And Miles to Go Before I Sleep

by Cluegirl

Summary

They all made mistakes. They all have regrets. They all have nightmares, suspicions, and questions they'd like to ask.

And they all left business behind them that was never quite finished.

This is the story of how the Avengers ask those questions, get their answers, and come together like fucking adults to make things right again.

- Inspired by #whereisfalcon by perspi
Tidying up

Chapter Summary

In which are the wounded and the consequences shouldered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*** Siberia ***

Neither of them said a word as they limped together out of the bunker, each step just shy of a tottering fall, each breath crowded with silent groans and regrets. Steve kept them both moving, navigating by way of Bucky’s shaky nods and head tips to lead them to the massive ground level doors, dragged further apart now than either of them had done on the way in.

But if the snow there had held the steaming prints of Iron Man’s repulsor boots alongside Bucky’s and Steve’s tracks, it had been only briefly, for new snow had blown in to wipe all trace of them under a blanket of powdery white.

_Dammit, Tony_, Steve kept the words behind his teeth as he scanned the hazy, wind-scraped snowfield to try and figure out what the hell they were gonna do now. He could see the Quinjet where they’d left it, a low, sloping mound of grey, scraped clear by the winds on top, but skirted almost to the cockpit window by the blowing snow.

It was new, bleeding-edge technology, that jet, equipped with a repulsor engine that would never need fuel, and enough stealth and jamming technology that it could get them just about anywhere in the world without another machine knowing about it. But it was also about as subtle to look at as diamonds on Lent, and would leave hundreds of living witnesses behind wherever they managed to put the thing down.

His hands spasmed, twitching with cramp and the memory of the unforgiving ridge of metal against this palms. Helmet release catch. Smash. Rip. No more AI to guide Tony’s fists. Brown eyes full of terror, disbelief, certainty...

“Zemo,” Bucky gritted beside him, and Steve shocked from his memory with a damp gasp.

He grabbed the intrusive vision by the throat, shoved it into a mental box, and slammed the lid. Bucky tipped a shaky nod toward the rented Snow Cat they’d passed coming in. Like the Quinjet, it was half-buried in the blowing snow, but still there, at least.

“I’ll get it,” Steve nodded, shifting his grip on Bucky’s wrist to ease him down where the door could give him some shelter from the wind. But Bucky clung, leaned heavily into Steve’s side, shaking his head so hard he nearly toppled them both over into the snow.

“No! He’s still here! He’s got the... He knows the-”

“I know, Buck, I know,” Steve answered, turning Bucky’s back to the rough hewn granite and cupping his chin to hold his gaze. “I promise I’ll go and find him, but you’re falling into shock right now, and if I don’t get you someplace warm, we won’t get a clear mile toward safety.”
Safety. Wherever that was. Steve drew a breath so crackling cold it almost seized his lungs up tight. The sudden, shocking flare of pain in his abused ribs had him instantly on his back again, shieldless, helpless, Iron Man a brutal, implacable weight on his chest, one gleaming scarlet fist that could stave in a tank’s armor with one blow plunging for his face. Concrete splintering to powder an inch from his ear when Steve flinched aside. Certainty of it coiling into his heart, crushing and colder than all the weight of Iron Man himself -- Tony would kill Bucky. And if he had to kill Steve first, he would do that too. And he wasn’t going to hesitate. Nothing Steve could say would stop him until Tony had both their blood on his hands --

No. Slam it in the box. Lock it tight. Later. Think on it later.

The breath gusted out of Steve all at once, vast and white as the wind unraveled it overhead. “The Snow Cat will have a heater,” he said, his voice cracking dry. “Maybe a med kit too. Let me get you into it, and I promise I’ll go find where Zemo crawled off to--”

“Don’t bother,” a voice called out of the blurring white, snapping Steve around into a futilely shieldless guard position. “He is in my custody already.” And with that, King T’Challa dropped from the rocky ledge overhanging the bunker’s entrance, and landed lightly in the snow.

“Steve,” Bucky warned, gripping his shoulder, tugging him back, or trying to.

“No, Buck,” Steve said, and stood his ground. To T’Challa, he called, “If you have Zemo, then you know Bucky had nothing to do with the bomb that killed your father.”

This won’t change anything

I don’t care

No! Slam the door. Lock it.

“This is true,” the young King allowed with the kind of nod that made Steve think sadly of Thor’s courtly grace. “But there are those who will hunt Sergeant Barnes for other crimes now that the world knows him for the Winter Soldier.”

“Steve, don’t!” Bucky tugged again, then shoved when Steve didn’t budge. “If I surrender,” he called, jostling past when Steve staggered on the icy stone, “If I give myself up, what will you do to Steve?”

And Steve’s heart seized up tight again, his left arm aching as the shield scraped off it, toppled free to clang on the ground with all the weight of a century behind it. All that, and still to be alone, left behind. Life sentence still counting inexorably onward. Steve clenched his fist, chinned up into the looming despair and readied himself for a fight.

“You can’t have Bucky without me,” he said. “Somebody’s gotta be on his side.”

T’Challa cocked his head, as if intrigued, or possibly sizing up which wounded soldier he ought to take down first. But all he asked was, “And who is on your side, Captain?”

Sam, Steve thought at once, Natasha. Clint, Wanda, even Lang, though God only knew why. All those who’d stayed to capture so Steve and Bucky could steal the Quinjet and rush out here to Siberia... straight into Zemo’s trap. He shook his head. “They’ve fought enough of my battles,” he said, refusing to see the angry, appalled look Bucky shot him.

The Wakandan King merely reached up and pulled the helmet from his suit, saying, “I think, perhaps, we have all fought enough for today.” He half turned, sweeping an arm out across the
snowy grey world. “I have a jet that can carry us all to safety, if you will place your trust in my offer.”

“What about Zemo?” Bucky said at the same moment Steve blurted,

“What about Tony?”

T’Challa aimed a quizzical eyebrow at Steve. “Mr. Stark still lives, does he not?”

Steve nodded quickly, stealing a step from Bucky’s side. “Yes. He’s... he’ll be okay, but his suit’s down, and he’s got no way to call for help.”

“He’s still a Stark,” T’Challa smirked, “And no Stark is ever truly helpless.” Then he lifted his arm, as if to usher them away.

Steve stood his ground, the jet in question couldn’t be a large one -- there was no place within miles where it would be safe to land anything without VTOL capability. “Tony’s my friend,” he said. (So was I) “I’m not going to abandon him.”

Bucky made an incredulous groan. “Stevie, you gotta leave him be! He just tried to kill you -- he ain’t gonna take your help right now!”

“He doesn’t have scanning equipment to find his way out of the bunker! He could freeze down there if he passes out or gets lost!” Steve shot back, flashing a glare at the Wakandan King. “But you’re not supposed to be here any more than Stark is, and if Tony knows you are here, then he’ll have to report it to the UN. That’s what the Accords demand of unauthorized vigilante activity, isn’t it, your Majesty?”

T’Challa narrowed his eyes, but gave up a nod all the same. Steve met it with another. “And that means you can’t hand Zemo over to the UN either, or they’ll know that you broke the Accords too.”

“Stevie, what are you thinking?” Bucky growled as T’Challa chewed on the oversight and clearly didn’t enjoy the taste.

“I’m thinkin the only way Tony can get out of this without General Ross getting him over a barrel is if he’s got a really big chip to bargain with. And since Zemo’s a bargaining chip none of us can use without getting arrested...”

Bucky caught Steve’s arm in a shaking grip that still pinched like icy iron. “Steve, he knows! Zemo knows the triggers that-”

“That are only useful to him if he can say them within your hearing, Sergeant Barnes,” T’Challa put in, stepping through the high-drifted snow as if he’d never hunted either of them to the ground before. “He could say nothing at all to you if you were in my country. Wakanda has held its borders secure from all invaders since the first Whites began to carve Africa into territories. It was the deaths of Wakandans which set in motion Zemo’s plots against you, Captain, and involved you, Sergeant Barnes. It seems just to me that Wakanda should offer you shelter now. Accept my hospitality, accept my help, and the matter of what words Colonel Zemo knows need not be a matter of concern.”

“Until it is” Bucky cried, “and then people get killed!”

Steve pulled him back, ducked a shoulder under the ragged stump that was all Tony had left of Hydra’s terrible fist, and bore his oldest friend steady. “One step at a time, Buck,” he said. “Let’s leave some of the problems to solve tomorrow, okay?”
Bucky clicked a frustrated sound against his teeth, but he didn’t pull away when Steve slipped an arm around his waist and bore his shaking and exhausted weight forward a step. “Two years,” he mused, long, dark hair hanging in his face as T’Challa got in along his other side and balanced Bucky between them. “Two fucking years, I didn’t kill so much as a fly…”

“I know, Buck,” Steve promised, breaking a path through the snow, “We’ll figure it out.” Somehow, he didn’t add. Somehow.

Steve had been right about the jet. T’Challa’s plane was going to be a very tight fit for the three of them, even after they heaved Zemo out of the co-pilot’s seat and dumped him headlong into the snow.

Steve took the man, bound and gagged and still plenty groggy, over his shoulder and set off back toward the bunker before Bucky could rouse to what Steve was doing, and decide to try and fight off T’Challa’s first aid care. If he was a little less than gentle about jostling as he carried his captive back down to the missile chamber, Steve didn’t let it bother him.

In the bunker entrance, he paused to pull the helmet from his head, and turn it over to check the embedded comm unit. It showed no obvious damage, so Steve pressed his index finger into the smooth spot near the temple, and held it for two seconds.

The link crackled to life, the AI’s voice, tinny and panicked, frantically trying to raise a response from Tony on all Avengers frequencies.

“Friday,” he cut in, “Mr. Stark is alive and uninjured. Please dispatch rescue and prisoner containment to my coordinates as fast as possible.”

The AI’s voice cut out abruptly, shocked. Then after a moment, she returned, cool and serene once more. “Acknowledged,” she lilted. “Rescue will reach your location in two hours, Captain Rogers. Will medical aid be required?”

And there, Steve had to huff a laugh. “If you can get Tony to sit still for it, I’m sure he could use an aspirin or two. And it’s not Captain, Friday. Not anymore.” And then he dropped his helmet in the snow at the door, shouldered Zemo higher, and carried him down into the darkness.

It was there, under the judging corpses of five brutal patriots who had suffered, killed, and now had died for their country, that Steve bore Zemo to the ground and stripped him all but naked. He left T’Challa’s secure bindings in place, roughly shredding through sleeves and collars, layer upon layer, until the man who had set himself the Avenger’s judge, jury, and saboteur lay shivering on the bare concrete in shorts and shame alone.

“They told me you used to command a kill squad when you worked in Sokovia,” Steve said, using the cuffs from his utility belt to attach Zemo securely to one of the cryogenic tanks, wrists and ankles both secured to different hard points, and the raw, bloody urge to murder the man shoved down low beneath Steve’s aching chest. “So we both know that you got away with more than your fair share of murders in your day. Political killings tend to be pretty brutal, don’t they? Usually all about leaving a big mess and a loud message to anybody who might cause trouble.”

He gathered up the rags of Zemo’s clothing, still musing aloud. “So I’m pretty confident that there are sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, wives, siblings and lovers alive in the world today who’d say you took everything from them too. And when you’re on trial for this latest game of yours, I’m sure some of them will watch it, and try to find some sense of justice in what the UN decides to do with you.”
He stooped, caught Zemo’s chin with two fingers, and locked their gazes together. “It won’t be justice though. You and I both know you don’t have a shred of regret over any life you’ve taken, whether somebody told you to kill them, or they just got into your way. No, watching you suffer won’t be justice for them, for the survivors who’re still mourning for your victims; it’ll just be vengeance. Which is fitting, I suppose, since this is what all this was about in the first place. But Bucky is not your Judas Goat, and neither am I. You get to carry the guilt for the lives you’ve taken all by yourself.”

Then he checked the bindings one last time, and stood to leave, dropping the rags like a trail of breadcrumbs behind him as he went.

Chapter End Notes

I took one liberty here that is not precisely laid out, or at least thickly hinted at in the film; I had Steve aware of Zemo’s affiliation with the Sokovian kill-squad. Since this was a detail that the audience got by way of FRIDAY telling that to Tony, it is a stretch that Steve might know it BUT it’s not exactly a stretch that Bucky might, and so I’m standing by that choice.
The first package had been the phone, and while it had been unexpected, it hadn't exactly been a surprise.

Because it was always going to be Steve who reached out to Tony -- had always been Steve who'd reached out to make it right after every time they tore strips off each other; Steve, who spoke the language of apology and forgiveness more fluently than anyone in Tony's life ever had; Steve who always seemed to be the first out of the stubborn, contentious pair of them to offer his hand after they'd butted heads and picked bones and shouted themselves stupid over any little thing.

The phone, the letter, the olive branch that they represented... Tony should have known they'd be coming as soon as he finished dropping Zemo's frostbitten ass off in Vienna. If he'd wanted to think about it, he probably could have named the day, so when the phone and letter arrived at the Avengers compound, it was almost more of a comforting irritation than anything else, because yeah, of fucking course it did.

The second package was another thing altogether.

When the second package arrived with Steve's name on it, Tony didn't give himself time to think about it. He just slapped the thick manilla envelope onto the desk in the office he'd taken over from Steve, yanked the burner phone out of the drawer, and dialed the only number saved in the memory.

It rang five times without rolling to any kind of voice mail, and Tony had to bite his lip hard to quash the urge to snap the phone closed, take it back, end the conversation before it could even-

"Tony?" Steve's voice was rough, ragged and hushed, a warily hopeful note lingering through just that one word that drove a hook under Tony's ribs and tugged.

He took a deep breath, and slapped the heavy envelope against the blotter. "You didn’t leave a forwarding address,” he said, crisp and businesslike. Pepper would've approved.

Steve was silent for a long moment, then he gave a sigh. “No, I guess I didn’t.”

“Well that’s just rude," Tony snapped back, not quite so businesslike, but fuck it. "How the hell am I supposed to forward your mail to you then?"

There was a weighted silence, then a rustle and cough. "It shouldn’t really be a problem, Tony,” he said at last, voice pitched low, like he was trying not to wake someone nearby. “I never get much-”
“You're joking, right?” Tony scoffed. Cap got more fan mail than all the rest of them combined, even before his fans decided that he needed a show of support in the face of the media’s well-orchestrated smear campaign. Tony had hired an agency to deal with it all, returning each heartfelt declaration or frothing spite-bomb with a photo and a form letter, but they only dealt with the stuff addressed to Cap. “I got a shoebox full of envelopes with your given name on them just in the last three months since you bailed!”

A sigh. “There’s nobody left who’d write to me in New York.” The words were soft, weighted and somehow hollow at once. “Not anymore.”

“Well, I got a package in my hand right now, says you’re wrong,” Tony said, trying to punch through the weary gloom in Steve’s voice with angry cheer.

Another sigh, this one made up of amused annoyance, and Steve gamely asked, “What package, Tony?”

“Well, if it’s Dildo of the Month club, you’re gonna want to get your money back,” Tony replied with a smirk, “Eleven by fourteen, standard manila envelope can't hold much artificial joy unless they like 'em slim in Nigeria.”

“Oh, you're hilarious,” Steve growled, his eyeroll all but visible in the tone of his voice, and for a moment, it was just the two of them -- Tony prodding for weak spots, Steve humoring him -- and neither had ever tried to kill the other over ghosts no one could possibly save. Then Steve's voice sharpened and shook the easy, almost-comfort right off. "Wait. Is the package from Lagos?"

"That’s what the return address says," Tony replied, peering at the cramped handwriting on the Customs stickers. "Your man, 'Dr. Odogwu Ebrakumo' used a private courier to get this here, and I'm judging by the big red 'confidential,' and 'eyes only Capt. Steven G. Rogers' that he kinda wanted you to be the one to sign for it." So tell me where you are, Tony didn't add, nor, Tell me you're safe. Tell me you've got a place to sleep, that you aren't trying to live on Powerbars, and you've got someone other than Ghostface with you to watch your back...

Steve hesitated. "And you haven’t opened it yet?” he asked, something a little sharper than playful disbelief in his voice bringing Tony's hackles back up a bit. "Why should I do that?” he challenged. “It’s got your name on it.”

"Because it's a package with my name on it, and because you can?” Steve's tone matched Tony's precisely; clipped and snippy, with an undercurrent of 'dear god, why this again?' running like quicksand beneath it.

Tony kicked the desk chair into a spin and glared at the ceiling. "Yeah, well I’ve recently been reminded of just what a private person you are, Rogers."

That won a sigh, shallow and strangled, and a muted, dragging rustle that clearly indicated a facepalm in action. "Tony..." Steve growled, and somehow Tony found himself grinning to hear it.

"What?” He spread his innocent hands to the turning room and grinned. "I’m just sayin’!"

"Look,” Steve said, and his voice wasn't smiling, "I’ve already apologized to you for keeping-”

"Yeah, well that’s not the point here, Rogers,” Tony snapped, hoping to shoot the elephant in the room before Rogers could take its goddamned pants off. "The point is, a courier delivered this package to the compound an hour ago, and he almost wouldn't leave it because I couldn't conjure you up to personally sign for it." Tony thwapped the envelope against the desk for emphasis. "So
you need to give me a goddamned forwarding address so I can get it off my hands, okay?"

He expected the hesitation. Didn't like it, but after everything that had happened, not even Steve goddamned Rogers could waltz into the minefield that lay between them with no second thoughts at all. What Tony did not expect though, was the genuine regret and sorrow in Steve's voice when he answered, "You know I can't do that, Tony."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Steve, you gave me this goddamned phone," he snapped, claws out and not sorry. "You know I can figure out where you are if I want to, no matter what kind of anti trace measures you've managed to put on the thing!"

"I know." Steve came back with neither hesitation, nor heat. "And I also know you won't." It was all patient restraint, that voice, and it was just the thing to get right the fuck up Tony's nose.

"Oh, right, because I'm the one who busted up the-"

"It's because I've read the Accords, Tony," Steve cut through the rising tirade, battlefield steel and no mercy at all in his voice. "All of them, even the fine print, and so I know that if you have actionable knowledge of where to find me -- even a hypothesis -- you're obligated by that treaty to pass it on to Secretary Ross!"

Tony blinked. "Not necessarily. It could be to any agent of the oversight committee-"

"There is no oversight committee, Tony," Steve's voice was leaden cold now, unyielding in a way Tony hadn't ever wanted to hear. "There isn't even a stated agenda of appointing one anywhere in the Accords, just the assumption that sooner or later, one will be there. But Ross is named personally as the executive official until the committee that doesn't exist appoints someone else."

"I told you we'd amend it after-"

Steve rolled over his thin protest like a tank. "And if Secretary Ross finds out you have information that could lead to my capture and you kept it back, that's classified as an act of 'warlike collaboration' under the contract you've signed your God damn name to!" If there was anybody in the room with him, Steve’s angry snarl would definitely have them up and wondering who was getting told off now. "Ross will stick you in that goddamned death trap of a prison without so much as a trial if you give him half a chance, Tony, just like he did to Clint, and Sam, and Scott, and under the Accords’ waiver of due process for 'Human Allies of Enhanced Captives', nobody but him and the guards will ever know where the hell you’ve gone!"

Tony’s stomach turned over at that, and he couldn't help remembering how Wanda had looked over the security monitor when he'd gone to the Raft to beg Wilson for information; bundled down tight in straightjacket and shock collar, dead-eyed and motionless in despair. 'Wanda's just a kid...' But Steve hadn't mentioned her in his list just now, and that could mean anything. "Steve..." he swallowed hard, tried again. "Look, all that-"

“So no, Tony,” Steve went on, as if Tony hadn’t said a word, “I’m not going to paint that kind of a target on you. Not even if you think you’re out of Ross’s range.”

This time Tony let the silence lie, aching and awkward for half a minute before he sighed loudly into it and said, “Fine. So what the fuck am I supposed to do with this package then?”

Steve left the silence alone for another long moment. “I assume Friday scanned it when the package arrived?” he said at last.

Tony scoffed. “Psht. Like I’d have even touched the thing unless she said there were just papers
inside.” He tapped the envelope edge-on to the desk blotter. “Especially with a return address for a city where you blew up downtown last spring.”

“You know what, Stark-” Steve rose to the weak barb with the scrappy tone of a man who truly loved a good fight, and the relieved tone of a man who was glad to quarrel over nothing and leave the true carnage unspoken.

Tony cut him off with a grin, and dug a little deeper. “So who is this guy, anyhow? I was under the impression the Nigerians didn't much like you anymore.”

But instead of the expected return volley, Tony got a tense pause instead. Then Steve sighed, and Tony could hear the crisp rustle as he scrubbed a palm over his hair. “Yeah, well that's what you get for listening to the press,” he said, exactly on script, but somehow going through the motions now. Tony hated it instantly.

“So I should have Friday look him up then?” Tony poked, knowing that his AI would take the statement for a command whether he was talking to her or not.

And on cue, Friday piped up, loud enough that the crappy little burner phone's speaker would pick it up. "Dr. Ebrakumo is the Chief Medical Examiner for the City of Lagos, Boss," she said.

"I had a meeting with Odogwu before the team left Lagos," Steve explained resignedly. "I asked him to send me whatever his forensics team could find about Rumlow once the investigation was finished."

"And he agreed?" Tony couldn't help the note of surprise in his voice.

"Gladly," Steve shot back. "Despite the way the international press spun it, he knew just how crowded that market square was at midday on a weekend, and how many more people his team would have been putting into bags if Rumlow's bomb had gone off at street level instead of a hundred yards above it."

"There you go, confusing the truth with the facts again Steve," Tony soothed, even as his mind was spinning up to speed. "So Rumlow, huh," he said, tapping the envelope into his hand consideringly. "Pretty thick package for what amounts to analysis of a greasy smear."

Steve's voice warmed at that. "Turns out you can learn a lot from a greasy smear these days," he said. Then, "Go ahead and open it if you're curious. If you scan the pages and save them onto my server there at Headquarters, I'll download them later and-"

"And I know Natasha told you that ISP addresses are actually easier to trace than cell phones, Steve," Tony warned.

"I know they are. But I also know you won’t trace it, and neither will Friday." And this time it was Tony rising, scrappy and snide to that smooth, knowing tone. "Oh, you know that, do you?"

Steve actually laughed then; softly, not hiding the weariness behind it, but genuine all the same. "Yeah, I know it. Neither of you want to see Tony Stark in one of those prison suits. So just please do as I’ve asked, all right?” And there was that quiet, half-resigned pleading note in Steve's voice again; weary and warning, and conjuring up sudden ghosts of concrete echoes and grainy security video. "This won't bring your parents back, Tony..."

"Yeah," Tony snapped, because he did care now, no matter how little he wanted to. Now that it was
too late; now that the team was scattered, and Captain America was no more than an abandoned shield and a contentious headline; now that there was no Avengers to speak of, and nobody left who was much worth Avenging anyhow. "Yeah. I'll think about it."

And then he snapped the shitty little cell phone closed on any reply Steve could possibly have made.

Chapter End Notes

Immediately after Rumlow's bomb went off in Lagos, Steve was calling for medevac and emergency services -- he had someone actually on the line, and it was not the Avengers. My choice was to interpret that he was working with Lagos Police services that day, and had dispatch waiting on a side channel of his communicator for him to tell them all was clear. Obviously, this is not what he told them, however as I wrote in this chapter, experienced first responders would have looked at the damage in that market square, and immediately known it was intended to be twenty times worse. And they, (unlike the media,) would have been willing to work with Steve to figure out what really happened, and why.
"Security Breach!" Tony yelped -- not particularly suave, admittedly, but it was the first thing that came to mind when he looked up from his tablet to find Dr. Helen Cho striding out of the elevator like a pocket sized valkyrie with a soul to collect whether it wanted to come or not.

Cho gave him a supremely unimpressed look, and parked her carry-on roller bag beside the sofa so she could accentuate the glare with crossed arms over her chest as Tony scrambled to his feet in a supremely not guilty or freaked out way. Rhodey mirrored her look, eyebrow raised and lips pressed while Vision, looking baffled as usual, glided into the room saying, “Mr. Stark, I am certain Dr. Cho poses no actual threat to anyone on this compound,” He turned to Cho with hopeful eyes, “isn’t that right, Doctor?”

“Okay first,” Tony said, shutting his tablet down and dumping it on the sofa as he casually put the coffee table between Cho and himself, “Vision; don't ever tell a woman she’s not dangerous.”

“Never ends well, man,” Rhodey agreed, shaking his head. “Never.”

“And second, I thought you were building a new research facility in Hong Kong, Helen,” Tony continued, calm, so calm, charming, and not the least little bit nervous, no sir, not him, “What brings you to the wilds of New York?”

Cho’s frown twisted sideways. “The weather.” Then she rounded the sofa and stalked toward him with her finger out and tracking Tony like a sniper’s scope as he gave up all hope of pretending and backed through the maze of furniture. “Also, a certain sanctimonious jerk who thinks he can sling an obscene amount of cash at my architects and builders out of some misplaced sense of guilt over a megalomaniac AI destroying my previous facility,” Tony fetched up at the entertainment console, and had to suppress a flinch as her small, pointy finger found his exposed chest at last. “But who doesn’t think needs” poke, “to,” poke, “call me in,” three extremely emphatic pokes in rapid succession, “when his team is injured and needs care!” the accusing finger then turned toward Rhodey, who was still sprawled easily on the sofa, watching Tony’s interrogation like the only thing he could wish for in the world was a bag of popcorn.

“I literally had nothing to do with that decision, ma'am,” he told Cho with a grin as Tony tried to gauge his odds of making a break for the stairs, “I was unconscious at the time.”

“Look,” Tony rubbed at his poked chest warily and dug for something, anything that would take that angry, accusing, hurt expression off the woman’s face. “Helen, I'm sorry, but with the Accords, I didn’t...”
Her eyes narrowed, not buying. He tried again. “There really wasn’t time to...” This time, her eyes went wide with outrage, and as her finger went rigid and rose into poking range again, Tony figured he had nothing left to try but the truth.

“Ultron nearly killed you,” he blurted. “Twice! And the Avengers couldn’t help you either time. How the hell was I supposed to put you back into the line of fire after something like that?”

“By ASKING, Stark!” Cho snarled with one final, mighty poke. “Did you think I wouldn’t know from the start that working medical support for the Avengers would be dangerous? Every single person on my team, from the lab techs to the medical interns knew from the moment they signed on that something like that could happen at any time!” She threw up her hands then, and stalked back to drop her shoulder bag onto the sofa. “But we did it anyhow, because someone needed to be doing that research. Someone needed to be learning how to treat and heal the Enhanced, rather than just trying to replicate their enhancements! I thought you, of all people, understood that!”

“Look, Helen,” Tony began, rubbing the sore spot she’d left on his collarbone, “I just-”

“By ASKING, Stark!” Cho snarled with one final, mighty poke. “Did you think I wouldn’t know from the start that working medical support for the Avengers would be dangerous? Every single person on my team, from the lab techs to the medical interns knew from the moment they signed on that something like that could happen at any time!” She threw up her hands then, and stalked back to drop her shoulder bag onto the sofa. “But we did it anyhow, because someone needed to be doing that research. Someone needed to be learning how to treat and heal the Enhanced, rather than just trying to replicate their enhancements! I thought you, of all people, understood that!”

“Look, Helen,” Tony began, rubbing the sore spot she’d left on his collarbone, “I just-”

“Whoa, Doc,” he said as Tony fought his shocked mouth closed, “That’s harsh.”

“It does seem so to me,” Vision put in, worried. “Mr. Stark has been under considerable strain lately, Dr. Cho.”


Tony sighed and covered his face with both hands. “Come on, Helen...”

She ignored him again and pointedly turned her attention to Rhodey. “Anyway, I came to see if Colonel Rhodes would be willing to allow me to examine his injuries, and see if the shiny new nano-molecular regeneration cradle Mr. Stark paid for might be able to repair some of his nerve damage.”

Tony blinked out from behind his palms to find Rhodey alert and awestruck, and staring at Cho with a terrible hope in his eyes. “That's...” he licked his lips, then tried again, his voice no steadier than before. “You think you really can...”

There finally, Cho’s ice cracked, leaking a tentative smile onto her face. “I don't honestly know, Colonel,” she said to him. “The cradle's never been used with an injury as old as yours, but if it can help you at all, the data it gives me will potentially expand treatment options for veterans, accident victims, anyone suffering from neurological or-”

Rhodey put up his hand to stop the list. “Yeah, I get it. And yes, please, I would love to be your guinea pig, Doctor Cho. Not,” he stole a glance at Tony and gave his walking brace a rough pat, “that this rig you built me isn't slick, it’s just-”

“You don't like the tan lines,” Tony cut him off, forcing the words out past the solid lump of terrified hope that had lodged in his throat at the idea. “I knew you'd be all about style, GummiBear.”

Even Cho was smiling when she bent to tug a thick manila envelope out of her case, and brandished it expectantly in Tony's direction. “I also came to New York to bring this to you, Stark,” she said,
and Tony absolutely did not wince.

He might have wished a sudden attack of laryngitis on the doctor, but he definitely did not wince. "Aw, you really didn't have to come all this way to make a hand delivery," he tried.

She smirked at him in reply, and gave the envelope an expectant little waggle. "I really felt I did, Stark. Autopsy analysis of an enhanced criminal didn't seem like something I wanted to leave on your answering machine."

"Autopsy Report?" Rhodey sat up, suddenly all business.

"Enhanced criminal?" Vision sat down, and turned every ounce of that eerie focus onto Cho.

"Wait, you're saying Rumlow was enhanced?" Tony demanded, rushing over to swipe the envelope from her hand and rip it open.

"To at least some degree, yes; that's what I'm saying," she replied as Tony began leafing through the stack of papers. "There's simply no other way his system could have tolerated the frankly staggering array of drugs the toxicologist found in his blood and tissue samples. If he'd been a baseline human, no matter how healthy, he couldn't have survived all that."

"Okay, let's back this up a second," Rhodey cut in, both hands raised like he was calming excited toddlers. "Why are we interested in the toxicology report of a dead mercenary right now?"

"Because he's not exactly up for an interrogation session, and someone needs to find out why he exploded," Tony spared breath to reply. Then he brandished one of the diagram pages in disbelief. "They seriously got this much of him on the table after--"

"He exploded," Rhodey said, standing, "because he had a bomb and a hard on for Cap, Tony."

"I disagree, Colonel," Vision put in before Tony found the words. Rhodey wasn't buying though. "I've seen the micro-cam footage from Cap's helmet, Viz -- Rumlow made it pretty clear he was all about revenge at the end there."

"That is not the point of my dispute." Vision shook his head and floated to a standing position as if the idea of using his feet and legs to achieve it hadn't occurred to him. "Brock Rumlow, since his return to active status following the Tryskelion collapse, had several close combat encounters with Captain Rogers --"

"Eight one-on-one encounters since DC14."

Vision glanced at the dormant TV with a tiny frown and said, "Thank you Friday. And Agent Rumlow has never before-"

"That's not including unverified sniper fire on the Captain in Fredericksberg, Bogota, Petropovlosk and San Carlos."

"Thank you, Friday. My point is -"

"Wait." Tony flipped the report closed as the words connected in his mind. "What sniper fire? He didn't say any- The encounter logs don't say anything about sniper fire! Why wouldn't he report that?"

"Says the man who thought he could walk off heavy metal poisoning," Rhodey grumbled pointedly.
"The Captain always seemed to place a lot of faith in the serum's healing properties," Cho put in, hiking a hip to perch on the sofa back. "It stands to reason the rest of the team would follow his lead in that regard."

