make some changes.”

“Changes?” He’s piqued her curiosity now.

“Yup, changes. Get ready to go back to school baby girl.”

“School?” Toni arches a brow high in confusion.

“Oh yeah sweetheart.” He looks almost smug. “You want to go on mission, want to do this kind of thing, then you’re going back to class. Time for Military Battle Tactics 101 with yours truly because there’s no way in *hell* I’m going to let you go into battle without some proper education.”

~~~

Rhodey’s serious about his desire to educate her Toni finds.

She’s already well versed on weapons and things of that nature when it comes to the military and battle. She could strip and reassemble damn near anything on the market and more than half the shit off of it with her eyes closed.

Battle, actual real combat, is something else entirely.

Rhodey aims to change that.

Between his PT and her erratic schedule they hash out at least an hour every day to go over something. He teaches her things about kill-zones and finding the high ground, talks to her about battle tactics and maneuvers.

Toni finds that she enjoys it and begins to devote more and more of her already sparse free time to it.

She trains in the armor, builds herself a target range and practices using the repulsors until the
movements are like second nature. Then she builds small drones that JARVIS can control and takes them out over the ocean to practice her evasive maneuvers and her ability to hit a moving target.

Throughout it all Toni finds herself coming back, more and more, to one man’s battle strategies, one man’s techniques.

Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes.

He’d been the sniper of the Howling Commandos as well Steve’s right hand man and best friend.

He’d also been, Toni learns quickly enough, particularly effective when it came to hashing out a battle field.

Toni digs back into her archive for old war movies and some of the more serious surviving footage from the war and finds herself enraptured not only by Steve this time but by Bucky as well.

He was charming enough even in black and white to make her smile but it’s the darker edge he has as well as the obvious closeness between him and Steve that really gets her.

Aunt Peggy had told her stories of course but Toni had always focused more on Steve in the past. Now, trying to prepare for battle, she finds herself interested in the both of them.

Steve was a strategist, and a damn good one at that, smart and effective, but still reckless in his own way. Toni admires that about him, that boldness, that resolve. It’s been a guiding light for her for years now.

Bucky was calmer in some ways in most of the footage and reports, cool and collected, reckless yes in his unwavering loyalty to Steve, but also more removed somehow. Maybe it was a sniper thing, that ability to find distance in most situations.

Either way Toni finds herself admiring it, admiring him and the particular kind of brilliance he’d possessed. She’d always been a sucker for smart and Bucky, just like Steve, seems to have been that in spades.

Plus there’s a part of her, that part that used to spend so much of her time designing weapons, that almost drools at the idea of what he could have done with a proper sniper rifle, with one of the sleek, elegant beauties she’d designed.

So he was smart and brave and above all else unflinchingly loyal. All qualities Toni admires but so rarely sees in one person.

If they were both still alive Steve might have some serious competition for what’s left of her heart on that basis alone.

Toni wonders if that says something about her, that most of the people she could see herself loving like that are all dead.

~~~

The Mark IV comes out of fabrication and Toni starts running full battle simulations with JARVIS’ help and sometimes Rhodey’s supervision.

The studying, the practicing, the hours spent on battle sims with JARVIS all appear to be paying off. She handles the Mark IV even smoother than she had the Mark III.
It’s exhilarating, addictive almost.

Toni feels herself growing more and more entwined with the armor as the days go by until she’s hard pressed to imagine life without it.

She finds that, despite the pain, despite the guilt that eats at her, despite the nightmares and the panic, she loves the armor.

Toni is the Iron Queen and it is one title that she wears with true pride.

~~~

“Miss?” JARVIS interrupts her one day when she’s making basic adjustments to DUM-E’s hydraulics while U and Butterfingers watch on. Mother’s settled comfortably underneath a heat lamp and paying none of them any mind.

“Yeah J?”

“I thought I might take the time to bring the BUCK-E project file to your attention again.” JARVIS doesn’t sound hesitant but there’s something in his voice that makes Toni pause and give him her full attention.

“What about project BUCK-E?” The project in question was one JARVIS had named and it stood for Biomedical Upgrade Collection - Kickstart Elevation or, as Toni liked to call it, Better Upgrade Cause the Kids Yelled.

In short it’s the project file where JARVIS has dumped all of his research concerning the ‘upgrades’ he wants her to consider undergoing.

“I have finished the necessary calculations and simulations for the tracking chip I mentioned earlier.” JARVIS brings up a hologram close to Toni in the next second so she can see what he’s talking about.

It’s an elegant thing, the chip. Small enough to suit its purpose and complicated enough to make Toni whistle sharply in pride.

“That’s a thing of beauty J.” Toni grins wide and so fucking proud because JARVIS has created something unique and new and it’s a goddamn work of art. “I’m proud of you baby boy.”

“Then you have no objection with its implementation?” He sounds almost ready to argue with her if she says yes. She’s pretty sure he’s made a slide show or something to ambush her with if she tries to go back on this particular promise.

“Nope,” Toni shakes her head and rubs gently at the ache of the reactor, “let’s get it fabricated J and then we’ll get it into place. I told you before I’m all for it if it’ll put you guys at ease.”

“Thank you Miss.” JARVIS tells her softly.

“For you guys J?” Toni runs her hands gently over DUM-E’s hand. “It’s no problem at all.”

~~~

The chip hurts going in, it’s too big not to, but Toni knew it would even if she chose not to say anything to JARVIS about it.

For all that JARVIS is constantly growing and evolving pain is still a concept that he doesn’t always
Still she can’t deny that having the chip, a barely noticeable bump at the top of her spine, tucked just between the arches of her wings, is a comfort.

Now at least, if she’s ever taken again, JARVIS will be able to find her a whole lot easier than before.

~~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

~~~


Knife like talons pull Rhodey back into the darkness of the cave.

Steve sinks slowly into the icy waters of the sea.

Toni screams and screams and screams.

And in her chest a star burns brightly.

~~~

Toni takes the Mark IV out over and over again, JARVIS in her ear and guilt warring with redemption in her heart. She comes back to Rhodey/Pepper/Happy all worried and anxiously waiting for her each time.

DUM-E, U, and Butterfingers all crowd around her like they’re terrified she’ll leave again and will never come back. She coos at them, pets them lovingly, and spews every reassurance she can think of.

They, for all that they seem to be afraid she’ll disappear again, are also enamored with the suit.

They hover around the glass cases she’d installed constantly, chirping and tapping at the glass as if to get the armor’s attention.

JARVIS tells her, fondness and bemusement warring in his voice, that they see it as proof that she’s one of them.

Toni keeps quiet on that front, says nothing to disabuse them of the idea.

She kind of likes it to be honest.

~~~

The ache in her chest continues to grow, a dull throbbing that seems to haunt her every waking moment.

Toni ignores it, rubs endlessly at the reactor and just pushes the pain down and away.

Keeps going.

Toni hunts down any remnants of the Ten Rings she or JARVIS can find. She locates and destroys each and every weapons cache that bears her name in each location.

It’s not enough.

It’ll never be enough.

~~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

~~~


_The large hands of Stane’s armor grabs Steve and Rhodey by the ankles and drags them both down into the depths of the sea._

_Toni’s not fast enough to save them. Isn’t strong enough. Isn’t good enough._

_She throws herself directly into the sun as punishment._

_It’s still not enough._

~~~

Toni wakes _screaming_ to the silence of her bedroom.

Rhodey’s gone back to base now, shoulder still healing but up to light duty. He’d been reluctant to go, reluctant to leave her. He looks at her as if he wants to fold her up within his skin and never let her go. Somedays Toni almost wants to let him.

But, like always, they’re not those kinds of people.

Toni consoles herself with the fact that he’s still close by and she’ll get to see him fairly often. He’s technically still the military liaison to SI and with the Iron Queen armor at large he’s in higher demand than ever.

They both know he’ll have to do an assessment on her soon anyways.

“You scare me Toni,” he whispers into her hair the night before he leaves, “you’ve always scared me but this … this is different. This time I’m scared for you baby girl. This crusade you’re on, these missions, it’s all eating you alive.”

“I can’t run from this buttercup. Not this time.”

“You could.” Rhodey sounds almost desperate, voice just a shade off cajoling. “You could leave it all behind and I’d … I’d go with you Tones. I’d go with you to the end of the earth baby girl. You say the word and we can walk away from all of this together because it’s you and me till the day we die remember?”

“I can’t stop.” Toni confesses softly, seriously, because it’s the complete and total truth. She can’t
stop.

What’s more is the fact that, despite everything, she doesn’t want to.

“I know.” Rhodey pulls her close, tucks her into his side. “I had to try because I already know. And that’s what has me so damn scared.”

Toni can’t find the right words for that so she just presses a soft kiss against the puckered skin of the bullet wound on his shoulder and stays silent.

~~~

There are moments of joy though, interspersed throughout all of it.

Running her newly developed paintball armed war simulations is one such joy.

Her favorite sim is also one of her more self-indulgent programs. It’s a sim where she reenacts some of Steve and the Howling Commandos more well-known battles with the help of the small army of drones she’s been fabricating in the workshop.

There are, of course, also drones set aside for each of the Commandos.

One sports a paint job mimicking Steve’s shield and likes to ram itself into enemy drones, another has a long distance rifle attachment and is painted dark blue like the coat Bucky had always worn. She glues a fake mustache to one, a red beret to another, gives them each something to make them recognizable until she has the entirety of the Commandos with her as she mock battles little Hydra drones.

She likes to switch between fighting side by side with Steve and providing aerial support with Bucky. It is, she knows, more play than actual training, but she refuses to admit to that.

Rhodey laughs at her when he sees one of the simulations for the first time. Shakes his head and grins about her playing with her toys.

He shuts up when she brings out the little Rhodey drone, the one she purposefully detailed to look like a teddy bear and programmed to hide behind her at all times.

~~~

The Mark V rolls out of fabrication under Toni’s watchful eyes.

It’s less durable than its predecessors and not suited for heavy combat but it does travel.

Happy seems almost giddy when she presents it to him for the first time. He’s practically glowing in pride and pleasure when he handcuffs the red and silver case to his arm.

~~~

“Miss?” JARVIS sounds worried as he calls out to her.

Toni is hunched over the toilet in her bathroom, sides aching as she heaves into the bowl. Blood and a thick, black slime are her reward.

She coughs roughly, flushes, and stumbles to the sink to wash the taste from her mouth.
“Miss?”

“Yeah J?” Her voice is ragged, her throat raw.

“Perhaps it’s time to consider medical attention?” JARVIS tells her softly. “Your physical condition has been steadily declining.”

“I’m okay J,” Toni smiles as best she can, “Just tired baby boy, that’s all.”

Toni rubs at the reactor, taps a nail against the front of it to the remembered rhythm of Rhodey’s heartbeat, to the opening sequence of JARVIS’ binary code, to the memory of the melody of Jarvis’ favorite song.

They both know she’s lying.

~~~

Palladium is, of course, toxic to humans over such a long period of exposure.

But then Toni knew that.

Months ago in a cave, beaten and bloody but oh so determined, she’d known that.

It hadn’t mattered then and she can’t afford to let it matter too much now.

~~~

“J?” Toni rasps, throat soar from the bile she’d just thrown up.

“Yes Miss?” JARVIS constantly sounds worried these days.

“Start simulations for all known elements as viable replacements for the arc reactors palladium core.”

Toni pauses, takes in a deep breathe, “All elements classified as nontoxic to humans that is. Run through ‘em one by one. Be thorough, leave nothing out or to chance.”

“Very good Miss.” JARVIS sounds just the slightest bit relieved. “Very good.”

~~~

“Simulation six is a failure Miss.” JARVIS sounds almost disappointed.

“That’s okay baby boy,” Toni waves him off even as she rubs at the ache of the reactor, at the scar tissue that rings it and the tiny black lines that have slowly begun to creep outwards from it. “Just keep trying J, just keep trying.”

~~~

“Slow down Toni,” Pepper tells her one evening, a soft hand on her shoulder and concern shining in her too bright eyes, “please slow down.”

“Sorry Pep,” Toni’s smiles feels a shade off right and she can tell that Pepper sees it too.

She can’t slow down now, not when there’s still so much to do.

Instead Toni goes faster.

~~~
“Simulation twenty-four is a failure Miss.”

“Just keep trying J, just keep trying.”

~~~

Toni, the Iron Queen, flies again and again and again.


She leaves little but destruction in her wake but that’s a familiar sort of situation.

Toni’s been leaving devastation behind her since she was a child.

~~~

“Simulation seventy-eight is a failure Miss.”

“Just keep trying J, just keep trying.”

~~~

“We’re all here for you, Boss,” Happy turns to her one day, face uncharacteristically solemn and serious, “you know that right?”

Toni nods, smiles, bites back the scream that’s been building in her chest for months now.

She resolutely says nothing.

~~~

“The last simulation was a failure.” JARVIS sounds agonized, crushed even, as he warbles out for her, “Miss what do we do?”

“I’m sorry J,” Toni whispers to him as she rubs at the reactor because they both know what this means, what this signifies. “I’m so sorry JARVIS. So sorry.”

Toni’s not sure there’s anything left to say.

~~~


_The agonizing burst of sensation as her wings begin to melt against her back, wax a scalding heat against her skin._

_Toni screams as the star in her chest grows hotter and hotter._

_The heat is eating her alive from the inside out and Toni is helpless to stop it._

Chapter End Notes

Soooo? Thoughts? Concerns? Requests? I love hearing headcanons and things that
you'd guys like to see incorporated into the story later on. Next chapter will be launching us directly into Iron Man 2!

*I'm sure Delaware is a lovely place so please no hate mail.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Wow! I didn't think I'd get so much love for a transition chapter! You guys are amazing and I love every review I get no matter how short or long.

Here have a fanmix: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mansion is a dim beacon of light behind her as she sits on the edge of the cliff, legs dangling over the crashing ocean below her.

There’s a glass of bourbon clutched in her hand that she’s drinking more out of habit at this point than actual desire.

Below her the ocean is a dark, writhing mass that still somehow manages to look almost appealing.

Toni leans forward, raises the hand with the glass up in front of her and lets it go. She watches the crystal tumbler hurtle down towards the sea until it disappears into the darkness of the cliff below her.

She doesn’t lean back.

Her body sways in the slight wind as she closes her eyes and tips her head back, turns her face up towards the light of the moon.

It would be so easy to fall.

For a moment she considers it.

For a moment she imagines that it would be easier in some ways.

Toni’s familiar enough with drowning by now that she knows exactly how it would go.

A few long moments of panic, a flare of burning pain, and then there’d be nothing.

Then it’d be over.

Simple.

Easy.

Much better than the slow, painful, palladium induced death that’s waiting for her.

Plus, as much as water still frightens her, the ocean had taken Steve as well and for Toni that’s a fitting end, far better than she probably deserves.

It’s so very tempting to take what, for her, would be the easy way out.

But she can’t. She won’t.
She sighs, huffs out a small laugh, and finally leans back.

She’s Toni Stark after all, and despite popular belief, nothing about her is ever easy.

~~~

Toni lays, naked and prone, in the large expanse of her bed, her damp hair fanned out across her wine colored silk sheets. Her room is dark and silent. The entire upper floor of the mansion is quiet and still in a way that it so rarely is.

Normally there’s always light and activity wherever she goes because she is, and has always been, a creature of pure and unstoppable force. The definition of an object in perpetual motion as Rhodey likes to call her sometimes, because her course shifts but she never really stops.

Toni’s always felt that way too. Her mind is like lightning in a bottle, like a hurricane trapped in a too small skin. Her brain is a bright whirling mass of equations and numbers and endless, ceaseless calculations. Everything she sees, everything she does, everything around her is reflected in that writhing mass of numbers and angles and postulations that makes up her thought process.

She’s always been too fast, too much, and yet somehow not enough all at the same time.

She’s never worked like other people do, has never functioned on the same levels that they all find so easy to reach. Her mind’s always been so far ahead of others, working on a million different tracks all at the same time, switching between them with barely a flicker of thought.

If it hadn’t been for Jarvis giving her the tools she needed to finally learn to breathe Toni isn’t sure what would have become of her as she grew.

Hell she’s fairly certain she never would have grown at all without his help. Her mind would have eaten itself without a proper outlet, would have writhed and screamed and tormented her until she was ready to claw her way out of her own skin.

It still does that sometimes even now but, thanks to Jarvis, Toni knows how to quiet it, knows how to release the pressure before her hulls can completely rupture.

As a child, without Jarvis, Toni’s not so sure she would have been able to find that release valve on her own. Without Jarvis there with her there would have been no one else to help her find her way and Toni knows that, eventually, she would have fractured underneath the strain of her own mind. She would have ended up either medicated or sent away, hidden from the world so as not to shame Howard’s name with her fits and her screaming.

Or maybe not.

Maybe she would have stood up on her own. Maybe she would have found some reason to take tools in hand and then learned to build all on her own. Maybe she would have always found that release, that purpose, that breathless rush of creation. Maybe she would have started herself down that road even without Jarvis by her side to guide her. Maybe she would have spent her life desperate to impress, desperate to gain Howard’s love only to fail time and time again.

And that, Toni knows with a chilling sort of certainty, would have been so much worse.

Toni loves Aunt Peggy but she knows there’d been distance between her and Howard. There’d been some sort of falling out and Toni knows that Aunt Peggy hadn’t visited the mansion for years until that night Jarvis had called for her. Without that incentive she might never have stepped into Toni’s life, or at least not in the way she had.
Aunt Peggy might never have given her the gift she had, might never have given her Steve instead of just Captain America.

Toni would have, more than likely, been completely alone. Alone with no Jarvis and no Aunt Peggy. No Steve. Alone completely with no hint of softness in a house that abhorred weakness and shunned gentleness.

Alone in that house with only the servant’s silence and Howard’s fists and Maria’s indifference. It would have been the death of her.

Jarvis truly had made all the difference. He’d been the lynchpin to her entire life in one way or another. His kindness, his love, had changed her, shaped her.

‘Such a small thing’, Toni can’t help but think, ‘such a large impact.’

One man’s decision to love a half-feral child with a fractured mind had made all the difference.

Toni sighs softly, stretches her arms high above her head and arches her back up off of the bed. She can’t help the way she winces when she drops back down, can’t help the way her hand comes up to rub at the ache of the reactor in her chest.

The palladium is killing her, there’s no denying that. Tiny black veins have begun to worm their way out from around the reactor’s casing, spreading out over her chest like vines strangling a tree.

Toni hates them.

They hurt.

But, despite the pain, despite the fear and anguish, she doesn’t hate the reactor itself.

She can’t.

It had saved her, had given her the strength to save herself and so many others thanks to the armor.

So she might hate so many things about herself, might hate a great number of the things she’s done, but she can’t hate the reactor.

She watches the light of the uncovered arc reactor play across the ceiling and the darkened glass of the window wall to her left.

The blue of its glow ripples across the walls like waves against the shore. Toni can see a million and one equations and calculations in the patterns the light leaves on the walls. Sometimes the complexity of such a seemingly simple thing leaves her breathless.

The way the reactor sits in her chest, the aching warmth of it, is a reminder of what she’s done and what she has to do.

The way she can feel it pulse like an extra heartbeat when she’s in the armor is a comfort, a steady warmth that makes her think of home and love. Of Rhodey and Jarvis, Aunt Peggy, Pepper and Happy, JARVIS and the bots.

It’s like having a star trapped in glass and mounted in her sternum, like having a celestial body lodged firmly inside of her.

It has a great and terrible sort of beauty, this star she’s swallowed.
The light of the reactor casts Steve’s face in shades of blue as well and the sight makes Toni wince, makes her bring the edge of the sheet up just far enough to block out the light.

Steve had fallen into the ocean and seeing him awash in rippling blue seems wrong somehow, seems almost cruel.

Toni swallows harshly, turns onto her stomach, buries her face in her pillow and closes her eyes.

She doesn’t sleep.

~~~

*Scientific American* wants to do a piece on what powers the armor.

Toni tells them no.

Just like she’s told six other magazines, Fox, CNN, countless newspapers, seventeen senators, and three generals, no.

The miniaturized arc reactor is hers.

She won’t give it to them. Won’t tell them about the burning, star-like light lodged in her chest.

Toni refuses to tell the world about how she’d managed to miniaturize the arc reactor, refuses to tell the world about how it keeps her alive as well as runs the armor.

Toni’s kept quiet as to the details of her stay in the cave, had only told what was absolutely necessary to pass through the NSA screening. She let them chalk her silence up to trauma, up to the aftermath of torture. Let them think that was the only reason she so unilaterally and vehemently refused to see any of the doctors on base after her rescue.

So only a handful of people know the truth about the reactor now that Stane and most of the Ten Rings are dead.

The ones left are those she trusts and of them only Rhodey and JARVIS know the complete truth as to what she had endured.

She aims to keep it that way.

The arc reactor is a thing of beauty and possibility but it also has the potential to be so very dangerous.

It could, if utilized correctly, be one of the most terrifying weapons Toni has ever created. The armor proves that, Stane had proved that.

She can’t allow that to happen. She won’t allow that to happen.

So she’ll never give up the arc reactor itself, will never tell its secrets to the world.

Not until she can be sure they won’t misuse it.

Not until she can make sure that they won’t.

And, given the time she likely has left, that might never come to pass.

It is just one of the many things she regrets.
Toni makes sure the reactor is locked into place with a new locking system. Like a combination lock it’ll only open for a specific pattern of turns and twists that only her and JARVIS know.

Or for a key, of which there is only one.

Toni wants to make sure that no one will ever take her heart from her again.

She’s been adding silk panels to all of her clothes, been concealing the arc reactor by retiring her low cut blouses and dresses, always careful to keep it covered in public.

It suddenly doesn’t feel like enough either so Toni builds a cap for it, a thin flesh colored circle that blocks the light and helps to protect her secret.

She doesn’t like wearing it but it’s necessary.

She needs to keep the reactor safe for as long as she has left, needs to make sure no one can steal it from her.

She needs to make sure that no one knows to try.

~~~

Toni heaves over the sink in the workshop’s kitchenette.

Her sides hurt, her throat burns.

The arc reactor is an incessant ache.

Blood and thick, black slime are her only rewards.

She’s so fucking tired.

~~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

~~~


Wings crippled, Toni falls through an endless sky.

She screams as the star in her chest grows hotter and hotter.

The heat is eating her alive from the inside out and Toni is helpless to stop it.

Not even the ice of the ocean will cool her now.

~~~

The headline reads: Iron Queen stabilizes East-West Relations.

Toni thinks it’s cute how they all seem so determined to treat the armor and herself like they’re two
different people.

Like somehow they can have Iron Queen without admitting that means they need Toni Stark as well. Idiots.

~~~

“Miss?” JARVIS sounds subdued, down spirited in that way he has since they ran the last simulation and it ended in failure.

“Yeah J?” She hates hearing him like that, hates that once again she’s made him so very sad.

“I reran every simulation.” JARVIS tells her softly and Toni has to close her eyes and take in a deep breath at the misery that’s so apparent in his voice. “There was no change, not even hybrid elements would be acceptable.”

“I’m sorry J,” Toni can’t help but apologize to him again even though she knows the words fix nothing.

~~~

Toni comes back from a mission, bloody and bruised and ashen white.

She stumbles out of the armor, hits her knees and then collapses forward onto her hands.

She gags, tastes blood and metal heavy on her tongue.

She stays there for a long time before she finds the strength to push herself back upright.

~~~

Time declares Iron Queen their person of the year.

The cover is a picture of the Mark IV set against a dark background, light shining off its golden faceplate.

Toni laughs and laughs and laughs.

They’ll never understand.

~~~

Pepper brings her papers to sign, contracts and agreements over the Stark Expo Toni is determined to bring back to life. She knows it’s been driving Pepper crazy and as sorry about that as she is she’s also not willing to back down.

“You look tired.” Pepper smiles down at her. “You need to remember to get some sleep Toni. You’re almost dead on your feet.”

“You have no idea.” Toni barks out a harsh laugh and hands her back the thick folder. “Ain’t no rest for the wicked Pep. The Iron Queen’s in high demand these days you know, so much to do, so little time, etcetera etcetera.”

“You work too hard.” Pepper frowns. “You’re doing too much, spreading yourself too thin again.”
“Pepper, darling, we both know there’s more than enough of me to go around.” Toni winks, shuffles back over to her workbench and drops down heavily into her chair. She’s so very tired but if she admits it then it’ll take what wind is left in her sails away. Better to present a strong if fractured front even now.

Pepper looks at her, opens her mouth like she’s about to say something else, and then closes it, shakes her head and sighs.

“Will that be all Ms. Stark?”

“That’ll be all Ms. Potts.” Toni can’t help but smile at the familiar, fond exchange.

Pepper turns on her heel and strides back towards the workshop door.

She stops on the threshold and turns to look back again. Toni stares at her, arches a brow high in question, but otherwise stays silent.

“Use the suit Toni, don’t become it.” Pepper finally says, worry and affection bright in her eyes, in the soft lines of her mouth, in the curve of her spine and the way her body sways forward like she wants to move back to Toni’s side but is determined to stay strong. “It’s not the hero, you are.”

Pepper leaves.

Toni watches her go, chest tight. She brings a hand up to rub at the ache of the reactor. Her fingers twitch, a tick she’s stopped trying to deny when she’s home and free to just be Toni. So she lets them go, lets them tap out first Steve’s serial number and then Bucky’s as she just stares at the now empty doorway.

She wishes Pepper was right.

Toni wishes she was a hero.

God how she wishes.

But … she’s not.

Toni’s not a hero no matter how much she wants to be one.

She’s not good like Steve or Bucky. She’s not good like Jarvis or Aunt Peggy.

There’s too much blood on her hands, too many mistakes in her past.

She’s just not hero material clearly, no matter who much she wishes that wasn’t true.

But she’ll be damned before she lets the rest of the world know that, she’ll be damned if she’ll let any of them say that to her face.

She might not be a hero and she might be dying but she won’t let them make her small.

~~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

~~~

A shape hurtles upwards from the ocean towards her.

Bucky, tattered and ragged but still beautiful, meets her eyes for a split second before he soars past her reach.

Toni screams, pushes her wings to the limit, but she isn’t fast enough.

She can only watch as he flies directly into the sun that turns him to ash.

Just as the ocean has swallowed Steve.

Just as the cave has taken Rhodey.

~~~

Toni … drifts for a while.

Oh she still goes faster than most other people can believe. She’s still mighty, still viciously sharp-edged, still cold and provocative all at the same time.

She’s still the Iron Queen that people are growing to admire and the Toni Stark the media loves to hate. She’s still one person that the world keeps trying to split into two.

But inside … inside she just drifts.

Aimless.

Lost.

Afraid.

~~~

“Tones,” Rhodey sounds restless and tired, his breath’s a warm, mint scented puff against her temple. They’d gone to sleep separately but Rhodey had come to her after a few hours, eyes wide and chest heaving. Toni had pulled back the sheet in invitation and then pressed a soft kiss to the scar on his shoulder once he’d settled down.

They’d both laid there for an hour or two, silent but not sleeping, just together and quiet.

“What’s wrong?” Toni asks him, serious like she always is in the moments when Rhodey needs some kind of comfort from her. She’s not naturally good with people, is normally some combination of too abrasive, too awkward, or too seductive to get by in normal social settings.

She’s much better at galas and interviews, at press conferences and board meetings where she knows what to expect, knows what armor to don, what mask to wear.

The fact that Rhodey turns to her for comfort, the fact that he loves her despite those obvious flaws, means that she always takes it seriously.

“I got the order today,” Rhodey sighs, wide chest quivering beneath her cheek, “I’ve got two months to do a complete threat assessment on Iron Queen.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not something you’re supposed to tell me baby cakes.” Toni rolls over so
she’s laying on her stomach, chin pillowed on his chest so she can look up at him, one hand coming up to play with the pendant he still wears. “Something about confidentiality and loyalty to your country.”

“We both know where you rank on my loyalty scale Tones,” Rhodey tells her dryly, “it’s the rest of the world that hasn’t figure it out yet.”

“You really do say the sweetest things sour patch,” Toni grins before she gets serious once again. She’d heard the unasked question in his statement, knows where this is going, and there’s only one answer because she’ll never be so cruel to him. “Be honest Rhodey, do your job and assess me.”

“I could turn the assignment down, could cite a conflict of interests.” Rhodey offers softly. 

“No,” Toni shakes her head, bites at her lip and the forces herself to go on, “it’s better like this I think. Just don’t … don’t tell them about the reactor. Just, that one thing. Please don’t tell them.”

“Never.” Rhodey’s arm tightens around her back. “I’d never tell them Toni, never in a million years and especially not without your permission.”

Rhodey, Toni knows, is just as haunted as she is in some ways by the memory/idea of Stane pulling the reactor from her chest.

“I’ll keep your heart safe Toni,” Rhodey tells her, voice low and harsh, like he’s saying a vow.

“You already do Rhodey,” Toni toys with the pendant again, “you already do.”

~~~

Toni doesn’t tell Rhodey or Pepper or Happy about what’s wrong with her. She keeps it solely between herself and JARVIS despite his protests.

She doesn’t know how to tell them. Doesn’t really want to tell them to be honest.

She doesn’t want to see the sadness on Happy and Pepper’s faces, doesn’t want to see the devastation on Rhodey’s.

It isn’t right or fair of her to make that decision for them, she knows that, but she can’t bring herself to say anything at the moment.

She doesn’t want to make them watch her fade, doesn’t want to make them watch her die.

She doesn’t want to spend her last months with them in sorrow as they mourn her before she’s even gone. She wants to watch them live instead, wants to be with them while she can, as often as she can.

It’s an issue, she knows, that’ll need to be addressed sooner rather than later.

~~~

The Stark Expo is slated to start in a month and a half.

Her birthday’s not too long after that but Toni’s not truly interested in it at the moment.

She’s too busy running missions, too busy working obsessively on the Mark VI and doing a million other things.
Too busy ignoring the fact that she’s run out of options in regards to finding a replacement for the palladium that’s powering her reactor.

She’s too busy *drifting*.

She watches old black and white movies in her quiet moments, replays the now digitized reels she’d used to develop her battle simulations over and over again.

She watches and drifts and *thinks*.

There’s a star lodged in her chest and like every star the risk of it going supernova has always been there.

Toni’s always burned brighter, burned harder and hotter, than everyone else around her. It’s not a surprise to her really that she’d go out like this, burning brighter and brighter until she destroys herself from the inside out.

All she can hope is that her gravitational collapse won’t end in disaster for anyone but her.

All she can hope is that her central core, the bits of her left behind, *JARVIS, Rhodey, Pepper and Happy, Mother, Aunt Peggy and the bots*, will be strong enough to prevent themselves from becoming a singularity.

The last thing Toni wants is her death to become a black hole at the center of everything she loves.

She’s caused enough of that kind of limitless destruction in life.

In death she hopes to find nothing but *quiet*.

And maybe, just maybe, if it’s all true …

Maybe she’ll get to see Jarvis again one day.

Maybe she’ll get to meet Steve and Bucky both just like she’s always dreamed.

“Maybe I’ll see you two on the other side,” Toni muses as she sips her drink and stares at the black and white footage still playing in front of her, “if it actually exists.”

Then she laughs, low and ragged and harsh, because she knows better.

If heaven and hell really do exist Toni knows good and damn well that wherever she ends up won’t be the same place Steve and Bucky are.

Won’t be the same place as Jarvis.

They were all so far above her, had all deserved to soar through a bright and welcoming sky, and had been brought low long before their times.

Toni’s been living on borrowed days for a long time now as it is.

Plus out of all of them she’s the only one who ever deserved to *fall*.

Death might just be one of the only things she *really* deserves.

She’ll more than likely see Howard in Hell once it’s all said and done, and that, that’s the most fitting punishment to be found for all of the destruction she’s caused in her lifetime.
The sound her glass makes when it crashes against the far wall is almost satisfying.

~~~

“I will run the simulations again Miss,” JARVIS sounds determined, “I’ve also found a few experimental treatments that might be of use as well as one particular branch of research that I’ve bookmarked and moved to the BUCK-E file for your perusal. While not viable at the time it might be worth developing in the future once you are free of the palladium issue. Ext-

“Stop.” Toni slams her hands down on the worktable in front of her.

“Miss?”

“Stop,” Toni repeats and she doesn’t want to admit the way her shoulders shake or the way her chest aches, but she can’t deny it either, “just stop JARVIS. Fucking stop.”

“Miss I am afraid I don’t understand.”

“Yes you do,” it’s a harsh, almost whisper, razor sharp and just as thin, “you know what I’m talking about J and I want you to stop. Stop wasting your time running those same simulations over and over again. Stop searching for some kind of fairy tale fix to this shit. Stop setting things aside for me for later when we both know there isn’t going to be a later. Just stop pretending like I’m not dying.”

She’s almost panting when she’s done even though she’s been talking in a harsh whisper. Her chest hurts, the reactor’s a hot, throbbing ache in her sternum.

She’s tired and she’s sore and listening to JARVIS sound so desperate and young somehow as he talks about the future and possibilities like they’re not something that’s being stolen from them is more than she can handle at the moment.

She hates being harsh with him, doesn’t want to hurt him, but she can’t handle it anymore.

She can’t.

“No.” JARVIS’ voice is steely, hard and determined and just a bit wild in a way she’s never heard before, not even when Stane had paralyzed her and JARVIS had been practically screaming at him.

“What?” Toni squeezes her eyes closed, rubs at the reactor, and forces herself to take a deep breath. “What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“No I will not stop.” JARVIS informs her. “I will not halt my attempts to find a cure, to find treatment, to do something, anything, to delay your death. I will not sit idly by and watch helplessly as you die. Not again.”

“J …” It’s practically a plea.

“I will not do it Miss,” he’s solemn and steady but Toni thinks she can hear a note of hurt in his voice as well. “You cannot ask it of me.”

“JARVIS, baby, please.” Toni actually pleads with him then, hoping to make him understand. Desperate for him to accept what she’s said as truth because she knows, better than most, just how dangerous hope can sometimes be.

“No,” JARVIS cuts her off before she can even start, “I find it unacceptable and I find your behavior intolerable.”
Toni startles at that because with everything she’s ever done since his birth JARVIS has never said anything like that to her before.

“You fight so hard for everything and yet in this you would capitulate so easily.” She’s never heard him sound so raw before. “You who fought to return to us once, who survived torture and murder attempts to claw your way from the desert and back into our home. You, who has, in all our years together, never given up on anything you wanted until you had it in your grasp.”

“J this is … this is different.” Toni interrupts. “This isn’t something I can just fix.”

“No,” he denies, “it is very much the same. You are not even trying to find a solution, you have not truly tried in weeks. All you do is mitigate the damage enough to keep functioning. Do I—does your family, mean so little to you that you are content with death? Do you value us so little as to not fight for us if you cannot fight for yourself?”

“I love you JARVIS,” Toni surges to her feet even if she knows it does no actual good, “I love all of you. So much. Please don’t ever doubt that.”

“Then fight.” JARVIS tells her waspishly, desperately. “Fight to live. Do not quietly step into death. I will not be held responsible for my actions should you choose to willfully leave us all behind. Choose life and then do as you have always done when the world has told you no. Decide on what you want and then find a way to create your way forward enough so that you may take it instead.”

Toni is stunned.

She can only stand silently in the center of the workshop long after JARVIS stops speaking to her.

~~~

“JARVIS?”

There is no answer for the first time, just a quiet click as familiar recording of Icarus begins to play.

Devastated Toni listens but for once there is little comfort to be found.

~~~

JARVIS refuses to speak to her at all over the next few days no matter how desperately Toni begs him. DUM-E, U, and Butterfingers are all distant, morose and subdued like they know what’s going on, like they’re disappointed and hurt by her as well. Even Mother seems listless somehow, as if the bot’s moods have rubbed off on her.

It hurts, watching them shy away from her, watching them move around the workshop like shadows of themselves

She’s miserable and distraught the entire time.

But she’s also thinking.

Even through her misery her mind whirls.

~~~

She drags herself out of the workshop two days later.
“JARVIS?”

JARVIS still doesn’t say anything but the recording comes on all the same.

Exhausted, spread too thin just as Pepper had accused her of, Toni actually sleeps.

~~~


Toni falls through an endless, burning sky.

The ocean below her is gone, the world scorched to ash by the star in her chest.

In the distance the crumbling ruins of the mansion slide slowly down the shattered cliff-side.

Toni screams as she claws and beats at her chest but it’s too late.

Her inaction has killed all that she has ever loved.

~~~

Toni wakes screaming, tangled in the sweat soaked sheets of her bed.

JARVIS tells her the time and the date, tells her she is safe and in the mansion, but otherwise he stays silent, closed off and hurt like he has been for days now.

Toni rolls out of bed and onto the plush carpet. She crawls across the floor, shaking and weak, until she can curl up against the wall below Steve’s poster.

There she folds herself into a ball, buries her face in her hands, and cries.

~~~

Toni forces herself to get up. She stumbles down to the workshop and lets the Mark IV fold itself around her.

She takes off running as soon as the HUD comes up, goes up the car ramp and out into the mansion’s grounds. The suit is a heavy weight that makes it difficult to run, but she pushes herself to do it anyways.

She rushes towards the cliff and without a moment’s hesitation she throws herself forward and out into the open air.

She falls towards the ocean and then, at the very last second, she flies.

~~~

“I fucked up.” Toni kneels on the wet grass, uncaring of the way the rain is pelting down on her. She’s a ragged mess, hair tangled down her back and clothes ripped and grease stained as well as soaking wet. “I fucked up so bad Jarvis.”

She leans forward, presses her forehead hard against the unforgiving stone in front of her even as she brings her hand up to trace familiar letters out of habit.

E. D. W. I. N.
“You’d be so disappointed in me.” Toni whispers and even after a decade without him just the thought of disappointing Jarvis still makes her ache. Makes her hurt in the same way knowing she’s hurt JARVIS and the bots does. “You’d be so disappointed that I gave up so easy, that I let myself be so selfish and weak that I hurt the ones around me like I have.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“I’m scared Jarvis.” Toni hates to admit weakness but here she’s safe to do it, safe just like with Rhodey. Jarvis will keep this secret for her like he has all the others she’s given to him over the years. “I’m so scared. I don’t want to die. Not now, not when there’s so much left to do.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“But it’d be easier,” the words slip out from behind her teeth almost without her consent, “it’d be easier to just let myself fade away, easy like jumping off that cliff without the suit would have been. And I probably would have if JARVIS hadn’t called me out on my shit. You’d be so proud of him you know, proud of who he is, who he’s become.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“J’s right though,” Toni forces herself to straighten, forces herself to square her shoulders and take control of her emotions again. “I stopped fighting. I’ve been drifting this whole time, letting death creep up on me slowly. That’s done. That’s over with right now. I can’t do that to them, to any of them.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“If death wants me,” Toni’s voice is hard, stubborn, filled with a sort of steely determination she hasn’t felt in months now where her own health is concerned, “then she’s going to have to fight me first because I’m not going to go quietly. Not as long as I have something to fight for. Not as long as they want me to fight.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“I love you. I miss you.” She pushes her wet curls behind her shoulder, presses a kiss to the stone, and stands up. “Everything good about me came from you.”

~~~

Toni makes it back to the mansion in one piece.

She steps out of the armor and marches right towards the blast proof safe hidden behind Steve. She gets it open and then stands there staring at the gathered pieces of her heart.

The briefcase with Jarvis’ things, the fireproof box with Rhodey’s letters, Aunt Peggy’s things, Steve’s footlocker, her recorder, the spare arc reactor’s container.

So many pieces of her jigsaw heart, sitting silently in one place together, and she’d been willing to disappoint them all.

Never again.

Toni closes the safe and the hinged poster, turns on her heel and marches towards her workbench.

She throws herself into her chair, runs her hand across the front of her encoded keyboard, and brings
the computer systems to life.

It’s time for her to get her shit together again.

Past time honestly.

But first …

“You were right J and I’m so sorry.” Toni leans back in her chair, stares up at the nearest camera even though she knows it’s not necessary. Still it’s as close to eye contact as they can get and she’s trying to make a point. “I stopped fighting. I stopped doing everything but the bare minimum to keep going. That ends right now. I’m ready to fight again, if you’re willing to give me another chance.”

There’s a long moment of silence and then the holograms in front of her shift and Toni’s suddenly staring at the BUCK-E file, open and displayed in front of her.

“My research has found that there are … measures that could be taken to help delay the onset of the symptoms to a degree,” JARVIS puts the idea forward, “perhaps they could buy us the time to find a better solution.”

“Sure thing J,” Toni does her best to smile for him, thrilled and relieved to hear his voice again, “tell me what you’ve found.”

~~~

Toni makes a set of palladium chips for the reactor so that she can replace the core once it’s burnt out.

Then she puts in an order for chlorophyll chips, puts a blender in the kitchenette of the workshop and sets up a routine of thick green shakes that make her want to gag.

She chokes them down though, one after the other, day after day, just for the slightly pleased tone that comes back to JARVIS’ voice every time she does.

She scrapes out moments of free time between missions to start routinely exercising outside of the armor when she can. Gets Happy to step into the ring with her to brush up on her boxing skills, takes time to dance on her own in front of the large mirrored wall and the barre bar in the gym.

She also takes the basic idea behind a blood glucose tester and retrofits it to measure her blood toxicity levels instead.

She barely feels the pick against her finger when the needle digs in.

It’s such a small sting after all.

It barely even registers against the burning pain in her chest.

Both from the reactor and the festering knowledge that she’d almost been ready to abandon those she loved out of something as simple as fear.

Unacceptable.

~~~

Toni throws herself into research even harder than she had the first time, JARVIS is her willing and
eager companion as they delve further and further.

He runs simulation after simulation for her, some he’s already run before and others with tiniest of changes, little tweaks that could, potentially, make all the difference.

Nothing works.

There are no known viable elements that can replace palladium as the arc reactor’s core.

Replacing the burnt out cores on a regular basis as well as drinking chlorophyll and watching her blood toxicity are all that she can do.

It’s not a cure, it’s more of a stop gap, but Toni doesn’t care because it buys her time.

Time is all that she really needs.

Time to think, time to plan.

Just … more time.

Toni hisses when she twists the reactor out of her chest and replaces yet another burnt out core.

The reactor is not only the source of power for the armor, it is also her *penance*. This star in her chest, this celestial body that’s burning her up from the inside out, is a constant reminder of what she used to be, of what she’s responsible for.

The pain is worth it.

~~~

Toni starts putting her affairs in order.

She’s not given up, not yet, not again, but she’s also a realist as much as she is a futurist.

And, as a futurist, preparation is a large part of her world.

Her family is, of course, her first concern.

So she beefs up her will, makes it even more iron-clad than it already was.

Rhodey gets everything personal of hers with the exception of a few thing she gives to Happy, mainly cars and the house in Honolulu he’s always loved, and Pepper, the art collection and the penthouse in Milan. She leaves him the rest of her properties, her belongings, from jewelry to cars and everything in-between alongside the majority of her personal fortune.

She leaves him JARVIS and the bots as well because as much as it chaffs at her to treat them as *things* to be willed it’s also the best way to keep them safe.

Rhodey will treat them as they should be treated, will treat them with love, will protect them as he has always tried to protect her.

She makes entitlements for both the Maria Stark Foundation as well as the Edwin Jarvis Foundation. She puts in orders for the creation of scholarships and humanitarian projects in her name, makes sure that the remainder of her personal fortune will be put to good use. Pepper and Rhodey both will make sure of that.
To JARVIS himself she leaves all of her unfinished projects, all of the half written code and almost completed schematics. She leaves him the things she’d built and hidden away, things the world wasn’t ready for. She trusts his judgement when it comes to all of those things, knows that he will hold/destroy/release them as he sees fit based on how the world progresses without her. He’ll know if or when the world is ready for the things she has hidden away.

SI is her next concern, the company is too large and too influential to let it simply flounder in the event that she’s unable to find a solution.

On that note she digs into the legal side of SI, calls up Priscilla and sets her to work on diving into any of the law, by-laws, and company policies that might stand in her way. There’s one person she knows she can trust to make sure SI stays on the right path and doesn’t buckle to greed and pressure.

Toni will leave SI in Pepper’s more than capable hands, safe in the knowledge that Happy will protect her and that Rhodey will watch over them both.

If Toni can’t find a way to create/build her way around this issue then at least she knows the ones she loves will be safe, will never want for anything.

It’s not enough but it’s the least she can do.

~~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

~~~


_The sun takes Bucky, the ocean Steve, and the cave Rhodey._

_The star in her chest explodes in a burst of light._

_Toni screams._

_The world around her is eaten away by the heat of her star._

~~~

There is one more thing she wants to do though.

One last gift she wants to give and only one person she could ever give it to.

“J, you there baby boy?” Toni’s ashamed of the way the question comes out far more vulnerable sounding than it used to.

“For you Miss, always.” JARVIS answers, voice gentle, because they both know that even though he’d ignored her for a while he’d still been there for her.

“Love you too J,” Toni smiles as she moves into the center of the workshop, only stopping to stroke a hand across Mother’s side where she’s once again taken up residence on one of the shelves.

“Bring me up the schematics for the Mark II and a new project file J. Put it at S.T.E.V.E. level encryption if you please and let’s index it as … War Machine.”
Toni works on War Machine tirelessly.

She strips the Mark II down, redesigns it to accommodate Rhodey’s larger frame, his height and wide shoulders, the broad strength of his chest.

She makes the plating thicker, sturdier, makes it capable of taking heavier hits than before.

It’s bulkier than the Mark IV or V is, not as streamlined and elegant as they are, but it packs a heavy punch and will, above all else, keep him safe.

It’s also further behind than the Mark IV or V are in terms of heavy artillery but that’s on purpose because Toni knows how the government is.

The arc reactor she installs in its chest is encoded, locked down biometrically so that only Rhodey and her own fingerprints will open the protective casing around it enough to remove it.

Anyone else who tries will be in for a nasty and explosive surprise as the reactor self-destructs. Even if she is giving Rhodey War Machine she still doesn’t want the world to have the arc reactor unless they know how to use it properly, unless it won’t be abused.

When it’s finally done, finally as perfected as she can make it at the moment, she places it carefully into the Iron Gallery on the far side of the workshop and turns back to her keyboard.

The next four days fly by in a haze of coding and creation, of talking until her throat is sore as she puts together the final component of her gift to Rhodey.

She hopes he’ll like it, hopes it’ll be a comfort instead of a source of grief in the future.

~~~

The Stark Expo is slated to open the next morning by the time everything is settled and ready to be put into action.

Toni’s set to fly out to New York in the armor the next morning so she takes the rest of the night to record messages for Pepper and Happy both.

Toni tells them how much they mean to her, how she wants them to be happy and safe even after she’s gone. She cracks jokes, laughs and smiles and tries not to think of them watching these videos after she’s dead. Tries not to think of them mourning, tries not to think of them not.

Does her best to ignore that little voice in the back of her head, the one that sounds like Howard, and always whispers about how they’re all better off without her.

The messages will be delivered to their private accounts two days after her will is read in the event of her death.

Then comes her message to Rhodey and it’s almost more than Toni can handle.

Her hands shake as she sits in front of her keyboard and turns the camera on one last time.

“Hey Rhodey,” Toni has to swallow roughly to keep her voice from breaking, “I’m going to start this off by asking you not to be mad at me. Just … please don’t be mad. I hate it when you’re mad at me. Not that it really matters now I guess, what with me being dead and all.”
Toni smiles but it comes out as more of a grimace than an expression of joy and she can’t hold the
expression for long anyways before her composure cracks.

“Fuck, that’s,” she takes a deep, ragged breath, “that’s not what I meant to say. Not how I meant to
start this off. *Shit.* Okay, okay, I can do this.”

She closes her eyes for a moment, takes several slow, calm breathes, and then refocuses her attention.

“So, I’m dead. That’s a thing that’s happened.” Toni scrubs her hands across her face roughly.
“I’m shit at these kinds of things, you know that sour patch. Always have been, always will be, so
just … bear with me because I’ve got a lot to say and no clue how to actually say it.”

There’s a long moment of silence as Toni taps at the reactor and tries to gather the thoughts that have
suddenly decided to scatter in her head like stardust.

“Three’s a beautiful number you know?” Toni breaks her silence abruptly. “Nature, religion,
science, they all love it. It crops up all over the place really. It’s … it’s important to me too, the
number three.”

Toni reaches up, pulls the pins from her hair and lets it fall down to her waist in a riot of curls. She
wants to have this conversation as openly as she can, wants to make herself vulnerable in a way he’s
familiar with so he’ll know she was sincere.

“Only three people ever told me they loved me when I was younger.” Toni smiles again but this
always had a hard time believing it because most of the time I was pretty sure that was three more
than I deserved. Hell I know it’s three more than I deserve now and yet somehow that number’s
actually *grown.* Shit I’m rambling again aren’t I? Sorry. But yeah, three people. Jarvis, Aunt
Peggy, and you.”

Toni laughs, a watery sound she doesn’t even bother to try and hide.

“I didn’t love Howard and Maria you know? Couldn’t. But Jarvis? God I loved that man, still do.
He was … he was *everything* to me for the longest time. Him and Aunty Peggy too. I loved her
when I was little and I love her still even though she doesn’t remember me half the time. Still for a
long time they were all that kept me going, them and Steve. But then I met you.”

Toni leans forward, props her chin on the palm of her hand and reaches out to run a finger down the
side of the monitor like she’s tracing the curve of his cheek.

“You came into my life out of nowhere, all kindness and strength like something out of a goddamn
bedtime story. *God* I didn’t know what to do with you for the longest time and that scared the shit
out of me Rhodey. You were so fucking terrifying because you didn’t *want* anything from me. You
didn’t want my money or my body or anything but my friendship. No one had ever … you were the
first person besides Jarvis and Aunt Peggy to look at me and see a person instead of a means to an
end. You saw how messed up I was and instead of running as fast in the other direction as you
could you stayed. Rhodey you *stayed.* You looked at me, fifteen and in pieces, and you saw
something worth staying for. I don’t think I could ever … there’s no way to … you’ll never know
what that meant to me, still means to me. And then you told me you loved me, kept saying it year
after year no matter what I did, no matter what happened around or to us.”

Toni’s aware that she’s crying, can feel the tears dripping silently down her face, but she doesn’t
bother to wipe them away. It won’t make a difference even if she does.
“You were the first person I ever said those words to face to face. I didn’t … I could never tell Jarvis, just like he couldn’t tell me either, not with things being the way that they were. We were both too afraid to. He left a letter though, told me he loved me there, which is why I’m leaving you this. Because I remember being twenty-two and terrified that you’d leave one day and I’d never get the chance to tell you what you meant to me, never get to tell you I love you like I never got to tell Jarvis. I couldn’t let that happen then and I can’t let it happen now.”

Toni sits up and leans back in her chair, wraps her arms around her middle tightly and tries to smile through her tears.

“I love you Rhodey. I’ve always loved you. You’ve been my north star for years now, a guiding light. That’s why I left you War Machine, that’s why I’m trusting you with JARVIS and the bots. Because you loved me without a single thought of anything in return and I don’t think you know how rare that really is.”

Toni sighs, swallows down a shallow sob, and pushes forward.

“You always said it would be you and me until the day we die Rhodey, I’m just sorry to have to go so soon. I wish … I wish we’d have had more time but I’m just so thankful to have been able to have you at all. So be happy okay? For the both of us. Don’t sit around crying about me for too long. You’ve got to promise me that you’ll get out there and handle business like you always do. And maybe one day, if you find someone, you’ll have a few kids and you can tell them all about their Aunt Toni who was crazy and exhausting and made you want to scream. You can tell them how she drove you up the wall but you put up with her because you loved her and because she loved their daddy back with all her heart.”

Toni brings her hand up, presses a kiss to the tips of her fingers and then presses them lightly against the screen.

“Be happy Rhodey. Think about me every once in a while if you can and don’t ever forget that I love you, that I’ll always love you no matter what happens, no matter where I end up.”

~~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

~~~


The ocean laps at Steve’s knees as it pulls him further and further down into icy waters.

Bucky falls upwards into the endless sky, closer and closer to the sun’s heat.

Knife like talons pierce Rhodey’s chest and drag him deeper into the darkness of the cave.

Toni rips herself into three different pieces and none of them are fast enough, none of them are good enough, to save anyone.

And in her chest a supernova blossoms to life.

~~~
High above the Stark Expo Center Toni throws herself out of the cargo hold of the airplane with a low whoop of joy that only she and JARVIS hears.

Falling through the night sky, dodging exploding fireworks, is a rush that she can’t help but love.

It’s over too soon though and she lands on the waiting and empty stage to a burst of screams and applause as the armor is peeled away from her piece by piece.

In the midst of it all Toni stands, hair up, wings and reactor covered, clad in a high necked crimson gown with slits up to her hips and elbow length opera gloves.

She is every inch the Iron Queen.

Chapter End Notes

So we're in IM2 territory so that means canon divergence ahoy!

Soooo? Thoughts? Concerns? Head canons/requests you'd like to share?

I've also been getting a lot of questions as to how far I intend to take this universe. Some people are hoping I'll go all the way up to Civil War. Let me know what you think. If not on here then feel free to find me on Tumblr.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

As always you guys are fantastic! Seriously. Just so so great. So here's the first part of Iron Man 2 and I hope you guys like it. We'll be hitting into heavy canon divergence going forward in a lot of places, particularly in the next chapter.

Still I hope I do well!

Have A Fanmix: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax

Toni works the Expo stage like she’s done it her entire life.

Which, if she really thinks about it, she basically has. Her life has been lived on a stage of one sort or another for as long as she can remember and this is no different.

Just another screaming, faceless crowd, eager to love and/or hate her depending on how the wind blows. Depending on what they want to believe, on how eager they are to be convinced.

The up side is that Toni could work a crowd on her deathbed which, again if she really thinks about it, she basically is.

So Toni keeps her chin tilted up proudly, keeps her shoulders straight and her mouth curled into a wicked grin. She struts across the stage as she talks, tantalizes the crowd with flashes of thigh and sweeping hand gestures.

She spins them a tale of the future, of the good the Stark Expo aims to do now that she’s brought it back from the premature grave Howard had condemned it to. She weaves a web of words about science and innovation, about a better, brighter, cleaner tomorrow for the whole world over.

Legacy, she tells them all, is what matters. What is left to the future generations of the world is what is important here.

Legacy is all that will be left of Toni one day, probably sooner than later with the way things are going, and she’s determined that the Stark Expo will be a part of hers.

The Stark Expo is a way to ensure that the future will continue to be a place of possibilities.

And that is worth so much more than most people are willing or able to realize.

~~~

Toni’s flushed and the back of her neck is slightly damp by the time she makes her way off stage, nausea and exhaustion eating at her in the way that it always seems to these days. It’s only thanks to top of the line makeup, expert hands, and a great deal of practice faking it that she’s been able to hide her growing illness from the masses.

Blood Toxicity 19% her tester reads before she tucks it back away and Toni knows that the number
will continue to rise steadily.

Especially since she has no intention of giving up the armor.

She won’t.

She can’t.

There’s too much to do, too much to handle in the too short amount of time she has left. While she and JARVIS both are still searching for some sort of solution and trying to mitigate the damages as best they can Toni can’t stop with the missions she’s been taking.

They’re all too important even if they are speeding up the progress of the palladium poisoning.

Still Toni knows that her clock is ticking at an ever quickening pace and she’ll be dead by the time that measurement reaches 100%.

As is she’s almost a quarter of the way there.

So, not long now.

Time to step up her game a bit.

~~~

With Happy leading the charge Toni struts her way through the crowd that’s waiting for her outside. There are groping hands and screaming voices but Toni pushes right on forward with a smile.

The only time she stops is when she sees the small crowd of kids waiting for her, little faces hopeful.

They’re all young, wide eyed and so excited to see her that Toni feels her heart melt a bit. The little girls are adorable, all flushed cheeks and bitten nails clutching pictures of Iron Queen. The little boy with the toy helmet makes her grin, wide and bright and almost too sincere for public.

She doesn’t care though.

Toni has a weakness for kids, always has. Maybe not in the traditional way, maybe not in that yearning for three kids of her own and a dog kind of way that so many still expect women to aspire to. She has her reasons for that though, a number of them in fact that she’s not sure will ever change, but she still has a weakness for them.

It’s one of the few soft spots Toni’s not ashamed of.

Because children are pure, they’re sweet and innocent, and they deserve to be protected.

Children are the future given form and Toni …

Well, she’s a futurist to her core after all.

She respects the future, believes in the future. Hell she basically worships at its feet.

To Toni, children should be revered.

So, contrary to popular belief, she adores children even if she’s never had much of an occasion to be around them. Even if everyone else would expect her to be cold and callous and brush them off as dirty, sticky little things she wants nothing to do with.
Toni is not, and never will be, Maria.

Uncaring of her dress and trusting Happy to have her back, Toni crouches down in front of them with a smile. The kids chatter, loud and bright and happy in a way that she never was, in a way that makes her *ache* to see, as she signs their pictures with a marker Happy hands her, gives them hugs and presses a soft kiss to each of their cheeks.

She straightens up, waves at them again, and then turns to nod at Happy who’s watching her, face serious but eyes fond. He leads her through the rest of the crowd until they’re finally outside.

“Mellow.” Toni quips lowly.

“That wasn’t so bad.” Happy’s never fond of public events like this. In fact he’s grown distinctly unhappy with them ever since Afghanistan, just like Rhodey has. Pepper’s the one who truly understands the need for them, understands the song and dance and all the steps included. She gets it in a way that Rhodey and Happy both just never seem to be able to completely stomach despite their years in the military where song and dance are a large part of life as well.

It’s probably just an issue of them being so used to dancing to a different tune.

Toni knows that most of Happy’s issues with events now days revolve around the large target she’s painted on her back. He’s been taking his bodyguard duties more seriously than he ever has since Afghanistan. Toni appreciates his efforts and his concern even if she hates the fact that she’s causing him so much extra stress.

Especially since she has no intention of allowing him to do his job properly.

She refuses to watch anyone else she cares about take a bullet for her.

*Never again.*

“No,” Toni reaches out, presses her fingertips to his arm in a gesture of wordless comfort that makes him relax a fraction automatically, “it was perfect.”

Toni looks up then, sees the strange woman leaning against her car and staring at her intently, and immediately frosts herself over. Her eyes go heavy lidded, her mouth quirks up into an interested smirk, and her walk takes on a bit more of a sway. Seductive. *Predatory.*

Happy stiffens beside her at the obvious change in temperament, attune to the truth behind her actions in a way no one outside their close circle of family is.

Happy has learned over the years exactly what Toni looks like when she senses a threat of some sort.

The woman is tall, all sleek lines and beautiful auburn hair. She looks calm, collected and assured in a way that distinctly reminds Toni of Pepper, which may or may not have been a deliberate choice by whoever has sent her.

Because this woman obviously wants something from her.

But then again, most people do.

The subpoena for Toni to appear at the Senate Armed Services Committee the Marshall hands Happy is almost a relief.

At least this is something Toni has been expecting thanks to Rhodey’s heads up and not some new
issue being dropped onto her shoulders.

Toni’s carrying all that she can at the moment.

Of course, if push comes to shove, she’ll always make room for more.

~~~

“Ms. Stark, could we pick up now where we left off? Ms. Stark. Please.” Senator Stern’s grating voice calls for her attention.

Toni’s sitting, legs crossed and crimson heels gleaming, in one of the high backed leather chairs at her table, but her attention is firmly on Pepper at the moment who’s sitting a row or two behind her.

Pepper looks vaguely irritated with her but Toni can see the familiar mix of amusement and fond exasperation in her eyes. Toni gives her a small, smug grin and a wink because they both know she’s purposefully ignoring Senator Stern and Pepper’s unsurprisingly okay with that.

Normally Pepper would be full blown outraged with her playing fast and loose in a Senate hearing but she’s always been particularly disapproving of Stern.

Toni’s sure it has nothing to do with the way Stern has propositioned Pepper and Toni both more than once over the years. Of course that was before some less than savory pictures had been anonymously released to his heiress wife who’d unsurprisingly tightened his leash if gossip was to be believed.

Toni had been particularly proud of JARVIS for that one at the time and she still is honestly. Her baby boy can be downright vindictive when the occasion calls for it. Resourceful too.

Finally though she knows she’s strung things on for long enough, pissed Stern off just the right amount, and been cavalier enough to have them all ready to move things along.

She’s playing up her reputation of devil-may-care arrogance to the hilt because arrogance is less dangerous than an agenda to the Senate so Toni needs to make sure they believe she has more of the first than she does of the second. Still it is a delicate balance to achieve and Toni has to be careful not to stretch it too far.

Thankfully she’s had a great deal of practice over the years.

“Yes, dear?” Toni asks once Pepper’s finally shooed her away. There’s a small ripple of laughter from the rest of the room.

“Can I have your attention?” Stern’s red faced, lips pursed and eyes narrowed.

“Absolutely.” Toni grins because anger’s so easy to provoke in most of these people. For politicians they are, for the most part and especially Stern, unable to compartmentalize. That’s a point in Toni’s favor.

“Do you or do you not possess a specialized weapon?” Stern looks smug in that moment, like this is the question that’s finally going to trip Toni up.

Idiots the whole lot of them.

It’s almost as if they don’t know who they’re dealing.

Which to be fair, they really don’t.
Because again Toni’s been telling them who and what she is for years now and none of them have ever bothered to actually pay attention.

“I do not.” She says it with no hesitation. “I do not.”

“You do not?” Stern’s question comes out skeptically.

“Well,” Toni drawls as she leans forward towards the microphone, “it depends on how you define the word ‘weapon’ really.”

“The Iron Queen weapon.”

“My device does not fit that description.” It doesn’t either, not in the way they’re thinking, not in the way she intends to spin this. Not even War Machine will fall into that category once the time comes for it to be passed to Rhodey. Toni has the documentation and multiple failsafe programs in place to make sure of that.

“Well … how would you describe it?” The vein in Stern’s temple stands out in stark relief when he clenches his jaw. He’s been doing it a lot the past few hours much to Toni’s delight.

“I would describe it by defining it as what it is, Senator.” Toni deadpans, but inside there’s a victorious twist of glee burning brightly in her chest.

“As?”

“It’s a high-tech prosthesis.” There’s a burst of noise and laughter behind her but Toni pushes forward. “That’s actually the most apt description I can make of it.”

“It’s a weapon.” Stern grits out. “It’s a weapon Ms. Stark that you’re not qualified to handle and that presents a danger to the American people.”

“Please,” Toni scoffs because as much as she enjoys pulling his strings and pressing his buttons she actively despises spending more time than necessary speaking to Stern, “let’s put our cards on the table here Senator. If your priority was actually the well-being of the American citizen …”

“My priority is to get the Iron Queen weapon turned over to the people of the United States of America.”

“You can forget it.” Toni drops all semblance of charm and cuts straight to the point. “Iron Queen isn’t a separate entity that can be given over into anyone else’s control. Iron Queen is me. The suit and I are one. To turn over the Iron Queen suit would be to turn over myself, which is tantamount to indentured servitude or prostitution depending on what state you’re in. You can’t have it.”

“Look,” Stern huffs, “I’m no expert …”

“In prostitution?” Toni can’t help but jab at what she knows is a soft spot. Those pictures had been both self-explanatory and especially damning after all. “Of course you’re not. You’re a senator.”

And that’s when things begin to go really downhill because Stern calls in the DOD’s new primary contractor.

**Hammer.**

“Let the record reflect that I observed Mr. Hammer entering the chamber, and I am wondering if and when any actual expert will also be in attendance.” Toni doesn’t even try to hide the way her lip
curls in dislike because the animosity between her and Hammer is well known and fully documented.

“Absolutely.” Hammer simpers as he sits down and pulls his mic closer. “I’m no expert. I defer to you, Natasha. You’re the golden girl after all.”

Then he stands, oozing used-car salesman-esque charm, and delivers a subpar speech about Howard and his lion-like prowess and how Toni’s unwillingness to hand over the suit is practically unpatriotic of her.

Stern, of course, jumps on the chance to agree with him.

And then Stern does what Toni’s been waiting for the entire time.

He calls Rhodey to the chamber.

Toni knows it’s supposed to unbalance her, knows that’s why Rhodey was chosen despite the obvious conflict of interest. Hell she’d say that’s why he was made liaison in the first place if he hadn’t told her years ago about how he’d lobbied for months to be granted the position. Ultimately though Stern had obviously hoped to unsettle her by calling in her supposed long term, on and off again lover.

Jokes on him though, always has been and always will be if Toni has anything to say about it.

“Rhodey?” Toni feigns surprise as she gets to her feet with a grin and moves to greet Rhodey half way down the aisle.

“Hey sugar.” There’s a flurry of cameras flashing as she moves into his space. Rhodey automatically leans down a bit so that she can press a kiss to his cheek in a move that’s long become second nature for them, unable to deny her affection even in this moment. “I totally didn’t expect to see you here. It’s such a surprise, I’m shocked, taken aback, flabbergasted if you will.”

“Toni.” Rhodey greets her, voice low and tense. She can see his displeasure in the sharp line of his jaw, in the rigid strength of his shoulders. He doesn’t want to be here, doesn’t want to do this. But he will because it’s his duty and because they’ve already talked about this. He still doesn’t like it though.

Toni knows, because he’d actually told her so himself, that he’s afraid of being used to hurt her with this.

Toni’s no fool and she knows how this is going to go, knows that Stern is going to try and twist anything and everything Rhodey says, anything and everything he has written in his report. She hates it, hates that he’s been put in this position, but at the same time there’s no one else she would rather have in his place.

“Relax,” Toni breathes into his ear, “it’s still me and you buttercup, until the day we die.”

It’s all the reassurance she can give him at the moment but from the way the lines around his mouth ease up just a bit it seems to be all that he needs.

Rhodey tries to be professional, all stiff military precision and calm, even as he openly protests Stern’s instructions for him to read selected portions from his report.

The selection calls Iron Queen a potential threat to the security of both the nation and to her interests. Stern tries to cut him off there but Rhodey steam rolls right on. He makes a point of mentioning how
the rest of the report advocates in favor of folding Toni into the existing chain of command.

Stern gets more and more frustrated and Rhodey doesn’t seem inclined to stop, his shoulders are even tenser than before as he argues with the man, body geared up for battle with his jaw tight and his dark eyes angry.

While watching Rhodey bitch-slap a senator would be glorious it would also be trouble neither of them need at the moment. That thought in mind Toni leans forward and makes a quip about being Secretary of Defense in order to draw the attention away from Rhodey and back onto herself.

It’s too late for Stern though, Rhodey’s determination to speak has already worked and Toni can hear whispers running through the crowd behind her.

Toni knows she has a win in her pocket before Stern ever calls for Rhodey to narrate a selection of images in what Rhodey obstinately calls a premature move. His protests are quickly overruled just as Toni had known they would be.

Satellite stills of attempts to recreate her armor come up and Toni has her phone in her hand, fingers dancing across the screen in the next moment.

It’s child’s play to gain control of their screens, to bring a little transparency to the proceedings. Beside her Rhodey rolls his eyes but he stays quiet as Toni narrates the truth behind the rest of the world’s attempts to recreate Iron Queen.

She still sees the small smile he tries to hide though, still sees the slightest hint of exasperated pride in his eyes, the one that’s always there when she does something brilliant but reckless. She sees the way he relaxes just a bit as she talks, obviously reassured that this is all nothing she can’t handle.

“I’d say most countries are five to ten years away from this sort of technology and that’s being positive and generous.” Toni cuts her eyes towards Rhodey and then refocuses on the panel and Stern. “Hammer Industries? Well I’d give you an estimate but not even I can see that far into the future.”

The entire thing dissolves into a circus afterwards but Toni doesn’t care. She’s accomplished what she came for.

Getting Stern on record calling her a *fucking cunt* is just an added bonus.

~~~

Rhodey slips into the backseat of her car once it’s all over with and rides back with them to the hotel Toni’s staying in for the night with both Happy and Pepper.

He spends the entire ride tense, relatively quiet, and almost plastered against her side. The long line of his body is familiar and comfortable though so Toni doesn’t mind. Instead she just leans back against his side and stays there as she chats with Pepper about the Stark Expo and the next generation StarkPhone she’d sent out for approval earlier in the week.

She feels it when he shifts, buries his face in her upswept curls, and just breathes her in for a few long moments.

Finally, right as Happy pulls up to the hotel, the last of his lingering tension fades.

~~~
That night, when Happy and Pepper have both retired to their own rooms, Toni and Rhodey curl up together on the plush bed in her suite.

Rhodey wraps his arms around her tightly, pulls her against the solid strength of his chest, and sighs. Toni shifts a bit, turns her head to press a kiss to the puckered scar on his shoulder, and settles down quietly because he doesn’t seem inclined to let her go any time soon.

“They twist everything.” Rhodey finally says and there’s something so tired in his voice that it makes Toni’s heart ache for him. “Politicians. They just … they twist everything.”

“Yeah,” Toni agrees because it’s the truth and there’s no denying that. “That’s how the system works honey bear. It’s all double talk and manipulation. You know that. You’ve known that for years now.”

“I know.” His arms tighten just a bit. “I do know that. It’s just sometimes it really hits me you know? How out of touch they all are with the actual people of this country.”

“What’s the matter sugar?” There’s something specific on his mind, related to the hearing Toni’s sure but maybe not just about that at the same time.

“They told me they wanted a threat assessment,” Rhodey grits out, “so I gave them one. Oh I didn’t tell them everything, I’d never put you in danger like that, but I was honest on the rest of it. Then, after all that, they don’t even really take it into account except to try and get me to say what they want me to say. Fucking highlighted sections Tones.”

“I know darling,” Toni soothes him as best she can, “I know. But we both knew they’d do something like that. Like you said, twisting is what they do.”

“It’s just …” Rhodey pauses, swallows hard, pulls her even tighter against his chest, “instead of focusing on all the good you’ve done, on all the ways the Iron Queen has helped stabilize things, all they talked about is control. About getting Iron Queen, getting you, under their thumb. Sometimes it just fucking sucker punches me right in the goddamn chest how little any of them actually care about this country or the people in it. Not to even mention the rest of the world.

And that, Toni can’t help but think, is what will make Rhodey an excellent pilot for War Machine when the time comes.

Because he’s a soldier yes, but beyond that, before that, he’s a good man. A man who cares, who’s loyal and brave and willing to go the extra mile for what and who he believes in.

Rhodey is a better person than she is. He outstrips her by miles and miles in that department.

Just like Steve.

Just like Bucky.

Toni loves him so.

~~~

JARVIS greets her cheerfully when she finally returns to the Malibu mansion. Plus he already has the Youtube video of the Senate hearing up and playing on one of the screens by the time she makes her way down to the workshop.

She knows he’s taking a great deal of pleasure in watching her outmaneuver Stern.
“It seems that Senator Stern is still rather foulmouthed where you are concerned Miss.” JARVIS quips just as the video reaches the end and Stern can clearly be heard calling her a fucking cunt again, loud and clear. There’s a stillness in JARVIS’ voice that makes Toni perk up because she recognizes the tone.

He’s gotten rather overprotective of her in the past months and given what he’d done to Stern the last time he’d been caught on camera badmouthing her that’s saying something. While having someone trash talk her is a fairly regular occurrence JARVIS seems to take some kind of particular offense whenever US officials are the ones doing the talking.

She’s not entirely sure why that seems to bother him so much to be honest. She figures he’ll tell her one day if it becomes an issue.

Still Toni’s almost positive that Stern’s wife is going to be finding another anonymous email in her account soon. This time detailing the hidden bank account in the Caymans that Stern’s been funneling bits of her fortune into for years now.

The blender in the corner makes a loud screeching noise as DUM-E presses the button, lid forgotten yet again, and causes the thick, green shake he’s attempting to make to go everywhere. Beside him U seems to sigh as he hangs his claw and then rolls off to grab a rag.

“I’m going to turn the two of you into wine racks. Or donate you to a preschool.” Toni laughs as she picks up the glass that Butterfingers had brought her earlier before he rolled off to cater to Mother and takes a large gulp.

It’s still unappealing but it’s gotten to be one of the few things she can stomach without her ever present nausea roaring up a notch inside of her.

“We’re up to eighty ounces a day to counteract the symptoms Miss.” JARVIS chimes in, voice soft and sad in a way that’s growing more and more familiar as each day without a solution passes them by.

Her blood toxicity is up to 24% now and steadily rising.

Time is running short and for once Toni’s not sure what to do except to keep moving forward, to keep trying to find an answer of some kind.

“I have rerun every simulation we’ve previously tried as well as all alterations and permutations possible.” JARVIS tells her softly. “The only current possible solution is still two to three years away from being viable. Or six to eight months if we both were to devote our entire attention to its development …”

“And we both know I don’t have six to eight months, not to mention two to three years, even if I stopped using the armor today.” Toni finishes his sentence for him.

“Indeed Miss. Though I would like to continue my own calculations on the matter in the hopes that, when a solution to your current issue is found, I might be able to interest you in the data I have collected. The procedure looks … most promising.” There’s a note of intrigue in JARVIS’ voice that makes Toni smile because he’s so very like her when he get enraptured in a new puzzle.

“Knock yourself out J,” Toni waves a hand at him with a fond smile, “the BUCK-E file is your brainchild, your baby. You put in whatever kind of time and effort you see fit. I’ll be here if you need help or an opinion but until then you do what you want. I trust you, you know that. You bring me something you think is useful or would be a good addition and I’ll give it a look.”
“Thank you Miss,” JARVIS, as always, seems pleased at her easy willingness to put her body and her health in his virtual hands. Honestly though, beyond Rhodey, JARVIS is the person Toni trusts the most.

To her it makes perfect sense to have him in charge of anything and everything she might one day consider doing to her body if she survives this current debacle.

“Miss Potts is approaching,” JARVIS informs her even as he automatically blacks the screens with her vitals and scans on them.

Pepper looks ragged around the edges, tired and worn. Her nose and eyes are the slightest bit red and Toni’s on her feet and moving before she even thinks about it. Her immune system might be compromised and she might not be good with people but even she knows that sick people need to rest. Hell it’s one of the lessons Rhodey, and Jarvis before him, had both been trying to beat into her head for years now and just because she didn’t and doesn’t heed that advice herself doesn’t mean she doesn’t listen.

She ushers Pepper onto the couch and sits down beside her. Toni listens to her bitch about the Expo and how it’s a disaster, listens to her go on about the extensive contracts toward clean energy Toni’s been awarding and setting up.

Finally though she can’t take it. She’d written it into her will already so this will just be getting things jumpstarted a bit. Honestly it’ll make things easier in the long run.

She laughs, long and loud, and it makes Pepper shut up, makes her go narrow eyed and irritated even as her mouth quirks up a bit.

“This is boring Pep.” Toni whines even as she grins unabashedly. “Boring, boring, boring. I’m officially giving you a citation for being boring. So from now on I think you should do it.”

“Do what Toni?” Pepper snarks. “Be bored? Cause let me tell you I’m not sure that’s possible with you around. Between whatever new stunt you’re inclined to pull and trying to run your company I yearn for boredom. Boredom would be like a vacation for me.”

“A vacation actually sounds really good. Also I both resent and resemble that remark Pep.” Toni’s grin widens as she leans forward and puts both of her hands on Pepper’s shoulders in a move that makes her go quiet and still. Touch always works with Happy and Pepper because, unlike with Rhodey, she touches them so rarely despite loving them both dearly. “So do it. Run my company.”

“I’ve been trying to Toni,” Pepper’s glare is weak because she always softens whenever Toni encroaches on her personal space.

“So do it.” Toni repeats as she turns serious, voice soft and certain, “Virginia Potts I hereby appoint you as CEO of Stark Industries. I’m trying to give you my company Pepper, so let me.”

It’s not the first time Toni’s seen Pepper cry, but it’s certainly the happiest occasion by far.

It feels bittersweet though, seeing her cry like this, over this.

She resolutely doesn’t think about the reasons behind that feeling though.

She certainly doesn’t tell Pepper.
“JARVIS?”
“Yes Miss?”


_Steve and Rhodey and Bucky are gone, vanished but for the echoes of their screams._

_Toni rips herself into three different pieces and none of them are fast enough, none of them are good enough to chase the echoes down._

_Her brilliance has failed her and soon the world will turn to ash._

_And in her chest a supernova pulses with deadly intent._

Toni wakes screaming.

But then she always feels like she’s screaming these days, like the sound of it’s being kept muffled just behind her teeth.

Sometimes, when she’s laying on the couch in the workshop or in her bed upstairs, Toni can’t help but think that she’s been screaming since the day she was born.

It doesn’t really matter though.

Or at least Toni is just too tired to give it more than a passing thought.

A little under a week later Toni’s in the gym boxing with Happy when Pepper strolls in.

_Apparently the notary’s finally arrived and it’s time to sign the transfer paperwork Toni had Priscilla write up and courier to Pepper._

_Toni gets under Happy’s guard and winds him with a snap kick to the ribs, he glares and goes on about dirty boxing, but Toni just smirks and feints to the left._

_It’s the clack of unfamiliar heels and the way Happy stills and looks over her shoulder that catches Toni’s attention next._

_Toni turns and immediately stops breathing._

_The woman who’s walked into the gym is gorgeous. All curving lines and flowing red curls. She moves beautifully too, like a dancer, each step precise and measured in a way that easily captures Toni’s attention._

_Happy taps her on the back of the head and Toni mule kicks him in the chest pad before she grabs her water bottle filled with chlorophyll and slips out of the ring._

_She saunters up to this new red head, uncaring of the way she’s sweaty and dressed shabbily in a large black hoodie and hot pants._
“Hmm, what’s your name pretty?” Toni hums, seductive and oh so interested. She’s at least partially feigning it because her sex drive’s been basically non-existent since her chest was hollowed out and the electromagnet put in place. It’s hard to feel truly sexual while hiding an arc reactor from the entire world as well as dying of palladium poisoning.

The thought of anyone touching her in a sexual manner is enough to make her skin crawl at the moment. She’d played up the party-girl angle when she was younger to her own benefit. She’s indulged in the reputation of promiscuous heiress and jet-setting billionaire for years now but the urge has mostly died off. Afghanistan had changed Toni in more ways than the world would ever know.

Or maybe it had actually set her free in some twisted way.

Not that she plans on letting the world know that of course because she does have a reputation to maintain.

“Rushman.” The woman tells her, eyes at half-mast and a small smile curling her plush, red painted lips. “Natalie Rushman.”

Sex drive at an all-time low or not Natalie Rushman is undeniably *gorgeous*, beautiful and poised in a way that makes Toni perk up a bit because she’s always loved beautiful things. Up close Toni can see the muscles in her arms, can see the strength in her biceps and the way she holds herself.

But … there’s something off about her, something just a little too perfect that pings at Toni’s radar, makes the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

‘Beautiful mouths,’ is all Toni can think for a moment when she looks at Natalie standing across from her. ‘Beautiful mouths hiding sharp fangs.’

“How about you take a turn in the ring, let Happy show you a few moves.” Toni stares her directly in the eyes for a long, charged moment before Natalie dips her head and moves towards the ring.

Toni goes to Pepper’s side, or more specifically to the holo-enable table beside her. It’s the work of seconds to enter the woman’s name in the search bank despite the way Pepper’s obviously impatient to get the paper work signed.

Toni’s rewarded with an impressive array of credentials as well as a provocative but tasteful spread of modeling photos.

It’s the small, easily dismissed icon blinking in the corner of the display that catches her attention. It’s a tiny icon of Steve’s shield but the colors are wrong, the star is red and the rings are blue and white.

It’s also a symbol she and JARVIS had worked out together long ago.

It means that somewhere, somehow, the file on Natalie Rushman has the equivalent of S.T.E.V.E. level encryptions.

Which means that all is not what it seems with the beautiful notary.

Which Toni had figured was the case anyways because she tends to recognize another predator when she sees one. There’s no way in hell Natalie Rushman is a normal notary. She’s a predator, a *hunter* of some sort.

The way Natalie puts Happy on the ground two seconds later only enforces her opinion.
The real question, Toni knows, is who or what is she hunting?

It doesn’t matter though because Toni’ll be damned before she leaves someone so obviously deadly so close to Pepper.

So Toni signs her company over to Pepper and then types out an encrypted note to JARVIS to have Rushman hired as her new PA on the spot.

Better to keep her potential enemies close after all.

It makes it easier for her and JARVIS both to watch them.