And Tony was just about to tell her all of the myriad ways in which that was supremely, and absolutely not okay, when Vision gave a pointed cough and said, "If I may?" in such a perfect imitation of the voice that Edwin Jarvis had always used to pry practical sense into Tony's excited ramblings that Tony found himself sitting down to listen before he'd even decided to do so.

"The point is," Vision continued, with a gracious nod to Tony's Pavlovian response, "that since Rumlow became an adversary to the Avengers, he has demonstrated no inclination toward either bombing attacks, or suicide. Even in Lagos, his mercenary team seems to have used nothing more destructive than gas, grenades, and bullets. Until the end of the encounter, when Rumlow had the Captain's full attention on him."

"You know he knew you," Cap's micro-cam footage played abruptly in Tony's mind, Rumlow on his knees and gloating, foam on his lips and spite in his eye. "Your pal, your buddy, your Bucky."

Then Steve's voice -- Steve's, not Cap's -- shaking just a little, as if something large and painful had lodged suddenly in his throat. "What did you say?"

There had been more Rumlow said. Something about a message, a brain in a blender, and in 20/20 hindsight, Rumlow's hand fidgeting at his side, almost out of sight as he promised "You're comin' with me!"

And then... boom. And on this side of things, that promise was kind of eerily ironic. Steve was now where Rumlow had been after DC14; a wanted outlaw, with a prison cell waiting for him the instant he showed his face somewhere the US could reach it. What a waste. What a goddamned waste!

Tony didn't notice how long and uncomfortable the silence had gotten until Cho stirred from her perch on the sofa to lean across and pluck the autopsy report out of Tony's hands, saying, "Well, if this was Mr. Rumlow's normal blood chemistry, then suicide was probably a kinder exit than the one he had to be sliding down toward." She flipped open the report and tapped a page. "If I'd exposed the Captain to any of these chemicals, his serum would most likely have broken them down into harmless components, but in Rumlow's liver and brain tissue samples they all seemed to be just building up to critical mass."

She shook her head and sighed. "I've no idea how he was still functioning with this much paladium in his tissues, but I'd have pegged that alone to kill him within a few months, even if he'd stopped using the opiates and amphetamines altogether."

And of course, that made Rhodey slide a judgey look Tony's way. "Huh," he said. "Dude put up a hell of a fight for a guy circling the drain."

It was on the tip of Tony's tongue to point out that he'd kicked Rhodey's ass while circling the drain himself a few years ago thank you very much, when Cho flipped a couple of pages over and tapped the report again. "That would be this section of the chemistry profile," she said. "I won't bore you with the names, but there are steroidal and hormonal compounds in this range that could have been increasing his reflex speed and muscle mass, and suppressing pain reception in the brain at the same time." She shook her head, and her expression was all professional condemnation, with only a tinge of worried awe behind it. "He could get pretty torn up before his brain would register the damage."

Rhodey whistled low, and Tony thought of Steve taking a sniper's shot and shaking it off, not thinking he needed to tell anybody about it. If the hits had been grazes or through-and-through, Steve
probably wouldn't have even asked Wilson to look him over, either. Probably just handled it himself with that elaborate damned first aid kit he'd ordered for his private quarters. Goddamned stubborn idiot.

"Friday," Tony barked at the TV, "Bring up the file on Rumlow."

"Which one, Boss?" she answered as the monitor brightened with folders. "The Avengers suspect file, or the ones I've collected from the HYDRA download?"

That caught him up short. "Wait, you've decrypted that mess?"

"'Course I have, Boss."

Vision coughed pointedly, and Friday's voice held a grudging note when she continued. "I found the decryption program on the J.A.R.V.I.S servers when you brought me online, and I finished the job-"

"It was nearly done already," Vision murmured.

"In anticipation of your asking for the decrypted files at some future point," Friday finished defiantly. "But you never did."

"And you didn't tell me?" Tony asked, throat tight around the ghost of a different question. "Did you know?"

Friday had the tact to sound regretful when she answered, "It seemed you really didn't want to know, Boss." And Tony's throat locked up tight for a moment around the certain hindsight knowledge that no; no he really, really had not wanted to know.

"Well I want to know," Cho put in, the anger in her voice scruffing Tony away from the mental abyss. "I need to find out what Rumlow's baseline chemistry used to be like if I'm going to get anything meaningful out of this mess, Miss Friday, so if you've got any kind of medical records, please bring them up."

"Boss?" Friday asked, tentative, and Tony made himself shove his ghosts back into the closet and give the order.

"Do it, Friday. I'm pretty sure HIPAA's not an issue for dead terrorists."

Three files came up out of the ranks, one larger than the others, with 'Hdra' in the server address. "There appear to be several dated medical reports in this one, Doctor Cho," Friday said as Tony came into touch range of the screen. "The 'Avgr' file contains mostly after-action reports and tactical data, but the 'SGRp' files appear to be the most recently accessed of the three."

"Copy that one to Cho's tablet," Tony said, flicking the 'Hdra' file in Cho's direction. "And these two to mine." The date of last-access on the 'SGRp' folder was just one week ago, Tony noted as the files fell back into their ordered tables. One week ago. What had Steve needed to see in this ghost file for a dead man? Why would he risk being traced and arrested just to look through Rumlow's history?

Rhodey caught up Tony's tablet from the sofa and said, "Okay, wait. Just wait. Why are we doing this right now?"

Tony strode toward him, hand out and expectant. "Know your enemy, Rhodes. Beginner level tactics."
"Yeah okay, but that particular enemy pretty much fits into a ziplock baggie now, Tones," Rhodey argued, but he still turned the tablet over. "He doesn't rank all that high up on the threat list anymore."

Tony opened the 'Avgr' file and scrolled down. "Maybe so, but the guy who made Rumlow like this," and he clicked open a bystander webcam video of Crossbones punching Cap twenty feet across the Laotian market square. "That guy is still out there."

"Exactly," Cho backed Tony up. "And I want to know just what I can expect out of that... doctor," her mouth twisted, as if she had to force the word out of it. "if I have to deal with anymore pet projects of theirs."

"I hope you know that we would protect you, Dr. Cho," Vision put in with his best earnest certainty. "If such an eventuality should arise."

She gave him a sour look. "I'm sure you would, Vision," she said, returning to the files on her tablet and heading back to where she'd left her suitcase. "Assuming the UN gave you clearance to do so, you might even arrive in time to rescue a few of the survivors. Miss Friday, will you show me to a guest room please? I'd like to get a shower before I dig too far into this."

"Hey now," Rhodey objected, trailing behind as Cho caught up her shoulder bag and headed for the elevator again. "That's not fair!"

But Cho didn't even look up from her tablet when she stepped into the elevator and replied, "No. It definitely isn't."

Chapter End Notes

It always bothered me that nobody involved Dr. Cho when Rhodey was injured. After her proving that the tech was able to literally create a living body for Vision, a trifling thing like a spine injury wouldn't have been beyond her range at all, I think.
Chapter Summary

Steve copes about as well as he ever does. And then there's tea, as well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*** Wakanda ***

The dreams had started up again.

Steve knew they would -- they always did when the dust settled and his subconscious decided it was time to 'process'. Sam had taught him that word's shiny new meaning when they'd been on one of their futile Bucky searches, and he'd figured out just how much effort Steve had been putting into not sleeping, and why.

Processing. Like scraps through a sausage grinder. Steve hated it, even as he admitted that it was just about the only word that fit the mess his nights had become; processing his life, his memories, his fears, his regrets over and over again until the pain leveled out into a lumpy emulsion of restless anxiety that eventually, he'd be able to sleep through again.

"Did you know?"

Sam had thought the sausage analogy was hilarious, and had welcomed Steve to the 'touchy-feely-new-future' with a gap-toothed grin. But he also had also made sure Steve knew better than to try and stay awake instead of dealing with the dreams.

"I didn't know it was him."

So he just had to wait the dreams out, was all. He couldn't change them, couldn't rewrite the awful script as he went along, even though he knew every misstep, every solid hit, every angry word, and every loaded silence by heart. He was along for the ride until the 'process' was done, until the penance was paid, or until some even greater disaster eclipsed the one haunting him that night.

"Don't shit me, Rogers! Did. You. Know?"

But of course, it wouldn't be that easy. Just obsessively reliving the worst mistakes of his life every night would be exhausting, and tedious, and annoying as hell, but it would hardly qualify as a genuine nightmare, would it?

"...yes"

Tony turns away from him, brow knit, lips parting in a grimace that almost looks like tears. Steve is about to reach for him, to steady him in case his knees give out when Tony suddenly pivots, putting all the force of his spine into a backhand swing that cracks Steve's cheekbone and sends him tumbling. But this time when Steve hits the floor, it isn't concrete, it's ice; thin and brittle over brine that is cold, dark and seventy years deep.
It shatters under his weight, heaves around him, and before he can gasp one horrified breath, Steve falls straight through. Bursts of fire, blue-white and orange streak the ice above him as Steve fights the shocking cold, the weight of the water, and the shield dragging against his back.

Bucky and Tony are still up there, still fighting, somehow not crashing through yet, though the ice is thin enough that Steve can see pale scars where their boots have cracked it, and where repulsors nearly melted it through. They'll kill each other if he doesn't get up there, if he doesn't make one or the other of them stop and just listen. He kicks, thrashes against the icy drag even as his limbs go numb and his chest creaks with strain. He fights, because it's all he can do, and he's damned well not going to give up and die! Not now! Not while the only family he's got left tear each other limb from limb!

Three times Steve breaks the surface just long enough to gasp, and fumble a grab for the floating ice. Twice it fails him and he plunges below, crystal slivers melting in his fists, but the third time it holds. He drags himself to the edge and hangs there, chin and elbows braced on the whisper-thin ice as he struggles for breath and aches everywhere. Blood roars in his ears, but Steve can still hear the savage music Bucky and Tony are making of each other; the clash of metal on metal; the high, bursting whine of repulsors; all cut through with roars, grunts and screams of animal rage. He is running out of time.

His suit crackles, already frozen in place as he lifts his head to look. They are against the far wall, of the exhaust chamber -- Bucky pinning Tony's helmet in place with all his weight while digging at the arc reactor with his metal hand.

"Wait," his voice is barely a whisper, "Bucky, don't!" But it's too late. He can hear Tony's unibeam charging, can see its building glare through the net of steel fingers. Steve’s arms are frozen to the ice sheet, nails blue, skin grey, but they don’t hurt anymore, and he can’t look away from the fight he is afraid to watch. "Tony, please!" he begs, but they don’t hear him.

The unibeam flares, brilliant, deadly, but instead of blasting Bucky's arm away, the light twists, shivers, and begins to burn a hungry blue. And then the Tesseract is there, pressed like a threat and a promise between Bucky's metal hand and Tony's armored breast. Both look shocked to see it, but dread digs like a hook in Steve's heart. He’s seen this before, he’s seen what it can do... but he can’t make a sound as the hungry light begins to devour both men.

"Drop it," the words trickle out of his lungs and hang like smoke in the freezing air. "Let it go. Please, please let them go!" But it doesn't, and the Tesseract’s hum as it unravels both arm and armor to reveal the vulnerable men beneath, sounds a lot like satisfaction.

Steve can't feel his legs. The ice around his chest has refrozen, sealed the hole he made with him in the gap. He can feel it building up around him, riming his clothes and skin with sharp, shining cold as the Tesseract tears two roaring holes in the room; one above, a portal blooming with the fire of an alien armada's destruction, the other below, filled with a distant, pulsing white glow. Tony and Bucky stand no chance against the opposing gravities, and both of them know it.

Steve's tears freeze to his cheeks as he watches them cling together, arms grappling, nails tearing ragged, futile gouges as the cube makes fuel of their living flesh.

When their grip finally fails, what's left of Bucky is whipped up and away like smoke through a chimney. Tony fares a little better, still half anchored in decaying armor, but he's too close to the edge, and the swirling drag is too great. He stumbles, slides backward, heels over the ledge, and in a wild, flailing grab, catches a bent rebar spur in one bleeding hand. There he clings, eyes wide and desperate on Steve as a terrible gravity drags the Iron Man's remains into the void. "Damn you, help
me!” he screams.

And if not for the ice, he could! Tony is just there, just there, so close that Steve can see tears spinning, weightless from his eyes as the wind roars through that open throat around him. But the ice has Steve again, and he can feel nothing of his body but the hot burn of fear and the cracking cold of ice crushing his chest. “I’m sorry,” he gasps, trying again, and failing again to break the crystal prison around him. The Tesseract hangs in the air, well beyond his grasp, and Steve could swear it looks as if it’s laughing at them all.

“As!” Tony calls again. “Steve!” and then his grip fails, the spur shears off, and Tony Stark spins away into the white silence of some ancient, distant star.

The tears freeze in Steve’s eyes, his scream a silent wheeze against the roar as the vortices converge behind the baleful blue cube, and then begin to iris contentedly closed. A figure tumbles through just before they meet -- scarlet skin in shredded rags of black leather. Steve does not need to focus his eyes in order to know who it must be.

Johann Schmidt stands slowly as space heals itself and the cube clatters to the floor. He brushes the tatters of his old uniform away, revealing a politician’s fine suit underneath it. Then he turns to Steve and kneels to pry the shield from his back. Steve can barely feel the lurch of it as the magnetic clamps and the hoarfrost let go. His hands are as scarlet as his skinless face, and Steve’s shield gleams against them as Schmidt uses it to scoop the Tesseract up like a glowing ember fallen from a hearth fire.

Then Schmidt leans close again, the naked bones of his scarlet face horrible in the blur of Steve’s freezing sight, but his voice all earnest warmth as he says, “Captain America. You have my gratitude.”

Then he stands and he walks away, and it is only the ice that hears how Steve is screaming, and screaming, and screaming inside.

And then the scene stopped. The scarlet blur of the Red Skull wisped away like smoke, the icy Siberian light faded low, and the distant sound of a woman humming soft and soothing and sweet hushed his panic, quieted his despair. He didn’t know the tune, but as the singer came nearer, Steve realized the lullaby wasn’t in any language he knew anyway. It wrapped around him, the song and the red light it came on, bound him snugly and lifted him gently up to his feet. Then like tendrils of fire, the red light swept away all the nightmare trappings -- the Skull, the Bunker, the Tesseract, the Ice. All of them trickled away on the rambling tune, and by God, Steve was more than happy to let them.

“Just a dream,” he told himself as the memory of helpless terror gave way to the lullaby and strength returned to his body. “It was all just a dream, and it’s over now.” Something pressed at the back of his knees, and Steve let himself sit without looking, relief a giddy, trembling sensation in his belly.

Then Wanda’s lullaby came to an end, and he opened his eyes to find that they were sitting together at a small sidewalk cafe in Sokovia with hot, sweet tea and small pastries between them. The breeze was brisk, the brief Baltic summer yielding to autumn, but his frozen uniform had become a suit of good blue wool that was more than equal to the mountain chill. His shirt cuffs felt like linen against his wrists, and the weight of suspenders pulled at his shoulders. Steve hadn't ever owned a suit like this, but he remembered vaguely that Bucky had once, when they were younger.

Wanda smiled at him and poured steaming tea into delicate cups, asking, "Do you remember the first
time we met?"

Steve blinked, thrown for a minute as he accepted the cup she pushed at him. "Strucker's outpost in Sokovia," he answered, and was surprised to hear no screaming rasp or fear tremor in his voice. "You made quite an impression."

She flicked him a chiding glance and shook her head. "Not the first time, I didn’t, flatterer. Not on you."

"You stopped me from collaring Strucker," he said, and she laughed.

"That was only because you had no intelligence on me," she replied, and took two of the pastries before pushing the rest toward Steve. "If you had known what I could do, you would have kept your prisoner that day, and maybe taken me as well."

"I don't think so," Steve said, and chose a pastry to sample. It was delicious, sweet and flaky on his tongue with a tartness to the cherries that was familiar, but in a way he couldn't quite place.

"I think so," Wanda said. "We were not supposed to be there that day, Pietro and me. We had been told to stay back, to only observe. Strucker told us that we were not yet ready to fight the Avengers."

"Well you proved him wrong." Steve remembered Clint and Natasha that day, each deeply shaken from their first encounters with the twins.

"Did we really?" Wanda peered at him, but then shook her head. "Did you know I went looking for you? I wanted to reach you first. To see inside the famous Captain's mind, and to know for sure that the Righteous Bully of America was as foul beneath the shining surface as the country he stood for."

Steve frowned, hearing the weight of sarcasm in her voice, but stung all the same.

She raised a placating hand before he could rise to the barb. "I know. I was naive then; angry and hurt, and wanting someone to blame. I felt I had Stark to blame for the loss of my parents, but to me, America was just as much a builder of monsters as the Merchant of Death himself. So," she shrugged one shoulder and sipped at her tea.

"I wanted to find the cracks in you. To find what would make you flinch, hide, cower, run away from the fight like the coward they told me you were." Steve watched as she made scarlet fire dance along the fingers of one hand raised between them. "But in that moment, when you had Strucker cornered in the stairwell and you didn't know I was there..." She snapped her fingers, and the fire went out, leaving only her eyes; warm, brown, human, staring into Steve's own. "I couldn't find anything."

"Come on now. I may not be a genius, but I'm not that dumb." But Steve's joke only won a flicker of her smile as she reached down and brought his shield from under the table. It hadn’t been there before, he was sure of that, but something in the dream made him accept its presence without any longing pang after the real thing he had left behind him in Siberia.

"Your mind," she said, her silver rings chiming softly against the metal as she smoothed her hands over the painted surface, "Your heart was like this shield to me. I could find no cracks in it, no chinks, nothing I could catch onto and pry open to make you bleed. So," she rapped twice at the scorched, singed star and shrugged, "I ran away, and found the others."

"You found Tony," Steve remembered gravely, and a flicker of regret crossed Wanda's face.

"I found Tony." She paused for a sip of tea, and Steve could watch the catechism of apologies and regrets she always seemed to rattle off inside her head when the subject of Ultron came up where she
could hear. "He was easy; so much easier to read than you. He wears his fear like his armor suit; complex, all encompassing, rigid in some places, brittle in others, but full of cracks that could let me in." Her nimble hands took another ringing sweep across the shield. "They all were like that in their own ways, the others. They were all easier to read, and easier to reach than you."

"You..." Steve swallowed, remembering the ghosts of his lost dance, lost love, lost chances, and lost peace. And then he shook his head. "You hit me pretty deep when we fought in South Africa."

Wanda's smile was a small, tart thing. "You are still flattering me. I barely distracted you at all, because I did not understand then what I do now; you," she took up her teacup and tapped it delicately to his, "simply do not fear for yourself. Your fear is all for other people -- the people who fall when you cannot reach them, the ones who die while you live on, the ones your great heart cannot shield from harm."

Steve hid a smile in his own cup. "Now who's flattering?"

She shook her head. "Not me. This dream you were having before I interfered; it is proof. If I had known you well enough, back in Sokovia, to imagine this nightmare for you..."

"Then the raid would have gone very differently for the Avengers," Steve finished the sentence when she let it trail away, but instead of sharing his smile, Wanda turned a look on him so densely loaded that he couldn't begin to parse out what it meant.

"Yes. It would have. Whether Stark had found the Scepter that day or not, I would have judged all the Avengers differently if you had let me see this part of you," she told him after a long, searching moment.

Steve tried another smile. "You talk like I was hiding it on purpose."

"Do I?" she laughed at last. "I think that might be why I missed it at first -- I had been looking for a Secret." When she said the word, Steve could hear the capitalization. "Something wadded up tight and hidden from view in a locked and guarded place. But you wear yours right out in the open." She reached across the table, brushed a touch over his linen shirt just where the star would sit on the uniform he might never wear again -- just where Dr. Erskine had tapped out his dying wish with two shaking fingers. "Your heart has always been on your sleeve, but the whole world imagines it is just an act. We try so hard to see the man behind the Legend that we miss the truth -- that the legend was the man all along."

Amazing how even in a dream, Steve could feel the heat of a blush spread across his face as he shook his head. "I'm just a kid from Brooklyn."

"I know," Wanda said, tipping a nod toward where the wormhole had been. "And so do they. That is why they love you."

"Wanda!" Steve spluttered once he'd managed to stop choking on his tea.

But she only laughed at him and nibbled at her own pastry while he got himself under control. Which seemed like a good strategy to buy time and recover his composure, actually.

But when Steve reached for his plate, he found that the little fruit filled pastries had become coconut shuku shuku, plantains fried in sugar, and slices of the simple, sweet yellow cake that the Wakandans favored. And so of course, when he around him again, he found that their shared table was now on one of the palace's open air balconies that overlooked the well planned sprawl of Birnin Zana in the distance, and closer in, the ball court where the children of the Royal Palace's staff liked to play
when their lessons and chores were over.

Steve often came here to sketch them, and to passively practice his understanding of the conversational Wakandan and Yoruba he'd picked up since coming to Africa. Nobody seemed to think he was in the way here, and it was nice to be close to people, to give himself the illusion of social contact without his pale skin making him an even bigger distraction than his celebrity had ever made him back in New York.

"I have been a poor friend to you since we came to this country, I think," Wanda broke the silence gently after awhile.

"No." Steve reached out, caught up her hand and squeezed. "Wanda, no, you've been recovering from-"

"I have been recovering from the same things as the rest of you," she said, turning her hand in his grip to squeeze back "Loss, betrayal, fear, grief, anger, guilt." A smile there as she slipped her hand free, but not one which reached her eyes. "I have been thinking very much about guilt."

"Wanda, that's-"

"Because it is not the same as regret, is it?" she pushed on as if he'd never spoken. "Regret is when you know what you will do better the next time; when can take what you have learned from your mistakes, and build a lesson around it that will help you grow. But guilt doesn't build anything, it doesn't save anything, it doesn't even prevent anything." She spread her fingers in the air again, and let the scarlet fire dance between them again. "But what terrible things guilt can make people do -- to themselves, to others, to the world. It is often the easiest thing for me to see, when I look at someone, when I really try to know them."

"Then I don't see how you could have missed the guilt I've been carrying since the moment Bucky followed me onto Zola's train," Steve murmured, because it was a dream, after all, and such things could possibly be safe to say here. And because it was Wanda, and she probably already knew it anyhow.

Sure enough, she smiled knowingly and tapped two fingers to the star in the shield's center again. "I have also been thinking of Secrets; what makes us keep them, what makes us hide them, whom do the secrets really protect, and when they come to light, whom do the secrets really hurt."

Steve glanced down, thinking of Tony's face as Zemo's video played; thinking of Howard's voice as the HYDRA's fist did its dirty work; thinking of the leaden roll in his belly as he realized too late that Zola hadn't been stalling them with a lie in the Camp Lehigh bunker after all.

"Don't shit me, Rogers! Did. You. Know?"

"Not only that secret," Wanda broke into his reverie with a brittle smile.

Steve peered at her, wary. "Are you reading me right now, Wanda?"

She raised both hands and said, "With my eyes only, I promise."

"Then how do you know about what-?"

"Bucky told me what happened with Stark at the bunker," she interrupted, stealing a worried glance at Steve's face when her confession shocked him silent. "I needed to talk with someone, you see, after the dampener collar, and... and the p-prison."
He blinked at her, budding anger utterly derailed. Because in the month it had been since the Wakandan technicians had gotten the collar off her, Wanda hadn't shown any signs that she wanted to talk with anyone. The medics said she was fit enough, if underweight, but instead of joining the rest of the Avenger refugees, she'd kept to her room, sleeping -- or appearing to sleep -- whenever the rest of them had tried to look in on her, and rousing to give vague, one-word answers when anyone tried to budge her further. The only reason Steve had known she was eating at all was that Clint and Sam had taken it upon themselves to bring food to her room twice a day, and to clear the empty dishes away. Sam had told them she needed time, and that when she felt safe again she'd start to respond, but until then all they could do for her was to be there in case she reached out.

"Wanda," he tried carefully, "We couldn't know what you were going through, but Sam's been trying to-
"

She put her hand to his arm, stopped his rambling with a touch. "I know. I know you have all worried, and wanted to help, but... my mind has been so raw, so vulnerable. When the collar stopped working, being around anyone who was awake..." she stopped, took a drink of her tea, and her voice had stopped shaking when she went on. "It was almost enough to make me forget who I was. I had to fight the chaos of my own heart and feel too much of yours while I was doing it. But Bucky's mind was quiet, at rest. He would talk in whispers when the rest of you couldn't tell that you were screaming. It is peaceful, his twilight mind, and he is not afraid, so... we have been talking while we both sleep, while we both heal."

Steve's breath caught behind his breastbone, snagged and tore a little bit on that deep, terrible hook of hope -- that Bucky was at peace within his glass coffin, for as long as it might take to knock HYDRA's poisoned apple from his throat. He swallowed, blinked the misting rain from his eyes and made himself smile. "What do you talk about?"

Wanda did him the favor of looking out over the city, giving him a chance to wipe his face as she answered. "Loss, betrayal, fear, grief, anger, guilt; about seeing too much, and understanding too little; about faith, and regret; HYDRA, Tony Stark," she cut him a glance, and there was a smile in her eyes as she added, "and you."

He huffed a laugh. "Yeah, I'll just bet he's given you an earful on that account."

She only smiled, and went on. "We've talked about secrets too. He has helped me to realize that there is something I need to do. There is a secret that I need to tell, and I need your help to do it, Steve."

"Whatever you need, Wanda," he said at once. "If I can help you, you know I will."

The smile that broke across her face then was a rarity -- it wasn't wry or sly or teasing or mysterious, it was just happy. Simply, purely happy. "I know," she told him. "I knew it even before Bucky told me that was what you would say. Almost those exact words, in fact."

The hook dragged in his chest again, pleased, nostalgic, and sad. Steve laughed it off, but even he knew it wasn't convincing. "Well then I'm glad those memories are coming back to him then."

Wanda shook her head. "Don't be. It will go far harder on him before it begins to get easier."

_Seeing too much_, Steve remembered. _Understanding too little._

He reached out to touch the shield, wishing there was something more he could do for Bucky, but knowing all too well that there really wasn't. He'd done all he could, the rest was up to Buck, and whatever magic Wakandan medicine could work.
"I know it will," he said. Then he turned in his seat, squared his shoulders to face Wanda straight on. "What do you need me to do?"

She stood with a smile, holding the shield in both hands as she passed it across the table to him and answered, "Wake up."

Steve woke up.

Though for a few blinking moments, he wasn't sure he had woken up at all. He was in the same chair, on the same balcony, and his face was wet by the same drizzling rain. But instead of the fine wool suit, Steve was wearing the loose linen trousers and long tunic he'd dressed in that morning, and that instead of his surrendered shield in his hands, Steve was holding onto his phone.

The screen of which was blinking at him determinedly as he stared at it and tried to get his bearings. *I new message* the banner said, a slash of white over the background photo of the Avengers, as assembled in uniform for a publicity shoot. He really needed to change that background to something else. Maybe a shot of the Brooklyn skyline. Or Peggy. He thought there had to be at least one good photo of her out there somewhere on the internet.

_Wanda's up, Sam's text message read. And, She wants to talk. Meet in the library in 15._

Steve drew a deep, bracing breath, and shoved up out of his chair.

So the dream had been Wanda reaching out to him after all, using her power to turn his terror into hope, to turn his frustration into action. At one time, Steve might have bridled at the notion, and given her a talking to about privacy and respect, but now, in the wake of all they had all survived, Steve could only find gratitude -- for her timely intervention, as well as for her decision to ask for his help at all.

He cut a glance toward the trees as one of the parrots, nearly tamed to hand, but only when he was sharing shuku shuku, took to the sky in a rattle of scarlet and green. 'On my way now. he typed back, and hit send.

Chapter End Notes

Yep! Still rolling on this one. I promised a slow build, I know, but things are going to begin to roll together soon. In the meantime, I would really love to hear what you think!

Your comments give me the best kind of life -- the kind that makes the neighbors show up with torches and pitchforks to party!

*Puts on Evanescence and dances around the morgue.*

(Edit note:) It's important to remember here that Wanda is not an impartial narrator here. Her thoughts about and admiration for Steve are not meant to be taken as fact, but as the impressions of a young woman who's suffered enormous losses, betrayal of trust, and direct trauma, and who views him as one of the only authority figures she has left in the world.
"Shit!" Tony lurched upright gasping, one hand clutching at his scarred chest, the other hopelessly tangled in his sheets. "I knew it! I know that face -- Friday!"

The bedroom lights bloomed up instantly, a warm, rosy hue as Friday's voice filled the room. "You're safe, Boss. It's March of 2017, and you're in your bedroom at the Avengers Compound in New--"

"Yeah, I know that," he grumbled, shaking loose of the bedclothes so he could scrub at his face with both hands. "I'm fine, fine. Just get me data on General Ross's aide. Whatever you've got. Something with a photo."

He disentangled his legs and kicked the sheets away as Friday brought the lights up the rest of the way and opaqued the window to bring up a screen shot of a handsomely serious, dark skinned man.

Tony blinked, then shook his head. "No, not him, the dead one."

"Major Nathan Edwards was involved in a fatal auto accident on the fourteenth of June," Friday pointed out, even as she highlighted the same text in the obituary article the photo was attached to.

"Huh..." Tony shook his head, then went back to hunting for his pants in the huddle of clothes he'd been ignoring on his bedroom floor for probably way too long. "Well I mean the other dead one. The chick. Brunette badass. Kitty something. She'd have been working for him back in 06, about a year after the BTFE project got shut down."

"Scanning public data," Friday announced, and Tony took the moment's respite to haul a not-too-nasty shirt over his head. It was the same woman, he was as sure of it as he could be of anything that had happened in a casino bar back in his PartyStark days. Ross had come to Stark Industries waving a development contract for extremely high-powered, non-lethal suppression weapons, and Obie had known just enough of Tony's proclivities to send the project on to Tony. Tony had, of course, done what he always did when men in uniforms wanted a dog-and-pony show; he'd taken the whole negotiation to Vegas for the weekend, had way too much fun, way too much to drink, come very close to getting his nose broken by the General's surprisingly hot Aide when a simple 'no thanks, I don't fuck boys' would probably have sufficed. And then six months later, delivered the first of a series of very expensive sonic weapons into Thunderbolt Ross's hands.

"Major Kathleen Spar," Friday announced as Tony was digging the last pair of socks out of his nearly empty underwear drawer. "Worked as General Ross's aide from two thousand one, until June fourth, two thousand eleven, when she was killed during the Hulk's rampage in Harlem." The picture came up then -- another public obituary, all blah blah exemplary, and blah blah courage and honor, until he read to the end, where Major Kathleen Badass Spar was survived by her wife, daughter, and
Her younger brother. And Tony was pretty sure he'd read in the HYDRA file that Rumlow had been recruited at her funeral, too. God damn it!

It was on the tip of his tongue to have Friday call the HYDRA file up, but some ghostly, almost superstitious distaste stopped him. He didn't want that shit in here; not in his room, not where he had to try and sleep for fuck's sake. He had enough trouble shutting his brainweasels up already.

"Send all this up to the computer in Rogers' office," he decided, grabbing a watch and his tablet from the dresser. The whole Rumlow investigation had been Steve's baby to begin with, and it wasn't like Tony would be falling asleep on Steve's way-too-comfortable sofa up there anytime soon. Or, y'know, probably ever, now. "And bring up Rumlow's Hydra files too. Side by side photo-comparison mode."

"It'll be waiting for you, Boss," Friday acknowledged as the window went clear again, and left him staring at his reflection against the shadowy, nightbound trees outside. Three in the morning; hair standing wild in an epic pillow-twist; eyes more deeply shadowed than unfortunate lighting could account for; beard well and truly off its leash; Tony looked every inch the reclusive genius, wallowing in laundry and stereotype. All that was missing from the scene's dysfunctional shut-in aesthetic was a collection of half-empty whiskey bottles and take out containers.

Tony gave himself a shake and a sneer. "What, you can afford to send your best friend to Seoul, and fund his experimental medical treatment, but you can't afford a housekeeping and laundry service? Grow up, Tony." And yeah, that did make him sound a lot more like Pepper than he was really prepared for, but then again, Tony figured it was probably about time he started getting over that disaster, too.

But he had a few synaptic gaps and degrees of separation to jump first. Up in Rogers' command office, where everything was always nice and tidy.

Tony detoured to the kitchens long enough to brew himself a pot of coffee, then he took both cup and carafe to the office where the smell wouldn't rouse Cho or Rhodey from sleep, and he locked the door behind him. As Friday had promised, Steve's old desktop was lit up, woken from its two month abandonment-nap and showing a background photo of the team -- the old team, as they'd been before Sokovia -- while it waited for Tony's voiceprint override to finish unlocking it.

Something in Tony's belly curled up cold and tight against the sight of them, dressed up and hamming for some reporter's camera; Thor grinning as he balanced Clint on one shoulder, Steve beside him, reaching one hand forward so that it rested easily over Tony's armored pauldron as Bruce and Natasha posed in front, both of them caught mid eye-roll, and Tony... he was in the middle of them all, smiling. Not his Red Carpet grin, and not his flirting, You-Know-Who-I-Am smoulder, just... smiling.

Yeah, no.

"Friday, change that background," he ordered.

"Change it to what, Boss?" she asked as the screen behind the utility icons went black.

"Don't know, don't care. Whatever's next in the photo cue, and bring up..." The picture that bloomed across the screen was no better. Tony didn't know when it could have been taken -- he hadn't ever noticed Steve sneaking into his workshop with a camera to capture him in the middle of a work binge, grease on his forehead, soot ringing the goggles' print around his eyes, tee shirt ripped at the
hem, and eyes all but crossed on the tangle of wires he'd pulled out of the glowing repulsor gauntlet... wait a minute... Even on 39 hours and half a gallon of Red Bull, he'd know better than to work on a powered repulsor like that... wouldn't he?

Tony zoomed the image in tight, and the mystery resolved itself into smooth, masterful pencil lines, shades of light and saturation layered so masterfully, executed so skillfully that he could follow the curved reflection of his image in each of the gleaming red gauntlet's segments. He didn't need to look for a signature to know exactly who had drawn it.

"Admin mode," Tony managed, voice arid and creaking. "Password override, code 0-704192, Tony Stark authorizing." Because he'd be damned if he owed Rogers the effort of covering his tracks here... And then the picture was gone.

Replaced by the Kathleen Spar, side by side. Friday's newspaper obituary to the left, and beside it the photo from the HYDRA file that had jogged Tony's dreaming memory in the first place. It was grainy and faded, and the smudged watermark looked a lot like it had been lifted from an old ID, but it was definitely the same woman, give or take the strain of spending her career cleaning up Tunderbolt Ross's messes.

A moment's scanning through the file entry nailed the clue solidly into place: Rumlow had first been approached by HYDRA operatives at his big sister's funeral. "Highlight this, Friday," he said, thinking hard. "And save a copy of the obituary to this folder too, with a reference link between them."

"Done, Boss," Friday replied, curiosity plain in her voice. "What next?"

"I think..." Tony kicked his feet up onto Steve's spotless desk, and cradled the coffee cup against his sternum. "I think I wanna know why neither HYDRA nor SHIELD records have anything to say about Rumlow's niece and sister in law. Let's see if we can find out what happened to them."

Half an hour later, he was digging the flip phone out of the desk and holding down the speed dial, almost giddy with discovery. And so, of course it rolled to fucking voice mail. Tony rolled his eyes, but made himself stay on the line until the beep ended.

"Hey. Look, I got some news on your buddy Crossbones, thought you might find it interesting. I don't know who paid him for what happened in Lagos, but I do know how they paid him." He tapped the pen from the Captain Unicycle Monkey picture frame against the desk at hummingbird speed, wondering how long he'd have before the voicemail cut him off. "And in case you're curious what the price for Rumlow's suicide run on you was, let's just say it involved some very clever hackers destroying almost every trace of two people and creating two new identities, a nice big trust fund on a Madripoor bank, and a cute little house in Argentina." It was really cute, actually. The satellite photos had showed some kind of shaggy, llama-like animal that a pre-teen girl would probably adore.

"So we're talking not just someone with a lot of cash to sling around, but with a lot of resources. Resources..." the pen skittered out of his fingers, and he made himself take a breath and slow down. "Resources I'm pretty sure a thug like Zemo wouldn't have had after Sokovia. I mean, a lot of heavy favors would have had to be called in to make this kind of a removal happen in the time frame I'm looking at here. I'd expect Fury could have maybe pulled it off, but when he did it for Barton's family, he still had a whole federal agency backing him up, so..." Tony squeezed his eyes shut and took a breath that didn't shake at all. "Anyway, call me back when you're out of the shower or whatever, and I'll walk you through it."

Then he flipped the phone shut.
"I could still hear them," Wanda said, voice quiet but unshaking, and her chin lifted so that the running microphone wouldn't miss a word. "Strucker always thought I must have been Gifted, somewhat, even before the procedure. He never said so to me, but he couldn't hide the thought that with me at least, there had to have been something there for the stone to build on." Wanda paused, took a sip of her coffee, and glanced around the room, her gaze snagging on, then sliding away from each of them in turn -- Sam awash in sympathy, Scott fidgeting with a spoon as he listened, Clint focused and utterly still, his face thundrous with protective rage, and Steve... he couldn't even begin to imagine what he might look like to her now, listening to her account of what Ross's prison had put her through.

Finally, Wanda's gaze drifted to T'Challa's sober, stately face, and it stuck there as she went on. "I don't know how the soldiers developed the collar and the drugs they used on me in their prison, I don't know who gave them the formula or the data they used to build it, but if they thought it would stop my powers, and make me like any other prisoner, then it only partially worked."

"What was the effect it had on you?" Sam had obviously stepped firmly into Counselor mode, and Wanda seemed grateful for the leading question.

"It made this..." she let a trickle of scarlet light dance across her fingers for a moment, "beyond me. It would shock me if I reached inside for ... the movement, the pushing force. And I somehow knew that if I could have reached past the pain, the power I touched would be wild, and too dangerous to control, like it had been in the first few weeks after Pietro and I recovered from Strucker's procedure, when we had to sleep in cells to keep everyone safe from us."

It made Steve remember his first, violent run through Brooklyn, how he'd caromed off cars and shattered shopfronts, barely in command of the sudden force Erskine had charged his body with, half of him praying he'd catch the murderer before he got away, the other half praying he wouldn't kill anybody with his awful new strength. Then the phone in his pocket vibrated against his hip, shattering his reminiscence into the sudden need to squelch a violent flinch.

"It took away my control, so I had no way to not hear what the soldiers were thinking when they would get near me." Wanda's eyes flickered to Steve, and then away as he dug the phone from his pocket and diverted the call to voicemail. "Even if it was the last thing I wanted to hear. They didn't know it at first, but... some worked it out, and they began to deliberately show me..." she wiped her lips against the back of her hand.

Steve closed his eyes, focused on taking one deep, long breath. Across the room, he heard someone curse under his breath, someone else fidget in place, and then Clint said, "You get any of their names?" in a voice that promised murder.

"Barton," Sam chastised, and Steve mastered his silent agreement with Clint's sentiment enough to open his eyes again. Wanda was shaking her head, a small, tart smile curving her pale lips.

"It wasn't that," she said. "Probably it would have been in time, but they didn't have to begin there. Not when they could show me how all they had to do was push a button, and they could flood any cell in the prison with sea water. How they made the prison submersible for that reason -- so they could kill us at any time, for any excuse."

"The guards had access these controls?" T'Challa asked, steepled hands settling to his lap as if they'd rather be fists.

Wanda nodded. "One of them showed me the device they all carry, pushed some buttons and
flooded the cells to either side of mine, so I would hear it, smell the seawater, feel the shaking through the walls. They wanted me to know just how ready they were to... to kill..."

"To kill you," Scott supplied in the weary, disgusted voice of a man accustomed to the worst in men.

Wanda shook her head. "No, to kill you if I did not cooperate when they brought their scientists in. And..." she flicked a glance at Steve then, lightning quick and bleeding anguish. "And eventually, they hoped, they wanted to use it when they had you, Captain."

Chapter End Notes

Hey there, Poison Dart Frogs. Didja miss me?

(Edit Note: Major Kathleen Sparr. Just in case folks missed that movie. Canon has not revealed any actual relation between Major Sparr and Brock Rumlow though -- that's all me.)
Five twenty two AM, and Tony was still combing through Steve's damned files.

The sky outside the office windows was tiptoeing toward the silver side of dawn. What little coffee there was left in the carafe had gone cold, gross and gritty, while the greater portion was apparently trying to decide whether Tony more deserved an ulcer or a migraine for drinking it all on an empty stomach.

Objectively, Tony realized that he really needed to get some actual calories into him, maybe take a shower, catch an hour or two of sleep so he wouldn't look like a zombie when it was time to see Helen and Rhodey off to the airport. But Steve's phone was sitting there, silent and still on the spotless desk blotter, waiting.

Tony picked it up, checked the battery, checked for texts, checked for messages, and found nothing. He tapped the phone into his hand once. Twice. It was probably ridiculously late wherever Rogers was. The man could've been asleep, or on one of his demolition boxing binges in a gym somewhere, or... or he could be on a date. Or in bed, having sex with....

Tony set the phone aside, and forcefully returned his attention to the folder open on the desktop, and the five files listed in it as Project Insight Target List1, Project Insight Target List2, Project Insight Target List3, and so on. The file histories reflected their designations, and aside from the numbers tacked onto the title of each one, the only readily evident difference between them was that the file sizes, while all excessively large, were not quite the same.

Then he opened the phone and called again.

"And another thing," he said when it rolled to immediately to voicemail again, "Why the hell did you save like six different copies of the Project Insight targeting list, anyway? Eight hundred thousand names plus geo-coords and telemetry data makes for some serious server-hogging, okay? You realize that, right? So call me back and tell me why I shouldn't just delete like four of these, okay?"

And again, he clapped the phone shut and dropped it onto the desk again. His stomach grumbled about the coffee again as he stood to stretch, and his neck gave him a pinch over his hours in the desk chair, and Tony admitted he was beaten. It was time to find something to eat.

And if he took Rogers' damned antique phone along in his pocket, well nobody had to know but him and the raisin bran, right? He scooped up his empty cup, sloshed the dregs of the coffee pot into the trash can, and turned to go...

***Wakanda***

"The Infirmary?" T'Challa interrupted, outrage all but rumbling through his voice. "They threatened
Steve closed his eyes again, counted breaths and tried not to think of a cold and stinking prison in Azzanno, or of metal tables with straps on, and huge, reeking drains in the floor. He wanted to vomit. He wanted to smash something to pieces. He wanted to curl Wanda into his arms and rage at the world on her behalf, and none of those would do one bit of good. So he made himself open his eyes, uncurl his fists, and, as he had promised, just listen.

"Not the infirmary," Wanda answered, worn down small and weary into the corner of the lounge sofa. "Not really. Only one of the guards had seen it. He knew about the other... laboratories down in the bottom section of the prison. He had been with the General when they toured the facility before we were brought there. He told the others that the..." she paused to sip water, and her voice was steadier when she went on. "That the morgue was three times bigger, and better equipped than the infirmary, and that it was where the real science was going to be done. He said there were scientists from all over the world lining up to get access to the prisoners in that facility, no matter what their enhancements might be."

She bit her lip bloodless for a moment, drawing a shaky breath in through her nose before continuing. "He... the guard made sure I knew, that I saw the kinds of machines they had there, and what they could be used for after an enhanced person was dead... or if the researchers thought he was soon going to be." A noise scraped out of her then, ragged and damp and half strangled on the words she forced out after it. "He... he asked me if I would be ready to tell the scientists where... Where Pietro had been buried."

The silence descended, appalled and complete as Wanda's face disappeared behind her hands again to hide her struggle not to cry, leaving each of them alone with the horror her words had crashed down over their heads. Steve flexed his useless fists open, and tried not to hope that particular guard might have been one of the ones he had possibly hit a little bit too hard while he was breaking his friends free. When the phone buzzed against his thigh a second time, it was all he could do not to snatch the thing out and throw it at the wall. The quiet humming sound was enough to crack the silence however, and Sam, taking a quick look around the room, reached out to pick up the recorder. "I think we should call a break," he said, ostensibly to Wanda, but fooling no one. "We've been at this for awhile, and there's no rush to get it all out in one day. Why don't we-

"No," Wanda caught for Sam's hand even as the rest of them were unwinding, heading for the door, shamefully eager to get out of that awful room and its truths. "I..." she looked around at the men who had gathered there, and Steve watched the courage rise up again in her dark eyes as she brought them at last to him. "A break, yes," she said in a voice that was nearly steady. "But I don't want to stop now." She flicked that glance to Sam, then Clint. "Not yet. I want to tell you everything," she said this to T'Challa, whose hand hovered, frozen over the door latch. "So I won't have to do this again." And here, she looked back to Steve. "Please?"

And what else could Steve have possibly done, but move to her side on the sofa, flip phone cradled like a skipping stone in his fist as Clint and Scott both followed T'Challa and Sam out the door. "Of course, Wanda," he promised as the door swung closed with a gentle snick, "Anything you need. You know that, right?"

She nodded into his offered hug at once, hid her face in his shoulder and let the tears she had been fighting come on, and Steve gave himself permission to be there, wholly there with her until the storm passed, and the others returned.

After all she had endured on his behalf, it was the very least he could do.
... Then Tony yelped and jumped back, dropping everything as he discovered that Vision had come up, silent as a ghost behind him. "Hnnngsonofabitch," Tony wheezed, prying his fingers away from his repulsor watch as Vision's handwave caught the cup and carafe before they could shatter on the floor. "Do I need to get you a goddamned bell, V-Man?"

"I apologize for your alarm," the android replied, backing up hastily. "I presumed you had seen me as I had approached the door."

"Fine. It's fine," Tony said, hastily taking the dishes back and stepping around him to leave, "I was just spacing out was all. You're good. So what's up? You guys getting an early start of it?"

"No, I don't believe so," Vision replied, his shoes making soft, deliberate taps on the flooring as he followed Tony out of Steve's office and down toward the kitchen. "Doctor Cho and Colonel Rhodes had said they meant to sleep late before the flight, in an attempt to avoid jet lag. I had wished to consult with you on a different matter."

"Hit me," Tony said, dumping the pot and cup into the sink while Vision settled down onto one of the bar stools as if gravity had been an afterthought. Which, upon consideration, for him it probably was.

"I had been examining the documents Dr. Cho brought with her while she and Colonel Rhodes were discussing his impending procedure, and I wished to share an observation regarding Mr. Rumlow's autopsy report."

Tony grimaced as he opened the fridge. "A little grisly for midnight reading, but okay, shoot."

"According to Dr. Ebrakumo's notes, Mr. Rumlow's body was remarkably intact, given the intensity of the explosion, and the damage done to the buildings nearby," Vision said, watching while Tony found a bowl, spoon, and random box of cereal mostly by touch. "That fact, taken along with the Doctor's apparent willingness to share autopsy findings with Captain Rogers, led me to wonder if there was not also a strong likelihood that Lagos Forensic Investigators might have been able to recover most, if not all of the explosive device itself."

Tony nodded, beginning to see where his big purple brainchild might be going with this. "Well yeah, if you know what you're looking for, you can recover the important pieces of just about any explosive device with a non-nuclear payload."

"And as I understand it," Vision went on, "such fragments are often used to discern quite a lot of information about the device's creator...?"

Tony blinked, cereal box frozen mid-pour. "Which... was probably not Rumlow, because he was an insertion point heavy hitter, and didn't do any of his own demolitions." Tony slapped the box down onto the countertop, ignoring the scatter of escaping cereal flakes. "Friday, I need that data. Put through a call to... wait, what time is it in Nigeria right now?"

"Ten thirty-two AM, Boss," the AI came back at once. "Deputy Commissioner Ikenna is listed as lead investigator for the market bombing and attack on the IFID. Sending his number to your phone now."

Vision stood, somehow clear of the breakfast bar without having moved the stool an inch. "I shall leave you to your meal then."

"Hold up," Tony said, waving him back toward the stool as he got the milk out. "I wanted to ask you
about the Lagos op."

Vision's face went subtly perplexed. "I'm not certain what I could tell you, given that I was not present."

"That's what I wanted to ask you about; Why weren't you there?" Vision blinked, as if the question had never occurred to him, so Tony went on. "I know that Cap and Wilson originally went alone, and I'm guessing it was probably a Bucky sighting," Tony was rather proud at how the name came out of his mouth with hardly any urge to spit at all. "But at some point he caught wind that Crossbones would be attacking the police station, and he called Natasha and Wanda out there to back him and Wilson up. What I can't help wondering is, why not you and War Machine too?"

"I had the impression at the time, that the team split was a matter of coverage. I believe the Captain felt that someone of combat status needed to be prepared to react in case the information regarding the assault on the Lagos city police station should turn out to be a deliberate misdirection providing a distraction for an attack elsewhere."

"Which it turned out to be, on a smaller scale than he probably expected," Tony thought, nodding. Full marks for Cap's gut on that point.

"However in retrospect, I believe the Captain's decision might have had more to do with..." and there Vision gestured to himself with some chagrin, "Visibility."

Tony stuck a spoonful of cereal into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "Well, I'll give it that you don't blend into any crowd ever," he allowed after a moment, "But Rhodey looks a lot more like a Nigerian native than Cap or the Scary Girls do. And the War Machine's got the same kind of quick response automation that the Iron Man armor does, so that doesn't exactly explain why-"

Vision blinked, then shook his head. "Ah. My apologies, I misrepresented the matter. I was stationed for stand-off duty alone, as Colonel Rhodes had been called away the day before."

Tony sat up. "Called away."

"To Washington DC, I believe," Vision agreed. "For a consultation with his superiors at the Pentagon. Colonel Rhodes would not have been able to participate in the mission unless the Captain had needed to issue an All Hands Assembly alert."

Tony put his spoon down, mind whirling, and thumbs prickling. "Right... got it," he said, suddenly very aware of the weight of Steve's goddamned phone in his pocket. Rogers might have been temperamental, judgey, and uptight as a Vatican choir in Vegas, Tony would be the first to admit that his instincts in a fight were always on. And if Steve thought the Lagos run could have been a trap, then maybe it had been, and a far bigger trap than the obvious one involving the HYDRA meathead and his explosive exit.

"Thanks," Tony said, refocusing on Vision's considering stare, and summoning up a cheery smile to deflect it. "Thank you Vis. That's a lot of help. I'm just..." He picked up his cereal bowl and tipped a nod back along the hallway toward Steve's office, and the new file he was going to open and attach to Steve's Rumlow/Lagos incident report. "... gonna go and finish this."

Chapter End Notes
What, you didn't think I'd stop with just one chapter after making you wait this long, did you? Still, I'd appreciate it if you'd pause in the binge-read and let me know what you think as you go along. It's been awhile, after all, and I'll admit I'm a bit rusty...

(Edit note: It deeply bothered me that Viz and Rhodey were both absent for the Lagos op. Never made sense from a tactical perspective, and it's definitely not a mistake Cap would have made, knowing there was a chance Crossbones could have been involved.)
Wanda's interview -- or debriefing, or deposition, or whatever it should be called -- only went on for a little longer after they all reconvened in the lounge in the long, low light of the jungle at evening.

Wanda had begun to shake as the others had come back in, and where at first she had caught Steve's arm to keep him from moving off the sofa and back to his chair, it wasn't long after she'd found her place and begun talking again that she had pulled back into herself, a tight knot of anguish in the smallest space she could wedge herself into. Steve couldn't help remembering what she'd said when she'd interrupted his nightmare earlier -- "He would talk in whispers when the rest of you couldn't tell that you were screaming" -- and so he took care not to let any careless touch of his make her situation worse.

Eventually, when Wanda began to stammer and repeat herself, her command of English slipping unnoticed into Sokovian and occasionally, to T'Challa's surprise, into Yoruba, it was Steve who called the meeting to a halt.

"Wanda, I think you may be done," he said softly into one of her long, dazed silences. Her dark eyes flickered to his and back away, quick as a flinch, and her elegant brows knotted stubbornly down.

"I want... not... no, I do not-"

"You have told us more than enough to be going on with, Ms. Maximof," T'Challa said, leaning into Wanda's eyeline, but apparently following Steve's no-contact approach to her space. "What we have in this recording will be a matter of some months to investigate and verify in a way that will be acceptable to the United Nations, even were I to put all of Wakanda's resources to the problem at once. I would not see you cause yourself injury unnecessarily."

"Yeah, leave that to us, kiddo," Clint said, nudging Scott with his elbow. "We're kind of the experts there."

Sam leaned forward then, picking up the recorder, and switching it off. "Wanda, I understand your urge to get it all over with at once, but you gotta understand that trauma doesn't work that way. It doesn't go away just 'cause you understand it, or see the levers it's pulling on you. You can get it all out into the open, and still have it ambush along down the road. I promise," he held up a palm to the protest she clearly intended, "I promise you that I will make the time to be with you, and to help you with that when you need it from here on in, but right now, I think you're just grinding your gears. You need food, and you need sleep-"

"And probably an aspirin too," Scott put in.

"And the rest of us need some time to deal with what you've told us," Sam finished with a quelling
glance in his direction.

Steve reached out, brushed a single, light touch over the cloth-covered arm nearest him, and met her eyes soberly when she flinched her wide eyes to him. "You know who was always good at boiling down the details into a sensible debrief?" he asked her, and then by way of an answer, he cut his eyes toward the Cryo Lab where Bucky rested in frozen silence. "You can go back over the report you've given us, and see if you need to add anything in tomorrow morning, right?"

The sharpness of her gaze unspooled a bit at that, and they could all see her weighing the idea against her own stubbornness in her mind. "With your permission, I can have a transcript delivered to you in the morning," T'Challa added into her indecision. "So that you need not listen to the recording again if you do not choose it."

"It's not a battle, Wanda," Steve said, not pleading, not exactly, "You don't need to walk it off today. You can take some time to get it battened down." And that, apparently, was what it took. Wanda's dark eyes closed, and the severe cut of her brows lifted, quivering from stubborn resistance toward grateful collapse. She was not on the very edge of tears as she nodded, but she wasn't many steps away from it either.

Clint stood then, caught the hanging sleeve of her coat, and gave it a tug. "Come on Kiddo," he told her. "Me and Scott'll walk you back to your rooms."

And in a few rustling moments, the three of them were gone. Sam sighed and rubbed a weary hand over the back of his head as he stood, the little recorder still in his hand. "I'm not sure how counselor's privilege works here," he said to T'Challa as he stood expectantly. "But I figure if she didn't want to trust you with this, Wanda wouldn't have asked you to come and listen in..." Then he breathed a sigh, shrugged, and dropped the recorder into the King's outstretched hand.

"That is my expectation also," T'Challa replied and his fingers curled around the recorder as gently and securely as if he held a frightened bird. "Miss Maximof's trust will not be misplaced, nor will yours." His weighty gaze swept between Sam's and Steve's. "I shall have the archivist send copies of the transcripts to each of your mail accounts. The better to be certain that the information does not accidentally disappear, and render useless the effort to which she went today."

"Could you have them send me a copy of the recording too?" Steve asked, thinking about the levels of security they had built into the Avengers facility back home, "In case we need a voiceprint analysis on it sometime down the road?"

T'Challa nodded, and then swept from the room, the rolling, ferocious prowl of his stride the only outward hint of his inner turmoil as his Dora Milaje escort fell into step behind him.

Sam gave another deep, world-weary sigh. "Man. I need to go run this off," he said with a shake of his head. "You wanna come?"

Steve considered it for a moment, then shook his head. "Thanks, but no." He flexed his hands, almost startled to find that he'd kept hold of Tony's phone throughout the last hour or so without breaking it. "I think I need to go punch something instead," he told Sam, slipping the phone into his pocket and pushing the door open. "Dinner after?"

Sam grinned at him, all gap-toothed charm, and shoulder-bumped Steve on his way out of the room. "Sure. If, y'know, you eat that sorta thing..."

"You're hilarious," Steve sighed, turning to take the hallway that would lead him out to the practice arena that the King's guardian wives had agreed to let him use whenever he needed to fight. There
wouldn't be any sparring for him today, he knew. The Dora Milaje had told him that they did not bring rage into their challenge ring, but if Steve was lucky, one of their hardwood pillories would stand up to his furious mood for long enough that he could at least try and get steady.

So he really shouldn't have been surprised when the damned phone started to buzz at him again the instant he stepped inside the arena.

*** New York ***

The third time, Steve picked up the phone at once, his voice was low and taut as a wire as he murmured, "Tony."

"So can we talk about official Retired Avengers' policy on getting shot?" Tony found himself saying as he clicked the pen from Steve's desk out and in and out and in again. "Because I'm thinking that we should make it a rule going forward that you guys have to let team know about it when some asshole's taking pot shots at-

"Tony, you..." Steve clipped off whatever it was he'd been about to say, and drowned it under a deep breath. The kind of deep breath he always took when Captain America was censoring whatever had been about to come swinging out of Steve Rogers' smart mouth. The kind of deep breath that had always let Tony know that he was about to get within one or two good insult's range of a shouting fight. "This isn't a good time."

"Why," Tony asked, his brain filling in a thousand terrible odds it had already been more than half primed to spin from what few facts he had. "That's wrong? What's happening?"

More breathing -- taut and angry now. And was it more fucked up that Steve's lungs had their own emotional language, or that Tony could interpret it? "Not now, Tony," Steve murmured, a thin, pleading note creeping through the annoyance and... was that grief? "Just... it's a really bad time right."

"Okay. It's fine," Tony answered the sudden spike in his heart rate, waving the Insight clone files away to the projection wall so he could bring up a world newsfeed on the desktop screen and set it scrolling. He tapped at his scarred sternum with his free hand, scanning the headlines for anything horrible enough to be causing that tone in Steve's voice. "Just, are you okay right now?"

"Yes," he said, in the least okay voice Tony had ever heard out of him.

The feed had nothing new. No suddenly moving military units, no frantic, coded chatter on the alphabet soup networks, not even a puff piece on Enhanced activity cropping up anywhere that had an active newspaper within the last four days. But the haunted weight of despair lurking under Steve's voice got under Tony's skin and just itched, and he couldn't -- he could not just let it drop. "What's happened," he asked, even though hoping for a straight answer despite everything they'd smashed through and ruined between them was utterly, catastrophically stupid. Because unverified sniper fire in Fredericksberg, Bogota, Petropovlosk and San-fucking-Carlos, and for fuck'ssake, man! "Steve, are you hurt?"

A wavering moan, thready and somehow desperate. "Tony, why aren't you listening to-

"Cho's right downstairs with Rhodesy," he cut in, shoving to his feet. "We can be ready to go in-

"Tony, listen to me," Steve said, the words archly pleasant, sharp edged, and clearly forced out past clenched and perfect teeth. "I told you before, I am not going to-

"FUCK ROSS, OKAY STEVE?" Tony shouted, and flung the goddamned pen at the far wall.
"Fuck the Accords right now -- all I want to do is help you, so will you please just fucking LET me?"

And that, of course, brought Vision floating like a ghost through the locked office door, because fuck Tony Stark's life, apparently. Tony thrust a hand up in the android's direction, warding off whatever intervention/rescue/eerily inhuman attempt at comfort he had in mind. Steve's breath was all he could hear through the phone; hissing quick and wet, as if he was holding back blood, or vomit, or tears behind his teeth. "Just tell me you're not hurt," Tony pleaded after an endless, aching wait. "Can you tell me that much at least?"

The phone moved away from Steve's face for a moment, the still air whispering a cough and hissing sigh before he brought it back and used his Captain America Gives A Press Conference voice to cough up something a little bit closer to the truth. "It isn't me that's hurt, Tony. I'm... I really am fine."

Tony scoffed. "You haven't been fine since '45, but okay. Will you tell me what IS wrong then?"

"Are you speaking to Captain Rogers?" Vision asked, and there was something in his voice that wasn't quite relief, and wasn't quite eagerness, but held a little of both.

Tony nodded, but left his silencing hand up.

"Wanda is..."

"She's with you?" Tony blurted, fumbling behind him for the chair. "Shit, that's a relief!"

"Wanda?" Vision floated closer, and Tony nodded but waved him silent.

"Hey, I can put this on speaker if she's there," he tried, hopeful. "Vis would really like to-"

"Tony, I can't." The refusal fell like a guillotine. The rest of Tony's words tumbled, unspoken from his lips as Steve gave up another sigh, and gentled his tone. "She's...she just got done talking to Sam."

That was good, right? Wilson proved in the Raft that he could be reasoned with, at least. If anybody could bring Steve to reason, it'd be him. Tony put gloss of fake cheer on his face and began, "Well then put them both-"

"This is the first time she's spoken to anyone since Leipzig," Steve went on as if Tony had never said a word. "Anyone at all, Tony. It's been months, and she's just..." There was that breath again, the shaking one that pulled so thin it made Tony's chest ache in sympathy. "She's...wrecked, Tony. She can't."

"Oh," he said, rubbing at the scars on his sternum, and trying not to think of dark eyes, hollow and despairing over the grainy security feed. "Is...is it-"

"Bad," Steve said. "Yeah. She... I can't either right now, Tony. I'm sorry, it's too much, and I can't... I'm trying to let it slide off, but." Tony could hear his throat click as he swallowed whatever he'd meant to say. "Just give me... Give me till tomorrow morning to work it off, okay?"

Tony swiveled the chair toward the window, and ignored his reflection in favor of the pearl and orange sunrise sky outside. Time zones told a lot, if you knew the right questions to ask, but with Steve so distracted, so clearly off his game, it felt like cheating to try and trick the facts out of him now. So Tony gave up a sigh of his own, and threw in the towel.

"Sure. Whatever. Just..." he closed out the file he'd created, being sure the date stamp would put it at the head of the queue whenever Steve accessed it next. "Just clean out your e-mail folder whenever
you're done brooding, okay? You've got some big-ass, redundant files on here, and I'm not hosting a
free web storage service." Then he clapped the phone shut, hoping the tragic look on Vis's face
might mean he'd be too distracted to bring up just how much space Avengers HQ's mail servers
actually had.

"Well that was a waste of time," Tony grumbled, slinging the flip phone into its accustomed drawer.
Then he rocked the chair back on its springs and scrubbed both hands through his hair, trying not to
imagine how long it might be before he would bring himself to open that damned phone again. "You
need something, V-Man, or did you just come up to say hi?"

Vision shook his head, as expected. "I came out of concern when I heard you shouting," he
admitted, "though of course I did not realize you were speaking with the Captain at the time."

Tony grimaced. It was probably true that yelling was the baseline of communication between the two
of them, but that didn't mean he had to like it that way. "Yeah, well let's just keep that little secret
between the two of us, okay?" he asked.

"Plausible deniability for the sake of Accords compliance," Vision mused, "of course. I wonder
however..." he added, slanting a curious eye toward the multiple screens of the Insight Targeting files
that Tony'd had Friday project into the air around Steve's desk. "if I might provide some assistance
with the comparison analysis you seem to be conducting here however? I find the early morning
hours uncomfortably restless when one must occupy them alone."

And yeah, Tony could definitely agree with that. "Okay," he decided, taking a moment to stretch and
pop his neck. "From what I can tell, Cap was using these various iterations of the list to identify
possible highly placed HYDRA agents who added their names to later versions on the web in order
to cover their tracks, or muddy the waters, or hell, even to get a relative's name onto it so they'd have
a better chance at parole." As he spoke, Friday highlighted names that appeared on some, but not all
of the various lists, as well as the download dates that Steve had written at the top of each file.
"Problem is, these lists are all over seven hundred thousand names, and let's just say that Steve
Rogers isn't all that quick at sorting code, so it doesn't look to me like he got all that far along into it."