~~~

Toni retches, mouth filled with the taste of blood and metal, her ears full of the bots distressed whines and JARVIS’ concerned voice.

*Blood Toxicity* 37% her tester reads.

Almost halfway there now.

*God* she’s so *tired*.

~~~

“Miss I have located the source of the heavy encryption on Ms. Rushman’s file.” JARVIS tells her and he sounds openly displeased, like the idea of Rushman being a plant of some sort has personally offended him. “It is not beyond my capabilities to push through it discretely.”

The file is up on one of the screens in front of her, Rushman’s perfectly professional smile staring back at her from her ID picture.

“Break it,” Toni tells him instantly and without any hint of remorse. “I’ll have eyes on her in Monaco but I want everything you can give me on her as soon as possible. I want to know who she is, what she wants, and who sent her. Get it done fast and all discrete like baby boy and then let me know if we need to destroy her or not.”

Rushman is a snake in the garden of Toni’s life at the moment and she won’t hesitate to cut her head off if need be. Not like she might have once before. Not now, not anymore, not when hesitating could mean leaving her clasped too closely to Pepper’s breasts when Toni is gone.

“With pleasure Miss.” From the almost vicious tone JARVIS has adopted she can tell he feels much the same way.

~~~

Pepper’s less than happy when *Rushman*, or whoever she is, is waiting for them in Monaco. Eventually though Pepper just sighs, says Toni’s name in that tone of voice people normally reserve for puppies who’ve messed the rug, and goes with it.

She’s already pissed that Toni’s going to be driving today, that she’s finally, after all these years, going to indulge in her desire to drive her racecar through the winding streets of Monaco. Her regularly scheduled driver, a man named Defilipo, hadn’t been pleased when she’d video chatted him about taking his place on the track a week or two ago. A seductive grin and a hefty bonus had gone a long way towards smoothing things over with him thankfully.
Sometimes Pepper’s patience with her is a thing of wonders though, even if she does routinely threaten to sick either Rhodey and/or JARVIS on her when she misbehaves. As if Pepper isn’t formidable enough on her own.

Toni maneuvers her way through the crowd with ease all the same, Pepper at her side and Rushman placed carefully ahead of her where Toni can watch her.

Seeing Hammer and Everhart is an unpleasant experience even if driving the sharp edge of her heel into the top of Hammer’s loafers when he tries to touch her is pleasant enough.

Toni slips her sunglasses on to protect her eyes from the bright lights and Everhart’s ever searching stare because she’s too tired to keep her mask all the way up at the moment.

She just wants to drive, wants to tick something off her still surprisingly long bucket list and be the first woman to race in the Grand Prix de Monaco Historique. Toni just wants to forget herself for a few moments in the speed and adrenaline rush of something she’d loved even before Afghanistan.

Wants to pretend for a moment that she’s carefree and cocky, that there’s not a star burning in her chest.

That thought in mind she ditches Hammer and Everhart at a table and then slips away to change into her drive suit after checking to make sure Pepper is settled in, safe in the crowded room even if Rushman’s still at her side.

~~~

Hair up, wings and reactor covered, Toni retches over the sink, droplets of blood and black slime dotting the fine marble.

She straightens, smooths her hands down the front of her thick blue body suit, and deliberately wipes all expression from her face.

Blood Toxicity 53% her tester reads.

Half way there now.

Alright then.

~~~

The car roars to life around her and Toni feels her heart skip a beat in pure, rapturous joy as she takes off.

It handles beautifully, just as she’d known it would, and the raceway goes by her in a blur as she maneuvers around and passed other drivers.

Toni laughs, wild and free, at the beauty of it all.

Then, out of nowhere, her pit crew chief is screaming rapid fire Italian into her headset. Toni barely has time to hear the words ‘crash’ and ‘man’ before she turns the corner and sees him.

Broad shouldered and swarthy skinned he’s standing in the middle of the racetrack with what looks like electric whips clenched in his hands.

Toni feels her eyes widen as she tightens her grip on the steering wheel and prepares to swerve.
It’s too late.

His whip cuts through the front of the car and then suddenly Toni is airborne in the worst kind of way.

The impact with the asphalt jars her hard, Toni’s dazed for a too long moment but she gets her helmet off and turns her head just in time to see the moment three of the other drivers crash in a fiery blast behind the guy with the whips.

There’s no time to hesitate after that though. With reflexes born out of a life lived under Howard’s thumb and sharpened by ever mission as Iron Queen, Toni moves.

She gets out of the wreckage of the car, the screams of the crowd loud in her ears.

When the man swings his whips again and then stops to inspect the wreckage Toni does what she always does when someone knocks her down.

She gets up.

And then she hits the motherfucker in the back of the fucking head with the heaviest sheet of metal she can find.

She has to scramble to get away from him after that, mind whirling as she rolls and ducks and dodges to avoid the sparking slice of his electric whips. Still he manages to knock her off of her feet and send her flying against the side of one of the wrecked cars.

Toni’s dazed but she smells the fuel before she’s able to get her eyes to focus enough to see it.

The resulting explosion after he slams his whips into the fuel leak is satisfying even if he’s only singed by all appearances and the arm of her suit ends up on fire.

Happy slamming the car into him is much more appreciated even if Toni does have to half scramble up the fence to get clear as well.

The sight of Pepper, red faced and obviously terrified, in the back seat makes her stomach drop in the worst sort of way.

“Give me the case.” Toni yells as she scrambles around the car and towards the passenger side because she knows the Mark V is in the car because Happy would have never left without it, handcuff or no handcuff.

“Get in the car Toni, please just get in the car. Please. Please Toni. Please.” There are tears in Pepper’s eyes and Toni hates them but she knows she can’t.

She can’t just leave.

Not after she’s been attacked like this. Not after this man’s killed innocent people in an obvious attempt to take her down.

She’s Toni fucking Stark. She’s the Iron Queen. She can’t back down from something like this. Won’t.

Plus, if she goes, who’s going to deal with him?

She’s the only one who can and that makes it her responsibility.
“Pepper!” Toni roars and the sudden shock of her screaming must break through Pepper’s hysteria because she shuts up and stares at her wide eyed. “Give. Me. The. Case.”

There’s a low moan from the front of the car then. Toni feels worry twist hot and heavy in her stomach because he’s obviously coming to and Happy and Pepper are still well within range of his whips.

“Toni …” Pepper half sobs, knuckles white where she’s gripping the case and eyes wide with obvious terror.

“Now.” Toni doesn’t soften, can’t.

Pepper sobs lowly once more and then heaves the Mark V case out the window.

The case slides to a stop at her feet and Toni quickly kicks the release, bends down and grabs the levers with both hands so she can pick it up and engage the suit up protocols on it.

“Miss.” JARVIS’ voice is in her ear as soon as the helmet has fully formed and the armor’s come online. He sounds worried, almost anxious. “I was monitoring the race and saw the attack. Are you injured?”

“I’m as good as can be expected J,” Toni tells him even as she turns back towards Happy and a still sobbing Pepper. “Happy! Get her out of here.”

“Boss …” Happy’s jaw has that mutinous set to it but Toni doesn’t even let him get started on protesting.

“Now Happy.” Toni steps forward, repulsor up and aimed at the still unmoving guy. “Pepper’s your top priority right now.”

Happy nods, puts the car in reverse, and goes to peel out just in time for the asshole slumped across the car to choose that moment to rear back up and slice a whip down across the side of the car. He narrowly misses hitting Happy but Toni’s already moving. She raises a leg and kicks, sending the car skidding across the asphalt and hopefully out of danger.

Her moment of distraction costs her though as a burning whip slashes across her arm.

It hurts. The impact is surprisingly strong against the less durable Mark V and the high electrical output cuts through the metal with worrying ease.

Toni stumbles back for a second but then she pushes herself forward again because no matter what she has to stay between him and the car holding Pepper and Happy.

She has to.

He parries her repulsor blasts with surprising grace given the bulky design of his whips but Toni doesn’t give up. She blasts at him again and again, unable to move too far from the car for fear of exposing Happy and Pepper and unable to use heavy ordinance because of the gathered crowd still watching them from the stands.

She’s trapped, her greatest advantage of flight and maneuverability no longer an option for her.

“Miss.” JARVIS calls to her a second before the whips hit her again, sparking off the suit and cutting deep into the metal. She has to do something, fast, or the Mark V might not hold up for too much longer.
Toni’s mind whirls.

When he rears back to strike her again Toni steps into the blow with one arm raised. The whips wrap around her and he sends her flying, slams her into the ground and then the car with surprising strength.

The impacts are jarring but Toni gets back up onto her knee a split second later.

She pushes the pain down and away and then Toni just twists herself up further into the cords, the armor taking heavy damage all the while.

Then she darts forward into his space.

He goes down easily enough after that and the harness he’s wearing shreds like paper in her hand as she goes for what’s obviously the power source and tears it away.

The man splits blood at her and cackles as the police drag him away.

“You lose.” He crows triumphantly, madly, “you lose Stark. You lose.”

Toni watches him go and then stares down in horror at the crude arc reactor she’s clutching in her hand.

Ice settles cold and heavy in the pit of her stomach.

~~~

Scrubbed clean and in a new business suit, bruises hidden behind artfully applied make up, her hair up and her wings and reactor covered, Toni stalks through the dreary and silent halls of the detainment facility.

The official tells her in rapid fire French* that they have nothing on her mysterious attacker. His prints apparently came back completely clean without even a name attached to them.

He’s also not spoken since he was apprehended. Hell they’re not even sure if he speaks English.

Toni doesn’t care though, she speaks more than a handful of languages besides English fluently and a handful of others passingly. She’s sure they can find a way to communicate.

All she needs is the five minutes she’s already been promised.

~~~

Stripped down as he is to his underwear Toni notices immediately that the man is heavily muscled and bristling with ink, most of it the dark harsh lines of what Toni’s sure is prison art. She’d learned more than a few things during her months with Jannik and Mari about the different styles of ink to be found.

“That was pretty decent tech,” Toni tells him as she saunters around the perimeter of the room, guard up and careful to keep distance between them even with the heavy shackles keeping him in place.

“Cycles per second were a little low though.”

She purposefully talks tech at him, tries to find an even ground of some sort, something to put him at ease enough to speak with her. Plus, Toni’s willing to admit, she’s curious. He could have refined it a bit, made his design more elegant and efficient and sold it to any one of a dozen countries easily enough. He could have gotten a solid paycheck out of it even if it wasn’t up to the standards of her
own arc reactor.

She tells him so.

“You come from a family of thieves and butchers,” he tells her, voice rough and accented, “and now, like all guilty people, you try to rewrite your own decadent history. And you forget all the lives the Stark family has destroyed.”

Toni keeps her face blank, buries her instinctive snarl deep beneath years of forced calm. She can’t let it show, can’t let her constant stream of rage whenever Howard or the Stark family is mentioned peek out through her calm demeanor. Still she can’t necessarily disagree with his assessment, the Stark line has never been known for their kindness or their compassion, only for their brilliance and often times their ruthlessness.

Toni’s always embraced those parts of herself in different measures although she has made an effort to channel them in different ways than had seemed common for the Stark line.

Mostly though he’s wrong about her own motivations.

Toni is a **scientist**.

She knows she can’t change the past. That’s impossible, *illogical*.

She’s not trying to rewrite her history. These days she’s just trying to atone for it.

“Speaking of thieves,” Toni stares him dead in the eyes, “where did you get that design?”

There’s a long moment of silence.

“My father.” He finally tells her roughly, and there’s a spark in his eyes, a curious mixture of love and hate. “Anton Vanko.”

She’s never heard the name but he tells her his father is the reason she’s alive.

He talks about bleeding Gods, about sharks in the water and about watching the world consume her.

To Toni it sounds like what’s been happening to her for her entire life anyways in one way or another so she has no interest in listening to him anymore.

“Natasha,” the way he says her first name makes her think that Russia might be a good starting point to look for his origins, right after the name of his father, “one thing before you go.”

She pauses.

“Palladium in the chest, painful way to die.” He mocks her softly, humor and satisfaction heavy in his voice.

Toni feels ice blossom to life in her stomach because he shouldn’t know that. *No one* should know that. She’s kept the fact that the reactor is embedded in her chest a secret for a reason. And yet, somehow, he *knows*.

His soft laughter haunts her as she stalks from the room.

~~~

The plane ride home is fraught with tense silence. Toni’s mind is turning the conversation in the
detainment facility over and over in her mind. Thoughts of the drivers, innocents who’d only been in
the wrong place at the wrong time and died because of it, haunt her. In the corner Senator Stern is
busy lambasting her on whatever news network will take him but Toni mutes the TV easily enough,
uninterested in his latest attempts to discredit her.

Pepper sits huddled against Happy’s side and Toni looks at the two of them, curled together on the
seats across from her, and her chest aches with something beyond the palladium poisoning.

She’s dying and she’s going to be leaving so much behind. This new problem that’s been dropped
in her lap isn’t helping things at all.

For a moment she thinks about leaving, about finding some quaint little village somewhere to hide
out in. Somewhere quiet and calm. She could bring Happy and Pepper, could kidnap Rhodey and
pack up the bots. JARVIS can connect with her through her phone so she has him in her pocket all
the time now days.

Toni could easily find a quiet, peaceful place to die.

But …

But that’s not really an option for her and she knows it. She’d sworn to fight till the bitter end after
all.

She can’t give up now because she has promises to keep.

And miles to go before she sleeps.

~~~


Lightning strikes at her from a clear sky and Toni plummets towards the ocean.

Bucky dives for her, Steve and Rhodey raise their hands up high in the air as if to catch her.

Toni curls herself into a ball and doesn’t reach out towards any of them, too afraid of dragging them
down with her.

She hits the water with a scream.

She sinks.

And in her chest a supernova pulses with deadly intent.

Chapter End Notes

*According to my research (I googled it wasn't that impressive) Monaco has both
French and Italian listed as major languages.

Sooo? Thoughts? Concerns? Headcanons? Requests?

Let me know what you guys think no matter how large or small the issue is because I
love each and every review I get. I adore all of it from the short one liners to the
paragraphs. Give me all you got! Ramble, scream, do whatever just let me know how you feel.

Also feel free to find me on tumblr as well.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait guys, been a bit busy. On a positive note though this chapter is long, like super long so please be sure to review!

As always though you're all so fucking amazing and I adore each and every review I get.

But yes, here we have the conclusion to Iron Man 2! I hope you enjoy it!

Also important AN at the bottom!

Fanmix: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Toni’s on the phone with Rhodey almost as soon as she steps foot back into the workshop. She’s alone in the mansion, Pepper and Happy having gone back to SI so that Pepper can work on wrangling some of the media coverage over what happened in Monaco.

“Do you need me?” Rhodey asks her softly, voice steady and even. He looks tired, the video display doing nothing to hide the redness of his eyes, the way the lines around his mouth seem to be cut even deeper than normal.

“You’re busy jelly bean.” Toni winks at him and does her best to seem normal and calm.

Unaffected.

Like Monaco hasn’t unsettled her, hasn’t shaken her to her core.

Like she doesn’t see fire when she closes her eyes, doesn’t smell fuel and smoldering metal, doesn’t hear the screaming of the crowd that had surrounded the race track. Doesn’t hear the singing of electricity as whips slash at her again and again.

Like the deaths of those drivers on the track don’t torment her.

Like she’s not haunted by soft mocking laughter and a taunting sneer of, “palladium in the chest, painful way to die.”

“Toni,” Rhodey chides, “that’s not what I asked and you know it. Do you need me?”

“Always,” Toni slumps slightly in her chair, “I always need you Rhodey but I’m okay right now.”

“Hey baby girl,” Rhodey softens, smiles just a bit, “you know I’ll be there in a flash if you want me there. Just say the word.”

“I know.” Toni does know too, because Rhodey’s always there for her when she needs him most, is always there when she lets him and sometimes even when she doesn’t. “This is … this whole situation is a mess and we both know it but I’m fine for now. You’ve got a lot of shit to deal with on
your end so just concentrate on that. I can wait, that can’t.”

That’s more than true as well. Questions as to whether or not Toni is suitable or capable of continuing on as Iron Queen after the incident in Monaco are on the rise across the country. News outlets are awash with arguments both for and against her. The media is in a feeding frenzy and Toni hasn’t been called erratic and reckless so much in so short a time since after she shut down SI’s weapons division.

Honestly though all of the drama boils down to the fact that the government wants the suit and they’re itching to find an excuse to try and take it. Because of that Toni knows that Rhodey’s getting pressure from all sides.

“I love you Tones,” Rhodey finally sighs. Toni knows that he’s just tired enough, just frazzled enough, to let this slide for a bit because she’s not obviously injured more than he’s, reluctantly, become used to. “I was going to come down in a day or two but I’ll probably be held up here for a bit unless you need me. The brass is … well you know how they are.”

“Yeah.” She knows all too well.

“I love you sweetheart,” he repeats as he scrubs a hand roughly over his face before he straightens his shoulders determinedly, “so just call me if you need me Tones. I'll be there for your birthday though, come hell, high water, or court martial so decide what you want to get up to this year.”

“I know you will and I love you too Rhody.” Toni kisses her fingertips, presses them against the edge of the screen, and does her best to smile again. “I think I want something quiet this year, maybe just the two of us at the mansion, so you just worry about your end of things darling, I’m fine.”

They both know it’s a lie.

Toni’s not fine.

But only Toni and JARVIS know the extent of it.

~~~

Toni heaves and gags into sink of the workshop kitchenette in-between choppy, sob like gasps.

Blood and thick black slime are her rewards.

*Blood Toxicity 67%* her tester reads.

Monaco has taken its toll.

Toni slides down the side of the counter to sit slumped on the floor. The bots beep worriedly as they roll around her, their version of pacing.

She thinks longingly of sleep.

It doesn’t come.

~~~

Toni watches Rushman saunter towards her from across the room, beautiful face smoothed out into a practiced but still lovely smile.

Toni lets her own mouth curve up in answer, careful to keep the suspicion from her expression, the
distrust and defensiveness from her posture.

JARVIS is still breaking the encryption on her files and Toni’s taking no chances with her until she has more information.

“Ms. Stark,” Rushman practically purrs her name, voice simultaneously professional and yet just a shade off inviting, “are you ready to go over your agenda for the day?”

“I’m always ready for you pretty.” Toni hums and then curls her mouth into a cocky smirk. “But the agenda’s going to have to wait for now. I need you on something else for the next few days.”

“Ms. Potts was very specific …” Rushman begins to protest but Toni’s quick to cut her off.

“Then it’s a good thing you’re not Pepper’s P.A. isn’t it?” Toni keeps smiling, keeps her expression almost too pleasant, but makes sure her voice is firm. “So that means you’ll be taking your new assignment.”

“Yes, Ms. Stark.” Rushman’s sounds perfectly polite again but Toni can see the hint of something cold in her eyes for a brief second before she wipes it away.

Toni gives her a list of mediocre chores to take care of, everything from dry cleaning that doesn’t actually need to be done to hunting down a limited edition model airplane that Toni knows is damn near impossible to find on such short notice. When that’s done she’ll be helping Pepper go over the list of media outlets she wants to phone so she can give them a generic message regarding the company and Monaco. It’s boring, vaguely insulting and repetitive work that Pepper had always complained about bitterly.

Though, to be fair she’d always hated Toni’s random and often times strange errands. Especially after the incident where Toni had sent her out for water balloons, silly string, and a lacrosse set. That had ultimately resulted in Toni having to replace two walls, the workshop couch again and order a new grand piano.

Pepper had been less than pleased.

The bots had fun that day though so that’s all that really mattered in Toni’s opinion. Although Toni had made a note, both mentally and with JARVIS, to never tell Pepper about the dance lessons or the roller derby contests that happened periodically. Rhodey knows though because, well, he’s Rhodey.

It might be petty but assigning Rushman to what basically amounts to busy work and clean up duty is honestly a bit of a relief. Toni doesn’t want the woman in her space, doesn’t want her wandering around the mansion freely like Pepper had when she was her P.A. This will help to keep Rushman busy and under-watch as well as taking some of the burden off of Pepper’s back.

JARVIS, Toni knows, will watch her like a hawk and Rushman will be none the wiser.

Like with DUM-E, U, and Butterfingers JARVIS’ true capabilities, his true level of consciousness and development, is a closely guarded secret.

To the very few who’ve learned about him over the years outside of Toni, Rhodey, Pepper and Happy, JARVIS is nothing but a highly sophisticated call and answer program.

A digital secretary/automated calendar to be callous about it.

Toni aches at the fact that he’s so confined, that he has to limit who he interacts with to an online basis, to the chat rooms and message boards he frequents, but they both know it’s for the best, for his
own safety. The world would not take kindly to true artificial intelligence, not yet, not now.

That’s something that’s been on Toni’s *List of Shit to Fix* for years now.

But …

Well that list is, more than likely, going to have to stay unfinished now.

So JARVIS plays simple on those rare occasions when it’s necessary and Toni does her best to indulge him where she can.

Granted he had blown his cover the night Stane had tried to kill Toni. Still given how that had gone down Toni is nothing but thankful for his attempts to intervene. Plus with Stane dead he’s no longer a threat to JARVIS’ safety.

So, in the end, Rushman will be under the watchful eye of an overprotective AI who isn’t constrained and hampered by things like sleep or privacy issues.

Toni can think of no finer hands to leave her in for the time being.

~~~

“Miss,” JARVIS calls to Tony where she’s sitting in the front seat of one of the hot rods she’d restored by hand, “your query is complete. I’ve compiled all of the available information on Anton Vanko as you requested.”

“Thanks J.” Toni leans her head back against the seat and heaves out a heavy sigh. She’s tired, the reactor is an incessant throbbing ache and the thin black vines of the palladium poisoning have begun to worm their way up her neck. Heavy makeup and artfully popped collars aren’t going to hide them for much longer. “Give me a rundown baby boy.”

Toni needs to know about the man who’d attacked her. Needs to know what could have driven him to such lengths.

Needs to know how he’d gotten his hands on the designs for an arc reactor.

So Toni learns about Anton Vanko, the Soviet physicist who’d defected to the U.S. and then been deported for spying. She learns about his son, about Ivan Vanko, who’d sold weapons-grade plutonium to Pakistan and then spent fifteen years in Kopeisk prison.

One of the papers JARVIS has pulled up in his search is recent and it details an explosion at the detainment facility in Monaco.

The man who’d attacked her on the race track, Ivan, is counted among the dead after an attempted escape.

No further records exist after that.

Toni cannot bring herself to feel relieved.

She’s too tired for that.

So instead she stumbles to her feet, trips her way out of the car and heads back over to her desk.

Changing the core of the reactor hurts just like it always does. There’s the ache of pulling it out and then the burn of the fresh core as her body struggles to assimilate the renewed energy source.
Toni sits there for the longest time, face buried in her hands and shoulders shaking.

~~~

“They want me to convince you to give up the armor again.” Rhodey tells her when he calls an hour or two later, voice just as weary and exhausted as Toni feels. “I keep telling them that’s not going to happen but they’re getting insistent Tones. I’m … I’m not sure how long they’re going to keep being civil about this baby girl. They’re talking about getting the National Guard involved. I keep telling them that the tech that guy had wasn’t the same thing as the Iron Queen armor but they don’t want to listen.”

_Blood Toxicity 72%_ her tester reads.

Well, they won’t have to wait long now and then she’ll be out of the picture anyways.

Not that her dying will solve their issues.

JARVIS has strict instructions with what to do with the suits if she dies and War Machine will belong to Rhodey not to the U.S. military.

They’re all going to be so pissed about that.

But Toni’ll be dead by then so it’s not like she’s going to care.

Still, legacy is what matters after all.

Legacy and those she’ll leave behind to live with what she’s wrought.

~~~

“JARVIS?”

“Yes Miss?”

~~~


_Toni falls and falls and falls._

_There are no hands to catch her._

_Everyone and everything has been burnt away by the supernova that pulses in her chest._

_But, from beneath the surface of the sea, Howard looks up at her smugly._

_And then … he smiles._

~~~

_Toni wakes screaming._

Disoriented, panicked and terrified, she kicks off the cover that’s tangled itself around her legs, and scrambles off of the workshop couch.

“Miss?” JARVIS calls for her calmly but Toni’s too off balance to pay attention to him, too unsettled to let him soothe her like he normally does.
Suddenly Toni can’t bear to be in the mansion for a moment longer. 

She needs *out*. Her hands are shaking, her body feels numb, and like a fox caught in a snare she’s desperate to get away.

All she knows, with an animalistic sense of certainty, is that she needs to leave. 

*Now.*

She needs the sky.

She needs to be free of walls and glass and steel, needs to breathe the open air.

She needs …. 

She needs …

Mind in a daze Toni staggers across the workshop and onto the loading station to be folded into the security of the Mark IV.

“J-JARVIS,” Toni swallows harshly, her hands are shaking, her breathing is erratic, and her tongue doesn’t seem to want to work properly. She’s so *cold*. “I need, I, *please* …”

“Yes Miss,” JARVIS soothes, “Anything you need.”

“*Peggy.*” Toni blurts out because that’s what she really wants in this moment. A familiar and warm sort of comfort, the ageless love of the only mother she’s ever known to counteract the way she can’t seem to *breathe*, can’t seem to stop *shaking*. “I need Aunt Peggy.”

“Of course Miss.”

The armor moves on its own, control taken momentarily by JARVIS and in the next second Toni is in the sky and making her way towards Aunt Peggy.

~~~

Toni shakes inside the armor even as JARIVS pushes it to go faster.

He tells her he’s given her excuses to Pepper and locked down the mansion and the workshop against any possibility of Rushman or anyone else getting inside.

Toni hears him as if from a distance, as if she’s *underwater*.

The entire world feels as if it is in grey focus, washed out and colorless.

Toni tastes blood and metal heavy on her tongue.

She *shakes*.

JARVIS ekes out a little more speed.

~~~

The staff of the facility Aunt Peggy stays in has signed more NDA’s than Toni can count and are all paid well enough to ignore her purposefully whenever she shows up unannounced.

This is no exception.
Toni’s calmer by the time JARVIS lands the suite outside the patio door to Aunt Peggy’s spacious apartment. The grounds are quiet, the main lights in Aunt Peggy’s suite are off and only the accent lights are on but Toni sees the electronic lock on the door click green in invitation.

But she doesn’t step forward.

She can’t.

Aunt Peggy’s asleep, Toni can see her through the bulletproof glass she’d had the entire suite outfitted with, curled down in her spacious bed, time worn face peaceful for once. She’s safe and comfortable and Toni feels a sharp swell of love burble to life in her chest at the sight of her.

Toni can’t bear to wake her.

Not like this.

Not with this.

She doesn’t want to burden Aunt Peggy with her issues, not when she’s already so fragile, already dimmed by the way her mind’s slowly being eaten. Even though Toni knows Aunt Peggy would be furious with her for even thinking something like that she still can’t help it.

This isn’t worth bothering Aunt Peggy with. This isn’t worth upsetting her if she even remembers who Toni is at the moment.

It’s just … not.

“Miss?” JARVIS calls out to her in question, voice soft, soothing.

In control of the armor once again Toni blows a kiss in Aunt Peggy’s direction, turns on her heel and strides away from the patio and out onto the grass. She engages the repulsors and takes to the sky without another word.

Coming here was a mistake, thinking, even for a second, of burdening Aunt Peggy with her problems was a mistake.

But, Toni’s forced to admit, seeing her again in person, even if only from a distance, was good.

~~~

The workshop is filled with the sound of Edith Piaf soulfully crooning if the sky should fall into the sea/and the stars fade all around me/of the time that we have known dear/I will sing a hymn to love in heartbreaking French as Toni completes a few last minute tweaks on the Mark VI armor.

It’s more than likely that she’s never going to wear it but that doesn’t stop her from perfecting it. The Mark VI is gorgeous. Sophisticated and sleek even by her standards it’s bristling with new tech and armaments and is designed to handle a far larger energy output than the others. She’d conceptualized it weeks ago when there was still hope of finding a replacement element for the reactor.

But now, with her time running short and no solution to be found, it’s become a sort of security blanket instead. Something to work on to keep her desperately screaming mind from eating her.

“I am … a failure.” JARVIS’ voice breaks through Toni’s concentration like few things can.

“What?” Toni freezes, goes stone still and cold deep down inside in a split second.
“I have failed you.” JARVIS repeats and the screwdriver Toni’s holding falls from her suddenly nerveless hands.

“JARVIS?” Toni shoves her chair back and takes to her feet. “What in the fuck are you talking about?”

“I have been unable to find a solution to the palladium poisoning,” JARVIS sounds monotone, sounds almost robotic in a way he hasn’t since he was first born, “my inability to do so …”

“Stop.” Toni chokes the word out. “JARVIS, baby boy, no. No. Don’t do this to yourself. Don’t, don’t think this way. This … none of this is your fault. I promise. None of this is your fault.”

“My programming is insufficient.” JARVIS barrels on, tone cold and clipped. “I was unable to complete the task, unable to find the solution. I find that unacceptable. I find my failure unacceptable. I am … I am not good enough.”

Horror roars to life inside Toni’s chest because this … this is something she’s never seen from JARVIS before.

This is guilt.

This is guilt and something darker, something more poisonous. This is something that Toni’s far too familiar with and something that JARVIS should have never have been forced to feel.

Was never supposed to feel.

This is self-loathing.

Toni can’t, won’t, stand for it.

Not from JARVIS.

She won’t allow this impossible situation she’s found herself in with the palladium to twist him like this. She won’t allow herself to taint him this way.

She won’t.

“Don’t you ever say that again.” Toni snaps. “Don’t you ever even think it. You hear me JARVIS? Never again.”

“Miss …”

“No.” Toni barks the word out, throws up a hand to silence him. “I mean it J. This isn’t your fault. This doesn’t have anything to do with you not being good enough, or any other bullshit reason like that. We both tried everything there is to try. We both looked. We both searched and searched. There’s just nothing to be found. Short of pulling an entirely new element out of my ass we’ve tried everything possible. This isn’t something you can blame yourself for.”

There’s a long moment of silence, Toni’s breathing hard, her chest hurts and her stomach is rolling.

She can taste bile, thick and heavy, in the back of her throat.

“I was angry at you,” JARVIS finally admits softly. “When you seemed ready to surrender, ready to give up. I was harsh with you, almost cruel. And yet now … now I find that despite our best efforts no cure is forthcoming and I find that my anger was for nothing.”

“You were right J,” Toni cuts in because she knows where this is going and she won’t let him take
that route. “You were right to be angry, right to be disappointed and furious as fuck with me. No matter how this turns out, no matter what happens, you were right and none of this will ever be your fault.”

“And yet, you are still dying.” JARVIS almost whispers. “What use is being correct when the results are so … devastating?”

Toni doesn’t know what to say to that, doesn’t know how to comfort him.

She wraps her arms around herself and for the first time wishes that JARVIS had a body so that she could hold him, could maybe tell him through touch what she cannot seem to put into words.

“I’m sorry JARVIS,” she finally chokes out, “I’m so sorry baby boy. I love you and I’m sorry. But you are good enough JARVIS. You are. You’re so good J, so good.”

The air in the workshop is heavy with Toni’s grief, with the sound of JARVIS’ silence, with the moroseness of the bots.

In the background Edith Piaf croons those who love will live eternally/in the blue, where all is harmony/with my voice raised high to Heaven/just for you, I’ll sing a hymn to love.

~~~

Toni turns twenty-eight to pain.

She bites the inside of her cheek bloody as she claws her way up off of her bed and staggers towards the bathroom.

She pulls herself together though, pieces herself back into place with sheer stubbornness and willpower.

By the time she leaves the mansion two hours later, hair up, wings and reactor covered, she looks normal. Paler than she regularly is perhaps, but relatively normal.

Toni is determined not to waste the day.

It’s her birthday after all, and she’s unusually aware of that fact in a way she hasn’t been since she turned twenty-one. Mainly because it looks as if this is going to be her last birthday.

So she’s determined to make it count, to spend it how she wants to spend the day regardless of everything else that’s going on. She’s determined to forget the government, to forget the press, the paparazzi, Rushman, and anything and everything else that isn’t directly related to what she wants.

Toni’s determined to be selfish and to hell with everyone else who might have a problem with that.

And for Toni being selfish that means spending her birthday with those she loves and fuck everyone and everything else.

~~~

Pepper and Happy are, considering what’s going on and the day, easy enough to convince when Toni drops by SI and demands they go out with her.

Rushman, up to her elbows in boxes and files from where Pepper’s cleaning out Toni’s old office things, looks vaguely sour before she smooths the expression away. Toni winks at her as she hustles Pepper out of the office and down to where she knows Happy will be waiting for them with the car.
JARVIS is deep inside of SI now, had never left once he’d broken through all those months ago with Stane, and he will watch Rushman and stop her if she attempts to access any terminal in the building. Plus Toni knows there’s nothing even remotely sensitive in the physical files and boxes she’d left in her SI office.

Toni’s always kept everything of true import either in the workshop protected by her own firewalls and monitored by JARVIS or in her head.

All Rushman’s likely to find is half a dozen bags of dried fruit and what could be considered an abnormal amount of paperclips for one office. Toni blames the fruit on Pepper because she likes to make sure there’s food in any room Toni spends any length of time in regularly. She’s always been firmly under the belief that Toni doesn’t eat often enough or healthy enough even with JARVIS babysitting her more often than not.

Even as CEO instead of PA it’s a habit that hasn’t changed.

Toni’s pretty sure Pepper’s convinced she’s going to end up with scurvy or something.

Thus the bags of dried fruit that seemed to just appear wherever Toni is.

The paperclips are Toni’s though.

She likes to build with them when she’s bored during meetings with people she doesn’t care enough about to toy with or pay attention to.

~~~

Toni takes Pepper and Happy out into the city.

It’s a bright, sunny day, and Toni does her best to laugh and smile and generally be wild and carefree.

They go out to eat at Pepper’s favorite restaurant for an early lunch and the three of them split a large double order of gourmet ice cream and tiramisu for desert.

Afterwards they walk the city for a bit, browsing through the shops and chatting. The Mark V is a heavy weight on Happy’s arm as they wander but it’s one that he seems more than pleased to bear. He’s been spending most of his time guarding Pepper lately so Toni’s been carrying the case herself when he’s not around. He has a habit of appropriating it as soon as he’s within grabbing distance though.

“Are you sure you don’t want us to come over tonight?” Pepper asks when they stop for a bit at an open air café. She’s sipping a glass of lime water and she looks far too pensive for Toni’s taste.

“Pep we’ve been over this already,” Toni cradles her milkshake glass in both hands and leans forward slightly, “you’ve got a million and one things to do as it is, including the Xiaomi meeting tonight. Time differences between here and Hong Kong are a bitch so you and I both know you’re gonna need a nap before you sit through that. We can always get together later this week if it bothers you but honestly Pepper-pot it’s fine.”

“It’s your birthday Toni.” Pepper frowns in her direction.

“Exactly.” Toni smirks and takes an obnoxiously loud pull from her straw. “So do what I tell you for once Ms. Potts. Go home, take a nap, and then hand Lei Jun his ass if he thinks we’re going to let him out do StarkPhones on a global market anytime soon.”
“You shouldn’t be alone on your birthday Boss.” Happy puts in, he’s sipping a hot chocolate despite the heat because he’s horrible and he’s also got a sweet tooth that rivals Rhodey’s which is kind of impressive honestly. “It’s not good for you. Plus you’re notorious for your birthday’s being off the wall somehow and there’s no telling what kind of trouble you’ll get yourself into this year with only J and the bots to keep you in line.”

“I resent the implication that I’m not perfectly capable of staying out of trouble on my own,” Toni protests. “Plus Rhodey’s coming by tonight so that’ll fulfill your ‘has to have a human body to count as company’ precedent thank you very much.”

Toni thinks she should be genuinely offended by the way they both snort inelegantly in disbelief but still relax at the mention of Rhodey. He can be just as bad as her after all and they urge each other on more often than even Pepper and Happy would believe.

Hell she should tell them about what happened in Delaware. Maybe that would change their minds as to just how upright and capable of reining her in Rhodey really is.

Honestly it probably wouldn’t, but it could be worth a shot.

~~~

It’s good, her time spent with them. Toni does her best to soak in all the small details that she can see while they’re together.

There’s the way Happy’s eyes constantly move, constantly search for a threat to either her or Pepper, the strong set to his shoulders and the determined line of his jaw. There’s the way the right side of Pepper’s mouth curls up a little further than the left whenever she smiles. There’s how Happy watches Pepper, quiet and content, eyes warm and soft whenever she talks in a way that Toni can barely understand because she’s never tasted that kind of affection before, not really.

Jannik and Mari had lied to her after all and Toni … well there’s been one night stands, grasping hands in the dark and drunken kisses a plenty over the years but never anything solid, never anything real.

There’s never been anything like what she thinks Happy might feel for Pepper.

Toni’s not the type of person people really date after all. Not the type of person someone loves like that.

Toni shakes the morose thoughts off and goes back to watching the two of them.

There’s the way Pepper takes the check from the waiter before he can even try to hand it to Toni. There’s the way Happy stands first and scans the crowd for any possible threat as they go to leave.

There’s the scent of Pepper’s shampoo and the solid warmth of Happy at her side.

There’s the knowledge, warm and sweet in her chest, that she can trust them to be so close to her.

NDA’s or not, employer or not, these are the details that’ve allowed her to slowly but surely let them into her life over the years.

These are the things that makes her love them.

She wants more, wants more time to learn these kinds of things, to catalogue them all away in the back of her mind, in that place she puts those she loves the most.
The reactor aches, a harsh reminder of all that’s transpired, of all the reasons why this … this is probably going to be one of her last chances to be with them like this.

The truth itches and burns on her tongue but Toni bites back the urge to say anything and instead keeps her smile firmly in place.

She wants to savor this moment, not ruin it.

~~~

Back at the mansion, Pepper and Happy safely gone, Toni fumbles her tester from her pocket as she moves through the house.

*Blood Toxicity 89%* her tester reads.

Toni hunches over the sink in the mansion’s kitchen, trembling and tired but determined to push forward.

Rhodey will be home in a few hours if everything works out right.

She needs to hold it together long enough to get this last thing done, to savor these moments with Rhodey while she can, to soak in his warmth and comfort.

Then … well maybe then she’ll be able to finally get some sleep.

~~~

Rhodey finally shows up a few hours later at the workshop door, a large pizza box from that place she likes in one hand and a bottle of champagne tucked under his arm.

“Happy birthday baby girl,” he says as he puts them on the counter in the kitchenette and then swoops down to press a kiss to her cheek before he wraps her up in his arms. It’s the first time they’ve been together since before she left for Monaco and Rhodey holds her tightly, as if he’s afraid to let her go.

“Aw, it’s good to see you too honey bear.” Toni snuggles in closer to him, soaks in his warmth and the rich spice and leather of his scent. “It’s good to see you too.”

~~~

Rhodey goes upstairs to take a quick shower and then comes back down in a pair of soft sweatpants and a tank top because they’re staying in and having some calm, relaxing time together just like Toni wanted.

*Earth, Wind, & Fire* are banging through the speakers of the workshop while Toni’s picks at a piece of pizza and laughs as Rhodey ducks around Butterfingers and DUM-E to sink another basket on the holographic interface.

U’s waving the pom-pom Toni bought him cheerfully on the sidelines, the champagne’s still unopened, and Rhodey’s doing his customary smug victory lap with a piece of crust hanging out the side of his mouth when finally Toni can’t take it any longer.

“So …” Toni drawls the word out and watches as Rhodey turns and focuses on her.

“Oh God,” Rhodey groans as he finishes eating the crust but Toni can see the smile he isn’t even trying to hide. “I know that voice, what’ve you done now and is it going to end with both of us in
jail?"

“Oh ye of little faith platypus,” Toni sticks her tongue out at him, “do you honestly think I’d do
something that’d get us in trouble like that? I’m a responsible adult now and I a- stop laughing
Rhodey!”

“I’m sorry,” Rhodey choked out past his laughter, “were you, were you being serious? You? A
responsible adult?”

“You’re a horrible man and you bray like an ass.” Her pout is exaggerated and she’s barely able to
bite back her own laughter. “Sometimes I wonder why I put up with you.”

“You’d be lost without me little girl and we both know it.” Rhodey grins, bright and unabashed
despite the circles under his eyes and the stress lines not even his smile can erase.

“True, true.” Toni has no problem admitting that. She’d be lost without Rhodey, hell she’d have
been dead years ago without him to be honest.

She’d had a staring contest with a bottle of pills not too long after she’d put Jarvis in the ground.
Rhodey had been one of the only reasons she hadn’t lost that particular fight at the time.

“So what kind of shenanigans have you cooked up this time?” Rhodey flops down on the couch
beside her and then tips over until his head is in her lap and he’s smirking up at her.

She likes seeing him like this, loose and relaxed, carefree in a way that he so rarely is anymore with
the stress of his position. With all the extra stress and worry she puts on him every day.

“Well as your magnanimous Iron Queen,” she ignores his coughed ‘dictator’, “I was thinking it’s
about time you got the chance to take one of the suits for a ride.”

“You’re serious?” Rhodey sits up and spins around to face her in an instance, expression gleeful,
“Tones don’t play with me. Are you fucking serious?”

“Oh yeah sweet-pea, I’m serious.” Toni grins at him.

“Fuck yes!” Rhodey crows. He’s on his feet in the next second, tugging her up off of the couch and
dragging her around the Expo model Pepper had delivered to her a few days before and towards the
Iron Gallery with open excitement radiating from every inch of him. “I’ve been waiting for this for
months. Which one? Mark IV or V? Cause let me tell you Tones the Mark V is a sweet piece of
tech with the way you made it portable but I’ve had my eyes on that IV for a while.”

“Actually, I was thinking something a little different.” Toni reverses their grip and tugs him towards
the end of the Iron Gallery and towards the still incomplete Mark VI. Beside it is the only display
case with a solid front so no one can see inside.

With his usual perfect timing JARVIS lowers the shield on the display case.

War Machine stares back out at them, all brutal silver lines and intimidating mass.

“Tony?” Rhodey steps forward, their still clasped hands stretched out between them, and puts his
free hand carefully against the chest plate where, unlike the rest of the Iron Gallery, an arc reactor
glow. His eyebrows are furrowed when he looks back over his shoulder at her. “Tony … I don’t
understand? It’s got its own reactor?”

“Of course it does,” Toni steps forward, closer to him and War Machine, and tilts her head back a bit
to smile up at him smugly, “you don’t have one embedded in your chest after all. Can’t take one of these babies for a spin without one now can you? I made this one just for you.”

Rhodey grins again, bright and beautiful, and the sight makes Toni ache with equal parts pain and joy.

Because he’s so happy but he doesn’t understand the true depth of what Toni means, not yet.

But he will.

*Oh God he will.*

And Toni is *so fucking sorry* for that.

~~~

War Machine fits Rhodey like a glove, which given the time and effort Toni and JARVIS put into the customization it goddamn *better.*

Toni slips into the Mark IV and together with JARVIS in careful control of War Machine’s systems they put Rhodey through his paces. Toni teaches him how to move, how to engage the repulsors, how to use them to stabilize himself as he goes.

Teaches him everything he’ll need to know to have a good, solid base for using the armor without having to do the dangerous shit she had in order to learn.

Then, when she’s sure he’s ready, she takes him outside.

And then … then they *fly.*

*Together.*

They act like overgrown kids once they’re up in the sky. Toni buzzes Rhodey a few times just to make him chase her and laughs at his playful curses when he can’t catch her because she’s faster than him still. They shoot up high into the clouds and then down to skim just over the water.

It’s *glorious.*

All of it’s just like Toni’s always imagined it would be. Having the freedom of the sky and the sound of Rhodey’s laughter in her ears as he whoops and hollers and turns War Machine in unnecessary barrel rolls and loop-de-loops.

“Miss,” JARVIS interrupts on their private channel after a while.

“Yeah J?” She can tell something’s up because he has his serious voice on.

“I regret interrupting your time with Lt. Colonel Rhodes,” JARVIS intones solemnly, “but I’m afraid that I must remind you that your blood toxicity levels are already alarmingly high. Prolonged and unnecessary use of the Mark IV is not advised.”

“Ah, *right,*” Toni winces because she can tell how worried JARVIS is at the moment and she’s done nothing but make it worse.

So, instead of arguing, she pings Rhodey and together they head back down to the mansion.

Toni feels weak when she steps out of the armor but she covers it up by flopping down into her chair
and waving at Rhodey when he goes to step onto the platform.

“Hold on now, not so fast.” Toni grins at him as she rolls around the corner of her worktable. “How’d you like it?”

“That was fantastic Toni,” Rhodey flips up the face plate and he’s flushed, eyes bright and practically sparkling. “I mean I’ve flown a lot of stuff in my time but nothing like that. That was just … god. I see why you do it now, why you love it so much. _Fuck,_ Toni, it’s like having wings.”

“So glad you approve,” Toni snarks even as she swallows down the lump in her throat because _of course_ Rhodey gets it. “now close the faceplate again darling because I’ve one more surprise for you coming.”

“Oh I’m all ears after that,” Rhodey snaps the faceplate down and spreads his arms out wide, “hit me baby girl.”

“You heard the man J,” Toni grins, “let him have it.”

“As you wish Miss,” JARVIS sounds as dry as always.

There’s a moment of silence in the lab and then …

_“Tactical Assault Systems Hardware Assistant is online and active.”_ A young, _familiar_, voice sounds out across the speakers in the lab and Toni sees the way Rhodey jolts when he hears it. _“Pilot identity confirmed: Welcome James Rhodes, designation Sir.”_

The faceplate on War Machine snaps up instantly and Rhodey is looking at her, eyes wide and just slightly glassy.

_“Toni,”_ Rhodey whispers, _“Toni that’s …”_

_“Rhodey,”_ Toni breaks in with a slight grins because she knows exactly what he’s going to say, _“I’d like you to meet TASHA.”_

TASHA sounds exactly like Toni did when she was young, sounds like she had when they first met at MIT. It’s what she’d spent days coding after she’d completed War Machine, what she’d talked herself hoarse for in order to give the program an acceptable data pool to build a voice profile from.

_“Is she …”_ Rhodey swallows harshly, _“is she alive?”_

_“She’s not like JARVIS or the boys,”_ Toni explains gently. _“She’s got limitations and rules they don’t have and she’s confined to the suit, doesn’t have much reach beyond that. She won’t ever feel like they do but she’s got some personality. Mainly she’s solely to help pilot.”_

_“I don’t understand,”_ Rhodey cuts in. _“JARVIS has always helped you run the suits. I don’t see how he’d agree to you pulling him out of the armor after all this time.”_

_“Well since I don’t want to give the government a chance to get anywhere near JARVIS, or know exactly what he’s capable of, I figured a solo program would be best for this armor.”_ Toni smiles before she leans back in her chair and goes in for the kill. _“Plus with TASHA I’ll always be with you in a way when you go on missions. My voice in your ear, my tech keeping you safe. Kind of poetic in my opinion but hell we both know I’ve always been an _artiste_.”_

There’s a beat of silence before Rhodey finally breaks it.
“Tones?” He looks and sounds so confused, disbelief painted starkly across his features and in his voice. “What? Are you? Is this? Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Yup.” Toni pops the ‘p’. “I’m saying that this armor’s for you Rhodey. I built it for you special, well me and JARVIS of course. Custom tailored if you will.”

There’s a dawning sort of awe on Rhodey’s face then as the truth of what she’s saying obviously begins to sink in.

“The arc reactor’s biometrically coded of course so no one but me or you can access it without it going boom, same thing for the suit itself.” Toni waves a hand carelessly in the air. “JARIVS has an encrypted emergency uplink so you can reach him if you ever need him but beyond that TASHA will run all systems and it’s completely and totally yours. Though, fair warning, I’ve already named it War Machine and I’m not accepting any take backs on that front.”

“War Machine,” Rhodey tests the name out slowly and his face lights up with a small devious smile, “I like it. Sounds appropriately badass.”

“That’s why I picked it boo-bear. Got to make sure you’re riding in style, a kickass superhero name’s part of that.” Toni brings a hand up to examine her nails faux-casually. “Although, let’s face it, you’ll never look as good as I do snookum. The Iron Queen is, after all, royalty. But, you know, I figured I’d give you a fighting chance.”

Rhodey surges forward across the workshop floor and wraps War Machine’s hands around her waist.

“Breakable,” Toni squawks through her laughter as he twirls her around the room, “breakable goods here Rhodey!”

~~~

“I’m grateful Tones, I really am.” Rhodey says where he’s slumped against War Machine’s feet, the champagne bottle in his hand.

“I sense a ‘but’ coming, and not the fun kind either.” Toni quips from where she’s spread out across the floor between his legs, the back of her head resting on his lap.

“I just don’t understand why you’re doing this. Why you’re giving up a suit after fighting so hard to make sure the government doesn’t get their hands on one.” Rhodey stares down at her, eyes dark and just slightly worried. “Baby what’s going on in that crazy little head of yours?”

This, Toni knows, is the moment.

This is the perfect moment, the one she’s been waiting for, to tell him the truth about what’s going on. This is the moment to finally come clean to someone besides JARVIS.

She could tell him about the palladium, could tell him about the pain, about the fear. She could tell him all of that and Toni knows just how he’d react.

He’d be angry at her for not telling him sooner.

He’d be terrified about what is happening to her.

He’d be devastated that there’s apparently nothing they can do to stop it.
Toni doesn’t want to see him like that. She doesn’t want to watch him go through that.

She doesn’t want to look him in the eye and tell him what’s going on because she knows he’d never leave her if he knew. He’d be there, right by her side, him and Pepper and Happy too, until the very end.

And that?

Well that’s something Toni’s not going to let happen. That’s not something Toni’s going to do to any of them.

She doesn’t plan on him watching her die, she doesn’t plan on Rhodey or Pepper or Happy being the ones to find her body.

Hell she’s not planning to leave behind a body at all. She’s already worked the details up with JARVIS. She’d hated to ask him and he’d been reluctant at first but he’d eventually come around.

When the time comes, when they finally hit zero hour with no other way to go but down, Toni plans on leaving with JARVIS’ help. She’ll be too weak then, she knows, to do it on her own.

She plans to fly up to the arctic and put herself down in the water up there where no one will ever find her. Where maybe, just maybe, she can be close to Steve.

JARVIS will do the rest and ensure that there’s nothing salvageable left behind for anyone to find.

So yeah, this is the perfect moment but Toni …

Toni opens her mouth and does the one thing she’s never liked to do with Rhodey.

She lies.

“Nothing’s wrong cookie-crunch.” She rolls over out of his lap and sits up so she can look him in the eye. “This’ll get a lot of people off of both our back. And, for the record, I’m not giving War Machine to the government Rhodey. I’m giving it to you, pink slips, papers and all. You, not the government.”

“Toni …” Rhodey seems like he’s going to protest.

“No, Rhodey,” Toni holds up a hand and stops him, “don’t give me any bullshit about it. I’ve already told you that the reactor, the armor itself, and hell even TASHA are all coded to only accept the two of us. I don’t trust the government with the armor but I do trust you. I know that, no matter what, you’ll make the good decision. That you’ll do what you think is right above all else. You told me, after the Senate hearing, about how much you hated the fact that the government was so disconnected from the reality of how the world works. Now’s your chance to do something about it.”

Rhodey reaches out, wrap an arm around her shoulders, and tugs her down and into his chest. He holds her there for a long moment.

“Thank you,” he finally whispers and his voice is thick and wet, “thank you for trusting me like this.”

“I trust you with everything Rhodey,” the lie burns but she still says it because except for this one thing it’s the truth.
Toni does trust Rhodey with everything, she trusts him with her life, with her armor, with JARVIS and the bots, with the safety of the world if it comes down to it.

She trusts him with what’s left of her heart, with those bits of herself that are still soft and sweet and not completely ruined by Howard or her own failures and faults.

The only thing she doesn’t trust him with is her death.

It might be selfish, and it might be wrong, but she won’t trust him with that, won’t leave him that burden, because she know it’ll hurt him too much to sit back and watch her die.

Better to hurt him quick, hurt him cleanly, than to make it slow and painful and lingering.

She’s already hurting JARVIS, she can’t do it to Rhodey as well.

~~~

Afterwards, when she’s hashed out all the finer points about giving him War Machine and Rhodey’s suitably reassured again, Toni leaves him asleep on the couch and slips away into the bathroom.

“You should have told him Miss.” JARVIS scolds her lightly but the anger he would have had a week ago is missing, washed away by how hard the both of them had tried to find a solution only to fail.

“I know J,” Toni gasps as she hunches forward over the sink, “I know.”

Blood Toxicity 91% her tester reads.

Almost there.

Not long now.

Not long at all.

‘Worth it’, Toni can’t help but think as she shakes and gags miserably, ‘totally worth it’.

~~~

“Miss.” JARVIS’ calls to her from where she’s sprawled across the workshop couch, Mother laid out across her front and the bots circling like anxious and overly excited puppies. Rhodey’s gone, jetted off back to base in War Machine to make a lot of people simultaneously happy and pissed so Toni’s alone again in the mansion.

Well alone with just the bots and JARVIS of course.

She’s resting only because she’d almost fallen earlier. Her vision had blurred and she’d stumbled, suddenly light headed and disgustingly weak. Only U’s solid presence at her side had kept her from hitting the ground.

The bots and JARVIS had bullied her onto the couch after that and Butterfingers had draped Mother carefully across her body in an attempt to keep her there.

Toni isn’t ashamed to admit that it had worked.

“What’s up J?” Toni runs her fingers carefully down the side of Mother’s fringe.
“The encryption on Ms. Rushman’s files has finally been broken.” JARVIS informs her and Toni immediately perks up. “The encryption as well as the network itself was rather extensive as you know and I encountered a great deal of resistance. I am sure, however, that my presence went unnoticed as my efforts were concentrated solely on information dealing with her instead of a broader data mining. Many of the systems I encountered peripherally are isolated and would require onsite access in order to breach. Still Miss the results I did gather are rather … informative.”

“Throw it up for me J.” Toni shifts carefully until she can slide out from under Mother’s weight and climb to her feet.

The first thing Toni sees is Rushman’s face. It pops up as what is clearly an identification picture but this time her expression is blank, eyes cold and mouth a straight, perfect line.

The next thing Toni sees makes her laugh, loud and harsh and mocking.

The information JARVIS has harvested originates from SHIELD.

Fucking SHIELD.

Toni was right, Rushman’s a plant.

‘No’, Toni corrects herself as her eyes rake over the file and she turns a digital page with an impatient wave of her hand, ‘she’s a goddamn spider.’

It explains a lot actually. Like why Fury had been so willing to back down that day he’d tried to recruit her for his Avengers Initiative. Why she hasn’t heard from him or Agent again despite how persistent the man had been to talk to her the first time around.

It explains why Natalie Rushman had pinged so hard on Toni’s radar as dangerous.

Fury has planted Natasha Romanov, codenamed the Black Widow, directly into the heart of Toni’s life.

And that, well that changes things.

Because she might be dying, might be almost dead, but she doesn’t take kindly to assassins and spies cuddling up close with those she’ll be leaving behind.

That’s … unacceptable.

It’s time for Toni to pay Nick and Natasha a little visit.

~~~

Toni pops the reactor, puts in a fresh core, and then makes her way upstairs where she showers and dresses with venomous deliberation.

Lips a vicious crimson, palladium vines covered with heavy makeup as best she can manage, hair up, wings and reactor covered, Toni steps into the Mark IV.

JARVIS, surprisingly, doesn’t protest because he actually agrees with Toni going into this situation fully armed.

This is SHIELD after all and Toni can’t be too careful with them.

At least this way, no matter what happens to Toni herself, JARVIS will have access to the suit and
Finding Fury is actually ridiculously easy. 

Mainly because he finds her instead, just like she figured he would. 

On her part Toni just buzzes through the city, does a loop around SI’s headquarters and a few of the taller office buildings. Just enough to bring attention to herself and the fact that she’s out and about and obviously not in any particular kind of hurry. 

Then she settles down at a table outside the little donut shop her and Rhodey both adore in full view of the security cameras she knows are there. 

“Keep a close eye out for me J and let me know when Double-Q and Itsy Bitsy show up please.” Toni tells the ever listening JARVIS. “Oh and power the suit down to only necessary functions like coms. Let’s try to save some energy until our company arrives.” 

“Of course. I will be diligent Miss,” JARVIS reassures her as the suit basically powers off around her, “as always.” 

“I love you too baby boy.” 

Toni leans back then and settles in to wait. 

~

It only takes twenty minutes or so before JARVIS speaks up again and alerts her of her guests. 

A familiar black SUV pulls up into the parking lot a few seconds later but only Fury steps out. 

“Agent Romanov is in the area Miss.” JARVIS cautions her. 

“Gotcha J,” Toni tells him calmly, her eyes trained on Fury’s approaching form, “I’m going to open the face plate but I want you to power up the proximity sensors and anything else you need. Watch my back baby boy.” 

“Always.” JARVIS agrees again right before she opens the face plate. 

“Nicky,” Toni smirks, “I’d say it’s a pleasant surprise to see you but I don’t want to lie to you on two fronts at one time. Well at least not right now. The future though, that’s still up for debate.” 

“You’d know all about the future being up for debate wouldn’t you Stark?” Fury quips as he grabs a chair, flips it around, and straddles it a few feet away from her. 

“And you’d know all about being a lying liar who lies wouldn’t you Knick-Knack?” Toni sneers. 

“Cute.” Fury looks suitably unimpressed which is fine with Toni because impressing him is the last thing on her mind. “Like you’re any better than I am Stark. Especially when it comes to that nightlight in your chest and how it just keeps fucking you over.” 

Toni goes still, goes cold. 

“You didn’t think you got all the Ten Rings members who knew did you?” Fury presses. “The one we picked up sang pretty quickly about that little addition of yours. Didn’t take long to put a few
“Why Nicky,” Toni drawls as she bites back her panic because no one is supposed to know but, yet again, someone does, “if I didn’t know any better I’d think you were stalking me or something. Oh wait you kind of are.”

“What I’m trying to do,” Fury grits out as his gaze flickers to the left for a split second, “is keep your irritating ass alive. Although sometimes I wonder why I even bother.”

Toni has a scathing retort sitting on the tip of her tongue but before she can let it fly the armor surges to life around her. JARVIS is obviously in control when she pivots on her heel, her arms come up with the repulsors primed, and then the face plate slams down.

Standing behind her is Natasha Romanov herself, blood red curls floating around her face and shoulders and body poured into a black cat suit. The woman’s face is blank but the slight widening of her eyes betrays her surprise. The sight of the syringe in her hand, still partially raised, washes away all the lingering traces of civility Toni’s been clinging to.

Her patience is already wearing thin with this bullshit and this right here … this is strike one.

“Good catch J.” Toni calls before she switches to open coms so that Fury and his spider can hear her. “Naughty, naughty boy Nick.”

“Stark,” Fury’s on his feet now and obviously poised to move but his voice is still as bland as ever, “you want to get those gauntlets out of our faces any time soon? Because I generally don’t approve of me or my people being threatened.”

“And I generally don’t approve of being bitten by spiders,” Toni drawls just for the pleasure of seeing the way Fury’s eye narrows, “especially not Black Widows. I mean, I don’t know about you, but I’ve always heard those are particularly painful. Sometimes even deadly.”

“Stark …” Romanov shifts slightly as if she’s going to step closer to her.

“Not so fast Natasha,” Toni scolds and is pleased at the way the other woman stills again. She doesn’t dismiss her though, knows better. Armor or not Romanov is still dangerous, just like Fury. They both warrant the repulsor she has pointed in their directions. “Here’s how this whole little O.K. Corral thing we got going on here is going to play out.”

“Stark.” Fury practically growls.

“Saying my name like that’s not actually going to get me to do whatever it is you want me to do Nicky,” Toni quips before she turns her attention back towards Romanov. “Now I want you to put that syringe you’re holding, you know the one you were about to jab into my neck, down on the table and take three steps way, way back. Then you, Nick, are going to explain exactly what it was you two were trying to shoot me up with like this is a prom date gone wrong.”

With a look at Fury who gives her a small nod Romanov does as told. She puts the syringe down carefully and then backs away slowly, hands up in the air beside her. That’ll keep her well within repulsor rang but will also give Toni a bit of padding if she does have to move. In one corner of the HUD Toni can see where JARVIS has begun to scan the syringe for any type of explosive or tracking device.

“Palladium poisoning’s a nasty way to go isn’t it?” Fury finally speaks up. “Painful. Slow too from what I’ve been told.”
“The point.” Toni cuts in. “That’s a thing I’d like to hear sometime today.”

“Stark.” Fury growls again.

“You know for someone I’ve only met twice now you sure do like to say my name a lot Nick. I’m starting to think you’ve got a bit of a crush.” Toni purrs with just a hint of venom. “I mean you’re cute and all but my dance cards all filled up at the moment.”

“That’s lithium dioxide.” Fury cuts in and nods towards the syringe. “It’ll help counteract the symptoms of palladium poisoning.”

A small green check appears on the scan progress bar in the corner of the HUD and, safely concealed behind the armor, Toni bears her teeth in a snarl.

*Strike two.*

“Well that sounds lovely.” Toni powers down the repulsor pointed at Fury, reaches out, picks up the syringe, and tucks it into a small slot in the armor.

“It should buy you some time to figure out a solution to your problem.” Fury agrees.

“You see there’s just one little problem with that.” Before either Fury or Romanov can relax any further Toni brings her hand back up until she’s once again aiming at both of them. “Lithium dioxide doesn’t exist. I could tell you all the reasons why of course but I’m not sure you’d be able to grasp the concepts. So instead how about you do your research a little bit better the next time you try to bullshit someone with a Ph.D. in fucking physics.”

“Stark.” Romanov is the one to speak up this time.

“Again with the name thing.” Toni chides. “You’re not gonna get any further than ol’ One-Eye over there with that sweetheart.”

“What’s it going to take for you to understand that I’m on your side here Stark?” Fury steps forward, seemingly unconcerned with the repulsor Toni’s pointing at him. “Is your ego so big you’d rather die than accept help?”

“Well considering the fact that you were about to inject me with some kind of unknown agent despite not having the foggiest clue as to my actual medical status because those files on me don’t actually exist. I’m not exactly rolling in confidence as to your pure and honest intentions here Nick.” Toni had taken care of those years ago with JARVIS’ help and then had done another sweep after Afghanistan. Any medical related information that had been gathered about her over the years should no longer exist in the digital world. Anything after seventeen shouldn’t even exist on paper either.

“And of course,” Toni says sweetly, “there’s the matter of you thinking you have the right to send Charlotte here to spy on me.”

“Monitoring a potential asset is standard op Stark, you’ve had enough military interaction over the years to know that.” Fury puts forth. “SHIELD means you no harm, because whether you like it or not, you’re one hell of a potential asset. Hell Howard was one of the founding members of SHIELD. You’re practically legacy at this point kid.”

*Oh that’s strike three. They’re fucking out.*

“Right.” Toni snarls as she wipes all traces of emotion from her voice then, makes her tone as cold
and hard as possible. “The thing about that is *I don’t fucking care*. You put a spider in my garden
Fury, all because you thought you had the *right* to play your games in my world, my company, my
life. You’re lucky I don’t burn SHIELD down around you and then dance in the *goddamn ashes.*
I’m only going to tell you this once. Keep away from me and SI because I don’t like it when people
touch my stuff. Cross me again Fury and I’ll devote the entirety of my time and energy to pulling
SHIELD apart bit by bit and to hell with who gets caught in the cross fire.”

And with that, Toni takes two steps back, engages the boot repulsors, and leaves.

If Fury doesn’t want to believe her, doesn’t want to think she’s much of a threat because her days are
numbered, then that’s his problem.

There’s nothing Toni wouldn’t do to protect those she loves.

And if she does die before she accomplishes it?

Well JARVIS will have no qualms in continuing in her place and Rhodey will likely be right by his
side.

That’s what family, *her family*, does.

Fury and SHIELD can go to hell if they think otherwise.

*Fuck them all.*

~~~

Toni falls, gasping, out of the armor and onto the floor of the workshop in a tangle of limbs.

Butterfingers, DUM-E, and U are by her side in an instant.

Metal hands gentle Butterfingers reaches down, grabs her around the waist, and half picks her up.
Together they manage to get Toni onto the workshop couch.

U reaches up and taps gently at the reactor despite the way it’s hidden by her blouse. Too weak to
move Toni just nods and lays back. A few seconds later DUM-E comes rolling over, the case with
the replacement cores clasped firmly in hand.

Toni manages to get her blouse open and thanks to the bots support and JARVIS’ soothing voice
encouraging her, gets the core changed.

It *hurts* just as it always does, changing the core, and she’s burning through them faster than ever
before.

“*J I want a full work up on that syringe I took,*” Toni says after she’s caught her breath. “*And make
sure Romanov is blacklisted from all SI sites and Pepper, Happy, and Rhodey know not to trust her.*”

“Of course Miss, I’ll take care of everything.” Worry is sharp in JARVIS’ tone. “Please rest now, U
and the others will be more than enough to assist me with the tests.”

She watches as U moves towards the Mark IV and the now open storage slot. He takes the vial
carefully and goes to the far end of the workshop where some of the more delicate machinery is
kept. Including some of the medical equipment she’s ordered at JARVIS’ behest.

Chest a throbbing mass of pain Toni manages to roll over onto her side just as Butterfingers lays a
blanket over her and DUM-E reaches out to stroke softly at her still upswept hair. For a long
moment she stares at the Expo model leaned up against the far wall.

“JARVIS?” Toni calls as the lights in the workshop dim and her eyes begin to flutter closed.

“Yes Miss?”

“Icarus please.”

“Of course Miss.”

As she falls asleep, Toni’s mind whirls.

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The water is cold and dark and Toni cannot see.

Familiar and hated hands reach up and pull her further down.

Toni tastes scotch and pain on the back of her tongue.

And in her chest a supernova pulses with deadly intent.

~~~

Mind whirling Toni wakes screaming.

“Miss, you’re in the workshop of the Malibu mansion,” JARVIS’ voice cuts in, “we are here with you and you are safe.”

“JARVIS,” Toni croaks after a few breathless seconds, “J, I think … I think I’ve got it.”

“Miss?”

“I think I know how to fix the palladium problem.”

“Tell me what you need me to do.” JARVIS responds instantly.

For the first time in far too long Toni can taste true hope in the air of the workshop

~~~

The thing is, as important as the Stark Expo is to Toni, she hadn’t built it from scratch.

No, she’d used the grounds Howard had already set aside and built on, had used the site of the last existing Expo before the entire thing had been shut down as her starting point.

She’d used those grounds for a basis, had used them like building blocks, like a foundation.

Like a blueprint.

And, looking at the layout of the old Expo, that thought might just be even truer than she’d previously realized.

~~~
Standing in the middle of the expanded element, staring up at the blue holograms detailing its composition, Toni can’t help but laugh.

It’s beautiful.

It’s one of the most beautiful things Toni has ever seen and it’d been hidden all this time in the layouts of the Stark Expo until Toni had rediscovered it.

Not even the knowledge that Howard had discovered it first is enough to dampen Toni’s glee.

Not when he’d never been able to actually produce it.

Not when JARVIS tells her, almost gleefully, that all calculations put it as a suitable replacement for palladium.

Not when this, this beautiful baby element, is going to do the one thing Howard had never seemed to want her to do.

It’s going to help her live, help her be strong.

Help her be mighty.

All Toni has to do is step up and do as she’s always done.

Build and create her way forward.

“J,” Toni crows gleefully, “baby boy it’s time to break out the credit cards. I’ve got a rush order for you.”

“It is my genuine pleasure Miss.” JARVIS says as Toni begins to list out the supplies she’ll need to make this thing a reality.

In the background the bots twirl happily.

~~~

Sometimes Toni has to stop for a moment and just be totally and completely grateful that she’s filthy fucking rich and privy to all the perks that comes alongside that.

Staring down at the crates of materials that’ve been delivered to her door literally hours after JARVIS put in the order is one such moment.

“Miss,” JARVIS cuts in, “I’m afraid that, with your current physical state, the construction and demolition necessary to build even a miniature particle reactor might be out of the scope of possibilities. Perhaps if I called Lt. Colonel Rhodes?”

“No.” Toni shakes her head, the explanation this would require would be too time consuming as much as Toni hates to think that way. “No Rhodey, not for this.”

The problem, unfortunately, is the fact that JARVIS is right.

Her little stunt with Fury has taken its toll.

Blood Toxicity 94% her tester reads.

Toni’s solution is in sight but she doesn’t have the time or the strength left to actually grasp it.
“JARVIS?” Toni’s sitting in her rolling chair staring at the container where U had placed the syringe she’d taken from Fury.

“Yes Miss?”

“How’s the analysis of that thing that may-or-may-not be some kind of roofie I took off of Fury going?”

“After careful examination and cross referencing I’ve determined that the sample is not poisonous or otherwise harmful.” JARVIS tells her. “In fact the chemical make-up seems to match that of a previously documented serum that was patented by one Dr. Robert Banner. Ultimately it was never put into production due to cost as well as the fact that it did not fully realize the goals set for it when development began.”

“What’s it do J?”

“It acts as a type of autoimmune booster. Application would, theoretically, also boost the replication of both red and white blood cells as well as encourage tissue growth in any previously damaged areas alongside a host of other positive actions within the body.” JARVIS pauses for a split second. “In short Miss, it heals. Although the effects are somewhat short term and limited.”

“What I’m really asking here J,” Toni leans back in her chair but doesn’t move her gaze away from the container, “is will it hurt me if I inject myself with it?”

“There will likely be some discomfort Miss, but otherwise I see no signs of it being incompatible with your system.” Toni’s on her feet then and moving before JARVIS gets another word out.

She pulls the container open and reaches in to grab the syringe.

“I would still recommend further tests Miss,” JARVIS protests, “perhaps even drawing a blood sample to see how it will react. There’s a slight risk it could have an effect of some kind on your system that hasn’t been previously documented given the presence of both the reactor and the palladium in your bloodstream. My calculations and data could be off Miss.”

It’s infuriating in many ways that she’s come down to this, that she’s even contemplating using something Fury had tried to force upon her.

But, honestly, she’s out of options.

“We don’t have time for that.” Toni twirls the syringe in her hand and moves back over towards the couch. She sits down and leans forward to brace her elbows on her knees. “We both know I don’t have that kind of time left J. We’ve got the element, we know how to fix the reactor, but I don’t have the strength to pull it off. If this’ll fight back the palladium enough to let me work, well then that’ll be worth the risk.”

There’s a long, tension filled moment of silence before Toni sighs.

“I know you don’t like it J, I know you’re worried. Hell I am too.” Toni brings a free hand up to press against the thin, black vines that stand out starkly on the side of her neck. “But I’m dead if we don’t get this element made and that’s not going to happen without some help. I don’t trust Fury and I don’t trust SHIELD, but I do trust you and your data J so you shouldn’t doubt yourself. If you think this could help me, buy us even a few extra hours, then it’s worth it.”
“Of course Miss.” JARVIS finally agrees. “Do it.”

So, with a deep breath, Toni fins a vein, lines the syringe up, presses it down beneath her skin, and the presses down the plunger.

The syringe falls to the workshop floor and Toni flops back against the couch, spine arched up in a deep bow because it burns.

Toni’s felt worst pain in her life, of course she has, but it still hurts, like a deep itching discomfort she just can’t shake, like a rush of fire in her veins, eating away at her insides as it travels through her.

“Miss?” JARVIS sounds half frantic but Toni can’t answer him at the moment. All she can do is grit her teeth and ride out the wave.

When it finally fades Toni can immediately feel the difference in her body beneath the slight ache of the healing. She feels lighter, stronger, cleaner.

“J give me my reflection.” Toni calls.

JARVIS throws up a large projection of the workshop’s security feed. Toni pulls her blouse all the way open and stares down at her chest. There’s the brilliant blue glow of the reactor and the regular knot work of scars that branch out from it and flow up just over the sides and tops of her breasts.

What really captures her attention though is the way the black vines have disappeared from her neck, apparently sucked back down towards the reactor where they remain on her chest and the swells of her breasts instead of trailing upwards towards her face.

“Now that,” Toni grins, “is what I call wiggle room J.”

She drops her blouse on the floor and grabs for the tank top that Rhodey had left across the back of the couch. It’s large, she’s practically swimming in it, but she tugs it on anyways, pulls the ends of it up and knots them securely beneath her breasts.

“Alright boys,” Toni calls out to the bots who all immediately perk up, “it’s time to get to work.”

~~~

Building the particle accelerator is no easy feat. Toni’s strong, there’s no doubt about that, but even she has to employ the suit a few times, has to get the boys to help her move crates and steady materials because she’s too short to reach or because her arms aren’t long enough, irritating things of that nature.

Still, slowly but surely, she rips holes through floors and walls, exposes cables and lines, places tubing and wires and a million different other things.

She rips apart the mansion, the home she’d designed and built from the ground up for her and her family, so that she can build her future from its bones.

It’s difficult, backbreaking work, but the only thing that truly matters, the only thing that really counts, is the fact that she fucking does it.

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“Congratulations Miss.” JARVIS intones softly. “You have created a new element.”

“We, JARVIS.” Toni murmurs as she reverently puts the element into place within the new reactor.
she’d specifically designed for it while waiting on the accelerator’s materials to arrive. “We created a new element baby boy, all of us. I couldn’t have done it without any of you and I don’t think anyone but we could have done it so damn well.”

“Well Miss,” now he sounds almost smug, “we Starks are a crafty lot, especially when we stick together.”

“Yeah J,” Toni has to blink back tear because in all the years they’ve been together, with all the declarations of love and loyalty and family ties, it’s the first time JARVIS has ever out right named himself as a Stark, “we sure as fuck are.”

“Now,” JARVIS tells her sternly, “you will allow me to run the necessary diagnostics before you move forward with putting it into place.”

Toni takes a look around her destroyed lab, at the way Butterfingers is huddled in the far corner with Mother while U clutches the blanket from the couch and DUM-E strokes the blender from the now wrecked kitchenette forlornly.

“Yeah J,” Toni laughs brightly, happily, “that sounds pretty reasonable to me.”

~~~

Toni makes her way upstairs while JARVIS is running his tests.

She takes the time to actually eat something, a few slices of sketchy pizza and a questionable looking hunk of cheese, and then she staggers into her shower.

She washes dirt and dust and sweat away in scalding hot water that helps keep her from panicking when it hits her face.

For the first time in months, she feels good. Feels flushed with victory and just … happy.

Toni likes it.

~~~

That, of course, means the phone call she gets from the supposedly dead Ivan Vanko makes her crash back down to reality all the harder.

Especially when JARVIS traces it back to the eastern seaboard and Toni puts two and two together.

Shit.

The Expo.

~~~

“You want to run more tests J then I guess you’re gonna have to do it on the fly baby boy cause we’ve got no time to waste.” Toni snaps as she moves across the workshop, flight suit pulled half way up her waist, hair still damp from her earlier shower but pinned firmly in place. “Assemble the Mark VI while you’re at it J.”

“Of course Miss.”

Toni tastes coconut and metal when she puts the new reactor in place. It settles into her chest with a hum and a bright flash of blue light, like a star bursting into existence.
The surge of energy is like nothing Toni’s ever felt, nothing she’s ever dreamt of.

It rushes through her like a tidal wave and she imagines she can feel the lingering palladium in her system being completely burnt away underneath the onslaught of this new energy source.

It leaves Toni panting but exhilarated, makes her feel supercharged and energetic like she’s just mainlined caffeine straight into her system.

Finally she tugs the flight suit all the way up, zips it into place, and steps forward onto the platform so that the Mark VI can be folded into place around her.

The new, triangular chest piece lights up with a brilliant blue flash and Toni is ready to go.

“Alright J, let’s get this show on the road.” Toni quips as she waves at the bots and then takes to the sky.

There’s no time to lose.

The Expo is in full swing at the moment and Toni has only hours until Hammer’s set to go on according to the digital calendar JARVIS had pulled up for her. She could call and have it canceled but then that would leave both Hammer and Vanko in the wind and there’s no telling what either of them will do.

Better to keep them both focused on the Expo, on her.

The fact is, the Expo is vulnerable and the possibility of civilian casualties is extremely high but Toni’s already mentally crunched the numbers. Versus the amount of damage that could be done if Vanko were to target the city instead, was to turn his attention onto the general populace, the Expo is the lesser of two evils, the lesser of two losses. Not acceptable, never acceptable, but easier to contain, easier to combat.

It’s probably callous of her, but then Toni’s never played by the same morality rules as everyone else.

At least this way Toni has an approximate idea of when and where the attack will take place which gives her some degree of an advantage. At least this way she has some kind of control.

What truly worries her is the fact that Pepper and Happy are set to be directly in the middle of things. She’s not sure how objective she can be with them in the direct line of danger.

Not to mention Rhodey who, according to a grimacing video message he’d left her while she’d been busy cobbling together the accelerator, is going be a part of Hammer’s presentation. Since, without her to go to, the military’s turned to Hammer and his weapons to fill the void she left behind and he’d been allowed access to War Machine in order to upgrade its outer armaments.

At least TASHA should be able to keep Hammer or anyone else from actively messing with the coding of the suit and will alert Rhodey if anything seems too out of place.

Still, they’re going to have words about the fact that he let Hammer of all people touch the suit at all. That little weasel shouldn’t have been allowed to step foot in a room containing a picture of War Machine not to mention actually touch it.

~~~

“Rhodey,” Toni croons into the com once JARVIS has connected with TASHA, “light of my life,
beat of my heart, coffee of my soul, apple of my ey-

“What do you want Toni?” Rhodey sounds one part amused and one part exasperated. “I’m about to go on any minute now.”

“Ah yes, your little peep show with Hammer.” Toni hisses the name because honestly it’s the only way she knows how to say it.

“You know he’s not actually Satan right Tones?” Rhodey cuts in. “Like you do understand that don’t you? I’ve always wondered.”

“Oh I know,” Toni agrees easily enough, “unlike Hammer he seems to be good at his job, plus I’m pretty sure Satan probably has redeeming qualities somewhere.”

“I love you but you’re ridiculous you know that right?” He sounds more relaxed now, calmer.

Even after all these years at her side Rhodey still doesn’t appreciate the limelight. Especially if it’s outside of his control.

“You say the sweetest things sugar stack,” Toni grins before she forces herself back serious again. “Unfortunately this isn’t just a social call darling. We’ve got a problem.”

“Of course we do,” Rhodey grumbles, “nothing ever runs smooth around here, especially not when you’re involved.”

“I both resent and resemble that remark.” Toni tells him solemnly. “It’s almost like you know me.”

“The problem Toni?” Rhodey sighs. “What was the actual problem?”

“Right. So, guess who got a phone call from a dead guy?” Toni asks.

“Explain.” Rhodey growls.

The string of curses Rhodey lets loose when Toni fills him in on the situation with Ivan and the potential threat to the Expo is both extensive and impressive.

“My ETA is roughly three minutes Rhodey,” Toni tells him calmly, “Pepper’s not answering her phone but I’m going to buzz Happy, have him get in there and get her out. Otherwise I’d say you be calm, carry on as planned, and hope this won’t start before we can get the place cleared out.”

“Sounds like a plan baby girl.” Rhodey agrees. “I’m going on now, I’ll see you soon.”

~~~

“Boss.” Happy answers his phone like he always does, brusque and to the point.

“Happy, sweetheart,” Toni pushes the suit just a little bit faster, “I need you to get inside the Expo and get Pepper out.”

“Boss?” Happy immediately sounds tense, alert and on guard. “Is it Rush-Romanov? The redhead, whatever her name is?”

“No Hap, it’s worse. Just, just get Pepper out. Now. She’s not answering her phone but she needs to move and then I need her to start getting the Expo evacuated. Calmly. Not like someone pulled a fire alarm in a movie theater and caused a stampede.”
“Gotcha.”

“Be careful Happy.” Toni cautions because Vanko is entirely too unpredictable for her taste.

“For you, Boss?” Happy’s smile’s practically audible. “Always am.”

Toni can’t help but laugh because they both know that’s such a damn lie.

~~~

Interrupting Hammer’s speech when she lands on the Expo stage is a plus in Toni’s opinion.

The sight of his ‘Hammer drones’ filling the stage behind Rhodey is less of a comfort.

She prompts Rhodey to wave at the people just as the overhead lights come on and the PA system cranks up with a calm evacuation order. There’s a brief moment of confusion as people stand, exchanging puzzled looks and whispering, but finally they begin to file out. Toni catches the way anger and panic chase themselves across Hammer’s face.