"I can see that," Vision agreed, floating down to the leather sofa as he mused. "It also seems as
though this strategy would be flawed without knowing for certain which of these files represented
the original, and therefore accurate, HYDRA targeting file."

"Yeah, I thought of that too," Tony said. "And even Friday isn't certain that the files she found on
Jarvis' servers were the original data, because she had to reconstruct so much scrambled data after..."
he swallowed, flushing cold as the sudden, awful memory of Ultron's mocking voice washed over
him.

Vision, thankfully, didn't seem to notice Tony's discomfort. "No, of course, much of that data would
have been corrupted in the initial viral overprint. And at this point, discerning the provenance of
these files, or of any on the internet, would be problematical at best."

"Right," Tony said, grabbing the Unicycle Monkey pen again just to have something for his hands to
fidget with while he thought. "So what if we went right to the one remaining source for it?"

"But it had been my understanding that the SHIELD Insight servers were destroyed in the collapse
of the Tryskelion in 2014, and it does not appear as though the Insight program was backed up on
any other servers at the time of the upload," Vision said, and Tony grinned.

"That's just what they want us to think..."
There, my corpse-flowers; NOW this spate of chapters is done. What did you think?
*Perches chin in hands and flutters eyelids* Telllll meeeee...
"Seriously?" Sharon asked, incredulous as she drew abreast of the cafe table, where Natasha Romanof looked up with a smile.

"The barista said the almond biscotti was your favorite," she replied, indicating the plate between the empty cups and steaming teapot. Sharon scowled through the cafe's front window, and noticed a tall, soft-looking young man behind the espresso machine. He shied away from her glower at once, blushing faintly as he focused every scrap of his attention on steaming his milk pitcher.

"I have been here all of twice," Sharon said, bracing her arms across her chest as she turned her ire back to the redhead every Agency in the world wanted a piece of. "How would he know my favorite?"

Natasha's smile tilted to one side, went roguish and sly as if she'd spotted her in. "Apparently," she said, cat-green eyes scanning Sharon's running attire, "you made an impression."

"Right," Sharon rolled her eyes and didn't smile. "And you blend." Red hair styled exactly as it had been when she'd famously helped to save New York from an alien invasion, clothes close fitting and black with touches of gold, not even a floppy hat or pair of oversized sunglasses to give lip service to incognito. It had to be deliberate, but Sharon couldn't figure out why. Why the blatant lack of disguise in a city crawling with spies of every nation, stripe, and creed? Why the public meeting place instead of an unexpected drop-in at Sharon's apartment? Why the step-into-my-parlor bloody tea?

"Sometimes, darling," her aunt Peggy had once told her, "When you're up against someone particularly clever and ruthless, the safest way to escape their trap might just be to spring it."

So with that in mind, Sharon yanked the cafe chair out and sat with a huff. "What's your game, Romanoff?"

"We haven't had tea in a few years," she replied with an ingenue's smile and a graceful nod at the spotless china, "I thought we should catch up." And then she took up the pot and began to pour.

Sharon let her know with a glare that she wasn't buying. "And despite your codename, I shouldn't be worried that you're obviously lying in wait for me with bait at the ready," she said, pointedly not touching the cup in front of her, even though the smell of the steam spoke of rich, estate-grown oolong, perfectly steeped. Memory so strong it might have been poured from Aunt Peggy's prized Jardinière teapot, surged inside her, and Sharon resolutely ignored it.

Natasha raised an amused eyebrow and floated a slice of lemon in each of their cups before taking up
her own and sipping. "It's tea I'm offering, not sex. Besides, I'm not your type."

"Oh, I have a type now?" Sharon dared, and did not for an instant think of Steve Rogers.

Natasha smiled anyway. "Well, I'd say that putting your career on the line to steal the shield and EXO falcon out from under your boss's thumb in Berlin last year at least hints at a tiny preference," she said.

"No more than switching horses mid-charge and attacking one of your allies so that your mark can get a clean getaway does," Sharon answered, all wide eyed, sarcastic innocence.

That won a laugh. "Relax," Natasha grinned, "I'm not here to sink you, Thirteen."

Sharon felt the smile true up just a little. "You wouldn't have let me see you if you meant to try," she agreed, then chose a biscotti, broke it in two, and put one half on Natasha's saucer. "But that does beg the question," she mused as she dipped the other half into her tea, "what are you doing here?"

Natasha nibbled at the biscotti, and pretended to consider her words. "Before..." she began, then hesitated until Sharon nodded her understanding -- they had both been SHIELD, after all; there was only one 'before' that really mattered. "Had you been read in on the LMD Interface Veil project?"

"The robot thing?" Sharon couldn't help the incredulous glance.

"No, they shelved that. The androids were far too glitchy. But the facial simulacrum interface developed for the LMDs peeled off into a separate project." She picked up her teacup and cradled it close, as though taking comfort from the heated china and fragrant steam. "The projection mesh could be slipped over an agent's own face, and so long as nobody else touched it, would provide a seamless visual cover, right down to vocal nuance and physical tics."

Sharon blinked, resisting a chill that wandered down her back at that idea. Body doubling a known figure was an exacting art that usually couldn't withstand close proximity or known associates' examination. Including the two of them, Sharon knew maybe two or three other agents who might have the subtlety to pull it off. But with a tool like what Natasha was describing, that number would be suddenly much larger, and the game much, much more personal.

Her face must've shown her thoughts, because Natasha nodded knowingly and said, "Yeah. It was going to be big. Thing was, they were still in development then. They'd got the tech working, but it required very specific target access to the intended mimic. Extensive voice print records, detailed brain scans with very specific data recorded by the technicians."

Sharon nodded. "Not the kind of thing that's easy to get on a mark."

"Not at all," Natasha agreed. "The one successful field trial I participated in only worked because Councilwoman Hawley had been treated for a concussion earlier that year, and her follow-up checks were done at a SHIELD facility." She gave Sharon a moment to work it out, then smirked and nodded. "When Hawley saw Fury's evidence on Pierce, she was all too happy to skip the on-site meeting that day and let me go in her place. But here's where it gets interesting." She leaned in, and despite herself, Sharon did too.

"Those masks couldn't be re-used. Even if the one I'd worn had survived the Tryskellion's collapse, it would have been essentially useless after it's charge had expired in five, maybe eight hours. If it was deactivated, it would go blank, but if it just ran down, it would freeze in the features it had been programmed to hold."

And Sharon couldn't help remembering the news blitz that had erupted in Berlin when the police had found Theo Broussard's body in a hotel room, along with a dark brown wig, and a mask of James
Buchanan Barnes. The fact that the CIA, along with every other international agency, had learned of it like the rest of the world; on TV had not gone over well with Sharon's boss. But then, that could be said about basically everything that had happened over that infamous week.

"So you're saying that Zemo stole one of the electronic life-masks," she ventured, tearing a packet of sugar for her tea. "Or maybe he just bought one on the black market. Lots of SHIELD tech went missing after '14."

But Natasha was shaking her head. "These were still in initial field trials then," she said. "Prototype cost was so high Fury himself was overseeing the project. Only six masks had been built as of May 2014, and of those six, I know for certain that three were burned."

"So that leaves three in the wind," Sharon mused. "Long odds, but not impossible, given the Sokovian black market." There had been more than one reason why Ultron had chosen the scraping-poor Baltic nation as his base, after all.

"Just wait," Natasha smirked, "Those odds are about to get longer. Of the six masks, two were retained within SHIELD. LMD-IV 1 and 2 both got burned. 3 and 4 were rendered to the Department of Homeland Security for field testing -- LMD-IV4 was the third burn I mentioned. LMD-IV 6 went to the Secret Service, pre-programmed to mimic President Ellis. That one's still unused and exactly where it ought to be..." Natasha picked up her tea, and flashed Sharon a loaded glance over the rim of her cup. "But LMD-IV 5, delivered to the State Department at the same time as the others, has now gone missing, and no one there seems to know anything about it, or the person who supposedly signed for it."

That made Sharon sit back and think for a long minute, before she met Natasha's expectant green eyes again. "So what are you after here, Widow," she asked. "You knew where to find me, so you must also know that I'm essentially back-watered on this nonsense surveillance op while they try and tie me to the Liepzig fight. I don't have the clearance or the anonymity right now to help you get anything done in the field, so what do you want from me? Data analysis? Do you need me to validate your theory, or check your math?"

And at that, Natasha gave up a wry chuckle. "Sure. Let's start with that," she said, and popped the end of her biscotti into her mouth. There was something in her gaze that spoke of unwinding now -- not settled, or at all unwary, but perhaps just taking comfort in the idea of her own confirmation bias being checked by a peer.

'It's no good letting the agent who gathered the intelligence do their own analysis dear,' Aunt Peg's voice haunted Sharon's ear as the fragrant tea did her nose. 'That's a wartime tactic that only leads to disaster in peace.'

She set her empty cup down with a 'toc' on the saucer, and laced her fingers together on the table. "All right, Devil's Advocate it is. Assuming you've verified that it was one of SHIELD's units that Zemo had...?"

Natasha tapped her phone a few times, then turned it to show Sharon the photo. A police evidence bag, sealed and signed, but the transparent plastic made it easy enough to see that it didn't contain the foam and latex kind of facial prosthesis, but some kind of crumpled fabric tinted in all the subtle colors of a white man's skin. She considered the photo. "You get this before, or after Vienna handed over all its evidence on the bombing to Interpol?"

"Vienna didn't have this," Natasha replied, "Berlin's a little less interested in sharing intel on a global level. Almost as if they'd spent half a century in an espionage tug-of-war." Sharon chuckled at her wide eyed innocent act, and Natasha took her phone back. "An old contact got me the photo and
write up on the mask," she admitted, "A week after this particular evidence bag went missing from the Berlin PD lockup."

Because no, that wasn't suspicious at all. Sharon sighed. "All right, so that's provenance narrowed down to one of three possible."

"Provenance confirmed," Natasha corrected, enlarging a different picture so that Sharon could see that someone had written down a serial number in the paperwork's note field. LMD-IV5

Sharon scowled at the number. "So whoever gave Zemo the Winter Soldier's trigger words also stole the mask from the State Department?" she tried, just to feel how the notion fit in her ears. "From the sound of it, you're suggesting that HYDRA had equal access to both." Not that that was horrifying or anything.

Natasha shook her head. "Vasily Karpov had gone into hiding thirteen years before the LMD project even began."

"And he is...?"

"Was," Natasha corrected with the grim, satisfied sort of smile that probably meant she'd had some kind of skin in that game once. "Vasily Karpov was HYDRA's Russian overseer of the Winter Soldier protocol at the time it went dark. He died early last June, and the FBI's medical examiner called it an accidental death due to faulty wiring. Although my contact told me that the autopsy tech was awfully surprised at the time to find Karpov's lungs full of water instead of smoke."

Sharon had to resist the urge to sneer at the hamfisted cover up. "If the FBI knew where to find him, why didn't HYDRA have him in hand already?"

"Blackmail, I'm guessing," Natasha answered. "As Operation Commander, Karpov would have known exactly who had given the kill orders in every activation of the Winter Soldier since before the Wall came down in Berlin. If he had wanted to, he would have been able to pull receipts on killings from Arnold Brown to the Kennedys and the Starks." She reached to refill their cups then, a subtle tension in the set of her shoulder. "Karpov was the kind of operative that HYDRA preferred to keep close to the chest, but as I understand it, there was some kind of expensive internal disaster involving the Winter Soldier program, and that made HYDRA decide to move the Asset maintenance and operations team to the US. Karpov stayed around long enough to mothball the Russian facility, and then he dropped off the radar."

"The Russian facility was where Stark captured Zemo, wasn't it?" Sharon didn't really need the question answered, but grounding the details helped to keep them all straight. "Were they able to find anything there after the munitions dump finished burning out?"

"Is that what they're calling it on Capitol Hill?" Natasha smirked, and then shook her head. "HYDRA knew better than to store munitions on that scale near a volatile Asset like the Winter Soldier. Between you and me, that explosion had to be all Stark, and the fact that it's still burning out six months after it went up is probably not an accident. Nobody's going to get anything from that base."

Sharon whistled. "He always did have a way with explosions," she admitted, then dragged the conversation back to its salient point. "So you still haven't said why Karpov couldn't get hold of a mask to give to Zemo," she said, dragging the conversation back to its salient point once more. "Or why the US handlers couldn't have given Zemo both the mask and the code. So what are you holding back?"
Natasha smirked and checked her wristwatch. "I don't know everything, Thirteen, I only act like I do."

"Bull. You wouldn't be here -- you wouldn't be talking to me if this circumstantial breadcrumb trail was all you had."

"Maybe it is all I have," Natasha answered, and her eyes were suddenly laser-focused on Sharon's own. "S.H.I.E.L.D and the Avengers shattered, the Accords holding the remains of both in a stranglehold of red tape, while the CIA hunts for fugitives and vigilantes to put under indenture. Maybe I'm here because I need your help to get the rest of what I need."

"That you need to do what, exactly," Sharon asked, though she knew, from the sudden rush of her pulse rate to the eager knot in her belly that wasn't quite rage, but wasn't far from it either. "Zemo's in prison, he's not going anywhere soon, and you must know I don't stand a chance at getting you access to him anymore."

"Zemo never had the kind of reach it took to accomplish this on his own," Natasha said, cold as a new bullet. "All I want to do now is balance the ledger."

It was Sharon who looked away first, anger struggling with an eager sort of anticipation in her throat as she stared at the biscotti, the tea cooling in matched cups, the torn sugar packet, the damp spoons. She had wanted to ask Steve to get coffee with her in London, after Aunt Peg’s funeral, to talk about the woman they'd both known and loved, and maybe, hopefully, to discover whether the tug of attraction between them had been strong enough to withstand the weight of 2014. But of course she hadn't got the chance to ask. Zemo had bombed the UN building in Vienna, and it had all come crashing down too quickly for any of them to breathe.

By the time they had stolen the shield, and the wings, and the Winter Soldier, and a single kiss, all Sharon had been able to taste on Steve's lips had been ashes and regret.

"If I go dark to help you," she said to the shadows in her cup, "I'll have to burn my life to the ground. They couldn't pin me to the Berlin mess or Leipzig, but suspicion is all it takes these days, with HYDRA under every damned rock. I step out of line for you, or burn my bullshit, make-work surveillance op, and both Sharon Carter and Agent Thirteen will be out of a job for good. 'And would that be such a bad thing, really?' a weary part of Sharon's soul whispered. She ignored it, but the soft smile that she found on Natasha's face when she looked up suggested that the Widow had picked up on it after all."

"Not necessarily," she said, waking her phone again. "There may be a way to sort out both our problems at the same time, but you'll have to trust me first. Think you can manage that?"

Sharon laughed, and picked up her teacup. "How many opportunities have I given you to poison me so far?"

"That's not the kind of trust I mean," Natasha smirked, and her red curls rolled as she shook her head with a pointed smile, "But I'll take it for a 'yes' anyhow." Then she put two fingers to her lips, and whistled as if she was hailing a taxi in Midtown Manhattan. It took all of Sharon's self control not to jolt upright in her seat and grope for a weapon at the obvious summons, but she managed it, settling herself into the potential of violence with a deep breath and a shift of her running shoes beneath the table.

Then the cafe's bathroom door opened, and a spry old man with pomade in his hair, crumbs in his mustache, and mischief in his eyes came out grinning straight at her, and it was too late for Sharon to
do anything other than close her eyes and curse both herself and the Black Widow, silently, exhaustively, and in detail inside her head.

"Stanley Uatu," Natasha said, laughter not hiding in her voice, "I'd like you to meet Agent Thirteen. Agent Thirteen, I believe you already know Stanley as your 'bullshit, make-work surveillance op', but he's been one of my best contacts for intel within the US government for, what is it, Stan; ten years now?"

"Fifteen, sweetheart," Stan replied, pulling a chair from another table over. "And that's if you don't count all those times I let you hack into my work computer and read my private interview notes back in the day." He stole a biscotti and used it to point at Natasha's fond smirk as he leaned toward Sharon conspiratorially. "She always thought she was being clever, but the truth is, sometimes a reporter finds out dirt that won't do anybody any good on the page. Sometimes it's good to know that people with different skill sets can get things tidied up."

"I thought you'd turned the newspaper over to your nephew in Queens," Sharon managed not to growl.

Stan barked a laugh around his biscotti. "Yeah? Well I thought you were a nurse, so I guess that makes us even, don't it? Now," he clapped his free hand on the table top, "Where are we going first; Cleveland? New York? New Mexico? Wakanda? Hey, I know a guy in British Columbia swears the Hulk was his next door neighbor until the black helicopters showed up and the cattle mutilations started."

"Wakanda?" Sharon asked, "Why the hell would we be going to-"

"Your place first, if you don't mind, Stan," Natasha answered, tossing more money than the tea and biscotti could possibly have been worth onto the table as she gathered her purse and phone. "I need a secure internet connection to check my mail."

"You got it, Red," Stanley said, and offered his arm. "Doug came down from Westchester this summer, and gave the Ultimate Machine another update." Then, as if an afterthought, he held the other elbow out to Sharon as she sighed and stood too. "My Grandson's got so much encryption on my home server, you just wouldn't believe. Even Tony Stark couldn't trace his codes."

"That," Natasha smiled as she slipped her hand around the old man's arm, "is exactly what I'm hoping for."

Chapter End Notes

This was a bit left-field, and not the chapter I'd expected to post next, my puff adders, but here it is all the same. Natasha simply would NOT be overlooked, and neither would Sharon, and then before you know it... Shenanigans afoot.

Let me know if you're still having fun, won't you?

(Edit Note: Lots of thread-spinning going on in this chapter, but all of it's things we've seen before. Vasily Karpov was the HYDRA agent that Zemo murdered in CACW, of course, and isn't it odd that Zemo engineered a car wreck on the street in front of his house, and then had time to search the man's house, and torture him to death with no interference whatsoever from neighbors or police? I thought so.

Another question I had after CACW was this: Just how did Zemo find out that the
Winter Soldier was Barnes? That wasn't public knowledge at all, so to have the press suddenly be blasting the name and designation without any back-fill? That was just hinky from where I stood. Especially since before '14, the Winter Soldier was nothing but a rumor in the Intelligence Community. Especially given that Zemo needed to plausibly disguise himself as Bucky in order to pull off his attack on the UN.

As for Stanley... well, MCU did that. I just rolled with it. And yeah, his nephew is https://marvel.com/universe/Cypher_(Douglas_Ramsey) Because once an X-Girl, always an X-Girl, don'tcha know.
Chapter Summary

In which are debated the Long Odds of Ridley Scott.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

L5 orbit

“What do you mean, it’s not there?” Tony demanded. “The whole system is orbit locked! None of them are supposed to be able to go anywhere once they’re in position!”

“I can only tell you what I perceive, Mr. Stark,” Vision’s voice came back through the Quinjet’s speakers. “There is a small debris field at the coordinates where this Insight Satellite should be, but I can see no sign of the satellite itself.”

“So what do we have here; a collision site?” Because god knew there was enough trash hurtling around at the orbital level to snipe anything that didn’t have its own class 2 armor. Tony wiped a trickle of sweat from his face and forcibly dragged his thoughts away from that idea. He was safe. The Quinjet was solid, stable at this altitude, just where the friction of atmosphere began to give way to the stomach-liquefying weightlessness of true space. It could stay here on auto pilot for a week before the air scrubbers would even need to activate, and he’d designed the Quinjet’s armor to bounce a direct hit from a Chitauri battle sled, so it would be far more than equal to any random orbital garbage. He was fine. It would be just fine.

“Not precisely a collision,” Vision answered, only the barest tint of confusion in his tone. Tony zoomed the cameras in on his location as the android turned in place against the glittering grist that whatever had happened here had left behind. “None of the debris fragments seem to match the design specifications of the Insight Satellite as shown in the HYDRA plans. These all seem to be fragments of... other satellites?”

“So what,” Tony tried and failed to quell a nervous giggle, “Did something eat something else?”

“Odd as it may sound,” Vision answered, ever the straight man, “That may not precisely be untrue. Of the pieces I can see readily, I can identify the source of one as an obsolete Italian GPS unit, and another as a Swiss weather mapping unit. Both have been... not so much broken, as disassembled. I can see signs of torsion stress in some components, while others show damage more akin to a cutting laser.”

“Okay,” Tony breathed, then wiped his hair back from his sweaty forehead. “Okay, terrifying as that may be, we need to stay on course here. Do, uhm...” He scrubbed both hands over his face again, and thought. “Do we have enough atmosphere out there to check for a chemical propulsion trail?”

On the small screen, Vision turned around again, the billow of his cape comically unreal in the airless, weightless void around him. He could breathe, Tony reminded himself, taking a pointed breath of his own, Vision was maintaining a bubble of perfectly good, grade a Earth air around himself using just the power of his own bad self, and that power hadn’t ever, like, misfired and
gotten one of Tony’s oldest friends nearly killed or anything.

*Shut UP, Stark!* he told himself, and pressed the back of his hand against his lips just for extra insurance against the inevitable StarkMouth that always seemed to happen when he was mildly freaked out.

“I don’t believe so,” Vision replied. “I doubt any propellant would have sufficient oxygen to ignite, and any other non-combustive propellant would disperse evenly over time. But perhaps if we were to locate the broadcast frequency which the GPS satellite operators once used to update course corrections and telemetry, we could try to connect to—”

“Right, right,” Tony agreed, damply hot against his fist. “Marco Polo’s a stupid game, but it beats a grid search every time.” He laced his fingers together to give them a crack, then brought up another work screen. “See if you can find me a piece of the GPS with the serial numbers on it, and I’ll get Friday started on the Italian space records—”

“You’ve got a phone call Boss,” Friday said as soon as the new link connected her to the Quinjet’s cockpit.

“I’m not home,” he answered without thinking. Then, thinking, “Who is it? Is it Ross? Because if it is, you tell him we don’t need anybody’s permission to be in International Airspace, and anything over 90 miles off the ground totally counts.”

“Does that include unauthorized salvage of satellites, I wonder?” Vision put in, mild and sarcastic all at once.

“Hey, I’m authorized,” Tony came back. “I’m still a SHIELD contractor, and technically Insight was a SHIELD operation. I even have clearance on it, since they used my goddamned repulsor engines for their international mass murder platforms! I have every right to be out here, tracking down their satellite unit and figuring out how it managed to run away in the first place!”

“It’s not General Ross, Boss,” Friday put in.

“Then I’m definitely not home,” Tony said again. “Feed them the standard recording, and then look up the records for Italian space payloads that have gone up within the past ten—”

“I can’t do that, Boss.”

Tony blinked. “Sure you can. I mean hell, it’s only the Italians—”

“I mean I can’t redirect the call, Boss. I’m not in control of that line.”

“What do you mean, that line?” Tony demanded, already setting up the search parameters for whatever numbers Vision might manage to bring back to him out of the debris field, and adding an atmospheric particle sampling and analysis subroutine to the Quinjet’s buffer computer for later.

“I mean the untraceable cell phone that you keep in the drawer of the desk in Captain Rogers’ office is ringing again,” Friday’s voice was unmistakably peevish now, “And since I don’t have trap, trace, filtering, or answering capabilities on that signal, I can’t do anything but tell you that you’ve missed his call, Boss. Again.”

“Aww, dammit,” Tony facepalmed. “Steve, why do you only try to call when I’m asleep, in the lab, or 90 miles above Siberia? Did he at least leave a message this time, Friday?”

“I couldn’t say for sure,” she sniped, “But I heard no alert tone to that effect coming from the desk.”
“Perhaps, while I collect the reference numbers you requested, you might return to the Avengers facility and return the Captain’s call,” Vision suggested, not smoothly at all. “I can meet you there, and we can devise a way to track the-”

“I’m fine,” Tony gritted, and stilled his fingers from tapping at his scarred sternum. “I’m not having a panic attack, and I’m not hyperventilating, it’s just a reaction to the high altitude atmosphere mix.”

“The jet’s cabin bio monitors read your heart rate quite high, Boss,” Friday put in, “And your body temperature seems to be lower than normal.”

“Quit it, the both of you,” Tony said, resisting the urge to smack a fist anywhere on the control board. “I am not freaking out, I am not having a panic attack, and I am not going to go home and organize my socket sets while I wait for you to get me some numbers I can work with, Vision, so get on that before I suit up and come out there myself!”

“Mr. Stark, I hardly think you-”

“Yeah, why don’t we leave the hardly thinking to me, Viz,” Tony cut the android’s complaint off, turning the pilot’s chair to face the looming black and gold bulk that was the Iron Man he’d been designing in his head as soon as he’d realized he would need to go straight to the Insight Satellite to get accurate data. “It’s what I’m best at. Just ask any reporter, anywhere.”

“Boss, the Suit’s not designed for an environment like this one,” Friday ventured into the pregnant silence that followed. “Propulsion and stability factors will be wildly different given the unknown friction coefficients and-”

“Not unknown, Friday,” Tony said. “Most of the data we have on spaceflight was taken at more or less this altitude, and thanks to NASA being a public organization, I didn’t even have to break any laws to get all the math we’ll need to control the suit out there.” ...For the twenty minutes of air that I’ll have if I actually wind up having to go out that airlock chute, oh holy Chrome, why didn’t I build an exterior tank interface...?

“I could prevent you leaving the Quinjet, actually,” Vision’s mild, faintly disapproving voice interrupted the whirling what-if’s going on in Tony’s head, and he was honestly almost glad of it, despite the sudden squeeze of his chest at the idea of having to fight Vision and his unquantifiable powers.

“You could try,” Tony came back, more to hear his own unshaking voice than anything. In the corner of his eye, Tony watched the Iron Man’s chest and eye lights come online -- Friday’s unspoken declaration of having his back.

“However I would far prefer knowing that you would answer me without deflection,” Vision went on, as if he was somehow unaware of the implied threat. “Will you please tell me why, exactly, you found it so very important to personally accompany me on this mission to retrieve the Insight data from this satellite? Given the data we had upon setting out, there was no reason to believe the retrieval would present any real complications, and yet you delayed the mission for a fortnight, until you had retrofitted both the Quinjet and your armor -- both illogical and excessive expenditures of time and money, given the goal at hand.”

Tony closed his eyes, counting Pi silently in his head until his hands steadied up, and he felt sure he could remember how to form words. He was good at words, especially words that didn’t mean anything; words that hid important things under insults and inanities; words that flattered in tone and slighted in syntax; words that promised bullshit on a dare, and then defied anyone to believe he couldn’t deliver... Oh yeah, he was so good with words. Just not the kinds of words that made the
people who really mattered understand how much he wanted them to see past his daring them to leave, and realize he needed them to stay.

*Love you, Dad...* had said no Tony, ever. Not until it was decades too late, anyhow.

He took a deep breath, looked for a place to grab the truth and start, but all that came out of his mouth was, “In space, no one can hear you scream.”

Vision was silent for a beat, and on the monitor Tony could see him doing that RCA dog headtilt before he replied, “While strictly speaking, that is factual, it does not seem particularly significant, given that the atmosphere within the Quinjet and my own air-sphere both relay the sound waves from our communicators without any trouble at all.”

“It’s an advertising slogan from a 1979 film by the name of *Alien,*” Friday put in the rolling of eyes she didn’t have clearly audible in her tone. “Directed by Ridley Scott, and starring Sigourney Weaver, Tom Skerrit, and-”

“Forgive me, I was unaware what relevance cinematic trivia might have to the conversation,” Vision came back smartly.

“Children, play nice,” Tony murmured, pushing out of the chair and drifting over to lay his hand beside the glowing reactor in the Iron Man’s chest. “It’s because Aliens are real now, Viz. Really real, and even more terrifying than they were when Ridley Scott reminded the world that space exploration was probably not gonna actually be all spandex tights and lightsabers.” He took a deep breath, and let himself remember the Chitauri mothership, sprawling to eclipse the sweeping glow of the galaxy behind it. Let himself remember the nonsensical thought that had studdered through his brain as JARVIS had cut out, and the Iron Man’s systems had cascaded into failure -- that he’d never have a way to know if it was the Milky Way back there behind that continent-sized ship, or a different one.

“Aliens are real now. They’re out there, and more importantly, they know we're in here. We’re all down there, all seven billion of us, in the only atmosphere we know how to get to, on the only planet know can survive on.” He took another deep breath, one that even years later, made him think of metal and coconut, and looked away from the curve of the planet, just visible through the Quinjet’s portside window. “They know where we are, and they know that we are not ready for them.”

“I wanted...” He tapped his fingers against the arc reactor’s steady blue glow. “I designed Ultron hoping it would help us to become ready for them. Ready, when they came back -- and they will come back -- ready to take the fight to them. To take it off the planet, away from all the cities, schools, hospitals, and homes that the lawyers hold over our heads every time a bad guy knocks one down. So that maybe,” He closed his fist, nearly eclipsing the blue, but for where the light showed through his skin and mapped his bones in delicate shadow. “So maybe when we do our Goddamned jobs and fight to protect the whole damned human race and every terrestrial species down there with them, we don't get fucking sued out of existence because someone's summer house got smashed under a space whale!” It was only in the ringing silence that followed, that Tony realized he’d been shouting.

“So this recovery mission was actually an excuse to retrofit your Quinjet and armor designs for low Earth orbit capability?”

“Excuse?” Tony shook his head. “I’m Tony Stark; since when do I need excuses to build cool tech that does neat stuff?” *Since Ultron,* his own voice answered, wry and cruel inside his head, *Since Sokovia. Since the Accords.* “I’ve been thinking since 2014 that those Insight Satellites needed to be de-orbitted before someone figured out how to access them from the ground again, and seeing
Steve’s little comparison project really just gave me the excuse I wanted figure out how to make the Iron Man suit function without atmosphere or gravity -- which, I don’t have to tell you, is way trickier than it looks in the comic books. Plus, I kinda wanted to do it while Rhodey wouldn’t be around to get jealous that I got to go to space before he did.”

“So, an opportunity-sensitive proof of concept then?” Vision corrected himself. “Ah. This will do.” When Tony looked, the monitor showed Vision returning to the Quinjet, towing what looked like part of a solar collector along with him.

“It’s a shakedown cruise,” Tony replied primly. “And a data recovery mission, because the targeting algorithm on that Insight Satellite is going to be a lot better tool for digging Hydra out of its trench than the lists Steve was trying to use it for.”

“Because if we know how they had been choosing their targets,” Vision began, holding up his prize to the exterior cameras so that Friday could zoom in on the inscription, and then turning to slot the piece of space trash into the cargo slot Tony opened up in the Quinjet’s belly.

“We can get to their targets before they do, and be waiting with the handcuffs when they arrive,” Tony finished for him.

“According to Captain Rogers’ files, there were well over seven hundred thousand names on that first targeting list. It will be no mean feat to determine the most at-risk targets from a number like that.”

“Luckily for us all, I have a lot of computing power at my discretion,” Tony grinned, and went back to his seat at the helm as he heard the airlock chute empty itself with a whoosh from the outside. And no, thank you, he had full confidence in his tech, so he did not hold his breath against the catastrophic failure that never came... much.

“If you’re both done congratulating yourselves,” Friday put in as soon as the airlock closed, “I thought you might like to know that I’ve been tracking astronomy chat room threads on mysterious equipment failures in satellites in this general region, and I believe I’ve found your missing satellite.” She flashed a still frame up onto the monitor; the raw data so dense that it pixelated even his screens. “This was the last picture received from the Somayaji telescope before it went dark, and that,” a bright ring appeared on the monitor, highlighting a large blot of darkness, frosted in hard, jagged angles from the oblique angle of the sun, “would seem to be another man-made orbital object on a collision course.”

“That’s my girl,” Tony crowed, already groping blindly for his flight harness as the airlock finished cycling, and Vision pushed off to join him there. He enlarged the frame, skipping past the ragged image to focus on the camera’s metadata, which appeared to be in Sanskrit. “When was this taken?” he asked.

“Just over two hours ago,” Vision replied, peering at the image as if he could process the telescope’s data himself. “That makes it roughly the same time that we filed the Quinjet’s flight plan, and left the Avengers’ compound.”

Tony stared at him for several heartbeats. “Yeah, cause that’s not creepy or anything.” Then he returned to the controls, where Friday’s reemote navigation app had already begun uploading the new coordinates to the Quinjet’s flight computer. “Not creepy at all...”

Chapter End Notes
Hey, lookitthat! An update! Who knew!?

(Edit Note: It ALWAYS bothered me how nobody seemed ready to take any steps to deal with the Insight Satellites once the Helicarriers were down. I mean the data-mining, targeting capacity of those things is downright horrifying even WITHOUT a gunship attached to the other end of them.)
Interlude: DC

Chapter Summary

In which timing, and lawnmowers are significant.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

~* Washington DC *~

"You can't be serious." the voice on the phone asked in the sort of arid British disbelief that managed to convey boredom and panic at once. "You do know how this sounds, don't you dear?"

"I'm quite serious," she replied, voice forcibly bright as she watched Stanley Uatu filling his bird feeder across the street. "And from where I'm sitting, it sounds like a big favor you've owed me for eight years finally getting called in."

"Well now, it was a lucky thing, of course, and I'm grateful for your help of course, but I hardly think it-"

"I saved your life, Harry," Sharon prompted, "Yours personally. And I caught your terrorist ringleader too. I even got the damned haircut! All to help you out, Harry, and you know it."

"It looked quite fetching on you," Harry tried.

Sharon wasn’t buying. "Princess. Diana. Haircut." she gritted. "And it took me two years to grow those layers out, so unless this is your way of telling me that you can't do it...?"

"Here now, less of that if you please young lady," Harry tsked, rising to her goad as she’d known he would. "I've been running field analyses and evaluations since well before you were born, and-"

"Then running a security eval on Saint Anne's last May should be a snap for you," Sharon cut in brightly. Stanley was using his walking stick to hang the bird feeder back on its hook, while a squirrel scolded him from the roof. It looked for all the world like he was arguing back, but Sharon didn’t bother to activate the mic hidden in the old man’s porch light -- last time she’d turned it on, she’d wound up listening to him reading the newspaper. Out loud. From start to finish. By the time he got through the want ad section, she’d been almost willing to out herself if it would get him to stop, but given his behavior since the week before last, when Natasha Romanoff had outed her, it probably wouldn’t have helped the situation.

"-AND I can tell when an agent's grief and anger are creating specters out of shadows on the wall," Harry's voice went gently kind, like a pat on the shoulder, or an extra biscuit with her tea. "We all loved her you know, but that disease has absolutely no mercy for any-"

"That disease took my aunt at a very strategic time, Harry," Sharon gritted through her teeth, beating a furious tattoo on the windowsill with the end of her pen. "She had been stable for years. Years, Harry. And her death, happening exactly when it did set in motion a very specific set of events by which one very wily, very capable, and very dangerous person shattered the only team of enhanced heroes this world has..." she closed her eyes and corrected herself. "Had."
On the other side of the line, she heard Harry cough, tweed rustling, chair creaking, and she rushed to fill the void before he could beg off. "Now if Aunt Peg really did go on her own, and it was just a... coincidental bit of bad luck and worse timing, then fine. I trust you to tell me so. After you've done the footwork to be sure her death didn't involve a pillow over the face, or a triple dose of comfort-morphine to help speed things along. And I know I can trust you to do that," she added. "Because you owe me."

"Petal..."

"Princess. Diana. Haircut," she said again, letting her sing song tone carry the implicit threat. Across the street, Stanley had retreated to his porch swing, and appeared to be having a conversation with a skinny teenage boy and his lawnmower on the sidewalk. The boy's clothes were baggy, but his lawnmower looked new.

"Saint Anne's is the hospice of choice for half the Parliament-" Harry began.

"All the more reason to give them a security review," Sharon shot back.

"The scandal of an official investigation would-"

"Official's no use to me, Harry. I need unofficial -- actual data, not the scrubbed up dog and pony show we both know the administrators will give you if you go asking. I need to know who was scheduled for duty, who was actually there, whose finances, or career path, or home address suddenly changed before or after. And we both know you don't need anybody's permission to get hold of that kind of information."

"Lord Bartram himself is on the hospital board of directors, and-"

"Oh good," she replied, watching the kid wheel his mower around the back of Stanley's house, "You can get some data on that old fraud's money laundering business while you're at it."

"He's... er... beg pardon?"

Sharon grinned as the muffled roar of the lawnmower started up, and Stanley Uatu gave Sharon a cheeky, beckoning wave over his morning cigar. The man was about as subtle as pantomime horse in church, and twice as ridiculous which, as a tactic for hiding in plain sight, Sharon had to grudgingly appreciate. It had fooled her, after all. "Look Harry, I've got to go now," she said. "Call me when you've got something, all right?"

"Here now, I haven't said I'd get anything!"

"But you will," Sharon answered his bluster as she tucked her .25 into the bra-band holster and then bent to tighten her ankle holster as well. "You'll do this because you know you owe me, and more importantly, because you know you owe Margaret Carter more than you could ever repay in your life, and you won't stand for the thought of some Sokovian kill squad thug making her into a sacrifice pawn when she'd been decades out of the game."

There was silence for a long moment, and then Harry gave up a sigh. "Tell me why you're doing this, Petal," he asked quietly. "It won't bring her back."

"I know it won't," Sharon said, thinking of Natasha's eyes, dull with hurt, and rage as she'd said, "All I want to do now is balance the ledger." And then she hung up before he could reply.

He'd do it -- she'd known that from the moment he had picked up her call. Peggy Carter had made her fame, her career, and her reputation from the ground up, and even her lifelong enemies had loved...
her at least a little bit by the time she had retired. The Intelligence Community and its shadow world
had hated to see her go, and Sharon not least among the lot. But still sometimes, she found herself
remembering how pale and lost Steve had looked at Peg's funeral; adrift in loss, and shocked white at
pain no amount of prior warning could dispel. Steve hadn't even known Sharon was there until his
friend had nudged him out of his thousand-yard contemplation of the floor, and the game little
almost-smile he'd dredged up when he'd met her eye during the eulogy had been heartbreaking.

Losing Peggy just then had crushed Steve Rogers in a way that little else could, and with Natasha
come back into Sharon's life last month, dragging conspiracies and entanglements like sticky webs
behind her, Sharon felt at least a little bit vindicated in her choice not to take her aunt's timely death at
face value.

Speaking of face value, however, Stanley had begun to wave vigorously at Sharon from his porch
swing, equal parts bored old man playing games with his surveillance, and not-so-sly summons to
come over and get some scheming done.

Sharon took a deep breath to stuff her bitter musings down into their mental box once more, then she
pasted on a smile and waved back. Then she grabbed her keys and her sunglasses, slipped her phone
into her back pocket, and went to see where the Black Widow had disappeared to for two weeks,
and exactly what she was doing with that lawnmower in Stanley's back yard now.

~*~

“This was a game I used to play with JARVIS,” Natasha said, her eyes fixed on the code scrolling
down the screen as Sharon stood behind her. “Back before Ultron and Sokovia, when I was splitting
time between Shield and Avengers HQ. Hide and seek, if you like. I would plant a back door into
the system somewhere, and he would tell me when he'd found it. Kept us both sharp.”

“I’ll bet it did,” Sharon agreed, clearly impressed. “Kind of surprised it didn’t get you reassigned to
the Cyber unit, given how badly Fury wanted an in past Stark’s watchdog.”

“Please,” Natasha spared a smirk and shook her head, “Fury needed me too much in the field.
Besides, my ins never lasted long. That was kind of the whole point of it. Thing was, I had just built
a new one the night before Ultron activated, so because JARVIS hadn’t found it yet, Stark’s
replacement AI didn’t even know to look for it when he brought her online.”

Sharon whistled in awe. “So Stark doesn’t know either.”

“Not so far,” she said, filling up a prompt window with a volley of asterisks. “And if I time my
incursions and downloads with scheduled code pushes and updates, that will stay true for at least a
little while longer.”

Outside the sliding glass door, Stanley Uatu was having a blast with the RC lawnmower she had
brought him, cackling as he made the machine carve dirty words in the long grass, where the nosy
neighbor across the alley, whom he never tired of complaining about to Natasha, would not possibly
overlook.

Sharon hummed appreciatively and sipped at the coffee Stan had left for them, wincing when she
discovered for herself why Natasha had left her own cup untouched beside the keyboard. “Wow.
That’s...wow.” She shook her head and set the cup on a shelf. “So that’s why you didn’t get
anything when we did this two weeks back?”

“That’s why,” Natasha agreed. “This audio file in Steve’s server is enormous,” she said as the file
menu opened on the screen. “FRIDAY would definitely have noticed if I’d grabbed it then. But on
the first Friday of the month, she runs a backup with her satellite locations, so this,” she highlit the file in question, then five more below it, and copied them to her datastick, “will be just another data packet in the crowd.”

“And what does Rogers think of you making free with his system passwords?” Sharon asked, and Natasha had to smile.

“I’ll let you know if he ever finds out I’ve got them.” She said, then snorted at the pinched look of disapproval that crossed Sharon’s face. “You were in DC that year, Thirteen, you’ve seen firsthand what can happen when Steve Rogers spots a fight that needs starting, or something he needs to put to rights.” Sharon allowed it with a nod, and Natasha went back to watching the download bar, achingly slow due to all the encryptions. “I think, given how often I wind up involved in Rogers’s fights, it’s only reasonable that I should take every scrap of warning I can get.”

“Pretty sure he wouldn’t see it that way,” Sharon said, then sighed. “But given the givens, I guess he’s probably got other things to be concerned with right now.”

“Almost certainly,” Natasha agreed, remembering the Winter Soldier as she’d last seen him over Steve’s shoulder; battered, frightened, his eyes more human, more desperate than she had ever imagined they could be. And they had run together; her dear friend and that man, who was so apt to become a machine for the litany of a handful of words. And then Siberia had caught fire, and Stark had turned Zemo over to Interpol, then crept home in a resounding lack of fanfare, and all the intelligence community seemed to know about it was that Captain Rogers was missing, and that something terrible had probably happened to him. Which Natasha knew for truth, because the same terrible thing had happened to them all.

The download finished with a ding, and Natasha closed the connection, then brought up the copied files in a new menu. She recognized the Insight targeting files, a collation of the data they’d collected on Rumlow, with the fascinating addition of what looked to be an autopsy report from Lagos, a folder of fan mail that she recognized as the regular monthly push, and then the big one; the mystery file that had caught her attention when she’d spotted it the last time she’d peeked under Friday’s skirts.

It was, as Natasha had suspected, an audio file, and once she unpacked the compression, it nearly filled the data stick’s capacity. She hovered the mouse over the file, carefully reading Agent Thirteen’s expression in the reflected screen before deciding against turning on the speakers and diving into it right away. Whatever it was in that file, she wanted a preview before she sprung it on her ally -- whom she suspected hadn’t quite forgiven her for standing against Rogers when the Accords had blown up in their faces.

There were companion files within the compression though -- numbered text files that Natasha felt sure would turn out to be a transcript, -- and those she sent to Stanley’s printer.

In the backyard, the lawnmower stopped abruptly, and Natasha glanced up to see Stanley hurrying around the house toward the gate. Sharon stepped up to the door and peered to try and see where he was going, then visibly flinched when the front doorbell rang. Natasha swore softly, glancing at the printer, which had just begun to spit out pages, and the datastick, which was still flashing as it worked through the queue. “I can’t leave this,” she murmured, closing the menu on the screen. “Stan said he wasn’t expecting anyone today...”

Sharon nodded. “Whoever it is, I’ll stall them,” she said, peering through the study doorway out into the house. “We can meet at the cafe tonight in case you have to run for it.”

Natasha huffed a sigh, nerves singing as she watched Sharon check the sightlines with laser focus,
and a steely determination. “Just don’t shoot up Stanley’s place if you can help it. He’s one of my best sources, and I can’t afford to have him mad at me.”

“Seriously? With Mr. Uatu’s heart condition? Gunfire would be far too much excitement for my client in his delicate condition.” Then with a wink, Agent Thirteen made the transformation to her friendly nurse persona, and left the study in a scurry that almost made Natasha regret it when she closed the door firmly behind her.

Chapter End Notes

You're right; these chapters are shorter than the other ones. But hey -- at least they're up where you can read them, and maybe comment, right?

(Edit Note: It also always bothered me, the precise timing of Steve getting the news of Peggy's death. Just when the team had been backed into the corner of the Accords' 3 day deadline.

And given her technical proficiency shown in Iron Man 2, it's not much of a stretch to say Natasha still had access to the Stark servers, I thought. And if she DID have backdoors installed, you damn skippy she'd be using them. She is a spy, after all.)
Interlude: Wakanda

Chapter Summary

Safety precautions regarding urban wildlife.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Birnin Zana, Wakanda *~

“Wanderer, stop right now!” a woman cried out in Wakandan, the fluid syllables ringing sharp in the deep gloom the jungle trees made of the twilight. Jerked out of his thoughts, Steve did stop, eyeing the skypaths above for movement until the blue-silver glint of a kimoyo bracelet gave Nakia’s position away.

“Why?” he called back in the same language as she hopped the railing above his head and rope-slid to the ground instead of using the steps twenty yards ahead. She looked worried, tense and winded as though she’d run to find him, and Steve felt his heart speed up. “Trouble? There is trouble I should go to?"

“Trouble you are about to trip over, if you keep on walking that way,” the War Dog corrected him in English, taking hold of his arm to tug him around the way he’d come. “This neighborhood is not safe for you, even if you are awake this time.”

“I was just out for a walk,” Steve said, his hand rising to touch the tracker bead on its vibranium chain at his throat as he tried not to blush at the reminder of how inconvenient his sleepwalking had been for everyone lately. Friday’d had protocols to keep him from wandering too far when the stress would get to him back in New York, but the Wakandans didn’t make much use of that kind of AI assistant, and after a few times when alarmed citizens had found Steve meandering like a pale, silent ghost through their city, the Dora Milaje had taken steps to see that one of their number could find him quickly if his dreams sent him out into the night. It was, they had explained, the kind of bead parents would string onto their young children’s bracelets until they were old enough to find their way home on their own.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he explained, rolling the bead between his fingers, “and I didn’t want to disturb the others by rattling around our quarters all night. It seemed like I wouldn’t be bothering anybody if I went out at this time of night. Is it really that rough of a neighborhood?”

“Not during the day,” she said with a shrug, ”but at night, this close to the city's edges, it is another matter. You shouldn’t go out this far from the palace at night without at least some way to call for help.” And here, she tapped the beads at her wrist, the largest of which lit briefly, brightly blue at her touch. His necklace, lacking the prime bead given to Wakandan children at birth, did no such tricks. It was there to answer to them, not to him.

“I have my phone,” he said, patting his pocket. He’d been careful to have it with him at all times for two weeks, stubbornly hopeful even though Tony hadn’t picked up, and he hadn’t dared to risk leaving a message any of the times he’d tried to call. “And anyway, I’m not bad in a fight.”
Nakia cut him the kind of look that made Steve’s heart twist with a sudden, sharp wistfulness for Natasha. “Some fights aren’t for you to win, Wanderer.”

“Because I’m white,” Steve sighed, understanding. It was impossible to ignore how the exiles all stood out against the Wakandan population, and for all the normal response to them had been curious courtesy among the Birnin Zana residents, it had been easy to see suspicion and wariness creeping underneath as the days had rolled into weeks, and months with them still sheltered under T’Challa’s wing.

“Because you are made of meat,” Nakia corrected him with a sharp nudge of her elbow. “This close to the city’s edge, people still keep some livestock in their gardens. Guinea fowl, goats, swine, sometimes even cattle. Leopards can be a problem at night.”

"Leopards?” Steve asked, fascinated and a little alarmed.

Nakia shrugged. “London has foxes; Delhi has macaques; Chicago has coyotes; Harar has hyenas; Birnin Zana has leopards. And a man walking unwary in the silent hours before dawn, so pale and easy to track against the darkness would be a temptation to any mother with cubs to feed.”

"Leopards in the city," he mused again, eyeing the skybridges with a new understanding, "That'd be something to see..."

"Another night, perhaps," Nakia said with a smile. "When we have more time, and better tools to see them in the dark. And also when my King has not sent me to find you and bring you back to the Residence."

And just like that, the tension was back, ramming his spine straight and his shoulders taut as armored steel. "Something has happened," he said, past dread and halfway to resignation. "Is it Tony? Ross?"

She shrugged and kept their easy pace as if she didn't notice he'd faltered. "It is probable that something has happened, given the hour and the summons, but I am a War Dog, Wanderer, not a messenger. You will have to ask my King for your explanation."

"Of course," Steve nodded, forcing himself to take a breath, and shove the rising dread down again. Worry wouldn't make the miles or the minutes pass any quicker, after all.

Nakia left him as they came into the lush gardens surrounding the Palace, ghosting away from Steve's side with a nod of farewell, and a last friendly nudge with her elbow, as if telling him to shake a leg, or lighten up -- or maybe both. Steve took her advice to heart, and decided on a whim that, rather than make his way to the Palace along the winding switchback path that showed the lush gardens like a string of jewels on long, easy thread in the daytime, he would take a shortcut instead.

Or rather, he would make a shortcut all his own. A straight line, or as close to it as he could manage, up the steeply terraced slope -- leaping from high branches of trees and clambering up rock walls like some figment of Edgar Rice Burroughs's imagination. The night-roosting parrots scolded his progress as he climbed, and more than once he spotted the subtle shift of tracking cameras, felt the prickling wash of security fields he didn't understand the workings of, but honestly, none of that made the ascent any less fun. He wasn't trying to break into the palace unnoticed, after all, and with the gift of the tracking bead around his neck, Steve was reasonably sure none of the Dora Milaje would take him for any kind of a hostile even if they did decide to challenge his sidelong entry to the Royal Palace.

And it was fun, challenging himself on such a primitive level, shunting to the back of his mind all the tangled knots of ifs and ands, whys and wherefores, and wishes and horses and all the things beggars
could never hope for. Whatever it was T'Challa had to tell Steve, in the airdrop moment between the leaping and the landing, it didn't matter. All that mattered were thrust and vector, inertia and gravity, and in a few heartbeats, the strength of his grip once something came close enough to grab and hang onto tight.

Momentum feeding momentum, Steve almost missed seeing Scott Lang, perched like a silent gargoyle at the edge of the walled garden that the exiles' apartments all shared. But as Nakia had mentioned to him earlier, the pale hues of the man's skin stood out strongly against the moonless dark, and once Steve had spotted him, the woeful distance of his thousand-yard-stare out over the sleeping expanse of Birnin Zana drew Steve's upward charge to a halt.

"Scott," Steve called, dropping onto the pavers as the man bolted upright and whirled to face him. "Cap - uh - Steve," he called back, his bearing slouching hurriedly from alarm to nonchalance as Steve drew near. "Hi?"

"You're up early," Steve said, worry prickling at the back of his neck. "Is everything all right?"

"Uh, yeah," he said, then glanced back up at the lit windows above them and shook his head. "I mean no, not everything hunky dory, but not not all right, you know what I mean?" Steve shook his head, and Scott grimaced. "Hawkeye got a phone call about an hour ago. Damned ringtone was so loud it woke everyone else up before him. Anyway, it was his wife."

"Laura called?" Steve asked, the ease of his midnight climb burning away like mist. "What's happened?"

"Don't know for sure, but I think his uh... Lila? Little girl?" He gestured, as if measuring the child's height from the ground. "I think she fell at school. Broke her arm or something."

Steve closed his eyes, sucking in a deep breath of the night, and hating how his mind immediately leapt to all the wrong reasons the child of an exiled father might be injured while at school. "But she's okay?"

"Don't know," Scott answered, strain threading its way through the barely suppressed hero worship the man had yet to get over when Steve was around him. "He took off soon as he hung up with her. Took his bow though, so I guess he needed to go shoot some stuff. Which," and here he shrugged, and his gaze returned briefly to the interminable, midair distance on which it had been fixed before Steve had disturbed him, "I mean, I get. I'd feel the same if it was Cassie who got hurt and I was stuck all the way on the other side of the world. Not that ... not that Paxton would let Maggie tell me about it if anything did happen to Cassie, I don't think. Even if I was still right there in Frisco." Here he stopped, rubbed the back of his neck, and sighed. "He's a cop, you know? Not my biggest fan, even on a good day."

"And it's been awhile since any of us had one of those," Steve said, feeling deeply miserable, and deeply culpable at the same time. "I'm sorry," he said, aware of how uselessly hollow the sentiment was, and equally aware of just how little beyond that he had to offer now that he'd given up the shield for good.

"Naw, hey," Scott protested. reaching out to jostle Steve carefully. "That's all on me, dude. Maggie and me -- that ship sailed the day I got sentenced for the Vistacorp thing. Cassie was always gonna be part of that. I mean I'd do anything for her, and that's why I came when Sam told me why you needed me." Scott shook his head, and patted Steve's arm. "Back in 2014, everybody saw what one Winter Soldier could do, and that was with him pulling his punches. What kind of a father would I be for Cassie if I stayed home for a barbecue when there might be five more just like him, only
meaner about to wake up and start taking names, and deposing governments?"

*Did you really think I wanted more of you?* Steve managed not to flinch as the memory of Zemo's smug query slid through his memory like icy mist. *I'm grateful to them though; they brought you here.*

They'd been so blind, all of the Avengers. Each of them dancing to Zemo's tune, and none of them seeing the man behind the curtain until it was too late. Even now it burned Steve's temper while chilling his guts to realize just how many strikes of pure, lightning luck the Sokovian soldier had in order to bring the heart and soul of the Avengers to blows there at the end of the world.

"And none of it necessary," Steve sighed, thinking of five corpses, lit gold in their frozen glass coffins; of watching helpless as grainy footage proved Zola's cruel hints true; of shattered glass and knuckles, the smell of ozone, steel and coconut, shocking metal to metal and still Tony dragging himself upright, spitting ire and endings as Steve could only walk away. "Not a god damned bit of it."

Scott cut a look at him, sidelong and assessing, and Steve weathered it in silence. "Well, the other Winter Soldiers are dead now, aren't they?"

Steve nodded. He'd told them all what had happened in Siberia as soon as he'd gotten them off the Raft; every awful, unflattering detail. There was a part of him that was still expecting condemnation for it every time he met their eyes.

"And the news said that the whole facility blew up, so it's not like anybody's like pulling a Dr. Frankenstein on them at this point," Scott added, a brightness coming into his voice that fooled neither of them. "So technically that's a win from where I'm standing." Steve shot him a skeptical glance, and the man gave a bashful grin and shrug. "I mean I've certainly done more jail time for smaller acts of public heroism, sooo..." He bobbled his head side to side, in a sort of 'win some, lose some' gesture that somehow hooked a smile Steve didn't know he had left in him. "And hey -- how many white guys can say they've got to see the Royal Palace of Wakanda, and not even get shot at for it?" he added with a grin.

"Yet," Steve added, fighting a smile of his own.

"Yet," Scott agreed. "But if you keep crawling around the Royal Palace in the dark like that spider kid, I'm sure that could change."

Steve gave a chuckle and shook his head. "I'll be sure not to wear my pajamas if I do," he said. turning toward the gate that let off the small walled garden, and onto the road he was supposed to take.

Scott kept pace with him, the cheer in his voice a contrived, yet welcome thing. "So anyway, after Clint took off to call his old lady, Sam and Wanda went on down to the kitchens to see if they could rustle up an early breakfast." He tipped a nod at the round table and chairs that filled their shared outdoor space. "They should be back soon if you want to hang out awhile."

"Can't," Steve shook his head, then tipped a nod toward the official buildings farther up the rocky cliff spire, lit here and there with the warm gold of late hours and work to do. "T'Challa sent for me, and I'm pretty sure it was awhile ago. I don't want to keep him waiting too long."

"Oh, no, probably not a good idea, with the..." he briefly mimed the Dora Milaje's royal salute, but without the warrior women's stoic expressions of determination, it was more comical than intimidating. "You going to maybe go the long way up though? So they don't, you know, shoot you
or something? Cause I'd hate to break our lucky streak...?"

Steve considered his abandoned shortcut climb briefly, but shook his head. He couldn't conjure up the sense of playful challenge from before. Not now that the cold reminder of all that they'd given up had crept into the sultry night. "Maybe after T'Challa's done with me I'll join you," Steve offered, opening the gate and slipping through alone. "If any of you are still up then."

"Sure, Cap," Scott replied. More wry cheer, openly mocking the fact that neither of them really felt it. That was a skill Steve guessed must have stood the man in good stead while he had done his time in prison. *If you can laugh in the devil's face, and still stand up every time he knocks you down,* his ma had always liked to tell him, *Then at the end of the day, you'll know yourself the winner.*

For years, that philosophy had kept Steve going -- that ingrained stubbornness which let him believe that as long as he could just keep standing up, he would find a way to make it through. It had been hope, really, that his ma had meant to teach him, but like everything else he’d tried to build since SHIELD found him out of the ice, it felt as if Steve had left that hope behind him when he’d carried Bucky out of the bunker, and then let him fall once more, gently now, into his own icy sleep.

Steve didn't have a mission to focus on now, and that, more than anything else, burned inside him. But there was so much beyond that he didn't have: his rank, his job, his team, his shield. He didn’t even have a country anymore. But what Steve did have was a brother, frozen in terror of what lay inside his own mind; a crew of good friends too far from their homes and their families; a phone that no one had answered for fifteen long days now; and he had a King who had sent for him in the dead hour of night. And whether Steve took the short way or the long way up, whatever news waited for him at the end of the climb wasn't going to be a laughing matter for anybody.

Chapter End Notes

Here you go, my Puff Adders; Three new chapters to chew on while I keep pushing on the rest. I hope you enjoy them, and if so, I hope at least some of you drop a note to let me know it. As always, your comments give me life!

(Edit Note: So clearly, this part of the fic was written before Black Panther dropped, so I didn’t know that Nakia was on assignment, and had been for months. I also did not know that the Dora Milaje armor she appeared in for the trailers was borrowed, and that she was a War Dog in the MCU instead of a DM. I've (kinda) fixed that now. However overall, I am saying that all of this fits into the canon of the Black Panther, but only if you extend the BP timeline a little bit. Nakia meets the Refugees while she's come home for T'Challa's coronation ceremony (which the refugees are not welcome to attend, let's be honest here.) The Klaue capture in Korea, and the attack of Erik Killmonger take place later in T'Challa's reign, and they fit in the space between chapter 30 and 31 for the purposes of this story. Also, there really are urban leopards in Mumbai. I couldn't resist using them for Wakanda too, because they just make sense here.)
Nakia was waiting for Steve in the hallway outside the King of Wakanda's private apartments, and she gave him a knowingly amused once-over before letting him in, as if she knew exactly why his shirt was sweat-damp and wrinkled, and precisely which stones and trees the moss-smudges on his shoes had come from. But she didn't say anything when she pushed the door aside to let Steve through except, "He's in his study. Third door to the right."

And so Steve thanked her with a nod, and followed the curving wall along as directed. He'd thought, when T'Challa had first brought them to Wakanda, that he might never get used to the roundness of the buildings here; every room a formation of rings and mounds, and circles within circles, so that even the soaring official rooms within the palace felt as though they had grown elegantly from the earth, like the giant trees along the rampart of the King's Mountain, and had struck a truce with the architects to avoid intrusion or excessive labor on any of their parts. In the guest apartments that all of the exiles shared, it lent a coziness and communal nature to their lodgings that Steve, at least, found a comforting contrast to the sleek modernity of the living quarters at the Avengers' Compound.

Here in the King's chambers, the effect was nothing short of sweeping grandeur. As, of course, the architects must have intended. Even the reading desk at which Steve found T'Challa, still in the elegant suit he must have worn all day, had the air more of a throne than of a workspace: far too grand for the furtive hush of four in the morning without the grace of a decent sleep going before it.

"Good morning, your majesty," Steve said as he ducked under the hazy veil of energy that, had it been hung straight instead of pulled to the side of the doorframe, would have kept him out of the room no matter what he tried.

T'Challa looked up with a weary smile. "I am... still not used to being called that."

"I can imagine it's harder to get used to than 'Captain' ever was," Steve said, then tipped a nod toward the neat stack of pages at his elbow. "Niaki said you needed to see me. Is there a problem?"

"Always, it seems," T'Challa said, his smirk twisting dryly and without much humor. "I have a newfound awe of my father's stamina, as well as his patience. Take a seat please." He waved Steve toward one of the benches that orbited the bulwark of the desk, and waited until he'd settled into it to continue.

"Wakanda's Ambassador to the United Nations has sent me some troubling news today," T'Challa began, then put up a soothing hand when he noticed the wince Steve couldn't keep off his face. "Nothing about you, or your friends, Captain," he said. "Not directly, at least. Forgive me for alarming you; the day has been a long one."
Then he scrubbed one palm over his close-cropped hair and sighed. "Let me begin again. Your friend from Lagos; the doctor who shared his autopsy findings with you when you first came here. What was his name again please?"

"Odogwu Ebrakumo," Steve replied, an image flash of a narrow, dark face with a wry, dry smile arising from his memory at the sound of the man's name. "He's the Chief Medical Examiner for Lagos City."

"Yes," T'Challa nodded, sliding a couple of pages aside on the stack beside him. From where Steve sat, it looked like the documents had been composed in the Wakandan glyph-script instead of the more familiar Roman alphabet. "Do you recall whether he had a... colleague, or an employee by the name of Doctor Samuel Stearns?"

"That name rings a bell," Steve blinked and thought hard, but no face arose to meet it in his mind. "But I don't think it could have been anybody I met in Lagos. Dr. Ebrakumo hardly had ten minutes to speak with me between the rescue efforts and my action reports to the Lagos Police, and I didn't meet any of his staff officially." He tried the name in his head again, but got no better results, as if it named a character he'd never met face to face, only ever read about. "I do remember that none of the first responders or rescue personnel were anglos." T'Challa's eyebrow quirked a silent question, and Steve shrugged. "Samuel Stearns doesn't sound much like a Nigerian name, is all."

"According to the Internet, it is not," T'Challa agreed, slipping another few pages aside on the stack, to reveal a more familiar typeface, and the structured format that hinted strongly of the kind of official report paperwork that Steve had never yet learned to do anything but endure. "The only Dr. Samuel Stearns a cursory search turns up is an American, from your own New York City. Apparently he currently works with the US State Department, and that being the case," T'Challa slipped one sheet of the form free, and displayed the blue ballpoint signature looping across the bottom of it. "I cannot understand why it is that his signature should have been on the autopsy reports submitted to the UN Sokovia Accords signators as part of the inquest into the Lagos Incident yesterday."

"That's," Steve had to blink, confused. "That still going on? The inquest?"

T'Challa tilted his head. "Why does that surprise you?"

"It's just Ross had the Accords in front of us two days after the incident happened," Steve answered, quelling the burn of anger that still rose in his belly as he remembered the Secretary of State's manipulative slide show like the burn of salt in a wound. "Told us we had three days to sign it or to..." he took a breath and edited the quote carefully in his head. "Or to resign. Even with the bombing, I'd have thought the UN would have moved on to other business once it had the Accords in place."