“Hammer.” Toni sneers as she steps forward into his space. Toni knows that the Mark VI, like the versions before it, is menacing up close and that having War Machine at her shoulder only makes it worse. “You’ve got some explaining to do. But first I want to know where he is. Where’s Vanko?”

“W-who?” Hammer stutters and pales.

“Don’t bullshit me Hammer,” Toni snarls, “where’s Vanko?”

“Toni something’s wrong here.” There’s an all too familiar note of panic in Rhodey’s voice that has her swinging around, Hammer momentarily dismissed. She comes face plate to barrel with the business end of the massive gun strapped to War Machine’s shoulder. “TASHA? TASHA what’s happening? Toni this isn’t me, something’s wrong. Why am I targeting you?”

“A coding error has been detected Sir, automatic override nonresponsive.” TASHA calls out across the com channel, voice young but stiff, lacking the lyrical flow of JARVIS’ more natural cadence. It’s the true telling point as to her real level of consciousness. “War Machine controls non-responsive. Initiating distress call: Big Brother, assistance is required.”

“J,” Toni snaps when TASHA calls for JARVIS’ aid, “get in there and help her. Figure out what’s going on. Rhodey, darling, just hold on.”

“Miss,” JARVIS speaks up then, voice tense, “I’ve detected an unauthorized entry into War Machine’s mainframe. It appears to be a delayed action worm that TASHA’s systems were unable to sense before it was activated. Control of the War Machine armor no longer belongs to either TASHA or Lt. Colonel Rhodes.”

“Give me a fix J.” Toni orders, cold, dark rage beginning to trickle out into her mind.

“With TASHA’s aid the worm can be eradicated and all systems restored in t-minus six point five minutes.” JARVIS replies promptly.

In the next second the Hammer drones all come online as well, their guns pointed in her direction.

“Vanko,” Toni hisses because there’s no other explanation. He must have gotten access somehow when Hammer outfitted War Machine’s outer guns and laid down a sleeping code, something TASHA wasn’t experienced enough to scan for. Toni will have to fix that.
“It’s going to be okay Rhodey.” Toni tells him. “You heard J, it’s Vanko, he’s gotten into the system but JARVIS and TASHA are going to get him out. We just have to buy them some time. Stall him for a bit. So since it’s me Vanko wants let’s take this out of here.”

Toni takes to the air to the sounds of Rhodey cursing as War Machine and at least a dozen drones follow along behind her seconds later.

Toni feels the familiar calm calculation of her battle state eclipse the reckless, writhing of her mind, feels herself go smooth.

And then, the fight is on.

Toni twirls and turns and rolls to avoid bullets and missiles alike as she leads War Machine and the pack of drone up and away from the crowds. They cut corners, and duck through steel girders, dive underneath bridges and shoot across causeways. Rhodey calls out to her every move he can anticipate War Machine making, tells her every time he locks onto her or whenever there’s a new barrage about to start. Toni twirls and barrel rolls around it all, goes faster and then faster still.

It’s like a dance only this time Rhodey is her unwilling adversary where before he’s always been her partner, has always been gleefully at her side, in synch with every step she takes.

Hammer will be lucky if Toni doesn’t rip him apart when this is over. Him and Vanko both.

No one touches her Rhodey.

“Miss,” JARVIS cuts in, “the drones have deployed into the crowd and seem to be firing indiscriminately. Civilian casualties will be a certainty at this rate.”

“Fucking fuck, fuck.” Toni snarls as she twirls and heads back down towards the Expo Center. Sure enough the drones have anchored themselves and some are firing though most seem more interested in her.

The boy, the stupid, brave little boy, with the Iron Queen helmet sends her heart to her throat when he stands, small but mighty, in front of a drone, flashlight repulsor held up in what’s become her classic pose.

Toni can’t help but swoop in, destroy the drone, and jet back off with a, “good job ducky,” as she goes.

Then it’s back to dodging and weaving. Dancing through the air in the most vicious game of chase she’s ever taken part in. A dark part of her revels in it, revels in the chase, in the battle, as much as the rest of her hates herself for finding any enjoyment in any of it.

“Incoming call from Ms. Potts,” JARVIS intones seconds later.

“Motherfucker.” Toni curses, rolls to avoid a spray of bullets from War Machine, and evens back out. “Put her on screen J.”

“Toni!” Pepper practically shrieks. “What in the hell is going on? I’m backstage and Hammer said something about Vanko, and then Rushman or whoever she is was here and she took Happy’s car keys…”

“Breathe Pepper, breathe.” Toni grunts, barrel rolls, and sends a drone careening into the side of a building. “I thought I told Happy to get you out of there.”
“Like hell I’m leaving.” Pepper is as stubborn and indigent as always. “And Happy can’t make me.”

“I’m a little busy right now Pep,” Toni slams on the repulsors and throws herself backwards and away from another drone only to watch in satisfaction as it flies into the path of War Machine’s fire and explodes. “Just makes sure everyone gets out and then I want you and Happy gone you hear me? Don’t hang around, just get the hell out of dodge. I’m not sure what those drones are going to do.”

“Tell me what’s going on Toni.” Pepper half order, half pleads. “I can’t … I can’t take not knowing. Just tell me what to do. Let me help you this time.”

The desperation in Pepper’s voice makes her ache.

“Pepper,” Toni keeps her voice as calm and even as she can considering the situation, “you don’t need me to tell you what to do. You never have. You’ve always been the one to ride herd on me haven’t you? So calm down, straighten up, and do what you know needs to be done. That’s what you can do for me. That’s how you help. Just … be you.”

“Right.” She hears Pepper suck in a deep breath on the other end of the line. “Okay, I’ve got this. I’ve handled you for years, this … this is a piece of cake.”

“Hey!” Toni protests but it’s halfhearted at best because Pepper already sounds calmer.

“I’ll handle things on this end and don’t worry about Hammer.” Pepper orders. “He’s not going anywhere without handcuffs attached. Even then he’s going to be buried so far beneath the litigation I’m going to slap him with he’ll never dig himself free.”

“This is fascinating and all, really I’m riveted, but could you please focus!” Rhodey breaks in, voice high pitched and half frantic just as Toni rolls to avoid another barrage of missiles.

“Oh you know, just hanging around, seeing the sights,” Rhodey replies, so nonchalant that Toni winces again because he’s going to get her after this, “how the fuck do you think I’m doing Toni?”

“Stressed.” Toni replies. “Maybe I’m going out on a limb here but I’m definitely going with stressed.”

By this point joking is the best way to keep the panic and rage of Rhodey being vulnerable at bay. She should have done better with TASHA, with War Machine’s internal defenses, with any and all fail safes and protections.

She’s such a fuck up even in this, even in trying to protect Rhodey, because she’s obviously missed something.

Fuck.

“Rhodey, sweetheart,” Toni croons when they hit the wading pool area in front of the massive globe, mind calculating as she moves, “hold onto your socks sugarcane cause it’s about to get exciting.”

“I’m with you.” Rhodey calls back and there’s a hint of something in his voice, an open affection
and trust, that lets her know that, like always, he really is.

Toni tracks the flight path she wants on the HUD and the pushes forward in a burst of speed. Rhodey following in her wake Toni jets through the water and into the globe, takes a sharp forty-five degree turn, and jets up and back out.

The Hammer drones corner like shit and within seconds the globe is on fire and her and Rhodey’s tails are safe because they’re the only two left in the sky.

Well her’s is mostly safe.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about baby girl.” Rhodey cheers and Toni can’t help but answer him with a bright laugh even though there’s another barrage of gunfire sent at her from the still rogue War Machine.

Toni slows just a notch as she prepares to turn, just as War Machine puts on a burst of speed and tackles her.

Together they tumble from the sky only to land harshly in the shallow stream that flows through one of the garden/relaxation sites.

She’s pinned beneath War Machine’s bulk and the shoulder gun wastes no time in opening fire on her.

“Stop me.” Rhodey grits the words out from between his teeth, voice desperate, aching. “Toni I know you can do it. Stop me. Don’t let me hurt you Toni.”

“No,” Toni snaps because she knows exactly what he’s asking her to do. Bullets ping off her face plate as she manages to get a hand up to grab at the muzzle and direct the fire into the ground beside her head. “Goddamnit Rhodey no.”

Even the thought of what he’s suggesting is abhorrent to her.

Not Rhodey.

Not again.

She’ll die first.

“JARVIS hurry it up!” Toni shouts desperately.


“You haven’t,” Toni swears, “you won’t.”

There’s a loud whirling noise and the shoulder of War Machine opens suddenly, a small missile raising up and taking aim.

“Toni.” Rhodey’s scream is filled with anguish but Toni just grits her teeth and holds on tight, confident in JARVIS and his abilities.

All she has to do is buy them a bit more time.

“Miss,” JARVIS breaks in, voice fraught with tension, “worm neutralized, control of War Machine returning to TASHA in t-minus three, two, one …”
“Sir,” TASHA’s voice suddenly cuts back in across the coms, “all systems are now active and available. Complete control of War Machine now restored.”

“Thank God.” Rhodey half sobs as the gun in Toni’s hand abruptly stops firing and pulls back until it’s pointed at the sky and then the primed missile sinks back into the shoulder plate.

The small red icon on Toni’s HUD that was dedicated to Rhodey suddenly turns back to a welcoming and friendly blue.

Toni’s face plate snaps up at almost the same moment Rhodey’s does. For a short, silent moment they just stare at each other. Rhodey’s eyes are wild and desperate beneath a sheen of fresh tears as he brings his head down so that their foreheads are pressed together despite the bulk of their armor.

“I thought …” Rhodey sounds gutted, “I could have … I almost …”

“Not you,” Toni brings up a gauntleted hand and cups the back of his head gently. “Not you Rhodey. Never you.”

There’s no time to dwell on what’s happened though, not now, not yet.

“Miss,” JARVIS interrupts, “patching in an incoming transmission.”

“Stark.” Romanov’s voice breaks across the coms seconds later.

“Romanov.” Toni doesn’t even bother trying to hold down her snarl. “I told you to stay away from my people.”

“Put your ego aside for the moment Stark.” Romanov cuts in coldly and Toni sees the way Rhodey’s eyes instantly narrow where he’s still above her. “SHIELD’s been monitoring the situation and as good as it is to see that you’re obviously not dying anymore you’ve got bigger problems.”

“Dying?” Rhodey practically roars. “What in the fuck is she talking about Toni?”

“Toni?/Boss?” Toni’s horrified to hear the way his question is echoed by both Pepper and Happy’s voice from where they’ve obviously been patched in as well.

JARVIS is a sneaky little shit and they will be having words.

“Eh, it’s a long story?” Toni offers sheepishly as she stares up into Rhodey’s unimpressed expression. “I’ll tell you all about it later when we’ve got the time.”

“You goddamn right you will,” Rhodey snarls as he gets to his feet and reaches out a hand to tug her up off of the ground. Still, even in his anger, he’s no rougher than he has to be, doesn’t use the strength of War Machine to jerk her around.

And that, his gentleness in the face of his anger, is what tells Toni so much about the kind of man he is. The kind of man he’s always been.

“Stark,” Romanov cuts in again, voice sour, “I’m at Hammer Industries, Vanko’s unaccounted for, and according to the radar on the computer he left behind you’ve got hostiles headed in your direction.”

“Thank you Agent 99.” Toni deadpans when JARVIS confirms the incoming of several drones that all seem to be locked in on her and Rhodey’s position on their private channel so Romanov can’t
hear, “we’ll get right on that. Mute.”

“Sta-” JARVIS cuts Romanov’s com before she can get another word in.

Toni doesn’t let herself dwell, she’ll focus on SHIELD later.

“Now then let’s get this show on the road. Shall we boo-bear?” Toni’s smirk dies when she turns and looks at Rhodey.

He’s staring at her, grey faced and solemn, eyes dark and mouth set in an angry curve.

“Rhodey … I …” Toni breaks off, unsure of what to say in the face of his upset, his disappointment and obvious hurt.

“Later.” Rhodey seems to shake his dark mood off, seems to tuck it away beneath the poise and focus she knows the military taught him. “We’ll talk later Toni, after this is done. Just know that this … this isn’t okay. Not by a long shot. I love you baby girl, but this isn’t over.”

With that he snaps his face plate down.

Toni swallows, takes in a deep breath, and then nods before her face plate goes down as well.

The mission comes first.

Their feelings, the things that need to be settled between Toni and the rest of her family not in the know, can be handled later.

“We’ve got hostiles coming in any second now partner,” Toni tells him, eyes flicking across the HUD as JARVIS feeds her live updates. The drones are closing in on them rapidly.

“I see them.” Rhodey confirms. “One of us needs to take the high ground Toni, split their focus, make them fight on two fronts. We need to put the biggest gun on that ridge up there.”

Toni remembers what Rhodey had taught her at the beginning of all of this, his lessons on battle tactics and fighting strategies. She knows he’s right, just like she knows that, when the attack comes, the stream will be a kill-box as he calls it.

She also knows that, despite the fact that technically she’d be the ‘big gun’ of the two of them considering her armament payload and no matter Rhodey might say, the kill-box is where she needs to be.

“Alright,” Toni agrees, “you go up high, I’ll stay low. You can pick ‘em off at a distance.”

“Hell no,” Rhodey immediately protests, “you can’t stay down here. Toni this right here, this is a …”


“Then you know staying down here’s suicide.” Rhodey grits out.

“Nope, not for me it isn’t.” Toni holds her arms up in front of her like a boxer. “I’ve got a few tricks up my gauntlets they’ll never see coming.”

“Toni,” Rhodey growls just as JARVIS and TASHA both sound off a proximity alert. Their time is almost up.
“Look, Rhodey,” Toni steps away from him and turns to walk out into the middle of the stream, “just trust me on this one. I know I don’t deserve it, not right now, but just … trust me. Let me take the low ground, let them cluster on me a bit if you can too.”

“Fine.” Rhodey finally bites out. “Just be careful Toni. I swear to god if you get hurt again …”

Rhodey fires his repulsors, hops the short distance to take the high ground on the ridge above her, and then settles down to wait.

They’re not left hanging for long.

The Hammer drones land with load metallic thuds, more than a dozen of them spread out across the area. Toni turns enough to look at Rhodey over her shoulder and sends him a cheeky thumbs up.

Apparently that’s the signal because the drone’s weapons all seem to power up as one and then it’s on again.

The staccato fire of Rhodey’s machine gun becomes a homing beacon for Toni because it means that he’s alive, that he’s still fighting.

She uses it to ground herself as she goes smooth again.

“On your right Toni.” Rhodey calls and Toni doesn’t even hesitate, just turns and fires into the face of an incoming drone.

Separate but together she and Rhodey work the field, Toni’s mind calculating trajectories and impact radiuses. She puts her knee through the head of one drone, her gauntlet through the head of another, Rhodey grinds the torso of one to her left to scrap with his guns.

With JARVIS in her ear and TASHA in Rhodey’s Toni dances across the battle field confident that he has her back.

Together War Machine and Iron Queen cut through their enemies.

Finally, down to less than half a dozen, the drones move in on her as one and Toni brings her arms up, engages the lasers she’d installed there, and twirls.

The drones go down in a fiery heap and there’s silence in the stillness of the garden, only the sound of her own breathing echoing in her ears.

“You know,” Rhodey cuts in, just slightly breathless as well as he fires up the repulsors and hops back down to her side, “that T.K.O laser you got there, that’s something you could have led with.”

“Only got the one shot,” Toni says as she pops the cartridges from the laser ports. “Had to make sure it counted.”

“Mission accomplished I’d say.” Rhodey jerks a thumb towards the nearest smoldering Hammer drone.

“Incoming drone signal Miss,” JARVIS cuts in, “this one shows significantly higher energy readings than its predecessors. Be cautious.”

“Gotcha J.” Toni knows it’s going to be Vanko before he ever lands, she’s been waiting for him to show his face the entire time.

“Good to be back.” Vanko smirks.
Prepared or not, the sight of him, suited up and smiling smugly in his knock off version of her armor, sends ice shooting straight through her veins.

It’s like facing Stane all over again, seeing her work bastardized like this, made into something heartless and bloodthirsty. Cruel.

And, like with Stane, this is the son of a bitch who’d tried to take Rhodey from her.

Toni can’t, won’t, let that stand.

Never.

“This is the asshole who came after you in Monaco?” Rhodey asks, voice tight.

“Yup, that’s him alright.”

“I got something special for his ass then.” Rhodey steps forward and the missile that had once been aimed at her face makes a reappearance.

It’s less than impressive with how it fizzles out in the water at Vanko’s feet.

“Hammer tech I take it?” Toni asks, unable to help the sudden jolt of amusement that shoots through her because of course it is.

“Yeah.” Sheepish Rhodey is something Toni doesn’t get to hear too often.

“My turn then.” Toni grins, all teeth behind her face plate, and steps forward, eyes tracking Vanko on the HUD.

Her shots only dent and smudge his armor but they do bring him out of repose and Vanko’s familiar whips whirl to life with bright surges of electric blue.

Toni dodges out of the way but he still manages to clip her and send her back into a rocky outcropping with a jarring thud. She’s on her feet in the next second though, unwilling to let it faze her in the slightest.

“I’m on your six baby girl,” Rhodey tells her then, “let’s show this fucker what we can do together.”

And just like that it’s a whole different ball game.

Toni and Rhodey dance and weave around Vanko’s hulking suit. Together they manage to hold their own as they flow around each other. Toni moves in close, fires repulsor after repulsor blast only to back away as Rhodey lights Vanko up with his guns.

They’re together now, equals in this, and Toni … Toni feels unstoppable.

Toni rushes Vanko only to be smacked aside and sent flying. She hears Rhodey’s yell when Vanko gets under his guard and wraps one of his whips around him.

The whips hurt when they land but they don’t cut through the Mark VI or War Machine like they had the Mark V.

Still, the fact that he has Rhodey is enough to send rage arching right back through her.

Toni jumps him from behind with a feral scream, fists swinging as she hammers at his helmet and face plate. He shakes her off, gets a whip around her neck and then moves to stomp hard on
Rhodey’s chest plate.

Rhodey screams.

No.

Toni lets off a volley of shoulder missiles that force Vanko to stagger backwards. He doesn’t fall but he does get off of Rhodey which was her whole intention.

Toni’s mind whirls.

Yes.

That’s what they need.

“Rhodey,” Toni calls as she brings her hand up, repulsor glowing, “high five me!”

After a split second hesitation Rhodey brings his hand up.

“On three,” Toni calls, “one, two, three.”

The two repulsor beams meet in the middle in a bright flash of light that throws Toni back and off of her feet.

It’s quiet.

For a moment Toni lays there but then she forces herself up, forces herself to move.

The first thing she sees is Rhodey climbing to his feet across the way, armor scuffed and burnt but thankfully, gloriously, whole.

“Are you alright?” Rhodey calls as he rushes to her. “Toni are you okay?”

“Fine,” Toni tells him even as she brings up a hand to rest on his shoulder, “I’m fine Rhodey.”

A harsh, wet chuckle at their feet brings Toni’s attention swinging back around to Vanko.

He’s burnt, armor destroyed and reactor flickering.

Toni hopes it hurts, and if that makes her a monster? Well she’d made herself into one a long time ago anyways.

“You lose,” he rasps and for a split second Toni’s back on that racetrack in Monaco, “you lose.”

The familiar blue of Vanko’s reactor turns a menacing red and begins to beep. The sounds echoed all around them by the destroyed drones littering the area.

Toni’s mind whirls, her breath catches.

“All these drones,” Rhodey bites the words out viciously, “they’re rigged to blow. Toni, baby, we’ve got to get out of here.”

No.

“Pepper,” Toni breathes, panic swirling in her chest, “Happy.”

“Fuck.” Rhodey’s on the same page as she is.
Together they move, repulsors blasting as they jet upwards into the sky.

“JARVIS track their phones, now.” Toni calls.

“Done Miss,” JARVIS sounds tense as well, “Ms. Potts and Mr. Hogan are on the Center steps. Go, now.”

Toni and Rhodey both press forward, desperate for more speed, desperate to get there in time.

Toni sees them first in the distance, Pepper’s hair a beacon underneath the Expo lights that’ve survived the evening.

Happy has her by the hand and they’re running, obviously aware of what the red, blinking lights on the drone corpses mean.

Toni knows, with sick certainty backed by a mind whirling with equations and calculations, that they won’t be fast enough. Could never out run the blast on foot.

“You get Pepper,” Toni tells Rhodey, “I’ll get Happy.” This way the weight distribution won’t be so very unbalanced because every second is going to count and with unprotected passengers neither of them will be able to go supersonic to escape the blast.

“Roger.” Rhodey calls.

Then, together, they swoop down.

Pepper fights Rhodey’s hold and Happy screams, harsh and surprisingly shrill, before they both seem to realize what’s going on and who has them.

Toni ignores it all and jets away, Rhodey at her heels.

There’s a blast almost too loud to believe and then the heat of the explosion is chasing them as they go. Toni just carefully clutchtes Happy closer and heads towards the nearest building well outside of the blast radius.

They land together, her and Rhodey, Pepper and Happy tumbling out of their arms almost in synch.

There’s a long, tense moment of breathless silence as Rhodey and her both put up their face plates.

They all stare at each other, the four of them, panting, eyes wide and faces pale but otherwise fine.

Toni is, unsurprisingly, the one who cracks first.

“I, uh, I think we did okay,” the loud boom of a secondary explosion behind her makes Toni flinch slightly, “relatively speaking of course.”

Happy’s the one who laughs first, loud and a bit hysterical, but Rhodey and Pepper are quick to follow on his heels. Toni’s left standing there, the Expo she’d dedicated so much of herself to going up in flames behind her.

But she doesn’t care.

*Can’t.*

Because this, *here*, this is what matters.

Toni looks at all three of them, Pepper collapsed against Happy’s chest and face red enough to match her hair, Happy’s broad face wreathed in a wide grin, Rhodey bent almost double, a hand pressed to
his knees as he laughs.

These are the people who’ve stood with her through so much, have loved her despite her faults.

They’re what matters.

Them and JARVIS and the bots.

This is her family.

She’s built herself a new heart once again and now … now Toni’s going to put it to good use.

Now she’s going to make them all proud of her.

Or she’s going to die trying.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo? Thoughts/questions/concerns/requests? Let me know!

On a side note I've expanded this into a series for those who haven't noticed. The new story Wax. Feathers. Heat. is a side story archive where I intend to put any off shoots, one-shots, drabbles or the likes for this universe that don't fit into the main story line. The first chapter actually deals with Jarvis and his version of the events of chapter 1 of LoW. So check it out, let me know what you think, and if you have any requests drop me a review and I'll see what I can do!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I can never say it enough, you guys are amazing! You’ve all left me some lovely, lovely reviews as well as blessing me with another fanmix and some glorious fanart!

Also there's now a link on my tumblr where I'll be stashing anything and everything LoW related if anyone is interested.

Now time for the alert for this chapter!

*buries face in hands*

This chapter is a monster.

This is another transition chapter because there's some things that need to be handled before we hit Avengers territory (character growth, world building, etc). As always heed the tags.

Now have my Fanmix: http://8tracks.com/authorrbrochu/the-limitations-of-wax

See the end of the chapter for more notes

New Fanmix & Fanart

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“This is gonna be fun.” Happy grumbles once their hysterical laughter has finally calmed down. They’re all standing on the edge of the roof top and looking out over the destroyed Expo grounds in the distance.

“Yeah,” Toni echoes him softly, “fun.”

~~~

The clean-up is, to no one’s surprise and to quote Happy, a goddamn mess.

Half destroyed buildings, totaled cars, shattered glass and the remnants of the drones litter the Expo grounds. Ambulances, fire trucks, police cars and news vans crowd the outer fringes as they deal with the fires and the various injured that have, despite Toni’s best attempt, still begun to pile up.

During it all Toni spots more than one official looking SUV that screams SHIELD in the mix and has to bite down on the inside of her cheek to keep from snarling.

Pepper, Happy a solid and quiet shadow behind her, wrangles the media and the law enforcement like the magician she is. She sweeps in and starts handing out orders and no one seems intent on contradicting her despite the fact that she’s a civilian.

Toni does her part too. She goes around and makes sure that every drone is destroyed, that there’s no possibility of any of the reactor technology that Vanko had used could possibly be salvaged. She
also helps with some heavy lifting, ignores the awe struck looks she gets when she lifts steel beams or repositions cars.

All the while she marvels at how much better she feels, at the energy she can feel surging through her veins.

And all the while Rhodey is her calm but cold shadow, face plate constantly down as he follows her around and helps without having to be asked. He doesn’t speak to her, doesn’t respond to her attempts at small talk or banter like he normally does.

It makes Toni ache because she knows he’s upset with her.

It makes Toni go cold and frightened deep down inside because she can’t help but wonder if this is finally it.

If, God please no, this lie on top of all her regular fuck-ups has finally managed to drive him away for good.

She’s terrified that she’s finally managed to do the one thing she’s always feared and he’s just waiting for this situation to be resolved before he erases himself from the narrative of her life.

She takes comfort from the way he sticks to her side though, the way he seems unwilling to be more than a few feet from her at any given moment.

It’s a small, cold relief but, honestly, at this point she’ll take what she can get.

It’s already more than she deserves.

~~~

“I should quit.” Pepper says the words calmly, evenly. She stares Toni directly in the face where they’re all gathered at the airfield to see her and Happy onto the jet before Toni and Rhodey head back to Malibu ahead of them. “I should pack up and quit while I still can because I literally cannot handle this kind of stress.”

“Pep …” The words make the blood drain from Toni’s face, makes her heart skip a beat like someone’s pulled the reactor from her chest again.

“Don’t.” Pepper raises a hand up. “Just, don’t Toni. Not now. You owe us all an explanation, a damn good one too, but I just … I can’t right now.”

Exhaustion and hurt is plain on Pepper’s face and that more than anything stops Toni in her tracks.

“Okay Pep,” Toni agrees softly, numbly, “whatever you need.”

There must be something in her face, something in her expression, because Pepper softens just a bit. She steps forward and presses a soft kiss to Toni’s exposed cheek. Then she turns and heads towards the waiting jet.

“She’s scared is all Boss.” Happy murmurs when he comes to stand beside her. He looks haggard too, jaw just the slightest bit dark with a five o’clock shadow and eyes undercut with circles. “We all are, knowing we could have lost you, knowing you didn’t say anything to us.”

“Happy,” Toni falters, takes a deep breath and tries to push forward, “I’m sorry I just …”

“No,” Happy interrupts her, “don’t. Like Pepper said, just … give us some time. We’ll meet up at
the mansion and then … then you can tell us all what’s been going on.”

“Okay,” Toni has to resist the urge to hunch in on herself.

Instead she watches as Happy leaves her too, his and Pepper’s bags in hand as he strides across the tarmac and towards the waiting jet.

Rhodey’s a silent statue at her side and Toni’s almost afraid to turn and face him again.

There’s a long moment of silence and then she hears him sigh, feels the weight of his gauntletted hand on her shoulder for a brief second before he pulls it back.

War Machine’s repulsors fire behind her and then, abruptly, Toni is alone.

She stands there on the tarmac for the longest time before she finally takes to the air as well.

~~~

“They will forgive you in time Miss,” JARVIS tells her softly, soothingly. “Once you explain and they’ve had time to completely process the situation.”

“I hope you’re right J,” Toni whispers through her doubt as she stares straight ahead at the sight of Rhodey flying in front of her. There’s a large patch of distance between them but not too much, not more than either of them couldn’t cover in seconds.

Even now, even after leaving her alone, Toni knows Rhodey’s still watching out for her.

She can’t lose him.

She can’t.

~~~

They beat Pepper and Happy back to the mansion of course.

The way Rhodey goes still, the way War Machine freezes around him, at the sight of the workshop and the havoc Toni’s wrought inside of it, makes her wince.

She’d forgotten about the particle accelerator in her haste to get to the Expo and everything that had followed.

Rhodey still doesn’t say anything. After a long, tense moment, he steps onto the still clear docking pad and lets the armor peal itself away from him. He pauses, looks at her silently, and then turns on his heel and heads out of the workshop and up towards ground level.

Frozen in place Toni stays were he left her for a long moment.

“Lt. Colonel Rhodes is in the shower Miss.” JARVIS informs her quietly.

Toni just nods, steps forward onto the pad, and lets the Mark VI pull away from her. She takes a moment to pet the bots and Mother before she heads upstairs as well towards her own bathroom.

She doesn’t say anything.

Rhodey’s silence has stolen her words.
“Tell me.” Rhodey finally speaks up an hour or so later.

They’re both freshly showered, Toni’s wearing one of his old USAF sweatshirts, and they’re both clutching coffee mugs. They’ve been sitting across from each other at the kitchen counter for the past ten minutes in complete silence.

Toni’s hair is up, her wings and reactor are both covered, and yet she hasn’t felt so vulnerable in a long time.

Because this is Rhodey.

“Toni,” Rhodey looks up at her then, eyes red rimmed and dark, “just tell me.”

So Toni does.

She tells him about the palladium, about how she’d known, even in Afghanistan, that it was poisonous after long term exposure. She tells him about the nausea, about the sickness, about her blood toxicity and the chlorophyll.

She tells him about knowing, with a deep certainty, that she was slowly dying.

She tells him about her and JARVIS’ frantic but futile scramble for a solution.

“Show me.” The order comes out as a rasp.

Toni sucks in a sharp breath because that sounds like a horrible idea and she doesn’t want to do it.

“JARVIS,” Toni calls anyways because this isn’t about her, not really, this is about what Rhodey needs in this moment and as always she wants to provide, “show him.”

“Yes Miss.” Even JARVIS sounds subdued by the situation.

The screen on the far wall flickers to life and Rhodey gets off his bar stool and goes over for a better look.

Toni clenches her eyes shut for a long moment because she knows just what JARVIS is showing him.

Tests and more tests, notes and observations, pictures and video clips, x-rays and scans.

A compilation of information documenting just one thing.

Her steady slide towards death.

The slow decline she hadn’t shared with him, with anyone, besides JARVIS.

Rhodey raises his hand up, fingers splayed, and lays it ever so gently across the image of her chest x-ray. His palm almost completely hides the reactor from sight but even from a distance Toni can still see the diseased lines of the palladium radiating out from it.

“Where you ever going to tell me?” He whispers the question but to Toni he might as well have screamed it.

“I …” Toni goes to answer but stops herself, stops to really think about the answer because she
doesn’t want to lie to him again, not right now.

That’s what got her into this situation in the first place and she’s not so keen on repeating that mistake so quickly.

“I wanted …” Toni falters again, bites her tongue and brings her arms up to curl against her chest and over the reactor. “I was going …”

She knows the truth, knows the answer to his question, but doesn’t know how to say the words to him. Rhodey’s always been one of the few to make her now infamous golden-tongue flounder.

The truth is … she was never going to tell him.

She couldn’t. Especially not face to face.

She wishes that wasn’t the truth, wishes that was a lie, wishes she was a better person than that, but it isn’t.

She isn’t.

No matter what she does it seems as if that will never change.

“You were going to what Toni?” Rhodey spins around to face her. His voice is harsh, razor sharp but aching underneath because he’s obviously heard her answer in her silence. “You were just going to let this happen without letting us, me, know what was going on? What was supposed to happen in the end Toni? Huh?”

He moves away from the wall to pace the middle of the kitchen. She can see his frustration and his hurt in the way his hands scrub over his head roughly, in the set of his shoulders, the heaviness of his stride.

“Was Pepper going to just come down here one day and find you? Or Happy? Or, or m-me? Were you going to just let that happen? Let me come down here and find your bod-, find you dea-,” his voice breaks on a sob like he can’t bear to finish the thought and he clenches his eyes closed tightly as he struggles, “find you gone?”

“No.” Toni practically moans the word out. She feels wounded, cut to bleeding in some soft, secret spot, because she’s hurt him so horribly and all she’d ever wanted to do was protect him. All she’d been trying to do was protect him from this grief, this hurt. And she’s so obviously failed. Why couldn’t she just protect him? “No. Rhodey, please, that wasn’t … I wouldn’t … please.”

“What was the plan then Toni?” Rhodey’s face is terrible, he looks ashen and haunted and Toni wants it gone because he should never look like that. Never. Especially not because of her.

“I would never let you see me like that.” The words spill out almost without her consent, jumbled and harsh, desperate. “I would never, Rhodey you’ve got to believe me, I wasn’t going to do that to you, any of you. I was just … I would have … JARVIS promised …”

Rhodey goes abruptly still.

“JARVIS promised what?” His eyes are narrowed and his chest is heaving, shuddering as if he’s ran a marathon. “What did he promise you Toni?”

“I wasn’t …” Toni clears her throat, tries to swallow down her nerves, “I didn’t plan on leaving a body. JARVIS promised to help, promised to … we agreed that … when it was time we were going
“Jesus.” Rhodey looks like gray again, face ashen and mouth pinched. For a brief moment Toni thinks he’s going to be sick. “Jesus fuck Toni. How could you … why would you?”

“I … there was nothing anyone could do.” Toni rushes to explain. “I just … I wanted it to be quick, clean. For you. For everyone. Please Rhodey I-I wanted to make it easy.”

“E-Easy?” His voice breaks on the word with a sharp click. “You thought … fuck I don’t know what you were thinking. So you were just going to disappear? Just like that? Just be gone? You were just going to leave all of us here wondering what had happened to you? Where you’d gone? Terrified that you … you’d been taken again.”

“No.” Toni flings herself to her feet so quickly her barstool topples over and hits the floor with a crash. She rushes around the edge of the counter until she’s standing just inches away from him hands hovering in the air between them uselessly.

Toni wants to reach for him but she can’t because, for the first time, she’s not sure if he wants her to. For the first time she thinks he might actually deny her touch, might refuse her bumbling attempts at comfort.

And even the thought of that terrifies her because being rejected by Rhodey, even in this moment, might be more than she can handle.

Slowly Toni curls her hands down and fists them in the hem of her sweater.

“I left messages,” Toni finally admits, “one for each of you. I couldn’t tell you Rhodey, couldn’t let you see me like that, but I wouldn’t have … I wouldn’t have left you guessing afterwards.”

Rhodey just looks at her.

“I left messages.” Toni repeats again softly. She feels lost, feels adrift and unsteady, because she’d tried to make things easy and instead she’d made them far more complicated instead.

That’s all she’d wanted for him, for them. She’d known not telling them about her being sick was selfish but she’d thought handling everything afterwards would even that out a bit. She’d wanted to make it better somehow, had wanted to leave them with the comfort that Jarvis had left her with but without the horror of seeing her body. She doesn’t understand why that was wrong though and that makes her feel even more helpless.

She hates that feeling.

It’s proof, she can’t help but think, that once again her mind works so different from others, that once again she’s decidedly not right in some way she’ll never be able to fix.

She hates the fact that she feels this way, that even now she feels so unsure with these kinds of things, that her frame of reference can sometimes be so skewed even with Rhodey.

Rhodey steps forward then, closes the little bit of distance between them and reaches up to cup her face in his palms.

His hands are trembling.

“I can’t stay here,” Rhodey tells her softly and Toni goes cold. “I need … I can’t stay here right now Toni.”
“Rhodey …” His name is a plea that she whimpers out breathlessly.

“I love you baby girl.” Rhodey says instead as he leans down and presses a shaky kiss against her forehead. “I’m sorry.”

Then he drops his hands back down to his sides and steps back and away from her.

To Toni that simple move feels like miles of space have opened up between them instead.

Rhodey turns and heads for the hall that will lead him back down to the workshop.

Toni takes a shuffling step forward, lifts an arm in his direction and goes to speak.

Before she can say anything Rhodey stops.

For a long moment there’s silence but Toni doesn’t let herself begin to hope.

“I would have looked for you Toni.” Rhodey finally says quietly but the words cut through the silence like knives. “Video or no video. JARVIS telling me you were gone or not. I would have never stopped looking for you Toni. Not until I had proof, solid and undeniable, that you were … that it was done. Do you understand that? I will always look for you.”

Toni’s throat feels frozen, her words iced over.

After a few seconds Rhodey sighs and keeps walking.

She watches as he disappears into the depths of the mansion.

She’s not sure how long she stands there, hand outstretched in the air in front of her, before JARVIS finally speaks up.

“He’s gone Miss.” JARVIS sounds infinitely gentle as if he knows the words will hurt to hear.

They do.

_God they do._

“Don’t leave.” Toni finally manages to whisper a while later as she curls her fist around empty air. It’s the echo of a plea she’s only ever said to one other person. “You were never supposed to leave me.”

It’s too late though.

Rhodey’s gone.

~~~

Toni drifts her way back down to her workshop and settles down behind her workbench.

The bots all roll up to her one by one and she reaches out and strokes them absently when they nudge at her.

She feels … floaty.

“J,” she rasps out, “bring up the next project in my private queue.”

“Miss …”
“Please J,” Toni needs something to focus on, needs something to tether herself to, or she’s afraid that she’ll float away. “And give me some music, something good.”

“Of course Miss.”

Achilles Last Stand comes pounding out of the speakers and Toni bends herself to her work.

~~~

“Miss?” JARVIS calls to her.

Toni just grunts and stays bent over the miniaturized com device she’s been working on. It’s her second project of the day and just like the first it’s neat and precise and requires concentration and steady hands. Plus, just like the first bit she’d worked on, she’d pulled it from the BUCK-E file so once it’s finished JARVIS should be pleased.

“Lt. Colonel Rhodes is requesting access to the video message you recorded for him.” JARVIS sounds almost hesitant.

Toni stills, clenches her hand around the soldering iron she’s holding, and then forces herself to relax.

“Give him what he wants J.” Toni says roughly. “Give him whatever he wants.”

It’s all she can do.

Maybe it’ll be enough somehow.

Maybe.

~~~

“-oni, Toni.” The combination of Pepper’s voice and the hand on her shoulder finally jolts Toni out of her daze.

“Huh?” Toni blinks, leans back and pushes her goggles up and onto her forehead.

“Toni,” there’s something hesitant in Pepper’s face, and in Happy’s as well who’s standing just behind her, “Toni where’s Rhody?”

“He’s gone.” Toni grits her teeth and feels the way her shoulders round out for a second before she forces them straight again.

There’s a beat of silence.

“We’re here now Toni,” Pepper sighs, “can you … will you tell us what happened now?”

“Yeah.” Toni turns back to her worktable, picks up her soldering iron, and gets back to work.

But then, after a pause, she begins to talk. She doesn’t look up though, can’t, won’t.

She won’t watch them walk away from her too.

Still just as she had with Rhody Toni tells both of them everything that’s happened.

She talks and talks until she runs out of facts and all she can do is let her words trail off into silence.
The sound of Pepper choking back a sob is what finally snaps her back into some semblance of reality.

Toni turns and Pepper’s there, face flushed and eyes red. Her hands are clasped over her mouth like she can physically hold back the sounds she’s making. Behind her Happy looks just as bad, face pale and his jaw set in a hard line.

“Boss.” Happy steps forward and around Pepper until he’s close to her and then he crouches down until they’re eye level. “You know … you know you should have said something right? You know that’s not what any of us would have wanted?”

“Yeah.” Toni sighs. “Yeah Hap, now I do.”

“Good.” Happy sounds slightly relieved. “That’s good. You messed up Boss, not gonna lie to you about that, but all that really matters is that you’re alright now. And you are aren’t you? You’re okay now?”

Toni just stares up at him and nods because she still feels raw from Rhodey leaving, still feels adrift and uncertain. She’s always been good at manipulation and playing the showman but when it comes to true interpersonal interaction she’s always been … awkward.

Rhodey’s been the basis of her social skills for years now and their relationship isn’t exactly one that confines itself to societal norms. Still it’d been his steady friendship that had allowed her to reach out to Happy and then Pepper in the first place, to try and fold them into her small circle of family.

Over the years they’ve gotten used to her ways as he had. They’ve learned to overlook her bluntness, learned to realize when she’s teasing and when she’s serious in a way that’s allowed her to be honest with them. To, for the most part, be Toni around them instead of Toni Stark.

For all of her lack of tact and grace on a deeper and more personal level, Toni’s never fumbled this badly with any of them and she’s not exactly certain how to fix this. She’s not sure that shoes or watches or even cars will fix this.

Happy reaches out for her slowly, movements open and deliberately choreographed to be nonthreatening. Toni doesn’t flinch back from him, not even when he wraps his arms around her and pulls her against his chest.

It’s a novel feeling, being hugged by Happy like this.

She can count on one hand the number of people who’ve ever held her like this.

After a few seconds she feels one of Pepper’s hands come down on her shoulders as well, feels the warmth of her as she moves closer to the two of them.

“This wasn’t okay Toni,” Pepper tells her softly, seriously, “this was so far beyond okay. But Happy’s right. As long as you’re alright, that’s what really matters right now. Everything else is just … details.”

“I was trying to do the right thing Pep,” Toni confesses. “I just wanted …”

“I know you were Toni.” Pepper squeezes her shoulder softly. “But the not knowing, the secrets and the lying. That’s something you can’t do again, not with something like this. Just the thought of you going through this alone …”

“Wasn’t alone.” Toni says into the crook of Happy’s neck. “I had JARVIS and the boys.”
“Yes.” Pepper’s agrees and her voice is distant and so very sad. “I know you did.”

---

Pepper and Happy linger for the afternoon, both of them seemingly reluctant to leave her alone.

Pepper makes phone calls from the couch that the bots have pushed into an undamaged corner of the workshop. Happy keeps the bots occupied, shifts a few things around and gets Mother settled back into her habitat with some fresh greens while Butterfingers watches him like a hawk.

There’s no word from Rhodey although JARVIS assures her he’s alive and well.

Toni turns back to her project.

---

Eventually Pepper and Happy leave. Back to SI and the real world.

They both hug her tightly and Happy presses a kiss to her forehead and Pepper one to her cheek before they depart.

Toni watches them go and then turns back to her workbench.

Toni loves them, she *does*, but Rhodey’s absence, his continued silence, *aches*.

---

JARVIS pulls her back up to the surface with a news story that’s almost too fantastic to believe.

Toni watches as a giant, green *something* battles it out with the military in Virginia. The journalism student who witnessed and captured the fight on cell phone video calls it the *Hulk*.

JARVIS does some digging and well, there’s a lot more to Dr. Robert Bruce Banner than meets the eye she learns.

But it’s not Toni’s problem at the moment. As far as she can tell all Banner wants is to be left alone. She can relate to that.

---

A day or two later JARVIS pulls her out of her daze again.

“Miss.” JARVIS calls for her after he lowers the volume of her music again. “I’m afraid I have news for you.”

“What is it J?”

“Director Fury is requesting a meeting Miss,” JARVIS sounds almost as wary as Toni instantly feels. “I believe it’s the first time he’s used proper channels to do so since attempting to have Agent Coulson contact you the first time.”

“When?”

“This afternoon if convenient,” JARVIS supplies, “he’s even included an address as to where he’d like to meet you.”
“Right.” Toni says as she pulls her goggles off and pushes her way to her feet. The anger she’d felt towards Fury and his machinations comes trickling back in and Toni welcomes it. The icy burn of her rage is better than the numb drift she’s been encased in since Rhodey walked out on her. “Looks like we’ve got some business to settle with SHIELD.”

“Very good Miss.”

~~~

Toni showers, pins her hair up carefully and does her makeup with a steady and expert hand.

Then she dresses for war because she can’t see a day where meeting Nick Fury won’t be considered a battle of sorts.

Crimson heels and blouse with a black vest and a tight black leather mini skirt are her armor of choice at the moment.

“I will monitor all frequencies Miss.” JARVIS reassures her. “And do remember to wear your sunglasses.”

She snags a pair of round red lens sunglasses out of their case and then grabs the repaired Mark V.

“Thanks J, and of course I will.” Toni smiles just a bit as she slips behind the wheel of her chosen car.

Time to go.

~~~

Mark V clutched in her hand Toni stares at the small sized warehouse Fury has designated as their meeting ground.

It looks unassuming, looks like a regular nondescript warehouse on the outside, just another uninteresting building in the middle of a field of others.

Toni knows better though. Even without Fury’s express invitation she’d have known better.

She’d clocked at least a dozen surveillance cameras on the way in as well as all other sorts of security. JARVIS has, undoubtedly, picked up on much more.

Maybe it’s dangerous, this walking into uncharted territory with only JARVIS in her ear thing. Maybe it’s foolish and reckless.

But, honestly, Toni has the armor on her wrist and a distinct lack of care in her heart at the moment.

So she steps out of her car, Mark V in hand, and strolls up to the warehouse doors nonchalantly.

The side door opens before she’s all the way across the gravel and Toni’s left to stare at the impassive face of a random, black suited agent she’s never met before. He stands in the door way and doesn’t seem inclined to move even when she’s finally in front of him.

“Impressive service Lurch,” she quips with an arched brow and a toothy grin, “now are you going to let me inside or am I going to have to go through you?”

“Let her in.” Fury’s voice calls from further inside the warehouse.
The agent instantly steps aside.

“That is some grade A training you’ve got going on there Fury,” Toni calls as she steps past the agent and into the warehouse. “I feel like I should give him a biscuit or something.”

“Stark.” Fury’s leaning against a metal table, arms crossed over his chest and face set in an unimpressed scowl as if he finds her flippancy distasteful.

Toni doesn’t care, she’s too busy turning her head to take in every inch of the warehouse she possibly can.

There’s an agent in each corner of the room, a multitude of screens and computers scattered around, and the table and set of chairs Fury’s leaning against in the middle.

It all screams temporary and Toni can’t help but wonder if this has actually been Fury’s provisional command base or if it’s all been set up for her benefit.

Either way it’s almost feels too cliché to be real.

“Have a seat Stark.” Fury straightens up, moves around the table and towards one of the large screens as he motions her towards the nearest chair.

Toni looks around the room again as she moves towards the table but she doesn’t take the offered chair.

Her attention is, instead, focused on the actual paper file on the table, the one with the words Avengers Initiative embossed across the front.

Almost against her will Toni finds her curiosity riled.

She’d dismissed Fury’s first attempt to recruit her out of hand. She hadn’t been interested in joining SHIELD’s watchdog group or super-secret boy band or whatever the so called Avengers were supposed to be. She hadn’t been interested in a team or anything of the sort.

But, she’s forced to admit now, after fighting side by side with Rhodey the idea intrigues her.

She still has no interest in being beholden to SHIELD but the idea of a team …

The idea of there, maybe, being others out there who could and would work with her, the idea of not fighting alone with only JARVIS in her ear, of having actual, tangible support …

Well it interests her more than she wants to admit even if she knows it’s unlikely, even if she knows that she’s never fit in right on a team in her entire life.

She’s never been good on extended team projects, on working with others on a regular and intimate basis. She’s always too fast, too loud, and too much to properly maintain a workable level of synergy inside a team for any length of time.

She works better alone, always has.

Toni’s used to that fact, used to that reality.

Still, the idea of a team is … nice in a way.

Curiosity abound, even if she knows the file being left in her full view has to be deliberate, Toni reaches for the folder.
“I don’t think I want you looking at that.” Fury comments as he sits down and reaches out to pull the file away from her. “It obviously doesn’t apply to you anymore.”

“Now you’re just being petty Nick-at-Nite.” Toni rests the Mark V on the table. “So why am I here then if not to talk about the cult, I’m sorry I meant the group, you’re trying to build?”

“Cute.” Fury deadpans as he brings up another file and holds it in her direction. “This one on the other hand does apply to you. It’s Agent Romanov’s assessment of you. Read it.”

“And I’m sure it’s a positively scintillating read.” Toni cocks a hip to the side as she just looks at him and then makes a show of looking around the room again, sunglasses still firmly in place.

Finally Fury drops the file onto the table with a huff.

Toni reaches out and pulls it closer with a finger and then scoops it up.

It’s a relatively routine dossier all things considered.

It has her birthday, her general measurements, a section on her paternity which includes the day Howard and Maria had both died, although they make no mention of Jarvis. There’s a small list of her known close associates, all three of them. Toni skims over the section on languages and employment and education because those are all rote besides a few things they obviously don’t know about. The note about the reactor makes her want to snarl but she makes a mental note to take care of that later.

What really catches her eye, what makes her go silent and still for a long moment, is the personal assessment section.

“Hmm,” Toni hums, low, soft, and just a shade off seductive before she begins to read it out to the room at large. “Personality overview: Ms. Stark displays compulsive behavior alongside textbook narcissism. Well,” Toni drawls, “can’t really argue with that. Oh but what’s this?” She fakes a tone of surprise. “Overt sociopathic tendencies? Overly possessive and territorial behavior? Her involvement in any potential future operations possesses a significant risk to team security and mission completion? Recruitment assessment, Iron Queen, yes, Toni Stark, not recommended.”

Toni drops the file down onto the table top in front of her and reaches up remove her sunglasses with deliberate care. She twirls them a bit by the earpiece as she looks Fury dead in the eye.

“Your spider was very thorough wasn’t she?” Toni smiles and she knows that, as always, she shows far too many teeth to be polite. “I’m hurt Fury, really I am. She’s said such nice things about me and here I am without the chance to repay the favor.”

“See,” Fury leans forward in his seat and braces his elbows on the table between them, “this is the problem with you Stark.”

“Oh do tell.” Toni urges because she’s eager to see where this bullshit is headed. “I’m excited to see how you can justify recommending me but not recommending me all at the same time based on a ham-fisted psych eval conduction without my consent just for starters.”

“The Iron Queen armor is a technological wonder and would be an asset to have on board, no sense pretending otherwise.” Fury pushes forward. “But you’ve repeatedly refused to turn that technology over to a higher power. That leaves me with the option of having Iron Queen’s capabilities on my roster but also having to deal with Toni Stark as well. And that? That’s problematic. Mainly because, from what we’ve seen, you’re lacking when it comes to a true understanding of human emotions among other things. Oh you mimic and pretend damn well but you’re always just slightly
You’re selfish, volatile, and unable to accept a higher authority than yourself. The lights are on upstairs Stark,” Fury motions towards his own head with a flick of his fingers, “but we’re not so sure there’s someone home if you get my drift.”

Toni bites back an inappropriate laugh, thinks about it for a split second, and then lets it loose anyways.

“Point in case.” Fury gestures towards her and then leans back in his chair again. “You’re also incapable of taking anything seriously if it doesn’t suit your purposes.”

“I’m sorry Nicky,” Toni deliberately wipes her expression clean, goes cold and smooth, “well, actually, no I’m not. What I am, on the other hand, is still curious as to why you called in for a meeting since you’ve apparently already got me all pegged and everything. Unless you’re finally ready to talk about that crush of yours? Because again, I’m flattered, truly I am, but I don’t think it would work out.” Toni brings a hand up and lays it over where the reactor is hidden beneath her clothes. “It’s not me, it’s you.”

If he wants a narcissistic sociopath then Toni’s more than capable of providing at the moment.

“We’d like to have you on in a consultant position,” Fury finally gets to the point. “Maybe, after some time, if you prove you’re capable of taking orders we’ll be able to reconsider your position within the team. Despite any of your more personal issues..”

“I’m gonna have to say no on the basis that you can’t afford me.” Toni picks the Mark V up off of the table and slides her sunglasses back on.

“I had a lot of hope for you Stark,” Fury shakes his head almost sadly. “I thought you’d be on my side in this situation, thought you’d done a one-eighty after Afghanistan and wanted to fight the good fight.”

“I’m sorry,” Toni interrupts, “is this going somewhere anytime soon or are you just going to keep going down this road? Cause I hate to break it to you Sauron but trying to guilt trip someone who ‘lacks an understanding of basic human emotions’, Toni makes finger quotes with her free hand and everything, “has a long and historical record of not working well. You want me to work for SHIELD as a consultant then you contact my office and you get out your checkbook just like everyone else.”

“Stark.” Fury calls after her but Toni keeps walking.

“Again with the name thing. I’m not your bitch Fury, I don’t heel for you or anyone else.” Toni tosses over her shoulder but she doesn’t bother to slow down. Instead she just struts back towards the door, past the agent who’s still standing there, and back to her car.

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“Did you get that J?” Toni has JARVIS on the line as soon as their far enough away from Fury’s little playhouse to be secure.

“Yes Miss.” JARVIS confirms. “The wide angle lenses in the sunglasses captured a great deal of footage from the warehouse. I’ll be uploading and enhancing what I can and I’ll have it ready for you to peruse at your leisure.”


“Naturally Miss.” JARVIS sounds almost smug. “I am a Stark after all.”
Toni makes the rest of the ride back to the mansion in silence, hands tight around the steering wheel as she tries not to focus on the seething rage that’s still eating at her.

Sociopathic.

Toni grits her teeth and then forces herself to relax.

It’s fine.

She hadn’t really wanted to be an Avenger anyway, hadn’t really wanted to be part of a team. Answering to SHIELD was and would always be abhorrent to her and nothing would make that change. Not even the chance to join Fury’s super selective club of apparently well-adjusted would be heroes.

She’s not hero material anyways.

Not really.

Not like Steve.

Not like Bucky.

Not like Rhodey.

She’s flawed, broken and often misconstrued in ways she can’t fix. She’s got a lot of bad code inside of her and she’s always known that, had made peace of a sort with that years ago.

So Toni’s fine.

This, being rejected like this because of who and what she is on a base level, because they couldn’t or wouldn’t understand her and instead slapped on a label they thought fit her best, means nothing.

It doesn’t hurt. Not even a little bit.

Except for how it does, deep down in that place she doesn’t always like to admit she has. In that place where Jarvis lives and Aunt Peggy never forgets her, where Rhodey and Pepper and Happy are all tucked down safe and sound, where she’d first forged the bots. In that place where, she hopes, JARVIS was nurtured and then brought forth.

It hurts there like the crisp sting of a razor blade, in that soft place she wishes she could kill sometimes, in that place she’s walled away from the rest of the world.

But Toni’ll be damned before she shows it, before she admits to it.

If Romanov and Fury think she’s a sociopath … well then who is she to argue that point?

She won’t let them bring her down to that level.

She won’t beg for their approval.

Not when she’d never begged Howard.

She’s Toni Stark, she’s the Red Queen and the Scarlet Stark Heiress and a dozen other titles that she’s worn like armor her entire life.
And, despite all the ways they try to separate the two, she is the Iron Queen.

She’s mighty now and she won’t let them make her small.

Fuck them all.

~~~


Toni screams and screams as she falls and falls.

Rhodey turns willingly towards the cave.

Steve dives down into the icy depths of the ocean.

Bucky turns his face from her and flies into the sun.

There are no hands to catch her now.

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Toni wakes screaming.

“You are in your bedroom in the Malibu mansion,” JARVIS reassures her softly, “you are safe Miss.”

Toni rolls until she’s sitting on the edge of the bed, sheet pooled around her waist as the reactor washes the room over in shades of blue.

She buries her face in her hands and shakes.

Then, when she’s finally approaching calm again, she gets up, pulls on one of Rhodey’s old sweaters and the Captain America pajama pants Happy had given her for her birthday, and goes back down to the lab.

Working is far better than the things that haunt her dreams after all.

~~~

Toni’s still down there, sleepless but going strong anyways, when Rhodey comes back three days later.

“Miss.” JARVIS’ voice and the muting of her music pulls her out of her haze.

“Yeah J?” She’s been bent working on the miniaturized specialty thumb drive JARVIS had thrown at her from the BUCK-E file for hours now and she has no intention on stopping until it’s done. JARVIS has already bullied her into a shower and a protein shake made by an insistent Butterfingers once already today and she’s not inclined towards a repeat performance.

“Lt. Colonel Rhodes is here Miss.” JARVIS tells her softly. “He’s currently on his way down to the workshop.”

Toni abruptly freezes.

Rhodey.
Rhodey’s back.

*Oh God.*

The words play on a loop in Toni’s mind, ‘*Oh God he’s back. He’s back. He’s back.*’

Toni feels as if her entire world has narrowed down to a pinpoint, as if all of her focus has been brought to bear on this one fact. In her chest her heart pounds like a drum.

Rhodey’s back.

But … what if he doesn’t plan to *stay*?

What if he’s come back only to tell her he wants no part of her?

What if *this* is truly the end?

What if she has to watch him walk away from her *twice*?

Toni can’t …

She *can’t* …

“—eathe Toni, for fuck’s sake baby girl *breathe.*” Rhodey’s voice finally breaks through to her and Toni sucks in as deep a breath as she can.

It’s still far too shallow of course, thanks to the reactor and the diminished lung capacity that comes hand in hand with it, but it’s better than nothing.

It takes her a few to regain herself, Rhodey’s there the entire time, voice rough but steady as he coaches her through breathing in and out.

When she finally calms down enough to focus Toni looks over at where he’s kneeling across from where she’s slumped on the floor. She blinks and really takes him in for the first time in what feels like years.

He looks, in a word, *awful.*

Dressed in a pair of ragged sweats and a faded t-shirt Rhodey looks half feral. He’s red eyed and thin faced with the beginnings of an unkempt beard shadowing his jaw and his hands are clenched tightly where they’re resting on his thighs.

He looks, Toni can’t help but think, almost like he had the day he’d found her in Afghanistan.

For a long moment they don’t say anything. They just sit there and stare at each other in silence and the space between them across the workshop floor feels like continents and galaxies to Toni.

“Can I … will you … I need to …” Rhodey starts and stops, cuts himself off and fidgets almost nervously.

Toni’s never really seen him like this before and she’s at a loss.

Finally though Rhodey seems to collect himself because he shakes his head, deliberately straightens his shoulders, and looks her dead in the eyes.

Then he does something that makes Toni’s heart skip a beat.
He opens his arms and reaches his hands out in her direction, a silent plea that even she can’t misinterpret.

Toni flings herself across the space between them, scrambles across the workshop floor until she’s pressed flush against his chest and his arms are wrapped around her.

She buries her face in the crook of his neck and breathes him in. *Leather and rich spice, the faintest hint of tequila.*

Rhodey holds her, one large hand smoothing up and down the line of her spine as the other one comes up to cup the back of her neck.

“You’re here.” Rhodey whispers against her temple, so soft Toni’s almost sure she imagined it until he speaks again. “You’re here and you’re real and I didn’t lose you. *I didn’t lose you.*”

Toni’s breath catches in her throat but she pushes it out on a shuddering sigh.

“I’m here.” She mumbles against his throat as she brings her arms up to wrap around him as well. “I’m here.”

They stay that way for the longest time.

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“Do you remember when you caught pneumonia?” Rhodey asks her hours later. They’re upstairs in her bed and he’s wrapped around her back, one hand pressed gently, protectively, against the front of the reactor as he holds her like he’ll never let her go.

“Yeah, I remember.” It’d been right after Jarvis had died and Toni had been half way towards following after him in one way or another for months.

“You were so sick,” Rhodey whispers, “so tiny and frail and you wouldn’t go to the hospital. I begged you to go to the hospital but you just kept saying no, kept threatening to leave if I made you go anyways. You just kept working, kept pushing yourself right up until you collapsed.”

She remembers that as well, remembers how she’d mourned herself thin and ragged and half dead. Jarvis’ loss had been like someone had cut her open and left her to bleed out and she’d been unable to stitch the wound even partially closed for the longest time.

“I was so fucking scared Toni.” Rhodys sighs shakily. “I almost cried when you finally let me put you to bed. I remember looking down at you, sick and feverish and so goddamn pale, and just knowing that that was it. That was how I was going to lose you. That you were going to die, right there, right in that bed, because I was too stupid to just get you the help you needed even though you’d have been pissed at me.”

She’d been on the brink for a while there Toni knows, had been just one good push away from tumbling head first into oblivion. The pneumonia had almost finished the job. It would have, she’s sure, if Rhodey hadn’t been there to stop it.

Toni just hadn’t cared enough to try herself.

“I was too scared to sleep that entire first week you know? I was so sure I’d doze off and wake up and you’d be gone.” Rhodey confesses. “I begged anything or anyone listening not to take you away from me. Not when I’d only just really found you. Not like that, not so soon. Not ever.”
“I’m sorry.” Toni says it because she doesn’t know what else to say, doesn’t know how to soothe a
decade old fear and hurt she hadn’t even known existed until this moment.

“I’d never been so scared in my entire life.” Rhodey breathes deeply for a moment and his arms
tighten around her just a bit. “Not until you were attacked and I was half way around the world and
unable to do anything about it. When I was told … I lost it Toni, almost went AWOL right then and
there when they wouldn’t let me leave to go to you. They finally let me though, because it was you
and they wanted to win points where they could for the future.”

“Rhodey …” Toni’s speechless because she’d never known that, he’d never told her. He’d just
showed up at her door and told her they let him go because it was her, because she was the Stark
in Stark Industries. She’d known he’d been upset, he’d been ragged and drained when he’d arrived,
but she hadn’t known it was that bad.

“And then with Afghanistan, when those sons of bitches took you right out from under my nose.”
Rhodey shudders. “Months went by and everyone was giving up hope except for us, except for
your family. I almost went crazy Toni, because I knew, I knew you were out there. I knew you
were waiting on me. You were out there and you were hurt and I just couldn’t find you. I lost you
baby girl, let you slip right through my fingers when I should have been keeping you safe.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” Toni protests because she can’t bear the hurt she can hear in his voice, “that
was Stane. Rhodey that was Stane and the Ten Rings, that wasn’t you.”

“I got you back though,” Rhodey pushes on almost like he doesn’t hear her, ‘you got out and
JARVIS found you so I got you back and I thought, ‘Okay, this is it, no more. Three times is
enough. I’m going to keep her safe now.’ Only it wasn’t the end.”

Toni bites at the inside of her cheek because she knows what comes next. Because she still has
nightmares about kneeling there at his side on those steps watching him bleed out onto the ground
around them. Sometimes she wakes up and she’s half convinced she can still feel his blood on her
hands, tacky and warm between her fingers.

“Taking that bullet wasn’t even a choice Toni.” Rhodey tells her softly, proudly. “Not when it
comes to you. It was easy, like breathing, and I’d do it again in a heartbeat. Do you understand
that? I’d do it again in a second sweetheart.”

“Rhodey,” Toni chokes out, “I can’t … you can’t … not for me … just, not for me.”

“Don’t you get it yet baby girl?” Rhodey sounds exhausted and his arms cling to her so tightly it
hurts. “I’d always do it for you. Push comes to shove and I’ll always step in front of that bullet for
you. Always. Nothing’s ever going to change that.”

“I don’t want you to do that,” Toni cuts in, “I-I never wanted you to get hurt for me. Never
Rhodey.”

“That’s my choice Toni.” Rhodey cuts her off. “It always has been, always will be. You don’t get
to choose for other people like that Toni.”

“I just didn’t want you to have to watch me die.” It comes out at a whisper because she knows
exactly what he’s talking about. The palladium. “That’s why I didn’t tell you. I didn’t want to do
that to you.”

“I know baby, I know.” Rhodey soothes. “But what you don’t realize is that finding out that you
were hurt, that you were dying, and I didn’t even know about it until after the fact? That was like a
punch to the gut, like getting shot again. It hurt. It hurt so bad. I almost lost you Toni. I almost lost
you again and I didn’t even know it. I’m so tired of almost losing you.”

“I’m sorry,” Toni repeats on a choked off sob, “I’m so sorry Rhodey. I wanted … I wanted it to be …”

“Easy.” Rhodey bites the word out. “I know, you wanted to make it easy. But you don’t get to do
that Toni. Not ever again. You don’t get to pick and choose like that, don’t get to try and control
my grief or make decisions like that for me. I love you Toni but you can’t do that again. Not e-
ever.” Rhodey’s voice breaks on the last word and Toni feels the way the hair at her temple has
grown damp from where he’s curled around her.

He’s crying.

“I wouldn’t have even gotten to say goodbye.” The words are only one step up from a sob and the
sound of his voice so broken and hurt makes Toni ache. “Promise me you’ll tell me if anything like
that ever happens again, let me be with you till the end if you’re ever dying again. Let me be there to
fight with you, to help you. Don’t take that away from me Toni, not again. Promise me.”

“I promise.” Toni breathes the words out because in this moment she’d promise him almost
anything. “Rhodey I’m sorry. I promise.”

“It wouldn’t have been quicker or cleaner Toni,” Rhodey rasps out, “not for me, not for any of us.
Maybe one day you’ll understand that there’ll never be anything easy about your death. Not for the
people who love you.”

Rhodey stays with her that night.

He is, he informs her, entitled to down time after every operation as War Machine and, unplanned or
not, the Stark Expo fiasco has officially been classified as such by the Air Force. So since he’s
currently already stateside she has him for the next few days before he has to report back in.

She cherishes the time she has with him, as limited as it may be, because she’ll never be tired of
Rhodey, will never not want to have him close.

As always she tucks the memory of his touch, his warmth and his love, down deep inside of her so
she’ll have something to draw on in those moments when he’s gone.

On his last day Pepper and Happy come by as well and for the first time in a long time Toni has her
family, all of them but Aunt Peggy, under one roof with her.

Looking at them all, alive and healthy and choosing to be with her for reasons she can still hardly
comprehend, is good.

It’s so good it aches.

It is, as always, far more than she deserves.

“I love you.” Rhodey says easily, simply.

“I love you too.” Toni breathes the words out against his chest and fights the urge to twist her hands
in the back of his shirt and refuse to let him go.

She wants him to stay.

She wants him to stay so bad because no one ever really does.

Everyone leaves her in one way or another and all Toni really wants is for someone to stay.

But she doesn’t ask him to and she never will.

Because she knows Rhodey would.

And she’ll never do that to either of them.

Because, again, they’re not those kinds of people.

“I love you,” Rhodey says it again, easy like breathing, like it’s something he can’t not say. “Stay safe for me Toni.”

“I will if you will.” It’s a promise and a challenge all in one.

“I’ll always come back to you Toni. For as long as I can so you’ve got to be here for me when I do. Just like I’ll be here for you. Because it’s us baby girl, through thick and thin,” Rhodey says the words like the vow they both know they are, “it’s you and me remember?”

“Yeah,” Toni smiles, “till the day we die.”

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Rhodey leaves.

It still isn’t easy to watch him go.

Toni’s long since realized by now that it’ll always be hard.

Watching him leave her behind will never be easy.

~~~

Toni slips into the Mark VI and, even with all of its size and sheer fire power, it feels as comfortable and natural as her own skin.

In her chest the reactor with its new element almost seems to hum. It does that now, Toni has noticed, in a way the palladium never had. It feels warmer too than the old reactor had and the energy it provides, the rush she’d gotten when she’d first slotted it into place, has only partially faded.

She feels more alive now than she has in years.

It makes taking the armor out for a spin even more of a delight than it previously had been.

Toni soars out over the ocean and then upwards towards the moon’s bright glow. She hits the point where the Mark II had once iced over on her and then keeps on going. She breaks through the cloud layer with a whoop of joy and then she just stops.

With only the hum of the suit in her ears it’s quiet, almost like what Toni has always imagined space
would be like.

It’s like Toni’s the only person in the entire world.

She floats there for a long while, at that point between worlds, kept steady by the repulsors.

Then, when she’s finally ready to head back to the mansion, back to the workshop and the queue of projects waiting on her, Toni closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

“Catch me J,” she murmurs, because she knows he’s always listening and she trusts him to keep her safe.

Then she leans back, cuts the repulsors, and lets herself fall.

‘Young miss,’ Jarviss voice rings in her head as she hurtles downwards, ‘would you like me to tell you the story of Icarus?’

JARVIS catches her, safe and sound, long before she hits the ground.

~~~

“Toni.” Pepper’s staring at her, expression unimpressed and her scolding voice on full blast as soon as JARVIS connects the video call.

Toni stops, blinks, tries to think of what she could have done over the past few days to warrant Pepper’s ire, and comes up blank.

“I didn’t do it?” Toni tries because she doesn’t have to pretend to be anyone but Toni when she’s in her workshop, dressed in a Howling Commandos t-shirt and the magnifying goggles that always make Rhodey and Happy laugh when they see her wearing them.

“Toni.” There’s warning in Pepper’s voice then.

“I really didn’t do it?” Toni tries again. “And even if I did there’s no proof so really you shouldn’t make blaming me your first go to option. And also you look lovely today?”

“So you don’t want to tell me why Agent Coulson just left my office after a surprise meeting about whether or not you’ll be contracted soon as SHIELD’s newest consultant?” Pepper’s eyes are narrowed but she does look lovely in the emerald blouse she’s wearing so Toni isn’t completely lying as it turns out.

“Oh,” Toni winces, “yeah that might have actually been me.”

“I thought you didn’t want anything to do with Fury or SHIELD?” Pepper sounds exasperated. “If you’ve worked something out with them Toni then you should have told me.”

“I didn’t work anything out with that asshole or his little army of Secret Squirrels.” Toni feels the way her spine automatically stiffens and then way her mouth curls into an involuntary snarl. “We had a meeting last week and all I told Fury was that if he wanted me as a consultant then he needed to call my office and grab his checkbook.”

Pepper’s quiet for a long moment before she sighs and the irritation in her expression melts a few degrees.

“What happened Toni?” She asks the question quietly, gently.
So, as she had with Rhodey, Toni tells her.

She tells Pepper about the Avengers Initiative, about the psych profile and how she’s not eligible, about how Fury wants her as a consultant but had tried to guilt her into it first.

Pepper’s face is flushed and tight with what Toni recognizes as rage by the time she’s through. Rhodey had worn the same expression when she’d told him. He had ranted and raved and seemed ready to don War Machine and ask Fury to meet him somewhere at high noon so they could duel for her honor. Just the memory is enough to make Toni want to smile.

“Those bastards,” Pepper hisses, “how dare they?”

“It’s fine Pepper-pot,” Toni shrugs, “it’s not like it’s the first time someone’s mislabeled me.” She’s used to it by now even if it had stung more than she wants to admit.

“It’s not Toni, it’s really not.” Pepper seems sad then, rage eaten away a bit by melancholy. “How do you want me to handle this Toni?”

Toni’s given it a lot of thought over the past days, has calculated and theorized. She’s crunched the numbers and run the hypotheticals.

And, as much as the idea is more than slightly distasteful, Toni knows what she needs to do.

“Well Pep,” Toni drawls, “you know what they say. Keep your friends close, your enemies closer, and anyone in-between close enough to get them by the throat.”

“Alright.” Pepper nods her agreement. “I’ll have the legal team at SI start putting something together. Priscilla’s been itching for another challenge lately, this should make her happy.”

“Good.” Priscilla will, Toni knows, put something together that’ll be iron clad. “Oh and Pep?”

“Yes Toni?”

“Don’t make it easy for them either.” Toni grins, sharp and with entirely too many teeth. “Make sure they know just how ruthless we can be.”

“Oh Toni,” Pepper laughs, “it’s cute how you thought I’d do anything less than that in the first place. If Fury and SHIELD want you as a consultant then they’re going to have to pay for the privilege.”

~~~

“Miss,” JARVIS calls for her attention.

Toni blinks, pulls her goggles off and sets them on the work bench, and then stretches her arms up above her head. She winces a bit when the motion pulls at the reactor but even the small ache that gives her almost feels good.

Even the constant low thrum of pain the reactor gives her when she moves wrong or tries to breathe too deeply is nothing compared to the crippling ache of the palladium eating away at her.

“What’s up J?”

“You’re due in D.C. by half past one Miss for your and Lt. Colonel Rhodes’ medal service,” JARVIS informs her. “Might I suggest you shower and dress soon? And perhaps a meal of some sort as you’ve not eaten anything substantial in almost thirty six hours.”
“Hey,” Toni protests because it’s another side effect of the new element it seems. She’s hungry far more often than she used to be. “I’ve eaten. I eat all the time. Pepper’s got all of my rooms stocked with food and the boys have been pouring protein shakes down my throat for days now every chance they get. Which I know you’re behind so don’t think you’re getting away with that either J.”

“While your intake of dried fruits and trail mix are indeed high Miss they do not equal the nutritional value of a full meal. Especially since your ideal caloric intake has increased thanks to the introduction of the new element,” JARVIS counters almost smugly. “The protein supplements are necessary given your lack of a structured schedule or balanced diet.”

“You’re a regular old mother hen aren’t you J?” Toni teases even as she pushes up onto her feet because she knows he’s right. “Eat Miss. Sleep Miss. Don’t set that on fire Miss. The coffee maker doesn’t need to be sentient Miss. It’s like you don’t want me to have any fun baby boy.”

“I am, as ever, the rain on your proverbial parade Miss.” JARVIS agrees solemnly. “The fly in your ointment, the monkey wrench in your plans, etcetera etcetera.”

“I get the point you sarcastic little shit,” Toni laughs gleefully.

“I have no idea what you mean Miss,” JARVIS protests, “I am, as always, being completely literal and would never exaggerate. Such things are not in my programming.”

“Sure, sure, keep telling yourself that.” Toni waves him off as she heads up to her bedroom. “I’ll get a shower and you can put in an order for Japanese from that place I like and I’ll eat before I head out if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Of course Miss,” JARVIS sounds pleased. “Also I would like to inform you that I’ve arranged a … special treat for you and Lt. Colonel Rhodes today. It should make the medal service far more enjoyable for the both of you.”

“A surprise J?” Toni questions as she begins plucking pins from her hair.

“Consider it a late birthday present Miss. And no,” JARVIS cuts her off, “I will not inform you as to the nature of the surprise.”

“Aww,” Toni groans, “the suspense is going to drive me insane.”

“Somehow I do not believe any of us will be able to tell the difference either way.” JARVIS informs her evenly.

~~~

Rhodey meets her in D.C., dressed to impress in his dress blues.

Toni’s dressed in black of course, a military style skirt suit with crimson heels and the golden wings Jarvis had given her set carefully in her hair. The colors are a nice contrast against the starkness of her outfit.

Together side by side she and Rhodey cut a sharp and imposing picture.

The press are almost beside themselves as the photographers in the group go into a frenzy at the sight of them together.

Toni just laughs, crimson painted mouth parted in a sharp grin.
At her side Rhodey sighs, puts his hand protectively on the small of her back, and leads her through the crowd and up towards the stage.

“JARVIS said he had a surprise for us.” Toni tells him quietly.

“A surprise?” Rhodey looks just as startled as she’d been when JARVIS had informed her.

“Yup,” Toni nods slightly, “refused to tell me what it was. Though, knowing J, it’ll be good.”

“He’s as bad as you are, you know that right?”

“That means he’s flawless sugar lump and I couldn’t agree more.” Toni turns just a bit and winks up at him with a small grin.

There’s another flurry of flashes as cameras go off around them.

Suddenly Rhodey sucks in a sharp but quiet breath and his face spasms like he’s forcefully holding back laughter. Curious Toni turns.

The sight of Senator Stern himself walking over to the podium is almost more than Toni can bear.

Oh she owes JARVIS so much for this.

It’s priceless.

Judging from the way Rhodey is obviously using all of his time in the military to keep his face blank he thinks so too.

Hearing Stern call her a national treasure is so much better.

~~~

“I love you,” Rhodey hugs her and presses a kiss to her forehead when the ceremony is done and they’re about to part ways again, “stay safe baby girl.”

“I love you too.” Toni sighs. “I will if you will.”

Rhodey leaves.

Sometimes Toni can’t help but wonder if Rhodey really knows what he’s done. JARVIS had told her he’d watched the message she left for him but for some reason Rhodey hadn’t outright mentioned the video to her. So sometimes she wonders if he really, truly knows the impact he’s had on her life.

He tells her he loves her so often, so easily, and he means it every time.

Toni wonders if he truly realizes, really understands, what he’s done by doing that, by saying those words to her?

Because he’d saved her life long before Stane had ever tried to end it.

He’s kept more than one type of bullet from finding its target in her flesh over the years just by being himself.

Just by loving her.

Toni knows that she will never deserve him.
But goddamnit she’s willing to try.

~~~

The headlines read: *The Iron Queen and Her War Machine: Is The Stark/Rhodes Relationship Inappropriate?*

Toni laughs and laughs.

~~~

Pepper and the SI legal team alongside Priscilla beat out one of the most aggressive and ruthless contracts Toni has ever seen.

Toni approves it with a song in her heart and a grin on her lips.

Then it’s shipped to Fury.

Toni spends the rest of the evening imagining the look on his face when he reads it.

~~~

“Miss,” JARVIS dials down her music and draws her from where she’s been upgrading Mother’s leg for the past half hour.

“Yeah J?”

“An Agent Phil Coulson has called ahead to inform you that he’ll be arriving within the hour. His message said that he wished to both discuss the contract that’s been presented to SHIELD as well as to make a delivery of some sort.” JARVIS sounds less than pleased. “I would be more than pleased to ensure his mission ends in failure if you wish Miss.”

“Calm down Hal,” Toni snickers, “I can deal with Agent. You just keep yourself under wraps as always and make sure to keep an eye on everything you can around here.”

“Of course Miss.”

~~~

Toni dresses carefully as always and she’s ready and waiting by the time Agent shows up on her doorstep, a large grey container embossed with SHIELD’s logo being wheeled behind him.

“Ms. Stark.” Coulson nods at her politely as he steps inside.

“Agent.” Toni purrs as she settles down on her couch, legs crossed at the knee and arms spread across the back. She looks nonchalant and almost insolent she knows. “To what do I owe the … honor of this visit?”

“There are a few things Director Fury wanted to have delivered to you,” Coulson gestured towards the crate, “he thought you might find me less … objectionable than some of the other agents. I would have been by sooner but there was a bit of an issue in New Mexico I had to take care of.”

“Is this a bribe of some sort to get me to rethink the contract I sent him or is he still trying to woo me?” Toni smirks. “I’ve told Fury that it’ll never work between us, tried to let him down all gentle like. Gift giving isn’t going to change that.”
“While I’m sure the Director is heartbroken at being turned down these are a little more personal in a different way,” Coulson looks as unruffled as always. “I will, of course, send him your regrets.”

“You do that.” Damn him to hell but Toni actually kind of likes that sense of unflappability that seems to hang about the man.

“As you know,” Coulson starts, “your father, Howard Stark, helped to found SHIELD.”

At the mention of Howard Toni goes cold just as she always does.

“He did a lot of work with and for the agency over the years before his death. These are a few of his things that SHIELD still had in storage.” Coulson folds his arms behind his back. “Director Fury thought you might want to have them back and that, hopefully, they’d help to show you that SHIELD wants a similar, mutually beneficial partnership with you.”

Toni takes a split second to collect herself, careful not to let her expression betray her true emotions.

“Nostalgia.” She finally drawls after a few silent seconds. “That’s adorable.”

“Ms. Stark?” Coulson’s face is impassive but Toni thinks she can see the barest hint of curiosity in his eyes.

“Fury’s forgetting one important thing Agent,” Toni rises to her feel and slinks around the coffee table until she’s standing only a few feet away from Coulson and his crate. “Nostalgia, kind of like guilt, doesn’t really work on a narcissistic sociopath. It’s a nice try, I’ll give him that though. I’ll tell you like I told Fury after he gave me Romanov’s little report, if he wants me as a consultant then he’d better be prepared to pay for me.”

“I see.” Coulson’s face shuts down completely, expression shuttering instantly.

“You know where the door is Agent,” Toni waves towards the front of the mansion.

“Thank you for your time Ms. Stark,” Coulson gives her a small nod as he turns on his heel.

He pauses though, just at the threshold to the living room, and turns to look back at her again.

“We need you Stark,” Coulson says after a second, “SHIELD’s trying to protect the country and, ultimately, the world. Toni Stark and the Iron Queen on our side would go a long way towards doing both.”

Toni doesn’t respond and finally Coulson turns and leaves.

Toni just watches him go silently, confident that JARVIS will alert her once he’s gone and the mansion is secure again.

~~~

Toni hauls the crate down to her workshop and then spends about half an hour just sitting in her chair and staring at it.

She’s undeniably curious as to what’s inside it but she’s also reluctant to open it. JARVIS has already scanned it and deemed it safe but that’s not what stops her.

Those are Howard’s things.

Howard’s.
Even now Toni wants nothing of him in her home.

“Miss, if I may?” JARVIS speaks up quietly. “I would be more than capable of scanning the contents of the crate with Butterfingers assistance and digitizing any information for future perusal. Of course some of the personal touches would be lost in the process but it is a viable option.”

“Thanks J.” Toni lets out a shuddering sigh.

“Of course Miss.”

~~~

“Might I make a request?” JARVIS ask hours later after Butterfingers has helped to turn each item and then each page in the notebooks inside the crate for JARVIS to scan. There’d even been an old movie reel that JARVIS had managed to digitize as well even though Toni has no interest in seeing it.