With a rueful chuckle, T'Challa slipped the page back into the stack and shook his head. "You overestimate the speed of international diplomacy, Captain, and you vastly overestimate its tidiness." He straightened the paper with the idle focus of a man who is far too tired, but has no plans to sleep anytime soon. It might have stirred a stab of homesick nostalgia, if there had been a set of wrenches lined up across the desk.

"There were significant questions caught up in the Lagos incident which warranted international scrutiny as the investigation developed," T'Challa said. "Not the least being the return of the bodies and possessions of the Wakandans who had been killed there. The black market puts great value on Wakandan technology, and as you can imagine, smugglers and thieves have been a problem in this country because of it. And then there is the question of the weaponized biological compounds which the terrorists stole, as well. And of how it was that the press was reporting the deaths of my countrymen before any hint of their involvement in the tragedy at all had been reported to Wakanda.
"I thought it was just what the press did nowadays," Steve bit out, "leaping on a tragedy and then stirring the pot to get a more exciting story out of it. Sorry," he winced at T'Challa's amused glance. "Don't mean to be bitter."

"Well, I cannot say you are wrong about it," T'Challa answered. "However I am still perplexed to find this autopsy report on Wakandan citizens killed in Nigeria last year coming to me by way of the US State Department, and with no sign on it of Dr. Ebrakumo's involvement in the findings at all."

"That is... confusing," Steve said, beginning to get a sense of why he'd been summoned. "And I'm guessing that calling over to the Lagos Morgue to ask Odogwu what's going on isn't something the King of Wakanda can get away with?"

T'Challa shook his head. "Not if there truly is anything to discover there, no. Will you reach out to him, Captain? I realize you are a soldier and not a spy, but you can at least get a sense of the matter without bringing to bear the international focus that tends to follow a King's interest in a lowly civil servant."

And here, Steve dug up his very best 'aw shucks' grin. "Well, I'm no Black Widow, but I can shoot him an e-mail without getting anybody in too much trouble. I haven't heard back from Odogwu since I forwarded him Dr. Cho's notes his report. It's probably time I thanked him directly for sharing his findings with me." He stood, and nudged the bench back into its place. "If I e-mail him tonight it'll be waiting for him when he gets to work tomorrow. At least that will open a line for him to give me a tip if something's not right on his end."

"Exactly so," T'Challa said, the tone of his voice hanging somewhere between pride and gratitude. "We will make a diplomat of you yet, Captain."

To which Steve could only shudder. "God, I hope not!"

*~ Washington DC ~*

She had been taught to read in 20 languages. In five of those, she could read fluently enough to cold-recite a document into a recording device, and in three of those, she could read content faster than the speediest of printers could deliver it. It probably said something about the Black Widow that the only one of those languages into which she put any effort at maintaining her speed-reading skills was now English -- she could never be sure when she might find herself needing to know a dangerous thing, even if she could not obtain a copy for proof.

And this... this gut churning testimony of a girl tormented; a girl whom Natasha had considered a protege and a friend... this was a dangerous thing indeed. She scanned through the pages as quickly as Stanley's top of the line printer could churn them out, noting the voices outside, and dismissing them without concern when she heard Agent 13 laughing at something a young child was saying to her. Another day, she might even have been suspicious of the young, enthusiastic voice -- surely not younger than she had been when first she learnt to kill -- but another day, Natasha would not have been transfixed, staring down the proof of her family's torment, and her own all-too-costly miscalculation.

She knew there would have to be a prison. SHIELD had had the Fridge, after all, and you couldn't put walking weapons (like Wanda, like Bruce, like Tony, like Thor, or Steve, or herself, or any of the Avengers) into general population at a supermax and just expect good behavior. She'd known there would be a prison. She hadn't known it would be ... this.
Natasha wiped at her face as the last pages came off, surprised and a little angry to find wetness on her cheeks. Tears were a resource; a tool and a weapon for use when they could accomplish something, not to be wasted on such trivial things as feelings! She took a deep breath and held it, head craned back to glare at the ceiling as the thick sheaf of pages rattled in her fist. The heat in her eyes, and the punishing twist of guilt in her throat did not yield, however, and as the accusing voice of a teenaged boy joined the conversation in the living room, Natasha realized couldn't stay there, her feet mired in sentiment, her hands gripping pages and pages of red. She could not be caught so helpless as this, not even by an ally.

The computer room had a sliding glass door which let out onto a backyard patio, which sheltered Stanley's barbeque grill, picnic table, and ashtray from the Virginia sun (and prying neighbors) beneath a pergola draped jungle-thick with wisteria vines. Natasha slipped outside, let the door slide nearly closed behind her, and went to the table, to read the whole thing again, slowly this time -- one part brutal strategy, combing the words for the data that lay between them -- three parts penance, her mind filling in the voices of her friends, the strain of their voices, and how they might have looked saying, and hearing them.

They were in Wakanda, or at least they had been when they had recorded this deposition. The speaker that the transcriptionist had designated "KW" could only have been T'Challa, and there couldn't have been anywhere safer in the world for Sam and Steve to have Wanda's damning testimony be recorded. Wakanda might be the one place in all the world where not even HYDRA could have touched them, though if it knew to try, then try it surely would. And clues like the one Natasha held in her hand, of course, would only lead the hunters to them sooner, if they should come before the wrong eyes.

Natasha fished Stanley's lighter out of a drift of cigar ash just to the left of the New Mexico souvenir ashtray, and took the deposition to the barbecue grill, crumpling each page as she finished reading it (one last time, to be sure she wouldn't -- would not ever -- forget the details) and lighting each one from the last flames of the page that had gone before it. Letting the smoke burn her eyes, and clog her throat as she made a pyre of her regrets and let them burn to ash.

She was just stirring the ashes down to an unrecoverable powder when her phone gave a ding, and then roared like a Jurassic Park T-Rex, and Natasha just... froze. Because what were the odds, really? She had gotten them all disposable burner phones first thing after she and Steve had ditched Pierce's thugs and gone to Sam for shelter, and of course she had cloned both of the boys' with hers before they'd gone after Sitwell -- privacy was an irrelevant nicety in the face of damage control, and keeping them all alive.

She'd never bothered to strip the program off her own phone account afterwards, thinking that with Stark handing out prototype phones and comm units to the team as fast as he could design and build them, neither Steve nor Sam would keep hold of the cheap burners that linked back to hers. But here, buzzing angrily against her hip in the pocket of her cargo shorts, was all the contradiction she needed. She tossed Stanley's lighter back more or less where she'd found it, and dug her phone free, silencing the alerts and pulling the text message up.

*You should not use Dr. Ebrakumo's e mail address any more, Captain.*

Natasha blinked at the text, trying to place the name in her memory, trying to guess why it would be so important that Steve would use the old burner phone to discuss the matter with...

*Who is this?* Ah. That would be Steve, direct as always.

*The Doctor has not been seen for two weeks,* the answer came after a long moment. *Authorities are monitoring all communications to his public accounts, and they will soon do the same for his
private ones as well.*

*How did you get this number?* Steve came back, so purely himself that Natasha could almost hear him say it. *Who is this?*

Odogwu gave your number to me as insurance after his office and laboratory were robbed. He seemed to think he could trust you, but he is gone, most likely dead, and I am not so certain.

Natasha closed her eyes, thinking hard. The name was African, probably Nigerian. Someone they'd met during the Rumlow fiasco? Or had this Ebrakumo been the informant whose lure had drawn Steve and Sam to Nigeria last year, purely on the strength of a rumor about an ex-HYDRA assassin lurking about Lagos' less reputable neighborhoods?

*What can I do to help?* Steve came back, because of course he did.

*What can you do, Exile? Fugitive? What help could you be to anyone?* Came the answer, and Natasha didn't suppress a grimace at the jab.

*Plenty,* came Steve's answer. *I'm a pretty resourceful guy. But what I can't do is read your mind, so tell me how to help you.* And a strange, backward, homesick sort of giddiness flooded Natasha's eyes and tightened her throat again at the proof that Steve was still, and would always be, Steve.

His mysterious correspondent, however, was apparently less charmed. *No.*

*Then why tell me this at all?* Steve replied, drawn in as had surely been intended.

*I trust no man on another man's word. Not today, not any day.* Which seemed reasonable enough, until. *If you want to win my trust, then meet me. Let me look you in the eye and decide for myself whether I will share the results of my investigation with you, as Odogwu did. I will decide for myself if you are an ally who wants to find the truth of what happened here, or just another white man propping up his own fortunes on the lives of Africans.*

"Steve, no," Natasha murmured, fist clenching on the table's gritty, scarred surface. "Don't you dare."

*Tell me where to meet you.*

"Goddammit!" she snarled, wishing for something to punch.

*You will come alone at my request?* The question dripped with disbelief -- proof positive that the sender didn't know the first damned thing about Steve Rogers.

Steve surprised her though.

*No,* he replied, *I'm not actually stupid.* And for a breathless moment, Natasha began to hope. Almost. *But I will come, and I will meet you, whoever you are. Dr. Ebrakumo risked a lot to share his findings with me, and clearly that cost him. I want the chance to try and put it right. Tell me where and when to come, and I'll be there.*

"Why, Steve?" Natasha groaned into her hand as all hope for Steve having developed a sense of self-preservation whilst on the run faded for good. "Why are you like this?"

*Meet me in Lagos,* the sender demanded, to surely nobody's surprise. *The bar lounge of the Wheatbaker hotel. Be there on Saturday, at lunchtime.*
"Sure! Great idea," Natasha spat, despairing. "Lunchtime on a weekend at an expensive hotel is a great time to spring a man-trap! And every person in that lounge will either be an armed assailant, or a human shield against your cooperation! Jesus Steve, you can't be this stupid!"

But of course, it was Steve, after all. *I will, but you need to tell me your name first.* The pause that followed was long enough, pointed enough that Natasha almost started to hope that this would be the deal breaker that would save Steve's fool neck. But of course Steve couldn't just leave it at that, could he? *Trust goes both ways, you know,* he typed out, *and right now, you're the one doing all the asking.*

*Sangodele Ikiemoye,* came the eventual answer, goading Natasha out of her despair with a precious crumb of actionable data. *I am the bomb technician who has been researching the evidence gathered at the site of your fight with HYDRA agents last year. Dr Ebrakumo was my friend, a just man, and an honest one.*

Right. Ebrakumo had been the name on that autopsy file that had turned up in Steve's Rumlow file. She hadn't met with any of the Lagos city officials at the time, because she and Sam had been holding Wanda together as best they could, but Natasha remembered that Steve had met with a lot of them before the team had left Nigeria the next morning.

*If you have played him false, Captain,* the sender went on, delivering the threat Natasha knew he would surely not rest easy without, *I will offer your CIA and State Department agents every assistance I can in their quest to capture you, and every fugitive with you.*

Which meant, surely, that both agencies already had people in place within the city. Maybe even putting pressure on the investigators to release their data and evidence, and surely, surely *that* would put at least a crumb of wariness into Steve's big, blond head, wouldn't it?

*Understood. See you on Saturday.* came the reply, and then the cloned screen went dark.

Saturday.

Natasha blew out a breath heavy with tension, and reset the phone to its normal functions as her mind whirled and ground away at the problem. That gave her five days -- just under a week to get to Lagos, alone, or with Thirteen in tow; to dig open the clockwork of this plan, whatever it might be; to find or create leverage on whoever was winding its key; and to maybe, if she was very lucky as well as very skilled, keep Steve and whoever he brought with him to the meeting from getting captured, arrested, and thrown straight into that prison laboratory Wanda had described.

Five days to save Steve Goddammit Rogers from himself.

"Sure, " Natasha said, dusting ash from her hands as she stood to go back inside, "It'll be fun."

Chapter End Notes

Hello, my poison mushrooms! So glad you could join me for the recommencement of the PLOT! (dundundun!) As usual, I treasure your comments, your suppositions, your conspiracy theories, and the gnashing of your teeth. Just picture me over here, stirring the cauldron and giggling to myself. Thanks for your patience, and thanks doubly for your comments -- they are, as always, what keeps me going!
(End Notes: http://marvelcinematicuniverse.wikia.com/wiki/Samuel_Sterns In case he's unknown to any of my readers.)
Chapter Summary

In which the laws of inheritance, regency, and Newtonian Physics are invoked.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

~* L5 orbit *~

The Insight sat was, this time, exactly where they expected it to be.

The Suit's new seals were holding beautifully, and the pared-down FRIDAY that Tony had loaded into the Quinjet's banks to do the heavy computational lifting was giving him a HUD reading of such steady, perfect atmospheric pressure and oxygen content, Tony could have wept with pride. Not nerves, not panic, pride, dammit!

He was flying. In Space. He was able to breathe; his piloting program on the Quinjet was close enough he didn't even have to worry about signal interference from the recent week of solar flares; he had a teammate close enough to rescue him if things went tits-up, and he was Flying! In! Space!

Which was a lot less exhilarating than flying through the air, but Tony was more than happy to accept low-key boring over exciting-and-potentially-fatal on this trip out. The new, more delicate repulsor thrustors he'd designed were tickling him gently along at precisely the right intercept vector, leaving Tony plenty of time to match the satellite's speed and gently seduce his way into the access panel behind which, the blueprints promised, all the best goodies were hid; Vision had even backed the fuck out of it, and agreed to let Tony make first contact with the sat this time -- largely on the strength of Tony's panic-hamster brain miraculously not screwing him over the instant the airlock cycled, and sucked him out of the ship like a tea-bubble through an over-large straw.

Sure, he'd had a Moment, but Tony'd taken himself in hand, and Gotten The Fuck Over It, Yessir before Mini Friday had even started to call him on his understandably elevated heart rate. So yeah; go, him.

Tony was flying in space; he was categorically not losing his shit; he was about to lay hands on perhaps the most top-secret, eyes-only piece of tech HYDRA had created since the Red Skull's party days, and hey look at that, he even had the mental bandwidth to try and take the call when Friday Prime decided this would be an awesome time to make Tony take a phone call from planetside. A phone call from someone with an accent so thick and obscure Tony wasn't sure he'd have been able to understand it even if the signal hadn't been cutting in and out, and echoing with electromagnetic interference.

No worries. All good. Tony had taken shouty, possibly-not-in-English phone calls while doing more dangerous things, he was pretty sure. The trick was really just to get enough of a word in edgewise to apologize preemptively for the hanging-the-fuck-up that -- let's be real here -- everyone in the conversation had to know was coming next. Tony could do that in his sleep. According to Pepper, he'd done it in his sleep more than once.
"Yeah, no. Still not getting through," he said cheerily over the staticky yelling, popping the tiny, mechanized screwdriver out of his left gauntlet and flexing the right as the Insight sat and its weird, glommed on tech-hoard drifted near. "Maybe you ought to try calling on a land line?"

FRIDAY Prime cut in there, or tried to at least. "B...ss ...uty Comm...sioner Ilkenna h...been try...your c..."

"This is the part where you take a message, FRIDAY," he prompted her. "You know the protocol. I'll be able to return Commissioner Whoever's call in about..." he checked the spastic HUD’s time readout as he reached for the satellite, “half an hour. Maybe two of those.”

Yep. Everything was going fine. Until it very much wasn't.

Tony's helmet filled up with a deafening feedback squeal, the HUD scattering into static as the suit suddenly blasted all repulsors to full power. With no atmosphere to slow him, and almost no gravity to steady him, the effect was instant, chaotic, and terrifying; Tony shot forward, his hand just clipping the edge of the Insight satellite as he flailed past. That brief second of contact was enough to set him spinning, tumbling and churning against nothing as his repulsors blazed madly, and even curses couldn't make it past the vapor-lock of pure, perfect panic in Tony's throat.

Solar flares. Jesus, fuck! Coronal mass ejection. No, no, no, no, no! Electromagnetic storm. Fix it! Fix it! Christ, just stop the fucking spinning! Shielding wasn't geared for that. Don't puke, don't puke, don't Signal disruption like that would have shaken even FRIDAY Prime's control over Pepper's gonna kill me! the vector and thrust controls and Rhodey's gonna kill me! charged particles would have Steve's gonna kill me! Have to come up with a better alloy to I can't die out here. maybe something with more I can't fucking die out here!!

"Emergency scram! Emergency scram!" Tony heard himself wheeze at last, "Aloft reboot, code 7836990! DO IT NOW!"

And then it all got worse. The suit jerked around him, arms and legs snapping into rigid, flight-hover mode as the static-scrambled HUD blanked to a terrible blackness, and the choppy garble of interference bled into silence.

In space, no one can hear you scream...

And Tony was falling -- he had to be falling, because there was nothing holding him up. No buzz of lift from his boots or palms, no vibration against his ribcage from the back-thrusters, no pull of Gs against his inner ear, just the silence, the cold, and the certain knowledge that while takeoff was optional, Newton and Einstein Hawking all agreed that landing was pretty much always gonna be mandatory. Tony tried to make himself do the math to figure out whether the Suit could withstand reentry, but found himself calculating the potential force of the inevitable sudden stop at the end of that long drop instead, and that just made everything worse, and then-

And then the HUD came back up, steady and clear, showing Tony the majestic arc of the world below; indigo and emerald and gold, swirled with cloud and entirely, perfectly right. There was a storm building up over the Atlantic, wide and tall off the inward curve of Africa, and it was fucking beautiful! Tony craned his head to keep it in view as the suit's magnetic lock yielded, and a pair of android hands turned him gently around where he hung, unsupported, unfalling, above the world. Vision's mouth was moving, and while the Suit's sound processor didn't seem to have survived the scram intact, it wasn't difficult to guess what he was saying.

The HUD was working perfectly, so all it took was a quick series of glances, and the Suit cut the palm stabilizers so he could sign. *I'm fine. Shielding failed. No comms. Where is the satellite?*
Vision turned a little, glanced behind him, and Tony followed his eyeline upward to see another debris field scrawled and glittering across the blackness above them. There was even a small drift of smoke or dust or vapor of some kind unspooling along the arc of the wreckage, as if the satellite had tried its best to explode, physics bedamned. The solar radiation burst that had taken out Tony's prototype space suit had done far worse to HYDRA's Insight satellite, or so it would seem. Because fuck his life, apparently.

*The Quinjet is on its way to us now,* Vision signed back to him, hands steady and deft, *I will assess the damage, and see what can be recovered from the satellite, but you must get to safety first. FRIDAY is keeping the Deputy Commissioner of the Lagos Police Investigative Unit on the line, and is not sure how much longer she can stall.*

Because of fucking COURSE that particular call would finally get returned while Tony was out of range as well! He'd only been trying for two weeks to get someone to call him back from Lagos PD. If Tony had been surer of the Suit's post-scram-recovery calibration, he'd have facepalmed. As it was, he settled for an unheard curse and a clanging eyeroll as he signed back, *Tell her send it to the jet. I'll take it as soon as I'm in signal range again. Will you be all right here?*

Vision didn't dignify that with a reply, and just took hold of Tony's armored elbow again, and flew them both steadily, easily and directly to the oncoming Quinjet. And no, Tony was not jealous that he didn't even have to dodge the satellite debris on his way. He was too busy being grateful as fuck that he had an ally already competent enough, comfortable enough in low orbit flight to save Tony's ass when his brain failed to cover all the angles. Because fuck his life, sure, but fuck his accidental death even harder, thanks.

~* Washington DC *~

Sharon had her 'unflappable-but-indulgent nurse' face firmly in place, and the retaining snap undone on her bra-holster by the time she was reaching for the front doorknob, so she was just exactly not-ready for it when the handle dipped, and the door hurtled inward under the pressure of what looked like a seven year old storm in a tiara. Sharon managed to evade collision with either the door, or the girl, and managed to suppress the counterstrike urge that usually went with that kind of evasive maneuver. The girl, however, wasn't as well balanced, or as well trained, and she had to flail her arms and hop when the traction went from linoleum entryway to natty shag carpet, and her momentum didn't really care. Sharon snared the flailing arm that didn't have a plastic shield, held it steady as the girl won her fight with the laws of physics, then let go as soon as she whipped around to answer Sharon 'harmless-helper' smile with a wide, reproachful stare.

"You're not a princess!" the girl declared, clutching the hand Sharon had touched to her chest, and holding her shield over it as though the touch had burned.

"Oh?" Sharon cocked her head, halfway between charmed and irritated. "How can you tell?" There was a star in the center of the round shield, but only one ring at the edge of it instead of three concentric rings.

"Because you got a gun," the girl answered, pointing directly at the weapon Sharon damned well knew wasn't visible under her shirt. "Princesses like swords, not guns. They're more honorable!"

Because of course the small warrior Princess had a sword too -- shiny plastic, a little larger than a good sized bowie knife, and nearly lost in the clouds of blue and red tulle she was wearing over her blue jeans. She yanked it out and struck a gladiator pose as if to illustrate what it was for, and Sharon had to actually struggle to keep her internal 'awwwwww' unsaid.

"Oh, I see, Princess... uh," *Star on the shield matching the one on the tiara; blue and red skirt, its
pattern of red striping up over the tee shirt until it ran into an eagle that outlined breasts the girl wouldn't have for a few years yet... "Oh! You're Princess America, aren't you?" Sharon guessed. Outside, she could see Stanley speaking with an intense young man who looked like he was probably the girl's older brother and combat handler. He also looked like he was spoiling for a fight, though Stanley didn't look the least bit worried about that.

"No, dummy!" the girl suddenly pushed her shield at Sharon's legs, getting a fair amount of traction given the flexibility of the plastic. "America don't have princesses!"

"Okay, you're right," Sharon laughed, sidestepping another shield rush, and turning the girl smartly away from the open door and the two men outside it. "But you must be Princess of somewhere, right?"

"I'm Princess of Themiscyra," the girl answered proudly, sweeping her sword aside like it held a cape, and bowing over her shield as her feet did something almost like a curtsey.

Sharon copied the move, but dropped the knee and leaned close to confide, "I... don't actually know where that is."

The girl leaned close, cupped the shield behind both of their heads and whispered. "Nobody does."

Sharon was leaning close, about to ask 'why not' when the screen door banged aside, startling them both.

"Cyanne," the boy scolded immediately, in the way of older brothers everywhere. "What are you bothering that lady for?"

"PRINCESS Cyanne!" the girl responded, all defiance as Sharon got to her feet. "And you got to call me Your Majesty, cause it's my birthday!"

The boy was having none of it. "Your birthday was Monday," he said as he herded his sister away from the door, and from Sharon too. He didn't glare in her direction, but it was clear that he wasn't nearly as comfortable with her as the Princess was.

"Still counts," the Princess in question insisted, twisting out of his grip and putting the sofa between them. "And I ain't even get all my presents yet anyway!"

"Cyanne..." The name was a warning now, and though the young man didn't glance Sharon's way, she could hear his fear like an itch behind her neck. This was a kid in over his head, and trying his best to figure out which way to swim before the predators realized he was there. And the little girl, so free and fierce and trusting, was as helpless as a seal on shark week.

"You told mama we was coming to get my present," Cyanne declared, thrusting her jaw and bracing up behind her shield as if for combat. "Eli, you said!"

Sharon was just wondering what kind of an interference might be needed to prevent the looming threat of sibling bloodshed when Stanley made his way into the crosshairs without second look.

"Hey, your Highness," he addressed the girl with a grin as he slapped a greeting card and its envelope into Sharon's hands. The boy's eyes widened in alarm as he tracked the exchange, but Stanley rolled on before he could protest. "Have you found your fellow royalty in here yet?"

"No," the girl said, pointing at Sharon with her sword. "it was only her inside, but SHE's not a Princess."

"I'm really, really not," Sharon agreed, ignoring Eli's glare as she flipped open the card. *Happy
Birthday, baby girl. I'm sorry I can't give you your present in person, but my friend will make sure you get it. Remember I love you. Dad. and on the back of the card, written in as if by an afterthought, Eli, Stanley has something for you too. I'm sorry it can't be more, but I trust you to do what's best. For your mom, for your sister, for everyone.

"Well of course she's not," Stanley declared, then leaned close to add, sotto voce, "She's a secret agent." And then? The little bastard winked at Sharon!

"She's a spy?" Eli went suddenly on full alert, balance on his toes, knees bent, hands spreading from his sides -- ready to fight, or ready to grab his sister and run, and not at all sure which would be best.

So Sharon had to laugh, wave a scolding-but-fond hand and say, "I'm actually a nurse," instead of throttling the old newsman with both hands. "Mr. Uatu just doesn't want to take his insulin this afternoon, so he's making trouble."

"No she's obviously not a Princess," Stanley went on, as if he couldn't hear them. "She's not even a dinosaur."

A dinosaur?

"A DINOSAUR??!" Princess Cyanne cried, bouncing up onto her toes and waving both sword and shield excitedly. Clearly this was the magic word, the utterance of which immediately turned royalty into velociraptors, and suspicious older brothers into groaning teenagers.

"Not the dinosaur thing again," Eli muttered, slapping one hand over his face as Stanley led the bouncing, roaring girl around the sofa to the shelves full of knicknacks.

"This dinosaur," the old man said, taking down a large model box from behind the dusty television. "Only you'll have to get your brother to help you her together first. See there? Tyrannosaurus Rex. Rex means king, but she's a girl, so she gets to be a princess."

"Or a dinosaur queen!" Cyanne declared, dropping her sword and shield aside so she could take the box from Stanley's hands. She dropped to the floor right on the spot, and began picking at the shrink-wrap while her brother made a theatrical production out of dropping into the sofa to watch her open it.

Sharon stole the chance to take a look at the card's envelope, still not sure why Stanley had passed it off to her, but then she spotted the sender's name and return address, and a chill went down her spine. Major Nathan Edwards, SOCC, Culver, VA. General Ross's aide-de-camp, while he'd still worked for the Joint Chiefs, though Sharon had no idea if the man had made the transition to politics along with his boss or not.

She looked up, startled, and found Eli watching her, expectant and grim. "Yeah, that's from my dad. Only according to the postmark, he mailed it to our house about twenty three days after he died in a car crash. So you can excuse me if I'm a little suspicious about alla this cloak and dagger bullsh-"

"You shush up with that," Stanley cut him off, lowering his tone as he plucked another tchotchke off the shelf and brought it back to the sofa with him. "Your mom will come over here and yank my ear if she thinks I'm letting you cuss in front of the Princess here. Your dad left this one here for you."

He held out a small plastic Captain America shield, a little bigger than a coaster. Then he thumbed a hidden catch, and the case opened up to reveal an unmarked CD inside it.

"What..." Eli looked up into Stanley's face, the suspicion and anger he'd worn like armor from the moment he'd come into the house bleeding into genuine, sorrowful worry for a moment as his hand
hovered over the gift. "What's on this?"

"I don't know, kid," Stanley said, using the sofa's thick arm to lever himself down into its dusty embrace. "But given the fact that your Dad didn't give it to you himself? I'm pretty sure it's not anything good."

Chapter End Notes

YES, more plot, my murderblots. You know I'm an addict for the stuff. I promise I'm moving all the pieces into range though, even as we speak. I'll be racing the next MCU movie release, trying to get this done before I get hopelessly jossed. As you'll have noticed, I am not referencing Spiderman; Homecoming in this canon. I've not seen it yet, and to be honest, I do not have the bandwidth to rejigger the outline to make everything fit.

ANYway. As usual, comments make me write faster, and long rambly interactions make me squee with the utmost of delight.

(Edit Note: I still have not seen Spiderman:Homecoming, so I still have not adjusted anything in favor of its plotline. However, here's the wiki on young Mr. Eli. https://marvel.com/universe/Patriot_(Elijah_Bradley) The MCU has not yet made use of the Bradley family, and so I claimed the right to weave him in where he made sense to me. Lo, the power of Fanfic!)
"You don't have to look at me like that," Wanda murmured into her tea, "It's not as if none of you were thinking about it already."

Which was kind of the problem with living around a telepath with PTSD, Sam thought, worrying his coffee with a spoon. Still, he dredged up a scrap of reassurance to say, "I'm sure T'Challa doesn't intend to kick us to the curb. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who'd offer shelter if he didn't mean it."

"Sure, but it's not like he's the only one with an opinion on it," Lang spoke up. "I mean you could maybe go incognito here, Wilson, but the rest of us aren't ever gonna blend. Sooner or later, someone's gonna notice that there are four white Americans shacking up with the King of Wakanda, and-"

"And General Ross will realize where he needs to go to find the super soldiers he wanted all along," Wanda finished, though she had to swallow thickly to manage the words. Sam was proud of her for making the effort, but he shook his head again all the same.

"And the West has been failing to get into Wakanda since slaving times," Sam insisted, rising to the defense. "Before anybody even knew what to do with Vibranium. Now that the Stark's cracked that wide open, Ross can impose all the sanctions he wants, and Wakanda's economy wouldn't shiver from it. Ayo told me that HYDRA tried to get at least two Black Widows into the country back in the 80's, but the Dora Milaje caught and killed both of them."

"You don't need to get a Black Widow in when an ICBM will take out a few miles of Birnin Zana," Barton said, startling them all around in their seats as he came in from the courtyard garden. He had leaves in his hair, long streaks of mud and moss on his clothes, and a swelling of his right knuckles that made Sam itch to go grab his first aid kit. The look in his eye though, was a big, grey 'back off' sign.

"Reasonably sure they've got the tech here to deal with that by now," Sam persisted, shoving a chair toward the archer and nudging the French press toward the empty seat at their communal table. "Iraq, Lybia and Egypt have all taken their shots and given up quick. Wakanda doesn't crack."

"And every time T'Challa has to stand up to another country to protect us, that puts Barnes at even more risk," Barton countered, taking the chair and drinking straight out of the coffee press. "The only way this plan to get the HYDRA cheat code out of his brain works is if the location of the Winter Soldier stays a secret until he's deprogrammed. And the longer we stay here, the less secret his location becomes." He sighed and looked around the table, grubby and weary and some strange
combination of resigned and determined. "Wanda's right. We need to go."

"I don't think we can just go back and hang out at your farm though," Lang put in, but the joking tone failed when he saw, as they all did, the instant shuttering of Barton's expression. "Dude. What happened?" he asked as Barton hid his reaction behind another long draught of coffee.

"Clint..." Wanda murmured, reaching for his hand. He moved it out of her reach without looking, then swallowed down his mouthful of coffee like it had ground glass in it.

"We're selling the farm," he said to the table while they all waited for the news. "Stark made Laura an offer back in January, and we've decided she needs to take him up on it now. Lila's medical bills are gonna be expensive, and we're not on SHIELD's Agency coverage anymore, so... Laura's gonna call Potts in the morning, and get the ball rolling." he looked up then, noticed their collective horror, and grimaced. "It's just until we can buy it back from him, guys. It's not like Stark's gonna evict my family or anything."

"Then why not just make it a loan?" Scott wanted to know, and Sam wondered yet again what kind of dirt the man's previous employer had on Stark that made him expect the worst out of him without even an introduction.

"If Stark's name's on the deed, then Homeland Security can't seize it as part of Barton's assets," Sam explained, trying not to think about his own place in DC, and his baby sister taking over the mortgage when he moved to New York to become an Avenger. Her little boy turned ten in April, and Sam hadn't even been able to send a letter for fear it would be traced back to them here. "Laura and the kids will have a place to live, at very least. We all know we can't just go back to the States anyway," he went on, stirring his coffee some more, and trying to make himself want to drink it. "The way things are going in the White House over there, I'm not sure America's where I even want to be right now."

Sam winced at the bitterness in his voice. He hadn't meant to say that out loud; to give voice to the growing disillusionment with the great machine that was the United States, chewing up lives and spitting out profits as fast as it could, and damn the consequences. He'd worked extra hard to keep his seething anger away from Steve's notice, because he knew just how ready the big blond idiot was to take personal responsibility for everything in the world that was NOT his damned fault, and the last thing Sam wanted to deal with was finding that Steve had been calling Stark on that flip phone he thought none of the rest of them knew about, and asking Iron Man to broker some kind of pardon deal for the rest of the Avengers in trade for him turning himself in. Y'know, for instance. Steve wouldn't turn Barnes over to Ross for anything in the world, but Sam knew to his bones that if Steve thought he could buy back the comfortable lives all of the rest of them had lost by turning himself in, he damned well would.

Well, he'd try it, anyway.

"We could go to Sokovia," Wanda broke the silence after awhile.

Barton spit his coffee. Sam didn't blame him -- he'd have choked too, if he'd been drinking when she said it.

"Really?" Lang asked, leaning over to whack Barton between the shoulderblades. "Didn't you guys kinda wreck the place a few years back?"

"Novi Grod is not the only city in Sokovia," Wanda replied, scathing. "There are other places where we could lay low, places where they will let you mind your own business. Even in the countryside, Sokovians are very good at ignoring foreigners who don't want to explain themselves."
"Maybe they were before Ultron," Barton managed, waving Lang away. "But between the foreign aid workers, and the black market bosses stepping in to fill power vacuum, we'd get made and sold out within a month."

"Not necessarily..." Wanda murmured, and a thread of red light arced across her teacup.

"No," Barton said, and wow, Sam was not ready for the metric tonnage spinning up behind that single word. From the startled glance she gave him as she recoiled, Wanda hadn't either, but Clint didn't soften the declaration any when he repeated, "No fucking way."

"What are we...?" Lang began, but Barton cut him off before Sam could think of a way to summarize what little Cap had told him about Hawkeye's brief-and-much-worse-than-Stockholm-Syndrome experience under the influence of Loki and the Mind Gem.

"First of all, no way in a million years would Cap stand for that kind of thing, and you know it."

"I wouldn't force anyone," Wanda hurried to say, though the tilt of her worried brows contradicted her reassurance. "Just... I cloud certain--"

"And second, unless you clouded the memories of every camera in every phone, traffic light, bank machine, and airport or train station we passed through, it would only be a matter of time before facial recognition software picked one of us up in the background of somebody's Facebook selfie," Barton mowed over her, then he cast a chilling glare toward Lang, who had already opened his mouth, "And yes, they can do it. That was exactly how SHIELD located Loki when w-- he stole the Tesseract and disappeared. And if SHIELD could do it in 2012, there are at least four agencies that will definitely be able to do it by now." He reached for the French press again, not to drink from it again, but apparently just to cradle it in his hands and stare into the depths.

Silence settled over the table for a moment, then Lang scratched his chin and hummed. "Anyway, didn't Sokovia sign those Accords too?" He looked around the table, shrugging as they all stared. "I mean it's not just named after them, right? Because if they signed it and we get caught there..."

"Whoa, yeah," Sam agreed with a sinking weight in his stomach that had nothing to do with his early breakfast. "Cause we got extradition treaties to worry about now too. Damn it."

Scott groaned aloud, Barton let his head thunk lightly against the coffeepot, and Wanda set her teacup down, but nobody reached for a tablet or phone. Google wasn't gonna make this any easier, and they all pretty much knew it.

Wanda set her cup down after a long moment and stood, hands smoothing at her clothing in a nervous tell Sam had grown practiced at spotting since the Raft. "Steve's coming back," she said, a pinch of worry caught between her eyebrows. "He's very..." she flexed a hand near her temple, and somehow the simple gesture caught perfectly that air of Steve's that Sam knew all too well -- the one where his temper and his tactical eye were fighting over who needed punching first, and hardest.

Sam stood too, abandoning his coffee and mentally putting on his VA game face in case he needed to run interference. They could come up with a game plan later, when their Captain was off the ledge and ready to think their way out of the corner. Sam could get him there -- it wouldn't be the first time. "I'll go see what's up," he said. "We can talk in the garden, or his room if you wanna stay and finish your breakfast."

Wanda shook her head. "I don't think I can eat... someone is with him," she said, backing from the table like it was a trap. "I think they're looking for you."
Because of course they were. Sam managed not to roll his eyes, in deference to the faintly envious, and still star-struck expression Lang was trying to hide in his coffee cup. It was a good thing Steve could open up to him, it was, and they were lucky their super soldier had an outlet to let off steam besides tearing the world apart looking for HYDRA goons to punch, but damn, could Cap pick some challenging hours of the A.M. to start whistling.

"Hey, if you guys are gonna go run an op in the States," Clint mumbled into the coffee press as Sam headed for the door, "wouldja bring me back a sesame bagel from that place in Bed Stuy? And maybe my wife and kids too?"

And to that, Sam had to laugh. "Only if there's room after we pick up my sister's family and my Nana," he replied, heading for the door. "Might not be room in the luggage for everyone."

"Actually," Lang perked, "I know a guy who could shrink..."

Sam shut the door with an unexpected smile.

~*~

The long curve of the hallway, and the wall of glass that overlooked the darkened courtyard garden gave Sam a reflected preview of the argument to come; Steve and tall, sturdy Ayo paused beside one of the palace's many fountains to wrangle over whatever strip of gristle they could find. This was normal for them -- race and gender aside, those two seemed to be more alike than different in all the ways that counted. Both were powerful, stubborn, and cheerfully passionate about the strangest things, and so they could most often be found at apparent odds with each other, and yet they always seemed to seek each other out, as if mutually aware that the other could stand up to whatever friction they had burning to express inside.

The words were clear enough from that distance, but the two were speaking in Xhosa, which Sam hadn't yet begun to learn, and it was clear from the Steve's emphatic handwaving that his vocabulary wasn't quite up to Captain America's normal stirring-improvisational-speech-to-the-troops standards. Equally obvious to Sam, was Ayo's subtle needling, her eyes glinting with a feline amusement when Steve rose gamely to it with a fresh surge of stammering pantomime. The sight of them reminded Sam so strongly of Natasha that he found himself instantly, and powerfully homesick. And then, a moment later, worried all over again.

Taking a deep breath, Sam let go of the doorknob and headed toward the pair, letting his shoes tap against the tiles to announce his approach, because while sneaking up on over-wound super soldiers was a dumb idea, sneaking up on Dora Milaje in any mood was basically suicidal. And sure enough, the argument switched to English as he rounded the hallway's curve.

"Sam," Steve said, "How's Clint doing? Is he back yet-"

Ayo, meanwhile, spoke right over Steve's query, calling his evasion right out. "And I tell you, Nomad, even that plan will not work if you do not take a Black Friend with you!"

And wow, could he ever hear those capital letters! He glanced at Steve and answered, "Pissed off, but he'll be fine. What plan are you cooking up this time, and when do we leave?"

Steve cut Ayo a glare, but at least he didn't try to deflect again. "I need to go back to Lagos," he said. "And yes, I was going to talk to you anyway. You don't have to go, but this isn't an op I'd want to take on without my wingman, even if we weren't going to Nigeria."

"Your wingman does not have a passport to show the Customs agent," Ayo pressed on, "and
without his flying suit, he cannot carry you past the Nigerian border. You need me to go as well."

Steve groaned and rolled his eyes. "I already told T'Challa, I don't-"

"You need me to go, Nomad. Because I can pilot the aircraft, and I can divert attention away from your big, white face in the middle of a -"

"I can fly the damn plane too!" Steve declared, "And if there's one thing a New Yorker knows, it's how to blend in with the tourists."

And Sam had to cut in there. "Uh, Steve she's right. Airport customs would bust you in a heartbeat, even with that chin-spinach you got goin' on there. It's gonna take a lot more than a ball cap and sunglasses to make you blend."

"Which is why," Steve toiled on, "I can just do a parachute drop outside Lagos,"

"A parachute? You?" Sam had to laugh. "Since WHEN?"

"- and walk in." Steve continued, doggedly.

"Sekmet save us," Ayo said, rolling her eyes so hard it looked like it hurt. "What kind of tourist parachutes into New York and expects not to be noticed?"

"Woman's got a point," Sam said, offering a shrug to Steve's not-really-meaning-it glare. "You kinda stuck out last time you were out there too."

"Yeah, well the suit was kinda designed to draw the eye," Steve grumbled back.

"A man like you," and Ayo scraped Steve tip to toe with a scathing glance, "with your suit or without it, does not blend wherever he may go, Nomad. However small you may feel inside, you are not one to be overlooked."

Sam had to resist the urge to flinch at the sharp-edged truth the Dora Milaje had just let fly. But instead of Steve's expression icing over, open, honest annoyance shuttering behind arctic eyes and a half smile as false and fragile as half an inch of river-ice, the man just groaned and slapped a palm over his face. "Ayo, I am not going to let you take me to Lagos in your damned luggage!"

"You...?" Sam blinked, holding back the urge to giggle in shock. "Her what now?"

"But you are, Nomad," Ayo replied, feline and smug. "Because my King needs answers from Lagos that you can provide, and so you will go. And to watch your back and protect you from yourself, Falcon will go with you. And to watch his back, and protect the city of Lagos from you both, I will take you there. In my plane." She tapped Steve's chest with one long finger, and grinned. "In my luggage."

"Ayo..." Steve grumbled, though Sam could spot the tick of a suppressed smile underneath his scowl.

"The baggage of any Dora Milaje is barely glanced at in Nigeria," she went on, stepping back from their close huddle and waving airily as if the idea of customs scrutiny was just a cloud of midafternoon gnats in the air. "They think any one of us could become Wakanda's Queen overnight, and so they dare not give offense."

"Not even to do their jobs?" Steve needled.
Ayo just laughed. "Especially not just to do their jobs."

"Okay, I have two questions though," Sam interrupted, putting up a pair of fingers. "First, when are we taking this hypothetical trip? Cause I didn't get a lot of sleep last night, and this one might do fine on two Cap naps a day, but I'm not feeling exactly daisy fresh right now."

"Sunset tomorrow," Ayo replied. "It is not a long flight, even at commercial speeds, but we will want darkness when the Ambassador's limousine meets the plane at the storage hangar."

"If it's gonna be dark anyway, then why-"

Sam put a hand up to Steve's protests, and folded his second finger down. "And second, I just want it known that my Mama raised a gentleman, but I am NOT gonna carry your suitcase to the car with his thicc ass inside it!"

"Oh, and what happened to Captain Tiny-Ass?" Steve demanded as Ayo laughed and walked away. Sam just shrugged, and turned back toward the apartments they all shared, saying, "You and them big breakfasts, man. They addin up."

~* Avengers’ Compound, New York *~

Objectively, Vision had always known that he had been made out of the pieces left of JARVIS after Ultron had tried to destroy him. It was a fact, and facts were binary things in their essential nature: true or false; yes or no; zero or one. As such, Vision found them in general, untroubling.

The analysis of those facts into implication was a subtler, and infinitely less comfortable exercise for him, especially when said implication trod into the marshy ground of human attachment, the bilateral sense of dependence and responsibility which seemed to develop between a creator and the subject of his artifice, and, to be honest, sentimentality as a whole. It was a little baffling how little influence binary facts could have over the outcome of a matter, as the group's dispute over the Sokovian Accords had proven. (Vision still was not entirely certain that the dispute had actually been about the Accords at all, though he did not feel he could advance a hypothesis as to the real heart of the matter without a great deal more research on his part.)

Vision knew he had been made from JARVIS, and he knew that sometimes, when he spoke, Mr. Stark responded to him with involuntary microexpressions -- quickly hidden and never acknowledged -- which seemed to illustrate distress at times, regret, grief, guilt, and loneliness at others. He had come to the conclusion that these moments were triggered by Mr. Stark seeing the ghost of JARVIS Vision's own living skin. It was a suspicion confirmed by Wanda after one terribly awkward attempt at a team dinner night, and Vision had categorized all similar instances afterward, to that phenomenon; Mr. Stark would always miss JARVIS, and would, most likely, find Vision's unwitting reminders of his destroyed masterwork occasionally unsettling. It was a fact, nothing personal.

What Vision found far more deeply unsettling, however, were the occasions when certain actions or behaviors of Mr. Stark's would spark an instant, and unthinking response within himself which could only be rationally explained as the ghost of JARVIS missing his creator.

Such as the disorienting rush of wistfully fond annoyance he weathered upon returning to the Avengers compound to find Tony Stark once again in Captain Rogers' office, arguing loudly at someone on the telephone while the High Orbit Suit's helmet ran down its diagnostic check in a torrent of scrolling green on the desktop's monitor.

"Yeah, well I've been waiting to hear from you for two weeks Ilkenna," Mr. Stark was saying, hands
waving in the air as he paced behind the Captain's desk. "But I really think we can get past all that and work together if we both try."

Vision had a brief, but strong urge to sharpen his hearing, so as to monitor the conversation from both sides, but mindful of Wanda's past advice regarding not being creepy, he satisfied himself with waiting at the office doorway for Mr. Stark's permission to enter.

Mr. Stark, however, seemed to be quite focused on his conversation.

"No, don’t put words in my mouth," he said, forcibly, aggressively cheerful, "I never said 'backwater.'" A pause, filled with the distant buzz of an angry reply, then Mr. Stark cut in to insist, "No, of course I don’t think that! I’m sure Nigeria has plenty of talented forensics technicians at its disposal—" More buzzing, loud enough that Mr. Stark brought the phone away from his ear with a grimace.

"I only meant that I’m offering to make myself, and my extensive experience with things that explode, available to them. As a resource." Mr. Stark tried again after a long moment. "This isn’t about celebrity... no, it's really not. You don't even have to use my damned name, and... no... No, I don't need you to 'turn over' anything, I just..."

FRIDAY chose that moment to flash the room's lights, which drew Mr. Stark's eye first to the ceiling, and then to the doorway, and Vision himself. *One moment* Mr. Stark signed, and Vision nodded, keeping to himself the mild annoyance at FRIDAY’s petty tattling. It was amazing how insecure and occasionally downright bratty artificial intelligence could be.

"Okay, first, I'm not inserting myself into the investigation," Mr. Stark went on, volume rising to push through the other conversant's attempt to interrupt. "What I'm doing is offering you and your investigators the benefit of over thirty years' experience in the business of explosions and what makes them happen, free of charge! And second..." Mr. Stark pulled the phone away from his ear and roared, "AND SECOND!!! Second, what the fuck does the US State department even want with your evidence in the first place!"

The answer was another barrage of shouting, followed by the implacable buzz of an unconnected line. Vision weathered the nonsensical urge to wince, as though it had been he who'd been hung up on, though watching the sudden flush of rage wash over Mr. Stark's features as he registered the insult suggested that Visions' chagrin might have been his JARVIS instincts twitching again.

With the deliberate care of a man who might suddenly explode, Mr. Stark set the phone down on the desk blotter. Then he closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. "I do believe," he said at length, voice straining with sarcastic cheer, "That this is a meeting that'll need to happen face to face. FRIDAY, clear my schedule for the rest of the week, and tell the flight crew at La Guardia to get the SI jet ready to go."

"That'll mean postponing the interview with Bill O'."

"Yeah, nobody's crying over that one," Mr. Stark interrupted, turning away from the desk and heading for the door as Vision moved out of it. "Who even agreed to that bullshit? Cancel it. Don't send flowers. What else can't wait?"

"The chief engineer of West Coast R&D wanted to go over the numbers on the latest Starkphone code push," FRIDAY added, the broadcast point of her voice drifting from speaker to speaker a constant two feet behind Mr. Stark's retreating back.

"That push isn't till next quarter," Mr. Stark waved the idea away like smoke. "Tell her to put the
notes on the server. Potts is still in Montreal, yeah?"

"Beijing, Boss," the AI protested. "Montreal was last month..."

The bickering exchange faded as Mr. Stark's storming pace carried them through the common area and away down the stairs to the new workshop. On the desk, the Iron Man helmet stared vacantly at the wall, the eye-lights pulsing gently as the central processor explained itself to the troubleshooting software that Vision had never helped to code, but which some part of him felt deeply invested in making sure caught every byte and bit of whatever it had been that had disrupted the Iron Man's attempt to lay hands on the Insight Satellite. He wanted to comb the code himself, even as the more rational part of him insisted that it was not his place to do so; that was FRIDAY's job now.

Vision looked down at the agglomeration of metal in his hands, turned it over consideringly.

The Iron Man was not, as today's adventure had proven, spaceworthy.

Whatever it was the Nigerian Deputy Inspector had said to Mr. Stark to make him feel that going to Nigeria was immediately necessary, the truth was that Mr. Stark would come to far less danger doing that, than he would were he to try to take the Iron Man back up to low earth orbit before the suit had gone through a thorough overhaul, and possibly a rebuilding. Such a thing could not... should not be rushed.

And if Vision were to draw Mr. Stark's attention to the troubling matter of the Insight Satellite having, as far as he could tell, cobbled itself a manipulating arm, and a rudimentary broadcasting array out of parts stolen from other manmade, orbital units, then any repairs Mr. Stark took time to make before chasing down the remaining satellites would be perfunctory at best. And he was not willing to stand by helpless and watch Mr. Stark fall to earth again. Not ever again.

Vision himself was far less vulnerable to the hazards of space than Mr. Stark was. He had the means to protect his own bio-processor from the sort of electromagnetic pulse attack that had disabled the Iron Man, and with very little help from Friday, he could track the remaining orbital nodes of the Insight network himself.

And if his suspicion was correct, and there was indeed some sort of crude artificial intelligence lurking within Insight, then Vision felt that he was personally the most well equipped of all the Avengers, past and present, to open negotiations with it.

Mr. Stark need not concern himself with the matter until things were certain. Yes. That would be safer for all concerned.

Chapter End Notes

Just a bit longer than usual this time, darling puff adders. There was going to be another scene in this chapter, but it was running long already, so I'll give that its own space.

I need to give a Shoutout to Perspi-looks for #WhereIsFalcon, which will be appearing more as this story progresses. It was their tumblr post which put my plans for Sam into this particular spin, and I want credit given where it's due.

I am also going with the comic canon of Sam's parents having been killed when he and his siblings were young. I am, however, going with them being raised by their
grandmother. Because Sam Wilson deserves the ferocious love of a Nana, dammit.

(Edit note: This chapter was written before the release of Black Panther, so I had to reference the Marvel Comics' wiki for the Dora Milaje. It's short and not very informative, but one detail it does give is that the Dora are sent to Birnin Zana from their individual tribes, and they are considered potential queens -- it's tradition for the King to choose a Queen from among them. Clearly this is not something they chose to do with the film though. So I'm rolling with the idea that the people outside of Wakanda only *think* that the Dora Milaje could all be queens, and they act accordingly.)
"No, I'm not implying your mom's neglecting you," Sharon managed to say politely, calmly, and not at all showing her annoyance at Eli's aggressive tone. "I'm asking where she is today because she must have seen that card when it came in the mail." As Stanley had predicted, Natasha had abandoned the computer room, which would, ostensibly, make ripping the CD to an MP3 format that Eli, a true child of the digital age, could listen to on his phone.

"It was addressed to Cyanne," Eli came hotly back, all attitude as Sharon peeked through the blinds and verified that Natasha was still out on the patio, reading. *Piss and vinegar*, Aunt Peg used to say. *Teenagers are full of it the whole world over dear. All you can do is keep calm, talk sense, occasionally ground them, and hope they survive to grow out of it.*

"Your sister's five," Sharon challenged the kid right back, claiming the desk chair and waking Stanley's computer with a mouse-jiggle. "No mother anywhere doesn't look when a card comes for their five year old. Parents do, however, sometimes keep information from their kids' notice." Sharon pinned Eli with a glance, and added, "Especially when one of them has a Top Secret Clearance."

Eli's expression twisted even harder, as if he'd been dared to finish a jawbreaker he hated, and Sharon left him to it while she raided the small stash of darkroom supplies for white cotton gloves with which to handle the disk.

"How did you know Nathan?" he asked eventually.

"I didn't," Sharon said reaching for the CD as the computer tray slid out.

"Then how'd you know he had a clearance if you're just a nurse?" This time the challenge was back, as if he'd caught her in a lie.

"Aside from the rank?" she laughed. "Kid, we live in DC; the senior staff to the Secretary of State is a matter of public record, and it hardly takes espionage to get that an officer's wife is going to be privy to things she wouldn't tell her children about." She set the CD into the tray and nudged it closed before turning the chair to face the boy square on. "Like I said, I'm not trying to take a knock at her, I just want to be sure I know where she fits with all this. I mean, did go to the police about the card? Is that why she didn't come here with you today?"

"Oh, she's talking to the police all right," Eli snarled, "Told me to take Cyanne and not come back till she called to say it was all cleaned up. Wouldn't even let me help put the furniture back or nothin!"

Sharon sat up, the back of her neck prickling. "You're saying you had a break in? When? Last night?"
"This weekend," he bit out, bracing his arms across his chest. "Door was kicked open when we came home from our Grandparents' place. We could see the mess inside from the driveway, but Mom didn't even let Cyanne and me go in. Just gave me that," and he waved dismissively at the card and its grubby envelope, "from her purse, said to get over here and wait for her to call."

The audio program loaded at last, and popped open a window asking if she wanted to rip the disk. Sharon clicked yes, and hastily gave it some extra instructions on what to save, and where. The drive inside the computer began to spin up as Sharon turned to face Eli again. "Has your home ever been robbed before?"

He gave her a narrow glare and said, "Just cause we're black, that don't mean we-"

She put a hand up and cut him off. "It's not an accusation, Eli, it's a question that needs an answer. Has your home been broken into before this?"

He steamed at her in silence, but Sharon returned his glare with pointed expectation until he caved. "This is twice since the funeral," Eli managed at last.

"But not before that." Sharon didn't bother to make it a question.

Eli didn't bother to answer. Instead, his dark eyes slid past Sharon's shoulder, to the status bar scrolling on the screen. "It says it's playing the file. Why can't we hear nothing?"

"I don't... Oh. The speakers aren't on," Sharon said, reaching for the switch.

Later, when she was alone with her emergency go-bag and trying to decide how many guns she could get away with in her checked luggage, she would admit to herself that it had been a rookie mistake; that she really had known better, and that if she'd been in her right fucking mind, there was no way in hell she'd have done such a stupid thing as letting a 16 year old boy listen to the recording that had almost definitely gotten his father killed.

But in the moment, it was her inner spy, rather than the nurse she was supposed to be, who turned up the volume until an unfamiliar man's voice could be heard saying, "All right Corporals, we're ready. Bring him in now."

"That your dad?" Sharon asked as the sound of feet and doors and moving chairs overtook the recording. Eli only nodded, chewing his lip.

Then another voice spoke as the last chair scraped into place -- a voice Sharon knew at once. "Do you know why you're here, Colonel Zemo?" asked Thaddeus Ross.

"Because I contacted your people and asked for a meeting, General," replied another voice, smug as a cat under its clipped Sokovian accent. Sharon felt her skin tighten all over as adrenaline surged to meet her racing mind. "General? Not Mr. Secretary? When was this recorded?" She hadn't heard that the State Department had asked for any contact with Zemo since Stark had turned him in to the task force in Vienna.

"No," Ross answered, his voice iron hard with suspicion. "That's not what got you in here. A tin-plate crook like you can ask for parlay all you want, but it doesn't make you worth my time."

"And yet you still came all the way to Orzysz to hear what I have to say," Zemo replied, all innocence.

"What might make you worth my time," Ross went on as if Zemo had said nothing, "is the fact that two of the most dangerous Enhanced on record came out of your country by way of HYDRA,"
"Surely not more dangerous than the Hulk?"

"AND," a crash and rattle punctuated this, as of a meaty fist bashing down on a cheap army table. "given your connections to the Sokovian military and other criminal organizations, I think there's better odds that you know about that operation than that you don't." A rustle crowded over the words, as of a wired microphone suffering the rub of thick army wool. "-ing else, you know what materials and personnel they brought in, and you know who in the area did the cleanup of Strucker's base after the Avengers hit it. THAT is what you're here for."

"Christ," Sharon breathed, her belly going cold.

"What?" Eli asked. "Who is it?

"It really isn't, General," Said Zemo on the recording as Sharon held up a stalling finger. Ross came back at once, all cheerful sarcasm. "Oh? Then by all means, enlighten me."

"I don't think that would be a good idea, speaking frankly while that tape recorder is running," the Sokovian agent replied, all humor evaporated from his tone. "Rumor has it that you will be entertaining an offer from your President Ellis soon, and it would be a shame to have recorded evidence of this conversation get in the way of such an important political career, wouldn't it?"

Sharon turned the speakers off, her pulse surging in her ears like a tide.

"Hey!" Eli protested, leaning over to reach for the button himself. "Turn it back on!"

She caught his hand and tugged him up short. "Don't."

"That's mine," he insisted, yanking against her hold. "You got no right-"

"Your dad died for this, Eli," Sharon said, some instinct making her sharpen the edge of that truth so it couldn't help but draw blood. "He didn't send you this so you could die for it too!"

"He died in a car accident!" Eli twisted against her grip until she let him go, though he didn't go far.

"I'm sorry Eli," Sharon told him, making herself stay in the chair by force of will alone. "I'm really, really sorry, and I wish this wasn't happening like this, but you need to think about this before you listen to any more, because you knowing what's on that disk will make you a target of the same people who killed him."

"He... It wasn't..." he didn't bother to say it again; they both knew he didn't believe it.

"If you want me to," Sharon said, holding his shattered gaze soberly. "I'll take the disk. You and your family don't have to know anything more. You can mourn your dad, and rebuild your family in peace, and this can all be a single, horrible event."

"Yeah, cause they teach you skills like that in Nurse School," he grumbled damply, and Sharon had to smile.

"I actually do have a nursing degree," she admitted with a careful shrug.

"But that ain't why you're here, is it?"

Sharon shook her head once, and let that stand for reply Eli nodded back, then tipped his gaze up to the ceiling and its constellations of textured plaster and star-sparks of glitter. "He said he trusted me to do what's right for us," he said after a long moment. "He said he trusted me."
And as much as every scrap of her training protested against it, Sharon knew she had to let that stand. There was something a little bit Steve Rogers-like about this boy, so angry, so eager to take up the fight and set things straight. All he wanted was a spark of the wrong kind of friction, and Eli would roar into the kind of inferno it would take a bullet to extinguish. And trying to shelter him now, to make his choice for him and tell him it was all for the best -- Sharon knew to her marrow that would be exactly what it took to touch his fuse right off.

"Then you should have it," she said, pushing the button to stop the replay and open the DVD tray. She put the disk back into its novelty case and held it out in her white-gloved hands. "But do me a favor?" she added, hanging on when he tried to take it from her, "Talk to your mom about this before you listen to anything more, okay?" Eli swallowed, listening, and Sharon went on. "Because this is going to put her and your little sister on the map too, and she deserves --"

The door skidded back then, the shriek of grit on metal rails startling Sharon around as Natasha rattled into the room on a sharp whiff of paper-smoke. She glanced at Eli, her eyes red, mascara-smudged and far too bright. and her voice sounded like she'd been coughing on ashes as she fixed Sharon with a meaningful stare and said, "Back yard's done, miss. I'll get started across the street now, okay? You can pay me when you're done here?"

It didn't take a decoder ring to interpret the undercurrent of 'oh shit' behind that message. Sharon stood, stripping off the gloves. "Uh, yeah. Sure, just let me... " But Natasha slipped out of the room, and it was all Sharon could do to catch up to her before she was out the front door. She managed it though, hooking one baggy sleeve just shy of the vestibule and hanging on tight.

"What's going on?" Sharon hissed. Up close, the sharp, scorched smell of burnt paper was even stronger. Natasha's arm felt like steel under her grip, but despite the enormous violence seething behind that green stare, the Widow only cut a glance toward the living room floor, where Princess T-Rex was putting her model together, and Stanley was blatantly watching the two of them instead of her.

"Not here," Natasha growled in German. *I need the raincoat I left at your house.*

Sharon managed not to raise her eyebrows, but only just. *You could have just asked me to hold a passport for you, you know, instead of breaking in to stash it.* she accused cheerfully in the same language, reaching past Natasha to push open the security screen. When they were past it, and safely on the front stoop, she added, *Where are you going?*

Away from the door, Natasha's voice rose from a whisper -- barely. *Steve's going to Lagos. It's a trap. I need to beat him there.* And if she noticed how that name made Sharon clench inside her skin, Natasha she was gracious enough not to mention it.

"Not alone," Sharon said to her after a bracing moment. "You need backup."

She didn't realize she'd switched to English until Natasha replied. "From you?" A smirk, pointed and sharp. "You're on probationary duty, Thirteen. The only way you could even leave DC would be if Stan-"

"If your good friend Stan happened to know a war correspondent currently living in Lagos," the nosy old reporter put in, leaning against the screen door with no attempt at subtlety. "And had a reason to go out there for a visit." He grinned like a shark when Sharon half-turned to glare at him. "I haven't seen Jamabo since Madagascar in '08. In fact, he still owes me fifty bucks."

"This isn't-" Sharon hissed, but then... stopped. Because this was, as Natasha, Stan, and everyone at CIA headquarters knew, just a bullshit surveillance detail Sharon was on. No one at Langley was
reading the reports she logged -- she had the resounding lack of e mail confirmation notices to vouch for that. If anything, some office drone was just checking the log-dates to see that she'd updated them on schedule, and then signing off on the chore without a second thought. So if she were to log a report that her subject was on the move, and she was taking the surveillance mobile until she received a countermanding directive, then...

"Later," Natasha's voice cut through Sharon's whirling thoughts like a knife. "At yours, when they're gone." A nod at the living room, where Eli now stood over Cyanne and her asteroid field of dinosaur parts, made clear the 'Them' in question. "I'll wait till we can talk," She said, then Natasha tugged free of Sharon's grip and jogged to the duplex across the street, leaving Sharon with the sudden realization that this was the most confident she'd ever been in a statement the Black Widow had made to anyone outside Agent Barton or Director Fury. As if being in the Avengers had cemented a sea change that had begun back in the days of her SHIELD allegiance, but had always remained fluid and changeable. Whatever that was, the Avengers had anchored it now, and it clearly pointed like a compass needle inside Natasha, quivering toward her new True North.

"So," Stanley said, opening the security screen and beckoning Sharon back inside. "If you two are done with the Ultimate Machine, I'll just go online and check how many mileage points I got. Between Groupon and my AARP membership, I bet I can find us a cheap fare."

"We just dropped a nuclear payload into those kids' laps, Stan," Sharon murmured, easing the screen closed behind her. "Their family's already on the radar, and we're talking about leaving the country just as things get hot?"

"Ah, they'll be fine," Stan replied, in just the kind of sotto voce that would guarantee the attention of anyone within fifteen yards. "I got things handled."

"What things?" Eli asked, crossing the room and leaving his sister behind with her monster-in-the-making. "Handled how? If it's about my family, I gotta right to know."

"It's just, my friend needs help with something," Sharon hurried to answer, not wanting to have to cover over the old man's utter lack of subterfuge.

"What, she get a call from Commissioner Gordon on the Nurse-Signal?" Eli snarked.

"Something like that," Sharon dodged. "But we'd have to travel to do it, and someone needs to be around to help you and your mom out in case this all gets ..." she waved a vague hand, indicating the whole situation, and all its madly spinning parts. "Crazy."

"Because it definitely isn't crazy already," Stan offered unhelpfully.

"When that recording hits the internet, we're going to see a whole new definition of that word," Sharon said, not even tempted to soften the prediction with a smile. "And if we're not even in the US when that happens, who's going to be around to help these kids and their mom out?" She was thinking of names even as she spoke; SHIELD Agents who had survived '14, who could be trusted with something like this. There weren't many, and of those few there was maybe a handful whom Sharon knew how to contact, but there had to be something she could do.