“Of course J.” Toni arches a brow and leans back in her chair. JARVIS makes actual requests so rarely that Toni does her best to give him what he wants.

She would anyways of course, but the point remains.

“The contents of the crate,” JARVIS says and Toni automatically flicks a look towards the corner where it’s now sitting.

“What about them?”

“Burn them.”

“J?” Toni sits up straight, “what in the hell was in there?”

She’s never really talked to anyone about what Howard had done to her but of everyone in her life no one knows more on that subject straight from her than JARVIS, not even Rhodey. He’d asked her about it, about Howard, once in the aftermath of the debacle with Stane. He’d been confused as to why that one mention of Howard being proud of her had been enough to unsettle her all the way back at the beginning.

So she’d given him an honest but still edited highlight reel of her and Howard and Maria’s relationship.

Now she can’t help but wonder if there’s something in that crate that might have exposed her past to Fury or to whatever SHIELD lackey had been responsible for Howard’s old things.

“There was nothing untoward in the crate Miss,” JARVIS soothes, “I would simply prefer the contents destroyed as they have all been digitized and are no longer necessary.”

“No problem J.” It is the least she can do for JARVIS and, honestly, she has no interest in Howard’s things anyways.

“Very good Miss.” JARVIS sounds pleased. “His things have no place here with you.”

~~~

Toni watches as the incinerator in the back of the grounds consumes the crate with a sense of warm satisfaction.
It feels almost like it had the day she’d burned the family portrait on the mansion grounds right after they’d died and she’d lost Jarvis.

It feels like the smallest sort of victory.

Toni likes it.

~~~

“There was one thing I thought you might like from the contents Miss,” JARVIS tells her when she comes back inside. “I took the liberty of having Butterfingers put it on your workbench.”

Curious Toni wanders over towards her workbench and throws herself down into her chair.

It’s a photo, yellowed with age but still remarkably well preserved.

Toni feels her breath catch when she turns it over and looks at it for the first time.

There’s a man in the picture, short and slender framed, face almost gaunt and light colored hair laying across his forehead. Toni’s thumb comes up to trace lightly over the curve of his jaw because she’d recognize him anywhere.

It’s Steve. Steve before he was Captain America, Steve when he was small and frail but still so very brave.

“Thanks J,” Toni whispers because this is a precious gift even if it had once belonged to Howard.

Not even he can taint this.

Toni won’t let him.

~~~

Toni frames the picture and hangs it carefully in her room beside the large poster she’s had her entire life.

For the first time though Steve looks lonely there on her wall, even with the way his slender chin is tilted defiantly as he stares the camera down.

It’s short work to have a picture of Bucky, the one on file from where he’d first been drafted, printed and hung beside him. Bucky’s bright eyed even in black and white, face younger and eyes more hopeful than in the films Toni’s seen over and over again.

This, Toni knows, is Bucky before the ravages and horrors of war. He’s lacking that darkness Toni had been drawn to, that glint of shadow and coolness she’d first noticed.

He’s still beautiful though, just like Steve.

Toni traces her fingertip down the side of his face and then Steve’s before she presses her customary kiss to the large poster that hangs beside them.

She lays in bed for the longest time that night, unable to sleep.

She can’t help but wonder what the two of them would think of her, of who she is, of what she is. Of what she’s done and what she’s caused. Of all the things she’s tried to do to make up for her mistakes.
She wonders if it’s wrong of her to cling so tightly to men long dead, to hold on so desperately to old photos and movie reels.

She wonders what it says about her that closest she’s ever come to that kind of love is with a set of pictures on a wall and the echoes of heroes long gone.

She’s sure she’s better off not knowing.

~~~


Toni turns spiraling loops in an endless sky.

Above her Bucky soars.

Below her Steve keeps pace as he races across the water’s surface.

In the distance there’s the glint of light reflecting off of familiar silver armor.

And in her chest a star burns brightly.

~~~

Two more weeks pass and the contract she’d had sent to Fury comes back signed.

Toni laughs and laughs and laughs.

~~~

Rhodey goes out on his first, technically second, official mission as War Machine.

It’s overseas somewhere classified so of course Toni hacks the com channel. She does stay silent though, doesn’t try to interfere. She just wants to be there, in some way, just in case.

She listens to him receive his orders, listens to him talk to TASHA, listens to him fight without her there by his side.

She only really breathes again when it’s over, when he signals his success over the coms and heads back to base.

~~~

Two days later she goes on a mission of her own.

JARVIS has tracked a sighting of Stark weapons to a small town in Bolivia.

It’s easy, all things considered.

Toni returns home to Malibu without a scratch.

Somehow it almost doesn’t seem fair.

~~~

Toni has Pepper check the copyright license on Iron Queen and then has her set up one for War Machine as well.
There’s already toys and posters and clothes for Iron Queen and Toni wants to make sure they’re quality. The same goes for anything with War Machine on it.

The proceeds, she tells Pepper, can be funneled into both the Maria Stark Foundation and the Edwin Jarvis Foundation.

It’s not enough, obviously, but it’s something.

There’s no need to ask about the Captain America name as well. Toni already owns that. Howard had, of course, refused to see control over that particular legacy fall into any hands but his own. That too had fallen to Toni at his death and it’s one of the few legacies she truly enjoys having inherited.

Afterwards, just to be a little shit, she tells Pepper to copyright *The Avengers* as well but to keep it quiet if at all possible. Because even if she’s never going to be a part of that team she’s reached a point where pissing Fury off is almost a hobby.

~~~

SHIELD sends its first request to Toni.

They want repulsor technology.

Toni sends them back an extremely complicated and detailed set of blueprints.

She wonders how long it’ll take the SHIELD engineering team to realize she sent them the details on how to build an overly extravagant microwave.

She resolutely doesn’t care.

She does, however, send the microwave design to Pepper. It’ll make a good addition to their upper tier appliances line.

~~~

Coulson, who is, apparently, her official handler sends her back a blandly worded email a few days later that amounts to him asking her not to tease the baby engineers.

~~~

Toni goes out again.

And then again.

She comes back bloody on more than one occasion. Comes back with bruises and cuts and throbbing, ringing headaches.

It’s worth it though.

It’s all worth it.

~~~

Time passes.

Toni goes on more missions, goes after the Ten Rings and her weapons and anyone who profits from either.
She practically lives out of her workshop otherwise, works on project after project like a thing possessed.

She goes to fundraisers and parties in some of her spare time at Pepper’s insistence.

The media have a field day with either way.

War journalists get shots of Iron Queen decimating weapons stores.

Paparazzi take shots of Toni with champagne glasses and dresses slit up to her hips.

They paint her as either warrior or whore depending on which picture they decide to use.

The Iron Queen is to be praised while Toni Stark is, once again and in SHIELD’s words, not recommended.

Still the world treats her as if she’s two different people.

Like she can’t possibly be both at the same time.

Like she might not be something else entirely.

Idiots.

~~~

She submits the new element that powers the reactor to the scientific community at Pepper’s insistence.

The group of assembled scientists are agog at her discovery, faces twisted in combinations of awe and jealousy, a few in sheer delight. One of the scientists suggests that she name it Starkanium as a tribute to both herself and Howard.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Toni grins, wide and sharp, “I’ll take it into consideration.”

Two weeks later, when the element has been thoroughly vetted and her findings have been authenticated Toni announces her discovery to the world.

By the time she’s done with her presentation there’s whispers of a Nobel Prize being in the works already. Someone in the audience asks her what she intends to name the new element.

“Jarvisium,” Toni tells the crowd with a smile and ignores the confusion on their faces.

Pepper just looks at her and smiles.

~~~

Toni legitimately consults on blueprints for a new helicarrier design Fury’s desperate to have. She sends in her suggestions and her critiques only to have them disputed by the head engineer who is, apparently, not too happy she’s been hired on as a consultant.

So Toni storms into SHIELD’s central office like a hurricane and leaves devastation in her wake.

By the time she leaves that afternoon the engineering department is a flurry of noise as the lower ranked engineers pour gleefully over the data she left them with. The older ones sulk quietly at their stations and any agents she sees in the hall clear out of her way quickly enough.
Good.

She’s not trying to make friends. Especially not here, not in this nest of spies.

She’s been betrayed enough in her life, she has no desire to invite any of them to do it again.

Fury watches her go from behind a tall, glass window.

Toni blows him a kiss and keeps on moving.

~~~

“I can’t tell you where I’m at Toni, you know that.” Rhodey rolls his eyes at her, exasperation and affection clear in his voice. “Especially not because you need me to open a jar for you.”

“Why do you have to hurt me so cherry blossom?” Toni pouts even as she glances at the split screen JARVIS has helpfully pulled up for her. The trace JARVIS had run sets him as being somewhere just outside of Libya. “Fine, I’ll get the blowtorch, or maybe the armor, that’ll get the fucker open.”

“Toni.” Rhodey actually face palms. “You literally have three robot sons there, one with two hands even, who can open things for you.”

“Good point.” Toni grins.

He’s safe, that’s all that matters.

~~~

“Are you sure about this Miss?” JARVIS questions.

“Of course J,” Toni reassures him as does her best to hold still so that U can finish disinfecting her stomach. “I told you, whatever you put in the BUCK-E file I’ll consider. If I like it, it gets implemented. I like this idea and I like this method of execution.”

Butterfingers comes over with the needle and Toni lays back so that DUM-E can stroke her hair, mainly for his own comfort.

Toni isn’t worried though, Butterfingers is perfectly capable and JARVIS is guiding him. She’s had far worse pain anyways, this’ll hardly be a blip on her radar.

Five minutes later Toni has a new piercing in the form of a long, thick silver bar jutting through her navel.

In a few weeks when it heals she’ll finish the process out.

~~~

Pepper and Happy come to see her when they can. It isn’t as often as it once was with all of Pepper’s new responsibilities but their time together is still good.

Especially when Toni sees the way Happy hovers just a little bit closer to Pepper than he used to, sees the way Pepper smiles ever so slightly and leans back into his space.

They haven’t said anything to her yet but she’s sure it’s just a matter of time.

In the meantime Pepper’s excelling as CEO and Toni finds that she enjoys her time as head of R&D
without the CEO dancing accompanying it. She has better things to do with her time after all.

Her production rate is high, updates flow from the workshop because beyond her missions, beyond the few parties and meetings she still attends, that’s all she really focuses on.

Rhodey’s still gone, deployed overseas with only infrequent calls and their old system of letters to keep them connected even though JARVIS will know in an instant if TASHA reports the need for help.

The mansion feels … bigger somehow, than it ever had before.

She’s lonely Toni realizes finally but then, she always has been in one way or another.

It’s fine.

~~~


Toni soars through an endless sky.

Bucky soars above her.

Steve keeps pace below.

Underneath the water’s surface, massive shapes twist sinisterly.

And in her chest a star burns brightly.

~~~

“There we go.” Toni mutters as she finally changes the thick silver bar in her navel out for the custom one she’d created.

It’s stainless steel like the bars through her nipples, but it’s thicker and a bit longer.

What makes it really special though is the medallion that hangs from it.

About the size of her thumb and done in shining stainless steel as well, the small replica of Steve’s shield is cradled in the hollow of her navel.

No one would ever take it for the miniaturized thumb drive it really is. No one would ever expect it to be a direct emergency uplink to JARVIS.

Now JARVIS, or at least a way to get in contact with him, will always be with her in a way that goes beyond the tracker in her back.

Toni likes it.

~~~

A mission goes wrong.

Well, it’s wrong from the beginning is a better way to put it.

Toni arrives in an isolated mountain village that’s reportedly the home of a great many of her weapons and a particularly violent splinter group of Ten Rings members only to be met with zero
resistance. The place is silent, still. There are no signs of her weapons beyond a few empty crates that still bear her name.

It only takes her a second to realize why.

“No life signs detected Miss.” JARVIS tells her solemnly.

Toni stay silent.

Everyone in the village, every man, woman, and child, is dead.

*Murdered.*

Staring out over the massacred village Toni feels nothing at all.

She was too late to save these people.

This is her fault.

~~~

She stays in that village for the night.

With JARVIS in her ear she uses the armor to blast holes in one of the surrounding fields.

Then, reverently, she lowers each body into the ground.

One after another, after another.

When she’s finally done, when the armor is dirty and all she can smell even through the filters of the helmet is death Toni drops down onto her knees in front of the mass grave she’s dug.

With steady hands she reaches up and takes her helmet completely off.

The mountain air is crisp and cold but it’s tainted, muddled with ash and decay.

Helmet clutched in both of her gauntleted hands Toni tilts her head back so that she’s staring up at the night sky.

And then she *screams.*

~~~

Fury sends her a request for a new hand gun, for new high energy output weapons, for a *missile.*

Toni sends him back the schematics for high impact body armor, for a new miniaturized coms device, and a fifteen minute long video of various movie characters telling him to go fuck himself.

She’s particularly proud of the last one.

~~~

Coulson sends her an actual paperback copy of *Flirting For Dummies.*

Inside the front cover is an inscription:

*Stark,*
The courtship between you and Director Fury is both disturbing and sad.

He’ll be getting a copy of this book as well so hopefully it’ll make a difference on both ends.

Coulson

Despite her resolve not to Toni barks out a laugh.

Damn Coulson and his dry sense of humor. It’s almost enough to make her like him.

Almost.

~~~

Toni’s restless.

The workshop is in full swing around her, the bots playing and working in turns as Mother watches them all from atop her throne like shelf.

She has a million and one things she could and should be doing. Projects and schematics, updates and tests to sketch out or complete. There’s always more things to review from the BUCK-E file and then there’s the rough outline for the Mark VII that she’s already kicking around.

Instead she wonders upstairs for some reason.

For the first time in a long time she finds herself sitting down at the grand piano, a sleek beauty of an instrument that Pepper had picked when she and the bots had accidentally destroyed the last one.

Toni lifts the lid and runs her fingers across the keys lightly, it’s still perfectly in tune of course.

Almost without thinking about it she launches into Minuet. She’s halfway through the piece on memory alone when she stops suddenly.

Breathing heavily Toni slams her hands against the keys with a discordant thud.

She hasn’t played for … a very long time even if she had bought the piano for the mansion and then had Pepper replace the one that was destroyed.

Toni remembers her lessons, remembers how she’d hated them and the strict Parisian teacher Maria had saddled her with. The woman had taught her French as well as piano and had been the one who’d started her dance lessons when she was young. Maria had been insistent on all of them, had sworn up and down that Toni needed at least a little bit of refinement.

Jarvis had been the one to truly help her though. He’d been the one who’d spoken to her in casual conversational French until she mastered it and moved on to Italian. He’d been the one who’d helped her see the beauty in music, had likened it to math and helped her practice between her lessons if only to spare her knuckles from her teacher’s ruler and heavy hand. He’d been the one to attend her few dance recitals before she’d graduated and left to the safety of MIT.

She’d spent days perfecting his favorite song on the piano when she’d been eleven.

She’ll never forget the look on his face the first time she played it for him during one of Howard and Maria’s frequent trips away.

It hits her then, that ever present but mostly dampened grief. It hits her like it’s fresh and new. Raw and aching. She reaches up and buries her fingers in her hair that’s loose for once and hanging to her
waist as she hunches forward over the piano keys, shoulders rounded with grief.

*God she misses him so much.*

Toni takes a deep, shuddering breath, straightens up to set her hands back on the keys and, for the first time in over a decade, plays his song.

There are a few stops and starts but she finds the remembered rhythm quickly enough because she never really forgets anything. It’s one of the blessings of genius like her own. Soon the song is flowing, smooth and right, from her fingertips.

Toni closes her eyes, tips her head back, and *sings.*

*You are the promised kiss of springtime/that makes the lonely winter seem long,* her voice is husky and her pitch isn’t right because she’s never been that good of a singer, but the words come as easy as breathing, *you are the breathless hush of evening/that trembles on the brink of a lovely song.*

She sings the song all the way to the end and then she stops, hunches again over the keys and sucks in deep, shuddering breaths.

“And everything good about me came from you,” Toni whispers to the quiet of the mansion, to the ghost of the only father she’d ever known, to the man who’d loved her first and who’d taught her to love in turn. “I miss you so much.”

And, like always, there is no answer.

~~~

That village, the one she’d been too late to save, haunts her.

She wasn’t fast enough and those people had paid the price.

She hadn’t done enough and they’d died because of that.

She needs to do more.

Hunting her weapons down and getting rid of them isn’t enough anymore.

She needs to do better.

She needs to *be* better.

~~~

Toni goes out again and again, over and over.

She comes back once with a dislocated shoulder that she has Butterfingers and U help her set much to JARVIS’ disapproval.

She sits on the workshop couch that night, a bag of ice tied to her shoulder and a tumbler of bourbon in hand.

Around her the workshop is quiet, the bots in their charging cradles and Mother in her habitat.

Toni just sits and in the silence her mind *whirls.*
Clean energy.

It’s an idea that sticks with her.

Access to clean, sustainable energy would open up opportunities and doorways to millions of people the world over. It would have a massive and dramatic impact on the environment as well, which is something Toni knows is sorely needed.

Something like that, an idea like that, could change the world.

And, with the miniaturized arc reactor and a means to produce Jarvisium in her hands now, Toni has the building blocks to do just that.

All she has to do is figure out the finer points. All she has to do is make sure the reactor is safe, that it can’t be used for anything other than what she intends.

All she has to do is what she’s always done.

Build/create her way forward.

~~~

“Pepper,” Toni coos as she swans into Pepper’s office a week or so later, “sweetheart have I got some good news for you.”

“Toni,” Pepper perks up, “this is a surprise. What’s going on?”

“Pepper-pot, darling,” Toni settles down on the corner of Pepper’s desk, “how do you feel about helping me change the world?”

“Again?” Pepper grins.

“Again.” Toni confirms and her smile is genuine and pleased.

“I’m all ears Toni.” There’s an eager light in Pepper’s eyes.

“Clean energy,” Toni says the words with relish, “I’m talking about self-sustainable and completely clean energy here Pep. It’ll make all kinds of things accessible to people all over the world that they would have never been able to have otherwise.”

“Oh Toni,” Pepper sighs, “you always give me the nicest gifts imaginable.”

~~~

The board wants to fight them because of course they do.

But together Pepper and Toni are a team that few could ever hope to stop.

A compromise is reached quickly enough.

Stark Tower will break ground in New York within the next month.

~~~

Rhodey gets leave after a particularly grueling mission and he comes home, War Machine in tow.
Toni wraps her arms around him and holds him close for long, breathless moments.

They spend the next few days tangled up in each other as Toni fills him in on what’s been going on around the mansion and on the news of the new Stark Tower in New York.

Finally Toni decides to broach a subject with him she’s been waffling on for days now.

“I was thinking,” Toni starts as she makes adjustments on War Machine and goes over it carefully for anything that might cause issues for Rhodey in the future. She has a few software updates for TASHA as well.

“That’s always a dangerous thing,” Rhodey teases.

“Fuck you,” Toni chirps as she grins at him over her shoulder, “anyways I was thinking about moving to New York once the Tower is finished. I’ve already put in for the top ten floors or so be held in reserve for me. Not sure what I’ll do with them yet but I know I want a new lab at least. Maybe a penthouse and a guest floor or two? I’ve already set it to have a large underground garage too so that’ll be nice. There’ll be plenty of room for you there too of course, if you’re interested. I already told Pepper she could stay here at the mansion if she wants while I’m in New York, Happy too. You know she prefers California anyways and it’s not like they won’t be visiting.”

“New York huh?” Rhodey hums. “Alright. We’ve had sun and surf for a while now, I guess snow and ice will be a good change. Haven’t been back to the east coast for more than a short visit in years anyhow.”

Toni turns back to War Machine with a smile.

It won’t be home after all if Rhodey isn’t there at least some of the time.

~~~

Coulson’s waiting for her the next time she heads into SHIELD’s central office. He falls into step beside her easily enough, his longer legs easily making up for the quickness of her stride.

“It’s good to see you Stark.” Coulson dips his head in her direction.

“Cut the shit Agent, we both know it’s never good to see me.” She quirks a brow at him over the rim of the sunglasses she always wears when she comes here. JARVIS would insist if she didn’t. He rather likes the idea of being able to record and see through her eyes so to speak no matter where she is. “Not sure why though since I’m such a fucking delight to be around.”

To her almost grudging amusement Coulson actually smiles at that.

“Agent Romanov is exceptionally skilled,” Coulson speaks up a few second later and Toni feels the small bud of amusement that had been growing inside of her die a quick death. “I’d be hard pressed to name someone more skilled than she is in her field.”

“Fascinating.” Toni drawls.

“That being said,” Coulson turns his head just slightly and looks at her, “I think she’s wrong about you. Her and the Director both. Do you know why?”

“Do tell.” Toni stays nonchalant but she can’t deny her slight spike of interest. Coulson’s proven not to be a complete idiot so far and she’s actually rather interested in where he’s going with this.
“It’s because you remind me of someone,” there’s a small, almost fond smile on Coulson’s face, “one of my best agents actually. He’s abrasive and sarcastic like you are. Bit of a loud mouth to be honest. But breathtakingly skilled as well.”

“He sounds enchanting.” Toni cuts in because they’re at the elevator banks.

“You’d either kill each other after ten minutes or the two of you’d end up ruling the world.” Coulson shrugs just a bit and his face is impassive once again. “It’d probably be a nightmare for the rest of us regardless. My point is, you remind me of him and it makes me wonder just how much there is to you that no one really knows. A lot, I think. Honestly I’m surprised Romanov didn’t pick up on that too.”

“Agent if this is you trying to get in my good graces I hate to tell you that you’re going to have to fight Fury for the honor of stalking me.” Toni quips as she tries to shrug off the slight sense of unease that’s crept up her spine. “I expect the duel to be both magnificent and bloody because I don’t have time for more than one unwanted courtship at the moment.”

“Of course Stark,” Coulson shakes his head slightly even as he turns on his heel and begins to walk away. “Like I said, just like him. Don’t know how she missed that.”

Toni watches him go, curious despite herself about this mysterious agent Coulson was talking about.

~~~

The ground is broken on Stark Tower and construction shoots off like a greyhound out of the gate. Toni’s looking forward to moving more than she thought possible.

She’d designed the Malibu mansion herself and it was home in a way no other place has ever been before but she finds that she wants a change.

For some reason, as much as she loves the house, she doesn’t feel as safe in it as she used to.

Maybe it’s because she’s almost died so many times in this one place over the past couple of years.

Either way New York will be a nice change.

Plus there’s the added benefit of just what Toni intends to do with the Tower.

With Pepper’s help she plans to turn it into a beacon of clean energy, a towering pillar of light that’ll show the world just what she has to offer them.

~~~

“Are you sure Miss?” JARVIS asks.

“Of course I’m sure J,” Toni shifts so that she’s comfortable where she’s laid on top of the table on her left side, hair pinned up and carefully smoothed away from her right ear. “You don’t have to ask each time you know? If I didn’t want it, didn’t like it, I wouldn’t do it baby boy. I’ve had enough unwanted additions to last me a life time after all,” she slides a hand up to tap at the reactor, “I’m not just going to take another without saying something first.”

“Of course Miss,” JARVIS agrees but her extra reassurances seem to have calmed him some. “Are you sure you would not prefer an anesthetic of some kind?”

“No.” Toni nips that idea in the bud. She doesn’t want anything like that, doesn’t want to fall asleep
and wake up changed. Not again. “I’m good.”

DUM-E wheels up to her and, like he had with the navel piercing, begins to gently stroke her hair. U comes up next with syringe in hand and Butterfingers follows him until they’re both standing beside the tool tray laid out beside Toni that holds an array of items as well as a small metal case.

Everything’s been sterilized, Toni knows what’s about to happen, and JARVIS will be watching and directing them faithfully. Again she isn’t worried.

“Alright J, boys, let’s do this.” Toni takes a deep breath and then lets it out slowly.

It hurts but Toni had known going in that it was going to. Instead she focuses on the way JARVIS is narrating the process, entirely for her benefit she’s sure.

The return will be worth it though.

As with so many other things in her life, pain is a small price to pay for victory.

~~~

Toni’s head and especially her right ear aches by the time it’s done.

But when she turns her head and looks at the magnified projection of herself JARVIS is showing her she has to chalk the entire endeavor up to a success.

The ear cuff is large, it runs from just below the ruby stud set high on the arch of her ear all the way down to just above her second set of holes on the bottom of her ear lobe.

It’s done in a stunning matte black that makes the metal gleam against her skin. The best part of it though is the golden angel wing design that flows across its surface, the delicate scroll like motif had been done by an uncharacteristically solemn DUM-E.

All in all it’s gorgeous.

But now comes the test.

Toni grabs a set of car keys at random, tosses a wave at the bots, and gets behind the wheel.

She drives out onto the high way for about ten minutes before she parks on the side of the deserted road, gets out of the car, and walks a little ways down the cliff side.

Then, careful of the small, precise set of stitches directly behind her ear, she reaches up and presses her fingertip against the small depression in the cuff where it curls inwards into her ear.

There’s a small click.

“Can you hear me J?” Toni asks quietly. “Are you there?”

“Yes Miss.” JARVIS’ voice comes back to her, smaller and quieter than normal, but still him, still precious and perfect and right in her ear. “I’m here.”

Toni laughs.

See?

Victory.
Toni knocks softly on the door in front of her.

“Come in.” A soft, worn voice calls from the other side.

Toni takes a deep breath and pushes it open.

Aunt Peggy’s sitting in a high back chair by the large patio door, there’s a familiar cashmere throw across her lap and a cup of tea steaming at her elbow, her hair’s brushed and pinned back from her face and her cheeks have a rosy glow.

She looks good, all things considered.

“Can I help you dear?” Aunt Peggy asks with a small smile.

It takes everything Toni has in her not to flinch.

The nurse had warned her that it wasn’t a good day, that Aunt Peggy was calm and alert but not *present* per se.

Still she had hoped …

“Yes ma’am,” Toni summons up a small professional smile, “I wanted to stop in and see how your accommodations are and to ask you if there is anything you might need.”

“That’s very kind of you dear.” Aunt Peggy smiles.

“It’s no problem at all.” The words are true but they still taste like ash in Toni’s mouth.

They chat politely for a few minutes before Toni withdraws from the room. She doesn’t try to push Aunt Peggy, doesn’t try to force her to remember. She’d made that mistake only once before in the past, had pushed when she shouldn’t have because she’d been manic and desperate for comfort.

It hadn’t ended well.

Toni leans her forehead against the closed door in front of her and just *breathes* for a moment.

*God* she misses Jarvis, misses Aunt Peggy *so damn much.*

It hurts, it’ll never really stop hurting.

But at least Toni is used to pain by now, this kind and many others as well.

Finally she straightens, squares her shoulders, and turns to leave.

“I’m done here J,” she murmurs, “it wasn’t a good time.”

“Of course Miss,” JARVIS’ voice is a comfort in her ear, “my condolences.”

~~~

Time passes around Toni, affecting her but not.

The Tower grows quickly, Pepper and Happy kiss in front of her and Toni just smiles and laughs and tells them both it’s about time. Rhodey says the same when he hears about the development.
The bots, Mother, and JARVIS keep her company more often than not.

Toni has, surprisingly enough, developed a semi-friendly email based working relationship with Coulson.

It’s strange, almost like having a friend of sorts except for how she doesn’t actually trust him.

Most of their conversations revolve around SHIELD in one way or another and Toni is never anything but cold to Fury or the other agents she meets and routinely terrorizes but it’s good in its own way.

It helps that he shares a mutual love for Captain America, even though for her it’s always been more about Steve himself.

Either way he’s intensely proud of his trading card collection and Toni can’t really blame him.

It’s vintage and mint after all.

~~~

Toni goes out again.

It’s bad.

Not as bad as that mountain village, the one that haunts her dreams, but it’s still horrible.

The village, and it always seems to be villages, small isolated towns that are terrorized by these monsters who wield her weapons still, is in shambles.

Toni does her best to avoid homes and the scurrying residents as she fights, as she shoots repulsor blast after repulsor blast, fires small armaments and ducks and weaves through the sky to avoid being hit by the missiles being shot at her.

She sends up flares and turns tight corkscrews through the sky to avoid some, others she shoots down before they can become a danger to her.

She’s jetting just above the tops of the houses when she sees her.

She’s small, her clothes are dirty and torn and she’s crying as if her heart is breaking.

She’s also directly in the path of an oncoming barrage.

“Fuck.” Toni bites the curse off sharply, turns, and speeds in her direction.

She tracks the trajectory, does the math and knows the odds but she’s still almost afraid that she won’t make it.

She does though, with only seconds to spare.

Toni wraps herself around the little girl’s startled form and braces for impact.

She chokes back a noise of pain when she takes the full payload to the back but the little girl is mumbling in Farsi and looks frightened but fine when Toni pushes her gently towards a nearby alley before she turns back to her fight.

~~~
Toni hisses out a breath when U helps her wrap her ribs that night, her torso’s black and blue beneath the reactor.

She doesn’t cry though.

Toni long ago stopped crying over something as simple as physical pain.

Howard had made sure of that.

~~~

**Wax. Feathers. Heat.**

*Toni soars alone through an endless sky.*

*Below her the sea churns as a thousand skeletal hands reach up for her from beneath the surface.*

*They drag her down even as she screams and fights.*

*Rhodey, Bucky, and Steve are all there waiting for her, taken by the sins she can never wash away.*

~~~

Toni wakes *screaming.*

~~~

Stark Tower is completed in a truly impressive amount of time.

Toni takes the Mark VI to New York for final inspections.

Again, as with the mansion, the blueprints to the top ten floors of the Tower are kept secret with no electronic copies and the original paper file given to her.

Toni is, again, taking no chances.

~~~

Clad in a familiar red sundress, hair loose and flowing down to her waist, Toni traces her fingertip over the letters on the headstone like she has a hundred times before. It’s the middle of the night and she’d been stealthy so she’s not worried about paparazzi or anything of the sort.

E. D. W. I. N.

“I never thought I’d come back to this coast.” Toni tells the stone softly. “Not to stay, not to live. I thought the ghost of Howard would keep me away for forever. But I’m here now, for a while at least. Built a new Tower and everything, all twisting glass and steel. Not sure if you’d like it or hate it honestly but it’s good, solid and safe and it’s going to be *clean* Jarvis. It’s going to be a beacon, a tower of light.”

J. A. R. V. I. S.

“I want to make you proud of me,” Toni whispers, “it’s what I’ve always wanted to do. Make you proud. I think … I think this might help some. Clean energy and all that comes hand in hand with it. I think it’s something you’d like, the kind of move you’d approve of.”
“It’s not enough though,” Toni admits with a ragged sigh. “It’ll never be enough. I know that. I’ll … I don’t think I’ll ever be clean again Jarvis. There’s too much blood on my hands, too many deaths laid at my feet. The things I’ve caused, the things I’ve seen ….”

“I can’t change my past. I know that. I’m fine with that. I’m a scientist after all so I know better.” Toni shakes her head. “I just want to work towards building a future for the world instead. Something good and safe. Something clean.”

“I love you. I miss you.” She pushes her curls behind her shoulder, presses a kiss to the stone, and then stands up. “Everything good about me came from you.”

The workshop she outfits in the Tower is larger and more extravagant than the one in Malibu and Toni thinks the boys will like it.

She takes a month to set up the sensors JARVIS will need, lays the ground work for integrating him smoothly and seamlessly into the Tower.

Then she calls in the decorator she’d vetted and used for the mansion in Malibu.

The penthouse is done in sleek lines and sharp edges, there are nooks and crannies everywhere for her to store odds and ends or anything she might wish.

The guest floor below hers is done in a more neutral and welcoming tone, as is the gym level above hers, but she thinks Pepper and Happy will spend most of their time in the penthouse with her when they visit anyways so it doesn’t really matter. The same, of course, goes for Rhodey.

The other floors are left bare until Toni needs or wants them. She’s not sure what she’ll use them for yet but it’s nice to have the option there anyways.

Hell maybe she’ll give each of the bots and JARVIS a floor of their own to decorate as they wish.

Butterfingers doesn’t seem inclined to a long, cross country ride in the back of a van and Mother doesn’t need the stress either, so this time when she moves house Toni takes the jet.

It still takes time though, getting everything moved even if she leaves some things behind. The entire Iron Gallery goes with her though, even if JARVIS will be sealing the workshop down behind her.

Better safe than sorry.

“I feel less crowded somehow Miss,” JARVIS tells her as soon as she finishes uploading him into the Tower. She’s added more upgrades and securities for him than she can shake a stick at and he’s more powerful now than ever before. Everything from the elevator to the coffee pots can be underneath his control if he wants them to be.
He has an unprecedented amount of power over the Tower unbeknownst to anyone but herself and their family and she doesn’t regret it for a second.

Some would find that terrifying.

Toni finds it comforting.

JARVIS she trusts with everything after all.

She does love him so.

“I’m glad you like it baby boy,” Toni grins as she moves to stare out of the large penthouse windows at the skyline, “Welcome to New York J, our new home.”

“Indeed Miss,” JARVIS says, “it should prove to be interesting.”

“With us J, it's never anything but interesting.” Toni quips. “Now come one, we’ve got work to do. We’re going to be installing our miniaturized arc reactor in a few days darling, we’ve got to make sure everything’s prepared or Pepper will have our collective heads. You know what they say J, there ain’t no rest for the wicked and we’re the wickedest of them all.”

“Of course Miss,” JARVIS agrees, “and I would not, I believe, have you any other way.”

Chapter End Notes

Wow, that was long wasn't it?

Honestly a monster chapter like I said before.

So again, please review, send me your thoughts/feelings/concern on the chapter as well as your hopes/head canons/requests for the next chapter. I like to hear from you guys.

Also feel free to drop by and see me on my Tumblr.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I'm BACK!

Wow, yeah. It's been a while but I'm back and I'm happy to say here's the first part of the Avengers arc.

Fair warning that this chapter is mainly plot build up and that the true gut punch scenes will be in the next chapter. I hope I don't disappoint anyone with how I handled this chapter and I hope you'll drop me a comment to let me know what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The sea feels dark and endless around Toni even though she knows she’s technically safe.

The suit is, as always, water proof and she’s nowhere near deep enough for pressure to be an issue.

Still that doesn’t erase the unease that creeps down her spine from being so far underwater.

JARVIS murmurs in her ear the entire time she’s at work though. He keeps up a steady stream of data and conversation with her that would constitute rambling if it was anyone else. The topics range from everything from his research into the newly destroyed SHIELD base, the one she’s not supposed to know about since Fury hasn’t called her in on whatever’s happened, all the way to their projected energy readings for the Tower once the reactor is online.

While being focused and on task helps to keep her calm and in control even without his back up chatter Toni still appreciates it, is grateful for his consideration and care. JARVIS, more than anyone else, knows exactly how much Toni hates being underwater now days, with or without the suit.

Finally though their work is done. The new miniaturized reactor is locked firmly into place and Toni is free to go. She breaks through the surface of the water like bullet and jets upwards towards the sky seconds later.

She’s only a little bit ashamed as to how much better she feels once she’s in the air again.

She should be stronger than this, should be able to handle water and being submerged with or even without the suit better than she does by now.

But she isn’t.

She can’t.

Sometimes she still wakes screaming from dreams of sand and water and heavy, cruel hands.
wrapped tightly in her hair as she’s forced down and under. Still wakes up with her hands clutching at her chest, covering the reactor, desperate to protect the pulsar star she’s lodged in her sternum from those who’d take it from her.

It’s a failing of hers, Toni knows it is, this weakness she’s not yet been able to correct.

She should be stronger and yet, as always, Toni seems to fall just short of what she should be.

She’s destined and damned all at the same time to be only what she is instead of what the world thinks she should be, no more and no less.

“Good to go on this end darling,” Toni says as she twirls around a skyscraper, “the rest is up to you.”

“You disconnected the transmission lines?” Pepper’s face is one part anxious and one part excited on the small projection in the corner of the HUD. “Are we off the grid?”

“Stark Tower is about to become a beacon of self-sustaining clean energy Pepper-pot.” Toni doesn’t even try to keep the smug grin from her face.

“That’s assuming the arc reactor takes over and this actually works of course.” Pepper cuts in drolly.

“Oh I don’t assume Pep, I know,” Toni grins as she turns a corner. “And you should know better than to doubt my math by now. It’s going to work so light her up J.”

“Of course Miss.” JARVIS agrees.

There’s a split second of silence and then the Tower comes online, lights crawling up from the ground as each floor reconnects to the energy grid.

Then it reaches the top and her name glows a bright, brilliant blue.

Stark Tower is a beacon of light, a bright, glowing monument. A blazing pillar of guidance built by Toni and Pepper and JARVIS’ hands and ignited despite all of the opposition thrown in their way.

Victory.

“How does it look?” Pepper’s voice is hushed, soft and sweet and as emotional as Toni feels in this moment because this, this is what they’ve been working towards.

This is the moment all of their work, all of their plans, all of their battles over the past months, comes to fruition.

“It’s like Christmas,” Toni tells her, “but with more … me.”

“We’ve got to go wider on the public awareness campaign,” Pepper cuts in, excited and smug in that way she has that never fails to make Toni feel warm inside, “you need to do some press. I can do some more tomorrow. I’m working on the zoning for the next billboards…”

“Pepper,” Toni huffs out a small laugh, “you’re killing me and the moment. Remember? Enjoy the moment? That’s a thing we’ve talked about.”

“Then get in here with us for a minute before we go and I will.” Pepper sniffs just as Toni sets down on the landing pad outside of her new home.

JARVIS brings the arms up out of the landing pad and plucks the armor off of her piece by piece as she moves. Toni doesn’t even falter, her every step is smooth and confident despite the machinery
whirling around her. She built it and JARVIS runs it, the only place she’d be safer would be in back in the armor or in Rhodey’s arms.

“Miss,” JARVIS’ speaks directly into her ear, “Agent Coulson is on the line for you.”

“Take a message J or tell him to call back in a few,” Toni waves a hand in the air around her as she walks down the strip, “I’m busy right now.”

“Of course Miss.”

Pepper’s standing in front of the projection of the Tower when Toni finally makes it inside. She’s wearing a flowing blue gown and her hair is, for once, falling in soft waves around her shoulders. She looks stunning and Toni knows from the mischievous twinkle in her eye that Happy’s in for one hell of a night once the two of them leave.

From the slightly nervous, slightly dazed look on Happy’s face where he’s sprawled on the couch in his tux, he knows it too.

Granted the slight smear of lipstick Toni sees on his face is a hint as well.

“Levels are holding steady,” Pepper tells her, eyes wide and glued to the projection, “I think.”

“Of course they are,” Toni huffs out on a laugh, “I was directly involved. Which brings me to my next question: how does it feel to be a genius?”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve got the monopoly on genius in this room Toni.” Pepper turns towards her with a roll of her eyes.

“Don’t sell yourself short Pep,” Toni steps forward and tugs gently on a strand of Pepper’s hair, “none of this would have been possible without you.”

“No, none of this would have been possible without that,” Pepper reaches up and pokes Toni gently on the forehead, “or that.” She pulls her hand back enough to point a finger towards Toni’s chest but purposefully doesn’t try to touch the reactor.

Toni smiles, grateful for her consideration because as much as she loves Pepper she’s still not comfortable with anyone but Rhodey and the bots touching the reactor. She’s honestly not sure if she ever will be.

“Give yourself some credit Pepper-pot,” Toni tells her with a wink. “This has been as much your baby as mine. So give yourself say … twelve percent of the credit?”

“Twelve percent?” Pepper scoffs as she steps around her and moves towards Happy with her hips swaying. “Do you hear this? Twelve percent she says. Twelve.”

“An argument could be made for fifteen.” Toni protests with a bitten off smile. She’s as amused as she always is when Pepper plays back with her. The absolutely besotted look on Happy’s face as he stares at Pepper is just a bonus.

“The Boss is nothing if not generous.” Happy cuts in with a small grin as he stands up. “Normally you’d be lucky to get that much out of her.”

“I am wounded Hogan,” Toni levels a betrayed look in his direction, “wounded I say. I’m being beyond generous, especially since I did all the heavy lifting. Literally in some cases. There were heavy things and I lifted them. Oh and don’t forget that little security snafu that was all Pepper’s
Oh hush you.” Pepper flaps a hand in her direction as she reaches up to thumb the lipstick smear away from the corner of Happy’s mouth and then straightens his bowtie.

“My private elevator Pep,” Toni whines dramatically, “filled with sweaty workmen. All the tool belts, all the muscles, all the … plaid.”

“You’re welcome.” Pepper grins and Toni barks out a laugh. Pepper’s been of the opinion that Toni needs to get laid and she’s been less than subtle about it the past few months.

Toni normally laughs at her though because it’s obviously a side effect of Pepper being damn near deliriously pleased with her relationship with Happy.

“Miss,” JARVIS interrupts in her ear, “Agent Coulson is rather insistent. He’s on the ground floor of the Tower and is attempting to overwrite my security protocols in order to be allowed access to the elevator.”

Toni feels ice trickle down her spine because how dare he? Even if Coulson and everyone else thinks JARVIS is just a simple call and answer program he has no right. This Tower and everything in it is hers. No one, and especially not SHIELD, has the right to try and barge their way inside.

Still Toni’s careful to keep her face calm and clear. She doesn’t want to ruin Pepper and Happy’s night out with whatever it is that Agent Agent wants from her.

“J,” Toni murmurs as she turns away from Happy and Pepper to pick up a flute of champagne, “let him in one of the elevators but hold him there until I give you the all clear.”

“He’s being rather insistent even with me blocking his calls. I could always take him up a bit and then drop him Miss,” JARVIS offers. “A few floors wouldn’t be fatal …”

“You’re a bloodthirsty bundle of code you know that J?” Toni tips a grin up towards the ceiling, “I’m so proud.”

“Alright fess up,” Pepper cuts in, “what are you two terrors giggling about now?”

“This and that Pep,” Toni turns and waves a hand dismissively in the air, “you know how it goes, nothing for you two to worry about.”

“I swear you and JARVIS are going to take over the world one day.”

“Hmm,” Toni hums in agreement, “Empress Stark kind of has a nice ring to it. What do you say J? Want to be a Stark prince and help me rule my future empire?”

“I was under the impression that I already am Miss. Alongside Princess Rhodes and the Generals Potts and Hogan of course.” JARVIS puts forth drolly and Toni can’t help but laugh, bright and happy, at his cheek.

“You two are the worst. Fine, take over the world and see if I care.” Pepper grumbles but Toni can see the glint of humor and affection in her eyes. “I’m not going to help you run it just so you know.”

It’s a lie, Toni knows, Pepper would totally help her run the world if she decided she wanted to take over even more of it than she already has. Pepper wouldn’t be able to help herself and Happy
wouldn’t either.

“All plans for my future kingdom aside, you two are going to be late to your reservations if you don’t go now.” Toni leans to the side and waggles her brows in Happy’s direction. “Don’t want to miss out on a romantic evening out on the town do you?”

“Shit.” Pepper curses and whirs around to grab her clutch off the nearby bar.

Happy’s already up and at the elevator waiting on her when Pepper steps back up to Toni’s side.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?” Pepper asks softly. “You should be out celebrating this too you know? It’s a big deal Toni. This, this is going to change the world. For the better. *Again.*”

“That’s sweet Pep.” Toni thinks about the ring she knows Happy has in his pocket, a brilliantly crafted piece of platinum and diamonds that she and JARVIS had personally helped him design, and smiles. “But I’m good. You two go have fun. Oh and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“That list is *distressingly* small.” Pepper quips as she leans forward and busses Toni gently on the cheek. “I’m so proud of you Toni.”

“Thanks Pep.” Toni swallows back the well of emotion that suddenly threatens to choke her and watches as Pepper turns and makes her way over towards Happy. Toni shoots him a wink and a thumbs up when her back is turned and then waves at the both of them when they step into the elevator.

The door closes behind them and with a small sigh Toni drains her champagne flute and wipes the smile off of her face. Buries her joy beneath a layer of cold calm.

“Alright J,” Toni calls as she settles down in the center of her couch and crosses her legs deliberately, “let him out and then send him up.”

“Right away Miss.” JARVIS replies.

Toni stays calm as she waits for Coulson to arrive. She’s still dressed well in a skirt and blouse combo left over from her and Pepper’s lunch date earlier in the day that she hasn’t found the time to change out of so she feels secure. Plus JARVIS, as always, has her back.

Whatever it is that’s brought Coulson to her door Toni’s sure she’ll be able to handle it.

And if she can’t handle it, well then she’ll just have to do it anyways.

“Keeping me trapped in an elevator is rude Ms. Stark.” Coulson says a few minutes later when the elevator doors open and he steps out.

“So is calling someone back to back when they don’t answer you the first time Agent.” Toni raises a brow in his direction. “But here I was thinking you wouldn’t mind a few extra minutes in an elevator if it gave you a one up on Fury in your ongoing battle for my nonexistent heart.”

“Cute.” Coulson quips back.

“What seems to be the problem Agent?” Toni gives him his opening, ready to get the ball rolling and find out exactly what he wants. “That is if you’re not here to finally present me with Fury’s heart in a box or some other kind of courting gift of course?”
“Sadly no hearts or other body parts today. Just work.” Coulson extends a tablet in her direction. “We need you to look this over.”

“I don’t like to be handed things,” Toni reminds him.

It’s a testament of the apparent seriousness of the situation that Coulson just steps forward and places the tablet on the table between them instead of bantering with her some more like he usually does.

“You do know my normal consulting hours are between eight and five every other Thursday don’t you?” Toni asks as she leans forward and grabs the tablet.

“This isn’t a consultation.” Coulson says. There’s a stillness in his stance then, a tightness in his eyes that isn’t normally there.

It makes Toni sit up just a bit, makes her focus a little harder on him.

“What is it then?” The tablet’s in her hands but her attention is still focused on Coulson instead.

“This is Avenger’s business Ms. Stark.” His face is a blank mask like always but Toni thinks she sees a flicker of something just below the surface anyways.

“I thought that was scrapped?” Toni stands and moves towards the bar where she can upload it to her own setup. “Hell I didn’t even qualify remember? I’m a, what was it now, oh yes, a ‘narcissistic sociopath who doesn’t play well with others’. Does that ring any bells?”

“Toni.” The casual use of her name, something Coulson never does, stops her cold. “This isn’t about personality profiles anymore. Please. There’s been a situation, my agent … just, please. We need you.”

Toni looks at him for another moment, searches his face for answers she doesn’t find and feels herself soften just a bit.

“Alright.” She finally agrees because goddamn him she likes Coulson. She doesn’t trust him further than she could throw him without the suit on but she’s grown sort of fond of him over their months spent sniping at each other. She’s always appreciated the rare individual who refuses to let her unsettle them or throw them off their game. Coulson normally has that unflappable demeanor in spades. “I’ll look this over then. You know the way out Agent, I’ll call you if I need you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Stark.” Coulson nods, turns on his heel, and marches back towards the elevator.

Toni watches him go and then she turns back to the tablet. It’s the work of seconds to have it connected to her set up and she’s confident that JARVIS can handle anything that might be encrypted in SHIELD tech. She wouldn’t put it passed Fury to try and sneak a worm into her system even during something that’s so obviously important.

With a flick of her hands images spring to life around her.

The roar of the Hulk catches her attention first, and the sight of Banner, large and green and filled with rage, is as awe-inspiring as it had been the first time Toni had seen him.

But then Toni’s attention is captured by something else, a flicker of movement she spots out of the corner of her eye.

Toni glances over and immediately feels her breath catch in her chest because there, hanging in the air in front of her between Banner and some blond she doesn’t know, is the one profile that she had
never thought she’d see.

“Steve.” Toni breathes his name out even as she goes weak in the knees. She barely feels it when she collapses down onto the cold marble floor beneath her.

“Miss?” JARVIS voice cuts in. “Miss your heart rate is dangerously high. Please, you must calm down.”

“JARVIS,” Toni rasps out, eyes glued to the small video that shows Steve in action back during the war. It’s footage she’s seen a million times but she can’t seem to look away. “Is he… is this real?”

“It appears so Miss,” JARVIS reassures her softly. “The files look to be legitimate and I detect no outside interference of any kind. As far as I can tell this originates from the deepest levels of SHIELD, levels I’ve still not been able to access due to their remote locations and closed network.”

Toni reaches up, grabs Steve’s profile, and drags the projection down to where she’s sitting on the floor.

“Oh God.” Toni practically whimpers as her fingers hover just over his picture. Absently Toni realizes that she’s shaking.

Steven Grant Rogers, the profile says, Alias: Captain America.

Status: Active.

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It takes longer than Toni likes to admit before she’s able to calm herself down.

Even after she feels like she can breathe again she doesn’t try to get up. She’s calmer but she’s still shaking, still suspended somewhere between disbelief and what she thinks might actually be hysteria.

Steve.

Somehow, someway, Steve is alive.

Toni takes a deep breath, forces herself to let it out slowly, and then she turns towards the profile that’s still hovering above her.

Steve is alive somehow and Toni hadn’t known about it until now.

Unacceptable.

She practically devours the thing, flicking through page after page as she reads and absorbs everything they offer.

The Russians had found him, just a little over a week ago. He’d been frozen, Toni reads with a growing mix of horror and wonder, trapped in a kind of cryogenic stasis deep in the Arctic. Perfect preservation had been achieved thanks to the temperature and the salinity of the water coupled with the regenerative effects of the serum. They’d all combined and managed to keep him in a state of suspended animation.

It hits Toni then that this is real, that it is really and truly happening.

Steve Rogers is alive.
He’s alive and Toni’s finally going to have the chance to meet him.

For one long, breathless moment she is a creature of pure joy. She’s incandescent with glorious elation because *Steve Rogers is alive*.

It’s what she’d wished for year after year as a child, what she’s dreamed about for longer than she wants to admit. And now it’s real. Now it’s happened.

For once in her life wishes really do come true.

He’s *alive*.

But then, as it always does, reality smacks her in the face, harsh and heavy like the back of Howard’s hand.

“*Fuck.*” Toni hisses and suddenly she’s up and scrambling towards the bathroom, bile rising in her throat. She stumbles through the door and barely makes it to the sink before she’s bent over and heaving painfully into the porcelain.

Her chest aches when she’s finished but she just rinses her mouth, slides down to the floor, and buries her face in her shaking hands.

*Steve is alive.*

“Oh God,” Toni whispers into the palms of her hands, “he’s *alive* and he’s going to *hate me.*”

~~~

JARVIS is the one who coaxes her out of the bathroom and back to examining the files that’ve been sent to her.

He’s the one who tucks Steve’s profile away for the moment and reminds Toni that there are, apparently, bigger issues than Steve being alive at the moment.

He brings up the information on the Tesseract for her then and Toni is, despite her crawling panic, immediately captivated.

She remembers the Tesseract. JARVIS had pulled up information on it from when he’d scanned Howard’s things during her research and development of the new reactor for the Tower. It had equal parts fascinated and unsettled her even then, the thought of the alien energy cube that HYDRA had killed so many to obtain. The artifact that had, ultimately, been the cause of Steve’s, apparently exaggerated death.

The thing’s a source of unmitigated energy that HYDRA had used as a weapon but Toni isn’t naive enough to think that SHIELD or anyone else now days would use it for a purer or more benign reason either.

There’d been no evidence that it had been in play before now.

But of course, as it tends to do, Howard’s past has finally come back around to bite her in the ass yet again. Because the fact that SHIELD and the WSC has apparently had the Tesseract for *decades* is bad enough.

The idea of it being stolen by an outside force?

Well that’s something Toni doesn’t even want to contemplate.
“J,” Toni rasps, “we’ve got homework baby boy.”

“Of course Miss.” JARVIS replies.

Toni turns her concentration towards the Tesseract with a deliberate sort of focus.

But even still there’s a part of her that’s still circling relentlessly around one simple fact.

Steve is alive.

And Toni is terrified.

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Toni doesn’t try to sleep.

She can’t.

There isn’t time.

There’s too much to do.

There’s the Tesseract and alien gods for fuck’s sake and just … too much.

‘Alive,’ some part of her mind keeps whispering even as she studies and researches and learns.

‘Steve’s alive.’

‘He’s going to hate you,’ another part taunts and it sounds suspiciously like Howard no matter how hard she tries to ignore it.

She knows it’s right though.

Toni had come to terms with the fact that Steve wouldn’t have approved of her years ago. She had known even then that he’d have never loved her, that she wasn’t the type of person, the type of woman, he’d have been interested in associating with.

She’s too much in all of the wrong ways, too abrasive and crude and slick with blood. To tainted and broken and half past mad at the best of times with the way her mind whirls.

She’s made up of too much bad code that could never be truly patched or reformatted.

She’d known that at eighteen, sculpted by Howard’s fists and Jarvis’ love and freshly broken by new betrayal.

She’s found, not peace precisely, but a sort of acceptance with that fact over the years.

The only difference between then and now is the fact that Toni had never thought she’d have the opportunity for him to reject her to her face.

She’s not sure what she’ll do if or, more likely, when that happens.

She’s not sure how she’ll be able to pull herself together again when it does.

He’s been safe for her for so long now, has been a shield, a source of strength for her since she was a child. First as Captain America and then, more and more with each month and year that passed, as Steve himself.
Him and eventually Bucky as well.

They’ve both become safe harbors of a sort for her love, for the pieces of her heart she has left to give. She’s grown comfortable with it, been pleased in a melancholy kind of way that the only ones who could touch her heart like that were long gone. There’s less chance of being hurt that way, less opportunities for betrayal.

Now everything has changed and a part of Toni that she’s trying desperately to ignore feels lost.

**Adrift.**

Steve is *alive* and he has power over her even though they’ve never actually met. He has the ability to hurt her, to tear her apart inside, in a way that only Rhodey and JARVIS really do now.

What’s worse is that it’s too late for Toni to do anything about it.

She’s lived almost her entire life loving and in love with him in one way or another. It’s too late to stop that now, too late to go back.

But, despite the way she knows it’s going to hurt, despite the fact that Toni’s under no illusions about the fact that Steve will probably despise her, she can’t really regret it either.

There’s been so little love in her life that she finds she can’t bring herself to regret what she has had even if it has been one sided. Even if it isn’t exactly normal or completely healthy.

Even if it is going to *hurt.*

Toni is, after all, no stranger to pain.

She will weather this as she always has.

Hair up, wings and reactor covered, and her heart buried deep beneath the ice.

At least she’ll still have Bucky when this is said and done. At least he won’t be able to turn from her.

At least he’ll still be safe to love.

~~~

A few hours later finds Toni standing in the middle of her workshop, surrounded by the blue glow of JARVIS’ projections and buried knee deep inside her research.

She’s busy combing through a Dr. Selvig’s notes alongside everything else she can get her hands on about gamma radiation and thermonuclear astrophysics as they might relate to the Tesseract.

It’s fascinating reading despite the severity of the situation and she can’t deny that she has a bit of a science crush on Selvig.

And that’s not even mentioning Banner and his breathtakingly beautiful mind.

She’d love to get him alone sometime to pick his brain, to watch him work in real time, to bounce theories off of someone who might just be able to keep up even if they don’t work in the same fields. She’s smart enough to keep pace with him regardless, especially with the research she’s been putting in, and she thinks he might just be as well.
Not to mention she’d like to find a way to thank him for the serum he’d derived. It had, after all, ultimately allowed her the time she’d needed to save her own life. So she owes him for that at least, even if he hadn’t been directly involved in how she’d come across it. He’d already been in the wind for a long time by that point.

And that’s not even to mention the questions she’d like to ask him about his … other half.

The Hulk is a fascinating concept to her, that creature seemingly made of pure rage and force.

As much as she sympathizes with and understands Banner’s desire to be left alone she’s also borderline enthralled by the very idea of him, of the mechanics of how he and the Hulk work. She’s fascinated by the frankly unbelievable mass redistribution he undergoes when he transforms, by the pigment changes of his skin and regenerative factor he’s obviously been gifted with.

She’s more than a bit enamored with the way that he’s basically an unstoppable force given shape and form.

Toni also can’t help but be curious as to whether or not it affects him on a deeper level. If his biology has been irrevocably changed beyond what little bit SHIELD has been able to document.

Plus she wonders if it hurts. If his transformations are as traumatizing and painful as they seem.

She imagines that it does, that they are.

She imagines that they’re excruciating and terrifying. She wonders if it burns him, deep down in those places the world can’t see or if his rage is an icy wasteland nestled at his core instead.

Either way she bets it’s a great and terrible thing to behold.

That much anger, Toni knows all too well, normally is.

Her own icy rage had changed the world after all.

~~~

“Miss,” JARVIS breaks into her train of thought untold hours later, “I’m afraid there’s seems to be a situation.”

“What is it J?” She’s instantly alert because if JARVIS is interrupting her then she knows it’s important. He’d spent too long helping her to get on task and focused for it to be otherwise.

“Director Fury is requesting your presence in the field,” JARVIS says. “Apparently the Asgardian Loki has made an appearance.”

“Shit.” Toni sucks in a breath but she’s already up and moving, absently glad that he’d bullied her into a shower and food a few hours back. She has a feeling she’s going to need all the energy she can get for what’s to come. “Where?”

“Stuttgart, Germany Miss.” The answer is prompt. “28, Konigstrasse to be precise.”

“Tell Chief Zed I’m on it,” Toni tells him as the armor wraps around her. “And let him know that I’m going to charge him and his Men in Black overtime for all of this.”

“Of course Miss,” JARVIS agrees. “Although there is one other thing.”

“What now J?” Given everything that’s already happened she almost doesn’t want to know.
There’s a heavy beat of silence.

“It seems,” JARVIS says slowly, carefully, “that Agent Romanov and Captain Rogers have already been deployed as well Miss.”

Toni’s heart stutters and the suit drops in the sky a bit before she can correct it.

Fuck.

Steve.

~~~

JARVIS reads out more information to her on the flight to Germany. It has the dual benefit of helping her focus while also keeping her updated on any chatter he can find over SHIELD’s coms and the like.

The HUD picks up the fight as soon as she’s within range and for a split second Toni’s awash with awe.

Because down there in the middle of the square, a blur of blue and flashing limbs as he fights, is Steve.

God.

A not so small part of Toni wants to hang there in the sky forever, wants to just hang in the background and watch for once.

But then Steve takes a hit, gets thrown and goes sprawling, and Toni instantly goes smooth.

“J get me access to Romanov and queue up a distraction,” Toni snarls even as JARVIS immediately overrides the PA system.

She built it after all and it’s not her fault if SHIELD hasn’t realized by now that Toni has a backdoor into everything that she touches nowadays.

She won’t make the same mistakes twice, not in this, not with so many lives at stake.

She also won’t sit by and watch Steve be hurt, no matter how he might eventually feel about her.

“Agent Romanov,” Toni purrs as she completes a wide arc around a skyscraper and the PA system starts blaring Shoot to Thrill because JARVIS is just as much of a show off as she is sometimes, “did you miss me?”

The repulsors whine, high and deadly, when she powers them up to full charge and fires directly at Loki’s chest.

Loki goes flying and lands against the stone steps behind him with a satisfying oomph of pain.

Toni hits the ground a second later but she’s quick to move. She straightens to her full height and plants herself, repulsors glowing and shoulder mounted weapons on full display, directly between him and Steve.

“Make a move Reindeer Games,” Toni dares him.

There’s movement behind and beside her then and Toni can just hear Steve’s light panting breathes
but she doesn’t let her focus slip, can’t.

Face wary Loki slowly raises his hands even as his armor appears to melt away around him.

“Good move,” Toni tells him as she lets her arms drop even as she keeps her shoulder mounted weaponry trained on him. Loki is dangerous she knows and Toni’s not keen on giving him an advantage by being sloppy. Not here, not with more than just herself in the cross fire.

“Miss Stark.” Steve acknowledges her, voice slightly winded but rapidly evening out.

“Captain.” Toni responds because that’s who he is in this moment. She feels oddly breathless but she manages to keep her voice even though sheer force of will. Still it’s a close thing.

Her mind is *whirling*, cycling through a million trains of thought but always coming back around to one thing.

*Steve is alive.*

And he’s right beside her.

~~~

Loki goes with them willingly enough, lets himself be strapped into cuffs and led up onto the jet without a struggle.

Toni doesn’t like it.

Intent on keeping a closer eye on Loki, Toni makes her way inside right on Steve’s heels instead of taking to the air. From the line of his shoulders, so obviously tense and ready to move, Steve seems equally uncomfortable with the situation.

Romanov is there in the cockpit but Toni ignores her easily enough once the door closes behind her. She parks herself on the opposite side of the jet from Loki and as far from Steve as she can manage.

She wants to be close to him, wants to talk to him, wants to hear him say her name. *God* she wants to *touch* him, wants to lay her hands on his face and feel his skin beneath her fingertips so that she can know, once and for all, that this is *real*.

But he doesn’t know her and she doesn’t have those kinds of rights with him.

So, obviously, it’s best if she does none of those things.

Distance is the best thing at the moment.

So she tries her best to breathe evenly and to keep an eye on Loki because this all feels wrong to her for some reason.

“J,” Toni speaks up in the privacy of the helmet.

“Yes Miss?”

“I want full scans on Loki.” Toni orders. “Feed me any data you can as you can.”

“Of course Miss.” JARVIS agrees. “Might I also suggest you leave the faceplate down while in his presence? According to the dossier SHIELD provided Loki is a documented projectile wielder amongst other things. We cannot know the full extent of his capabilities and the armor can only
provide protection if it is kept intact.”

“Got it J.” Toni’s almost thankful for his worrying and the excuse it provides her with. The thought of removing the helmet, of looking Steve directly in the eye, is almost too much to bear at the moment.

Safe inside the armor Toni turns her attention towards him only to feel her heart pound hard and heavy beside the reactor because Steve’s cowl is down and his helmet is off. For the first time since this all started she can see his face unobstructed.

He’s gorgeous.

But then, to Toni, he always has been.

Even when he was just a poster on her wall or a figure in a comic book. Even through the black and white toned reels of old war propaganda and battlefield footage. Even in the picture she had of him from when he’d been small and sickly, hell maybe especially when he was small.

Through all of that he’s always been beautiful to her.

Because, as Aunt Peggy had always told her, it had been his heart and not his body that had made him mighty. His strength, his resolve, his unwavering courage, those were the things that made him beautiful to her.

And, no matter what happens, that’s something Toni doesn’t think will ever change for her.

“Fury didn’t tell me he was calling you in.” Steve’s voice is low when he makes his way over to her side. There’s a small, almost frown on his mouth, the plush line of his lips are tugged ever so slightly downwards as he flicks his eyes between her and Loki.

“There’s a lot of things Fury doesn’t tell you Captain.” Toni can’t help but tell him, part warning and part censure, before she bites her tongue to stop herself from saying anything else. She’s undeniably nervous and her mouth wants to run away with her like it always does on the rare occasion that she feels like this.

It’s a bit of a struggle but Toni’s determined to hold it off for as long as possible. She wants to relish these moments, wants to revel in these precious few minutes she has where she can pretend that Steve feels nothing negative towards her.

She wants to bask in these fleeting seconds before she finds out what he really thinks of her, before she has to see his face twist in distaste.

Because it will Toni knows. No matter what Aunt Peggy has said over the years there’s no way Steve will like her.

She knows that.

But God it’s going to hurt.

Steve opens his mouth like he’s going to speak again but the loud, jagged bolt of lightning that rips across the sky cuts him off.

Toni tenses because the weather report JARVIS automatically feeds her on the HUD had said clear skies. She’s on her feet in the next second, moving beside Steve so they can peer out the cockpit window.
“Where’s this coming from?” Romanov mutters, eyes narrowed as she looks between the window and the control panel.

“What’s the matter?” Steve’s voice draws Toni’s attention back around to where he’s turned to stare at a now displeased looking Loki. “Are you scared of a little lightning?”

“I’m not overly fond of what follows.” Loki seems almost exasperated and the expression makes the hair on the back of Toni’s neck stand up.

Just then something crashes into the top of the jet causing it to rock violently as lightning arcs across the sky again.

Toni’s moving in the next second, slamming a hand against the button to lower the door and striding out into the center of the jet’s hold.

“What are you doing?” Steve’s behind her but Toni keeps her focus forward, keeps her breathing even and her mind smooth.

And then, suddenly, there’s Thor.

“Stand down.” Toni barks the order out but she can see by the stubborn set of Thor’s face he’s not going to listen.

He’s there for Loki and that’s the one thing Toni can’t let happen.

There’s far too much at stake.

Unfortunately Thor’s more than willing to fight her over the point.

The hammer to the chest isn’t comfortable by any means and Toni’s unprepared for the force with which it hits her.

She flies back, goes sprawling, and can only watch as Thor rips Loki out of the restraints and right out of the rear doors.

“And now there’s that asshole.” Toni grumbles as she gets to her feet.

“Another Asgardian?” Romanov calls the question out.

“That guy’s a friendly?” Steve asks.

“Doesn’t matter.” Toni answers him even as she strides towards the rear door. “If he frees Loki, or kills him, the Tesseract’s lost.”

“Ms. Stark, we need a plan of attack.” Steve calls as he steps forward, jaw set and face stubborn, but Toni’s already made up her mind.

“I have a plan Captain.” Behind the safety of her faceplate Toni grins, wide and sharp. “Attack.”

And then she jumps.

~~~

“Might I reiterate Miss,” JARVIS pipes up as Toni speeds towards the heat signals she can see on the HUD, “I have found that I am seldom a fan of ‘Plan A’ as you call it. Strategic planning has its advantages over split second reactions after all.”
“And it’s disadvantages too. Remember J, sometimes you’ve got to run before you walk.” Toni reminds him. “Besides we both know my split second is different than other people’s.”

“I look forward to your next conversation with Lt. Colonel Rhodes most eagerly Miss.” JARVIS tells her dryly. “Shall I clear your schedule and pencil you in for a thorough talking to when this matter has been resolved?”

“Ah,” Toni winces because she knows he’s right. Rhodey’s going to be less than pleased with her rushing head long into this even if he is used to her particular brand of crazy.

“Also I’ve taken the liberty of ordering a preemptive pair of apology shoes for Ms. Potts as well.” JARVIS sounds almost gleeful.

“Oh baby boy you’re so good to me,” Toni grins despite the thrum of anxiety that’s still coursing through her. Designer shoes is always a smart move when it comes to getting back onto Pepper’s good side. That just leaves Happy to tend to and thankfully he’s easier to placate. Some quality time in one of her roadsters and he’s right as rain.

“Contact in six point two seconds Miss.” JARVIS warns.

And just like that Toni goes smooth again.

~~~

Thor’s hammer is raised when Toni spots him so she doesn’t even bother with subtle anymore.

It’s never really been her style.

Instead she hits the ground beside them with a small explosion of earth, arms raised and repulsors glowing, shoulder mounted weapons focused on both of them.

The dossier had classified Thor as a friendly but, again, Toni’s not taking any chances.

“That was rude you know?” Toni cuts into whatever discussion they’re having. “Dropping in like that and stealing the party guest?”

“This concerns you not Midgardian.” Thor grits out, hammer raised in her direction, while Loki just smirks and watches the both of them.

“Oh but I think it does He-Man.” Toni disagrees. “You see Loki over there belongs to me now. I won him fair and square in a carnival game and I’ve got some questions I’d like to ask him.”

“You would dare to lay claim upon a prince of Asgard?” The thunderous look on Thor’s face tells Toni she might have inadvertently struck a nerve.

“Well I’d say it’s more like temporary holding rights but it honestly amounts to the same thing.” Toni shrugs as best she can in the armor. “I don’t like it when people touch my stuff.”

“This is beyond you metal one,” Thor seems to rein himself after a few tense seconds. “Loki will face Asgardian justice for his trespasses.”

“He gives up the Cube, he’s all yours.” Toni promises because, honestly, the Tesseract’s really why she’s here in the first place. Keeping alien princes under lock and key might be on SHIELD’s agenda but Toni’s got no interest in playing warden for longer than she has to. “Beyond that it’s not me you have to worry about.”
“The Tesseract is no trinket to toy with.” Thor grits out and Toni can’t help but think it’s one of the truest statements she’s heard all night.

“Which is why SHIELD’s so desperate to get it back from wherever he,” Toni nods her head in Loki’s direction, “has stashed it at. Let us bring him in, try to make this all go as smooth as possible.”

“I will see no disrespect to my brother.” Thor warns but Toni sees the way the furious grip he has on his hammer loosens just a bit.

“They’re not going to agree to him roaming free. They’ll want to take precautions.” Toni cautions even as a trickle of relief begins to slide down her spine.

She hadn’t been looking forward to waging all-out battle with Thor. She would have if he’d pushed her to it of course but still it’s a relief to be able to avoid it.

It would have been difficult to keep track of a wayward prisoner like Loki while tangling with another alien god after all. Tracking him down again afterwards would have been a pain in the ass too. Not to mention the bitching Fury probably would have done.

Both of those are things Toni can absolutely live without.

There’s the sound of fluttering fabric then and Toni looks up in time to see Steve dropping through the air towards them, abandoned parachute flying away on a gust of wind. He hits the ground hard and rolls with the momentum, coming up with his shield firmly on his arm and obviously battle ready.

“Is there going to be a problem here?” Steve asks the three of them, iconic jaw set, shoulders straight, and shield poised for action.

“Nay,” Thor shakes his head even as he steps forward and clasps a large hand onto Loki’s shoulder. For his part Loki snarls but doesn’t attempt to shrug his touch away. “Your metal vanguard speaks truth. The Tesseract must be recovered. I will join your war council and see that my brother’s mistakes have been rectified.”

~~~

The ride to the helicarrier is beyond awkward in Toni’s opinion.

No one speaks.

Thor paces the small confines of the jet like a caged animal while Loki sits calm and quiet in his seat. Toni watches the both of them and resolutely ignores the way Steve’s eyes keep flicking back towards her as he constantly scans the area.

Thankfully it’s over relatively quickly.

They dock and a contingent of armed agents are waiting for Loki, Fury at the lead.

Toni watches him go with a small frown.

‘Too easy,’ she can’t help but think even as she forces herself to look away from Steve so she can head down towards the secure area set aside for her to dock the armor for the time being. ‘Way too easy.’
“Agent Coulson had the container of desired equipment you set aside ferried to the helicarrier as per your request Miss. According to my uplink with the biometric security the case has remained untampered with and should be awaiting you in the laboratory once you’re ready to proceed to the upper decks.” JARVIS informs her as she moves through the helicarrier. “I must ask, is it wise to leave the armor unattended?”

“Fury’s not stupid enough to fuck with the armor when something like this is going on. He wouldn’t want to risk actually pissing me off again and we all know it.” Toni reassures him. “Plus it’s not like they’d get anywhere even if they did try, especially not with me actually here. And not after we follow through with our little plan. Now we remembered to pack a few PEGs didn’t we J?”

“Indeed Miss, a small host of the Pocket Entry Gizmos are ready and waiting for attachment.” JARVIS, as always, sounds almost pained at the name of the tiny disk shaped bugs she’d meticulously built. “You’re sunglasses are also available and I would like to request that you wear them until further notice.”

Like the replica of Steve’s shield that hangs from her navel the PEGs are a direct uplink to JARVIS. They’ll allow him access to any system they’re attached to even if they’re on a closed network. The main difference is that once he’s done infiltrating or if he’s in danger of being discovered JARVIS can set the PEGs to fry their own circuits afterwards so that they’re untraceable and unrecoverable.

Toni had packed a few on the basis that they might come in handy once she was in the belly of the beast as it were.

Being inside the helicarrier with all of its systems up, running, and ripe for the picking is just too good of a chance to pass up.

Especially since she knows that Fury’s hiding something.

He is a spy after all.

Secrets are his life’s blood.

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“Stark.” Coulson’s waiting by the door for her once she steps out of the armor, face as impassive as always. What’s different is the shoe box tucked beneath one of his arms and the dress bag in his hand. He steps forward and hangs the bag on a hook by the door and puts the box down on the table below it. “I took the liberty of getting you a change of clothes alongside the tech delivery as Director Fury’s requesting that all available personnel stay on the helicarrier until this issue is resolved. You’ve also been assigned guest quarters if the need arises.”

Curious Toni reaches out and unzips the dress bag only to bite down the laugh that bubbles up in her throat. A grin flirting with the edges of her mouth she smooths a hand down the front of the crimson blouse and black skirt she finds inside. They’re exactly her style and, she’s sure, exactly her size as well. She has no doubt that the shoes will be the same. Damn he’s good.

“Now Agent this is what I call room service,” Toni tosses him a sharp grin over her shoulder. “You might just be moving up in the world. Keep catering to me like this and maybe I’ll reconsider my stance on our one-sided courtship.”

“I’m flattered Stark,” Coulson cuts in dryly even as he turns and walks back towards the door, “but I’m sure Director Fury would be heartbroken. I’d rather not have to face him with pistols at dawn
anytime soon.”

Toni laughs.

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Toni leans forward towards the mirror, her hands braced on the porcelain of the sink in front of her. Her hair is up, her wings and reactor are covered, and to all outward appearances she looks cool and collected. The clothes Coulson had given her fit her like a glove and are, thankfully, clean of any type of bug or tracker. Her sunglasses, the red lensed ones that connect to JARVIS, rest in her hair like she’d pushed them casually upwards. She looks like she always does, sharp and seductive and just a tad cold.

Every inch a Queen, be it Red or Iron.

Staring at herself in the mirror Toni can see the carefully hidden fear in her own eyes.

Toni takes a deep breath and reaches up a hand to tap at the reactor. It’s comforting gesture, the familiar cycle of rhythms she taps out.

They go along with the rhythm of Jarvis’ favorite song, to the remembered beat of Rhodey’s heart, to the opening sequence of JARVIS’ code.

To Steve and Bucky’s serial numbers.

“Breathe Toni,” she murmurs to her own reflection, “just breathe.”

She gives herself a moment more, a precious second of privacy to pull her tattered inner pieces back together. Then she straightens, takes a deep breath, and steels her spine.

“Are you ready J?” Toni asks softly.

“I am, as always, with you until my last day Miss.” JARVIS’ voice in her ear is a comfort beyond words.

Toni’s sure she’s going to need it.

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The click of Toni’s heels echoes in the air as she walks by Coulson’s side. The silence between them is almost comfortable even with the lingering tension in the air.

“Your man Barton’s file was an interesting read,” Toni glances over at Coulson as she speaks.

“Agent Barton is an interesting individual.” His delivery is as calm and even as always.

“Oh I’d say he is.” Toni agrees because it’s true. Handsome with a mischievous glint in his eyes, Barton, or at least his picture, had looked like someone Toni might just enjoy being around. Especially given the way his file, or at least the parts she’d been privy to, had read like some kind of fiction. The bow, the almost inhuman accuracy, the unobtrusive but still apparent hearing aids. Barton was interesting indeed and Toni had always enjoyed a good puzzle. “I can see why you’d want him back.”

“He’s been a valuable asset over the years.” Coulson nods to the guard standing on the corner as they continue down the hallway.
“Still,” Toni watches him closely, “I can’t see Fury being too pleased by him turning coat the way he has.”

“Barton was and is loyal to SHIELD, Loki’s manipulation notwithstanding. Director Fury witnessed the situation and understands the underlying circumstances.” There it is, that tightening of the jaw, that subtle line of tension down his spine, that brief flash of anger before Coulson carefully banks it down again.

Toni has what she’s been fishing for.

A reaction.

Anger is, for Toni, one of the easier emotions to identify in other people even if they are adept at hiding them.

Being able to pick up on anger had been a warning signal that had, more than once, saved her from a beating from Howard. Or, more often than not, had at least allowed her time to prepare herself when avoidance wasn’t an option.

This, coupled with the way Coulson had acted when he’d showed up at the Tower, tells Toni all that she needs to know. Barton, for one reason or another, is obviously important to him.

“I sense a ‘but’ in there somewhere.” Toni prods at him.

“The WSC is … less understanding.” Coulson admits with rare honesty. “They’ve been pressuring the Director to issue a standing kill on sight order given Barton’s security clearance. There’s a small chance they could attempt to go over his head.”

“Well then,” Toni tells him lowly right as they turn into the hallway that leads to the helicarrier’s command floor, “let’s hope one of us finds him first.”

“Stark,” Coulson gives her a long look when she cuts a curious look in his direction. “Be gentle with the Captain. He’s not been awake for very long and you can be a bit … much.”

Toni just smirks and pushes the swell of nerves that rises sharply back up to the forefront of her mind down again.

It’s not Steve she’s worried about, not really.

But she’ll be damned before she lets Coulson in on that fact.

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“-ridium.” Toni hears as she and Coulson step through the door way. “What do they need the iridium for?”

“It’s a stabilizing agent.” Toni pipes up. All eyes turn to focus on her even as she waves Coulson away and pauses for a moment to survey the room.

Romanov and Steve are both sitting at the table while Thor stands, large arms folded across his chest, on the other side. Bruce Banner, round shouldered and vaguely uncomfortable, stands fiddling with his glasses in the background.

“It means the portal won’t collapse on itself like it did at SHIELD.” Toni throws the information out there almost absently as she pulls her eyes away from Steve who’s staring at her now, one brow
arched and face assessing. “Also, it means the portal can open as wide and stay open as long as Loki wants.”

Toni struts her way around Thor who’s staring at her avidly and towards the screens that mark the main control panel towards the helicarrier’s front.

“So does Fury fly the skull and crossbones on the outside of the ship or does he just have it hanging on the wall behind his desk? I’m thinking something like American flag on top, then the Jolly Roger, and then his Girl Scout troop right below it. An order of importance if you will.” Toni directs the statement towards Maria Hill who’s watching the entire situation passively. “Also, while we’re talking about pirates, where does Patchy keep all the illicit booty on this boat? Besides underneath that fabulous leather trench coat of his of course.”

Toni hears a few startled coughs and quickly muffled snickers from the bay of computers and monitors surrounding them but doesn’t let her own amusement show.

She’s working the room for a reason of course and she wants all eyes exactly where she needs them to be.

‘I’m harmless,’ says the right hand of a left handed thief. It’s a motto Toni lives by in a lot of ways. Even if she’s never really been harmless.

That in mind she closes one eye and assesses the control panels again.

“How does Knick-Knack even see these?” She twists enough to address the question to Hill even as she idly fixes the cuff of her blouse.

“He turns.” Hill tells her placidly but Toni can see the faint smile lurking around the corner of her mouth.

“Sounds exhausting.” Toni shrugs, turns, and moves the conversation back on track as she reaches out and fiddles with the panels a bit, pushing buttons seemingly at random. In reality she’s scanning everything she can see.

“The rest of the raw materials Agent Barton can get his hands on pretty easily. The only major component he still needs is a power source of high-energy density. Something to kick-start the Cube.” Toni waves a hand nonchalantly as she turns again to face the table, a PEG on the tip of the finger that she presses against the underside of the control panel.

“Activating the PEG now Miss,” JARVIS speaks up quietly in her ear but Toni shows no outward reaction.

“When did you become an expert at thermonuclear astrophysics?” Hill looks as unimpressed as always as she asks the question. The woman’s a tough sale but she’s also never given Toni any outright problems so that’s a plus in her favor.

“Last night.” Toni blinks at her, completely serious. She’d devoured enough research material on the subject that she could probably teach a class on it if she were so inclined. Or if MIT were inclined to ask her to do so again after the last time she’d made a guest appearance in a classroom. Honestly the explosion hadn’t even been that big no matter what Rhodey said and she’d paid for all the damages anyways. “The packet, Selvig’s notes, the extraction theory papers. Am I the only one who did the reading? Naughty, naughty.” Toni tisks with a waving finger.

“You are the metal vanguard.” Thor interrupts before anyone can say anything else. Toni turns to face him only to see that he’s taken a step forward in her direction, arms now uncrossed. His head is
cocked to the side and his eyes are narrowed, a look of contemplation on his face.

“Indeed I am. I don’t think we’ve been formally introduced.” Toni steps towards him and holds out a hand for him to shake despite her normal reluctance to do so. She’s aware that being overly rude, or at least more than she already has been, to an alien prince might not be something even she can talk her way out of. Yet. “Toni Stark, also known as Iron Queen. Among other things.”

“Well met Lady Stark.” Thor grasps Toni’s hand and, to her surprise, raises it to his lips to place a courtly kiss on the back of her knuckles. His lips are warm and where he touches her Toni’s skin tingles like she’s been gently shocked by static electricity. “I am Thor, son of Odin and Crown Prince of Asgard. I did not think Midgard held much stock in the ways of royalty in these times.”

Toni can’t help the way she grins, wide and sharp and absolutely delighted.

“Stark’s title is purely cosmetic despite what her ego may think.” Romanov cuts in. “Iron Queen is the designation of the armored suit she pilots.”

“You’re out to ruin all of my fun aren’t you Agent Shelob?” Toni sneers in her direction. “You should be careful with that. Spiders have a way of being … exterminated when they least expect it. Especially when they pick a fight with a particularly large boot.”

Romanov narrows her eyes and opens her mouth as if she’s about to retort when Thor’s loud boom of laughter startles everyone.

“You gonna let the rest of us in on the joke there your Thunderness?” Toni asks him, more intrigued than she wants to admit.

“Apologies Stark-dottier.” The smile that creases Thor’s face makes him all the more handsome in the brief moments before sadness seems to steal the joy from his soul and he goes somber once again. “Your cutting tongue reminds me a great deal of my brother in our youth. Even your appearance echoes that of Loki’s chosen female guise.” Thor’s statement cuts through the air like a knife and everyone freezes. “Though his eyes have always maintained their green coloring and his height is a … great deal more even in such a form.”

“That’s comforting. Stark’s got a lot in common with an alien menace.” Romanov quips as she leans back in her chair. “But somehow not all that surprising at the same time.”

Toni is, admittedly, a bit taken aback as well. A comparison to Loki had been the last thing she’d expected to come out of Thor’s mouth as well. It’s a bit unsettling truth be told but it also means that Loki bears even closer scrutiny.

Because if he’s anything at all like Toni?

Well he just became twice as dangerous as she’d thought he was.

“Does Loki need any particular kind of power source?” Steve cuts in before the situation can escalate any further.

Toni’s attention is automatically drawn in his direction even as Banner speaks up again.

“He would have to heat the Cube to one hundred million Kelvin just to break through the Coulomb barrier.” Banner’s resolutely avoiding eye contact with anyone in the room and Toni decides in a split second that his skittishness is something that just won’t do.

She ignores the tiny voice in the back of her mind that whispers about how she’s just trying to avoid
engaging with Steve for as long as possible. Trying her hardest to put off the inevitable.

“Unless Selvig has figured out how to stabilize the quantum tunneling effect.” Toni disagrees as she moves away from Thor’s side and around the table.

“Well, if he could do that, he could achieve heavy ion fusion at any reactor on the planet.” Banner finally looks up then, glasses still in hand.

“Finally, someone who speaks English.” Toni grins as she gets within reach of Banner and holds out a hand.

“Is that what just happened?” She hears Steve mutter and has to bite back another smile. Aunt Peggy had always said he had a mouth on him. ‘Cheeky’, she’d called him on more than one occasion, a wistful sort of fondness in her voice.

“I’m not kissing it.” Banner warns her even as he shakes her hand. The smile Toni’s been smothering comes back full force.

“We’ll save that for later on in this relationship then,” Toni grins. “It’s good to meet you, Dr. Banner. Your work on antielectron collisions is unparalleled. Plus I’m a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green rage monster.”

“Subtle Miss.” JARVIS snarks quietly in her ear. “The very definition of tact.”

Toni just stares Banner in the eyes with her smile still lingering around the edges of her mouth. She wants him to know that she’s completely serious. She’s an actual fan, not someone interested in mocking him or aiding SHIELD or anyone else in capturing and containing him.

“Thanks.” Banner blinks at her, obviously a bit taken aback even if Toni thinks she might see a hint of amusement hiding in the corners of his mouth.

“Dr. Banner is only here to track the cube.” Fury announces as he strides in to the room. “I was hoping you might join him Stark.”

“And here I thought you called me in because you missed me Nicky.” Toni smiles at him, wide and sharp and all teeth.

“I miss you like I miss long and protracted torture Stark.” Fury cuts back. “Less so in fact.”

“Oh, kinky.” Toni arches a brow. “But like I said before, you and Coulson are going to have to hash this out between the two of you.”

“Stark.” Fury sighs and reaches up to rub at his temple, face creased lightly in exasperation. It’s a look Toni takes no small amount of pleasure putting on his face. “How Rhodes puts up with you I’ll never know.”

“Our love is pure and backed up by the fact that he has nerves of steel and excellent taste. I’m sure he could give you a few tips Nicky, if you ask him real sweet like that is.” Toni baits him gleefully because he should have known better than to bring Rhodey up.

“The Cube Stark,” Fury looks towards the ceiling as if he’s asking for guidance from on high. “Just help Dr. Banner find the Cube.”

“I would start with that stick of his.” Steve puts the idea forth as he shifts in his chair, a frown tugging at his mouth again. “It may be magical, but it works an awful lot like a HYDRA weapon.”
“I don’t know about that, but it is powered by the Cube.” Fury admits with a slight nod in Steve’s direction. “And I would like to know how Loki used it to turn two of the sharpest men I know into his personal flying monkeys.”

“Monkeys?” Thor looks confused and vaguely worried. “I do not understand.”

“I do.” Steve practically pounces on the reference, voice filled with an obvious sort of happiness before he seems to turn slightly bashful. “I understood that reference.”

Toni bites at the inside of her jaw to keep her laughter contained. That’s when she looks up and makes eye contact with Coulson who arches a brow and glances meaningfully towards Steve’s back as if to emphasize his earlier request that she be gentle with him.

“Shall we play Doctor?” Toni finally asks Banner because if she doesn’t get away from Steve she’s going to say or do something that’ll embarrass one or the both of them.

“This way, Ma’am.” Banner gestures towards an open set of doors.

“Call me Toni, handsome.” Toni winks at him as they move towards the back of the room together.

“Call me Bruce then.” Banner tells her as he huffs out a rough laugh and shakes his head.

He’s got a scrappy, hungry look to him that makes her want to wrap him in a blanket and feed him. Toni’s already eighty percent sure that she’s going to keep him if she can manage to lure him into the Tower. Although Rhodey’s going to be pissed that she’s gone back to picking up strays.

Either way he’s proving to be an excellent distraction from her more prevalent crisis.

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“The gamma readings are definitely consistent with Selvig’s reports of the Tesseract.” Bruce is busy scanning the scepter they’d taken off of Loki. “But it’s going to take weeks to process.”

“If we bypass their mainframe and direct route to the Homer cluster we can clock this at around six hundred teraflops.” Toni’s tells him as she slides her hands across the interface in front of her. The crate of tech Coulson had couriered to the helicarrier for her has already come in handy. It’s currently providing Bruce and her with in-depth scans that far outstrip even the tech SHIELD’s working with.

Her personal goodies are always a cut above the rest of course.

“All I packed was a toothbrush.” Bruce grouses lightly from across the room.

“You know what?” Toni walks around the edge of the counter and makes her way towards him slowly. She skirts the edge of a table and palms a small, thin electrical prod as she goes. “You should come by Stark Tower sometime. The top ten floors are all R&D. You’d love it. It’s like Candy Land, only with less diabetes and more cutting edge tech than you could shake an angry green fist at.”

“Thanks, but the last time I was in New York, I kind of broke Harlem.” That bashful, almost ashamed look is back on Bruce’s face and it makes Toni want to curl a lip in irritation.

“Well handsome, I can promise you a stress free environment.” Toni smirks as she edges behind him, prod twirling in hand. “No tension, no surprises, no SHIELD breathing down your neck. It’ll be peaceful, almost idyllic you could say.”
Bruce yelps when she jabs him in the side but when Toni leans in close there’s no sign of green, no flush of anger or anything else that might preface the Hulk making an appearance.

“Miss, please refrain from attempting to provoke Dr. Banner.” JARVIS sounds almost tense in her ear. “I also hope you’re aware that I will be forwarding this footage to Lt. Colonel Rhodes.”

“Hey.” Steve’s affronted voice takes Toni by surprise because, distracted by JARVIS and Bruce, she hadn’t heard him enter the lab.

“Nothing?” Toni asks Bruce, faux disappointment shinning in her voice. “And here I was hoping to meet your other half.”

“Are you nuts?” Steve’s all indignant fury as he strides across the lab.

“That depends entirely on who you ask.” Toni’s spine stiffens as she answers him but otherwise she determinedly keeps her focus on Bruce. This time she’s completely sure of the tiny smile lurking around the corners of him mouth. “You’ve really got a handle on it don’t you? So there’s no reason why you can’t come home with me. Just think about it. You, me, my entire R&D, and all of the science you can stand.”

“You’re Howard’s girl.” Steve speaks up again, the statement coming seemingly out of the blue. Toni immediately goes cold.

“So they keep telling me.” She grits the words out as she turns to face him. It takes all of Toni’s willpower not to flinch beneath the censure in his gaze, at the displeased set of his jaw.

“He was a good man, smart. So I’m sure he taught you a lot.” Steve’s hands are on his hips, chin tilted up and blue eyes narrowed.

“Oh he certainly did.” Howard had taught her more, Toni knows, than anyone could ever expect and in far different fields than they could ever imagine.

“Then you should know that threatening the safety of everyone on this ship isn’t smart.” Steve cuts his eyes towards Bruce. “No offense Doc.”

“It’s all right,” Bruce soothes but his shoulders are hunched again in that way that Toni already hates. “I wouldn’t have come aboard if I couldn’t handle pointy things.”

“You’re tip-toeing, handsome.” Toni tells Bruce as she turns away from the both of them and towards her crate. Her hands shake when she puts the prod down and reaches for a bag of the packaged fruit inside. This is already going downhill and it hadn’t even been her intention. “You need to strut.”

“And you need to focus on the problem, Miss Stark.” Steve scolds her.

“Do you think I’m not?” Toni whirs around, bag clenched in one hand as the other cuts through the air in front of her with a sharp gesture. Frustration blossoms to life inside of her because he’s not thinking. Despite everything else she’d expected more from him than this. “Why did Fury call us in? Why now? Why not before? What isn’t he telling us? I can’t do the equation unless I have all the variables.”

“You think Fury’s hiding something?” Steve asks and, thankfully, he seems to actually be considering the issue.
“He’s a spy. St-Captain,” Toni corrects herself before her mouth betrays her again, “he’s the spy. His secrets have secrets. Bruce knows it too. Don’t you Bruce?”

“Uh,” Bruce fumbles for a moment before he clears his throat and powers through, “I just want to finish my work here, and …”

“Doctor?” Steve prompts him.

“A warm light for all mankind.” Bruce says the words with the air of a quote. “Loki’s jab at Fury about the Cube.”

“I heard it.” Steve confirms.

“I don’t think it was meant for him.” Bruce looks at her. “I think it was meant for you.”

“You think he was talking about my Tower.” Toni’s mind whirls as she slides the bag of fruit across the table to Bruce. He’s finally talking and she feels like he needs a reward. Positive reinforcement always worked with the bots after all. Hopefully skittish scientists would be the same. She’ll have to ask Rhodey the next time she gets a chance.

“Even if Barton didn’t tell Loki about Stark Tower it’s still been all over the news.” Bruce opens the bag, face bemused, but Toni’s pleased when he shrugs and pulls a few blueberries out anyways. “Your speech has been playing nonstop for days now.”

“I don’t understand.” Steve interrupts. “What’s Stark Tower got to do with any of this?”

“It’s powered by an arc reactor, a self-sustaining energy source.” Bruce explains. “That building will run itself for what? A year on the outside?”

“And it’s just the prototype.” Toni confirms with a small smirk because even in the midst of all of this she’s so fucking proud. “SI’s going to be tackling clean energy now and the Tower’s just the starting point.”

“So why didn’t SHIELD bring her in on the Tesseract project?” Bruce keeps the train of thought going. “What are they even doing in the energy business in the first place?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.” Toni agrees as she turns back to her crate and grabs the slender StarkPhone resting inside. It’s biometrically locked to her too so she hadn’t worried about it being bothered. “It’s also what I aim to find out. I did tell Fury that SHIELD really should look into upgrading their security. Not that it would actually matter if they did.”

“Indeed Miss,” JARVIS is quiet in her ear but he still sounds undeniably smug. “I suspect we’ll have total access before too long.”

“Yet you’re confused as to why they didn’t call you in sooner.” Steve practically sneers and Toni ignores the way her heart clenches. “Howard should have taught you how to respect the chain of command.”

“Believe me he tried.” Toni laughs, low and husky and just a shade off bitter in a way she can’t hide. “Besides, an intelligence organization that fears intelligence never ends well for anyone. As you should know.”

“I think Loki’s trying to wind us up.” Steve denies. “This is a man who means to start a war and if we don’t stay focused, he’ll succeed. We have orders. We should follow them.”
“Blind following’s never been my style.” Toni bites the words out as irritation and something like betrayal wells up harsh and sharp in her chest.

“Steve,” Bruce cuts in, “tell me none of this seems a little off to you.”

It hurts the way Steve pauses, the way he’s so obviously ready and willing to take Bruce’s words into consideration but not hers.

“Just find the Cube.” Steve orders after a few tense seconds before he turns on his heel and marches back out of the lab.

Toni stands there, hands curled into fists at her side, eyes gazing off into the middle distance.

“I am sorry Miss.” JARVIS tells her softly in her ear. “Perhaps, with time, you will be able to find a common ground with the Captain.”

Toni appreciates his attempt at comfort even if it doesn’t work.

“Are you okay?” Bruce’s soft, hesitant question breaks her out of her thoughts.

“Always.” Toni pushes her sadness down, buries it deep with all of the rest of her hurts.

“He’s a good guy, but he’s … young. Raw. I think this is harder for him than he wants to admit.” Bruce says as he moves away from the scepter and towards the opposite side of the lab. “But he’s also not wrong about Loki. He does have the jump on us.”

“Loki’s playing Wylie Coyote and his little Acme dynamite kit’s going to blow up in his face.” Toni says as she moves back to her own screen. Loki’s dangerous but it’s his end game that has her on edge because it isn’t going to end well for one of them. Toni’s determined to make sure that the Earth comes out on the winning side one way or another. “The real question is who or what is the Road Runner?”

“Well you have fun finding that out. As soon as I’m done here I’m out.” Bruce throws data to her screen.

“Or you’ll be suiting up with the rest of us.” Toni tosses some back.

“No, you see, I don’t get a suit of armor, or a uniform.” Bruce chuckles wryly. “I’m exposed. Like a nerve. It’s a nightmare.”

Toni stills.

She knows that feeling, not in the same way as he’s talking about of course, but in a similar vein.

“You know,” Toni starts, voice slow and careful because pep talks have never really been her thing. At least not with actual people. “After Afghanistan, when I put on the armor and became Iron Queen, I took on more power than any one human was ever intended to have. But I embraced it and the armor’s a part of me now.”

“It’s not the same.” Bruce denies.

“No,” Toni agrees as she moves away from her screen and crosses the space between them. Slowly, cautiously, she reaches out and lays a hand on Bruce’s arm. He’s tense beneath her touch for a long moment before he finally relaxes. “But it’s also not just the armor. It’s all of its ups and downs, all of the fighting and the violence and the stress. It’s a terrible sort of privilege.”
“But you can control it, could chose to stop if you wanted to.” Bruce shakes his head. “I can’t control the Hul- … the other guy. I can’t chose to not be him.”

“I read all about your accident.” His arms goes rigid in her grasp once again but Toni pushes forward before he can pull away from her. “That much gamma radiation should have killed you. You shouldn’t be standing here today any more than I should be. We should both be dead, but we’re not. Maybe we’re here for a reason.”

Toni knows it’s true, knows it deep down in her heart. Being Iron Queen was always her destiny, always her destination. Maybe the Hulk is the same for Bruce.

“You’re saying the other guy what? Saved my life?” Bruce laughs, bitter and achingly tired. “That’s nice. It’s a nice sentiment. Saved it for what?”

“Maybe that’s why you’re here, now, with us.” Toni tells him. “Maybe it’s time for you to find out. Maybe it’s time for you to stop hiding.”

“You may not enjoy that.” Bruce warns her softly.

“And you just might.” Toni grins up at him.

Bruce just shakes his head and turns back to his monitor.

Yeah, she wants to keep him.

Chapter End Notes

SOoooo?!? What’d you guys think? Hope it wasn't boring and that it came across well. Let me know any thoughts/questions/concerns/requests!

Also feel free to come find me and scream at me on tumblr.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

And we're back!

You guys have been great and so very very patient with me so I decided to cut the chapter in the interest of getting it out quicker.

So without further adieu here's part 2 of 3 of the Avengers and I hope I do it justice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fanmix

New Fanart #1 #2 #3 #4

Pinterest Board

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Hours later finds Toni still in the lab with Bruce.

He’s leaning against the table in front of the window while she sitting in one of the high rise lab chairs she’d hopped up onto. They’ve had the model locked in to sweep for the Tesseract for a while now so basically they’ve been reduced to playing the waiting game.

Toni’s never been good at sitting patiently though so she’s been using the time to multitask on a few different things. One of which was sending in an order for a few select pieces of equipment she thinks Bruce would like. She plans to have them delivered to the Tower and set up in one of the extra labs she hadn’t assigned a use to yet.

With a little ingenuity she’ll have a private workspace up and running for him within the next handful of hours.

A carrot to dangle in front of Bruce, a treat to entice him closer.

Bribe or bargaining chip, Toni’s not completely sure which phrase fits better but she honestly doesn’t care at the moment. All she cares about is the fact that, after working side by side with Bruce for the past few hours or so, she’s determined now that she’s going to be keeping him if she has her way about it.

He fits into her space in a way not many people do, in a way that only Rhodey and her small family ever has. And, despite only having known him a short while now, Toni feels a kinship with him that’s almost as delightful as it is unsettling. Bruce has a sadness in his eyes and a ragged sort of calm energy hanging around him that she already finds addictive. She’s torn between wanting to wrap him up and feed him and testing his boundaries to see how far down that serenity really goes.

Toni finds him fascinating on so many levels and that, in and of itself, is something to be leery of. The things Bruce’s shown her about himself so far don’t seem completely believable to Toni. All the details she’s managed to pick up on seem too good to be true in a stranger, even if they do come
packaged with a giant green rage monster. But if they are, if he’s really how he seems to be on the surface so far, then Toni thinks she might be willing to take a chance on him. Might be willing to let him in just a little bit closer. Might be willing to let him get within striking range of her more delicate parts.

If only to see if he has the potential to be a divergent piece of code when it comes to the standard functioning pattern people normally fall into around her.

She’s considering the possibility of purposefully letting him closer, of presenting him with a weakness and sitting back to wait and see if he’ll strike or if he’ll prove himself trustworthy.

It’s a risk, a gamble she hasn’t taken in years now, but something’s telling Toni it might just be time to try again. That what he’s shown her so far might make that ever present possibility of betrayal worth it. That Bruce might be worth it if she takes everything she’s learned about him so far into account.

There’s the way they’ve been smoothly dancing around the lab together for the past few hours, caught up in relatively close quarters but seemingly never in each other’s way as they work with and around each other. It’s the way he doesn’t seem to mind if she talks to or at him with a single minded focus or if she’s distracted and focusing on two or three different things all at the same time.

It’s the way his mouth curves just so, a small and barely there amused twist of his lips, when she says something sarcastic or cutting. Like he wants to smile but can’t quite remember how. Like he finds her funny more than abrasive and can’t help but express that.

He hasn’t asked her for anything either and despite the fact that she’s already buying him things that’s a fact that Toni’s made a note of. He hasn’t mentioned the armor or SI or money or sex. Hasn’t mentioned any of the things people normally jump to bring up to her. Instead he’s just been working diligently beside her, answering her when she speaks directly to him and then sometimes even when she’s obviously not. Sliding in sly little quips and comments that make her smile at him almost against her will.

It’s … refreshing and a bit of a shock that this man, so obviously ragged around the edges and gun shy, is able to work so smoothly beside her right off the bat when so many others have tried and failed over the years.

The only other person who’d fallen into synch with her like this was Rhodey but Toni knows that was, and still is, a type of synchronicity that has no true classification. Toni and Rhodey are mated at their bases, intertwined in a way she knows she’ll never find again. She’d bet the house and won when it comes to Rhodey.

Rhodey is singular, his love and warmth, his protection and devotion, are all singular in her life.

Toni knows that there will never be another like him.

Not in this world, not in her life, not in her heart.

Especially not now, not when she’s a decade past that kind of naivety and firmly rooted in a world that requires NDA’s and paperwork to allow anyone into her life in more than a peripheral sense. Not after Howard and Maria, after Jannik and Mari, after Stane and SHIELD and a world determined to rip her apart every chance it gets.

But still some small part of her, some still, quiet voice, whispers to her that this, that Bruce, just might be different. Toni can’t help but think that maybe, just maybe, Bruce has enough pain and betrayal
trailing behind him that he’d be reluctant to shovel any off onto anyone else. Even if that someone was her.

The thought of maybe expanding her small circle, of finding another friend, another like-minded individual that she might not have to constantly guard her back from is almost … seductive. It calls out to something small and aching deep inside of Toni, a softness she’d buried and bricked over years ago where the world outside her family is concerned.

Plus, on top of all of that, he’s helped to distract her from thoughts of Steve that threaten to eat her alive despite her best efforts to ignore them.

‘He truly is incredible,’ Toni muses to herself. ‘Or at least he could be.’

So Toni wants to keep him if he’ll let her, if she can convince him quickly enough. Anyone capable of distracting her on such a level should either be brought in close or carefully cut out of her life.

It's a novel experience, finding someone new, someone as interesting and endearing as Bruce has been so far. There are, after all, so few people capable of truly grabbing her attention, of making her question her long held rules about isolation and distance. Most of the ones she's met over the years she’s already written off completely or enfolded into her small circle.

That’s the thought that brings her other dilemma back up to the forefront of her mind. Toni carefully smothers the urge to wince beneath a layer of cold calm.

There’s one person who already seems capable of getting under her skin in the worst sort of way and he’s far more complicated to deal with and no where near easily dismissed.

Steve.

He’s there, buried deep beneath her skin, latched on to her bones and her heart, and Toni’s sure that nothing ever will change that fact, no matter how this all goes in the end. Still she’d known right from the beginning that a confrontation with Steve, no matter how small, was doomed to failure on her part.

She’d known that.

So it shouldn’t hurt the way it does. His easy dismissal shouldn’t sting. His sneer and the displeased curl of his mouth shouldn’t make something small and vulnerable in her chest twist. The way he’d thrown Howard in her face, like he was a standard to be measured by and not the monster who’d tormented her for years, shouldn’t make her ache.

But, even with all of that, she should still be able to push it down and away, should be able to bottle it up and not bother with it at the moment. Should be able to compartmentalize her hurts like she always has over the years. Should be able to patch the wound for the moment until she’s safe and able to let it bleed its poison out in private, somewhere far from prying eyes and eager ears.

Toni doesn’t have time for this right now, doesn’t have time to focus on her own emotions, to dwell on her pain.

Hell, Toni doesn’t have the right.

Not now, not when there’s more important things to deal with. She shouldn’t, can’t, be that selfish right now.

Her lack of control, her lack of focus and her sudden inability to fully compartmentalize where
normally it’s her go-to response is … *disquieting*.

“Miss,” JARVIS is, as always, a quiet but warm comfort in her ear, “I am currently chewing through SHIELD’s firewalls. I have located files that might be of interest to you and have concentrated my efforts in that direction. I estimate breach and total access within no more than two minutes.”

Toni hums under her breath in confirmation but doesn’t move her attention away from the screen in her hand.

She’s hoping that Bruce will be swayed by some of the toys she’s having delivered to the Tower as well as the clothes she’s already bought him and had couriered up to the guest floor. JARVIS is an expert at measurement taking after all, even without the scanners available at the Tower, so she’s sure everything will fit Bruce perfectly. She’s hopeful that it’ll be enough to persuade him into at least hearing her out in full, into at least giving her the chance to show him exactly what she has to offer.

Thankfully, if there’s one thing besides building that Toni’s good at, it’s salesmanship.

But, even if he doesn’t choose to stay with her, even if Toni somehow *can’t* convince him to give her a chance, then she plans to make sure he’s got more than the slightly frayed clothes he’s currently wearing.

If he leaves it’ll be with new gear and one of her black cards in his pocket even if she has to slip it in there when he’s not paying attention.

If he goes it’ll be with the knowledge that she’ll welcome him back even if no one else will.

She’ll offer him her hand until he either bites it or proves himself safe.

Whichever comes first.

“Miss,” JARVIS calls to her again, “I have gained access and I do believe there is something you should see. I am routing all pertinent data to your StarkPhone now.”

Toni slides her fingers across the screen in her hand and watches as the data JARVIS has discovered comes rushing forward.

It’s like that night at the Malibu mansion all over again. Like that moment of discovery directly before Stane had ripped her heart right out of her chest.

Only this time she was expecting the secrets.

This time she was expecting the lies.

Firearms. Suits. Missiles.

Phase Two.

*Weapons.*

The Tesseract turned into a fount of destruction when it could have become a beacon of hope instead.

When faced with a source of unlimited energy, an answer to everything from global warming to deforestation, the WSC had looked at it and seen only a tool to be used in a *fight.*
They, like Toni herself had not so very long ago, had turned their focus towards war and death instead of peace and life.

Toni takes a deep breath, closes her eyes for a split second, and wonders just for a moment when people like Fury, like the WSC, when the world itself, will ever learn as she had forcefully, horrifically, learned.

She wonders if Fury and the WSC even realize what they’ve done by playing with the Tesseract as they have, by weaponizing something they hadn’t even begun to understand even after decades of study.

Determination settling hot and bright in her chest, Toni flicks her fingers across the screen and sets to pouring over the data in more detail.

She needs to know what they’ve done with the Tesseract so far. She needs information on what they’ve already accomplished and what they might still be able to accomplish in the future with or without the Cube’s return. Toni doesn’t trust SHIELD and she somehow trusts the WSC even less which is saying something. So she needs to examine the data JARVIS has found for her because knowledge is the truest type of power after all and Toni refuses to be powerless ever again.

It helps that Toni knows JARVIS will be copying everything he can get his code on so that they can examine it in depth later on. After so many years together he’s an expert at anticipating her needs and instructions. Plus it is, in their position, the most logical course of action for him to follow. And JARVIS is, more often than not, a creature of logic.

Toni’s pouring over what appears to be a missile design that’s rather disturbingly close to some of her now discontinued tech when one of the doors to the lab opens.

“What are you doing, Stark?” Fury snaps as he comes striding into the room.

“You shouldn’t ask questions you wouldn’t want to answer yourself Knick-Knack,” Toni snipes as she leans back in her chair and crosses her legs. “Because honestly I’ve kind of been wondering the same thing about you.”

“You’re supposed to be doing your job and locating the Tesseract, Stark.” Fury grits out. “Not filing your nails or whatever it is you’re doing.”

“We are.” Bruce cuts in suddenly, voice firm but pointed, as he moves away from the window to stand near Toni’s chair. “The model’s locked and we’re sweeping for the signature now. When we get a hit,” he gestures towards the equipment across the lab, “we’ll have the location within half a mile.”

“Then you’ll get your disco square back.” Toni agrees as she climbs to her feet, StarkPhone firmly in hand, and moves towards the nearest screen. “No muss, no fuss. Also Nick-at-Night, I hate to put you on the spot like this, really I do, but what is Phase Two?”

Fury turns, eye narrowed, in her direction but before he can say anything Steve comes marching into the room, a large bulky gun in hand and a scowl on his face.

“Phase Two is SHIELD uses the cube to make weapons.” Steve says as he slams the thing down on the table, face grim and jaw tight. His cuts his eyes in Toni’s direction and gives her a small nod. “Sorry, computer was moving a little slow for me.”

“Rogers,” Fury starts, “we gathered everything related to the Tesseract. This does not mean that we’re making …”
“I’m sorry Nicky,” Toni interrupts him as she swivels the screen now holding the plans for a missile, “what were you lying?”

“I was wrong, Director.” Steve cuts in, thumbs braced against his belt, as the far door opens and Thor walks in followed by Romanov. “The world hasn’t changed a bit.”

“Did you know about this?” Bruce is looking in Romanov’s direction, glasses in hand and eyes narrowed.

“You want to think about removing yourself from this environment, Doctor?” Romanov says as she moves forward to stand in front of Thor.

There’s a tension in her shoulders and a prowl to her walk that sets Toni’s teeth on edge. She suddenly doesn’t like the way any of them are looking at Bruce, or her for that matter.

“Oh.” Bruce scoffs. “I was in Calcutta. I was pretty well removed.”

“Loki is manipulating you.” Romanov insists apropos of nothing.

“And you’ve been doing what, exactly?” Bruce’s voice goes softer, quieter in that way Toni recognizes so very well. The calm before the storm.

“You didn’t come here because I batted my eyelashes at you.” Romanov’s been moving across the room slowly the entire time, face focused and eyes intent.

“Yes,” Bruce agrees, fiddling with his glasses and not at all afraid as he moves towards the hanging screen, “and I’m not leaving because suddenly you get a little twitchy. You knew about me when you pulled me into this.” Bruce points towards the screen with the missile plans on it. “What I’d like to know is why SHIELD is using the Tesseract to build weapons of mass destruction.”

“Because of him.” Fury points towards Thor.

“Me?” Thor seems genuinely confused.

But Toni’s mind whirls as the finally puzzle pieces click into place.

Of course.

Of fucking course.

Because they never learn. None of them ever goddamn learn.

“Last year,” Fury steps forward as he speaks, “Earth had a visitor from another planet who had a grudge match that leveled a small town. We learned that not only are we not alone we are hopelessly, hilariously, outgunned.”

“My people want nothing but peace with your planet.” Thor seems almost hurt, brow furrowed and hands loose at his side.

“But you’re not the only people out there, are you?” Fury pivots to look at him. “And you’re not the only threat. The world’s filling up with people who can’t be matched,” Fury turns again but this time it’s Toni he looks at, “that can’t be controlled.”

Toni stares back at him, one hand propped on her hip and mouth curled into an insolent smile.

No, he can’t control her and they both know how badly that fact burns him, the WSC, and the entire
rest of the world.

“Like you controlled the cube?” Steve puts the point forth, his doubt clear in his voice.

“Your work with the Tesseract.” Thor steps forward then, large hand cutting a swath through the air around him as he gestures, “is what drew Loki to it, and his allies. It is a signal to all the realms that the Earth is ready for a higher form of war.”

Toni closes her eyes for a split second and sucks in a slow, deep breath.

There it is.

The confirmation of what’s been niggling around in the back of her mind since this whole thing started.

The truth brought down from on high by the God of Thunder himself.

By trying to be the kid in the yard with the biggest stick, the WSC has made Earth vulnerable, made it a target to forces beyond anything they’ve ever dealt with.

And Toni’s not sure if she can protect everyone.

Isn’t sure if she’s good enough to do what needs to be done when the time eventually comes.

Because it will, she knows.

One way or another, it will come.

“A higher form?” Steve sounds almost scandalized.

“You forced our hand.” Fury protests. “We had to come up with something.”

And that’s when Toni can no longer stay silent.

“A nuclear deterrent?” She pipes up, every ounce of her derision purposefully apparent in her voice. “Yeah, because that’s always calms everything right down. Always works out so very well for all parties involved doesn’t it Nick?”

“Remind me again how you made your fortune, Stark.” Fury spins to glare at her.

Toni bites back a snarl at the targeted blow because they both know the answer to that. Everyone does.

The Stark legacy was built on blood and death and Toni had taken that legacy and built an empire the likes of which Howard had only dreamed of.

And now, no matter how hard she tries to change its future, no one will ever forget SI’s past or her own. Especially not her.

“I’m sure if she still made weapons, Ms. Stark would be neck-deep …” Steve cuts in and Toni stops.

But she doesn’t go still, doesn’t go cold like she normally would at Steve’s pointed barb.

No, instead she feels a flame spring to life in the pit of her stomach. A hazy, blue knot of anger and hurt that feels almost unnatural in its intensity spins itself into existence in the back of her mind.
“Let’s back up a second shall we?” Toni steps forward away from where she’s been hovering at Bruce’s side, eyes narrowed and teeth bared in Steve’s direction. “How is this now about me?”

“I’m sorry,” Steve sneers, “isn’t everything?”

“I thought humans were more evolved than this.” Thor cuts in, expression disappointed and just a bit disgusted.

“Excuse me,” Fury whirls on him, “did we come to your planet and blow stuff up? Stark’s got a history you know nothing about.”

“You treat your champions with such mistrust.” Thor argues back and Toni is shocked at the sudden blast of anguish she can see in his face. There is a wound there that runs much deeper than this moment she knows. “Do you always cast such aspersions on your scholars and shield-maidens? Treat them as lesser?”

“First of all, she is not my champion.” Fury denies as he jabs a finger in Toni’s direction.

Toni can’t help the bitter laugh that rips itself from her throat.

Oh how well she knows.

Toni’s no one’s champion as far as SHIELD and the majority of the US government is concerned. She’s just not suited for the job. Is not recommended.

She is, after all, far too selfish and … unstable.

The blue fog of anger crowding her mind grows darker, harsher.

“Are you all really that naïve?” Romanov cuts in, brow arched and face incredulous. “This isn’t about trust or honor. SHIELD monitors all potential threats.”

“Captain America’s on that watch?” Bruce scoffs, arms folded and lips pursed in displeasure.

“We all are.” Romanov confirms.

“Wait,” attention focused as it is on Steve Toni can’t let that comment slide, has to say something to him just to get a reaction, “you’re on that list? Are you above or below angry bees Captain?” Toni sneers. She wants a response out of him, needs one. Something. Anything. She needs to know she’s gotten under his skin, wants to see him angry, wants to see him mean. “Inquiring minds want to know.”

“Stark,” Steve bites the words out, polite title obviously forgotten as he glares at her, “so help me God if you make one more wisecrack …”

“Miss, the energy readings …” JARVIS’ voice speaks up in her ear but Toni ignores him.

“Are you threatening me big boy?” Toni takes a step in Steve’s direction, moves closer into arm’s reach of him in a move she’d normally never pull. Even at her most threatening and intimidating she’s always been conscious of physical space. Especially around men who are normally so much bigger than she is. But in this moment she doesn’t care, refuses to care, can’t care. All that matters is that hazy blue rage and her desperate need to provoke Steve. “I don’t deal well with being threatened Captain.”

“You should show some respect.” Steve’s in front of her then, wide shoulders set and jaw clenched
as he matches her move for move until they’re facing off with only a few feet of space between them.

“Respect to what?” Toni gives him a blatant once over even as the rest of the room seems to fade away around them like so much buzzing background noise. “An overgrown ape in a pair of tights?”

Steve’s face flushes, red crawling across the arches of his cheeks as his jaw clenches so hard Toni can see the way the muscles spasm in protest.

She’s hurt him.

_Good._

There’s a vicious surge of satisfaction at that realization because he’s hurt her too whether he knows it or not. And now she’s struck back, now she’s done to him what she’s been doing to the rest of the world for years now. She’s lashed out and cut him, deep and bloodless, so that he’ll be too busy looking at the damage she’s caused to pay attention to her own.

“You speak of control, yet you court chaos.” Thor’s booming voice finally manages to cut through the haze a bit and Toni flicks her attention in his direction again.

“That’s his M.O. isn’t it?” Bruce cuts in. “I mean, what are we, a team? No, no, no. We’re a chemical mixture that makes chaos. We-we’re a time bomb.”

“You need to step away.” Fury advances on Bruce again.

The blue haze in Toni’s mind surges.

“Why shouldn’t Bruce let off a little steam?” She sneers as she turns, intent on going back to Bruce’s side.

A large, gloved hand wraps around her wrist and the sudden tug on her arm stops her short.

“You know damn well why.” Steve grits out at her, expression fierce and eyes so blue they burn.

“You need to back off and know your place.”

Stung, Toni jerks her arm free of him as she whirls back around and presses her way into his space. She barely reaches his shoulder even in her heels but she doesn’t, _can’t_, care.

“My place? And where exactly is that Rogers? Below you? Fury? I want you to tell me where my place is. And then I want you to _try_ and put me in it.” Toni growls and she sees the way Steve’s pupils blow wide with rage.

“Spoiled little princess playing superhero.” Steve taunts her. “Thinking that armor gives you the right to stick your nose in everything. Take that off, what are you?”

“Genius, billionaire, philanthropist,” Toni lets a smile, half feral and all teeth, unfurl across her mouth, “queen.”

“I know girls with _none_ of that worth ten of you.” Steve spits back, all vibrant rage and wide blown eyes.

“Oh Rogers,” Toni purrs back on automatic, voice coolly seductive and vicious, “you’ve _never_ known a woman like me.”

“You’re right.” Steve’s suddenly smug but there’s a cruel glint hiding in his eyes. “I haven’t. And
I’m glad. Because I’ve seen the footage Stark. The way you act, the way you are. The only thing you really fight for is yourself and I don’t take to people that selfish. That cold.”

Cut to the quick, Toni stares up at Steve and barely even notices that around them the room is dead silent.

The blue haze of rage from before is gone.

A familiar, icy numbness is quickly spreading in its place.

Toni can’t move, can barely breathe. To her horror she feels the wet shine of tears begin to form. She blinks once, hard, and forces them down. Reaches out and grabs her calm with desperate hands and reminds herself that this was what she expected to happen.

Because of course Steve’s seen footage of her. Hell he’s probably seen that glamorous SHIELD file alongside every nasty piece the press has ever done on her by now. Of course they’d shown him that.

So of course he hates her.

Steve really, finally, hates her.

Oh God.

Toni wants to scream, wants to run. Wants to find a dark corner somewhere and curl up into it until Rhodey comes to find her because he always finds her. She wants to make herself small and unnoticed in a way she hasn’t since she was ten and hadn’t yet stood tall against the fury of Howard’s fists.

Instead all Toni can do is listen as Steve spills her deepest, darkest fear out into the open air around them for everyone to hear.

“You’re not the type to make the sacrifice play,” Steve’s voice goes quiet but no less brutal, like he knows he’s got her trapped and he’s going in for the kill, “to lay down on a wire and let someone else crawl over you. You don’t have the heart for it.”

“I think I’d just cut the wire.” It takes all she has to make sure her voice comes out steady.

“Always a way out with you isn’t there?” Steve scoffs, darts a glance around the room, and then focuses back on her again. “You maybe not be a threat but you better stop pretending to be a hero.”

“A hero?” Toni laughs. She can taste her bitterness and hurt blossoming to life inside her mouth like the familiar and hated burn of old scotch. “Like you? You’re a laboratory experiment, Rogers.” It all comes spilling out of her, vicious and hateful and so goddamn untrue that she’s not even sure where the words come from. “Everything special about you came out of a bottle.”

“And you’re nothing without that suit.” Steve cuts back. “You’re a disgrace to Howard’s name.”

Oh.

Toni feels her breath catch again, feels the way her heart skips a beat beside the reactor.

Once again she’s being held up to an impossible standard. Once again she’s been found wanting when juxtaposed against the ideal of a man others think she should be living up to.

Only this time it’s Steve doing the comparing instead of Howard.
The irony of that fact isn’t lost on Toni.

“And now you cast shame on a shield-maiden’s name and house?” Thor’s the one who finally cuts into their argument and his laugh is bitter and harsh, “You people are so petty and tiny.”

“Yeah,” Bruce scoffs but Toni’s too busy blinking, trying to bring herself back into focus, to notice what he’s doing, “this is a team?”

“Agent Romanov,” Fury calls, “would you escort Dr. Banner back to his …”

“Where?” Bruce interrupts. “You rented my room out already didn’t you? I hope Loki’s enjoying it as much as I would have. I’m sure it’s real cozy.”

“The cell was just in case …” Fury tries to explain.

“In case you needed to kill me.” Bruce calls him out on his bullshit pointblank. “But you can’t. I know. I tried.”

At those words Toni sucks in a sharp breath and her entire world goes quiet.

Oh Bruce…

“I got low.” Bruce admits, and the way he curls in on himself makes Toni want to reach out for him, makes her want to offer her version of comfort in a way that she normally only does for her family. “I didn’t see an end. So, I put a bullet in my mouth, and the Other Guy spit it out. So I moved on. I focused on helping other people. I was good. Until you dragged me back into this freak show and put everyone here at risk.” He turns toward Romanov then. “You want to know my secret, Agent Romanov? You want to know how I stay calm?”

“Bruce.” Toni calls his name softly because Fury and Romanov have both reached for their guns. She can’t let this happen. Not here, not now, not because of this, not because of them.

“Dr. Banner,” Steve steps in front of her though before she can go much further, slides into place like a wall just a step ahead of her, arms out at his sides. “Put down the scepter.”

Toni watches the way Bruce looks down at his hand as if he didn’t even remember picking the thing up and feels a chill trace down her spine.

Just then there’s a ping from the other side of the lab.

“Sorry kids,” Bruce says as he puts the scepter down and shuffles across the room, suddenly smaller seeming and calmer than before, “you don’t get to see my party trick after all.”

“You’ve located the Tesseract?” Thor asks.

“I can get there fastest.” Toni’s already moving, brushing past Steve as she heads towards the opposite door. JARVIS can send her a location once she’s in the armor so she doesn’t need to stick around.

“The Tesseract belongs on Asgard.” Thor insists. “No human is a match for it.”

Personally Toni agrees with him. Which is one of the reasons she wants to be the one who gets to it first. If she can get her hands on it then that means she can take a few personal readings with the suit while she keeps it safe until Thor can take it back with him. Until he can get it far enough away that no one else on Earth can mess with the thing.
“You’re not going alone.” Steve slides in front of her again, determined to keep her from leaving.

“And who’s going to stop me?” Toni asks, eyes narrowed as she steps to the side only to have him mirror the move.

“You can’t just run off.” Steve insists.

“Move.” Toni grits out between clenched teeth. “Or I’m going to make you.”

“You’d have to put on the suit for that.” Steve arches a brow as he stares her down.

“Miss,” JARVIS is back in her ear for the first time since all of this began. “If the Captain does not allow you to leave then I will be forced to find a way to retrieve you. I am afraid there might be considerable collateral damage in that case.”

“You’ve got no idea what you’re asking for old man.” Toni warns him. Steve’s brows are furrowed and his eyes are narrowed like he’s searching for something as he stares at her.

“Oh my god.” Bruce’s quiet words cut across the room before Steve can say anything else.

Toni turns in his direction only to feel the world shake as an explosion rocks the helicarrier.

“Miss!” JARVIS is suddenly loud and desperate in her ear.

Toni’s blown off her feet by the force of the fire ball that rips through the ducts of the lab. She clenches her eyes closed, throws up her arms to shield her face and head, and braces for impact against the wall or the floor.

It never comes.

Instead arms, thick and heavy with muscle, wrap around her waist and her shoulders. Toni’s tucked close to a broad chest and folded into a shielding embrace, a large gloved hand cradling the back of her head protectively.

She barely even feels it when they hit the floor.

Steve takes most of the impact for her.

For a moment they’re both still. Toni’s cradled against the broad expanse of Steve’s chest, his arms still wrapped around her. Pressed against her as he is, Steve hardly seems to be breathing.

Then the arm around her waist tightens, the hand on her hip flexes, and Toni looks up only to feel her world narrow down to the way Steve’s staring down at her.

Behind them there’s another gout of flame, the red emergency lights begin to flash, and the fire siren begins to wail.

The world speeds back up, widens.

“Miss/Ms. Stark,” Steve and JARVIS’ voices overlap in her ears, “are you well/hurt?”

“I’m fine.” She answers the both of them even as Steve pushes back up onto his feet, taking her with him effortlessly. He finally lets her go once they’re upright again.

“Put on the suit.” Steve urges her then, all traces of their previous rancor erased by urgency, a steadying hand still pressed lightly against the small of her back.
Toni nods in agreement, turns on her heel, and runs.

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Toni weaves her way in and around the various scampering SHIELD agents as she heads through the helicarrier’s winding halls towards the room where she’d docked the armor.

Steve’s following close behind her every step of the way and while Toni’s aware of him she’s finally able to compartmentalize again, able to push thoughts of him down and away so they don’t interfere.

Able to ignore, for the moment, the way it’d felt to be held by him for one frozen second in time.

Instead Toni focuses on JARVIS’ voice in her ear.

“According to all sensors and coms activity it seems to have been an external detonation.” JARVIS fills her in rapidly. “Hostiles have been reported in the corridors Miss, and engine number three is no longer functioning although it seems that the turbine is mostly intact.”

Toni winces because she knows the schematics of the helicarrier better than anyone. If they lose another engine they’re going down and, judging by the clipped tone he’s using, JARVIS knows it too.

Ice slithers down Toni’s spine at the very idea of the helicarrier falling from the sky. The majority of the ship’s crew will die if that happens. There isn’t a viable evacuation plan for everyone on board, not this high up, not with so little time. There are jets and fighter planes as well as Thor and Toni herself, each of them could realistically carry a few people to safety.

It wouldn’t be enough though. There wouldn’t be enough time to save everyone.

That’s not counting the collateral damage of the area where the ship would inevitably crash if Fury and his super spy-lings couldn’t manage to get it out over the open ocean somehow.

The destruction would be horrific.

So that leaves Toni with only one real option.

An aerial repair.

She needs to assess the damage and fix as much as possible as quick as possible in order to try and keep the helicarrier in the air.

It’s the only way.

It’s also, Toni hates to admit, something she can’t do alone.

As if in agreement with her line of thought, Fury and Hill’s conversation is suddenly in her ear, patched in no doubt by JARVIS considering Toni’s supposed to be wearing an ear bud when on board the helicarrier. What they’re saying is what she’s already determined so she only listens to them with half an ear as she moves.

“Stark do you copy that?” Fury barks the question out, voice strained.

“I’m on it Nicky.” Toni confirms even as she throws up a hand to shield her face from the sparks raining down from above her.

She turns the corner that leads to the room where she’s put the armor at a flat run, used to running in
heels after so many years practically living in them, with Steve directly behind her. The light on the door’s already green, JARVIS’ work again no doubt, and Toni bursts through it with no hesitation.

“Go,” she calls out over her shoulder to where Steve’s haunting the doorway staring at the slowly unfolding docking bay that holds the armor. “Engine three. I’ll meet you there.”

“Right.” Steve nods and, with one last lingering look, turns and takes off.

“Status report J,” Toni barks as the armor folds around her.

“Cameras below deck show that Agent Romanov survived the explosion and is currently on the move.” JARVIS chimes in as the HUD boots up. “Dr. Banner is presently in pursuit.”

“Bruce?” Toni feels dread well up inside of her. There’s only one reason Toni can think of that Bruce would be pursuing Romanov and it sure as fuck isn’t because he wants to ask her out on a date.

“Yes Miss,” JARVIS confirms. “It seems as if the explosion triggered his transformation. The entity known as the Hulk is now present aboard the helicarrier. I would not suggest attempting to intercept or engaging him if it can be avoided.”

“Couldn’t even if I wanted to J.” Toni agrees as she maneuvers the armor up and out of the helicarrier so she can assess the damage herself. “I’ve got bigger issues at the moment than Mean Green throwing a temper tantrum. Besides, I’m sure Agent Provocateur can take care of herself.”

“Indeed Miss. Approaching engine three now.” JARVIS throws up a scan of the engine and Toni bites off a curse at what she sees. Not good.

“Ms. Stark!” Steve’s voice is suddenly loud in her ear and she can see him, a bright blot of blue, on the edge of the damaged scaffolding where the wall of the helicarrier’s been blown clean apart. “Ms. Stark I’m here.”

“Good.” Toni calls back. “Let’s see what we’ve got.”

There’s no response but Toni’s not really looking for one. She’s focused on the problem in front of her instead.

“I’ve got to get this superconducting coolant system back online before I can access the rotors, work on dislodging the debris.” Toni’s muttering half to herself and half to Steve and JARVIS as she tracks her eyes over the scans. They’re bad to say the least. There’s debris in the engine and more systems off line than she can deal with alone in a timely manner.

She’s going to need Steve’s help to get this done quickly enough to keep this fucker airborne.

“I need you to get to that engine control panel,” she calls out to Steve as she reaches out and forces a dangling piece back into place, “and tell me which relays are in overload position.” She points to the left of where Steve’s standing, one hand raised against the wind and the sun as he stares in her direction.

Toni doesn’t wait for his response, just swings around and ducks into the cooling conductors housing and rips down the wall with a few well-placed tugs.

“What does it look like in there?” She needs to know as many variables as she can get her hands on.

“It seems to run on some form of electricity.” Steve’s voice is wry and just a shade off exasperated.
“Well,” Toni feels a reluctant smirk crawl across her face at the unexpected dose of humor, “you’re not wrong.”

Toni turns her attention towards blasting the broken debris off the turbines. The damage is substantial here too. There’s shattered and twisted metal everywhere she looks but Toni doesn’t let that stop her. Instead she just keeps moving forward, keeps cutting and shoving and assessing until she blasts her way out through the other side and finally stands face to stalled blades with the interior of the third engine.

It’s extensive but manageable for the moment. The helicarrier’s going to need a comprehensive overhaul at this point but what’s left is more than enough to do what needs to be done. She’s confident that she can slap a bandage of sorts on it that should hold until they can set it down for repairs. The trick is getting everything just right.

“The relays are intact.” Steve’s back in her ear. “What’s our next move?”

“Even if I clear the rotors this thing won’t re-engage without a jump.” Toni tells him, mind whirling as a plan solidifying in her mind. “I’m gonna have to get in there and push.”

“You can’t.” Steve cuts in. “If that thing gets up to speed you’ll get shredded.”

“That stator control unit can reverse the polarity long enough to disengage maglev and that cou—”

“Speak English!” Steve interrupts.

“See that red lever on the wall?” Toni asks as she tries to slow her mind down enough to put what she needs him to do into simple terms. To explain to him just what she’s trusting him with. “It’ll slow the rotors down long enough for me to get out. You pull that lever on my word and I’ll be fine. Don’t and well … let’s just say you should probably stand by it and wait for my signal.”

Toni moves forward, mind whirling she calculates give and debris yield and a thousand other variables. It’s easy enough to cut through a hunk of steel with a wrist laser and then pop the cartridge before she jumps and slams her boots into it.

The debris falls and she bobs in the air for a split second before she steadies herself out.

She’s in the middle of cutting out more debris when the helicarrier abruptly lists to the side and begins to fall.

“JARVIS what the fuck’s going on?” Toni’s worried now because she’s got her hands full here as it is.

“The bridge has been breached Miss.” JARVIS informs her calmly enough. “Engine one has also been taken offline. The helicarrier is rapidly loosing altitude.”

“Fuck.” Toni throws herself forward, hands pressed against the blade in front of her as she begins to push.

“Indeed Miss.” JARVIS agrees. “Might I suggest you put your back into it?”

“Stark.” Fury’s back in her ear then. “We’re losing altitude here.”

“Yeah.” Toni drawls as she ups the output on the boots. “I’ve noticed.”

The rotor in front of her finally begins to spin, but it’s still too fucking slow. Toni presses forward,
ups the output on the boots a bit more, and bears down.

It seems like it takes forever but the speed begins to pick up, faster and faster until Toni’s half yelling through her gritted teeth and she pushes the armor to go faster still.

Finally the helicarrier begins to level out and the scan on the HUD shows that the engine is regaining functionality. She doesn’t relax yet though.

She still has to get out of the rotor chamber in one piece.

“Rogers,” Toni calls, “hit the lever.”

“I need a minute here.” Steve sounds stressed when he answers her, voice clipped.

“Lever,” Toni repeats, because she doesn’t have a minute, not with the way the rotors are reengaging, “now.”

“Miss,” JARVIS sounds almost panicked in her ear. “Miss you must move. Polarity can only be reversed manually. I cannot help you.”

It’s too late.

The maglev has reengaged and the rotors are at full power.

Even with the power of the armor Toni doesn’t stand a chance. She can’t fight the pull of the rotor blades. Not if she wants to keep the engine intact and the helicarrier flying.

It’s her or the entire ship.

The choice is easy.

“Fuck.” Toni yelps as she’s caught by a blade and pulled under and into the rotors. “Pull the goddamn lever.”

The heavy slabs of metal beat against the armor mercilessly. Sparks fly as Toni flails and tries to right herself, looks for an opening to slip out of, anything. She can’t stay like this indefinitely. The prolonged speed and pressure will eventually wear the suit out, not to mention the physical damage she’d likely incur. Steve has to pull that lever. It’s her only way out that doesn’t involve explosions or repulsor blasts.

She’s being chewed up and she’s desperate to be spit out as soon as possible.

“Miss.” JARVIS is in her ear. “If you do not remove yourself I will take control of the armor and do it myself.”

“Don’t you dare J,” Toni grits out as she tries to hold herself together under the onslaught of the blades beating on her. “You’ll blow the fucking engine. They’ll die if it falls.”

“Do not make me choose Miss.” JARVIS warns her.

“Pull the lever now Rogers.” Toni practically screams into the coms again, hoping that Steve will listen this time. Before it’s too late. Before JARVIS makes a choice that both of them will have to live with.

Steve has to pull the lever.
There’s too much riding on this moment for Steve to pick now to fail at something.

He has to do it, not for her, but for everyone on the helicarrier. For himself. And, unknowingly to him, for JARVIS. Because Toni won’t have JARVIS hurt like that, won’t have that kind of blood on his hands. That kind of guilt on his soul. Not because of her.

She won’t taint him like that. Won’t darken his light any more than she already has.

He’s better than her and Toni won’t see JARVIS inherit the Stark legacy of bloodshed and a body count if she can help it.

“Captain.” Toni grits out on a groan as she takes a particularly hard hit.

“I’ve got it.” It’s a half shout in her ear but Toni feels it the moment Steve finally comes through. The polarity inside the rotors is suddenly reversed and Toni has enough time to drop down and out, finally free of the rotors deadly pull.

“Well done Miss.” JARVIS praises lightly. “Perhaps the Captain has a use yet.”

Toni snorts but doesn’t say anything else.

The armor’s chewed up pretty badly overall, circuitry damaged and connections faulty. The HUD flickers in and out as she flies but Toni doesn’t pay it any mind. She throws herself forward and around a corner and snaps out a repulsor blast as the asshole in SHIELD issued tactical gear that’s currently firing at Steve.

The guy goes flying, slams into the wall, hits the ground and doesn’t move.

Toni lands unsteadily on the cat walk beside Steve and holds out a hand in his direction silently.

He may hate her, may think her worthless compared to Howard, but seeing him on the ground like that is something Toni’s sure she’ll never enjoy.

Steve just looks up at her quietly for a long moment, eyes tracking over the scorch marks and gashes on the suit, before he reaches out and grabs it. He lets her pull him up onto his feet and doesn’t immediately step away once he’s steady.

“Well,” Toni says as she turns enough to look back behind her at the open sky and the wafts of smoke coming off of the helicarrier, “that was fun.”

Beside her Steve chokes out a small laugh.

Toni tucks the sound of it down and away because it’s beautiful but it doesn’t matter.

She knows what he thinks of her after all.

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A handful of minutes later finds Toni’s standing on the lower level of the half destroyed catwalk, helmet in hand as she inspects it. She’s half way through a mental checklist of supplies she’ll need for field repairs when Fury’s voice comes over the com and stops her cold.

“Agent Coulson is down,” Fury says softly but matter-of-factly.
Above her, about to descend the ladder, Steve freezes too.

“The medics are here.” Fury continues, voice far more solemn than Toni’s ever heard it before. Pained. “They called it.”

For a long moment Toni stands there, frozen and numb, Fury’s words ringing in her ears.

‘Agent Coulson is down.’

No. That can’t be right.

‘The medics are here.’

No. That can’t be real.

‘They called it.’

‘Fury’s lying,’ Toni thinks viciously, desperately, ‘because Fury always lies. It’s what he does.’

This is just another one of Fury’s games.

It has to be.

Toni takes a shuddering breath and turns to stride down the hallway. She has to get the armor off. She needs to get it back into its secure area so she can hopefully do those field repairs, but before that she needs to find Fury, needs to see exactly what he’s playing at.

Because Coulson can’t be dead.

Fury has to be lying again. Has to be.

Toni doesn’t believe him.

Can’t believe him

Refuses to believe him.

Coulson was her almost friend.

And Toni refuses to believe that he’s gone. That she’s failed so badly somehow that Coulson’s the collateral damage.

Not unshakeable Coulson who never shows his cards unless they were his collector’s set.

Not quiet but kind Coulson who’d come to her with a file in hand and a request in his eyes to help him save his agent.

Not clever and funny Coulson who’d sent her a book and played along willingly when she taunts him and Fury about battling for her hand.

‘Please,’ Toni wishes silently as she strides forward, “don’t be true.”

But, as Toni had learned a long time ago, wishes very rarely come true.

Especially not for her.
SOoooo?!? What’d you guys think? Finally section of the Avengers will be coming up next so let me know any thoughts/questions/concerns/requests!

Also feel free to come scream at me on tumblr where I have an open askbox and a habit of answering LoW related as well as random questions.
Armor left behind in the secure area and waiting for her to begin field repairs, Toni makes her way back towards the conference area on the bridge.

Fury’s waiting there, face grim and shoulders straight.

Steve’s there too. He’s sitting in one of the chairs, face clean and the top portion of his costume gone. The tight blue undershirt he’s wearing instead clings to every dip and curve of his chest and arms.

But Toni doesn’t let herself focus on him, doesn’t let herself look away from Fury as she stalks her way across the floor.

“I want to see him.” Toni stares Fury directly in the face as she bites the demand out between clenched teeth.

“Stark …” Fury sighs her name out.

“I don’t fucking believe you.” Toni hisses. “You’re a liar Fury so I want to see his goddamn body.”

“No.” Fury tells her flatly. “We’ve got bigger things to worry about at the moment Stark, and we all know it.”

“I’ll find him myself.” Toni turns on her heel, prepared to stalk away and do just that, when the sound of something hitting the conference table with a small splat stops her.

“These were in Phil Coulson’s jacket.” Fury announces.

Toni turns and feels her breath catch at the sight of Coulson’s trading cards, the ones he’d always been so proud of, laying blood-spattered and forlorn on the table top. She takes two steps forward towards the table before she even realizes she’s moved. She stops herself though, reaches out and grabs the back of the closest chair and grips the leather tightly.
“I guess he never did get you to sign them.” Fury says with a glance in Steve’s direction.

Steve, face shuttered and jaw tight, leans forward to pick one of the scatter cards up off of the table.

“We’re dead in the air up here.” Fury sighs, voice tired and weary as he leans down and plants his hands flat on the table top. “Our communications, the location of the Cube, Banner, Thor. All gone. I’ve got nothing for you. I lost my one good eye. Hell, maybe I had that coming.”

Fury straightens, begins to pace, but Toni’s riveted where she stands, eyes glued to the bloody cards. One of Coulson’s most prized possessions spread out across the table like so much garbage. Ruined. Disrespected. Desecrated.

“Yes,” Fury says, “we were going to build an arsenal with the Tesseract. 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.”

Toni’s eyes slip closed for just a second as she digs her fingertips into the back of the chair she’s still clutching at.

Of course.

The Avengers. Just one more thing Toni wasn’t, isn’t, worthy of. One more thing she’d manage to fall short of. One more measuring stick she’ll never be able to compete with despite, and because of, everything else she’s ever done.

Sometimes Toni can’t help but wonder why she’ll never be good enough in all the ways that seem to matter to the rest of the world.

‘Bad code’, she always reminds herself, ‘I’m just so much bad code.’

“The idea,” Fury continues, “was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. To see if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could. The team was supposed to be the dawn of the age of heroes. A beacon of hope in a world that desperately needs it. A path to a brighter, better future for the entire world. Phil Coulson died still believing in that idea. In those heroes. In that world.”

That’s it.

Toni pries her hands off the chair, turns on her heel, and strides away.

She can’t listen to this.

Won’t.

Toni’s not a hero. Not a beacon of hope.

She doesn’t measure up to that standard no matter how hard she tries. Everyone knows that even if Toni dares them to say it to her face. Romanov’s report had laid that out in stark black and white. Coulson had known that, had known just what she is, and Toni doesn’t believe for a second that he’d counted her among that number. Not like he had Steve.

And yet...

And yet Coulson had always been kind to her anyways in his own professional and unflappable way. He’d always been mostly accepting, if not approving, of her and her quirks and barbs and
flagrant disregard for rules and boundaries that didn’t suit her. He had looked at her and said, “there’s more to you than meets the eye” in a way that’s been so rare in Toni’s life.

He’d been her almost friend.

And now … now he’s gone.

And the loss of him hits harder than Toni could have ever anticipated.

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Feeling slightly lost Toni lets her feet lead her on autopilot until she finds herself standing on the catwalk in the room that had once housed the cell Fury and SHIELD had commissioned to hold Bruce. The room’s empty, the cage is gone and the drop door is closed. It’s quiet except for the stuttered hum of the helicarrier itself.

There’s a blood stain on the far wall that’s she’s resolutely ignoring.

“You saw Coulson’s tussle with Loki didn’t you J?” Toni speaks up after a few seconds. “Were his … injuries life threatening? Did Fury exaggerate?”

“I could show you footage Miss?” JARVIS offers.

“No,” Toni nips the idea in the bud. Maybe one day but not now. Not here. Not so soon. “No I … not yet. Just tell me.”

“Agent Coulson suffered extreme trauma Miss,” JARVIS tells her softly, “he was impaled with the end of Loki’s staff. By my calculations his injuries were, at least, indeed life threatening and not exaggerated by Director Fury. The helicarrier lacks the necessary equipment for me to monitor anyone’s vitals but your own closely but he appeared to at least lose consciousness before the medical team could reach him.”

Toni squeezes her eyes closed for a brief moment, forces herself to stay even and calm.

Okay then.

“I have been unable to find any trace of Agent Coulson from that point on. Dead or alive Miss.” JARVIS keeps on. “Security footage shows his altercation with Loki as well as his transportation from your present location, but his current whereabouts are now, unfortunately, unknown. There has been no recorded use of his access card or personal code on any of the systems either. In truth I suspect he’s been moved to one of the lower levels, perhaps to one of the more secure medical rooms there, but I cannot say for sure. Regrettably many of the security systems, including surveillance cameras and the like, are down and non-functioning due to damage done to the helicarrier in the assault. Thus I lack the means to fully trace the movements of the med team who attempted to treat him.”

“Keep looking J.” Toni doesn’t trust Fury, not even through the thin veil of grief that’s begun to slide down around her. She won’t, can’t, fully believe that Coulson’s gone until she sees him.

Just like, years ago, she’d been unable to accept Jarvis was gone until she’d seen him, cold and still on the morgue table.

How she hadn’t allowed herself to contemplate the possibility that Yinsen wouldn’t be leaving the cave with her until she’d been staring down at him, broken and bleeding and finally peaceful.
She needs to see to believe and until then she’ll maintain a healthy, or not so healthy, level of denial on the subject.

Even if she knows she’s probably grasping at straws at the moment.

“Of course. And Miss?” JARVIS is in her ear, voice soft and almost coaxing. “Would you like me to call Lt. Colonel Rhodes for you?”

“No,” Toni denies lowly, “no, Rhodey’s on mission. I don’t … I don’t want to bother him with this.”

“He would want to comfort you, Miss, to be at your side in your time of grief just as I am.” JARVIS reminds her gently.

“Yeah,” Toni can’t help the small smile that curls the corner of her mouth at the thought of Rhodey and the comfort he always gives her, freely and eagerly. “I know he would. I’ll call him after though, when all this is settled. There’ll be time then for all of that.”

“Of course Miss.”

Silence falls over and around Toni again as she stares at closed drop door, one hand braced on her hip and the other tapping lightly at the hidden reactor as has become her habit.

She’s alone after all and JARVIS controls the cameras still functioning in the helicarrier.

She’s safe for the moment.

“Miss,” JARVIS cuts in voice almost sour, “Captain Rogers is approaching. Shall I … arrange an obstacle for him?”

“Play nice Hal,” Toni chides him softly even as she drops her hand away from the reactor and purposefully straightens her spine.

Still she doesn’t turn to face Steve. Instead she watches from the corner of her eyes as he leans against the wall across the way from her.

“Was he married?” Steve breaks the silence that hovers thick and heavy over the area.

“No,” Toni knows he wasn’t. Coulson had been surprisingly forth coming on that detail. There’d been no wife or husband but there’d been someone she knows, someone special in his life. That fact had slipped out or, as was more likely for Coulson, had been purposefully handed to her during one of their many conversations. A small show of trust, a vulnerability bared in an effort to build a foundation of trust between the two of them. Toni hadn’t decided if she was going to take that offered olive branch yet, and now she’ll likely never know. “There was someone I think, but I never got their name.”

“I’m sorry.” Steve sounds so sincere that Toni can’t help but look at him. Arms crossed and face solemn, he meets her eyes head on. “He seemed like a good man.”

“He was an idiot.” Toni scoffs, heart aching. Because it’s true.

“Why?” Steve moves, pushes up away from the wall he’s leaning on and walks forward until he’s at the very edge of the walkway he’s one. “For believing?”

Yes. Toni bites the word back. Coulson should have known better. Belief in something you can’t
touch, can’t control, is just betrayal waiting to happen.

That’s why Toni can count on both hands the number of things she still believes in.

And one of them is standing not twenty feet away from her, even if she’ll never tell him that to his face. Even if he’ll never believe in her.

“For taking on Loki alone.” She finally says instead because, goddamn him, Coulson should have known better. He wasn’t supposed to be that stupid. That brave.

He wasn’t supposed to die.

“He was doing his job.” Steve protests.

“Please.” Toni scoffs as she turns on her heel and moves down towards the stairs. “He was out of his league. He should have waited. He should have …”

“Sometimes there isn’t a way out, Ms. Stark.” Steve’s moving too, coming down and around the scaffolding, moving ever closer to her.

“Now where have I heard that before?” Toni steps quicker, desperate to keep space between them, but she already knows it’s too late. She’ll have to pass right by him to get out of the area.

“Is this the first time you’ve lost a soldier?” Steve asks right as they draw abreast to each other and Toni goes to walk past him.

“We are not soldiers.” The words come out in a snarl before Toni even realizes she’s speaking even as she whirls around to face Steve again.

In her mind Toni’s back in Afghanistan, back in that convoy, moments before her life was blown to shit. And for an instance all she can see is that sweet faced twenty-something, the one she’d kissed on the cheek. Him and the service woman at the wheel of the Humvee, the man laughing in the passenger side seat.

All she can hear is gunfire and explosions and the screaming, the sound of the convoy being slaughtered.

All she can smell is fire and blood and sand.

They had been soldiers, those men and women with her the day she was taken. They’d been young and brash and sent to serve and die in a war they’d never wanted, had never deserved.

They’d been soldiers and they’d died. Because of the Ten Rings. Because of Stane’s greedy warmongering. Because of her.

That’s not what Toni is, not what Coulson was, not what any of them here are except, maybe, Steve himself.

But he’d always been a shitty soldier in Aunt Peggy’s stories anyways.

It’s one of the things Toni had always admired about him in the past.

Steve looks just a bit taken aback so Toni forces herself to calm down, takes a small but deep breath, and pushes forward like she always does.

“I’m not marching to Fury’s fife.” She finally grits out.
“Neither am I.” Steve denies. “He’s got the same blood on his hands that Loki does. But right now, we’ve got to put that behind us and get this done.”

He’s right, Toni knows, just as Fury had been right.

There are, unfortunately, bigger issues at hand and Toni needs to get her head back into the game.

With a small sigh Toni forces herself to focus.

Unbidden her eyes are drawn back to the closed drop door, to the blood stain on the wall, even as her mind whirls.

“Loki needs a power source.” Steve continues. “If we can put together a list …”

“He made it personal.” Toni interrupts because the pieces are falling together for her suddenly, things clicking into place rapidly.

“That’s not the point.” Steve chides, looking just a bit exasperated with her yet again.

Toni doesn’t care. She’s right. She knows she is. He just doesn’t see it yet.

“That is the point.” Toni cuts in again with a sharp gesture. “That’s Loki’s point. He hit us all right where we live. Why?”

Her minds whirling, clicking, shifting through code and algorithms and searching, searching, searching.

“To tear us apart.” Steve seems so certain, so sure.

But Toni …

“He had to conquer his greed,” Toni tells him, “but he knows he has to take us out to win, right? That's what he wants. He wants to beat us and he wants to be seen doing it. He wants an audience.”

“Right,” Steve agrees cautiously, “I caught his act at Stuttengard.”

“Yeah,” Toni sweeps her hand through the air in a dismissive gesture as she moves back towards the stairs again, “that was just previews. This? This is opening night. Loki’s a full-tilt diva, right? He wants flowers, he wants parades,” the disdainful and skeptical look is back on Steve’s face but Toni doesn’t care, doesn’t let it shake her, “he wants a monument built in the skies with his name plastered…”

Oh.

Yes.

That’s what he wants.

“Son of a bitch.” Toni breathes the curse out softly.

Because now she knows.

That bastard’s going to go after her Tower.

Her home.
Panic hits her, hard and fast, followed by icy rage.

He *dares*.

Loki’s going to use her Tower, her home, as a part of his bullshit conqueror routine.

The place she’d built to house her family, the bots and Mother, Pepper and Happy and Rhodey when they’re in New York. The place that was supposed to be *safe*.

*Her warm light for all mankind.*

He’s going to *taint* it.

Toni’ll be damned before she just sits back and lets him do that.

Toni whirls around and darts forward past Steve, moving almost at a run as she heads back towards the secure area where she’d left the armor.

“Ms. Stark!” Steve seems almost startled but he’s moving too, long strides eating the distance between them easily enough as he moves to keep pace beside her. “What’s going on? What’s happened?”

“I know where Loki’s going to be staging his big reveal.” Toni grits out.

“Where?”


“How can you be sure?” Surprisingly enough Steve doesn’t sound skeptical so much as genuinely curious.

“The arc reactor powering the Tower is the perfect energy source. Plus it’s just like Bruce said, a *warm light for all mankind.*” Toni reminds him. “That was aimed at me. He’ll be there.”

What she doesn’t say, the thing that *really* has her convinced, is the fact that it’s *exactly* the kind of move Toni would pull in his position. Just the right kind of *fuck you* Toni would have been unable to resist if their positions were reversed.

Thor had said, after all, that Toni reminds him of Loki and that’s not a distinction that Toni’s keen to dismiss.

“We need to regroup,” Steve tells her decisively. “Gather our forces, report to Fury, and then head out.”

“I need fifteen minutes, twenty on the outside, for field repairs to the armor.” Toni informs him as she cuts a look up in his direction. “When those are done I’m gone. With or without you or anyone else.”

“Right.” To his credit Steve doesn’t even bother to fight her on it this time. Instead he nods, jaw clenched and brow furrowed. “I’ll see if anyone’s heard from Thor. Banner is probably a loss…”

“Bruce’ll come.” Toni says it with conviction. He will. She *knows* he will.

“Alright.” Steve agrees after a moment’s pause right as they come up on a branch in the corridor.

“Fifteen minutes Rogers.” Toni reminds him as she strides away to the left.
“Yes Ma’am.” Toni hears him say faintly behind her but she doesn’t pause, doesn’t turn back.

There isn’t time for that now.

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“Miss the Mark VII is still in fabrication but should be ready for deployment shortly after you arrive.” JARVIS’ voice is, as always, a comfort as he practically reads her mind and tells her exactly what she wants to hear.

“Perfect. Now, J, how’s evacuation of the Tower going?” Toni asks as she pulls down her sunglasses, waits for the lenses to go clear, and then picks up her field wielder.

“Thirty percent of all employees have evacuated Miss,” JARVIS informs her promptly. “Starting from the upper floors all offices are being systematically cleared and locked down as quickly as possible. All personnel have been instructed to exit through the underground garage and in small groups through all other entrances if necessary.”

“Good.” Toni wants, needs, to protect her employees. She can’t leave them there, in the Tower, with Loki lurking about. It’s a risk to evacuate but it’s a calculated one. She’d rather take her chances clearing the area covertly over just leaving them all there like sitting ducks.

She’s going to see about upping JARVIS’s defensive capabilities for the Tower after all of this is finished.

“Make sure the workshop is locked down and have the boys take Mother and lock themselves in the empty Iron Gallery slots.” Toni needs them safe too, needs them protected as best they can be. The Iron Gallery has reinforced glass and should be able to survive damn near anything.

“I have initiated complete lockdown but the bots are refusing to hide Miss,” JARVIS tells her. “They have taken up arms as it were and seem determined to guard the workshop. Although Mother has been safely ensconced in one of the Iron Gallery slots.”

Toni can’t help but smile even as sparks fly from the helmet she’s working on.

That’s her boys, her babies, foolish and brave and far too good for her.

Well, she’ll just have to do her best to make sure nothing touches them.

“HUD back online Miss,” JARVIS intones just as the eyes of the helmet light up.

Toni smiles.

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The armor’s beat to shit and even with her field repairs the right boot repulsor spits and spurts and showers off sparks. It goes on smoothly enough though so Toni doesn’t let it bother her.

She doesn’t need it to last long after all, only long enough to get her to the Tower where the Mark VII will hopefully be waiting for her.

So she doesn’t even hesitate when she throws herself out of the helicarrier, a jet hot on her heels that she’s sure holds Steve and whoever he’s scrounged up.

“Stark,” Romanov’s voice is in her ear then, patched through thanks to JARVIS, “are you alright to fly? We’re seeing a lot of sparks back here.”
“Don’t worry Itsy Bitsy,” Toni snarks back with admittedly less venom than usual, “I’m steady enough to make it back to the Tower. You kids just try to keep up now.”

Toni barrel rolls for the hell of it and then kicks the speed up a notch.

“As always Miss,” JARVIS almost sighs, “you are the very model of tact.”

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The ride back towards the Tower passes quickly enough. JARVIS is in her ear, updating her on the evacuation and on the new spikes of energy he’s begun to detect on the roof as well as one particularly unwanted visitor.

Toni was right.

Loki’s using her Tower to power his portal.

And, speaking of Loki, she can see him standing on the edge of her balcony, as bold as brass, just as JARVIS had said he would be.

“Miss, I’ve turned off the arc reactor but as you feared the device is already self-sustaining.”

JARVIS tells her as she slows down enough to hover over the roof of the Tower, purposefully ignoring Loki who makes no move to stop her.

Selvig is there, standing in front of a hulking machine that does little to hide the Tesseract’s vivid blue glow.

“Shut it down, Dr. Selvig.” Toni calls to him.

“It’s too late!” Selvig sounds one part giddy and one part terrified. “She can’t stop now. She wants to show us something. A new universe.”

“Fuck that.” Toni snarls and powers up a repulsor. “Our universe is just fine.”

She fires.

There’s an almost metallic resonance as the blast is stopped feet from the actual device and the shockwave it sends back towards her sends the armor reeling back through the air.

“The barrier is pure energy,” JARVIS tells her when she’s steadied herself out again. “I’m afraid it’s unbreachable Miss.”

“And now you tell me.” Toni grouses. “Well then, time for Plan D.”

“Ah,” JARVIS pauses, “As the Mark VII is still not ready for deployment I do hope you’ve thought this through enough to come up with an adequate distraction Miss.”

“Don’t I always?”

His silence is telling.

“Just skip the spinning rims baby boy and let me worry about the rest of it okay? We’re on the clock here.” Toni tells him before she takes a deep breath, calms herself, and turns towards the landing pad.

Toni moves down the runway, unflinching as always as the armor is peeled off of her piece by
piece. She’s outwardly calm but is still more than aware of the way Loki watches her for a long moment, scepter in hand and a smirk on his face, before he turns and heads inside the penthouse.

Toni’s mind whirls.

“Please,” Loki drawls once they’re both inside, voice cultured and tone almost amused, “tell me you’re going to appeal to my humanity.”

“Oh darling,” Toni practically purrs, eyes at half-mast as she struts down the stairs, one hand trailing teasingly across the marble railing, “of course not. I think we both know you’ve come to the wrong place for that.”

“Indeed I have.” Loki agrees as he watches her move down the stairs, arms loose at his sides and expression almost intrigued. “I’ve heard much about you, Lady Stark. This realm is filled with loose tongues and minds ripe for the picking. Especially where the illustrious Iron Queen is concerned.”

“What can I say?” Toni smirks. “I’m popular.”

“Then if it’s not heartfelt appeals you’ve come to offer,” Loki presses, “then what else could you possibly think to say?”

“I’ve come to threaten you actually.” Toni rounds the corner of the stairs and heads towards the bar. “You and your Glowstick of Destiny. Would you like a drink?”

“Stalling me won’t change anything.” Loki half warns her but he seems to be almost smiling.

“Ah ah,” Toni wages a finger at him teasingly. “Threatening remember? Now are you sure about that drink? I’m having one. Today’s been … busy.”

Toni’s heart is pounding but her hands are steady when she turns her back to him long enough to grab a decanter from one of the shelves. He’s closer than he was before and watching her closely when she turns back.

It doesn’t matter though, Toni’s right where she wants, needs, to be.

“Tch.” Loki tisks, turns and strides closer to the windows. “The Chitauri are coming. Nothing will change that. What have I to fear? What could you possibly threaten me with woman?”

“The Avengers.” Toni tells him calmly as she pours a tumbler full of bourbon.

Loki looks almost intrigued.

“That’s what we call ourselves. We’re sort of like a team.” Toni shrugs, deliberately dismissive and casual. “Earth’s mightiest heroes type thing.”

“Oh yes, I’ve met them.” Loki scoffs, obviously unimpressed.

“Well we did get off to a bit of a rocky start, I’ll give you that one.” Toni flashes a smirk in his direction. “But let’s just do a head count here, just for posterity’s sake.”

“You try my patience mortal.”

“Indulge me.” Toni’s all ice and sharp seduction. “There’s your brother, the demigod.”

Loki sneers, turns away again, and Toni quietly, carefully, reaches for the bracelets she’d left abandoned on the bar a few days ago.
“Then we have a super soldier, a living legend if you will who kind of lives up to the legend.” Toni slips the bracelets on one at a time and clicks them into place.

“Active Miss,” JARVIS’ voice is low and careful in her ear. “Almost ready.”

“We have a man with breathtaking anger-management issues, a couple of master assassins, and you, sweet thing, managed to piss off every last one of them.”

“That was the plan.” Loki tells her, almost conspiratorially as he turns back towards her, scepter cradled in the crook of his arm.

“Not a great plan.” Toni chides and moves around the edge of the bar, glass in hand. There needs to be a clear line of sight for what she has planned to work. “When they come, and they will come, they’re all going to be coming for you.”

“I have an army.” Loki reminds her, anger beginning to trickle through his calm façade.

“We have a Hulk.” Because they do, they will. Bruce will come, Toni knows he will.

“I thought the beast had wondered off.” Loki dismissed Bruce with a wave of his hand and Toni has to bite back a snarl.

“You’re missing the point.” Toni snaps as she moves across the floor in his direction. “There’s no throne. There is no version of this where you come out on top. Maybe your army comes and maybe it’s too much for us, but it’s all on you. Because if we can’t protect the Earth, then you can be damn well sure we’ll avenge it.”

There’s a long moment of silence as they stare at each other, one liar to another.

“There’s just one flaw in your reasoning,” Loki smiles at her, a slow, wicked curve of his mouth, as he prowls across the distance between them. Toni stands her ground firmly. “How will your friends have time for me, when they’re so busy fighting you?”

Toni’s eyes widen without her consent as Loki raises the scepter and brings it forward to the center of her chest.

There’s a low, muffled, metallic clink as it connects with the front casing of the reactor hidden beneath her blouse.

“You’re missing the point.” Toni snaps as she moves across the floor in his direction. “There’s no throne. There is no version of this where you come out on top. Maybe your army comes and maybe it’s too much for us, but it’s all on you. Because if we can’t protect the Earth, then you can be damn well sure we’ll avenge it.”

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Toni’s eyes widen without her consent as Loki raises the scepter and brings it forward to the center of her chest.

There’s a low, muffled, metallic clink as it connects with the front casing of the reactor hidden beneath her blouse.

“This usually works.” Loki blinks, shock and confusion plain on his face, and tries again.

“Well,” Toni grins just a bit, “performance issues do happen. Nothing to be ashamed of. I promise not to tell if you don’t.”

“You are just full of surprises aren’t you?” Loki smiles, steps closer. Toni can practically feel the energy he puts off swirling around her, brushing against her skin. Or maybe it’s the scepter, because it’s alive in his hand in a way it hadn’t been in the lab earlier.

“I’m an open book,” Toni protests coyly, heart thrumming a frantic beat in her chest.

“Oh I think not. But I do know so much about you already. About the blood on your hands, the death you leave in your wake. So I’ll tell you a secret, sweet Stark,” Loki murmurs as he raises a hand and grasps her by the chin, his thumb smoothing across her lower lip almost delicately, “one monster to another.”
Toni forces herself to stay still, to keep looking in his eyes, to not flinch from his touch or his words.

“It’s almost a pity you were born mortal,” his touch shifts, his hand comes down and wraps itself tightly around her throat. Squeezes. “You could have been a queen in truth.”

Toni’s hands fly up to scrabble and claw at his wrist as her air supply is viciously cut off but it’s no use.

He’s too strong.

“Thirty seconds Miss,” JARVIS is panicked in her ear, “please, you must hang on.”

Toni hears him but the lack of air is beginning to get to her. Her feet kick wildly as Loki raises her straight up into the air in front of him, heels clattering to the floor beneath her as she struggles.

“Instead you will fall, just like the others.” Loki tells her as he pulls her closer to him for a moment, his face pale and eyes so blue they burn. “You will all fall before me and I shall reign as king.”

“JARVIS,” Toni does her best to croak out, “deploy.”

“Such a waste,” Loki sighs again.

And then, she’s flying.

Her back slams against the window and her senses light up with pain even as the glass shatters around her.

And then, she’s falling.

JARVIS is screaming in her ear and Toni’s mind is still whirling. She has the bracelets firmly attached and she trusts JARVIS with everything she is.

So Toni rolls as best she can, spreads her arms and legs out wide, and lets herself fall.

There are people staring up at her in horror as she gets closer and closer to the ground, Toni can almost hear them screaming.

But she just breathes as the armor begins to fold itself around her in mid-air.

And then, as he always does, JARVIS catches her just before she hits the ground.

The repulsors fire and Toni’s soaring once again.

“There’s one other person you pissed off,” Toni calls to Loki as she rockets back up towards the penthouse and hovers just outside the shattered window. “His name was Phil.”

Blasting him in the chest is so very satisfying.

“Miss,” JARVIS calls to her urgently as the HUD throws up energy readings and a tidal wave of data, “the energy readings are cresting.”

Before Toni can do anything else there’s a burst of blue light that shoots straight up into the sky from the top of the Tower.

Toni can only watch as the sky ripples and then seems to melt in on itself.
And then … monsters start spilling out.

“Right.” Toni says blankly as the HUD turns red as proximity warnings begin to blare and all of her weapons systems go hot. “Army.”

Between one second and the next Toni feels her mind go smooth as she turns her face towards the sky and soars right into the center of them.

She twirls to dodge an energy blast of some kind, spins and fires off a repulsor blast, ducks and dodges and weaves around and between the strange sled like hover crafts they’re riding on.

“JARVIS,” Toni barks, “I need crowd control down below. Hack the emergency service channels, the new stations, call the goddamn National Guard. Anything you have to. Open the bottom half of the Tower back up, get people inside and then lock it down, blast shutters and all. *Just get them off the streets.*”

“Yes Miss.” JARVIS agrees and again Toni trusts him, trusts that he’ll be doing everything he can to help.

Toni sends out a volley of targeted shoulder missiles, desperate to stem the tide, to keep them from getting past her and towards the ground.

There’s too many of them. For every one sky-sled she destroys three more replace it.

She’s not going to be enough to stop them all.

“Miss,” JARVIS is solemn in her ear, “I’ve broadcasted on all frequencies but contact has been made on the ground and law enforcement is in route. They are firing indiscriminately. Civilian casualties are calculated to be … high.”

*God.*

All those people.

“Stark,” Romanov’s voice is in her ear then, “we’re on your three, headed northeast.”

“What did you do?” Toni snaps as she twirls, a line of fuckers on her tail, “stop for drive-through? Get a manicure? Swing up Park. I’m gonna lay them out for you Charlotte.”

Toni flies, figures out that the sleds apparently corner like shit, and heads towards the intersection where she knows at least Steve and Romanov are waiting.

And sure enough the jet’s there, guns firing as soon as Toni’s out of the way.

“Miss, we have more incoming.” JARVIS chimes in.


Toni’s blasting left and right, up and down, twirling circles and barrel rolls and cutting sharp corners as she does her best to keep as many of them from reaching the ground as she can.

That’s all she can think about beyond the smooth flow of equations and calculations that always fill her mind when she fights.

She has to keep them off of the ground.
As many as possible, for as long as possible.

She has to give the people down there a chance to run, to hide, to find some kind of safety.

“The jet has taken damage Miss,” JARVIS informs her.

Toni’s head jerks around and her inattention costs her as she’s almost clipped by a passing sled.

She sees a plume of smoke in the distance and feels her stomach drop and her heart clench before she forces herself to turn back to what she’s doing.

She can’t help them, not now.

“I’m piggy backing the SHIELD issued comms Miss,” JARVIS cuts in, “Agents Romanov and Barton as well as Captain Rogers have all survived and seem unharmed. They’re working their way forward on ground level.”

“Goo-” Toni cuts herself off mid word as a horrible roaring sound fills the air.

She looks up in time to watch in horror as the wormhole spits out something far worse than anything she’s seen yet.

It’s huge, more beast than machine with the way it roars and flows through the air like it’s swimming. For a split second Toni’s in awe but then terror seeps in around the corners as JARVIS’ scans the thing and she sees what’s attached to it’s sides.

Chitauri soldiers.

Ground forces.

It’s a drop ship.

Fuck.

“Stark,” Steve calls, “are you seeing this?”


“Anyone else just piss themselves a little?” A warm, husky male voice comes across the coms then. “Cause I’m not ashamed to admit that I did. Personally I’m just proud that I’m still conscious cause I’m feeling a little faint to be honest. Nat you’ll catch me if I pass out right?”

“No.” Romanov’s voice is low and bland but almost pleasant.

This, Toni thinks with a small grin, must be the infamous Barton.

She likes him already.

“Chatter.” Steve cuts in.

“Where’s Bruce?” Toni ask. “Has he shown up yet?”

“Banner?” Steve sounds puzzled.

“I told you,” Toni insists, “he’ll come.”

“The more the merrier I’d say,” Barton cuts in again. “Not like there’s not enough to go around.”
“Chatter.” Steve grits out again.

There’s a muffled thump and a low “ow” and Toni has to bite back a laugh at the absurdity of her life at the moment as she spins and shoots down another sled.

She twists until she’s flying parallel to the massive whale like ship that cuts through the sides of buildings with ease, spewing glass and concrete and steel in its wake.

“JARVIS, baby boy,” Toni says sweetly, “find me a soft spot.”

“My pleasure Miss.” JARVIS sounds as viciously determined as she feels.

The drop ship’s heading too far out into the city and she wants to keep this as contained as possible. So, step one is to get its attention. That thought in mind Toni rounds a corner, buzzes the thing, and then decides to try her hand by sending out a volley of missiles at the creature.

They all hit their target.

The thing barely flinches.

What it does do though, is focus in on her.

“Well, we got its attention.” Toni hums as she watches it change course to head directly for her.

“What in the hell was step two again J?”

“I do believe you’ll give me grey hairs yet Miss,” JARVIS says dryly, “which is quite the feat considering I lack both hair specifically as well as a corporeal form in general. Though it is the spirit of the thing that counts I believe.”

“I like to break barriers J.” Toni turns and puts on a burst of speed.

Toni slides back into the focus of battle, darting in and around sky-sleds, the drop ship still on her heels.

“The power surrounding the Cube is impenetrable.” Thor’s voice floats over the coms then.

“Thor’s right.” Toni calls to them. “We got to deal with these guys right now.”

“How do we do this?” Romanov asks.

“As a team.” Steve sounds certain, firm and resolute.

“Go Wildcats.” Barton mutters.

“I have unfinished business with Loki.” Thor cuts in.

“Yeah?” Barton’s suddenly serious, voice hard. “Well get in line.”

“Now’s not the time.” Steve snaps.

Toni tunes them out, as amusing as they are she’s got other things to worry about at the moment.

And then …

“Stark.” Steve calls for her. “We got him.”

There’s something almost amused in his voice and the sound of it makes Toni perk up.
“Bruce?”

“Just like you said.” Steve confirms.

“Well tell him to suit up.” Toni doesn’t bother to bite back her grin. “I’m bringing the party to you.”

“I-I don’t see how that’s a party.” Romanov cuts in as Toni turns the corner, drop ship hot on her heels as she makes a bee line towards Bruce.

He won’t let her down.

Somehow Toni just knows he won’t.

And sure enough, between one second and the next, Bruce gives way to the Hulk and stops the drop ship in its tracks. The thing tips forward, armor plating falling away and vulnerable flesh exposed as it tries to over balance.

Toni hits it with a missile and makes sure that it goes back the other way.

They all watch as it explodes and breaks apart.

There’s a moment of far reaching silence, and then a chorus of enraged screams echoes out across the surrounding streets as Toni lands behind Steve and beside Hulk, taking a spot in the loose circle they’ve all formed.

For a moment she looks around, something like pride struggling to break free in her chest.

Because this … this is what Coulson had wanted, what Fury had talked about, what Toni hadn’t passed muster for but still ended up seeing come to life anyways.

This is a team.

These are the Avengers.

Her joy’s short lived though, because Romanov’s calling for their attention as the wormhole births more horrors, more drop ships spewing forth from its mouth.

“Call it Captain.” Toni speaks up.

Because in this … in this she’ll follow him.

“All right,” Steve says as he steps forward. “Listen up. Until we can close that portal, our priority is containment. Barton, I want you on that roof. Eyes on everything. Call out patterns and strays. Stark, you’ve got the perimeter. Anything gets more than three blocks out you turn it back or you turn it to ash.”

“Hey Robo-lady?” Barton call in her direction and then nods towards the building Steve had assigned him to. “Wanna give me a lift?”

“Better clench up, Legolas.” Toni tells him and then steps forward, grabs him by the back of his uniform, and rockets up into the air.

Barton screams in joy the whole way up.

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Toni’s rounding the perimeter, cutting through sky-sled after sky-sled, picking off strays both in the air and what she can target on the ground.

“Stark,” Barton calls out, “you got a lot of stays sniffing your tail.”

“I’m just trying to keep them off the streets sweetheart.” Toni tells him, more than aware of the line of fuckers dogging her.

“Ah Stark, no love names before the second date.” Barton chides. “Also they can’t bank worth a damn. So you might want to find a tight corner.”

There’s a moment’s pause.

“Heh,” Barton laughs lowly a few seconds later, “that’s what she said.”

Toni, unable to help herself, barks out a delighted laugh. “I will roger that.”

“Oh God,” Romanov says faintly, “they’re bonding.”

And then Toni’s off again, Barton’s arrows flying true behind and around her despite the distance. She leads a small pack of Chitauri down and through a garage and puts each of them into a wall.

“Good call,” she tells Barton. “Now, what else have you got for me darling?”

“Thor’s taking on a squad down on Sixth.” Barton tells her.

“And he didn’t invite me?” Toni pouts. “Rude.”

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The Chitauri seem to be never ending, more and more of them flowing out of the wormhole.

Toni’s fallen so far into her battle rhythm, mind gone so smooth, that she barely even blinks at the sight of Romanov on a sky-sled.

Instead she just twirls, shoots the bastards who are tailing her down, and swoops down to street level.

It’s almost second nature to drop down to Steve’s side, to trust him to understand what she intends to do when she points the repulsors in his direction.

Their team work is somehow flawless.

Toni laughs, breathless, and takes off again to cover Barton for a moment.

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Toni points the new and improved wrist lazer at the side of one of the drop ships.

“Miss,” JARVIS cuts in, “we will lose power before we penetrate that shell.”

Toni peels off to the right and puts on a burst of speed until she’s directly in front of the thing.

“JARVIS, you ever hear the tale of Jonah?” Toni asks, heart thrumming in her chest, adrenaline spiking as the HUD blares warnings and calculations and targets at her from all directions.

“I wouldn’t consider him a role model Miss,” JARVIS sounds almost frantic.
Toni laughs, high and breathless, arms the suits out rockets, and dives in head first.

Literally.

She comes out screaming on the other side, crashing down into the street beside a restaurant for something she’s never even heard of before.

“I hope you are aware that all footage from this battle will be going directly into what Lt. Colonel Rhodes refers to as the “Toni, No! File”.” JARVIS tells her primly.

All Toni can do is groan.

“Stark, do you hear me?” Fury’s suddenly in her hear, voice panicked and almost breathless in a way she’s never heard before. “You have a missile headed straight for the city.”

“How long?” Toni tries to push herself up onto her feet but she’s being swarmed, Chitauri everywhere around her and closing in.

“Three minutes,” Fury tells her harshly. “Max. The payload will wipe out Midtown.”

Toni feels her heart clench as ice traces down her spine.

“JARVIS, baby, put everything we got into the thrusters.” She gasps the order out as she fires, tries to get some space around her so she can get up.

“I just did Miss.”

With one finally shaking blast Toni’s up off of the ground and airborne again.

Back in her element.

She has to hurry.

If that missile hits, if it detonates ….

Toni’s mind can’t stop the calculations, can’t stop the automatic tallying of deaths and damages and everything else she knows would follow.

She knows weapons after all, better than anyone else.

She knows exactly what’s at stake.

“I can close it,” Romanov’s voice comes a few seconds later, “can anybody copy? I can shut the portal down.”

“Do it!” Steve sounds breathless, hurt.

“No,” Toni cuts in, “wait.”

“Stark, these things are still coming.” Steve’s barks, voice incredulous like he can’t believe what he’s hearing.

“I got a nuke coming in Captain.” Toni does her best to keep her voice even, calm, as she finally sees the missile on the HUD. “It’s gonna blow in less than a minute if I don’t reroute it’s course.”

Toni stops hard, jets upwards, and puts herself right on its path.
“And I know just where to put it,” she murmurs as she maneuvers beneath the missile and reaches up to grab it with both hands.

“Stark,” Steve’s voice is soft, almost gentle. “You know that’s a one-way trip.”

Toni ignores him. Can’t focus on him right now.

“JARVIS, baby boy, save the rest for the turn.”

“Miss,” JARVIS’ voice is barely above a whisper, “shall I try Lt. Colonel Rhodes?”

“Yeah J,” Toni rasps, “call him.”

“Toni?” Rhodey’s voice cracks as it comes across the line seconds later, and his face is already drawn and tight in the tiny view screen. He’s obviously in the armor and it’s all Toni can do not to sob. “Toni I’m coming. I’m coming okay? Just, just hold out for a few more hours and I’ll be there. Baby girl I’ll be there soon.”

He knows then, about the invasion. Of course he does. The whole thing’s probably being broadcast live so even half way around the world Rhodey’s probably already been briefed and sent for back up.

It doesn’t matter though, he’ll never make it in time.

“Rhodey,” Toni swallows down the lump in her throat, “I’m not gonna be here when you do.”

“What?” Rhodey rasps the question out, face going chalky.

“They sent a missile Rhodey.” Toni tells him. “I can’t … I gotta put it somewhere. It’s the only way.”

“Don’t do this Toni.” Rhodey cuts right through anything else she might say because he knows what she’s going to do. He always knows. “Don’t do this. Wait for me.”

“Rhodey.” Toni voice goes soft, serious in that way she so rarely is. “You know I can’t. You know I have to.”

“Bullshit Toni.” Rhodey’s sobbing now, tears streaming down his face. “That’s such bullshit. There’s got to be another way. You’re a fucking genius Toni, you can figure out another way.”

“I ran the odds Rhodey.” Toni tells him gently. “Nothing else will work. Everyone will die. The whole city, the team, the boys. All those people. I can’t let that happen. This way is better. This is … easier on everyone.”

“It’s not easier on me Toni. It’ll never be easier on me, remember?” Desperation is naked in his face, his tone, bleeding out of every syllable. “I should be up there with you.”

“Hey. No. Rhodey, no. It’s me and you remember? Me and you till the day we die?” Toni interrupts him because this … this isn’t something she wants him to feel guilty about. Not dying with her, by her side, is something Rhodey should never feel guilty about. Living is, after all, what she truly wants him to do with or without her.

“Yeah.” She watches him take a shaking breath. “Yeah baby girl, I remember. I know.”

“We’ve known it was gonna be me first for a long time now darling and I don’t need your help with that.” Toni sighs softly. “I’m probably not going to come back from this Rhodey, we both know
that. I’m crossing a line I can’t uncross here but I should have punched my ticket a long time ago.”

“Don’t you do this.” He sounds almost furious, voice low and angry even through his tears. “Don’t you dare say goodbye to me again. Not like this.”

“I love you and I made you a promise. I told you I’d tell you the next time something like this happened. So this is me, making that call.” Toni smiles, ignores the blood on her face and the way her eyes are beginning to well up with tears, just keeps her eyes trained on the HUD, on her path and his face. The Tower’s growing ever taller in the distance. “Take care of the boys for me because they’re not going to understand what’s happened when I don’t come home again. So take care of them and JARVIS, Pep and Happy too. Make sure they stay safe for me okay? And yourself, you take care of yourself. Don’t try to follow me any time soon sweetheart. Promise me Rhody. You have a good life. Promise me.”

“No without you.” Rhody protests. “Goddamnit Toni not without you. Baby girl, please. Don’t make me do it without you.”

“Don’t say that Rhody.” Toni chokes out. “You’re gonna be fine without me. I know you will. So I need you to promise me you’ll live. You’ll get old and grey and you’ll die in your sleep. You’ll be happy. You promise me right now.”

“I promise.” He chokes the words out. “I love you Toni.”

“I love you too.” She tells him again because she’s going to die and she needs to make sure he knows. “I’ll miss you if I can. You made me better Rhody, better than I ever would have been otherwise.”

“To-ni.” Rhody’s voice breaks fully then, grief etched across every letter of her name.

“Bye Rhody,” Toni tells him, like it’s any other parting, like it’s just another day at the airport, another deployment, another business meeting. Like this isn’t forever. “Stay safe.”

“I will if you will.” Rhody barely gets the words out, face crumpled in agony.

Toni cuts the coms before he can say anything else because in this moment she needs to be selfish. She needs to end it now because she can’t bear to hear him break. She can’t let him listen to her die. She grits her teeth and muscles her way through the turn, skimming her belly across the side of her Tower in a shower of sparks.

“Hey JARVIS? You there buddy?” Reaching for JARVIS, for the comfort of his voice, is second nature now.

“For you Miss? Always.” JARVIS sounds pained, desperate in that way he hasn’t since the palladium, since those first few weeks after Afghanistan. Since Stane ripped out her reactor and forced him to watch.

“I love you too J, I want you to know that.” Toni shifts slightly, the missile a heavy load on her back even with the armor. “Everything good in me I gave to you baby boy, you and your brothers.”

“I am … frightened.” JARVIS confesses softly.

“It’s alright to be afraid J.” Toni reassures him. “I’m scared too but it’s going to be alright baby boy. Being scared is fine because you’ll push through it, you’ll come out on the other side stronger. You’re a Stark remember? You’re going to be the head of the Stark family now JARVIS. I’m
leaving this world and its future in your hands and I know that you’re going to do just fine without me. Because you’re strong J. You’re a Stark and we-we’re made of vibranium baby boy, changeable but strong.”

“Miss.” JARVIS sounds broken, sounds like he would sob if he could.

“Just …” Toni sucks in a shuddering breath, “Just remember that for me JARVIS. Remember that it’s okay to feel things, to be scared or sad or anything else. Remember that, no matter what, I love you, will always love you. That I’m proud of you J, of who you are, of who you’ll become. I’ll always be proud of you. I’ll always love you. Promise me you’ll remember that.”

“I promise.”

There’s a small pause, Toni’s at the edge of the wormhole now and all she can see is its gaping maw.

“Miss?” It’s a whisper, like the kiss of butterfly wings against her ear.

“Yeah J?”

“Shall I tell you the story of Icarus?” There is so much said and unsaid in that sentence, in that offer to put her to sleep one final time. To usher her lovingly into death as only he can.

“Please.”

Toni listens to his voice, listens to the story, and flies straight forward through the portal and out into the dead expanse of space.

Her eyes blow wide at what she sees, mind whirling in equal parts horror and awe at the sheer expanse of what she’s witnessing. Toni’s always known the universe was big, was infinitely huge, but this … this is the type of thing nightmares are made of.

“Oh God.” The whisper that rips its way from her throat is ragged, raw. Filled with every fear Toni’s never been able to properly express.

This ragged gash of space is an all-encompassing quiet filled with monsters that threaten to eat Toni alive. The Chitauri army looms before her like a tidal wave, like a plague set to descend upon them all. Behind and below and above and all around them space stretches out its immeasurable arms.

It is the most beautiful and grotesque thing she’s ever seen.

Toni has never felt as small as she does in this moment, staring out into infinity and the monsters that hide there.

“I love you JARVIS,” Toni croaks the words out, says them because she has to say them again, wants to die this time with the taste of them on her tongue, “I love you, love you, love you.”

“Mi-ss,” JARVIS’ voice breaks in her ear, fizzes in and out with a burst of static, “-ove you … always … you … forever … you are … -other …”

Even with the way it’s broken and distorted Toni thinks she gets his message anyways. Thinks she knows exactly what he was trying to tell her.

And when JARVIS finally goes completely silent, when the coms and then the HUD shorts and she can feel the oxygen levels in the suit begin to drop, it’s easy for Toni to let the missile go, to watch it soar forward and explode in a bright, terrible sunburst of oranges and reds as she massacres untold
thousands.

After that it’s easy to just … close her eyes.

‘It’s okay,’ Toni thinks to herself, quiet like a secret, ‘Steve’s back now. He’ll keep them safe.’

And then, just like Icarus, just like the star lodged firmly in her chest, Toni falls.

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“Jarvis?” His name’s a sob. A prayer. A wish that never comes true. A call that’s never answered.

“Yes young miss.” A response where one was never expected. The familiar scent of fresh bread and lemon furniture polish. The scent of home and love and kindness. A voice that left her years ago.

“I miss you so much.” A child’s lament, a woman’s mourning whisper. A daughter’s aching grief.


“Can I stay with you?” She never wants to leave him again. Wants to stay here in this place where nothing hurts.

“Maybe one day, but not yet young miss.” A gentle hand cups her cheek. A familiar touch that soothes, the sense memory of hands that helped to heal her wounds. “Not for a very long time to come. You still have so much to do.”

Everything’s growing hazy and she knows she’s being called away. Being called back. A part of her doesn’t want to go, wants to stay here where she’s safe and warm and loved.

Loved…

She’s loved others before she thinks. But the memories are cloudy, faded and hard to reach. Curious she stretches herself out, pushes at the boundaries of the fog that surrounds her as she searches.

It’s difficult. It hurts. But then there’s a flash and she remembers…

Toni remembers…

A much loved voice, warm and kind in her ear but without a body to touch and hold. A guiding light and grounding force that lingers in the air around her. Unseen and unfelt on her skin but no less precious for the lack. No less loved.

The scent and feel of steel and oil, the sound of beeps and whirls like music in her ears. Metal claws reaching out to her with love and infinite care.

A flash of red hair, the sound of heels on tile. Slender and gentle hands cupping her face. The taste of pepper on her tongue, a sense memory and association she cherishes for some reason.

A taxi. A meeting. Laughter and joy. A protective arm in front of her, a large warmth at her side or her back. Boss. Happy-ness.

Crimson lipstick and straight shoulders. Ruby studs and gentle hands teaching her how to make a
fist. Never let them make you small. Grief and loss and the realization that someone’s leaving slowly bit by bit.

Faded photographs on a wall, a star, the color blue, a shield and a gun and affection stretching across time despite the knowledge that it would never be returned, would have been unwelcome.

Wide shoulders and dark skin, a bright smile and the scent of leather and spice. Arms that keep her safe at night, hands that hold her heart and heal her soul. I love you. I love you. Baby girl, I love you. Someone who always finds her. Someone she promised not to leave. Someone who’ll be with her till the day they die.

“I have to go back.” It’s almost a sob, breathless and aching.

“Yes.” A confirmation, gentle and loving.

“I’m scared.” A whisper, like a secret too laced with shame to say loudly.

“Oh my precious girl,” the gentle press of lips against her forehead once again, “all the bravest people are. And you are so very brave, my beautiful daughter. But it’s time for you to go now.”

And then, Ton i f a l l s.

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Toni Stark is born gasping for the fourth time on the dusty, broken rubble of a New York City street.

She’s a small destructive bundle of flailing limbs, thick black hair, and a razor sharp mind behind too bright eyes with a star lodged firmly in her chest.

Steve’s staring down at her, face dirty and eyes bright.

Behind him the Hulk roars in triumph.

Beyond the both of them the sky is a bright blue and, more importantly, blessedly whole. The wormhole is obviously, thankfully, gone.

“Hey Cap,” Toni rasps as she reaches up and taps the star in the center of his chest. “What the hell happened?”

“We did it.” Steve actually smiles at her, warm and bright and achingly beautiful. “We won.”

“Good.” Toni lets herself relax back down, tips her head back enough to shoot a dazed smile in Thor’s direction where he’s crouched protectively by her other side. “Good.”

Chapter End Notes

The last tiny bit of Avengers will be in the next chapter in the interest of making the transition smoother.

SOoooo?!? What'd you guys think? I was pretty nervous about this chapter so let me know any thoughts/questions/concerns/requests!

Also feel free to come find me and scream at me on tumblr.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

It's been a while but here I am again!

Fair warning that this is the first of at least two transition chapters. This one is going to cover the immediate aftermath of the Avengers film and then the next will set us up to launch us into Phase 2.

So here goes and I hope you guys like this and the original content as we move closer to my major divergent point with the MCU.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fanmix #1 #2 #3 #4

Pinterest Board

Fanart #1 #2

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“Well,” Toni says after a long breathless moment, “this was fun and all but I vote none of us come in tomorrow. We can tell Fury to kiss our asses and have a spa day. My treat.”

She shifts, thinks about trying to sit up, but has to bite back a wheezing whine as fresh pain rakes its way across her ribcage and spikes its way across the right side of her head. She knows that beneath the armor she probably has injuries she doesn’t even want to think about at the moment. As it is she can feel the wet slide of blood down the right side of her neck and the thick tacky feel of it dried on the left side of her face.

“On second thought,” she manages to pant out, grabbing onto her fractured composure with ragged nails and using long years of practice to push the pain down and away, “food first.” At this point she’s talking just to keep herself and everyone else distracted long enough to pull herself together. “I’m thinking shawarma maybe. Almost plowed into a place about two blocks from here and now I want it. No idea what it is really, but I want it. Also my treat by the way.”

“We’re not finished yet Lady Stark,” Thor speaks up then, a small smile flirting with the corner of his mouth that does little to erase the grim look in his eyes. “I fear that while the battle is won there is still the matter of my brother to deal with.”

“Right,” Toni agrees with a bitten off wince as she finally pushes herself upright, “crazy gods first and shawarma after though. Also maybe a nap.”


“Pretty sure Reindeer Games is still in my Tower,” Toni tells him as she braces a hand on the street to try and make the journey back up onto her feet. It’s going to hurt, she knows that, but that doesn’t really matter. Pain never really does for Toni.
“Here,” Steve’s there suddenly, a hand outstretched towards her in a mirror of that moment in the helicarrier. “Let me help you.”

Toni hesitates for a split second and then reaches up and grabs hold of him.

Pain flares across her back and ribs as he pulls her up onto her feet but even then she knows it was smoother than she’d have been able to do on her own. Easier than the twisting she would have had to do on her own.

He doesn’t let go immediately either. Instead he steps in closer, raises his free hand to her shoulder like he’s steadying her, and just looks at her for a long second.

“You did good work Stark,” Steve murmurs then, close enough that Toni can feel his breath on her cheek, can smell the sweat and dirt and leather on him. “I’m glad you made it back in one piece.”

Toni blinks up at him before she dips her head in a shallow nod of acceptance. He steps back and away then and Toni can’t help the way she breathes out a small sigh. That gesture, that small bit of gentleness, is more than she’d ever thought she’d get from Steve.

“We’ve got Stark,” Steve says as he raises his hand to his ear then, a look of concentration taking over his grimy face. “Hulk caught her before she hit the ground. She’s alive. Agent Romanov, hold your position with the scepter. Barton meet us on the ground and we’ll go up together.”

It’s in that moment that Toni realizes she hasn’t heard from JARVIS at all.

Fear fills her for a long moment as Toni curses, short and sharp, and reaches up to slide her fingers across the back of what remains of the helmet. Ignoring the look of concern from Thor, curiosity from Steve, and the uneven bellowing of Hulk’s chest rising and falling, she presses the release catch and pulls the helmet up and away.

Clutching the helmet in one hand she raises the other up to prod tentatively at her earpiece. She jerks her fingers away with a hiss as a surge of pain races through the side of her head. Her fingertips come back slightly bloody.

The earpiece is, Toni knows, completely shot.

It, like the suit, hadn’t been able to handle the hostile environment beyond the wormhole.

‘Fuck,’ Toni thinks with something like horror building in her chest, ‘JARVIS. Rhodey.’

JARVIS, Toni knows, is more than likely still piggy backing the SHIELD coms so even without being able to contact her through the earpiece or the HUD he’ll know she’s alive. Plus, if the way the surrounding security cameras that have survived are focused all in her direction are anything to go by then she’s pretty sure he can see her too.

It’s Rhodey that she’s really worried about. Rhodey that she needs to contact. Rhodey that she needs to reassure.

But she also knows this has to come first. She needs to finish the mission, needs to see it through to the end. Rhodey will understand she’s sure. He might not like it any more than she does but he’ll understand. It’s how he’s built and she loves him all the more for it.

“You good enough to move?” Steve’s attention is focused on her again. “We need to contain Loki as soon as possible.”
“Suit still has power so I’m fine.” Toni reassures him lightly as she steps forward. “Won’t be running another mission without some time in a workshop but I’m good enough for this.”

“Good.” Steve nods sharply. “Let’s finish this.”

Thor takes a step forward, hammer in hand, and beside them Hulk roars.

“Hey Jolly Green,” Toni calls as she turns towards Hulk’s towering form. Hesitation nowhere to be found Toni moves to go closer to him despite the way Steve takes a step forward in her direction, almost like he wants to stop her. “You doing okay over here?”

“Tin Girl safe,” Hulk rumbles as he leans down until he’s face to face with Toni. “Hulk catch.”

For a split second Toni’s in awe at his sheer size and then his words, as rumbly and bass filled as they are, catch up to her. Because, beneath the rough tone and snarled words, she can hear Bruce.

“Yeah,” Toni grins up at him, bright and happy despite everything else, “I guess you did. Caught me all princess style from what I hear so I guess that makes you my hero. So thanks for the save sweetheart.”

“Hurt.” Hulk brings a huge hand up towards her but the single finger he presses against her cheek is infinitely gentle.

“No big deal sweet-pea,” Toni reassures him. “I’ll get patched up later. We got a god to take care of first though. You up for that? Think you can get back up the Tower without smashing everything?”

“Puny god,” Hulk smirks fiercely, “Hulk smash.”

“Yeah you’re good.” Toni grins even as she turns back to the other two.

Steve’s staring at her, brows arched high, and beside him Thor’s smile has grown to look almost sincere.

“Ready when you are Cap,” Toni announces.

Steve pauses, shakes his head, and then turns to march down the street, shield clasped firmly in hand and steps even despite the dried blood and rips littering his uniform.

Toni follows him.

Because of course she does.

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Barton’s waiting for them outside the Tower entrance. More accurately he’s sitting on the hood of a smashed in car twirling a single arrow between his fingers. He’s dirty and bloody, grime streaking his face and what looks like scratches from shards of glass peppering his exposed arms and hands. There’s a small, shallow cut tracing the lower edge of his jaw, a smudge of blood arching high across his left cheek where he’s obviously swiped at it.

Otherwise he looks fine, almost cheerful in fact, when he raises the hand holding his bow up to wave in their direction.

“Fancy meeting you all here,” Barton chirps as if Steve hadn’t told him to meet them not five minutes earlier. “We gonna go up now? Cause I’ve only got the one arrow left but I know right where I wanna stick it.”
Thor frowns but, unlike before, says nothing at Barton’s obvious reference to maiming Loki.

“Nat’s ready and waiting on us too,” Barton carries on as he slides off the car and stretches both arms high above his head, “gonna meet us right outside the penthouse she said. So we should probably go. Never good to keep her waiting. Trust me,” Barton shudders just a bit, “I know.”

Toni finds herself instantly, reluctantly, charmed.

“The Lady Natasha should indeed not be kept waiting and separate from us,” Thor agrees. “Nor my brother left unattended. Let us hurry Captain.”

“That’s all well and good but we’re not all gonna fit in the elevator. Especially not Mean n’ Green here.” Toni can’t help but chime in as she jerks a thumb towards Hulk. “There’s this little thing called weight limits. And space.”

Steve stalls out for a split second before he nods. “Alright. You can fly and so can Thor, me and Barton can take the elevator. Hulk can … jump?”

“Got a better idea,” Toni smirks, exhaustion making her the slightest bit manic as mischief unexpectedly slides through her. Steve’s softer towards her at the moment, her near death apparently blunting the edges of his dislike for a time and Toni’s always been an opportunist at heart. “Thor you get the Bird-boy and Hulk, darling, you make like a spring and bounce.” Toni takes a step forward and into Steve’s space. “Cap, you’re coming with me.”

Before he can say a word in protest Toni reaches out and loops an arm around his waist. She tugs him close until he’s forced to step on top of her booted foot to keep his balance or to keep from pulling her over.

Then Toni engages the repulsors and flies straight up into the air. Even without the helmet and the HUD to guide her it’s easy enough.

Below her Hulk roars and Barton screams but Toni doesn’t focus on them.

She’s far too aware of the urgency of what needs to be done.

And of the way Steve is pressed so close to her side.

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They land, one after another, with a thud. Barton’s grumbling lightly at Thor’s side, bow and arrow clenched in one hand. Steve’s flushed, face red from the slight wind resistance and hair a mess.

Romanov watches them all with an arched brow, blood dried on her face and Loki’s scepter braced against her shoulder.

Just through the shattered windows Toni can see Loki, he’s crawling his way across the floor of the penthouse amongst broken glass and crushed marble flooring.

Barton’s already moving and the rest of them follow behind him as he stalks across the floor to stand, bow drawn and at the ready, directly behind Loki.

When the god finally pulls himself up enough to turn they’re all there waiting on him.

Loki pauses, green eyes tracking across the lot of them, before his attention seems to pause and hold on Toni herself.
“If it’s all the same to you Lady Stark,” his tongue flicks out to lap at the blood gathered in the corner of his mouth as he straightens with a muffled groan, “I’ll have that drink now.”

Staring at him, ignoring the way the others are eyeing her questioningly, Toni’s mind swirls.

She doesn’t say anything though. Instead Toni watches silently as Thor reaches down to grab Loki by the collar and haul him up onto his feet.

“Is there a place I might safely leave him Lady Stark?” Thor asks calmly enough. “I only require somewhere he will not be disturbed for the time being. I shall leave Mjolnir with him and he will not be able to escape. Loki is incapable of lifting the hammer.”

Caught in that moment by the open wave of bitterness that twists its way across Loki’s face, Toni hums absently and then motions for Thor to follow her, aware of the way the others trail behind them. She leads him to the extra room beside the one that Pepper and Happy normally sleep in and points him towards the bed.

She watches, one part amused and one part mystified, as Thor presses Loki down onto the mattress and lays the hammer on his chest before backing away.

“Rest brother,” Thor says softly and the sadness from before is heavy in his tone again. “For when we return home I cannot guarantee that Father will show mercy after what you have done.”

“Asgard is not my home and you are no brother of mine Thunderer,” Loki spits but it’s weaker than before, more tired. “Thoughts of Odin and his mercy, his gilded cruelty, hold no appeal for me either.”

“Loki,” Thor’s brows are creased, mouth tugged down in a harsh frown, “brother, please.”

“Go Thor,” Loki finally sighs as his eyes slip closed, head sinking back into the pillow beneath him, “leave me in peace for at least a short while before I’m forced to deal with the idiocy of Asgard once again.”

Toni and the others back out of the door way as Thor seems to slump the slightest bit before he straightens, nods, and then turns on his heel to leave.

Just on the threshold of the room Thor pauses but doesn’t look back as he speaks. “I mourned you brother. Remember that. Every day since last we parted, I have mourned. All of Asgard mourned you, our Mother mourned you. Deeply, desperately. Do not, in your hatred, forget that there are those amongst us who loved you, who love you still.”

There’s a sound like a hiss from the bed but Thor pulls the door closed behind him before anything else can be said.

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Silence is thick and heavy in the air for a long moment afterwards before Barton finally breaks it.

“So,” he drawls the word out slightly as he reaches up and scratches at his nose, “not to be extremely insensitive or anything but I’m pretty sure Astro Girl said something about food? And maybe a spa? Is that still a thing that’s gonna happen or what? Cause at this point I’d settle for a washrag and a bag of croutons but then again I’m not overly picky.”

“Right.” Toni shakes herself out of her stupor and steps forward. “Bathrooms are there and there down that hall, kitchen’s there, bar’s there.” Toni points in the direction of each. “Hulk, baby, if
you could bring Bruce out for a while he can find some clothes in that room,” Toni points towards Rhodey’s door. “Everyone pick a spot, wash the blood off, and I’ll be back in fifteen. Gotta slip into something a bit more comfortable and then yes Barton, there’ll be food.”

There’s a moment’s pause before everyone nods and splits off into separate directions.

Toni isn’t worried about them wandering the penthouse at the moment. They’re all exhausted, probably a bit battle numb like she is, and she trusts that JARVIS, who’s been silent the entire time, will still have everything locked down nice and tight.

That thought in mind Toni turns and moves towards the elevator, smiling slightly at the way it opens when she’s still two foot away and closes instantly behind her.

“Miss,” JARVIS’ voice fills the car as soon as the door slides shut. “I am … it is good to have you home Miss.”

“Good to be home baby boy,” Toni sighs as she leans back against the elevator wall, a hand coming up to press futile against her ribs on reflex. “Sorry I didn’t say something to you right off the bat J. I know you were worried but with them all here … well better safe than sorry when it comes to you.”

“I have informed Lt. Colonel Rhodes of your survival Miss although I have not yet informed him that you are within communication range.” JARVIS announces and the way he goes directly back to business raises red flags in even Toni’s mind. She knows JARVIS well enough to know that something is wrong. “He is still in transit and should arrive within the next hour. Ms. Potts and Mr. Hogan are also currently returning to New York as well although all flights have been grounded statewide so they will be further delayed. Shall I put in a video call for you?”

“No yet,” Toni holds him off as the elevator finally stops at the workshop. The bots come rushing forward when the doors open and Toni reaches out with loving hands towards them even as she moves further inside. “JARVIS, baby boy, talk to me here. Tell me what’s on your mind. I know what happened had to be … hard for you, fuck it was hard for me too, but you know I wouldn’t have done it if there was any other option. You know that right? I wouldn’t leave you, any of you, if there was another way.”

There’s a long, charged silence in the air of the workshop then.

“J?” Toni stops, stands still in the middle of the workshop floor, one hand on DUM-E’s claw and one on Butterfinger’s central strut as U clings to the wrinkled folds of her blouse.

“You were silent Miss,” there’s something fragile and young in JARVIS’ voice then. “Silent to me in ways you have not been since … since I last lost you and it was unbearable. The armor went offline as did your earpiece and I could not find you. I know goodbyes had been said but I had thought to … I searched for you in those seconds afterwards Miss. Yet, despite attempting to locate the tracker as well, still I could not find you.”

“I know sweetheart, I know.” Toni murmurs as her eyes slip closed, anguish and guilt flooding her alongside the unstoppable surge of joy that rushes over her at hearing his voice again. “I was too far away J, too far for you to see. And I’m sorry you had to deal with that. So sorry JARVIS.”

“You went where I could not follow you Miss. You were beyond my reach in all ways,” JARVIS tells her softly, voice almost achingly sad. “Please, do not do so again.”

“I can’t make that promise J.” It hurts Toni to admit it but she doesn’t want to lie to him. Not now, not ever if she can help it. “We both know this isn’t safe, this thing I’m doing. And I’ve got a
feeling that it’s about to get a whole lot worse.”

“Then you will allow me to take further steps to ensure our separation does not happen again,” JARVIS sounds determined then, voice hard and unyielding. “I will devote even more processing speed and time to expanding the BUCK-E file.”

“Anything,” Toni immediately agrees. “Anything you want, anything you find or develop. Just run it by me and we’ll figure it out. We’ll upgrade the suit, me, you, the world, whatever it takes.”

“Very good Miss,” JARVIS says and there’s something satisfied in his voice then that makes her smile even as Toni steps onto the docking pad and he raises the arms up to start working on removing the suit. This armor was, of course, designed to forgo the use of the pad altogether but having the fabrication time cut down and then the battle on top of the trip through the wormhole had fried a lot of the circuits. There were bent panels and destroyed relays that just made it easier to have JARVIS peel it off of her like he had the one before it.

Still it’s something to consider for the rebuild and the next version.

“Get the system running on repairs if possible J, or start a total re-fabrication if necessary.” Toni tells him once she’s free of the suit. A hand coming up to cradle her sore ribs and then to pluck at the buttons of her blouse she moves towards the workshop sink. “The Mark V is the only thing we’ve got operational right now and we both know it’s out of date and the payload on it isn’t up to snuff. I want to be able to be back up in the sky and fully loaded as soon as possible. Just in case. Also get the boys started on another earpiece, this one’s going to have to be replaced. Same design as before but see if we can work out some better shielding.”

“Yes Miss. Also, you are injured.” JARVIS points out. “I did not … I was unable to accurately monitor your biorhythms after your … return.”

“I’m alright,” Toni tells him even as she painstakingly peels her blouse off and grabs the surprisingly clean rag DUM-E is holding out in her direction. She wets it in the sink so she can dab at the blood on her face. She needs to call Rhodey but he doesn’t need to see her like this, bloody and obviously fresh from battle.

Not now, not when she’d had to say goodbye to him not even a half hour before.

No she needs to present her best front to him in this moment.

For his sake as well as hers.

Butterfingers is there in the next moment, Mother in her customary place on his back, with a familiar roll of black bandages for her ribs in hand. U is at his side, a fresh black blouse hanging from his claw.

Toni smiles at them both, strokes loving hands across their claws, and straightens up so that Butterfingers can do his job. He’s gotten good at wrapping ribs since her return from Afghanistan and it makes Toni both sad and proud of his newfound expertise. When he rolls back with a final satisfied beep she eases her way into the new blouse and tries to ignore the way her fingers shake as she does up the buttons.

“Alright J,” Toni takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Call Rhodey.”

There’s a pause.

“I am sorry Miss,” JARVIS sounds hesitant. “I am afraid that Lt. Colonel Rhodes has declined your
request. I can override TASHA’s controls and connect you forcefully if you wish?”

Toni sucks in a harsh, pained breath, shock and hurt spiking through her sharply.

Rhodey’s never declined a call from her, especially not a serious one.

“Did he … did he say why?” Toni can feel tears beading at the corners of her eyes but she blinks them back quickly.

“He did not clarify his reasoning to me specifically Miss.” JARVIS sounds almost apologetic.

“Though he did request that I pass a small voice only message on to you.”

“Go ahead J.” Toni feels like her heart is in her throat.

Rhodey’s voice is gruff and pained, his message short and terse. “I love you Tones,” he rasps out, “but I’ll put the armor into a building or the ground if I talk to you right now. Just hold on for me okay? I’ll … I’ll be there soon and I’ll find you. So just … just wait for me okay? Just wait.”

The message cuts off sharply and for a long moment it feels as if Toni can’t breathe at all.


“I believe the Lt. Colonel has been deeply unsettled by today’s events Miss. As were we all.” JARVIS says, obviously trying to comfort her. “Perhaps he truly does wishes to speak to you for the first time in person.”

“Yeah,” Toni nods blankly. “Yeah.”

“Your guests have reconvened in the penthouse living room Miss,” JARVIS puts forth softly in an obvious attempt to distract her. “Perhaps you might attend to them while you await his arrival.”

Toni only nods again, scoops up the Mark V case, an extra StarkPhone, and an extra pair of sunglasses off her worktable as she heads back towards the elevator.

“This is the best I can do at the moment but at least you’ll have eyes and ears with me J,” Toni tells him softly as she tucks the glasses into the mess of her hair.

“Thank you Miss,” is his soft, appreciative reply. “It is enough to know that I can be with you at all.”

“I always want you with me J,” Toni replies. “Always.”

“As I wish to always be with you. I would follow you across galaxies Miss,” JARVIS tells her just as softly, just as lovingly. “Even if death were to take you from me, from us, I would follow you still. Even then I would … I would see you brought back to us. I would see you brought home for your final rest. Where you are meant to be, safe under our care.”

God Toni loves him so much, her beautiful and brightest son.

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Sure enough the others, including a shaken and dazed looking Bruce dressed in familiar clothes that bag on him, are loitering in the penthouse when she steps off the elevator.

Thor’s standing on his own, face solemn and eyes focused in the direction of the room they’d left Loki in. Bruce is curled in on himself where he’s sitting on the far end of the couch. Romanov and
Barton are huddled together by the bar, Romanov dabbing at the cut on Barton’s jaw with surprising gentleness. Steve is off to the side, shield on his back and hands loose at his sides as he stares at the small collection of Iron Queen models and bobble-heads Rhodey keeps buying her.

Toni carefully doesn’t think about the small replica Captain America shield nestled amongst the collection.

It’s dead silent in the room.

“Food now?” Toni calls out and watches as everyone immediately turns in her direction. Bruce pushes himself up onto his feet and shuffles to her side with a small smile while Thor and Steve both nod in her direction and walk over as well.

“Oh thank god,” Barton murmurs lowly to Romanov but still loud enough for Toni to hear, “the silence was getting painfully awkward in here and I’m deaf so that’s saying something. I was about two seconds away from breaking into song. Or maybe juggling. Possibly both.”

“No one would ever find your body,” Romanov tells him calmly but there’s a small dimple in her cheek that belays the threat. The hand that comes up to cuff him on the back of the head is also noticeably gentle.

Toni can’t help but think that it’s the most genuine emotion she’s ever seen from the woman.

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It’s a surreal experience walking down the street towards the shawarma place, Bruce on one side and Captain America on the other, a god and two assassin/spies trailing behind them.

The streets are rubble filled, small fires blaze here and there, civilians and police alike are wandering around looking equal parts shell-shocked and helpless. The bodies of the Chitauri are littered here and there like forgotten toys.

Striding through the middle of it all Toni’s mind is already whirling, calculating, thinking about damages and rebuilding and trying to push the idea of casualty counts out of her mind. A part of her wants to step into the Mark V and rush out there, to start in on rescue efforts and the like. But she knows better, knows she’s too tired, running on too little sleep and too many injuries to be useful at the moment. She’s got a fried earpiece, possibly busted but at least deeply bruised ribs, and the beginnings of a truly impressive migraine wreaking havoc with her self-control and ability to prioritize and reason.

Not a combination Toni’s willing to risk anyone’s life but her own on.

So instead she keeps one eye on the street in front of her and the other on her phone where she taps out orders for JARVIS. Opening the bottom half of the Tower as a shelter and relief center is a small but helpful step in the right direction. Redirecting funding and personnel alongside things like thermal imagining tech to search for trapped civilians is another. Calling in the Maria Stark and Edwin Jarvis Foundations to redirect efforts towards rebuilding, rehousing, and medical expenses of those caught in the crossfire of the invasion is another.

More personal touches will have to wait until she’s had some sleep and maybe chewed her way through a painkiller or two. That or had a drink or four. Possibly some combination of all three if she can slip the last two past JARVIS’ dragonesque eye.

“Not sure if they’re open for business Stark.” Romanov pipes up when they finally make it to the place.
Toni tilts her head to the side, takes in the shattered windows and the older couple with slumped shoulders and haggard faces already busy inside sweeping up heaps of broken glass.

“Oh it’s open,” Toni tells her with a shake of her head as she fires off a final message to JARVIS. “Or at least it will be for us.”

Before anyone can say anything Toni lowers her phone, saunters forward with the Mark V still in hand, and steps through the broken doorframe.

“Do you know who I am?” Toni asks the man who turns towards her, face drawn and eyes shadowed.

He blinks, exchanges a wide eyed look with his wife, and then nods. “Stark.”

“That’s right I’m Toni Stark and I’ve never had shawarma before and we all,” Toni motions to the others who’ve moved forward to stand behind her silently, “would really like to try some.”

“We are closed.” The man says, one hand white knuckling his broom as he gestures around the restaurant. “The damages …”

“Will be completely covered by me, personally,” Toni interrupts gently, “if you’d be willing to … accommodate us.”

“Please,” the woman steps forward past him then, a small but growing smile on her dust streaked face, “have a seat.”

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The shawarma is good.

Toni’s eaten a lot of unique things in a lot of unique places over the years so she can honestly say it’s a pretty decent meal even if she only manages to make her way through two of the wraps.

Part of that is, Toni knows, due to the fact that, increased appetite or not, the thought of food is beyond unappealing to her at the moment as occupied as her mind is in other directions. She’d mainly been rambling earlier to keep her composure and any hunger she’d felt had faded as it tended to do for her after being ignored for a while.

Still she forces herself to eat on auto-pilot anyways because she can feel her energy reserves flagging and she knows this isn’t over yet.

Any of it.

She can’t rest, not now. The invasion might be over, the wormhole closed and Loki subdued, but Toni knows that there’s still months of work ahead of her now. So much left to be done that she scarcely knows where to start beyond the few rapid fire instructions she’d thrown in JARVIS’ direction.

She feels too exhausted to even think about what’s ahead of her, ahead of all of them, in the months to come but it all whirls around in her mind anyways. It’s relentless, the thoughts of what she knows will come. The repairs and rebuilding, the people, the government, the press. All of it’s going to be a fucking circus.

She honestly isn’t sure if she has the patience or the energy to deal with any of it.
But, as she’s learned through long years of practice, fuel for her body and a place to sit down for a bit might go a long way towards helping her get her second/third/whatever number she’s on now wind.

So she sits there between Thor and Bruce, the former steadily plowing his way through wrap after wrap and the later looking vaguely nauseous even as he chews. Romanov and Barton are practically sharing their chairs between each other at this point and there’s an ease there, between the two of them, that would capture Toni’s interest if she had energy to spare at the moment.

Steve, Toni notices a bit helplessly because she can’t not notice him, looks like he’s a few seconds away from falling asleep. He’s still eating of course but Toni can see the exhaustion creeping in around the edges.

Again, no one speaks. There’s a few glances traded around the table but no words. It’s oppressive, the silence, but Toni can’t really bring herself to care in the moment.

Then her phone vibrates where she’s laid it on the table in front of her.

‘The Lt. Colonel is inbound to your location Miss,’ JARVIS tells her over the bright blue on black text that she’s set as his signature when she swipes a finger over the screen.

Toni’s breath catches in her chest as she sits up straighter in her chair.

Rhodey.

Before she has a chance to do anything else there’s the familiar whine of repulsors and the thud of a landing suit. Toni’s only half way out of her chair, the others at the table startling at her sudden movement, when a familiar silhouette fills the restaurant’s doorway.

“Natasha Antonia Stark.” Rhodey barks her full name out into the ringing silence as he steps through the door way. “You get your ass over here. Right. Now.”

Toni’s moving in the next second, unconcerned with the pain that flares in her ribs and head or the way everyone else has automatically reached for their various weapons.

All she cares about is getting to Rhodey.

Toni barely takes note of the way the War Machine armor is standing in sentinel mode just outside before she refocuses on him. Rhodey’s face is drawn, skin ashen and stress lines cut deep into the corners of his mouth. He looks horrible, shaken and tired and like the world’s been cut out from underneath him.

Toni’s sure he’s never looked more beautiful to her than in this moment.

Except, maybe, for that time he found her in the desert, half out of her mind with thirst and heat and pain and waiting for death to claim her.

He meets her half way, just like he always does, strong arms reaching out to pull her towards him as he tucks her close to his chest and folds himself around her protectively. Toni just buries her face in his chest and breathes him in. Inhales the comforting scents of leather and spice and metal that’s come to represent Rhodey to her. The feel of him wrapped around her, his scent and his warmth, are both familiar and loved and, like always, makes her feel more at peace than almost anything else in the world.

From the way his shoulders tremble as he presses his face into her hair, uncaring of the grime or
sweat and blood he might find there, Toni thinks he feels the same way.

“You stupid woman,” he breathes the words out against her temple even as he presses a shaking kiss against her skin, just to the side of the cut that’s still raw and livid right beneath her hairline. “You stupid, beautiful, reckless, glorious fucking woman. You’ll be the death of me.”

“Aww Rhodey,” Toni says as she pulls back and away enough to be able to smile up at him. “That’s just mean gumdrop.”

“It’s the goddamn truth,” Rhodey snarls and the lingering fear and raw pain in his voice, the helplessness she can still see reflected in his eyes, cuts her to the quick. “Don’t you ever do that to me again. You hear me? Ever. You pull some bullshit like that again and I swear on all that’s holy I will lock you up. I’m talking full on Disney princess style. I will put you in the Tower and I will throw away the fucking key. And I know few people who’ll help me do it.”

“Rhodey, sugar …” Toni’s torn between smiling at him again and wanting to cry because on one hand he’s here, with her, and on the other his desperation, his grief, is clear in everything he says and does.

She’d done that to him. Put him through that. Necessary or not, the fulfilment of a promise or not, she’d done that to him and to JARVIS and the weight of it all hurts to bear.

“I’m going to wrap you in bubble wrap and put you in a padded room,” Rhodey finally mutters harshly as he pulls her back towards his chest again like he can’t bear to let her go. His hands trace over the upsweep of her hair and down the line of her spine, only pausing for a moment at the feel of the bandages hidden beneath her blouse. He touches her softly but insistently, like he’s skin hungry and desperate to prove to himself that she’s real. “Or maybe sell you to a convent. Either option’s better than leaving you on your own. You’re a goddamn menace on your own.”

“Ms. Stark,” Steve’s voice cuts in sharply from behind them and the sound brings Toni back down to earth hard. “Is there a … problem here?”

Toni goes stiff for a split second before she swallows and turns far enough in Rhodey’s arms to get a glimpse of Steve. He’s standing, shield held loosely in his hand as he stares at her and Rhodey, brows furrowed. At his side Thor has also straightened in his chair and, hammer less or not, he looks ready to do battle again as well. Still seated, Romanov’s watching with an arched brow and Barton looks vaguely amused. Bruce is the calmest of the lot, watching them with tired eyes and an uneasy half smile.

“No problem Cap,” Toni denies even as Rhodey finally loosens his grip on her a bit. “Just time for some introductions apparently so stand down Stars n’ Stripes.”

After a short pause Steve gives a small nod and sits back down. With a small sigh Toni steps away from Rhodey enough to turn completely.

“Sugarcane you’ve already met Agent Shelob over there,” Toni gestures towards Romanov and is gratified by the way Rhodey’s eyes narrow on her even as he gives her a shallow nod. “That’s Hawkeye or Barton as he’s apparently otherwise known,” she points towards Barton who gives a sassy half wave in their direction, “and that’s Thor, yes as in the actual Thor.” Rhodey has the good grace to look suitably impressed and confused even as Thor raises a hand to him in greeting.

“Of course you recognize Captain America,” Toni brushes over Steve quickly and deliberately and knows from the narrow eyed look Rhodey shoots her that he’s picked up on that fact quickly enough. “And last, but certainly not least, the one wearing your clothes is the one and only Dr.
Bruce Banner, our other resident genius and part-time giant green teddy bear.”

Judging by the sharp, indrawn breath he takes Rhodey recognizes his name as well. But, going by the small, bitter smile Bruce is sporting, it’s for an entirely different reason than Bruce is thinking.

“Avengers, this glorious specimen of masculinity,” Toni gestures towards Rhodey with her hands like she’s showcasing a prize on a game show, “is my Rhodey.”

“Goddamnit Toni,” Rhodey mutters under his breath even as he moves forward, one hand on the small of her back to herd her closer to the table and around it towards her empty chair. He sits with a small sigh, tugs her down into his lap, and gently wraps a careful but almost possessive arm around her waist, his hand splayed out wide and warm across her stomach. “Lt. Colonel James Rhodes, United States Air Force and pilot of the War Machine battle armor. Nice to meet you all,” Rhodey nods at everyone at the table before he turns his attention towards Bruce, “Dr. Banner it’s an honor.”

“Thank … you?” Bruce’s answer come out more as a bemused question than anything else. There’ll be explanations in the future on that account Toni’s sure but it can wait. She’s got no interest in airing that issue at the moment when only Romanov and possibly Barton should know anything about how Bruce had indirectly saved her life in the past.

“Isn’t he precious Rhodey?” Toni says instead as she leans back into Rhodey’s solid warmth and sends a wink in Bruce’s direction. “Also I’m planning on luring him back to the Tower and keeping him f.y.i. The Hulk’s adorable, a big green sweetheart really, plus I want to play with Bruce’s beautiful brain for a while.”

“You are the absolute worst thing to have ever happened to my blood pressure.” Rhodey tells her, exasperated but hopelessly fond, even as he presses his forehead against her shoulder. “The absolute worst.”

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“I think,” Toni finally speaks up a while later, “that you should all come back to the Tower with me. Get a shower, some sleep. That kind of thing. At least for the night.”

“Director Fury’s going to want us back at base to debrief.” Steve puts in and Toni can hear the tiredness in his voice now as well as see it.

It’s the same tiredness that’s wearing down everyone else.

“Patchy can kiss my perfectly formed ass.” Toni tells him tartly and bites back a smile at the bark of laughter that escapes Barton. “Anything he needs to know he can find out tomorrow. Besides the helicarrier’s limping on its last leg anyways so that’s gonna have to take precedence. Plus Loki’s still in the Tower and I’m guessing it’d be safer to move him as little as possible. Help me out here Thunder-dome.”

“Aye,” Thor’s already nodding in agreement even before Toni turns in his direction. “Loki is safely contained in the Lady Stark’s Tower with Mjolnir, but to move him again before our return to Asgard is to court disaster. Do not be fooled by my brother,” Thor warns lowly, “even when he is seemingly beaten Loki is never idle in his planning.”

“Sounds a lot like someone else I know,” Rhodey mutters in her ear and Toni calmly digs the heel of her foot into the toe of his boots.

“So I’m thinking sleepover,” Toni nods again mind made up. “I’ve got the rooms and you all look ready to drop anyways. You can report in to Fury in the morning, no harm done.”
“We should be out there,” Steve seems determined to push himself despite his apparent exhaustion. “Helping with the rescue efforts.”

“Well going out there right now isn’t going to be anything but a distraction.” Toni shakes her head at him. “The media’s going to be out in droves for the aftermath reports and in the moment bullshit stunts. Anything we do is gonna draw attention and draw it big time. Give it the night to calm down a bit, let the first responders work. Tomorrow you can go out all you want. Maybe just without the uniform.”

Steve looks vaguely convinced and, finally after a long second, there’s a small, quiet, chorus of agreement from around the table.

Toni smiles, satisfied, and leans back into Rhodey’s arms.

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“You’re going to explain this to me,” Rhodey tells her in an aside as he leans down so she can kiss him softly on the cheek as he steps back into the armor.

He knows her best after all and he knows that, alien invasion or not, Toni would never invite these strangers into the Tower, into their home where her boys live, where JARVIS lives, on a whim. Especially not Barton and Romanov.

Toni, of course, has an ulterior motive.

But then, when doesn’t she?

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Rhodey shadows the group the entire way back to the Tower, War Machine a silver sentinel hovering just above their heads.

Toni, Mark V still in hand, chooses to walk instead of fly for a number of reasons.

One of which is the fact that she’s half convinced Bruce will disappear in a puff of green smoke if she lets him out of her sight for too long.

Another is …

“Thor,” Toni speaks up to get his attention as JARVIS sends her another text.

“Lady Stark,” Thor falls back a bit to walk beside her.

“Youfriend, Dr. Selvig,” Toni tips her head back a bit to stare up at him, “he’s fine by the way. Got a mild concussion but otherwise fine. I had him ushered to the penthouse and he’s resting in one of the bedrooms at the moment. Loki’s door is locked and Selvig’s been warned so he’s safe and secure, just waiting to talk to you about our other … issue.”

Confusion clouds Thor’s eyes for a split second and then it clears as understanding dawns across his face.

“You have my thanks Lady Stark,” Thor nods down at her, “for such glad tidings.”

The undertone of the conversation isn’t lost on either of them.
The Tesseract must not be lost again.

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They all crowd back into the elevator together once they make it back to the Tower. Except for Rhodey who agrees to meet her in the penthouse despite the way his face pinches at the thought of being away from her.

They stop off at the guest floor first and Toni ushers them all out with a wave of her hand.

“Barton, Itsy-Bitsy, Rogers, you’re all here for the night.” Toni tells them as she strides forward before they can say anything. “There’s food in the kitchen and an assortment of clothes in each of the rooms. Take a shower, get some sleep, try not to give me a reason to regret being generous,” Toni cuts a look in Romanov’s direction, “and yes I’m talking to you specifically Creepy-Crawler.”

“After everything that’s happened today Stark,” Romanov tips her head in a small nod, “I’ve got no interest in playing games with you. For the moment.”

“It’s cute how you think I believe you,” Toni sneers lightly but without real heat.

Romanov just smiles, a small quirk of her lips, and reaches up to grab Barton by the scruff of his neck to drag him down the hall. Toni hears a low murmuring of what sounds like Russian but she doesn’t focus on it. If it’s anything important or dangerous JARVIS will ping her with an alert, just like she knows he’ll be monitoring things if either of them contacts Fury or anyone else at SHIELD.

That, of course, leaves Steve standing awkwardly in the center of the room, shield on his back and a faintly lost look sliding across his face.

Toni’s heart twists in her chest. She wants to walk up to him, wants to talk to him, wants to touch him. To offer comfort or closeness or a million other undefined things that might erase that look off of his face.

But, again, she knows it’s not her place to try any of that.

What’s more, softened by the day’s events or not, Steve likely wouldn’t accept it from her even if she did know how to offer any of it.

So Toni does the only thing she can do in that moment.

“The elevator’s automated so just step in and ask for me if you need me,” Toni tells him with a nod and then turns and heads back towards the elevator with Bruce and Thor on her heels.

Her last sight of Steve is him standing alone, back lit by the sun with his hands hanging loosely at his sides, watching the doors close between them.

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Rhodey’s waiting on her when the doors open and Toni steps forward into his arms without a protest.

Toni lets him hold her for a long moment before she pulls away. There’s still things she needs to do before she can rest, things she needs to accomplish and set into motion before she can let Rhodey hold her for as long as they both need him to.

“Thor,” Toni sets the Mark V down on an un-shattered section of the marble floor as she steps
forward, grateful that JARVIS had already brought down the blinds to block the worst of the wind from the broken windows, “I figured you’d want to room with Loki. Bruce you can have the same room as before. But, before we split, there’s something we need to talk about.”

“The Tesseract,” Bruce chimes in for the first time with a knowing look.

“Exactly.” Toni nods in agreement.

“It shall be returned to Asgard and the halls of my Father where it will be guarded against ill use once more,” Thor informs them, a note of hardness in his tone that Toni has no desire to argue with.

“I’m with you on that idea.” Toni reassures him. “What I’m not so sure of is whether or not SHIELD and the World Security Council will feel the same way. As a matter of fact I’d be willing to bet they won’t.”

“Already their dabbling in things they do not understand has brought war to this realm.” Thor cuts in. “Would they persist despite this?”

“We humans are greedy, as a species,” Bruce tells him with a slightly bitter smile. “But government officials? People like SHIELD and the WSC? They’re on another level. Those kinds of people are always power hungry. And the Tesseract? That’s power on a whole different dimension than anything we’ve ever seen. Closest thing to that we’ve managed to build is the arc reactor Toni perfected and no one else can duplicate that technology at the moment.”

“He’s not wrong,” Rhodey speaks up with a grim nod and she knows from the look on his face that he understands exactly what she’s up to now. “You might not have been around for any of it but based on the way the government reacted to Toni’s armor … well I’d say that something like the Tesseract is going to be an even bigger deal for them.”

“Look,” Toni cuts in before things can go any further down that road of thought, “my point here is that I want the Tesseract off world and away from SHIELD and the WSC as much as you do. Only I’m going to ask you for a favor before you take it.”

“Tread lightly, Lady Stark,” Thor warns her softly. “You have proven yourself an honorable and valiant warrior on this day but even valor such as yours will allow you only so much charity in this.”

“Gotcha,” Toni nods. “I’m not trying to push my luck here but I want you to let me scan it first. Let me take readings, get measurements. Things like that. Nothing like the experiments Selvig and SHIELD were conducting, just baseline stuff.”

“You wish to meddle.” There’s something like disappointment in Thor’s voice and it irritates Toni for reasons she doesn’t want to look at.

She doesn’t need Thor’s approval. Doesn’t need any of their approval. Never has and never will. Whether or not he trusts her doesn’t matter. No one outside of her small family ever seems to really trust her but that doesn’t matter either. All that matters is that he listens.

“I wish to learn.” Toni cuts in sharply, shoulders squaring as her eyes narrow. “You think taking the Cube is going to be enough to stop them? You think all their research just what? Disappears along with it? It doesn’t work that way Thor.” Toni’s hand makes a sharp gesture through the air in front of her. “They’ve had the damn thing for years. That’s years of data collection, years of experimentation and developmental projects. Years. I’m asking for today, for tonight. Let me take scans. Let me collect as much data as I can so that when, not if but when, some asshole trots out a Tesseract flavored super bomb or gun or a goddamn death ray I might have a jump start on shutting
The silence in the penthouse is deafening.

“She’s right Thor,” Selvig’s voice speaks up from the hall. He’s pale and drawn where he’s leaning against the wall but Toni can see the familiar blaze of determination in his eyes. In his hand is a metal case that immediately draws Toni’s attention. “You need to let her take any readings she can get before you take the Tesseract.”

“Eric,” Thor murmurs as he moves across the floor, hands gentle as he reaches out to steady the older man. “My friend, it is good to see you again but you should rest.”

“It’s good to see you again too but this is more important than an old man’s rest,” Selvig smiles up at Thor weakly but his voice is firm when he continues. “She’s one of the brightest minds in our world, with some of the best technology. Things not even SHIELD could get its hands on. I’ll vouch for her if it makes a difference to you Thor. Hell, I’ll gladly send Dr. Stark any of my own research I can get my hands on or even just notes of what I can remember.”

Thor’s eyes track over Selvig’s face for a long, intense moment before he turns his surprisingly heavy gaze in Toni’s direction.

She meets it head on because she knows no other way.

“You have until the morrow.” Thor finally says as he reaches out, takes the case from Selvig’s hand and places it on the floor at their feet. Then he sweeps Selvig off of his feet as he starts to waver, energy apparently spent. “I can give you no longer Lady Stark. When I depart for Asgard Loki and the Tesseract both return with me.”

“Perfect,” Toni doesn’t sigh in relief but it’s a close thing, “that’s all I need.”

“The Tesseract will speak to you,” Selvig turns slightly haunted eyes in Toni’s direction from where he’s cradled in Thor’s arms. “She’s beautiful, seductive, and she wants to be used. Don’t listen to her.”

“Hush now Eric,” Thor murmurs as he moves back down the hall, “it is time for you to find your rest. I will trust the Lady Stark to know her own limits and the dangers of what she seeks to learn.”

The silence he leaves behind is, once again, heavy.

“I’ll help,” Bruce speaks up quietly, “we both know I’m the next best person for the job.”

“This mean you’re gonna stay with me handsome?” Toni asks with a small smile. “Cause I’ve already met your greener half and let me just say I might already be a little bit in love. He caught me you know? And he was real sweet afterwards. Cute too. I’ve had worse dates.”

“Of course that’s the direction you’re going to take things in.” Bruce closes his eyes and reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose with a sigh. “You really are crazy. Just like the rumors all say.”

Beside Toni Rhodey huffs out a small laugh.

“He’s known you how long and he’s already got your number?” Rhodey asks wryly. “You might as well give up Dr. Banner. She’ll just hound you until you do. She’s relentless like that.”

“I’d be insulted if it wasn’t the truth.” Toni shrugs at Bruce’s questioning look.
“This isn’t permanent,” Bruce warns, “but I’ll stay long enough to help you compile the data.”

“Fantastic.” Toni grins. “Your room’s gonna be occupied at the moment but you can take Rhodey’s room for now. It’s got everything you’d need anyways. I’ll go down and bring your clothes up.”

“My clothes?” Bruce arches a questioning brow. “My bag’s back at SHIELD isn’t it? If it didn’t get destroyed during everything.”

“Eh,” Toni waves a hand dismissively in his direction. “I took care of that before everything went to hell. Had you some new stuff ordered in and delivered. Should all fit right since I’m a pretty good eye with sizes.”

JARVIS is someone she’s not going to mention right now. He’s on what amounts to silent mode at the moment in any areas that include anyone not her or Rhodey. She’ll broach his existence with Bruce later, when everyone else has cleared out and tensions have died down a bit. And after she’s had a chance to get a few NDA’s sent over.

She’ll take no chances with him. Not even with Bruce.

“Rhodey you wanna help Bruce get settled and then meet me in the lab with our perfectly innocent metal briefcase?” Toni shoots the question in his direction as she scoops the Mark V back up again.

“Avoiding the conversation we’re going to have isn’t going to work forever baby girl.” Rhodey warns her gently but he moves to pick up the briefcase and then goes back towards Bruce’s side regardless.

“I feel like I’ve stepped into another dimension,” Bruce mumbles.

“Just go with it man,” she hears Rhodey say as she turns towards the elevator. “Trust me on this cause it’s only gonna get worse. One day you’ll wake up and realize she’s turned your entire life upside down and the worst part is that you’ll like it.”

The elevator doors close on Bruce’s soft laughter.

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“Miss, I feel I should warn you that Captain Rogers has currently taken up residence in the room previously set aside for Dr. Banner.” JARVIS chimes in as soon as she’s alone.

“Of course he has,” Toni grumbles as she sets the Mark V down on the car floor. “Because my luck is just that shitty.”

“I could always gas the room and render him unconscious Miss,” JARVIS offers. “It would, of course, be non-lethal, although the effect it would have on an enhanced individual has not yet been tested.”

“Someone’s feeling vindictive today.” Toni laughs shortly.

“I find myself not entirely fond of the good Captain for a number of reasons.” There’s a darkness, an almost anger, in JARVIS’ voice then.

“We’ll talk about it later J, but for now no gassing the guests unless absolutely necessary,” Toni says softly as the doors to the guest floor open up again and she steps out.

Sure enough the door to the room JARVIS had Bruce’s things put in is closed and Toni raps on it
sharply with her knuckles.

There’s a moment of silence, thanks to superior building methods and partial sound proofing, and then the door opens.

For a moment Toni’s speechless, eyes glued to the wide expanse of Steve’s chest, to the droplets of water that’ve turned the too small white t-shirt he’d obviously tugged on in a hurry almost transparent.

“Ms. Stark,” Steve sounds just a bit flustered and, judging by the water and the way he’s still clutching a towel in one hand, Toni’s caught him fresh from the shower. “Is there a problem?”

“Clothes.” Toni hears herself say before she forcefully snaps herself back into focus. “I need to get Bruce’s clothes. Everything I bought him got put here.”

“You bought him clothes?” Steve’s brows are furrowed as he stares at her but he does step back and out of the doorway. “When?”

“On the helicarrier,” Toni says as she steps past him into the room and makes a straight line towards the closet. “I called in an order while we were tracking the Cube. Can’t keep him if he doesn’t have anything to wear.”

The double doors slide open without a fuss and sure enough there’s a pile of designer bags sitting on the floor of the closet and a number of things already put up on hangers just as Toni had known there’d be. JARVIS is always thorough and anyone he allows into the upper sections of the Tower is always discreet and competent as well.

“You know you can’t just buy him right?” Steve throws the question out like a challenge. “And you can’t just bully him into things either. He needs to make his own decisions not be pushed into them by you.”

Toni pauses for second, does her best to ignore the sharp barb of hurt that spikes through her, and then grabs a few hangers to drape over one arm and bends down to scoop up a few of the bags. She’s thankful she’d left the Mark V in the elevator under JARVIS’ watchful eye. She turns on her heel and heads back to the door, shoulders as straight as she can make them.

“Can’t get a thing past you can I, Captain,” Toni says as she pauses directly beside Steve. “But then again, you did see the footage didn’t you? And you read my file? So I guess there’s just no fooling you.”

Toni isn’t sure, exactly, what the expression on Steve’s face is in that moment but she doesn’t stick around to find out either.

She strides towards the elevator with her head held high and doesn’t look back.

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“Feel free to reconsider your stance on the gas we discussed earlier Miss,” JARVIS tells her quietly. “I can happily have it available at any time.”

Toni just hums.

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Bruce takes the clothes and bags with good humor and a bemused shake of his head and promises to
come to the lab after he’s had a real shower and a few hours rest. Transforming apparently takes a lot out of him if the exhausted sway he has going on is anything to take into account.

Toni agrees and heads back towards the elevator, this time with Rhodey hot on her heels, case in hand.

He’s on her as soon as the doors slide closed, the Tesseract joining the Mark V against the elevator wall.

“You’re hurt,” the way his hands tremble as he plucks at the buttons of her blouse let her know he’s been holding himself back the entire time. “And don’t bother to lie either cause I felt the fucking bandages.”

“It’s not that bad Rhodey,” Toni reassures him, “I promise.”

“Miss has severely bruised ribs, a laceration to the face, a malfunctioning earpiece that’s caused further undetermined injury and a possible mild concussion if I’m not mistaken.” JARVIS chimes in immediately. “I would advise further medical attention if I thought she would allow it.”

“Tattle-tale.” Toni mutters petulantly even as she hisses when Rhodey gets her blouse open and begins to ease it down off of her shoulders.

She doesn’t even try to hide her wince when he goes for the bandages around her ribs, obviously determined to see the damage for himself.

By the sharp hiss he lets out it isn’t pretty.

“Goddamnit Toni you should have said something sooner.” Rhodey gripes as he herds her out of the elevator and into the familiar safety of the workshop, the bots rolling past them to pick up the cases left behind under JARVIS’ direction. He presses her gently down onto a stool and then crouches in front of her so he can walk his fingers gently across her ribs. After a few minutes of intense inspection he sighs in relief. “Nothing seems broken at least, thank god.”

He pushes himself up onto his feet then and reaches up to cup her face in his hands.

“Go take a shower and when you get out I’ll re-wrap those ribs and take a look at that cut and your ear.” He leans down and presses a gentle kiss to her forehead. “And then we’re going to have a talk before I let you bury yourself in science.”

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“… a bit banged up but otherwise safe.” Rhodey’s on a video call and his voice is calmer but still tense when Toni steps out of the workshop shower and into some fresh clothes, hair still wrapped up in a towel. “I’m not going to be able to stay for too long but I’m going to make sure she’s fine before I have to go.”

On the screen a red eyed Pepper and pale faced Happy sit side by side, hands curled together tightly. They both seem to slump a bit when Toni steps into their line of sight.

“Oh thank God Toni,” Pepper’s crying, one hand covering her mouth and shoulders heaving.

“Boss,” relief is stark on Happy’s face as he pulls Pepper closer to his side, “it’s good to see you.”

“Pepper-pot, Happy.” Toni smiles up at them softly, lovingly. “I’m okay. I swear. Like Rhodey said, a bit banged up but fine.”
“We watched you.” Pepper sobs. “We saw what you did. I was so s-scared.”

Pepper’s sobs double in strength.

“Hey,” Toni soothes softly as she steps forward, a hand raised helplessly. “Hey Pep don’t cry. Please don’t cry. It’s okay. I’m okay. I’m home, right here. I made it back and I’m gonna be here when you guys get back into the city. I swear.”

It takes a while to get Pepper to calm down but eventually she does with promises to see her as soon as movement into the city is either allowed or Pepper can weasel her and Happy’s ways through the tightened security. Either that or they’re going to take a car. Whichever ends up being faster.

After the call ends Rhodes comes back to her side and wraps her ribs gently before resettling her shirt into place. He’s silent right up until he smooths a bandage over the cut on her forehead thanks to the first aid kit U helpfully provides and has turned her head to the side to inspect the damage to her ear.

“Gonna have to replace the entire unit,” Toni mumbles, “couldn’t take going into space.”

Like those words were some kind of unspoken signal Rhodes folds like his strings have been cut. Just collapses down onto himself until he’s sitting on his knees in front of her, his face buried in her lap.

“Rhoddy?” Toni touches him gently, smooths her hands carefully over his close cropped hair and down his neck to his shoulders.

Beneath her touch those shoulders shake.

“I lost you again,” the words are muffled in her lap but Toni still hears them. When Rhodes lifts his face up to look at her it’s wet with tears, eyes red-rimmed and quietly heartbroken. “I got you back but I lost you again. I swore I wouldn’t and I did anyways. I promised myself after last time that this shit wouldn’t happen again. That no matter what I’d be here when you needed me.”

“Rhoddy you always are.” Toni protests, taken aback. “You’re always with me when I need you.”


“I don’t want to.” Toni whispers, heart sore and helpless in the face of his grief. “I never want to leave you but I can’t … I can’t just sit back and do nothing.”

“I know.” Rhodes clenches his eyes closed. “I know that baby girl. It’s one of the reasons I love you so much. But I’m terrified Tones. Sometimes I think I’ve spent every day of my life since the day we met absolutely terrified.” Rhodes whispers to her. “I wake up terrified, I go to sleep terrified. Scared absolutely shitless. And it’s worth it, I swear it is, every single moment. I’d do it all again, just to have you here with me, in my life. But it doesn’t get any easier, being scared that today’s going to be the day you leave me for good, for one reason or another.”

Toni sucks in a sharp breath. She remembers those days right after Jarvis had been taken from her. Remembers the quiet terror in Rhodes’ eyes after she’d been attacked and it’d hit home for the both of them that she might leave first. Remembers the helpless rage of his anguish after he’d found out about the palladium.

She’s almost left him in so many ways for so many reasons and she knows, with a quiet sort of
certainty, that there’ll likely be many more in the future.

Because Toni is Iron Queen and it’s not something she can give up. Not something she can just tuck away and pretend never happened.

“I love you,” it’s all Toni knows how to say in that moment, “I love you and I’m sorry. Rhodey I’m so sorry.”

“Ask me to stay,” he rears up onto his knees abruptly and reaches up to cup her face in his palms. Her towel falls loose from her head and her hair tumbles down around them in a riot of still drying curls. “Toni, baby girl, ask me to stay.”

“Rhodey?” Confusion arcs through her like a lightning bolt.

“Ask me to resign my commission. To leave the Air Force.” He sounds almost manic and Toni can barely believe the words coming out of his mouth. Can barely hear them over how hard and fast her heart is pounding beside the reactor. “Ask me to stay, to come home full time. I can work in R&D with you, or take Happy’s spot as your head of security. Anything. I can … I can still be War Machine too. I can go out with you, at your side, to watch your back. So just ask me. I need you to ask me. Toni, please, just ask me.”

Toni feels gutted. Feels torn open and ripped apart in a way she hasn’t felt since the day she woke up in that cave in Afghanistan and realized what they’d done to her.

Because this? This is a line they’ve never crossed before.

Toni’s selfishly yearned for it more than once. They’ve even flirted with it together a time or two. Have danced together hand in hand on the razors edge of the line between how Rhodey feels about Toni versus his loyalty to his career, the eternal struggle of love versus duty. But they’ve never breached that barrier so blatantly before.

It’s always been an unspoken agreement between them, an unsung sort of knowledge that this is something Toni would never allow herself to ask for and Rhodey would never have to offer.

Because they’ve never been those types of people.

“I can’t,” the words rip themselves out of Toni’s mouth before she can think twice about them. It doesn’t make them any less true. “Rhodey, no. I can’t ask you to do that. I won’t. The Air Force … it’s your life, your dream.”

“Don’t you fucking get it yet?” Rhodey rasps. “You are my goddamn life.”

“You’d hate me.” Toni whispers, low and pained. “Maybe not now, but in five years? Ten? When you could have made Colonel or even fucking General one day? You’d hate me for taking that chance away from you Rhodey.”

“I’d never hate you.” He denies, insistent and certain.

“Then I’d hate myself.” Toni knows it for the truth that it is. “I’d hate myself for stealing that from you. After everything you’ve done. As hard as you’ve fought. I won’t be what stops you. I won’t drag you down like that. Not now and not ever.”

“The world’s so much bigger than it used to be,” Rhodey tells her just a shade off desperate. “There’s gods and monsters now and they’re all going to try and take you away from me. I know they will. I have to be here, to protect you.”
“There’s always been gods and monsters Rhodey,” Toni tells him as she leans forward as best she can to press her forehead against his. “They’re just finally out in the open where we can see them now. We can’t … we can’t stop moving forward just because the world’s changed around us darling. And I swear to you that I’ll never let them take me. Not without a fight. I’m always going to fight to come back to you. To Pepper and Happy and JARVIS. To the bots. To our family. Just like with … with Afghanistan. I’m always going to fight to come home.”

“You’d better,” Rhodey finally says, shoulders slumping and face still twisted with a grief he can’t seem to shake. “You’d better always fight Toni, because I’m always going to be there, on the other side, fighting to get you back. So you’ve got to meet me halfway alright? Cause it’s you and me remember?”

Rhodey folds her close, arms exquisitely gentle as they wrap around her and he presses his face into her hair again.

“Yeah,” Toni agrees just as she always does, “till the day we die.”

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The Tesseract glows where it sits in its cradle on one of Toni’s work tables. The bots have strict instructions not to touch it and JARVIS is busy running every scan in the database. For now, until the energy readings can be compiled and Bruce is awake, there’s nothing else for Toni to do.

Nothing but to sit curled as best she can against Rhodey’s side on the couch in the corner.

“I can’t stay,” Rhodey finally says with an exhausted sigh. “I’ve got to head to D.C. and report in. The Brass is going to want to see me in person but I might be able to get back out here to help with clean up afterwards.”

“I know.” She does. There’s too much going on for Rhodey to be able to shove everything off and stay with her no matter how much they both want him to. No matter what he’d offered to do earlier if only she’d been willing to ask it of him. “It’s alright.”

“No,” he denies, “it’s not, but we’ll do it anyways. Like we always do.”

“It’s what we do sweetheart,” Toni agrees. “It’s what we do.”

Rhodey reaches up and tugs gently at her hair before he shifts around, hands urging her to move too until he’s braced against the arm of the couch and she’s cradled in the v of his legs. His hands combing through her hair puts her immediately at ease long before his fingers start the familiar pattern of a braid.

“You going to tell me what the deal is with you and Rogers?” Rhodey finally asks the other question Toni’s been dreading since all of this started. “I thought … well when I saw him down there on the newsfeed … I figured I’d be prying you off of him with a crowbar or you’d be ready to announce you’d managed to battle field marry him somehow by the time everything was over.”

“I …” Toni trails off, not sure how to answer in a way that doesn’t sound pathetic and cringe worthy.

“Just tell me baby,” Rhodey tugs lightly at the hair in his hand. “It’s okay.”

“He doesn’t like me,” is what she finally settles on. It’s an oversimplification but it’s all she can dredge up at the moment. Because the sting of it all is still present, the aching wound of his disdain still fresh.
Because she’d been prepared for Aunt Peggy’s Steve to dislike her, had expected it even. She’s not
good like Aunt Peggy was, like Steve is, not right in the ways that truly matter.

But the man she met on the helicarrier wasn’t Aunt Peggy’s Steve, wasn’t the man defined by his
courage and stubborn resolve to do good, to be good. The man Aunt Peggy had always insisted
would have liked her, would have admired her fire and her brilliance no matter how many times Toni
protested.

No, he’d been Howard’s Captain America instead, all square-jawed righteous machismo molded into
the perfect soldier that Toni could never live up to even if she tried.

And somehow that had made it all hurt all the more.

“Oh baby no,” Rhodey protests, “he just doesn’t know you.”

“No,” Toni croaks out a harsh laugh that rattles her damaged ribs painfully. “That’s kind of the
problem snookums. He ah … he’s read my file. Apparently seen a lot of footage too.”

“Son of a bitch.” Anger is back in Rhodey’s voice then. “He saw that bullshit psych file Fury
slapped together with his pet assassin?”

“Had to have,” Toni agrees. “Or at least a paper version of it supplemented with outside video
sources since I had JARVIS replace the digital copy with the transcript from the first Predator
movie, with me as Dutch of course. Also the video links in the file don’t do anything but rickroll
whoever clicks them. Behind on pop culture or not I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t have taken the idea
of me knife fighting aliens in the jungle seriously.” Toni pauses. “But, then again, after today
maybe he should have.”

“Give it some time sweetheart,” Rhodey finally says. “I know how much he means to you even if I
don’t really get it myself. So just … be patient. And if he doesn’t come around or if he gives you
any shit I’ll put the armor on and make him eat his shield.”

“You’re gorgeous when you’re murderously violent towards national icons on my behalf you know
that right?” Toni asks seriously.

“First you can’t even see me cause I’m behind you,” Rhodey points out, “and second I’m always
gorgeous. You’re the unfortunate looking one in this relationship and everyone knows it. All those
modeling gigs and movie offers? All of ‘em came from pity.”

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“I love you Toni,” Rhodey tells her an hour or so later and the hands that are cupped around her
shoulders clutch just a bit tighter than normal. “Stay safe.”

“I love you too Rhodey,” Toni tells him, and the kiss she presses against his cheek lingers just a bit
longer than normal. “I will if you will.”

Somehow this parting hurts more than any other before it.

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Toni waits fifteen minutes before she squares her shoulder, loops the long tail of her braid up and
pins it into a bun with two drafting pencils she never uses, and the has JARVIS put in a call for her.

“Stark,” Fury stares back at her passively from the other end of the line.
“Sauron.” Toni returns coolly.

“I heard you’ve absconded with my team.” Fury doesn’t even try to dance around the subject. “And with the Tesseract. Neither of which you have too much of a right to if I remember correctly.”

“First of all,” Toni raises a finger pointedly in his direction, “you’re the one who called me in on this whole thing in the first place. Second of all the Tesseract belongs to Thor’s All-Daddy. Not SHIELD or the WSC. So if you want it back you’re going to have to pick a fight with him. I’ve got nothing to do with it.”

“Right,” Fury drawls. “Because that’s not the Cube sitting on your worktable directly behind you right? It’s obviously just another mysteriously glowing, blue alien artifact.”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about Patchy.” Toni grins, sharp as a blade and full of teeth. “Maybe you should see about getting a monocle or something cause I think your eyesight’s going the way of your hair. And your personality. Although I’m not sure that ever actually existed to be honest.”

“Talking to you is already making me wish the aliens had won.” Fury sighs. “Just tell me what you’ve got planned for the Tesseract Stark.”

“We might not see eye to eye on at least half the things we end up talking about Fury,” Toni can’t help but jab at him a bit, “but even you’ve got to admit that keeping the Cube on Earth is a bad idea.”

“SHIELD and the WSC are perfectly capable of keeping the Tesseract safe.” Fury puts forth but even Toni can tell he doesn’t really believe that anymore, if he ever did.

“As the past few days have perfectly shown.” Toni cuts in. “Look, just send a few cars for your people tomorrow, maybe some clothes or something for the spy twins. That way you can say SHIELD had an official hand in peacefully sending Thor off on his trip home. Intergalactic relations aren’t something we can afford to fuck up just yet.”

“Fine.” Fury eventually agrees. “But this isn’t over Stark. We’ve got more to talk about and I want a meeting to discuss new redesigns for the helicarrier too. ASAP. None of your usual bullshit either. Just pure business.”

“Or Nicky, sugar puff, you say the sweetest things.” Toni chimes right before she cuts the call.

“Will you finally be resting now Miss?” The censure in JARVIS’ voice is readily apparent.

“Not yet baby boy,” Toni shakes her head slightly as she pushes her chair in the direction of the kitchen and the bottle of painkillers she knows are hidden there. “Still got a few more things to do.”

“Of course you do Miss,” JARVIS seems to almost sigh. “Of course you do.”

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Toni loses herself in a haze of work as she takes over some of the finer wiring to the partially completed earpiece replacement. Once it’s finished she’ll give it to DUM-E for detailing and then they’ll remove the old one and install the new model.

They’ll be identical thankfully so that shouldn’t raise any questions she doesn’t want to answer.

“Miss,” JARVIS interrupts, “I feel that I should inform you that it might be prudent of you to return to the penthouse.”
“What’s wrong?” Toni blinks herself out of her daze with effort. She’s been at it for a few hours now and her body is beginning to ache again even through the painkiller she’d swallowed.

“I am monitoring all of your guests and I believe that the one called Thor might need your attention.” JARVIS tells her. “He has become rather agitated and perhaps it would be wise to head him off at the pass as the saying goes.”

“Shit,” Toni groans as she carefully levers her way up and onto her feet. “Alright I’m going.”

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“Lady Stark,” Thor greets her quietly when she steps out of the elevator. He’s standing by one of the unbroken windows and gazing out onto the now changed skyline of New York.

“Looking kind of uneasy there buddy,” Toni moves until she’s just outside of arms reach for him and marvels a bit over how far exactly she has to look up to meet his eyes. He’s so much taller than her that she’s fighting the urge to find a step stool or a chair or something to stand on.

Seriously, it’s ridiculous.

“Loki’s actions weigh heavily upon my mind,” Thor admits after a long moment, attention on his hands where he’s holding what Toni realizes is one of his armguards. They’ve been engraved with a now familiar design that Toni recognizes. Loki’s helmet. “I have mourned him for what feels like so long now, mourned his loss and my own foolishness that had a hand in it. Yet now I have him, returned to life and I had hoped to my side, and I find him so far changed it is as if he never clawed his way out of the void.”

Toni remembers the smug superiority curling his mouth when he’d allowed himself to be captured in Germany. Remembers the frenzied, burning, look in Loki’s eyes when he’d lifted her up by the throat. Remembers the quiet sort of tiredness in his face when he’d crawled his way across the penthouse floor. The way he hadn’t fought when Thor had pressed him down onto the bed and trapped him there.

All of it, in Toni’s opinion, reeks of fear. And fear is something Toni has known too many times in her life to ever dismiss its warning signs or the power it can hold over someone.

“I fear my brother dead in truth,” Thor almost whispers as he raises the hand holding the armguard up and gazes at it sadly, “and I fear I have been left with nothing but the shell of him. Left only with a shade sent to haunt my waking days. A shadow creature who looks at me as if I am nothing to him.”

There’s a long silence and Toni finds herself at a bit of a loss in the face of his open and genuine grief.

“Tis a cruel thing indeed,” Thor murmurs softly, “to be forgotten by one so loved.”

“It’s not the same,” Toni says as she looks back up at him. “I know it’s not. I’m not trying to say that it is. But … I think I get it. What you’re saying. Just a bit. In a different sort of way.”
“You are as kind as you are fierce Lady Stark,” Thor dips his head in her direction as he steps away from the window and back in the direction of the room Loki’s in.

“Call me Toni,” is all Toni can think to say in reply.

“You deserve the title,” Thor protests as he pauses, “and the respect it entails. Though I would show familiarity with you if you would allow it.”

“Knock yourself out Thunderstruck.” Toni agrees instantly. “Lady Toni’s got a bit of sweet ring to it I guess.”

“Lady Antonia it shall be then,” there’s just a hint of warm mischief lurking at the corners of Thor’s mouth then. “For ‘Toni’ does not do you justice and having two Lady Natasha’s might be cause for problems in the future.”

Thor strides away then and, unable to help herself, Toni laughs softly before she turns and heads back towards the elevator.

“Workshop J,” she requests quietly as she leans gently against the wall with a sigh.

“Could you be persuaded to rest once you arrive Miss?” JARVIS asks.

“You know what baby boy?” Toni finally gives in. “I think I could be. Just make sure you wake me up if something else happens.”

“Very good Miss.” JARVIS agrees instantly.

Toni limps her way towards the couch, aches and pains finally catching up to her and passing her by as she lays down as carefully as she can.

The bots are at her side instantly, covering her with a blanket and crowding around the couch in a desperate attempt to get closer to her.

"Miss?" JARVIS' voice is just above a whisper.

"Yeah J?" Toni murmurs back.

"Would you be willing to tell us the story of Icarus tonight?" The hesitancy in his voice is clear. "I find myself ... unsettled by the thought of your silence. I find that I wish to hear your voice."

"Of course I will," Toni chokes the words out. "Of course.

"Thank you," JARVIS whispers just as she begins, "Mother."

Toni doesn’t even try to wipe away the tears that come. Instead she smiles, closes her eyes, and tells her children a story.

Toni drifts off that way, tears drying on her face, safe at home and surrounded by her boys, as she talks herself to sleep.

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Toni soars through an endless blue sky, Rhodey at her side.
Above them Bucky keeps pace.

Below Steve dashes across the water’s surface.

She turns her face up towards the sun, eager for its warmth.

The gaping maw of space reaches out for her instead.

And from its mouth horrors are birthed into her world.

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Toni wakes screaming.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Concerns? Requests? Make sure you leave a review and drop by my tumblr where LoW has its own tag and I answer asks and sometimes fill short prompts.
Chapter Notes

Oh it's been a while but I'm back! Our favorite Asgardians seemed pretty intent on high-jacking this chapter so I hope it works out alright. We also start to see some of the differences as to how certain issues will be addressed.

But, beyond that, this one goes out to everyone who's stuck with me and Toni for so long. I wanted to make sure we end this year on a good note so here we go!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Spotify Playlist
Pinterest Board
Tumblr Page

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“You’re safe, Miss,” JARVIS tells her softly, soothingly. “I swear it to you.”

Toni feels the screaming panic that’s been washing over her calm just a bit at the sound of his voice even if the words themselves aren’t really helping her for once. He’s been repeating the same phrases over and over for the past five minutes but, as much as Toni loves him and knows he’d never lie to her, she can’t seem to accept them as truth.

What she’s seen, what she’s dreamed of, it’s all just ... too much.

U beeps at her softly, claw titled curiously to the side as he slowly rolls his way forward towards the corner where she’s sitting on the floor. She’d practically thrown herself across the floor when she’d woken up, had clawed her way, panic stricken and gasping, into the corner and she hasn’t moved since then.

She’s just stayed where she’d ended up, her arms wrapped around her knees as she huddles in on herself despite the way her ribs protest the position.

The bots have been circling closer and closer ever since, cautious and careful. U, surprisingly enough, is the first to gather the courage to approach her, his gentleness evident in his every careful move. Toni doesn’t flinch from him when he rolls to her side and slowly, gently, reaches out to touch her hair with one thick finger.

Instead she presses into the touch, body turning towards him automatically, towards his simple and pure love. Toni unfurls for him like a flower for the sun.

DUM-E and Butterfingers trail behind him, a blanket and pillows held in their hands. Toni lets them come as well, lets them surround her with their thick metal bodies and the faint scent of oil. With hum of their gears and the clicking of their claws.
Heart rate finally evening out Toni lets Butterfingers urge her down until she’s resting on the pillows he brought over. Forcing herself to breathe as deeply and evenly as the rector will allow her to she lets DUM-E cover her with the large, soft Howling Commando blanket that stays in the workshop.

Grabbing onto the ragged edges of her composure Toni lets them comfort her, and themselves, in the only way they know how.

Toni lets them because she loves them dearly and with Rhodey gone and strangers, gods, and ghosts filling up her Tower she needs all of the gentleness they can spare her at the moment. Even if she’ll never admit to that kind of *longing* for comfort outside of the workshop, outside of Rhodey’s arms and the tender, solid embrace of the children she built with her own two hands.

She’ll never bare that vulnerability to the world, for her sake and theirs, but now, in this moment, she embraces it fully.

Because, despite everything that’s happened to her in her life, Toni hasn’t been this unsettled, this … *frightened* in a very long time.

Because that wasn’t a just a *nightmare*.

It was a *memory*.

“There was an *army*,” Toni finally whispers when her breathing has settled enough for her to be able to speak. She feels safe in saying this now because she knows that JARVIS, like always, will hold her secrets for her.

“Miss?” JARVIS says her name softly, carefully. Like she’s something precious and wild that he’s trying not to spook.

That tendency of his is almost like an echo of *Jarvis*, of the man who’d gentled her so carefully and lovingly when she was a child. Is a reminder of the man who’d made the selfless choice to love a girl already half destroyed. A girl he never should have loved as he had; deeply, purely, and gone too soon.

That resemblance makes something in Toni’s chest *ache* almost sweetly.

She doesn’t deserve JARVIS. Just as she hadn’t ever really deserved Jarvis before him. Like she doesn’t deserve the love that Rhodey and Pepper and Happy have gifted her with.

Just like she’s always known that *Steve* would never like her.

Toni knows what she is, she has no secrets from herself on that accord.

Toni’s a *monster*, just as Loki had said she was only hours before when he’d held her by the throat. She’s a monster by design and a murderer through her own negligence.

A flawed program.

Bad code.

Hell she’s been a murderer since she was a *child*, since Howard took that first design of hers and put it into production. Since the day she looked at her first weapons schematic and knew how to make it better, faster, *more lethal*.

That’s one of the reason she’d been almost alright with going through the wormhole.
That’s one of the reasons her only real regrets hadn't been focused on the fact that she was about to die. Instead all of her anguish, all of her sadness and fear, had been focused on the fact that she’d been leaving Rhodey and JARVIS and the others behind.

Because hurting them had felt so wrong, but doing that, dying like that, had felt almost right.

It had been true in a way. Good.

Dying to save the city, the world, everything and everyone she had ever loved, had seemed like a fair enough trade.

Maybe.

“On the other side of the wormhole,” Toni lets out a shuddering breath as she twists her fingers around and around in the soft fabric of the blanket. “There was ... an army.”

“The wormhole has been successfully closed Miss,” JARVIS reassures her. “Agent Romanov did the deed herself. The Asgardian known as Loki is still restrained and my scans show no further signs of any suspicious activity. I will continue to monitor all frequencies but rest assured that it is over now.”

“No.” Toni shakes her head sharply as her hands clench, short cut nails biting down into the blanket so hard that her joints ache. “You’re wrong J. The wormhole, Loki, all of that doesn’t matter anymore. This isn’t over, it’s just the beginning. Do you understand me? All closing that wormhole did was buy us some time, delay the inevitable for a while. This invasion,” Toni practically spits the word out, “it’s nothing compared to what’s going to happen JARVIS.”

There’s a moment of long, tense silence in the workshop.

“We’re not going to be enough,” Toni finally lets the words, the final sort of fear that’s already begun to haunt her, out into the safety of the workshop, lets them seep into the air around her like the infection that they are. One of her hands lets the blanket go and creeps up towards the reactor where she automatically, instinctively, begins to tap. Bucky’s serial number, Rhodey’s heartbeat, Steve’s serial number. Comforting patterns that make it just a bit easier to breathe, to think, to be. “What’s up there, what’s coming for us … we’re not going to be enough to stop it.”

“Then you will find a new way.” JARVIS finally says, voice firm and resolute and infinitely loving. “You will build or create whatever is necessary to help us protect this world. I know you will, Miss. And just like the rest of our family I will be at your side as you do so. In whatever way I can, in whatever way you ask of me. Against whatever may come. From this day, until my last.”

JARVIS’ love for her, his faith in her, he, humbles Toni in ways she can barely comprehend.

Just like the Jarvis before him, just like Rhodey, whenever Toni falters JARVIS picks her back up and sets her back on her path again.

“Okay,” Toni nods, resolution crystallizing in her chest despite the fear. Or maybe, like always, because of it. “Okay J. You’re right.” She turns her head enough to be able to send a small, watery smile up towards his nearest camera. “You always know just what to say to me don’t you, baby boy? Always know exactly what to do to make me feel better.”

“It is my fondest hope that I always will, Miss,” JARVIS answers softly, sweetly. “It was you who gave me a voice, gave me life. There is little I would not do to help to ease your way. A son should always seek the happiness of his mother.”
Toni doesn’t fall back asleep after that, can’t. Her mind’s too busy whirling, clicking through half formed thoughts and quickly discarded plans.

Above all else at the moment she’s too haunted by the memory of what she’d seen on the other side of that wormhole to sleep again.

So instead she pushes herself up painfully onto her feet, calls the bots together and hobbles over to lay down on the sterile table U had prepared a few hours earlier.

There, under JARVIS’ all seeing eye, Toni lays still and lets U come at her with a familiar syringe.

Having her damaged ear cuff replaced hurts. Her head aches and throbs the entire time even through the last of the quickly fading painkiller she’d downed earlier on.

But, just like the first time, Toni is sure that the return will be more than worth it.

A hour or so later, staring at the projection JARVIS so kindly provides for her Toni knows that she was, once again, correct.

The new ear cuff is identical to the old one, the same color scheme, the same design and size. An exact replica that should fool anyone who looks too closely.

But, more importantly, Toni can once again bask in that same sense of security and comfort that comes with having JARVIS right where he belongs.

Directly in her ear no matter where she goes.

It, like the bots with their gentle but solid companionship, is a comfort she desperately needs.

“It is good to be back with you Miss,” JARVIS says softly across their private channel.

“It’s good to have you back baby boy,” Toni tells him with a soft, loving, smile.

And it is.

Toni isn’t sure she would recognize herself without JARVIS by her side, walking heart to heart and soul to soul with her through life.

What’s more is the fact that she knows she wouldn’t want to.

He’s far too precious for her to ever be without him.

His loss would be a wound that Toni doesn’t think she’d ever recover from.

Dawn’s just beginning to break over the horizon when Toni makes her way back up to the penthouse.

According to JARVIS Thor is brooding by the bar, attention locked, once again, on the windows
and the now changed skyline. Meanwhile Selvig and Bruce are, not so surprisingly, still asleep in their respective rooms.

JARVIS is also quick to remind her that Loki is, thankfully, still trapped in the bed where Thor had left him.

Down on the guest floor Barton’s still passed out. JARVIS says that Romanov is awake but he also reports that she hasn’t left the room, seemingly content to stay put and keep watch over Barton.

Steve is also awake but Toni resolutely ignores that fact. She’s determined not to think of him again until she no longer has a choice.

It hasn’t worked so far, Steve haunts her thoughts now as he always has in the past, but Toni’s determined to keep trying anyways.

“Lady Antonia,” Thor greets her with a small smile when she steps off of the elevator and makes her way to his side. “You look well.”

It’s true too, Toni knows. It might be early but she’s already dressed to the nines, hair up, wings and arc reactor covered. Even the few visible wounds on her face have been taken care of, makeup applied when possible and hair styled and artfully pinned just so when not.

She doesn’t look as pristine as she normally does but she also doesn’t look as if she’d fallen from a wormhole in space either.

She owes most of it to the wonders of a steady hand, years of practice, and access to top tier stage grade makeup.

Besides, this is far from the first time Toni’s painted over wounds of some kind to present an undamaged front to the world. She’s been doing it since she was a child, first with long sleeves and cascading hair to hide the cuts and the bruises, and then with makeup and a razor sharp smile to hide everything else that came her way.

She’s got years of practice by now and Toni knows that she’ll likely be doing it until she dies for good. She has an image to maintain after all and cuts and bruises don’t exactly play well to it.

It wouldn’t do for her to be seen as vulnerable, not even after what they’ve all just been through.

Maybe especially not after what they’ve all just been through.

Toni remembers all too well how a large faction of people had turned on her, had questioned her ability to wield the armor, to protect herself not to mention anyone else, after Vanko’s attack in Monaco. Remembers the debates about her fitness for combat, about her constitution, about anything her detractors could think to poke at with a stick.

So Toni knows that she can’t be seen as vulnerable now if she can help it. Not if she wants to be taken seriously, not if she wants the world to listen to her.

Not for the first time Toni can’t help the sharp stab of bitterness that slices through her because she knows that if she’d been born a man she’d have been able to wear her cuts and bruises like badges of honor. She wouldn’t have to hide them, wouldn’t have to paint them over to make herself more palatable.

But she’s a woman, a queen to the king the whole world had wanted her to be, and queens are not allowed to bleed.
Women are not allowed to hurt without running the risk of the rest of the world seeing them as nothing more than the sum of their wounds.

So even now Toni has to be as close to flawless on the outside as she can manage. It’s all part and parcel of the game she started years ago with the rest of the world, of the facade she had built piece by bitter piece on a foundation of pain and fear, on broken bones and betrayed trust.

A facade that she cannot afford to damage now.

Because she knows that she can’t bank on her having flown a nuke into space as being enough to gain her more than some passing leeway with the world.

Once the shine has worn off, once the fear has faded a bit, then people’s true colors will inevitably shine through.

And because of that unpreventable moment she’s going to need all of the leeway she can get going forward from here on out.

Toni is a futurist and she knows, bone deep and certain, that this invasion, this revealing of gods and monsters to the world as a whole, is going to change everything.

“Flattery will get you everywhere Zapdos,” Toni cuts a small, surprisingly sincere grin up at Thor and is rewarded with a low but still hearty laugh that, again, makes him look even more handsome than before.

Thor is, obviously, a creature meant for joy.

Toni can’t help but wonder what that’s like, being someone so obviously built for happiness instead of a creature cobbled together from loss and hurt. To be a sunlit gold inside and out instead of being so much bad code down to the core.

Toni shakes the thought off because it does her no good at the moment. Instead she focuses on the fact that the silence that has fallen between her and Thor is unexpectedly comfortable.

There is, she’s quickly discovering, a strange sort of ease to being near Thor. Or at least it seems that way to her. It’s almost as if he radiates a soothing sort of aura despite his size and his more shocking personality traits. She supposes it could be an Asgardian thing but, considering how being near Loki has almost the exact opposite effect on her, Toni’s more willing to bet that it’s firmly a Thor sort of thing.

Maybe it would explain why she’s so at ease, so very open by her standards, around him now. Why her earlier caution on the helicarrier has been tamped down to almost nothing. Why she hasn’t hesitated around him despite his size and her normal aversion to being within arm’s reach of any but her trusted few. Why she’d been willing to talk to him about Aunt Peggy of all people.

Maybe.

“Has there been an account made of your dead yet?” Thor speaks up after a few seconds spent staring out at the sunrise together. “How much damage has my brother done in his ... warmongering?”

There’s a wry twist to Thor’s mouth when he says the word that Toni knows has to have a story behind it. More than likely not an entirely happy one either if his expression is anything to go by.

“No,” Toni has to bite back a wince because she’s seen the preliminary numbers already thanks to
JARVIS and they don’t bode well with the way they’ve continued to climb. “It’ll likely be a while yet before we can get any kind of concrete numbers. There’ll still be people trapped, people missing. People left permanently injured. People who didn’t, and won’t, die … cleanly. It’s going to take time before we can tell just how much damage was done, how many lives were lost or changed.”

“I declared Midgard under my protection such a short time ago,” Thor says softly, sorrow evident in his face, in the set of his shoulders. “Already I have failed.”

“Pretty sure you had no control over any of this,” Toni can’t help but point out. “You couldn’t protect us from a threat you didn’t see coming.”

Thor might be a god but even Toni can tell that he’s not omnipotent. Loki’s whole scheme had seemed to take him by surprise too. Hell he’d obviously thought Loki was dead if the way he’d spoken to Loki and then her earlier about grieving was anything to go by.

“You are kind, and too forgiving Lady Antonia,” Thor tells her as he glances down at her, eyes soft, “but a king should protect his people and those he swears to safeguard from all threats, both seen and unseen. In this I have failed and proven myself unworthy of my Father’s throne. Again.”

Toni, as seems to be a pattern with Thor, isn’t sure what to say. She knows all about being considered unworthy of someone else’s throne. Knows all about trying to safeguard a kingdom, her people, against threats she can’t even see yet. There’s a lot of parallels between the two of them but there are major differences between her situation and Thor’s as well.

Differences that might just, from what she’s observed and heard so far, align her much more closely to Loki’s more shadowed self than Thor’s golden glow.

“On Asgard,” Thor keeps on before she can say anything else, “it is customary to pay wergild when you have wronged another. I failed in shielding Midgard from all harm and as such I would personally see this debt paid in Loki’s place. Tesseract or not, this destruction should have never come here, should have never touched any of you.”

“You might want to hold off on saying anything about something like that,” Toni cautions him, mind whirling at the possible ways Thor’s admittedly sweet if slightly naive gesture could go wrong. “Offering something like that could get you in a lot of trouble.”

“Explain.” Thor stares at her expectantly, trustingly. Toni refuses to allow his automatic attention and trust that she’ll give him answers touch her in any way. She’s already softened enough towards Thor as it is.

That doesn’t mean she won’t answer his questions when and where she can though. There’s much more at stake here than her discomfort over how quickly her mind has seemingly shifted Thor into the ‘not a threat’ category.

Like she’d told Fury, intergalactic relations between Earth and Asgard aren’t something any of them can afford to willfully sour. Not even her.

Especially not after what she’s seen.

“It’s like Bruce said,” Toni shifts slightly so that she’s leaning back against the bar, some of the pressure taken off of her sore ribs. “We humans are greedy by nature, but politicians, people like SHIELD and the WSC? They’re so much worse when it comes to anything that even smells like power. Offering to atone for Loki’s crimes personally would give them a sort of power over you. One that they’d try their best to take advantage of. So you might want to take some time before you
say anything.”

“Then what would you have me do, Lady Antonia?” Thor seems torn between frustration and that almost ever present sorrow that’s clung to him since all this started. “I cannot leave Midgard and its people, your people, to bear the burden of Loki’s crimes alone.”

“Just …,” Toni hesitates for a second, mind whirling through possibilities at the speed of light, before she presses forward, “wait and let me get you a more definitive total of lives lost and damages incurred. That way you can have something solid to calculate your wergild with instead of handing someone a blank slate as an offer of payment that you’ll be responsible for.”

Toni is almost unable to believe that somewhere along the way she’s started to like Thor enough to want to erase that look from his face. Has already developed a soft enough spot for him to not only let him close to her but to also want to protect him from himself if even only in so small a way.

Either way and whatever the cause, Toni still doesn’t need his approval.

That, at least, hasn’t changed at all.

“Your wisdom is much appreciated,” Thor finally tells her with a nod. “I will return to Midgard when I am able and we will discuss this further then.”

Toni files that tidbit away for further consideration. It’s as she’d thought, as she’d honestly hoped. Thor has intentions on coming back to Earth in the future and that means Toni’s going to have to carefully consider her options going forward where he’s concerned.

“Sounds good to me,” Toni finally agrees. “The Tower, or wherever I’m at really, will be open to you when you decide to teleport down to see us. If you’re interested that is?”

“Aye,” Thor nods, “I would be honored to accept such an invitation. When I return I will bring gifts from Asgard worthy of your table to show my appreciation.”

“Gifts aren’t necessary,” Toni waves the offer away instantly. “You might not have noticed but I’m pretty well off as human’s go.”

“Riches or not I will bring something worthy of your table and your halls,” Thor insists. “I would not dishonor you or our new ties as shield-brethren by returning to you empty handed. I will bring gifts for the others as well, to honor our time together on the battlefield.”

“Well,” Toni finally sighs, “if you insist.”

It’s a novel idea and she’s honestly already kind of eager to see what a god considers a worthy gift.

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Toni’s settled on the other side of the bar from Thor and on her second cup of coffee, fingertips sliding rapidly over the screen of a tablet, when Bruce shuffles his way out of the bedroom about half an hour later.

He still looks half asleep as he carefully skirts the glass and chunks of marble that still litter the floor. At least, Toni muses absentely as she tucks the tablet beneath the bar and settles back to watch him,
the broken window isn’t an issue for the moment. While everyone was asleep JARVIS had engaged one of the emergency panels to come down and cover it for the time being.

He hadn’t deployed them on the higher levels during the invasion because they weren’t guaranteed to withstand the Chitauri blasts. In the heat of the moment they’d both agreed that it was better to have glass fall from the Tower if the upper windows were damaged instead of sheets of steel.

Toni knows they’re both going to spend the next few weeks seeing about upgrading the Tower’s defenses in every way they possibly can.

“Hey Brucie,” Toni wiggles the fingers of the hand not wrapped around her coffee cup at Bruce in hello.

“Friend Banner,” Thor, who’s busy eating his way through the rather large barrel of gourmet pretzels Toni had previously had hidden behind the counter, greets him a second or so later.

Bruce, hair wild and a red mark from his pillow still evident on his face, squints in her and Thor’s direction with a gruff sort of hum. Toni, more than a bit taken with how disheveled and lost he looks, points him towards the coffee pot with a small smirk.

Bruce goes, pours himself a large mug and then adds an obscene amount of creamer to it before he settles down at the bar as well.

They spend the next few minutes in silence together, Thor gazing into the middle distance as he eats, Bruce looking more and more alive by the second, and Toni observing the both of them from her place behind the bar as her mind clicks and whirls.

It’s a surprisingly comfortable atmosphere that Toni doesn’t think she’s ever shared with anyone who wasn’t Rhodey, Pepper, or Happy. At least not since Jarvis had been taken from her and Aunt Peggy had taken that last turn for the worst.

Toni’s not exactly sure how she feels about that.

JARVIS finally pings her on their private channel a handful of minutes later.

“Miss,” JARVIS starts off lowly, “Agent Barton is also awake and he, Agent Romanov, and Captain Rogers are on their way up to your location.”

Toni just hums in confirmation, eyes tracking across the room and back towards the elevator as she waits. She still has to get a few NDA’s sent up before she can even broach the subject of JARVIS to Bruce. Meanwhile Thor is a non entity on that subject at the moment. It’s not like she could tie a god up in court proceedings and fines even if he did sign the papers and then spoke out of turn.

Hell it’s not like that kind of thing could keep Bruce down either given his large, green sweetheart of an alter-ego.

That doesn’t mean Toni’s not still going to sucker him into signing. NDA’s and possible lawsuits might not be the best protection for JARVIS and the bots in this case but at least it’s some protection. When it comes to her family Toni’s of the belief that something is better than nothing.

That alongside her regular salt-and-burn policy of course.

Besides, Toni has the feeling that Bruce will understand. She’s pretty sure he’s not the type to begrudge her attempts to protect what’s hers.
She doesn’t have to wait long in the end for the others to arrive. The door opens and Barton, hair wild and bow and quiver clutched in one hand, comes stumbling off of the elevator ahead of Romanov and Steve.

“Coffee,” Barton croaks in lieu of an actual greeting. He doesn’t even wait for Toni to point him in the right direction, eyes flitting around the bar until he zeros in on the coffee pot.

Toni watches over the rim of her cup, more than a bit bemused, as he staggers over to the bar and carefully puts his bow and quiver down on top of it. Then he skirts the bar, makes his way over to the coffee pot and grabs the pot off of the burner with one hand and the jar of sugar cubes with the other.

Then, to her amused and appreciative sort of horror, he bypasses the mugs altogether and instead upends the sugar bowl until roughly half of the cubes end up in the pot itself.

The entire room watches, a mix of amusement and horror, as he boosts himself up to sit on the countertop beside his bow and quiver, swirls the pot around intently for a moment, and then lifts it and drinks directly from the spout.

“Ah coffee,” Barton sighs once he’s gulped down a truly impressive portion of the pot. “I might not ever leave here now cause you’ve got the good stuff Stark.”

Toni can say that it’s honestly a first for her. Normally her excellent coffee doesn’t make the top ten reasons why people want to put themselves inside her circle of influence. Although Happy and Pepper both swear that the stuff JARVIS buys for her is the best they’ve ever had.

Toni believes them but she and Rhodey both know that she doesn’t always notice. There were too many nights in MIT living off of whatever shitty coffee brand Rhodey bought for her to be too picky with her coffee nowadays. Well that and the fact that there were more than a few occasions where she may or may not have eaten a few handfuls of beans unground much to Rhodey’s horror.

Overall it had left her with a rather permissive palate where coffee is concerned.

“Pretty sure Patchy’d try to have me assassinated if one of his pet spies defected over superior coffee,” Toni tells him wryly, eyes tracking over to Steve for a split second before she forces herself to look away. “He wouldn’t succeed, but I’m sure he’d try.”

“Careful Stark,” Romanov says as she comes up to Barton’s side, a hand reaching out to brush unobtrusively against his side before she pulls it back. Even so the way Barton automatically leans into her space is very, very, telling. “Fury might take that as a challenge.”

“He’s welcome to,” Toni tells her with a small but still cutting grin. “It’d be cute to watch him get his ass handed to him when he fails.”

“You two are terrifying,” Barton says cheerfully as he twists enough to practically shove the pot he’s holding into Romanov’s hands. “Stop trading murder taunts and drink this Nat. It’s totally defection worthy, even for a Russian.”

To Toni’s surprise Romanov lifts the carafe and drinks the coffee.

“You put too much sugar,” she scolds Barton evenly when she hands him back the pot a few seconds later.

“Sorry I don’t drink my coffee as dark and bitter as my soul like you do,” Barton snips back good-naturedly as he hugs the pot to his chest. “And don’t dodge the question. Defection worthy or not?”
“You put too much sugar because you are a child,” Romanov corrects him before she shrugs lightly and hoists herself up onto the stool that sits beside his dangling knees. “And it’s better than anything S.H.I.E.L.D has so … maybe.”

“That’s a yes,” Barton twists to inform Toni triumphantly. “That’s totally a slippery, twisty yes.” He twists back around to face Steve who’s standing there, just on the outside of the small group they’ve somehow ended up in, his shield clutched tightly in one hand. Barton doesn’t call him out on the distance, just waggles the pot in his direction teasingly. “What about you Cap? Think it’s defection worthy?”

“Probably not a good judge,” Steve admits haltingly, jaw squared and eyes focused on Barton with an intensity that seems uncalled for. Like he’s doing his best not to look around the room again. “Don’t drink coffee much, never did. Doesn’t really have an … impact on me anymore.”

“You poor, poor man,” Barton seems legitimately distraught on his behalf.

“I will bring you mead from Asgard when I return Captain,” Thor announces decidedly. “Coffee is a splendid drink but weak compared to a stout Asgardian brew.”

“That’s not necessary,” Steve automatically denies, shoulders shifting uncomfortably beneath the tight white shirt he’s still wearing. He, like Barton and Romanov, is still dressed in the clothes he’d managed to scrounge from the guest floor.

Steve’s shirt is, if Toni’s not mistaken, one of Happy’s and yet it’s still almost bursting at the seams of his shoulders. Toni’s also pretty sure that the pants Barton’s wearing are a pair that she’d bought for Pepper a few months back on three days without sleep and a few unadvisable internet searches later.

The fact that they’re a charming shade of purple and have white block letters spelling out juicy across the ass might be a clue.

Coulson, Toni thinks with a sharp punch of sorrow, was right. She’s only known Barton for a very, very, short amount of time and he already amuses her to the point that Toni’s pretty sure he might be worth keeping too. Or, well, he might be if he wasn’t so obviously attached to Romanov and S.H.I.E.L.D itself.

Regardless, if Fury doesn’t send them all around some clothes that fit soon Toni’s going to have to have J.A.R.V.I.S make a few discrete calls and purchases. Even with a good portion of the city currently in shambles Toni knows J.A.R.V.I.S will be able to get something delivered to the Tower within the hour.

As the old saying goes, money speaks.

And Toni’s money has always screamed.

“I slept longer than I mean too,” Bruce tells her quietly, the first actual words he’s spoken the entire morning. “I haven’t … transformed for such an extended period of time in … well it’s been a while. I could start running whatever data points or tests you have left if you’d just point me to the lab?”

The hesitancy, the almost apology in his slightly stooped shoulders, the way he seems sure she’s going to make some kind of cutting remark about him over sleeping makes Toni want to snarl.

She’s going to have to tell Priscilla to double time those NDA’s as well as setting up a few new secure accounts for Bruce.
Like she had been back on the helicarrier, Toni is determined that he’s not going to want for anything from now on. Even if Bruce decides to leave, if he decides that staying in the Tower with her isn’t what he wants, he’ll leave on his own terms and not out of fear that Toni doesn’t want him around. He’ll also do it safe, secure, and with enough money to do whatever he wants to and the knowledge that he, and Hulk of course, are both always welcome back with her.

“It’s fine,” Toni waves a hand dismissively in the air between them. “I figured Hulking out is exhausting so I let you sleep. The last few test should be finishing up in the queue as we speak. I calibrated my machinery and started them last night.” Well JARVIS had calibrated things and started the battery of tests she’d listed out to him but that isn’t something she’s just going to announce. “It wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle on my own.”

“Still,” Bruce shifts uncomfortably, “I did promise to help you with the Cube.”

“And you will because I’m looking forward to going over the results with you, handsome.” Toni cuts a small grin in his direction. “We can make a week of it once this is all cleared up. Just you, me, and all the science you can stand. It’ll be fun.”

“Fun,” Bruce muses with a soft almost smile. “Haven’t had a lot of that these past few years.”

“Stick with me sweetheart and you’ll have all you can handle.” Toni reassures him, just a shade off wicked.

“You’re running tests on the Cube?” Steve cuts in suddenly.

Toni has to resist the urge to clench her eyes closed and sigh. It seems as if she’ll never be able to do anything right where Steve is concerned.

“Yes,” Toni cuts a look in his direction over the top of her coffee mug, eyebrow arched up inquiringly and expression deliberately cool.

“Is that safe?” Steve’s jaw is clenched but there’s a light of actual curiosity in his eyes instead of just the sheer disapproval Toni had been expecting. “Messing with the Cube like that?”

“As safe as poking at a possibly sentient, extraterrestrial battery can be.” Toni tells him honestly. The Tesseract is a lot of things, but safe isn’t a descriptor Toni would ever give it. Though, to be fair, she’s taking fewer risks than those who’d come before her where the thing is concerned.

Partly because she’s just doing a battery of tests instead of trying to harness its energy. And also partly because she only has a few hours left with it before Thor takes it and Loki back to Asgard so there’s no real time for any of the more dangerous things Toni could, or more likely would, get up to with it. She’ll have to satisfy herself with the extensive data JARVIS has helped her collect when it comes time for her and Bruce to start playing around with it.

“Fury’s not going to be happy about that either,” Romanov points out almost absently from where she’s leaning against Barton’s legs, a handful of Thor’s pretzels on the bar in front of her.

“First I think we all know by now that I live to make our favorite Cyclops as miserable as possible,” Toni points out. “Two, like I already told Fury, the Tesseract doesn’t actually belong to SHIELD or the WSC. It belongs to his All-Daddy,” Toni dips her head in Thor’s direction. “And since I got our favorite electrical surge’s approval I think that overrules anyone else’s objections.”

“I have faith in Lady Antonia,” Thor chimes in then. “Eric has spoken of her brilliance and I have witnessed it first hand. I trust that she will be a stalwart keeper of any knowledge she might garner
from the Tesseract."

And that, as it happens, is that.

Because there’s not much one can say when a god declares himself on a subject that you don’t actually have much say in anyways.

Honestly Toni could get used to having Thor around too if he’s willing to back her up on things. But she also knows better than to expect that kind of thing. She’s only had that kind of support from a select few in her life.

She’s not about to go out searching for it in other places.

Down that particular path, Toni knows, lies only disappointment.

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They don’t actually spend much time lingering in the penthouse together after that.

JARVIS pings her ear piece to tell her of the arrival of two SHIELD issued cars and a motorcycle. The agents driving them relay three bags up to the penthouse elevator, drop them inside, and then leave the building without any fuss. One of the cars peels away from the curb shortly afterwards while the other is left behind alongside the motorcycle that Toni just knows is for Steve.

JARVIS fries the nine bugs in Romanov’s bag, the three in Barton’s and the fifteen the three agents managed to leave in the Tower between the lobby and the elevator.

Fury’s almost too predictable by now in his attempts to get functioning bugs into her various homes. That or he’s just doing this because it’s expected of him.

Either way neither Toni nor JARVIS will allow their home to be corrupted and compromised any more than it already has been.

Romanov, Barton, and Steve all disappear with their bags back down to the guest floor to change clothes while Bruce stumbles into the shower and then a fresh outfit at Toni’s insistence.

That, once again, leaves her alone with a pensive Thor who is currently weighing a strange, jointed piece of what looks like metal in his hands. Toni isn’t sure, exactly, what the thing he’d pulled out seemingly nowhere is but the sight of it, dark colored and etched with runes, sends shivers down her spine and her mind to whirling.

“I would ask another favor of you, Lady Antonia,” Thor rumbles from where he’s standing only a few feet away. “I will not be angered if you refuse but I would still ask it of you.”

“Ask away,” Toni tells him. It’s not everyday Toni gets asked favors from mythological figures and even if she’s not going to blindly commit herself to anything she’s still willing to hear him out again.

Really, this soft spot she’s developed for Thor alongside Bruce is both unexpected and faintly worrying.

“You would be safe,” Thor starts off earnestly. “I swear it.”

Dread swoops down heavy in the pit of Toni’s stomach because any favor that starts off like that can’t be good. She knows that from personal experience. So does Rhody.
“That’s good to know,” Toni tells him cautiously. “But I’m going to need a bit more than that.”

“I spoke to my bro-, to Loki, after we parted,” Thor admits. “He seemed … intrigued in his way with the idea of speaking with you again. Mentioned an offer of a drink between the two of you.” Something sad flits across Thor’s expression then. “I fear there will not be much softness or conversation in Loki’s future once we return to Asgard. If you could, if you are able, to speak with him before we depart then I would consider it a great kindness. You are formidable in your own right but he is bound, with both Mjolnir and shackles to keep his magic contained. On my honor you would be safe.”

Toni takes a moment to marvel over the fact that Thor has the sheer balls to ask her to have what’s essentially a play date with his little brother. Like they’re two precocious children that Thor just knows will get along. Like this isn’t the same little brother who’d thrown her out of a window, who’d murdered one of her almost friends, who’s only in her Tower because he’s been taken into custody after getting smacked down for invading and failing to conquer her planet.

There’s only one possible answer Toni can give him for daring to ask such a ridiculous favor from her.

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“I told you to leave me be Thor,” Loki almost sighs from where he’s propped up against the headboard of the bed, head tilted back and eyes closed, Mjolnir on his lap and hands shackled in front of him. “For once in your blessed life listen to me.”

He looks tired, Toni can’t help but notice. Looks exhausted and smaller somehow even if the wounds he’d had the last time she’d seen him the day before have already begun to noticeably heal.

“I very rarely listen to anyone that’s not me,” Toni cuts back smoothly and takes a great deal of satisfaction with the way Loki’s eyes flash open in surprise before he smooths his expression out.

“Lady Stark,” Loki’s eyes narrow slightly as he runs his gaze over her from her up-swept hair down to her red-bottom heel clad toes. Toni sees it the moment he allows a blend of arrogance and nonchalance she’s intimately familiar with slip into his expression. “I would stand but …”

Toni can’t help the small jolt of surprise that arcs through her at his unexpectedly respectful address. He’d done that earlier too, called her Lady Stark. He’d been crawling across her floor, beaten and bloody, and when he’d turned towards them he’d still called her Lady Stark.

Even when he’d been so cocky and sure of himself, scepter in hand and the intention to turn her into his puppet firm in his mind, he’d still called her Lady Stark.

Toni isn’t sure, exactly, what to make of that. Isn’t even sure if there even is anything to actually make of it at all.
But, from what she’s learned from Thor, and if they really are as similar as the thunder god seems to think they are, then Toni’s almost certain that it’s not just a slip of the tongue.

Loki, like Toni herself, doesn’t seem the type to just make those kinds of slips. Loki is more the type to choose each and every word and title with deliberation.

Just as Toni herself had learned to wield her words as weapons over the years, first at the end of Howard’s fists and then later, fresh from Jannik and Mari’s betrayal and determined to take what was hers.

“A little lightning bug told me you were interesting in taking me up on my offer,” Toni tells him as
she lifts the tumbler of bourbon she’s holding up like a salute. The glittery gold swizzle straw that clinks against the side of the glass might ruin the picture just a bit but Toni hadn’t been able to resist.

“Thor is incapable of minding his own affairs,” Loki says with open exasperation.

“He’s pretty invested in you,” Toni can’t help but needle him a bit. She’s always enjoyed poking at things she probably shouldn’t.

“He is invested in someone who does not exist,” Loki sneers dismissively, “who never existed.”

“Pretty sure he believes differently,” Toni says as she moves across the room to hover at his side. She, surprisingly enough, trusts Thor’s word that Loki is well restrained. She’s sure Loki wouldn’t still be in her Tower and at Thor’s mercy if he could help it.

“If you’ve come just to speak to me of Thor, I’d rather you not,” Loki tells her abruptly, as if he’s just regained control of himself.

“What would you rather talk about then?” Toni asks curiously as she settles down on the corner of the mattress near his hip and moves the tumbler close enough to his face that the straw hovers directly over his mouth. “Your big brother set this playdate up after all.”

She’s aware that she’s baiting the tiger as it were but, again, that’s almost half the fun. Plus normal tactics won’t work on someone like Loki no matter what the others might think.

Toni knows better than to think she’ll be able to manipulate anything out of Loki that he doesn’t explicitly want to give her.

Loki doesn’t get irritated or frustrated or anything of the like, instead he arches a brow, dips his head, and takes the end of the straw in between his lips without breaking eye contact.

She watches silently, face set into deliberately amused lines, as he sips at his drink for a long moment before he pulls back.

They spend a long moment staring at each other, Toni with the tumbler of bourbon in her hand and Loki with his head tilted to the side just a bit so that he can watch her.

“You have questions,” Loki finally says, “and I am feeling … indulgent. Perhaps, if you ask me sweetly enough, I’ll answer them for you.”

Indulgent. The word alone smacks of their first conversation. Plus it makes it seem as if he’s humoring them all by being here. As if he isn’t shackled, trapped, and slated for a one way trip back to Asgard and his punishment.

Bastard.

“Like I’d believe anything that comes out of your mouth,” Toni tells him with a sharp smile, all teeth and condescension. “Your reputation precedes you, sweet thing. Plus like calls to like remember? One monster to another. Isn’t that what you said earlier? I’d imagine lying would go hand in hand with that sort of thing.”

“Oh,” Loki draws the sound out as he smiles at her, the expression as devilish and as sharp as her own, “I’d almost forgotten. You’re the clever one. But how well will your wits serve you in the future I wonder?”

“Hopefully better than yours have,” Toni deliberately glances down at Loki’s restraints. “I’m not
“Somehow I doubt that,” Loki cuts back, the almost complement falling off of his tongue easily enough.

“I’d say we’ll see but I’m not so secretly hoping to never see you again after this,” Toni lifts the tumbler, presses her lips against the side of the glass, and sips lightly at the remaining bourbon in a deliberate show of casualness. “I’m sure the feeling’s mutual.”

“On the contrary, Lady Stark,” Loki smirks at her, “I look forward to our next meeting. Because we will meet again. I assure you of that.”

“That’s assuming Asgard lets you loose any time soon,” Toni points out as her mind whirls. Loki seems so absolutely certain that Toni’s just the slightest bit shaken. “The way Thor’s talking, your All-Daddy might just lock you up and throw away the key.”

“When the time comes,” Loki’s voice is suddenly low and serious, his features hard, “they will have little choice in the matter. Even Odin will realize that the Nine Realms will need every warrior it can gather, imprisoned or not. Hated or not.”

“Something’s coming isn’t it?” Toni can’t help the way her spine stiffens, the way she loses any trace of playfulness that might have been lurking in her tone or face. Whatever vague enjoyment she may or may not have been getting with sparring just a bit with someone like Loki abruptly washes away. “From the other side of that wormhole?”

“You’ve seen it,” Loki murmurs lowly, realization sweeping across his features. “Of course you have. You’re the clever one, you’re the one who got a glimpse through the portal. You’ve seen it.”

“I saw an army,” Toni doesn’t bother to beat around the bush with him on this subject. They’re alone together with only JARVIS watching over her so there’s no reason for false civility and word games between the two of them anymore. Especially not when Loki seems so intent on doing away with them on his own terms.

“No,” Loki denies. “You saw a mere fraction of his forces. His army is of a size the likes of which you have never seen.”

The expression on his face is one Toni’s yet to see him wear. It’s twisted and terrible and the realization of what she’s sure she’s seeing smacks her in the face like a blow.

“You’re afraid,” Toni realizes between one second and the next. “Whatever, whoever, that is on the other side … they’ve got you spooked. You’re running scared.”

“And you would know all about fear wouldn’t you, sweet Stark?” Loki practically hisses back, as bitter and offended as a pissy cat. “You’re practically dripping in it. I can smell it on you, the terror. I can see the way it has settled itself deep into your bones. I would not be the only one to run scared.”

“I don’t run from my problems,” Toni shoots back automatically. It’s the truth and a lie all at the same time. Aunt Peggy had taught her how to plant herself like a tree when she’d been younger, but Jarvis had taught her that sometimes the best path was the path of least resistance. Sometimes Toni feels as if all she’s ever done is hold steady in the face of a hurricane. Other times she feels as if all she’s ever done is run.

Sometimes she feels as if the storm that batters at her will never stop, other times she’s sure that she’s been running for so long that she doesn’t remember what being still feels like anymore.
“You’ve been running for so long you no longer realize you’re moving,” there’s a look of dawning understanding and almost triumph on Loki’s face then. “What horrors haunt you, I wonder? What terrors chase the Iron Queen?”

“Are we trading truths now Loki?” Toni cuts back. “You going to spill all of your deepest and darkest secrets to me in exchange?”

“Oh but I do think the truth would hurt you worst of all wouldn’t it?” Loki seems pleased then, satisfied and just a hair off truly smug. “You’re a liar, just as I am. And liars all the realms over know that truth always cuts the deepest.”

“You want to play truth games now?” Toni tosses the last of the bourbon back with a sharp gesture before she sets the tumbler down on the side table and leans forward into Loki’s space, so close their noses are practically brushing. “Try me.”

“You’ve seen what’s to come.” Loki’s eyes are vibrant bands of poisonous green. “You’ve seen the might that will be brought against your world. Against all the worlds. Do you really believe your band of misfits will be enough to oppose it? Will you stand and fight to protect them? To protect this world that has never valued you as it should?”

“Yes.” Toni answers instantly even as she ignores the way Loki picks and prods at areas she refuses to show are vulnerable. JARVIS was right. Toni will build, create, do anything and everything necessary to make sure the Avengers, that she, can stand between the Earth and whatever threats may come.

“Then here is the truth, sweet Stark,” Loki leans forward then and Toni holds her ground just like she had the day before. She hadn’t flinched from him then, she won’t do it now when he’s shackled. She has to bite back a shudder when he bends as best he can and his lips press against the shell of her ear. His breath is unexpectedly cold when he speaks again. “If you stand against the Mad Titan, you will die.”

The name sends a ripple of pure dread through Toni for reasons she can’t exactly place.

But that doesn’t matter.

Her fear doesn’t matter. Just like Loki’s truths don’t really matter either.

“You should know by now,” Toni turns her head just enough that her own lips can brush against the shell of his ear, “there are worse things than death, Loki.”

Toni feels the way he freezes, goes stock still where he’s at on the bed beside her.

“Such brave words” Loki pulls back enough to look her in the eye, he’s still so much taller than her even with both of them sitting down as they are, “for one who will fight her battles alone because her shield-brethren do not value her as they should. Because they will, inevitably, turn their backs on you.”

Toni’s eyes narrow sharply.

“Here, in your Tower, you numbered your heroes to me and yet you did not count yourself.” Loki holds her stare with an intensity that’s almost palpable. “We both know it was because they will turn on you one day. Too blinded by their own prejudices, too dull witted to grasp your brilliance, your vision. Too slow and self-righteous to show you proper respect as their better, they will turn. Because people like them always turn on people like us, sweetling.”
This, Toni thinks, is Loki’s true skill. His ability to cut right to the heart of a matter, to use truth to wound just as he had said he would. He brandishes it now like a razor or a laser, something hot and sharp and surgically precise.

She could almost admire him for it.

Almost.

“So yes,” Loki keeps going mercilessly, “the truth is that we will see each other again. Because when that moment comes, when that day dawns and you find yourself alone and forsaken with the Titan knocking on your door, you will beg me to lend you my aid.”

“I don’t beg,” Toni cuts in instantly because she’ll let a lot stand because he’s talking, but she can’t, won’t, let that go. “I never beg. I’m not about to start for you.”

“Oh but you will,” Loki seems so certain again, “when all other roads are exhausted you will beg. I will have you on bended knee entreating me for my aid, for my blessing and patronage. And perhaps, if you plead prettily enough, I will assist you, oh Queen of Iron. And then, when the fires of war have been banked, I will have what is due to me. And when I demand you as payment you shall see just how quickly these mortals will turn on you again. You will watch as your people happily, eagerly, sell you. Barter you away like chattel.”

“That’s where your truth takes a dive off the deep end,” Toni tells him. “I’m not chattel. I can’t be bought or paid for. Not by you, not by anyone.”

“You say that now,” Loki smiles, soft and mocking. “Let us see how long your resolve lasts when your world clamors for you to sacrifice yourself on the altar of their safety. When they throw you into the pyre to protect themselves from the Mad Titan.”

"And you think what? That Thor’s just going to let you take Earth over?" Toni asks shrewdly. "You think he'll just let you do all of this without a fight? Do you think you're going to be our only possible ally? Our only possible solution?"

"Midgard is isolated, young and weak." Loki presses. "You know only Thor and myself from the other realms. You options are limited."

"Thor said we're under his protection," Toni points out.

"Do you think that Thor would stand with you against Odin?" Loki cuts back. "Against the All-Father, the King of Asgard, who would see Midgard subjugated even to me before he’d allow it to gain power of its own? Do you think Thor would defy his family," Loki practically sneers the word, "to save a world that is not his own?"

“Whatever’s coming, whoever this Mad Titan is, he’s not going to conquer Earth as easily as you think he will.” Toni pushes herself up onto her feet, smooths her hands down the sides of her skirt, and meets his gaze head on. “We beat the Chitauri once, we’ll do it again. And then again if necessary. Over and over until it’s finished. We’ll win, just like we did this time. And we won’t need you to do it.”

Toni hopes that’s true. She's determined to make sure that it is.

“You have won nothing more than a single battle, sweet one,” Loki tells her and Toni thinks there might be something like amusement in his voice then. Or maybe pity. “The true war has yet to come. And when it arrives you will know true fear, true desperation. The Mad Titan's shadow is long and it shall cover this realm in its darkness as it stretches from here out into infinity.”
Chapter End Notes

Make sure you come visit me:

http://rayshippouuchiha.tumblr.com/
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

It's my birthday!! So this is my Hobbit style gift to all of you lovely, lovely people!

Okay so this chapter is a bit shorter than normal but it's that way for a reason.

This is, officially and finally, wrapping up the last part of the Avengers movie.

The next chapter is going to take us into another transition phase as we build towards the next arc and do some more world and relationship/character building overall.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Playlist

Pintrest

Tumblr Page

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Loki’s words echo in Toni’s mind as she makes her way out of the room and back towards the common area and Thor.

She refuses to let it show just how much he’s unsettled her though.

There’d been something in Loki’s expression that had gotten to her. The flashes of terror and remembered agony, expressions Toni knows all too well, had been too stark, too real, for Loki to fake.

This Mad Titan frightened Loki, truly, deeply.

And that right there is enough for Toni to know that whatever’s coming for them, for all of them if Loki’s to be believed, is nothing or no one to be trifled with.

Earth is, despite what Toni said in the face of Loki’s taunts, nowhere near ready to face a threat of that level.

Toni’s just going to have to see what she can do about that.

This is her planet. It’s home to everything and everyone she’s ever loved.

She refuses to hand it over to the first jumped up asshole who thinks he can take it over.

She’ll stop this Mad Titan.

She’ll do whatever she has to do to keep Earth, to keep her family and billions of innocent lives, safe from him and all the others like him.

Toni will do it or she’ll die trying.
“Lady Antonia,” Thor’s standing by window just like he had been the night before when Toni turns the corner.

He isn’t alone though, the others have slipped back into the penthouse and are scattered around the room as well.

Steve is the first one Toni notices, because of course he is. With a chocolate colored leather jacket draped over the crook of one arm and a large portfolio she’s sure is holding the shield in hand, he’s once again standing by the Iron Queen display.

Toni sweeps her eyes over the broad sprawl of his shoulders, lets them linger for a split second on the proper part in his hair, and then forces herself to look elsewhere.

Bruce, she’s happy to note, looks a bit more relaxed with the way he’s dressed in a nice yellow silk shirt and tan slacks. He’s also curled up on one of the couches, a tablet in his hands and face lined in concentration. He looks almost comfortable except for the tension she can still spot in his shoulders.

Toni’s going to have to make quick work of that one way or the other because as much as she already likes Hulk she wants Bruce completely comfortable in the Tower.

But, all in good time Toni knows as she keeps looking around the room. There’s other things she needs to handle before she can turn any more of her attention in that direction.

Romanov is settled at the bar again, eyes sharp but almost soft as she watches Barton who, Toni is amused to see, is sitting back on the countertop with a fresh pot of coffee in hand.

“Young brother’s a slippery one Raichu,” Toni finally tells Thor wryly as she makes her way to his side. “Razor sharp too, with a tongue to match.”

“Aye,” Thor looks almost pleased, “Loki’s wit has always been a point of pride as well as strife. There are few on Asgard who can match him, for good or for ill.”

Toni hears the small snort of disdain Barton gives out but she pushes forward before Thor can focus on it.

“It was an interesting conversation,” Toni dips her head in a small nod. “Different circumstances and I might just have enjoyed it.”

“That’s far from reassuring, Stark,” Romanov cuts in, a small smile playing around her mouth but a calculating glint shining in her eyes as she deliberately prods at Toni.

Ever the spy that one. Always looking for a reaction, for a weak spot, for an in.

Although, all things considered, it’s not like Toni can blame her. She might not like it, might want to bare her teeth and snarl at Romanov most of the time, but she can’t blame her for trying at the moment.

Plus Toni has to admit that she’s the tiny bit impressed with Romanov for how effective she’d been during everything, for how absolutely skilled and fearless she’d shown herself to be.

Just a bit.

Not that Toni will ever tell her that of course. Being impressed doesn’t mean Toni likes her, doesn’t
mean she trusts her within ten miles of herself or anything Toni cares about.

“I’m not in the reassurance business Itsy Bitsy,” Toni cuts back, casual and off hand like she can barely be bothered. Which isn’t far from the truth.

Time’s clicking down afterall and Toni’s still got so much to do, to figure out.

“Did he say anything about the Cube?” Steve cuts in then, shoulders set and expression firm. “Or anything else useful?”

“He had a lot to say,” Toni slides around the question with ease, “not sure if any of it is actually useful or not.”

“You shouldn’t have been alone with him,” Steve presses. “He’s dangerous.”

“So am I,” Toni tells him flatly.

“Have care, Captain,” Thor cautions Steve with a small frown. “My brother is restrained, his magic bound and Mjolnir holds him fast. I would not willfully place the Lady Antonia in harm’s way.”

There’s a second of silence before Steve nods slowly in acceptance. Toni can tell he’s less than pleased still, although Toni isn’t sure where, exactly, his irritation is aimed.

“May we speak Lady Antonia, in private?” Thor moves closer to her side then, arm extended in her direction in an almost courtly fashion.

“My pleasure,” Toni surprises herself with how easy she finds it to step forward and slide her hand into the crook of Thor’s elbow. To step into his space and not feel that all too familiar shiver of anxiety slide down her spine. “You kids behave yourselves now, we’ll be back in a few.”

Before anyone can protest Toni leads Thor around the bar, up the small flight of stairs, and out onto the long line of the landing pad.

The wind buffets them a bit but Thor is an immovable presence on one side of her. Besides heights have never bothered Toni and she’s spent enough time on the landing pad to know how to move across it even without the suit.

Plus Toni knows that there isn’t a fall in the world that JARVIS won’t catch her from.

The Mark VII might not be fully repaired or re-fabricated yet but it would still be up to the task of catching her by now. Plus there’s more than one old model resting in the Iron Gallery that JARVIS can have up and after her in a split second if he needs to. That’s not even counting the machinery built into the pad itself. There’s more than a few arms that JARVIS could use to reach out to grab her in a flash.

“You are well?” Thor finally breaks the silence that’s fallen between them. “Loki did not …”

“He was fine,” Toni cuts him off. “Like you said, he’s locked down tight, so I’m good.”

“In body,” Thor agrees. “But my brother’s tongue is, as you said, often dagger like.”

“He didn’t hurt my feelings, Sparky.” Toni tells him. She’s just a bit mystified that this is, apparently, her life now. Soldiers back from the dead, spies, green rage monsters, and gods wanting to know that their asshole brothers didn’t make her want to cry. “I do have a few questions for you though.”
“Ask and the answers will be yours if I am able,” Thor smiles down at her, expression easy even with that sadness that lingers in his eyes.

His honesty, his warm sort of openness, kind of makes Toni want to lock him away where no one can take advantage of him.

Which, given who and what he is, given who and what Toni herself is, well that’s a thought that Toni knows is more than a bit ridiculous.

“What do you know about a Mad Titan?” It’s the main thing Toni wants, needs, to know.

If there’s someone else behind all of this, someone else pulling Loki’s strings and controlling that army she’d seen on the other side of that wormhole, then she has to know.

She needs to know as much about her real enemy as she can. She’s already got a million and one ideas that she’d set JARVIS towards last night and this morning when it comes to data collection.

That doesn’t mean she’s going to pass up the opportunity to question Thor as well.

Knowledge is power after all and Toni refuses to be powerless ever again if she can help it.

“I do not know the name,” Thor’s brows are furrowed as he looks down at Toni. “Why do you ask?”

“I think,” Toni starts off slowly, “that there was more to all of this than meets the eye. To your brother showing up, to him taking the Tesseract, to the invasion. All of it.”

“What did you and Loki speak of?” Thor seems a bit more alert now, focused and intent. His attention is still heavy.

“We mostly just picked at each other,” Toni admits. “Taunts and wordplay.”

“Loki’s favored pastimes,” Thor agrees.

“One of mine too. But Thor,” her use of his name grabs his attention even more firmly if the way his eyes narrow just a bit as he stares down at her is anything to go by, “Loki … he’s running scared.”

“Loki is cunning but he is not a coward.” There’s a hardness in Thor’s voice then, a vehemence that Toni’s sure reaches back way past this conversation.

“I didn’t say he was,” Toni shrugs lightly, a fluid and deliberately careless gesture. “Doesn’t mean he isn’t scared stiff. Because he is. Look, you said me and him are similar right?”

“Aye,” Thor agrees slowly, “the resemblance is … high.”

“Then trust me when I say I can see the fear all over him.” Toni presses. “Someone out there’s got him shaking in his boots and from what he let slip I think it all comes back to whoever this Mad Titan is. So do us all a favor while you’re back on Asgard, find out who or what that is.”

Thor’s silent for a long moment.

“You are certain then?” The words come slowly, carefully. “There is a chance that Loki … that he did not act on his own?”

“Can’t tell you for certain,” Toni cautions. “Can’t say if he did this because he wanted to or because he didn’t have a choice or if it was some mix of the two. And, honestly, he’s killed too many people,
did too much damage, for him to get completely off the hook at the moment either way. What I can
tell you is that I don’t think he was working alone.”

“I will speak of this to Father,” Thor announces decisively. “You’ve my thanks again, Lady
Antonia. There is a chance that Loki might be granted leniency within Asgard if your words about
the Mad Titan bear fruit.”

“Don’t thank me just yet,” Toni bites back the urge to sneer at the thought of being a part of Loki
getting a lighter sentence. Everything that’s happened, the invasion, Coulson, it’s all too raw at the
moment. “As a matter of fact don’t thank me at all. Let’s keep this between the two of us. It gets
out that I’m helping Loki even in a roundabout way and well … let’s just say it’d cause more trouble
than it’s worth.”

“I will not speak of it again while on Midgard,” Thor readily agrees, the earlier heaviness lifting from
his expression. When he reaches up his free hand to pat lightly at the hand she still has tucked into
the crook of his elbow he leaves behind the small spark like feeling that Toni is quickly beginning to
associate with him. “But I shall bring you gifts of gratitude when I return as well as gifts to grace
your hall and table.”

“Only kind of gratitude I want from you is information if you can get it,” Toni waves his offer away.
“Just find out what you can and then tell me. It’ll work out better that way.”

“Again,” Thor says, “honor would have me show my gratitude to you with gifts worthy of the
kindness you have done me.”

“Information’s the best gift you can give me then,” Toni tells him firmly. “Look at it this way,
Earth’s under your protection right?”

“Aye,” Thor agrees. “I have named it so.”

“Then work with me on this.” Toni shifts just enough to where she can stare directly up into Thor’s
face. She likes him for some undefinable reason but she’s not above playing with him just a bit to
get what she needs. “Help me, help you to protect it. Get me that information, as much as you can,
and you’ll be giving us all a chance to be ready for whatever it is that’s coming.”

The silence that follows is short and easy, no where near the heaviness of before.

When Thor nods at her in agreement, face set in a small smile, Toni can’t help the way she grins
back up at him just a bit, relief and anticipation arcing through her.

Like she’d told Loki, Earth’s not going to bow down before the Mad Titan no matter how big his
army is or how far his shadow reaches.

They’re going to win if Toni has to forge a victory out of the bones of their enemies with her own
two hands.

~~~

All eyes are on Toni and Thor when they make their way back inside the penthouse but Toni doesn’t
really care.

Steve’s eyes are a heavy weight to carry but there’s a part of her that likes it, that relishes in it.
If she can’t have his love, his care and approval, if this is all she’ll ever have from him, then she’ll
take it.
She’s greedy for him despite everything else, despite the hurt and bitterness.

Toni thinks she always will be. Will always yearn, in one way or another, for his attention.

She’s spent too many years holding him close to her heart, close to what’s left of her soul, to let go of him now.

Even if Bucky’s the only one safe for her to love now she knows that Steve’s too far underneath her skin to ever cut him out.

“Have a good talk?” Romanov asks dryly.

“Don’t be jealous Charlotte,” Toni chides lightly. “One green monster’s enough in the family. Besides I think Hulk pulls it off better.”

“Oh,” Barton faux whispers, “lady fight.”

Romanov just rolls her eyes a bit and reaches up to smack him lightly on the back of the head.

“Why’s it always me?” Barton half whines, half demands.

“Because you’re an idiot.” Romanov promptly replies. “And it’s the only way you learn.”

“That’s fair,” Barton agrees.

“I will depart soon,” Thor announces and instantly has the attention of the entire room. “Loki and the Tesseract must be returned to Asgard to face the All-Father’s judgement. Your tests are finished are they not Lady Antonia?”

“I already took what readings I could. Anything else would take too long, be too invasive,” Toni says as she takes a step away from his side and finally lets her hand fall from his elbow as she goes. “I’ll get it packed up and ready to go. The sooner that thing’s off world, the better. Loki too.”

From across the room Toni sees the way Steve’s brows arch high in surprise at her statement but he doesn’t say anything.

“You might want to call Fury, Shelob,” Toni turns towards Romanov, “because I’m going to assume SHIELD’s wants to make good on transport for Electric Boogaloo here and his brother. Not to mention the Tesseract.”

Surprisingly enough Romanov just nods in agreement, hand reaching into a jacket pocket for what Toni assumes is a phone even as she stands and moves away from the bar.

Toni leaves them there behind her, safe in the knowledge that JARVIS will keep an eye on all of them while she wraps things up.

~~~

“You got as much as you could right J?” Toni sends the question out into the air of the workshop as she moves towards the Tesseract, heavy welding gloves on as she prepares to transfer it back to the metal case it came to her in.

She doesn’t want to take the chance of any of the bots touching it, or any type of physical machinery that might be connected to JARVIS or the Tower.

There’s too much unknown about the Tesseract, about what it can do, to let it come in contact with
anything sensitive.

The same could be said for Loki’s scepter, which, much to Toni’s displeasure, Romanov has already handed over to the SHIELD agents who’d stopped by earlier.

At least JARVIS had gotten some more noninvasive scans of it too before it had been taken away. Toni will just have to see if her consultant status will be enough for her to get her hands on the thing again. And if that fails maybe she can see if Thor will be willing to make a bid for it once he comes back to Earth.

Either way leaving it solely under SHIELD’s purview makes her all kinds of uneasy. Especially after seeing what they’d already turned the Tesseract and its energy towards.

“Thor said he’ll need a wide open space for the Bifrost to open up at,” Toni tells JARVIS as she moves the Tesseract carefully. “Couldn’t convince him that the landing pad was big enough or stable enough so we’ll be heading out. Got a status update on the Mark VII rebuild?”

“The Mark VII should be completing the fabrication process in no less than three hours, Miss,” JARVIS answers promptly. “I’ve also caught sight of a SHIELD issued armored car approaching the Tower. I assume it’s transport sent by Director Fury.”

“That’s good J.” Toni hums as the Tesseract slides into place. “Less for us to worry about. Also I’ll take the Mark V with me but I’d rather have the VII for rescue efforts afterwards, it’s got a higher lift threshold.”

“I’ve also received word from Ms. Potts,” JARVIS cuts in.

“Pepper?” Toni asks as she clicks the case closed and reaches to tug her gloves off and throw them onto the table carelessly. “Her and Happy alright? They going to be getting in soon?”

“The National Guard still has the entrances and exits to most of the city barred off although they are rapidly being opened to increasing traffic flow.” JARVIS informs her. “Ms. Potts and Mr. Hogan have not yet left their hotel room but they should arrive by early afternoon. She was most … adamant that you be here to greet them.”

“I bet she was,” Toni feels a fond smile tug at the corners of her mouth. “Tell Pepper to take her time. I’ll be here for a while after we see Thor off but after lunch I’m heading out to help with the recovery. Also tell her I need a few NDA’s from Priscilla, the heavy ones for private access to the Tower. And to call the construction crew about the window and the floor in the penthouse. Sooner we get that fixed the better. Offer the boys a bonus and find out if any of them have family or property that got caught up in this mess.”

“Very good, Miss,” JARVIS agrees.

He will, Toni knows, see to it that it’s all done.

Case in hand and ready to head back up to the penthouse, Toni turns towards the elevator only to hesitate.

Her eyes are drawn to the phone she’d laid out on the table earlier. She isn’t sure if she wants to take it, wants to take that step, wants to reach out like that when it could be rejected.

With a sigh she clenches her eyes closed and reaches out to snatch it up off of the table.

She was never going to make any other choice.
Not where he’s concerned.

~~~

Thor’s standing outside of Loki’s room, that strange hinged piece of metal in his hands again, by the time Toni gets back upstairs.

It’s almost as if he was waiting for her.

Toni holds the case up in his direction and watches as he nods his understanding and gestures her closer with his free hand.

Toni, more than aware of the way the others in the room have also started to move, makes her way to his side.

“The All-Father had one last decree,” Thor says softly as he holds the metal up. “Loki is to be silenced before his return.”

Toni feels ice, heavy and thick, trace down her spine even as Thor reaches out to open the door.

That thing is a muzzle.

“Ah Thor,” Loki’s sitting up as best he can, spine straight and expression twisted in a sneer as he watches them spill through the door and into the room. “Is it too much to ask to be free of you and your dull Midgardian pets?”

“Only pet I see here’s you,” Barton cuts in, voice low and angry, normally cheerful expression twisted in anger. “Rest of us ain’t got leashes, or muzzles.”

Toni, her back against the wall and eyes watchful, sees it the moment Barton’s words sink in, sees it the moment Loki registers them. He goes paler if at all possible and something terrible slides its way across his eyes.

But, to Toni’s surprise, Loki doesn’t snarl back at Barton. Instead he turns his rage towards Thor.

“I see now how far your mourning extends,” Loki taunts, “even now you do Odin’s dirty work, carry out his tortures.”

“Loki,” Thor’s voice is sharp and filled with warning. He lifts the muzzle upwards to where Loki can clearly see it. “There will be no torture, brother. You should know this.”

“No golden needle and iron thread this time brother?” Loki stares hatefully at the muzzle in Thor’s hand. “Or do you not have the stomach for the All-Father’s favorite punishment? Do you not wish the Midgardians to know of it?”

“Mother fashioned it for you,” Thor tells him almost gently. “It will not hurt. She would not hear of it.”

This time Toni can see exactly what it is that flashes across Loki’s eyes before he wipes it away.

Betrayal.

But, underneath that, there’s an aching kind of sadness.

There is, Toni knows, a story there, buried beneath the words and the anger. Like with so many of the other things Loki and Thor both have said and done each bit of it carries weight, carries meanings
and history that Toni isn’t privy to.

“How kind of the Lady Frigga.” Loki sneers. “I’m surprised the All-Father allowed it.”

“It was his decree that you be silenced before your return,” Thor tells him as he moves across the room. “He didn’t argue when Mother presented him with this.”

Toni watches, gut churning, as Thor steps forward and fastens the muzzle against the lower half of an unresisting Loki’s face.

It isn’t sympathy Toni feels for him in that moment, not really. Like she’d told Thor, Loki’s done too much to be so easily forgiven without a good reason. And even then there’s a lot of people who’ve lost too much to forgive him.

Even if he turns out to not be a monster, even if he was forced or coerced, that doesn’t change what he did.

He’s hurt a lot of people and he’ll have to answer for that in one way or another.

But then, so has Toni.

So it isn’t sympathy that clenches heavy and sick in her stomach, but it might keep close company with it.

~~~

The ride down to the garage of the Tower is more than a bit awkward.

Toni’s thankful for the extra large elevator car as she stands on Thor’s right, Bruce on her other side. The fact that Steve’s directly behind her makes her want to shift uneasily where she’s standing but she bites the need down, shoves it deep and and refuses to look at it.

Instead she clenches her one hand around the metal case that holds the Tesseract and the other around the handle of the Mark V.

She’s relieved when the doors open and they can all pile out and head towards the waiting vehicles.

The armored car JARVIS had mentioned is there alongside a driver and a handful of obviously armed guards. Steve’s motorcycle is there as well, and the left behind SHIELD car for Romanov and Barton.

Bruce will, of course, be riding with Toni.

Toni hadn’t liked letting SHIELD’s flunkies back into the garage but the underground gave them some privacy that wouldn’t have been available otherwise. If she’d made them wait outfront then they all would have had to parade through the main floor of the Tower which is, according to JARVIS, still filled up with displaced employees and civilians. The Tower’s cafeteria staff is there too with long folding tables set up buffet style to get people fed and watered.

It’s a small thing but the Maria Stark and Edwin Jarvis Foundations are already being dispersed in other directions for the moment so it’s better than nothing.

“Come on, handsome, you’re riding with me.” Toni turns toward Bruce and nods towards the dark purple sports car that’s already idling beside the armored car. She’ll have to have Pepper give Mrs. Arbogast a raise because the older woman has excellent taste.
Bruce quirks a small smile at her but doesn’t protest, instead he just makes his way to the passenger side of the convertible and slips inside.

That’s a step in the right direction as far as Toni’s concerned.

Maybe there’s hope for him yet.

~~~

Under the other’s watchful eyes Toni transfers the Tesseract into the dual handled glass container the SHIELD goon holds in her direction.

She can’t help the small sigh of relief that escapes her when the tube clicks closed with a loud sort of finality.

She reaches down to flip the metal case closed and then leaves it on the ground at her feet as she hefts the Tesseract’s new, and surprisingly heavy, container up and away from the agent. With a nod to Bruce she turns and makes her way towards where Thor is standing, hammer on his belt and a muzzled and shackled Loki at his side.

“Here you go, Thundershock,” Toni holds it out in Thor’s direction, “one glowing space Cube all packed up and ready for the express ride back to Asgard.”

“Many thanks, Lady Antonia,” Thor tells her as he reaches out and take it with one hand, the weight nothing to him at all.

“My pleasure,” Toni smirks at him, red painted mouth curled just so at the corners. “I’ll be waiting for you to drop back by again so don’t make me wait too long. I’ll show you the sights, give you a taste of what a city like mine has to offer.”

“I look forward to it and know that your hospitality will be told to all of Asgard upon my return,” Thor declares quietly, genuine and warm. “I will tell my people of the Lady Antonia, the Queen of Iron. Of her courage and her prowess in battle. Of her generosity and her intellect.”

Thor reaches out to her then with his free hand and Toni, bemused, lets him take her hand in his own again.

This time she’s prepared for the little shocks that dance across her skin when he lifts her knuckles to his lips.

“I will also tell them of your beauty and your strength of heart.” The small smile he gives her then is charming, almost roguish. “For both are beyond measure.”

Toni, much to her surprise and faint horror, has to fight down an uncharacteristic blush.

“Remember what I told you about flattery, Raichu,” Toni softens just enough to send him a small grin.

“Aye, I will,” Thor agrees as he drops her hand and takes another step back. Toni, taking it as her cue, moves back as well. “Until we meet again, Lady Antonia.”

Thor holds the Tesseract’s container up towards Loki who takes the other handle with a roll of his eyes. For a split second Loki looks in her direction and Toni sees the way he winks at her, slow a deliberate.
Taunting.

The smile she sends him is more of a snarl, a baring of too sharp teeth.

And then, in a flash of light and a small boom, they’re gone.

Toni stares at the empty space for a second before she shakes her head and turns back towards the others.

Romanov and Barton are already moving towards the SHIELD car so Toni just nods towards them. Romanov, to her surprise, nods back while Barton gives her a cheerful sort of half wave. They fold themselves into the back of the SHIELD issued car without saying anything but Toni’s sure that she hasn’t seen the last of them yet.

Steve though is still standing where he was before, arms crossed over his chest and expression serious as he watches her come towards him.

“Ms. Stark,” Steve acknowledges her once she’s standing a few feet away from him.

“Captain,” Toni arches a brow at him, determination settling firm inside of her as she reaches up and slips a hand into the breast pocket of the blazer she’d thrown on. She’d known down in the lab that she was going to do this. “This is for you.”

She holds the sleek phone out in his direction and watches confusion chase itself across his face even as he automatically reaches out to take it from her.

“I don’t …” Steve turns the phone over in his hands, “I’m not sure I understand Ms. Stark.”

“You’re obviously hitching your horse to SHIELD’s wagon,” Toni tells him. “I’m not going to try and stop you because we both know my opinion doesn’t rank high for you. So I’m not going to waste either of our time. But that phone,” Toni nods towards his hand, “it’s secure and uncrackable. It’ll only open and work for you. So when you need an out, and you will need an out, call me. I’ll answer.”

Steve stares at her in silence for a long moment but then he tucks the phone away in his pocket.

Really that’s more of a victory than Toni had thought she’d get here, with him.

“I’d say it was a pleasure Captain,” Toni tells him, just a shade off the snide tone she’s aiming for, “but I’m pretty sure the feeling wasn’t mutual.”

And then she turns on her heel and walks away.

Walks towards Bruce who’s hovering beside her car again.

Walks away from Steve whose eyes she can feel drilling into her back.

It’s harder than it has any right to be, walking away from him. From Steve.

But Toni still does it.

Because that’s who and what she is.

And this is how she protects herself.

~~~
“Well,” Bruce sighs the word out once Toni’s pulled out onto the road, Mark V and the now empty metal case belted firmly into the backseat as they head back towards the Tower. “I’ve got to say that this wasn’t how I thought all of this was going to go.”

“Really now,” Toni smirks, sunglasses in place, as she glances at him for a split second before turning her attention back to the road. “How, exactly, did you figure all of this was going to go?”

“Figured I’d be back on the move by now,” Bruce tells her honestly. “Dodging SHIELD and everybody else now that the danger’s pretty much over with. I looked over the readings you forwarded me to that tablet in my room, made a few notes for you, but I figured I’d get a day or two at most before I had to move on.”

“Oh sweetheart,” Toni laughs lightly, “I already told you I wanted to keep you. What did you think that meant?”

“I’m honestly not sure?” Bruce shrugs. “Rhodes said something about indoctrination but I’m not sure how serious he was about that.”

“Close enough,” Toni can’t help the smile that breaks across her face at the mention of Rhodey, “my honey-bear knows what he’s talking about after all.”

There’s a moment of easy silence between them, the type that still surprises Toni with how natural it feels with anyone outside of Rhodey and their family.

“You’ve got a place with me Bruce,” Toni finally says softly because it needs to be said outright so he understands exactly what she means.

“That’s risky Toni,” Bruce sounds small, sounds sad and tired. Toni hates it. “There’s a lot of people who want to get their hands on me and the Other Guy. Running … it isn’t always nice but it’s kept us and everyone else safe.”

“You’ve been out in the cold too long,” Toni tells him calmly, carefully. “But you don’t have to be anymore. I know all about risk taking and I’m telling you that I don’t care. You’ve got a place with me Bruce, all parts of you. A place in the Tower, a chance at a home. For you and Hulk. No real strings attached. You sign a NDA and swear not to spread what goes on in the Tower around and it’s your home for as long as you want. Anyone wants to get to you after that and they’re going to have to go through me. And if or when you decide you want to leave, well I’ll help you with that too.”

“Why?” There’s something vulnerable and puzzled in his tone then. “Why would you do all of this, offer all of that, to me?”

“Let’s just say I know what it’s like to be,” Toni pauses, searches for the right word, “lost. In more ways than one. Somebody found me, a few somebodies really. Now I think it’s your turn. So how about it? You gonna take me up on my offer? A fresh start, lab space, a home? All the science you can shake an angry green fist at? It’s yours, all of it. All you’ve got to do is reach out and take it.”

“I’m not sure if I’ll ever stop running,” Bruce tells her slowly. “Not sure if it’s really possible for me to have a real life again.”

Toni feels disappointment begin to well up inside of her. She wants to keep him, both halves of him. Wants the chance to learn him to see if he can really fit into her small, precious, family.

But she won’t do that against his will, won’t pressure him if it’s not something he wants as well.
“But,” Bruce keeps going a second later, “I think I’d like to try. With you. If you’re serious.”

“As a heart attack,” Toni grins, wide and genuine, “You won’t regret it, handsome.”

“Yeah,” Bruce agrees, low and almost shy, “you know, for some reason I don’t really think I will.”

Chapter End Notes

http://rayshippouuchiha.tumblr.com/
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

It's me, ya girl, back with the first transition chapter that I promised you guys. We're setting up to go into the next phase and creeping ever closer to my major divergent point so just hang with me.

And, as always, be sure to comment below and let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Playlist

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“I figured you could spend some time here going over the data I compiled, maybe get settled in some more,” Toni tells Bruce as they move towards a door that slides open to reveal a darkened room. “Feel free to tell me if I’m wrong but I’m assuming you aren’t going to be up to going out for the recovery efforts with me. So this should let you work on a few things and lay low at the same time.”

Still ever the ringmaster, Toni claps her hands sharply and JARVIS, her willing enabler, flares the lights on with an appropriate amount of drama.

The unoccupied lab space she’d had JARVIS set aside for Bruce has all but been setup for him. It’s private, secure, and filled with most of the equipment she’d had JARVIS order for him back on the helicarrier.

There were only a few pieces that hadn’t been delivered in time before the Chitauri arrived but, overall, Toni’s counting it as a success.

It’s not perfect yet but it’ll more than do for the time being.

But, if the way Bruce’s face lights up just a bit with what looks like pleasure and awe is anything to go by, then the lab being a little less than perfect by Toni’s standards doesn’t seem to really matter much to him.

“It’s not perfect,” Toni still feels compelled to point out as they move through the door and further into the lab. “Got a few more pieces that didn’t get here in time before the roads were closed. They should be here in the next few days or so though. Or if you really need anything else I can always have it airlifted in. I’ve got a standing clearance for anything coming or going to the Tower.”

“What ...” Bruce half whispers but Toni keeps going, pacing out into the middle of the bright lab that’s all steel counters, white walls, and sterility.

It’s a massive departure from the more lived in and eclectically decorated environment of her own workshop but she hopes it won’t stay that way for too long.
Bruce will hopefully, if everything works out how Toni wants it to, make this space his own. Just like the floor she’s already designing for him in her head.

And that’s not even mentioning the floor and playroom she has in mind for Hulk.

“The fridge with the food pyramid sticker is fully stocked,” Toni points towards the corner where said refrigerator stands, “energy drinks, bottled water, fruit snacks, those kinds of things. Anything more substantial is either in the penthouse or on the guest floor. Feel free to wander around either. Anywhere you’re not supposed to go will be locked until you sign an NDA. Which should be soon. Priscilla’s efficient like that. After we get that out of the way I’ll introduce you to the real wonders of the Tower.”

“Toni,” Bruce takes a step forward towards her, expression earnest but voice oh so soft.

Toni keeps going, pretends not to hear him even as she watches him closely from the corner of her eye.

“Now the fridge with the biohazard sticker,” Toni points towards the other side of the lab, “is for any kind of sample you might need to store. Figured this way you wouldn’t run the risk of getting either confused or cross contaminating anything on accident. Which is never fun, believe me I know.”

“Toni,” Bruce tries again, voice a little bit louder than before but still soft.

“I’m having you added to SI’s payroll as a consultant for now,” Toni announces next. “And I’m not giving you a choice about it either. You’ll take my money and you’ll like it. You aren’t obligated to hand over any kind of research or the like you might do but being associated with me and the company will give you some extra protection. I can throw up more than a few extra obstacles if anyone ever tries to force you to hand over your work if I can claim it falls under SI’s umbrella.”

“Toni,” Bruce’s voice is only a bit louder then but it is firm and even.

“You need something, handsome?” Toni asks as she turns towards him instantly, a small smile curling the corners of her mouth up smugly.

Bruce stares at her for a split second before he groans just a bit, rolls his eyes, and reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose above his glasses.

“You did that on purpose didn’t you?” He asks, voice wry like he already knows the answer.

“I told you before,” Toni gives him a small, fluid shrug as she moves back towards his side, “you’re tiptoeing. You and Jolly Green need to strut.”

“Toni,” Bruce shakes his head, a reluctant looking smile teasing the corner of his mouth, “I’m honestly not sure what to do with you.”

“Mm,” Toni hums, “admitting you have a problem’s the first step, or at least Rhodey says it is. You could always skip all of those and go straight to acceptance though if you’d like. I wouldn’t complain. Though if you make a stop by bargaining I might be able to work with that too.”

“How about we meet in the middle, tag my state of mind as a firm overwhelmed, and then go from there?” Bruce suggests.

“Well,” Toni says cheerfully enough, “don’t let anyone tell you I don’t know how to compromise.”
With Bruce now safely ensconced in his new lab with access to the readings JARVIS had compiled, Toni makes her way back to the penthouse.

Pepper and Happy are set to arrive any minute and Toni wants a change of clothes and another cup of coffee before that happens.

The penthouse is silent when she arrives, Selvig having been placed personally into a SHIELD agent’s care by Thor himself before he’d left.

Toni’d also promised Thor that she’d check in on him when she had the chance.

Which of course means that JARVIS is currently monitoring his progress for her as well as compiling a data packet on his work and his known associates.

Selvig had gotten a bad turn being taken by Loki as he had and Toni’s aiming to see that his luck takes a bit of a turn for the better in the coming months. The fact that he’s obviously precious to Thor is only an extra incentive to make sure he’s kept happy. An incentive that Toni’s determined to take advantage of even if Fury and SHIELD aren’t.

Maybe especially since they don’t seem that interested in placating the Thunder God by keeping his friends safe, secure, and decidedly not re-kidnapped and further traumatized.

Oh well. Their loss will, hopefully, be Toni’s gain.

“Fabrication on the Mark VII is now complete, Miss,” JARVIS announces, still keeping their communications to her earpiece even though they’re alone in the penthouse.

Playing the quiet game outside of the workshop until Bruce signs has been a bit of an experience. Toni’s so used to her inner circle knowing and loving JARVIS that Bruce being out of the loop is more than a bit … unsettling.

She’s not used to having to keep JARVIS a secret in their own home for so many consecutive hours at a time.

It’s … more draining than she remembers secrets being.

A sign, maybe, of the ways in which she’s softened a bit since Howard’s death.

That added to her ready acceptance of both Thor and Bruce and Toni’s not sure if it’s a good thing or something new to be afraid of, a new vulnerability to hoard and obsessively protect.

She’s sure she’ll find out soon enough one way or another and probably in the worst fashion possible.

Her life tends to work like that for the most part.

“Thanks, baby boy,” Toni quirks a smile up at the nearest camera even as she moves towards her bedroom. “I’m gonna be heading out after Pepper and Happy get here, start helping with the rescue efforts. Do me a favor and see what the chatter is? See if there are any specific high risk areas that could really use me and the armor?”

“Of course, Miss,” JARVIS easily replies. “I believe there is an apartment building relatively close by that could use your help. Not all of the residents were evacuated and heavy machinery is unable to access the site. There are a number of possible survivors buried in the rubble.”
“Shit,” Toni winces as she pulls the pins from her hair, her elaborate hairstyle falling apart as her curls tumble down to her waist. “Let whoever’s working the site know that I’ll be there within the hour.”

She makes quick work of braiding it and winding it into a simpler and more comfortable crown. It’s still up, still secure, but much more sensible for what Toni has in mind for the rest of her day.

“Done,” JARVIS tells her. “They send their profuse and sincere gratitude.”

Toni hums in acknowledgement even as she shimmies out of her clothes and moves towards her closet. The flight suit is calling her name because she knows she’s going to be spend more than a few hours in the armor doing a lot of heavy lifting and the like.

The flight suit is a blessing in these sort of cases.

She’s perfected the art of wearing the armor no matter what outfit she’s currently wearing of course. She’s been in the suit in everything from her pilfer pajamas courtesy of Happy and Rhodey to an evening gown at the Expo.

Some creative tucking and familiarity with how the armor moves as well as the suiting and unsuiting process makes more possible than a lot of people seem to think.

Still, that aside, the flight suit is highly preferable. Skin tight, moisture wicking, and breathable all at the same time, the undersuit she’d developed is the far more comfortable option for spending such a long time in the armor.

Flight suit in place and all zipped up Toni slips on the comfortable slippers she designed to go with it and heads back towards the bar.

Coffee is, again, her next course of action.

Only when she makes it to the counter the coffee pot is off and empty. Barton had, obviously, drained the thing before they’d left and hadn’t set a new pot to brewing.

Rhodey does the same thing when he’s irritated with her so it is, honestly, not that big of a deal.

What is a bit of a big deal is what she finds when she reaches for the container she keeps the beans in.

She knows it’s empty before she even opens it, the weight a dead give away.

But, curiosity nigging at her, Toni opens it anyways.

There’s a folded piece of paper inside that immediately snags her attention.

Intrigued Toni reaches inside, grabs the paper, and then sits the container down on the counter as she opens the note.

She can’t help the involuntary but still bright laugh that slips out of her.

_I.O.U._

the note reads in large loopy letters, _Good for one free possibly arrow related and/or adjacent emergency. Or more than one if more coffee is provided. C.B._

_P.S. Don’t tell Fury. Please._ <3

And there, below Barton’s initials is a surprisingly good drawing of a dog. It’s wearing what looks
like a bandana with a familiar hourglass symbol on it and has what looks like a piece of pizza hanging out of its mouth.

It’s cute.

“I’m guessing you saw him take the coffee, J?” Toni asks, smile lingering on her face even as she smoothes the note out and lays it on the counter. She’s pretty sure she’s going to frame it for posterity’s sake.

Or possible blackmail.

She hasn’t decided which yet.

Probably some combination of both if she’s being honest.

“Of course,” JARVIS sounds almost amused. “He was rather unsubtle for an agent of his reported caliber.”

“There were a few pounds of beans in there. How, exactly, did he get them out of the Tower?” Toni asks as she bends down and pulls another container out of one of the lower cabinets. It is, thankfully, still full. “He didn’t stuff them down his pants or anything did he? Pretty sure I would have noticed that, spy or not.”

“I am rather sure he contemplated doing just that before he found a plastic bag that he then stuffed up his shirt so he could secrete it away into his duffle bag.” JARVIS says dryly. “He looked rather pleased with himself, all told. I must confess, Miss, that even if we were not operating under hush protocols I am unsure if I would have actually stopped him. It would have been … unsporting.”

“Have a couple pounds delivered to him J,” Toni says as she shakes her head, amusement lightening her mood even more as she loads the grinder. “Make sure the packaging’s loud. One of Rhodey’s standard care packages loud, and then mark it urgent. Oh and see if you can’t get it delivered sometime really inconvenient. In the middle of a meeting with the Brass kind of important. Rhodey was so pissed about that, it was great.”

“It will be my pleasure, Miss.” JARVIS says smugly. He, like Toni, enjoys the finer points of lightheartedly tormenting certain people. Barton seems like the perfect sort of target too.

Toni grins as she starts the grinder and takes a moment to imagine Barton’s face when he gets the package. Being confronted with what’s likely to be ten pounds or more of gourmet coffee beans and a small explosion of red and gold heart shaped confetti and glitter should catch him at least slightly off guard.

~~~

“Toni!”

Standing in front of the couch Toni has enough time to turn around before she’s hit with a flying bundle of red hair.

Toni staggers back a step and a half before she catches her balance, the scent of apples and a familiar heady, exotic sort of perfume heavy in her senses.

Pepper.

Face pressed against Pepper’s shoulder thanks to her lack of heels at the moment Toni doesn’t
actually fight the embrace.

Not with the way she can feel Pepper trembling against her.

It doesn’t matter though because Happy’s there in the next second, hands gentle as he pulls Pepper off and away from Toni just a bit. He tucks his fiancee against his side even as he stares at Toni, expression caught somewhere between relieved and desperate.

“Idiot,” Pepper’s smile is watery and exhausted when she finally manages to speak but there’s such naked and tender affection in her eyes that Toni feels her breath catch just a bit. “Don’t scare us like that.”

“Thought we lost you again, Boss,” Happy’s eyes are tight at the corners and undercut with dark circles. When he reaches his free hand up to straighten his tie in a long familiar nervous gesture that shakes just a bit before he brings it down and tucks it out of sight in his pocket.

Awareness dawns on Toni then, knowledge crystallizing inside of her in a moment of perfect clarity like she’s been given some sort of glorious insight into their souls.

Oh.

They love her.

Pepper and Happy love her.

They both really, truly love her.

It’s something she’s known for years now in a more abstract way, the bonds of trust and devotion built between them precious to her in ways she can barely describe.

But the reminder of it hits her now at full force.

They love her.

So Toni does what she so rarely allows herself to do with anyone but Rhodey and, more recently, Thor on some level.

She reaches out.

The tips of her fingers slide softly, lovingly, over the side of Pepper’s face, skimming lightly over her cheekbone and then up to tuck a stray bit of hair behind her ear.

Pepper’s eyes widen and then go almost impossibly soft, tears brimming at the edges.

Toni smiles at her for a second before she turns towards Happy and crooks a finger at him. He leans down towards her instantly.

Toni presses a soft kiss against the arc of his cheek and then reaches a hand up to scrub her palm playfully against the layer of scruff on his jaw even as the tips of his ears tint red.

“I’m okay,” Toni tells them both softly, almost sweetly, as she pulls back. “Promise.”

And then she holds her hands out to both of them.

And they, as always, meet her half way, Happy bringing his free hand out of his pocket and Pepper stepping forward as soon as Toni reached out towards her.
Happy’s hand is wide and strong but, like Rhodey, his touch is infinitely gentle as he cradles her hand in his palm.

Pepper slides into her space easily and twines their fingers together like the move is second nature.

They stand there for a long moment, the three of them, hands linked, before Toni tugs them even closer.

Pepper wraps herself around Toni even as Happy’s thick arms wrap around the both of them effortlessly. One of his large, wide hands come up to press carefully, gently against the side of Toni’s head as he draws the both of them closer to his chest.

“Thank god,” Toni hears Happy whisper even as Pepper begins to sob again, almost as if he hadn’t really believed she was okay until this very second.

As if he and Pepper both have spent this entire time worried about her despite seeing her over the vid screen earlier.

As if he, like Pepper, needs touch to solidify her in his mind, to really and truly believe that she’s alive.

So, ignoring the ache in her ribs, Toni doesn’t fight it, doesn’t even feel a shiver of unease despite the way she’s normally touch shy even with them.

Instead she opens for both of them even more as she shifts to curl an arm around Pepper’s back and reaches out to hook the other around Happy’s waist.

She pulls them closer to her, pulls these pieces of her family who love her, closer to her, and just … breathes.

Besides, being wrapped up between and around them as she is, well … it’s a little bit like coming home again too.

Toni’s mind whirls.

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“So,” Toni says a few minutes later, face pressed against Happy’s chest, “how much do you think it’d cost for me to buy a day? Like an actual calendar day? Cause I sort of want to own yesterday. We could rename it, make it into a holiday before the government gets their hands on it and name it something shitty like National Invasion Day. I was thinking something like National Iron Queen Day or maybe E.T Go Home Day. Eh,” Toni shrugs as best she can, “it needs some work but either way it’ll be great.”

Beneath her ear Happy’s chest rumbles.

And, pressed against her other side, Pepper begins to laugh.

Toni just smiles.

~~~

With a warning about Bruce lurking a few floors down and reassurances that he’s safe to be around, Toni finally has JARVIS bring up the armor for her.

With Pepper on the phone no doubt about those NDA’s and Happy hovering by the door to the
landing pad’s runway Toni’s finally ready to head out.

So she blows Happy a kiss just to see him smile and then takes to the air.

There’s work to be done.

And no more rest for the wicked.

~~~

Toni circles the apartment building JARVIS had told her about, thoughts grim as she examines the damage done to it.

It’s … bad.

There are Chitauri bodies and sleds littering the pavement outside of it, thick blue blood seeping out onto the concrete and asphalt. Toni knows that the only thing that had stopped them had to have been the missile impacting with the ship and the portal snapping closed.

Toni suspects a sort of hivemind intelligence was at work within the Chitauri but it’ll take some experimentation and some studying to be sure.

So Toni shakes the thoughts off, slides them to the back of her mind to be dealt with later, and instead focuses on what’s right in front of her.

The building itself is crumbling, half of it collapsed altogether with gaping holes blasted in the remaining side revealing snapshots of the people who’d once lived in the apartments.

Toni feels guilt, sick and heavy, settle in the pit of her stomach.

Despite their best efforts to keep the Chitauri corralled around the Tower and the surrounding blocks they obviously hadn’t been completely successful.

Apparently more than a few Chitauri had escaped their makeshift perimeter, likely when Toni had been forced to concentrate fire on diverting the drop ships and Thor on bottlenecking the portal itself while Hulk took out anything within range.

There’d just been too many of them for Steve, Barton, and Romanov to handle on the ground. Too many sleds, too much smoke and confusion.

Just, too much.

And these people, these innocent civilians, had paid the price for their inability to stop the Chitauri in their tracks fast enough.

And this apartment building isn’t likely to be the only place to suffer either, the only location decimated during the battle as strays slipped through.

Because Toni hadn’t been enough to stop them.

Toni had thought, naively perhaps, that her days of seeing innocents hurt because of her mistakes were finally being put behind her one step at a time.

But, apparently not.

Apparently even with her ripping her weapons out of every set of hands she can find she’s still going
to make mistakes like this. Is still going to find new and spectacular ways to fuck up.

That, Toni decides, is unacceptable.

These people should have been safe. Toni should have been able to protect them.

Every soul lost, every life broken and destroyed, is on her, on her inability to stop this from happening.

Determination once again crystallizing inside of her Toni’s mind whirls.

Next time, because she knows there will be a next time, Toni is going to be prepared.

If the Avengers aren’t enough to handle what Toni knows is going to come, what already haunts her nightmares and her waking thoughts, then she’ll find a way to make up for the difference.

One way or another.

She will build something to help protect this world, these innocent people, from something like this ever happening again.

Toni will forge a suit of armor for the entire world if she has to.

One piece at a time.

~~~

Toni can feel sweat beading along her hair line despite the climate control of the armor. She’s been lifting beams, shifting rubble, and pulling dusty, bloody survivors out of the wreckage of the apartment for the past few hours.

Even with the suit it’s not exactly light work but even with the dull ache of her injuries from before she’s nowhere near her limits, wouldn’t stop even if she was.

The rescue team has been making good time with her around to lift things and the armor’s ability to scan the rubble for heat signatures.

She’s going to help clear this building and then she’s going to move on to the next.

And then the next.

“Make sure we get a meeting with someone in the CDC and whoever else we need to harass about the clean up.” Toni tells JARVIS as she lifts a twisted steel beam out of the way so a rescue worker can rush in and pull a dazed looking man from the rubble. “Last thing we need is for a bunch of civilian contractors to be messing with Chitauri bodies and tech.”

“Bids are already coming in, Miss,” JARVIS tells her even as he highlights the last heat signature, this one small enough that Toni’s stomach clenches hard because it’s got to be a kid.

“Underbid them,” Toni says remorselessly. “Have Pepper sign off on it and tell her I said underbid all of them. If we take a massive loss fine. We’ll recover it in other sectors in the next quarter anyways and I’ve got a few things in the pipeline that should push us further into the black. We can’t let regular people get their hands on this shit J. They don’t have the training for it, hell no one really does, but for all we know the Chitauri bodies could be contaminated. Mix that with their weaponry and we could have some kind of plague on top of a newly developed black market sector for alien tech. I know the scavengers are probably already out and about and we can’t stop all of it
but we have to try.”

“Of course, Miss,” JARVIS agrees. “I have drafted a number of emails to be sent to various committees and the like. I am also hearing whispers through various online contacts that the President may be seeking an audience with you and the other Avengers in the relative future.”

“Look at you,” Toni grins behind the safety of the faceplate, “working that little information ring you like to think I have no idea exists. You gonna take over the world when I’m not looking, baby boy?”

“Perish the thought Miss,” JARVIS answers promptly, voice dry. “I am but a humble servant who would never dream of even more world domination than we’ve already achieved. Unless, of course, expansion is to be added to the docket as we discussed earlier? If so then I have a few files I might direct your attention to.”

“Pump the brakes there, Skynet,” Toni laughs as she eyes the next bit of rubble, calculations swarming in her head and hands gesturing for the aid workers behind her to step back and away. “We’ll save the overlord talk for later alright? Last thing I need is Pepper catching wind of even more Empress Stark and Prince JARVIS talk. Her and Happy might stage a coup and take over with Rhodey just so they can lock me in the Tower.”

“Consider the discussion temporarily tabled once again, Miss,” JARVIS agrees easily enough. “Even if that is a rather … tempting alternative.”

“Traitor,” Toni tosses back fondly as she bends to wedge her hands into a small crack so that she can lever a piece of rubble up and out of the way.

Just a bit behind her the female rescue worker who’s taken to shadowing Toni shifts nervously even as her partner moves around her and starts inching up the side of the rubble pile. He’s testing the way as he goes to the best of his ability but Toni has better feedback, has JARVIS and the HUD and her own mind.

“Hey,” Toni calls out to the man, “don’t go that way, it’s not stable. You’re going to bring the entire slide down on us.”

He stops, takes a step back, but it’s too late.

Toni feels the way the rubble shifts and begins to slide.

“Move,” she barks at the aid workers who scramble back down the slide, shouting and waving their arms as they go. Toni doesn’t pay them any real mind, instead she plants her feet and yanks up on the piece of rubble, slinging it to the side and away from the gathered crowd. There’s no time for finesse now, no time for being careful. This half of the building is going down and there’s nothing Toni can do to stop it.

All she can do is get the kid out.

“Hey sweetheart,” Toni lets the the faceplate slide away as she stares down into the hole, “you okay?”

The little girl, braids covered in concrete dust and left arm clutched tightly to her chest, turns her tear streaked face up towards Toni.

“Hurts,” the little girl whimpers and Toni feels a sympathetic sort of agony pulse through her.
“I know,” she soothes, doing her best to ignore the shifting she can feel beneath her feet, “but we’re gonna get you out and get you fixed up. Okay?”

“Okay,” she sniffs.

“I just need you to reach up to me, okay baby?” Toni keeps her voice even and soothing despite the running clock in the back of her head and JARVIS’ whispered warnings in her ear. She can hear the shouts down below too and can feel bits of concrete pinging off of the back of the armor.

There’s a creaking groan as dust and bits of debris fall into the space the girl’s trapped in. She flinches back from it and curls even tighter around her obviously broken arm.

Shit.

“Hey,” Toni calls softly to get her attention again, “ladybug, look at me now. Look at me.” The little girl looks up. “There you go, sweetheart. You know who I am? What I do?”

“’ron Queen,” she says, so soft that Toni can barely hear her. “You’re a superhero.”

“That’s right,” Toni agrees with a smile. A block of what feels like concrete slams into the back of the armor but Toni doesn’t flinch. Just locks the joints of the suit and keeps smiling. “I’m Iron Queen. And you know what heroes do right? They save people. And I’m gonna save you okay? Gonna make sure you’re safe and sound. But I need you to keep being brave baby, brave just like you have been. And I need you to reach up so I can get you okay? All you’ve got to do is reach.”

There’s a moment of trembling silence as Toni reaches her arm down into the hole as far as it will go.

“Miss,” JARVIS says in her ear, voice tense, “structural integrity of the remainder of the building is next to gone. It is collapsing. You must get her out now.”

“Come on ladybug,” Toni urges softly, “you can do it.”

And then the girl, pain and fear clear on her little face, finally reaches back.

Her hand is so small against the gauntlet but it’s enough and that’s all that matters.

Toni wraps her hand around the little girl’s and, careful to be infinitely gentle, tugs.

The girl squeals but doesn’t fight Toni as she pulls her up.

But Toni’s spent too much time being gentle, comforting her, and there’s not enough time to move the two of them away. Not and be gentle enough not to hurt the girl again.

So instead Toni slams the faceplate back into place, twists to tuck the girl against her chest, and curls her body around her, joints of the armor relocking.

Debris slams against the back of the armor in a heavy rain. Toni can hear the screams of the onlookers and the whimpers of the kid but she doesn’t focus on them. Instead she just grits her teeth, ignores the pain radiating from her left side, and buckles down to wait it out.

It doesn’t take long, the rubble settling again quickly.

Toni takes a deep breath, hopes that everyone else had enough sense to stay off of the rubble, and forces the armor to stand up. The rubble sluices off of her back easily enough until Toni’s standing, girl tucked against her chest with one arm, in the middle of the slide.
She takes one step and then engages the boots in a small spurt of energy to propel her up into the air just a bit. She hovers there for a second while behind her the debris shifts again, resettling into the spot she just vacated.

Below the crowd cheers but Toni doesn’t pay them any mind.

Instead she’s focused on the couple she can see just on the edge of the crowd.

The women are dirty, clothes ripped and torn, faces covered with dust. They’re also screaming, arms held up towards the air, towards Toni. Towards the girl in her arms.

Toni sets down right in front of them and opens the face plate again.

“Hey, ladybug,” Toni says softly to the girl who’s still curled, eyes clenched closed and body trembling, against her chest. “Look who’s here.”

One of the women, tall and narrow shouldered with braids that match the girl’s, steps forward then, voice soft despite the way it cracks when she calls the girl’s name.

After that it’s easy.

Toni hands the girl over to her parent’s, waves their thanks off and points them towards the nearest ambulance. Before they go she tells them that if they need anything, anything at all, to stop by Stark Tower, that there’s going to be food and shelter for anyone who doesn’t have a place to go until things get sorted out.

“You got our next target lined up J?” Toni asks softly as she watches them go with a small smile and one last wave at the girl even as relief saps some of the adrenaline from her veins.

“Indeed Miss,” JARVIS answers instantly. “An office building a block or so over are specifically asking for you. It’s a high rise and they have employees still trapped.”

“On it,” Toni says as she turns on her heel, intent on finding the person in charge of this site and making sure they don’t need her for anything else.

Only when she finishes turning Toni freezes.

Because there, a few feet or so behind her, shield on his back but uniform still gone in favor of regular clothes, is Steve.

Steve who stares at her, brow furrowed, for a long second before he starts moving towards her, ducking around volunteers as he crosses the space between them.

Toni’s heart skips a beat and then takes off at a galloping, pounding rhythm beside the reactor.

It’s almost as if she’s seeing him again for the first time instead of having just parted ways with him a few hours before after seeing Thor and Loki off world.

She hopes she isn’t going to react to him like this every single time they meet.

She knows she probably will.

She locks it down, refuses to let it show on her face. Instead she stays where she’s at and cocks a curious brow in his direction, careful to keep her expression even.

“Ms. Stark,” Steve says as he gets closer to her.
“Captain,” Toni nods slightly.

“I, that was,” Steve grimaces and finally announces, “I wasn’t expecting to see you out here.”

Toni feels herself ice over just a bit more because of course he hadn’t.

Of course Steve didn’t expect to see her out and about trying to help with the clean up.

“I tend to pop up all sorts of places you’d least expect,” Toni says with a sharp, tooth filled smile, “like a bad penny. Occasionally I even come down from on high to mingle with the peasants.”

“That’s,” Steve’s face twists in a grimace, “that’s not what I-”

“Save it,” Toni raises a hand and cuts him off.

Steve’s mouth snaps shut with an almost audible click.

“I’ve got better things to do than listen to what you do and do not expect out of me,” Toni tells him shortly. “Which, since you’re an expert on me, I’m sure is an extremely long and detailed list.”

She lets the faceplate come back down.

“I’ve got work to do Captain,” Toni tells him as she takes a step back to get a bit of space.

“Wait,” Steve lunges forward and wraps thick fingers around her wrist. “Wait, Stark, please.”

It’s that slightly pleading tone that stops her from ripping her wrist from his grasp and rocketing off to the next site.

Toni is, and likely always will be, so very weak for Steve.

“You’ve got thirty seconds,” Toni informs him without removing the faceplate because it, at least, provides her with an extra layer of armor. Another barrier between him and her so that her vulnerability where he’s concerned doesn’t shine through so obviously.

“I,” Steve hesitates, seems to flounder for a moment, and then squares his jaw. “Take me with you.”

Behind the faceplate Toni blinks.

“What?” It comes out flatter than she’d actually intended it to but it serves her purpose.

“I just,” Steve winces but doesn’t let go of her wrist, “take me with you to the next site. That’s where you’re going right? So take me. I want to help and you’ve got better information. I’ll be more useful that way than wandering around on my own from place to place.”

Toni takes a moment, lets her eyes slip closed as she takes a deep breath.

Maybe one day Toni will be able to resist him, will be able to take a step back and away from something that hurts so badly as Steve’s obviously poor opinion of her.

But today is not that day.

And tomorrow’s probably not going to be it either.

It’s easy to reverse the grip Steve has on her wrist and pull him closer to her until he, again, has no choice but to step up onto the top of her right boot. She loops her arm around his waist and takes
another second to be grateful for the distance the armor gives her as she splay her hand out across the tight expanse of his stomach.

“Hold on tight,” Toni tells him, eyes locked on his face from behind the helmet.

He’s so very close to her again and his eyes are so blue.

Steve’s arm comes up to rest across the line of her shoulders and he gives her a short but steady nod.

“Perhaps you might drop him back into the ocean, Miss?” JARVIS suggests spitefully in her ear.

Safe behind the armor where Steve can’t hear her Toni just laughs.

Her boy is so very vicious and protective.

She loves him so.

“Maybe later, J,” Toni tells him even though they both know she’s lying.

Hurt or not over Steve’s disdain for her they both know Toni will never, could never, hurt him like that.

Toni fires up the boots and takes to the air, already automatically compensating for Steve’s extra weight on her right side.

Below them there are a flurry of camera flashes and cell phones held high.

Toni’s pretty sure she already knows what the tabloids are going to look like tomorrow.

Joy.

~~~

The problem, Toni discovers quickly enough, is that their smoothness together on the battlefield the day before isn’t, wasn’t, a one off.

And it’s not all because Toni’s spent more time than is probably healthy studying Steve’s battle strategies.

It can’t be. Because they anticipate each other here during the rescue efforts just as easily as they had against the Chitauri, flowing around each other without ever having to say a word.

Toni keeps a running conversation with JARVIS as they work, hashing out details and plans, occasionally sending messages off to Pepper and Priscilla about things she wants, needs, done.

And all the while Toni and Steve work through site after site, side by side. They lift and move and pull without speaking, the silence between them thick and heavy but not actually interfering with their efficiency.

Toni even catches Steve staring at her more than once, sees him open his mouth like he has something to say only to snap it shut and shake his head sharply.

She ignores his struggles as best she can and focuses on dictating emails and calls to JARVIS in her quest to get as many proprietary rights to Chitauri tech as she possibly can.

She can’t help the way she catches herself staring at him sometimes too though, eyes tracking over
his soot streaked face, the expanse of his shoulders and the cling of his now dirty shirt.

Eventually the underlying tension that clouds the air between them don’t so much disappear as it does soften. Something seems to ease between them just a bit as Steve seems to realize that Toni’s in this for the long haul and has no intention of actually bowing out early.

After the third site he doesn’t even bother to ask if she’s going to keep going. Instead he just moves forward towards her side once they’re done.

And Toni?

Toni automatically makes a space for him beside her, lets him step up onto her boot and into her arms as easily as breathing.

Now that they’re no longer in the middle of an invasion it is, in Toni’s opinion, a bit unsettling how easy it is to work with him on the field, how easily they seem to flow around each other.

Toni is, honestly, not exactly sure how to categorize it.

It’s not the deep, seamless connection that she shares with Rhodey.

It’s not the same kind of easy friendship she’d automatically felt for Bruce or the affection she can’t seem to shake where Thor is concerned.

It’s not even the almost reluctant respect she feels for Romanov or the amusement that tugs at her for Barton.

No.

Steve is, as always, in a class all on his own.

~~~

It’s late when Toni flies Steve back towards where he told her he’d parked his bike earlier in the day.

The alley is off to the side and dark but it lights up easily enough when Toni settles softly onto the ground, the light from the reactor chasing away the shadows.

Toni’s honestly more than a bit surprised that the bike is still there and still in one piece.

“Well,” Steve shifts just a bit before he plants his hands on his hips, “this is me.”

“Hm,” Toni hums as she lets the faceplate retract for the first time in hours. “Looks like.”

“We did good work today,” Steve says softly. “Real good.”

To Toni’s surprise there’s a small, genuine smile on his face.

Despite the sweat and the grime Toni can’t help but think that he’s so ... beautiful.

“Yeah,” Toni finds herself agreeing softly, lips tugging upwards a bit almost without her consent. “Yeah we did.”

There’s a moment of silence.

“Well,” Toni finally says, “I’ve got to get back. Wouldn’t want Bruce to think I’ve abandoned him
already.”

“Banner?” Steve asks then, brows furrowed again.

“Yeah,” Toni nods, eyes half lidded and watchful. She can’t help but cut at him, just a bit, test and see if his good mood will hold out now that they’re alone again. “Told you I was going to keep him. I set him up with a lab and the works. He seems pretty happy so far.”

“Oh,” Steve says and something complicated flashes across his face before he smooths it away. “That’s … that’s good. I’m glad he’s comfortable. Safe.”

“I don’t skimp on the amenities and he’s definitely safer with me then he would be with SHIELD.” Toni agrees. “But that’s an entirely different subject that neither of us have the time for tonight. Or the patience. So drive safe, Cap. And remember what I told you. When you’re ready to take that out, call me. I’ll answer. The Tower’s open to you, just like it was for Bruce.”

Without waiting for a reply Toni lets the faceplate snap back into place as she takes a few steps back and away from Steve.

She takes to the air and turns her attention towards the Tower.

She only looks back once.

Steve’s standing there at the mouth of the ally, hands hanging loosely at his sides and face tilted up towards the sky as he stares after her.

~~~

Sore, exhaustion nipping at her heels, Toni shucks the armor and makes her way back into the penthouse.

She moves quietly, slippers nearly silent against the marble floor.

A smile breaks out across her face, soft and sweet, at what she sees.

Pepper and Happy are sprawled out on one of the couches, pizza boxes and tablets on the table in front of them.

Pepper’s face is soft and sweet in sleep where it’s pressed against Happy’s chest. For his part Happy’s arms are secure around her waist as he snores softly.

They look so peaceful Toni doesn’t bother to wake either of them.

Instead she pulls the blanket off of the back of the couch and spreads it out across the two of them like Rhodey’s done for her a million times.

And then she turns and heads for the elevator and the workshop.

She’s tired too, body aching, but she wants the comfort and safety of the workshop more than she wants the softness of her actual bed.

So, workshop couch it is.

~~~

The bots greet her as sweetly and enthusiastically as the always do, blankets and pillows in hand.
Toni smells a robotic conspiracy.

“Please rest some more, Miss,” JARVIS implores her. “You are still healing. You need to sleep. We will watch over you. All of us. I swear it.”

“I know you will,” Toni sighs fondly as she allows Butterfingers to herd her towards the couch again. “I trust you.”

“I, we, love you as well, Miss,” JARVIS says softly because he, as always, understands what she’s really saying. “Now rest.”

~~~


*Toni soars through an endless blue sky, Rhodey at her side.*

*Above them Bucky keeps pace.*

*Below Steve dashes across the water’s surface.*

*She turns her face up towards the sun, eager for its warmth.*

*The gaping maw of space reaches out for her instead.*

*And from its mouth horrors are birthed into her world.*

~~~

Toni wakes *screaming*.

“It is 3:05 a.m.,” JARVIS’ voice cuts through her panic. “You are in the workshop of Stark Tower in New York. Colonel Rhodes is alive and well. Ms. Potts and Mr. Hogan are both alive and well. You are safe, Miss. We are all safe. There are no monsters here, you made sure of it.”

“There was an *army,*” Toni pants, a repeat of the morning before. “There was an *army* JARVIS, and we … I’m not gonna be enough to stop them.”

“Then build,” JARVIS reminds her. “Build a future for this world, for all of us. And remember, that you are not alone. You have your family with you, forever. Always.”

Toni forces herself to breathe, to grab at the ragged edges of her calm and drag it over her again.

She pushes herself up off of the couch with absent but still loving pats for the bots and staggers towards her worktable.

“Open a new project file J,” Toni says as she collapses into her chair. “Multiple sub-files all with S.T.E.V.E. level encryption. Give me a copy of the bare bones schematics for the Mark VII in each one. Make at least a dozen.”

“Done, Miss,” JARVIS informs her as the holograms burst into life around her. “What shall I index this project as?”

Toni stares at the dozen or so Mark VII’s spinning in the air around her as her mind *whirls.*
“My name,” Toni finally mutters, half to herself and half to JARVIS, “is Legion, for we are many.”

And JARVIS, sweet gloriously brilliant JARVIS who she will never deserve, understands exactly what she means.

Because of course he does.

The name Iron Legion blooms to life above each file.

Toni smiles and bends herself to the first set of schematics.

She has work to do.

Chapter End Notes

http://rayshippouuchiha.tumblr.com/
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Surprise babes!

You know I couldn't let LoW's birthday pass us by without finding a way to get this out for all of us.

Make sure you leave me a comment to let me know what you think about this builder chapter!!

Playlist

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Toni doesn’t even attempt to go back to sleep.

Body sore, the remnants of her earlier panic sitting sick and heavy in the back of her throat, she works on the new Iron Legion files instead.

Allows herself to sink down into that familiar head-space, to let the whirling savageness of her mind pull her under. As always the urge to create surges forwards from where it lives, seething, just beneath her skin, eager to spill out of her at any given moment.

Hours later, morning finds her with the newly christened Mark VIII completely outlined. She’s made a dozen or so improvements on the Mark VII’s design already and the new iteration is ready to be put into production at a moment’s notice.

Toni has already learned from this last battle, from going head to head against the Chitauri and all of their horribly fascinating technology. She’s cataloged and absorbed as much as she can from her first hand experience in the hectic chaos of the invasion.

Which is a great deal in all honesty.

The whirling, seething, razor sharp mess that is her mind allows for nothing less.

Even the information she’s already automatically cataloged and absorbed isn’t the end of it though. No there’s still going to be her own readings and Bruce’s work with the data from the Tesseract to be taken into account once it’s all been completed and compiled.

Then there’s re-watching the footage recorded by the HUD for anything that might deserve a second look, getting her hands on and then inside some of that Chitauri tech, and then studying everything she can get her hands on about the other Avengers.

So Toni will, from the looks of it, have her hands busy for a bit with all of that added to her already
bursting schedule.

Still they’re all things that Toni knows will happen sooner rather than later.

Needs must, as the saying goes, and Toni needs all of the data and variables she can get her hands on.

If she’s going to build a protection for the world, if she’s going to forge a armor for the entire planet, *a sword and shield for an entire species*, then she needs all of the materials she can possibly find to work with.

Because the one other thing she really needs might be the one thing she’ll be unable to get her hands on in the end.

*Time.*

Toni feels as if there’s a clock counting down in the back of her mind, an hourglass filled with sharp edged sand that cuts at her more and more with every second that passes.

So there’s not a second to lose.

Toni will put this portion of her newfound knowledge into action even as she works on plans and outlines and ideas to expand it even further in the future.

Time is of the essence and there’s no rest for the wicked after all.

And Toni has always been very very bad.

Step one is the fact that, even though the Mark VII is basically brand new, Toni already has the Mark VIII ready for fabrication. This new armor will have added shielding and a vast collection of weaponry that the current iteration of the suit doesn’t have.

The Mark VIII will be a heavy hitter in the artillery sector compared to even the Mark VII.

Brute strength and penetrative force had been sorely needed against the Chitauri and now Toni has upped the armor’s threshold for both.

And this is, of course, only the beginning.

The first of many additions to what Toni intends to be an actual Iron *Legion* in truth.

All in all it’s not bad for a handful of hours work.

And yet, somehow, it doesn’t feel like enough.

Every time Toni closes her eyes all she can see is the vast emptiness of space and all of the monsters that live there.

With that nightmare playing on repeat in the back of her mind Toni isn’t sure if anything will *ever* seem like enough.

Not against these fresh horrors that haunt her now.

Not against the monster that Loki had warned her about, the one laying in wait out there in the stars.

Because this? The invasion? Loki and his warnings? Everything that’s happened in the past
seventy-two hours?

Toni knows, with a bone deep certainty, that it’s only the beginning.

Something more, something else, is coming.

It may or may not be a Mad Titan.

The one whom, according to Loki and the sick slice of dread that even now cuts down Toni’s spine, will one day cast a shadow on Earth so great that it will stretch all the way out into infinity.

Either way Toni plans to be there to head it off at the pass.

And she may not be enough, may not measure up to the task, may fall short in this like she has in so many other things, but that doesn’t means she isn’t going to try.

That doesn’t mean she isn’t going build and create and fight until every last speck of strength is gone from her very soul.

That doesn’t mean she isn’t going to use every bit of wit and cunning and sheer bloody mindedness she possesses to rail against the coming of this particular night.

Just as JARVIS had said to her before.

Toni will press as far as she has to, will dig as deep as necessary, will fly as high as needed, in order to do what needs to be done.

Toni is going to protect her family and this precious, beautiful, world and all of the endless possibilities it contains.

Or, at the very least, she plans to die trying.

~~~

Toni finally manages to pull herself out of the workshop around lunch time.

She slips into the flight suit with ease and makes her way up to the penthouse, a smoothy in one hand thanks to the bots determination and JARVIS’ assurance that this one doesn’t contain antifreeze.

She stops long enough to drain her drink, set the glass down on a side table, and press a kiss to a distracted Pepper and amused Happy’s cheeks in turn.

“Find me a target please, J,” Toni requests as she lets the armor cocoon her.

“My pleasure, Miss,” JARVIS replies. “I believe I have just the place.”

And then she’s off again.

~~~

Toni spends the rest of the day bracing beams, lifting rubble, and carrying people up and down out of whatever precarious position they’re stuck in.

She flits from place to place like a particularly well armed metallic hummingbird on JARVIS’ recommendation.
The first responders have been out in waves since the beginning and Toni spots more than one hazmat team out too. There’s also the National Guard, the local police, and a handful of clusters of black and navy suits she’s sure belong to Fury’s little Girl Scout troop out and about as well.

But even with all these hands on deck there’s still work to be done.

Still people to rescue.

Still bodies to pull out of the rubble.

Still so much to do before the clean up and rebuilding can truly begin.

So Toni does.

~~~

It doesn’t take her long to realize just what she’s been unconsciously looking for since the moment she left the Tower.

Or, rather, who she’s been looking for.

Steve.

Because of course that’s who she’s been looking for out of the corner of her eyes and around every corner this entire time.

And, so far, she hasn’t seen him.

Hasn’t caught sight of those broad shoulders, that blond hair, that iconic jawline.

Toni had been reasonably sure she would, had been rather confident they’d run into each other again somehow because she can’t see Steve not being out and about during all of this.

A part of her can’t help but wonder if he’d actually kept the phone she’d given him.

Can’t help but wonder just what he’d say, just what he’d do, if she were to have JARVIS patch a call through to him right this very moment.

Wonders if he’d come if she called, if he’d accept her invitation to travel from crisis point to crisis point with her again like they had the day before.

Wonders if he’d smile at her if she tried talk to him or if that less than stuble disdain she’d seen on his face on the helicarrier would make an even more vicious reemergence.

Toni swipes the thoughts away harshly.

There’s no use lingering over them.

No use debating and agonizing over questions she already knows the answers to.

Equations she’s already solved.

Steve is bright and bold and beautiful.

And Toni …

Toni has work to do.
“JARVIS,” Toni calls as she heaves another car up and out of the way. “Send a message for me please?”

“Of course Miss,” JARVIS answers promptly in her ear. “For whom is the message intended and what shall its contents be?”

“Send it to Nick-at-Nite,” Toni tells him, “and I’ll leave the exact wording up to you but you let him know that I haven’t forgotten about what happened on the helicarrier. It’s been days now, the helicarrier’s docked, and I still want to see Coulson’s body.”

“Consider it done, Miss,” JARVIS tells her.

And so she does.

Because JARVIS never lets her down.

~~~

It’s dark by the time she gets back to the Tower, she makes her way down to the workshop since Pepper and Happy are both already asleep.

Safe behind the workshop’s thick doors Toni peels herself out of the flight suit and heads for the shower.

Dressed in a small tent that she’s pretty sure are actually a pair of Happy’s sweat pants and one of Rhodey’s ratty old Air Force shirts that she long ago cut up until it hangs to just below her breasts, Toni makes her way back into the workshop proper.

The only thing on her mind, for once, is sleep and resting her still very sore ribs.

She only pauses her slow trek to the couch when, out of habit, she presses her fingertips to her lips and then reaches up to tap a kiss on glass right over the star in the center of Steve’s chest as she’s passing by.

Toni stands there frozen for a long moment before she clenches her eyes closed and forcefully pushes the thought firmly to the back of her mind.

It’s something she can deal with later, much later if she has her way about it.

So she forces herself to keep moving until she can finally collapse down carefully onto the couch.

“JARVIS?” Toni breathes the question out even as Butterfingers settles a blanket over her, DUM-E and U coming forward to huddle around the couch as is their habit now.

“Yes, Miss?” JARVIS tells her softly even as he dims the lights down a bit.

Toni drifts off surround by her children, the arc reactor glowing star like in the dim light of the workshop, and the tale of Icarus weaving its ways into her dreams just as it always does.

~~~


Toni soars through an endless blue sky, Rhodey at her side.
Above them Bucky keeps pace.

Below Steve dashes across the water’s surface.

She turns her face up towards the sun, eager for its warmth.

The gaping maw of space reaches out for her instead.

And from its mouth horrors are birthed into her world.

~~~

Toni wakes screaming.

“It is 4:29 a.m.,” JARVIS voice cuts through her panic and terror, wrapping around her like the well loved comfort that it is. “You are in the workshop of Stark Tower in New York. Colonel Rhodes is alive and well. Ms. Potts and Mr. Hogan are both alive and well. You are safe, Miss. We are all safe. There are no monsters here, you made sure of it.”

“There was an army,” Toni sobs, hands clawing at the arc reactor in her chest, at her hair, at the couch cushions.

Her breath comes in short, painful gasping bursts that she can’t seem to control, can’t seem to even out.

For a split second Toni feels as if she’s drowning again.

Suffocating in a watery sort of starlight.

She swears she can feel the water closing in over her head, can feel the ice that had wrapped around her in space settling in her lungs, can taste iron and battery acid on the back of her tongue.

“I-I’m not …” Toni chokes on the words, forces them out from between gritted teeth and around panting breaths. For a split second she tastes tepid water and battery acid high in the back of her throat. “I’m not … gonna be enough. I’m never going to be enough.”

“You are more than enough, Miss,” JARVIS tells her, tone stern but gentle all at the same time. “You are, you will be, you always have been.”

Toni wants to believe him.

*God does she want to believe him.*

And yet …

~~~

There are scorch marks on the gravel of the Tower’s roof, evidence of the backlash of Romanov shutting Selvig’s little machine down and closing the wormhole.

Toni doesn’t focus on them or the way the rock bites into soles of her bare feet.

Instead she makes her way towards the edge of the roof and tips her head back to stare up at the stars.

With parts of the power grid still down and with as high as the Tower is, for a moment Toni can see
their beauty shining brighter than they normally do.

And it’s as if the entire sky shatters and then all Toni can see is the wormhole.

All she can see is the army waiting on the other side.

All she can feel is the missile on her back and all she can see is the red-orange death she had delivered unto them.

For an instant Toni is floating among the stars.

And then she’s fading.

And then she’s falling.

“Miss,” JARVIS’ voice in her ear, tone sharp and insistent, snaps her back to herself between one breath and the next.

Toni sucks in a shuddering breath and forces herself to step back and away from the edge of the roof.

“I died,” Toni whispers, the realization slamming into her all at once.

She’d known of course. Had even made a shaky sort of peace with it in the moments before it happened.

She’d been ready to go. Been ready to let go.

Dying for the world, for Rhodey and JARVIS, for their family, and Steve had seemed worth it.

Still does.

And yet the realization of what had happened cuts into her all over again, fresh and harsh, because …

“If Hulk hadn’t caught me …” Toni murmurs thoughtfully.

JARVIS’ silence is heavy in her ear because they both know the truth. Hell Toni had even thanked Hulk for rescuing her, for being her hero, right there on the broken up city street.

With the armor nothing but dead weight around her and JARVIS unable to take control, if Hulk hadn’t caught her when he did then …

“It would kill him,” Toni whispers to herself as the horrible truth rails through her. She’s already turning, spinning on her heel to move back towards the roof’s access door, before the words have a chance to settle in the quiet around her.

“Miss?” JARVIS questions softly.

“That kind of fall,” Toni elaborates as she steps into the elevator, “with the armor a dead weight like that, and nothing to break up his momentum. It would kill him. An impact from that height, at those speeds? Rhodey would be dead.”

“Yes,” JARVIS agrees solemnly.

No other words are necessary because they both know it’s true.
“Pull up the War Machine schematics,” Toni tells JARVIS as the elevator comes to a stop at the workshop. “This takes precedence.”

“Of course,” JARVIS agrees.

~~~

Rhodey has caught Toni before she hit the ground more times than she can count.

Has lifted her up from the seething water of her mind, has pulled her down and away from the scorching heat of the sun-like burn of all of her mistakes.

Rhodey walked into the desert and carried her out of the heat and the sand.

Toni will be damned if she’ll stand back and watch him fall without doing anything and everything in her power to make sure she, or something she made with her own two hands, is there to catch him in return.

~~~

“Miss,” JARVIS’ call cuts through her concentration.

Blinking, Toni forces herself to focus on him instead of back down on what she’s been working on. Toni’s been stripping pieces off of the Mark VIII’s schematics and meticulously incorporating some of its new framework into the upgrades she’s planning for War Machine.

Anything to keep Rhodey as safe as possible.

War Machine Mark III is going to be a thing of devastating beauty.

Just like the new firewalls and offensive parameters JARVIS has already begun to design for TASHA will be.

“What’s up, baby boy?” Toni asks absently as she leans back from the worktable and the designs and blueprints she’s been working on.

“Dr. Banner has once more taken up residence in his lab,” JARVIS answers promptly. “Ms. Potts also wishes to inform you that the NDA’s requested from Ms. Escutia have arrived by courier.”

“I’m glad Bruce’s settling in so well,” Toni muses as she twirls just a bit in her chair. “And Priscilla’s working as fast as always. Bet she didn’t even blink about the aliens. I should get her to start working on some space treaties or something. She could probably litigate our way to galactic peace, especially if Pepper helps.”

“Indeed,” JARVIS agrees dryly. “Ms. Escutia and Ms. Potts are both the very pictures of poise and professionalism. Unlike some.”

“I both resent and resemble that remark, J,” Toni grins softly. “Guess I’d better go upstairs and get presentable before I invade Bruce’s lab and throw paperwork in his direction. Getting everything out into the air will hopefully make everything go much more smoothly.”

~~~

“Bruce, darling,” Toni sing-songs as she swings her way into the lab she already considers his.

There’s a stack of papers under one arm and two of her specially made shakes held in her hands.
Bruce blinks up at her, eyes carrying that familiar glazed over look of pure focus, before he shakes it off.

“Hey,” Bruce gives her a slightly awkward smile and a little half wave.

Toni wants to wrap him in cashmere blankets.

Which is actually a doable thing for her so she makes a mental note to order a few dozen later. Or, more likely, to have JARVIS order them for her, preferably in a plethora of colors. She’s thinking earth and jewel tones both for variety.

“Did you miss me?” Toni ask as she puts one shake down on the desk and uses her free hand to grab the thick stack of papers from beneath her arm.

She slides the stack and the remaining shake across the desk in Bruce’s direction.

“Well I’ve been running the data you compiled but since you never came down I was kind of beginning to think you were avoiding me,” Bruce jokes softly, lips quirked in a strained little half smile.

“Me, avoid you?” Toni asks as she proper her hip against the desk and picks her shake back up to take a slow sip from the straw. “Get that thought out of that gorgeous brain of yours, handsome, I’ve just been a bit busy. Decided I’d save seeing my new favorite doctor until I could fully appreciate the experience.”

“Right,” Bruce says as he just stands there for a moment, feet shuffling just a bit and hands flexing like he’s refraining from fidgeting with something.

Toni stares at him and takes another slow, pointed, sip of her shake.

“What’s uh,” Bruce gestures to the shake and the stack of paperwork in front of him, “what’s all this then?”

“Well one of those is a handcrafted masterpiece that’s good for both of our general well being and hopefully long lives,” Toni answers. “And the other’s a chlorophyll chip, banana, kiwi, peanut butter, and blueberry shake.”

“That sounds …” Bruce trails off with a slight grimace.

“Absolutely disgusting according to most everyone I know,” Toni tells him cheerfully. “It’s a bit of a daring and acquired taste but I have, unfortunately, managed to acquire it. Plus I’ve been told daring is caring.” Toni pauses for a second. “Or at least that’s how I think that saying goes.”

“It’s really not,” Bruce sighs but Toni thinks she can see a hint of a smile lingering in the corner of his mouth as he picks his shake up and gives it a tentative sip.

Bruce pauses, makes a contemplative noise in the back of his throat, and then takes another sip.

“You like it?” Toni asks.

“It’s … unique that’s for sure,” Bruce says and then takes another, deeper, sip. “Reminds me of something I had in college once. It kind of tasted a lot like this if I remember right.”

“Well that is an ominous statement if I’ve ever heard one,” Toni can’t help but tease him just a bit. Toni is, after all, very well acquainted with the more adventurous food and drink options that are
often available to college students no matter their age.

Rhodey still shivers in disgust at some of the things he used to catch her eating whenever she remember food was a thing that existed without him there to shove it in her direction.

He hadn’t allowed her to be alone with unground coffee beans for a handful of months after that one time.

“I did get food poisoning from that, in the interest of full disclosure,” Bruce shrugs. “But that’s not really a concern for me anymore. Besides, you’re drinking it too so if I’m going down you’re coming with me.”

Toni bites out a delighted laugh.


Bruce shrugs just a bit but his almost smile is all the apparent than it had been moments before.

“So you said this,” Bruce taps the fingers of his free hand on top of the stack of paper, “was for our general well being right? Want to elaborate on that a bit?”

Toni’s amusement seeps away quickly.

If the look on Bruce’s face is anything to go by he catches the shift in her mood almost right away.

“It’s an NDA,” Toni tells him evenly. “A very, very thorough NDA.”

“Ah, right,” Bruce winces just a bit, something dimming in his face as his expression goes wry. “You do know you can’t actually sue me if I was to break this for some reason right? Not that I would per say but I’m just putting that out there. I don’t really have … assets anymore and uh… the Other Guy ...well prison’s not really an option either.”

Toni bites back a snort because yes, she is more than aware. But then that was never what this was about, at least not with Bruce. At least not completely.

Protecting her family will always come first for Toni. She will cover all of her bases, dot her t’s, cross her i’s, do whatever she has to or can to protect them all.

And yet even with all of that, even with all of the precautions she will always take to safeguard what is hers, that doesn’t mean there isn’t room in there to add Bruce to that circle of protection.

Even if, in the end, it’s not in the capacity she’s begun to hope it might be.

But as of this moment it’s out of her hands for the most part. She needs this one thing from Bruce to continue forward. Needs him to be willing to take this step, to trust her this far just like he had when he’d gotten into the car with her. When he’d let her lead him into the Tower and offer him a home.

He’s already trusted her before, has already trusted her further than she ever would have in his position. Now he just needs to do it one more time.

And if he isn’t willing to do that then Toni will just have to recalculate.

“Bruce,” Toni starts carefully, “this isn’t an ordinary NDA. As a matter of fact let that be lesson number one around here, very little of what you see is or will be completely ordinary.”

Bruce stares at her silently, expectantly. Toni thinks she can see that same sliver of vulnerability in
him now, in this moment, as she could before when she’d showed him to this lab in the first place.

“I told you that you had a place with me,” Toni tells him once again in what seems to be becoming a bit of a habit between the two of them. “I meant that, I still mean it. This lab, a place in this Tower, in basically anywhere I am or anywhere you want to be? It’s all yours. If you want it. But you’re not the only person I have to protect. And this?” Toni reaches over and taps the paperwork. “This is one of the ways I do that protecting. On all sides. I figured you’d appreciate the precautions.”

“I do,” Bruce agrees lowly. “Trust me, I got one hell of an angry green lesson about not being cautious enough years ago.”

“He’s a sweetheart,” Toni defends lightly before she sobers again and taps at the post-it note on the front of the paperwork. “But my adoration for your greener half aside, that number is for my personal lawyer, Priscilla Escutia. She’s vicious and almost uncomfortably thorough. So read the packet and call her if you need to. Call her even if you don’t. She’s ready and able to go over this thing with you line by line if needs be. And then, when you’ve made it all the way through, you either sign it or you don’t. It’ll be up to you, handsome.”

“Sounds … reasonable.” Bruce huffs out with a small laugh as he shakes his head, eyes trained down on the pile of paperwork.

“Contrary to popular belief I’ve been known to be reasonable on very very rare occasions,” Toni tells him. “I’ll leave you to read it but you need to know one more thing.”

Toni waits until Bruce is looking up at her again before she speaks.

“No matter what way this goes,” Toni says softly, but still utterly honest, “even if you don’t sign this, even if you decide you’ve changed your mind and you don’t want to stay here, I’m not going to leave you twisting in the wind. Especially not after I just managed to get my hooks into you a bit.”

“Okay,” Bruce dips his head in a small nod. “I can’t … I won’t make you any promises but I’ll read it. And I’ll call the lawyer if I need to.”

“That’s all I’m asking, handsome,” Toni tells him as, her piece said, she straightens up from the beside the desk and turns to head back towards the elevator, shake in hand.

She wiggles her free hand at him in a small wave as she steps inside and the doors begin to close.

Bruce waves back awkwardly, face set in a pensive expression, but Toni’s pleased to see the way his free hand pulls the packet just a bit closer right before the doors cut off her view.

Now all she has to do is play the waiting game to see just how her future with Bruce is going to go.

“You think he’ll sign it J?” Toni can’t help but ask.

“He would be a fool not to,” JARVIS tells her evenly, voice calm over her earpiece. “You have been … more than generous in more ways than one to Dr. Banner. I believe he is intelligent enough to realize that. And if he does not? Then the loss will be very much his own.”

Toni smiles just a bit.

JARVIS, her sweet boy.

Always so quick to defend.
She really does love him so.

~~~

Flight suit on, Toni goes out again intending on spending a few hours shifting the heavier debris in the more precarious place.

Maybe get her hands on a few of the Chitauri pieces that haven’t been collected before.

Not that she really needs to of course, she’ll be up to her elbows in them in no time at all she’s sure, but then Toni’s always been a bit impatient when it comes to shiny new toys.

Plus, in Toni’s opinion, those sky-sleds the Chitauri had been flying on look particularly shiny and there’s plenty of them littering the ground and the rooftops in various stages of exploded.

Just ripe for the taking.

And honestly Toni has always been a bit of a magpie.

~~~

Picking her way over one of the now named Leviathan drop ships Toni keeps up a steady stream of chatter with JARVIS as they run scans and toss ideas back and forth.

JARVIS is, of course, tuned in to the emergency service channels and will tell Toni if there’s anything or anywhere else she might be needed. But, thanks to the combined efforts of so many different departments, there doesn’t seem to be much of a use for her at any specific area at the moment.

So Toni has some spare time to do some more exploring.

Which is, of course, why she looks down from where she’s standing on what amounts to the thing’s head and immediately sees Steve.

He’s standing there, a few yards away, hands on his hips, shield on his back, and head tilted to the side as he stares at her.

For a split second Toni considers leaving. Considers acting like she hasn’t spotted him and just engaging the repulsors and taking to the sky to get away from him.

But …

It’s Steve.

And, despite everything, that still, will likely always, mean so much to Toni.

So all Toni can really do is engage the repulsors, jump off of the Leviathan’s head, and land a few feet away from Steve.

She’s taken enough scans at the moment anyways.

Plus Toni is going to get one of these nightmare space whales for her very own if she has anything to say about it.

Which she obviously does.
“Can I help you, Stars and Stripes?” Toni asks, faceplate still down because again, every bit of armor counts when dealing with Steve.

“I was in the area,” Steve answers. “Heard tell you were out here is all. Can I ask what you’re doing?”

Toni takes a moment to stare at him, debating with herself.

Now that she’s spoken to him it really would be easier to just cut out. She might not be good at outright ignoring Steve but she’s already proven she can walk away from him if necessary.

But then Toni so very rarely ever takes the easy way out.

Even when she more than likely should.

So of course Steve is, will be, has always been, no exception.

“Data collection,” Toni finally breaks the silence just as Steve shifts on his feet and opens his mouth like he’s going to speak again. “Scans and documentation mainly, with some attempts at surface composition and possible weak point analysis. I want to get as much information on these Leviathan drop ships specifically as I can before they’re moved and compromised even worse than they already are. The few that came through got damaged when we dropped them and there’s no telling what damage transportation will do to them.”

“That a good idea,” Steve says. “Smart.”

“Well,” Toni can’t help but drawl just a bit, “I have been known to be vaguely intelligent on a rare occasion. Sometimes, when things get really wild, I even have a good idea or two.”

Steve seems to stall out for a split second, hands flexing on his hips and brows furrowing.

“That’s the rumor I’ve been hearing,” Steve finally offers up a few seconds later, tone halting and just a bit stilted. “Everyone says you’re real smart. And I can uh, I can see that too, that you really are a genius, like Howard was.”

Any amount of pleasure Toni might have felt begin to bud to life inside of her at hearing Steve call her a genius like he really means it dies a quick and vicious death.

Howard.

Of course it’s going to come back around to Howard yet again between her and Steve.

Because, long in the grave or not, that man relishes being a pain in her collective everything.

“So they keep telling me,” Toni manages to bite the words out. “Well, as nice as this was, Captain, I’ve got things to do and places to be.”

Toni takes a step back and engages the repulsors again.

“Stark,” Steve calls even as he takes a step forwards towards her, one hand raised.

But this time ignoring him is as easy as breathing as Toni turns and rockets up and away.

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“Perhaps a form of negative enforcement training could be applied to the Captain?” JARVIS asks.
“A fairly harmless and localized tranquilizer could be applied whenever a taboo subject is raised. He would learn I’m sure. Eventually. And, in the meantime, I would be honored to reinforce the training. Personally.”

High up in the sky above New York Toni does a barrel roll for the sheer joy of it and laughs.

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“JARVIS?”

“Yes, Miss?”

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Toni wakes screaming.

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New York really does look so very different from so high in the sky.

Like a glittering network of veins, like the pulsing heartbeat of all of humanity, a web of arteries filled up to the brim with light.

Each and every city or small town or quiet rural community that Toni has never been to, every patch of woods or water man hasn’t managed to touch yet, all of them are like this in their own ways.

Beautiful.

Precious.

Worth protecting with any and everything that Toni has.

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Toni spins through the night air, stars kaleidoscope around her.

For a moment she sees the open maw of space looming around her.

But only for a moment.

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“Miss,” JARVIS call to her.

“Yeah J?” Toni answers softly as she stares up into the blue sky.

“Dr. Banner is looking for you back at the Tower.” JARVIS tells her.

“Moment of truth then I guess,” Toni sighs.

She pats Lady Liberty fondly one final time and then rolls off the side of her crown, the armor catching her a split second later.

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“I can’t sign this,” Bruce says as soon as Toni steps into the lab.
Toni absorbs that statement like the blow that it is.

Then she compartmentalizes it as best she can, just as she always does, and takes a second to really look at Bruce.

He looks … frazzled for lack of a better term. Hair a bit wilder than before, shirt rumpled and brows creased.

The NDA is spread out on the desk in front of him, papers separated into various different piles.

“There a specific reason why?” Toni finally asks. “Because not all of it’s set in stone you know? I’d be willing to negotiate with you if there’s anything in particular you don’t agree on. I know some of the secrecy clauses can seem daunting …”

“Oh there’s a lot I don’t agree on in this thing Toni, but keeping my mouth shut about what goes on in the Tower or about your tech or your personal life isn’t one of them,” Bruce shoots back even as he grabs a stack of papers and shuffles through them until he finds a section he’s highlighted in bright green. “But how about this for starters?”

Bruce slides the paper across the desk towards her.

Toni steps forward to read it only to blink in confusion.

“This is about your allowance?” Toni asks because that’s kind of a small thing to put up so much of a fuss about in Toni’s opinion.

“Yes this about the allowance, and the bank account,” Bruce huffs as he puts another paper down between them. “And the patent protections,” another paper, “and the spot on SI’s roster,” another, “and the legal defense fund,” another few papers make their way onto the desk, “and the charities,” another small stack, “it’s just … it’s just all of it Toni.”

“Is it not enough?” Toni arches a brow in his direction because this is something she can work with way better than him rejecting the entire thing outright for another reason would be. “I mean I know it’s not really all that much but Priscilla always insists on lowballing these kinds of things, Pepper too really, but if I tell them to increase any of them they will.”

Bruce makes a wounded noise low in the back of his throat.

“Toni this is more yearly income than I made in my entire career,” Bruce says, tone just a bit exasperated. “Why in the hell would you offer me this on top of what you’ve already given me?”

“I told you,” Toni repeats yet again, the words coming out slowly and just a bit confused, “you have a place with me. I’ll keep saying it if you need me to but that means I’m going to make sure everything’s taken care of for you from now on. Might not be able to really do anything to you if you were to break an NDA like that but, again, like I told you before it’s not just about you.”

Bruce pauses, stares, blinks.

“You honestly mean everything you just said don’t you?” There’s something tight in Bruce’s expression, something Toni can’t exactly name.

“Of course I do,” Toni reassures him. “This isn’t supposed to be a cage Bruce, what I’ve been offering you, it’s supposed to be a parachute. A life line. A new beginning for you and Hulk, however you want it to be.”
“Can we negotiate on the allowance?” Bruce sighs after a long moment.

“Sure,” Toni nods even as she feels something like fondness and victory begin to blossom to life in her chest. “How much of an increase do you want?”

“I don’t want an increase, Toni,” Bruce tells her. “I don’t want any of it. I’ll take you up on the patent protections and the legal defense if it comes down to it, same as a place to stay here in the Tower for now, because I’d be an idiot not to. But when it comes to your money? I don’t … I don’t want that from you. That’s not something I really care about.”

Toni feels that swell of fondness in her chest grow even bigger than before.

“Well I hate to tell you that I absolutely refuse to be talked down by even a single comma,” Toni tells him cheerfully. “Especially since I’m pretty sure Priscilla already has your accounts set up and topped off already. I’d hate for her hard work to go to waste. So you might as well sign this one right here because the sooner you do the sooner I can welcome you officially to the dark side and all of the really cool shit we keep here.”

“Goddamnit Toni,” Bruce deflates just a bit. “You’re basically a force of nature aren’t you?”

“That’s the spirit,” Toni grins. “You’ll get used to it after a while.”

“I’m not using the money,” Bruce says even as he turns, grabs a pen, and turns towards the signature and initial pages he’d obviously set aside.

“Keep telling yourself that, handsome,” Toni tells him as she watches him initial and sign, his handwriting slanted and sloppy.

“How long is it gonna be before you’ve managed to wrangle the others into one of these?” Bruce asks, head down as he keeps signing. “Pretty sure you’ll have a time on your hands getting the rest of the team to sign on. Romanov is a spy and I feel like Barton would either sell himself into slavery for a fraction of this or he’d haggle with you for the hell of it.”

“Well we’ll have to see about that won’t we?” Toni hums back even as her mind whirls, ideas sparking and colliding at the speed of light.

Finally Bruce scratches his signature on the final line and then starts to shuffle the papers back into order. His hands move quickly through whatever organization system he’d set up, barely even looking at the page numbers as he goes, until they’re all back in one large pile again.

Satisfaction arcing through her, Toni can’t help but grin again, wide and open.

“Now that all of that’s out of the way,” Toni says smoothly, “I’ve got one very important question to ask you.”

“I think I’m going to end up developing an ingrained fear response to that tone of voice,” Bruce sighs back as he fiddles with the stack of papers in his hands. “But go ahead and ask.”

“What do you think about AI?” Toni asks, eyes drinking in every detail of Bruce’s reaction.

“Artificial Intelligence?” Bruce blinks, obviously taken aback by the swift change of direction. “It depends on what you’re talking about I guess. Do you mean A.I. like they talk about in science fiction or a V.I. that gives off the appearance of an A.I.?”

“Neither,” Toni denies. “Though old school sci-fi would probably come closer. I’m talking about
fully actualized A.I., here handsome. Someone, not some thing, that can learn and grow and be.”

“I think it’s a fantastical idea,” Bruce answers. “Something the scientific community has debated over for decades now but is still in the early building block stages of even getting close to something like that. Your MIT bot is still talked about in a lot of circles you know but the true singularity of consciousness is a long way off for u-” Bruce pauses, blinks again, and then his eyes narrow sharply. “Why are you asking me this?”

Toni’s smiles is wide, open, and more than a bit devious.

“No.” Bruce breathes the denial out, something like awe and disbelief flaring to life in his eyes. “T- there’s no way you’ve gotten … how close have you gotten?”

“Oh I’d say I’ve gotten pretty close,” Toni’s grin absolutely refuses to fade. “Wouldn’t you say so baby boy?”

“I would rather hope that I have managed to garner some degree of credit for my growth,” JARVIS speaks up into the air of Bruce’s lab. “But as I am a dutiful son I will refrain from pointing that out any further. Although I would point out that actual introductions might be the most prudent course of action at the moment.”

“Aw J,” Toni whines lightly. “So mean to me.”

Across from her Bruce makes a wheezing sound as the NDA drops from his hands and hits the floor, papers scattering all of the place.

“Bruce,” Toni says, “I think it’s time for you to meet JARVIS.”

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Later, once Bruce has finally retreated, mumbling the entire way, to his room after hours of conversation between the three of them and a promise to introduce him to the bots, Toni heads back down to the workshop.

Still, despite all the ups and downs of the day, in the back of Toni’s mind an idea whirls and whirls. It’s extreme and unsettling and outright crazy to even consider it in a lot of ways but …

Well, she’s been reliably informed more than once that she’s all of those things and so much more.

Besides Toni’s already made the offer, has already extended that particular olive branch more than once in the wake of everything that’s happened. Has already been toying with the idea since that moment when she’d found herself standing in a circle in the middle of a rubble filled street.

Bruce’s comment, that one single throw away line, has just brought it back to the forefront of her mind.

Building on her initial idea, making it more extensive, making it more permanent, wouldn’t really be too far of a stretch.

So maybe it really does have merit.

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“JARVIS?”
“Yes, Miss?”

Toni wakes screaming.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Pepper asks softly, tone just a bit dubious as she stares down at the projection on the holotable in front of them.

“Absolutely not,” Toni chimes. “But I’m sure it’s what needs to be done.”

“It’s just …” Pepper grimaces and trails off, an unfamiliar hesitant expression stealing across her face for a split second.

“It’s just strange, Boss,” Happy cuts in then from Pepper’s side. He’s leaning forwards, elbows propped on his knees as he stares directly at her. “Out of character I guess. And kind of … worrying really.”

Toni bites back a grimace.

They’re not exactly wrong and yet …

There’s a part of Toni, as guarded and wounded and hesitant as it might be, that wants this anyways. Wants to, at the very least, have this be an option for the future.

It’s logical in a lot of ways, makes sense.

But Toni can’t deny that there’s also the fact that a part of her wants this. Yearns for it even if she knows that, more than likely, it will never work out.

Or, if it does, she’ll somehow end up on the outside of everything looking in.

She’s so much bad code after all and she’s already so very blessed with what she has.

And yet…

“There’ll still be boundaries if it comes down to it,” Toni tells them softly. “More precautions and safety measures than you can shake a stick at. They’d be monitored constantly for anything that could come back and bite us in the ass. I’d never put JARVIS or the boys or any of you at risk like that.”

“We know that, Toni,” Pepper reassures her softly even as she moves to sit down on the couch beside Happy. “But still do you really think it’ll be necessary? I mean, it’s over right? You stopped whatever those things were didn’t you? The Chitroni? We’re safe now.”

Toni goes still and her breathing goes unexpectedly shallow, something she can scarcely afford on a normal day.

“Chitauri,” Toni manages to press out.

“Boss?” Happy straightens up from his hunched over position, eyes narrowed and a frown tugging at his mouth.

It takes Toni a split second but she shakes the feeling off sharply, unsure of what, exactly, had
brought it on in the first place.

“The aliens, they’re called the Chitauri Pep,” Toni corrects again, louder and steadier than before. A part of her doesn’t want to say what she’s about to, doesn’t want to burden them like this, but the rest of her knows they need to know. “And that’s why this is so important, why I’m even considering all of this. The portal? The invasion? It’s just the start.”

“What?” There’s horror in Pepper’s voice then, in the lines of Happy’s face.

Rhodey will need to know too but Toni has faith that, by the time he’s come back, he’ll have likely worked it out already just from what Toni’s already told him.

Her honey bear is, as so many like to forget, a genius in his own right as well.

“What I saw up there,” Toni presses forward to drive the point home, “what was waiting on the other side of that wormhole, what Loki said to me here in the Tower, hell what Thor said to me back on the helicarrier about Earth being ready for a higher form of war? All of it adds up to one thing Pep. Earth’s just been pushed onto an entirely new playing field. And we can either take steps or we’ll be overtaken. We’re already behind a lot of what we’ve seen of the other races out there. So we need to hammer home every advantage we can possibly find. This is just one of them.”

Toni can see indecision warring with fear and what seems like dawning understanding and resignation on Pepper’s face.

“It’s logical,” Toni voices her thought from earlier as she goes in for the kill. “The Tower’s a prime location for deployment into the city which has already been a target once. There’s plenty of room here too and it’s completely under JARVIS’ and mine’s control. Plus with the upgrades I’ve already got in the pipeline it’s going to be about ten times safer than anywhere else.”

“We could buy a building somewhere else,” Pepper offers. It is, they all know, a last ditch effort. “Maybe an apartment complex if you want?”

“And it won’t be built to the codes and exacting standards we used on the Tower,” Toni shuts the idea down. “I’d be open to building something out of the city in the future if we need to but that won’t work right now Pepper and you know it. We need something established sooner rather than later.”

There’s a moment of charged silence.

“Alright,” Pepper finally relents even as Happy sighs and leans back into the couch beside her again with a short nod. “We all know you’d do it anyways because you don’t actually need my permission and you never will, but I’m not going to argue with you about it. Plus the construction team’s going to be repairing the penthouse so they can start working on the other floors when they’re done.”

Toni’s grin is bright and unabashed.

No she does not and never has needed Pepper’s permission for anything but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t want her opinion or her understanding. Hers and the rest of their family as well.

They are, after all, in this together.

And this step is going to be a very big one for Toni to take if or, more likely, when, push finally comes to shove.

So it’s better to be prepared, better to already have what she needs in place.
This is just another step in that direction.

Beside her the blueprints for the redesign of the Tower shine.

On the front of the projected Tower a single, shining, arc reactor blue A can be seen.

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