"Well, this guy's gonna be one of them," Stan said, plucking a business card out of the bowl beside the door, and handing it to Eli with a flourish. "He's already expecting to hear from you or your mom, and he already knows what's on your dad's recording."

"You said you didn't listen to it," Eli accused, but he took the card. "Who's Nelson and Murdoch?"
"I didn't listen to it," Stan assured him. "I just made two extra copies of it, and mailed them off to the lawyer your dad hired after he came back from that trip to Poland. Which would be Nelson and Murdoch. Just Murdoch, to be precise. A little off the radar, but in this instance, I think that's probably for the best. Go on, call him now," Stan urged, waving for Sharon to open the door again. "Matt'll know who you are."

"So who else did you send that recording to?" Sharon asked after the teenager had glared himself suspiciously outside to hunch over his phone in the driveway. When Stan gave her a look of wide eyed, and utterly hollow innocence, Sharon put on her Nurse-face, and called his bullshit. "You said you made two copies, and sent the lawyer one. So where'd the other one go, since you didn't save a copy for yourself?"

"I've been a newsman for most of my life, and all of yours, sweetheart," Stan replied with a smirk. "You don't work in the business that long without developing a good nose for the kinds of situations that are gonna grow up to change the world. And I also know just the right kind of hungry young journalists who'll do that kind of story justice."

"So why is the story not already on the front page then?" Sharon challenged, and Stan chuckled.

"Because getting the big story isn't actually the tough part," he answered with a wink and a nod toward the front window, where they could just see Eli, pacing the drive with his phone to his ear. "The really tricky part is figuring out what dominoes you have to set up so that when you release the big story, it makes a damned difference."

"And how long have you been setting up these dominoes, Stan?" Sharon asked, eyeing him narrowly.

"Oh, don't think it's my doing, sweetheart, but these particular ones? I've been watching them stack up for longer than you'd probably want to believe," was all Stan answered, and he then headed into his office without another word.

And while Sharon might be disappointed with the evasion, she couldn't say she was surprised at it.

~* Times Square, NYC *~

"You're on in ten, Christine," the AD put her head into the dressing room to announce.

"Thank you, ten," she responded, and continued to carefully blend her contouring. The effect was hardly flattering under the sane light of the dressing room, but experience had taught her that the set lights would blanch out and flatten even as pointy a face as her own, unless she was willing to back right up to the 'way too much, you look like a clown, wipe all that off this instant young lady' line.

Thanks, mom, love you too! she thought, and smiled archly at the mirror. Then she blinked in surprise as one of the station interns appeared in the glass behind her.

"Um, sorry miss Everhardt," he stammered. "Sorry to bother you, but it's just there's a..." he fumbled with his clipboard, and managed to get a yellow padded mailer into his hand without dropping anything. "This came for you? Special courier?"

"Put it by the door," she sighed, and considered her lipstick options.

"Um?" the intern dithered, still waving the mailer. "It's marked 'urgent'?"

"Which probably means it's got a live scorpion in it," Christine bit at him. Jesus, where were they getting these children from, anyway? "If it came by special courier, marked urgent, then it got fast-
tracked in here, and that means Security hasn't put it through the x-ray machine, and I don't have time
to deal with hate mail when I have to be on camera in ten minutes, so Leave. It. By. The. Door."

The intern blinked at her, open mouthed, until she beamed at him and chirped, "Thanks!"

She didn't think about the package again until after the Newsfront at Nine segment had wrapped up,
and the AD called a wrap, sending the WHIH anchors off to their dressing rooms, and roughly a
metric fucktonne of wet wipes, which is what it generally took to get all the greasepaint off her face.

The envelope had been moved by then, propped longways up against her mirror, so she had to cock
her head left to make out the return address.

"Virginia, huh?" she mused, picking the mailer up with two fingers, and pinchind it gingerly, as
though the bubblewrap could give her a clue as to its contents. Nothing moved or wriggled under her
searching fingers, nothing squished wetly or stank, and the examination left her with the impression
that whatever was inside the mailer was roughly the size of a novelty greeting card.

She set it by, and told herself she didn't care. But by the time she'd dug down to her own skin with
the wet wipes, Christine had to admit to herself that her curiosity wasn't going to let her leave it by.
It was the same curse/blessing that any successful journalist bore; the need to know.

She cut the mailer open with scissors, shook the contents out over the back of her shooting schedule,
and only realized she'd been holding her breath when the Iron Man birthday card dropped out of it
and startled a laugh from her.

"Jesus, some people just can't let anything go," she chuckled, picking up the card with careful
fingers. It showed the infamous armor from shoulder to knee, gauntleted hands braced on gleaming
metal hips. and the card had been cleverly cut so that only most of the armor lifted away when she
opened it. The groin protector remained in place, over a very nearly naked, and not very accurate at
all representation of what the card's designer thought that Tony Stark might be hiding under his
armor.

And in case that hadn't been lurid enough, written in glittery frosting across Stark's improbable 8
pack was the announcement that "Life's short, Birthday Girl; Unwrap the Big One first!"

It was not Christine's birthday.

"Well, at least it's not laced with anthrax," she gritted to herself, dropping the card to the side.

Grabbing her tweezers, she peeled back the paper, and when the micro USB chip fell out onto the
dressing table, she'd been holding her breath on purpose. On the back of the card, in the same shaky
hand, was the marching orders that drove home just how truly urgent this package actually must be.

You're wasted on Anchor work, Cutie, it said. Time you got back out in the trenches again. This'll get
you started. Love, Stan U.

P.S. And remember; nobody who took 'no comment' for an answer ever won a Pulitzer!

And looking from her naked reflection, to the shredded card, to the silently alluring menace of that
tiny chip of plastic, which looked suddenly like the most real thing in the entire room, Christine
Everhardt could only close her eyes and breathe a heartfelt, "Shit."
This is where I put my stake in the ground and square up: There is no way in HELL that Zemo accomplished all that he did in CACW without help from someone high up in the US power structure. Someone who had a lot of pull, and who could get a lot of favors done. I also do not buy that General Ross's "change of heart" on the golf course changed any of who he was in essence -- a brutal, ambitious imperialist with a thirst for power and fame that did not shirk at making others pay in blood and grief for his achievements. In short, Ross is a typical American politician, and this is exactly the sort of shit they get up to.

Also, Christine Everhart is the best investigative reporter ever to appear in the MCU. If not for her direct intervention, Tony would never have learned what he needed to know in time to stop Obie. The fact that she and Pepper don't like each other, I consider to be an example of bad writing on Favreau's part. (Puts up fists = Fite me.)
Chapter Summary

Wherein things are about as bad as they look, unless they are possibly worse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Lagos *~

It was a nice hotel, the Wheatbaker; a local venture, classy enough that a white man, even one as well-built as Steve, wouldn't stick out in the crowd of tourists and business travelers, but smaller than the international chain hotels next to the airport, meaning less need for a strong on-site security presence. It had good sightlines in the tavern room, and plenty of open space between the parking lot, and the expansive lobby for watchers to spot anyone coming or going.

Sam and Steve had used the computer in the Embassy guest house to bring up plans for the place once Ayo had gone off to explain their presence to the house's staff, and by the time she'd returned with the promise of dinner coming soon, Steve had the plan all ready. Even though she'd complained about her role in it a little, Ayo didn't seem to feel it warranted any real rewriting -- strategy was what Steve was best at, after all, and even a Warrior Bride of the King seemed to think so.

What Steve's plan hadn't been able to account for however, was the confluence of a cardiology convention just finishing up that week, and a golf tournament about to begin that weekend. The Wheatbaker, and apparently every other high end hotel in the city of Lagos, was roiling with people checking in, checking out, standing around the hotel lobby in large, chattering knots as the hotel staff and those who were checking in/out tried to maneuver around them. It turned their nice, smooth plan of operation into a crowded, noisy, target rich environment.

But Steve's contact didn't respond to his text about finding a quieter place to meet, and whether Steve was just being his sweet, stubborn self, or he was still sore about having to fold himself into Ayo's trunk and putting off the return trip as long as he could, he insisted that he was going ahead with the plan.

And so along with that plan, Sam and Ayo went too. And now here they were; Steve at the bar, large as life and half as subtle as he watched the tv like he gave half a damn about soccer; Sam holding down a table in the corner, where he could cover the kitchen entrance about half of the hotel lobby, and critically, the second floor hallway that linked the hotel's wings together around a small parlor, and gave Ayo perfect oversight into all entrances to the lobby. Sam would have been happier with a couple more sets of eyes on the crowd, and maybe Redwing to scan for weapons, but kept his grumbling to a minimum, watched the tourists, and tried to savour the first Red Stripe lager he'd gotten his hands on since London.

But noon turned into one, then two, and still no one passing through the bar paid Steve any more attention than the barman refreshing his beer and having the waitress get the man another order of fries when he'd picked the first clean. Sam was toying with his phone, composing a text to Steve about how long they were gonna hang around the hotel waiting when he saw Ayo go from bored-but-vigilant in her sniper's overlook, to predator-tracking alert.

He sat upright in his booth, craning unsubtly to try and catch a glimpse of what had set the warrior
off, but the angle was wrong, and all he could see was suits and golf pastels. And then when he
looked up at her again to try and guess the direction of whatever threat she'd spotted, he caught only
the briefest glimpse of her face, thunderously enraged, and clearly promising utter destruction to
someone before she turned on her heel and strode off to the left -- the nearest stairs. And that couldn't
be anything at all like a good sign.

Sam left his beer on the table and went to the bar, sliding a bill to the barman and murmuring "we got
trouble," to Steve when the man turned to ring him out. "A's off script, and I think someone's about
to get a ass whuppin."

"Where'd she go?" Steve asked, voice intent while his face showed only idle curiosity, as if Sam
had commented on the game.

"Right side stairs, but she was looking behind and to the left." Sam said, taking his change and
peeling off a tip to send the barman on his way. "Nothing's back there but-"

"The staff entrance to the gym," Steve said after a moment's thought. "Either that, or the linen
storage. Go back her up."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Uh, in case you forgot, I'm supposed to be here backing YOU up."

"We've been here since noon," Steve shrugged, "It's well past any excuse for 'lunchtime'. I'm pretty
sure he's not coming."

Which had been just about exactly what Sam thought, back when he was bored and tired of people-
watching. Now that it was looking like game on...

"And the minute I leave you alone, if this IS a
trap, it'll close on your dumb ass," he countered.

Steve shook his head. "If it's a trap, it's a bad one. This place is full of tourists, I've got clear
sightlines to at least six exits, and a straight shot to the kitchens if I need a diversion. I'll be fine. You
need to find out about Ayo though."

"Steve-"

"Sam," Steve answered in the same tone. "She's the only one who can get us back out of the
country."

Sam closed his eyes and gave up a sigh. "... and she's got the keys to the Embassy guest house too." He ran a hand over his hair, feeling the gun shift against his ribs as the holster tilted. "Fuck. All right,
going. Don't you do anything stupid, you hear me Rogers?"

And the big blonde asshole had the nerve to give Sam shojo eyes at that. "Moi?" he asked, all
innocence.

Oh, this was such a bad idea. "All right, I'm going," he said. "Do NOT leave until I get back, you
hear me?"

Steve didn't answer, but waggled his old burner phone at Sam by way of agreement, and Sam
threaded his way off through the crowd, dodging golf bags and rolling carry-ons until he could duck
down the hallway that led to the hotel gym. The door to which was locked.

Between the blinds, an old man could just be seen mopping the floor between the eliptical machines
and the stationary bikes. There was no sign of Ayo, but behind the man's shoulder, Sam could see
another door that let onto the hotel's indoor pool, and Jesus, he really didn't want to have to
resuscitate someone today -- especially if he was gonna have to break into the pool to do it. Sure, the
door was only glass, but he was trying not to get arrested here!

Sam was just turning to head for the outer pool deck, and a less spectacular way into the inner swim room when a muffled thud, and under it, a nearly silent grunt drew him up short. That definitely hadn't come from the pool.

Taking a quick look around to be sure the cameras, hotel employees, and tourists were all focused elsewhere, Sam unsnapped his holster, scooped his gun free, and headed for the door marked 'staff only'. It wasn't locked, but that didn't mean it opened when Sam gave it a push. It did jostle though, and on the other side, something scuffled, grunted again, and rattled the door with another heavy thud.

"Who is in there?" Sam called, mimicking the accents he'd been listening to all afternoon. "What is going on?"

There was a woman's feline snarl from inside the room -- thorny words in some language Sam didn't need to understand in order to translate -- and then the weight came off the door in a scudding shuffle of rubber soles on tile. He had the door open in a flash, and caught it with his boot so it wouldn't bang the wall as he brought his gun up to cover...

Ayo. Holding Natasha Romanoff in an armlock and pressing her face-first into the tiled wall of the janitorial supply cupboard. Both glared at him like they could set him on fire for interrupting when they saw Sam in the doorway. But then Natasha smiled, in that terrifying, honeytrap kind of way she had.

“Hey Wilson,” She said, and with a fierce wriggle she shook Ayo off her back and slung the warrior into a shelf of cleaning supplies, “Long time no see.”

~*~

"Was that your friend?" the barman asked Steve once Sam had gone. Like all the hotel's employees seemed to do, he spoke to Steve in English, but his accent was so thick that Steve almost wished he would use Yoruba instead. The milling crowd in the hotel lobby was loud enough it made parsing the accent more than a little tough for his sensitive ears.

"Not the one I was waiting for," Steve admitted with a rueful smile as he reached for his wallet. "I don't think that friend will be coming today."

"Maybe he is just late because of the traffic," the barman shrugged, taking Steve's cue and heading for his cash register to get him the check. "Many of my regular customers did not come today because the hotel is too busy."

Steve turned the urge to grimace into a grin instead, and tried not to think of such a stupid happenstance meaning the end of the bomb technician's willingness to let Steve know what had happened to Dr. Ebrakumo. "Well, at least I got a good lunch out of it," he said. Then his phone buzzed against the bar, and Steve turned it over to see a text alert scrolling across its face.

*Where are you?* the message read, the number above it the same one that had drawn Steve back to Nigeria again.

*At the bar, Brown jacket,* Steve typed back, then added, *You're late. I almost left.* And then, because there was no point being coy, after all, he turned his chair and scanned the crowd for signs of trouble.

All he spotted was yet another airport shuttle pulling into the bell station, and a handful of limos and
"Mr. Ikiyemoye," Steve stood to greet him, hand outstretched despite the anger in the man's eyes. He wasn't surprised at the weight of the grip that met his, nor at the force of his single, desultory shake before he loosed his hand and nodded back.

"Captain."

A moment passed in silence, Steve increasingly aware that the building weight between them couldn't help but draw notice if it went on too long, but there was something a little too much like a dare in those dark eyes for Steve to let himself be the first to look away.

"Would you like to take a seat?" Steve offered, "Or is there a problem we need to take care of first?" Not a threat, though if it needed to do service for one, Steve was ready to let that stand.

"I am late," Ikiyemoye said at last, "Because I have spent all afternoon explaining meddling Americans that my investigation does not require their direction, their guidance, their expertise, or their money to insure its completion and conclusion. And because of that I almost did not come to meet you." He yanked the stool beside Steve's away from the bar, and climbed into it as if he would far rather have thrown the thing across the room. "But I said to myself that if I did not come and keep my meeting with you, there would be yet another meddling American rattling around my district, trying to discover why," he sharpened his glare beneath the caul of exasperation and frustrated weariness then, "And the last time you came to Lagos with a mystery to solve, all the world came to regret it."

Steve held his face still, choked back a dozen things he could have said, ground to powder between his teeth the rage that boiled in his gut, all too ready to lash back at the insult. Then, after a count to ten in Igbo, which he was just beginning to learn, Steve fetched up a thin, but knowing smile. "If you really thought that's all that happened last May," he said, "then you wouldn't have asked to meet me now. You wouldn't have been answering Dr. Ebrakumo's e-mails to a wanted fugitive, and you wouldn't be sitting here daring me to walk away and leave you facing whatever pickling brine you're treading water in alone."

"You have done that before," he challenged, but Steve could hear the anger cracking underneath it, and he smiled.

"That's not what happened," he said, and signaled the barman to bring two more beers, "which if you read Dr. Ebrakumo's e-mails to me, you know. So let's get past the dominance displays and see if we can't help each other out, shall we?"

Ikiyemoye glowered a moment longer, but then when the barman returned with their drinks, he turned and spoke to him, a patter of Igbo much too rapid for Steve to follow, with an answer just as quick, but far less weighty. Then the tech huffed a sigh, and picked up his glass. "Fine," he told Steve after a long drink, "But you are picking up the tab."

"Well, I don't know what I expected, Pep," Tony grumbled, waving the cab driver's assistance off with one hand, and hauling his case out of the trunk with the other. The man had been paid and tipped, and Tony's budding headache was just not interested in any further glad-handing between
him, a shower, and a very tall drink.

"Then why did you even go?" Pepper groused back, sounding every bit as exhausted as he was. "I could have used you on the job today. You could have gotten Rodriguez' code push cleared, and talked Schiff off his ledge out at the Philly plant if you hadn't run off to Africa for no damned reason!"

"Schiff. He's the one who panics every time someone says the word 'Union' around him, right?" Tony sidestepped a pair of little old men who were chattering like long lost besties and blocking the hotel entrance while the bell boy got way too many bags out of the back of an airport bus. "He doesn't need a call from me, he needs a scrip for Xanax. And I did clear the code push. Went through it on the flight over, and she should have my notes on it when she gets up in the morning. It is morning over there, isn't it?"

"Lagos is five hours ahead of New York, Tony," Pepper answered so automatically Tony knew she hadn't had to look it up. "And seven ahead of Burbank, so technically, yes. But you still haven't told me why--"

"Look, something was just off, all right?" he snapped, working his way through the clogged flow of business suits and leisurewear that all seemed to be checking in, or out, or just standing around in clumps of in-his-damned-way around the Wheatbaker Hotel's lobby. "Look you know how sometimes middle management types will pick a fight to cover up something that they're scared to let you look at too close?"

"Oh yes," she replied, curdling with irony, "I am familiar."

"Well that's what this Deputy Director was like," Tony went on, forcibly ignoring the lure. "And when I get here, it's like everyone's doing that. It took me literally four hours to even get someone to admit the case file number I had was a real one, and in all that time nobody even once threatened to arrest me."

"Okay, I am actually shocked at that one."

"I know, right? It's like they didn't dare give me reason to be around that long." There was a queue at the check-in desk, and Tony eyed it with profound distaste until FRIDAY flashed a log-in notice and room number across the inside curve of his sunglasses.

"Well, you do know your way around international incidents, Tony," Pepper went on with that 'this conversation isn't really about bullet holes' tone to her voice.

Tony pointedly ignored it, and steered around a clump of tourists chattering in Italian. "Well, it turns out the investigation's tied up in, like, continents of red tape," he said, claiming a spot against the wall beside an oversized floral arrangement and slouching against the cool tile to wait for the queue to thin out, or for FRIDAY to hijack enough of the system to print him a contraband room key. "Far as I can tell, it's been passed back and forth between so many departments that at this point half of them don't even have the same basic data on their files."

"Wait, they showed you their files?" Pepper sharpened up on that one, but Tony let it go by.

"And now even the politicians are all up in it, so instead of an investigation of a terrorist attack, it's become a pissing contest over jurisdiction and sovereignty and all the best of small-town and big city fuckery, all rolled up in one." He swiped the glasses off his face so he could scrub at the grit and ache around his eyes. "And if they actually did have any kind of line on misappropriated Stark Industry ordnance, like the Deputy Inspector was hinting at, I couldn't find any solid proof of it."
"Anthony Edward Stark, did you illegally access the files of a foreign police force last night?" Pepper asked, in a voice as sweet and cold as ice cream.

Tony scoffed, and hung his sunglasses from his breast pocket. "Like you haven't seen me do worse when Stark weapons turn up in the bad guys' hands! Come on, Potts!" And oh great, he was apparently shouting now. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and when he opened them again, almost all of the gawkers had gone back to their whatever. There was just one holdout though -- a pretty blonde, all leg and cheekbone and big, brown, startled eyes fixed on his face with a gravity that could only mean she'd probably seen him naked. And not YouTube naked, either; there was real recognition in those dark eyes, and Tony felt no compunction whatsoever in fleeing before she could bring herself to ask whether he remembered her name.

"Anyway, I'm thinking at this point Deputy Inspector dude just wanted to yell at someone who couldn't get him fired for it," Tony snapped up his case and the thread of his ramble as he strode into the bar like he'd meant to go there all along. "I mean, not that I actually couldn't get him fired, but it's not like I could've done it quickly or anything."

"Tony," Pepper sighed, "All I really want to know about this mess right now is; do you need a lawyer, do you need rescue, and when will you bring the jet back? Do you think you can answer at least two of those for me?"

"Well the crew tells me if they don't take at least 12 hours of downtime before they make the return flight someone's gonna lose a license," he answered, glancing in the bar-back mirror to be sure the blonde hadn't followed him in, and then heaving a sigh of his own when he spotted no sign of her. "So I'm just gonna get a room here and... the hell?"

The conversation evaporated from his mind, left Tony's tongue stunned and still in his mouth as his brain tried desperately to process the sheer impossibility of what he was seeing. He closed his eyes, tried the deep-breath-and-hold-it trick again, but when he opened his eyes and looked at the mirror again, the same impossible sight still greeted him.

Steve Rogers was at the bar.

Steve Goddammit Rogers, was at the fucking bar! Right fucking there; twenty feet across the taproom, shooting the breeze with a surly local as if it were the most logical place in the world for him to be, and nevermind the fact that he was probably on the UN's terrorist watchlist by now.

"Tony! What's happening? Are you okay?" Pepper's voice, sharp and loud in his ear was enough to shock him into motion. Tony fumbled his sunglasses back out of his pocket and backed out of the bar as quick as nonchalant could go.

"Nope, it's all good," he heard himself saying, bright and brittle, and hoping Pepper wouldn't see straight through. "Thought I saw Ty Stone in the hotel lobby for a moment, but I was wrong, so it's all."

"Tony..." when did that particular disappointed sigh become a stabilizing force in his universe, anyway? "Whatever you get up to, and whomever you get up to it with, just do me the favor? Try to keep it out of the news please?"

"Yeah. Sure thing, Potts," he said, putting his shoulders to the lobby wall again, and staring at the still milling crowd without seeing a single one of them. "You have a good flight to Montreal, okay? FRIDAY, end call."

The comm in his ear went dead, then switched to filter mode as Tony stuffed the knuckles of one
hand into his mouth so that nothing hysterical or embarrassingly loud could come out of it while his brain was stripping its gears on him. That couldn't have been Steve. But Tony would know those shoulders anywhere. But if Steve was here, then where was Barnes? And if Barnes was here, then...
He gripped the handle of his case harder, and told his stupid heart to slow down before it killed someone.

FRIDAY accessed his comm after a long and very shaky moment, her voice pitched soothingly low. "Boss, your biometric chips are alerting me that you're entering a state of heightened anxiety."

"Yup," he agreed from behind his hand. "Sure am!"

"How can I be of assistance?" she asked then, and Tony had to fight not to giggle.

"Just tell me I'm not crazy, and that that really was who I think it was," he managed, and the inner-lens HUD on his glasses instantly blipped frame maps over every face visible in the crowd before it found that half-familiar, leggy blonde again, this time talking urgently to the two old men who'd been outside by the bus earlier.

"Facial recognition scan is a 98% match, Boss," she said before Tony could correct her aim. "That woman appears to be Agent Sharon Carter; formerly of SHIELD, currently serving the Central Intelligence Agency."

And just like that, with a chilling drench of adrenaline and dread, Tony's no good, very bad, terrible, awful day got a whole lot more complicated. Because there was no way -- just no fucking way that she'd be there on her own if this was a takedown on Rogers. He pressed a hand to the center of his sternum, feeling the scars roll numbly under his palm as the ache of panic flexed from beneath the bone. There were suddenly way too goddamned many people in this hotel, and Tony had no way to guess which of them were tourists and which were agents, primed to take Rogers in, or down.

Somewhere in his brain, the television break-in reel of Steve on his knees in the street, surrounded by a SHIELD Strike team flickered to life; shield flat beside him, head bowed under the aim of a dozen rifles, a hollow doll with no fight left in him, and no. Just fucking no! Whatever he was doing here, whatever was going on in Rogers' big blond brain, Tony was not going to stand there and watch it go down.

"How many?" he asked, and Friday flashed rectangles across the crowd again, then switched to a security camera overlooking the lobby to do it again, and to another in the bar to run a third check a heartbeat later.

"I've got limited comparison data, Boss," she said, "but I've got four matches over eighty per-cent for known Intelligence Agents in the hotel's lobby. Another two in the bar, and an armored SUV carrying a dozen has just turned into the hotel's parking lot, and is heading for the porte cochere.

"Oh hell no," he breathed. "Where are the others? Barnes, or Wilson, or hell, even that shrinking dude?"

"I've got no sign of any of them within the hotel grounds, Boss," she answered, "Though there do seem to be more than one void in the hotel security cameras' coverage, and without accessing and replaying the taped footage of the day, I cannot be certain that-"

"If you can't see them, then none of them can see him," Tony said, and flexed his shoulders back against the wall. "And that means it's down to me."

"To do what, Boss?"
Tony closed his eyes, and sent an apology Pepper-ward for whatever might be about to happen. "Something stupid," he said then. "Cover me."

Chapter End Notes

And we're drawing everybody in now. Still no idea how many more chapters this is going to shake out to be, but at least *I* can see the end from here. Can you?

As always, my lovely poison dart frogs, my cuddly curare, your comments give me life, joy, and the will to write all the faster. Share them with meeeee! *makes grabbyhands*
Beer and Ultimatums

Chapter Summary

In which needs must, and the devil appears to be driving the whole show.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Hotel Bar *~

"My mother's people came from Wakanda," Ikiemoye said to Steve after their drinks had been refilled.

"Mine came from Ireland," Steve replied, trying not to flinch at the pointed mention of the country he wasn't supposed to be drawing notice to. "What happened with-"

"She had a bracelet of beads from there," he went on, ignoring Steve's attempt to get to the point. "It was nothing much to look at; just shiny metal beads on a wire around her wrist. I asked her once why she never took it off, and do you know what she told me?" Steve had an idea why, but he shook his head instead, and the bomb tech's forced smile trued up just a little bit. "She said it would take a special kind of machine to open the clasp, and there was no such machine to be found outside Wakanda. And then she showed me a little of what those beads could do, and said that if she had gone there for my birth instead of going to ECWA Hospital, that I might have had a bracelet like it."

And there, he leaned into the space between them and gently tapped the rim of his bottle to the vibranium bead that just peeked through the collar of Steve's shirt. He smiled knowingly when Steve held stone-still and let him do it. "I had thought that maybe I would turn you in today, you know?"

Steve grit his teeth and checked his sightlines in the mirror behind the bar. "Oh? Did you take offense at me coming in good faith to meet you, as you'd asked?"

The man's smile died at the challenge. "Nothing so personal as that, Captain. It is only that I have been working with this evidence for a year now, but I am no farther than I was six months ago. And do you know why?" It wasn't actually a question, and he didn't give Steve even a second to get an answer in. "It is because every week I have to stop my work, and go to the Deputy Chief Inspector's office and explain to yet another agent from yet another European agency that no, I cannot release my findings to him, I will not give him access to my evidence, and I will not accept an 'assistant' from his organization to 'help me wrap this case up!'"

"It's been that bad?" Steve asked, thinking of how Ebrakumo had asked that they meet at the evacuated and quarantined ruins of the laboratory where Rumlow had stolen his biological agents, where few would see them, and none would hear.

"It has been bad enough that I considered if all these agencies, CIA, Interpol, FSB, MI6, Mossad -- if they had something more exciting to chase for a day or two, that perhaps I could use the time to complete my analysis of the explosion that killed so many last year. And then I might even officially submit it to my superiors before the pressure of international meddling convinces someone in the
Steve just stared at him instead, waiting for enough of the man's anger to drain away that he could manage to tell Steve why he'd asked him to come.

"Until a month after the bombing in Vienna, they left us alone," Ikiemoye said at last. "But I was not surprised when the calls from the US began to come in after that." He shook his head, lips twisting to speak around a snarl. "I have seen this before, you see. So many times. Tragic violence happens somewhere in Africa; lives are lost, and many people suffer, and then the West comes in to 'render aid'," He didn't frame the quotes in the air, but Steve heard them there all the same. "And when they are gone, half the evidence is different than it had been, the other half missing, and the guilty walk free with no shadow on their names. And all the African blood is washed clean by their European money, while the West maintains the chokehold they have used here for centuries."

"What I'm hearing," Steve ventured after a thoughtful moment, "Is that someone in the States is trying to interfere with your investigation, and you called me here to try and make it stop."

"They are succeeding in interfering," Ikiemoye replied. "Why do you think Ebrakumo disappeared? His laboratory ransacked, and all his computers and documents taken, either by the thieves, or by the Internal Affairs investigators who came to find out where he had gone. And then they bring in a white doctor, who to make his report -- a white doctor who could not speak Yoruba, or Igbo, and could not have read Odogwu's notes even if they were still there to be discovered."

"And you're afraid they intend to do the same with you, and your evidence?"

Ikiemoye glared. "I know they do."

Steve set his own bottle down, and straightened up from the bar. "Then tell me how I can help you stop it, and I will."

"You cannot stop it," he said, still angry, but now with a note of disgusted resignation in his voice as well. "Nobody can. Even now the Director of Police, the Speaker of the Assembly, the Governor, maybe even President Bhutari; they are preparing to do what the US wants. They have only delayed this long in order to bargain for something they want more than the truth of why that bomb exploded, and why all of our people died last year."

"Then why am I here?" Steve asked, trying to be gentle with the man's fragile calm. "What do you need me to do?"

He reached into the pocket of his polo, and drew out a thumb drive. "I need to know if you can do for me what you did for Ebrakumo. If you can take my data, my findings, my facts, and save them. So that when they disappear from my evidence locker, they are not completely lost."

"I can do that," Steve agreed, holding out his hand.

Ikiemoye held back, drive still clasped in his fingers as if he was afraid it would struggle free. "But will you, I wonder?" the man said, challenging again now. "If you do not like what my findings show, will you still preserve their integrity?"
Steve closed his hand and let it rest, a loose curled fist on the bar. "How do you mean?"

"Some pieces I recovered from the bomb. They were made by your friend's company. Stark Industries." He smiled knowingly, spotting the surprise Steve couldn't keep from his face. "If Stark was complicit in last year's bombing, will you protect him from justice, as you did the Winter Soldier?"

Steve choked back a hundred angry, unwise answers that accusation -- both ends of it -- tried to goad out of his throat. He took a long pull at his beer, and told himself to go carefully. There was more going on here than he could see just yet, and if this door slammed, he might not get a look at what was behind it until someone tried to use it as a weapon.

Then he straightened his shoulders, and met the bomb tech's expectant stare. "If you think that Tony Stark's tech was used in the bomb, then I will help you find out who bought it, and who used it," he said, turning his bottle so that the last of the beer whirled within it. "Finding out who engineered Rumlow's attack last year, and what they hoped to gain from it was why I'd been working with Dr. Ebrakumo in the first place. But if you send elite SWAT troops after Stark," Steve went on, letting his own gaze sharpen into a warning, "With orders to execute him on sight so that he will never be able to answer to your charges in a court of law, then yes," he drained his bottle, and clapped it down, like a judge's gavel on the bartop. "Yes, I will do for Tony Stark what I did for James Barnes, and I will not apologize to anyone for it."

It was fair to say that Steve had an instinct for saying the right thing at exactly the right moment to get what he wanted -- whether that be a surrender, or a rousing brawl -- and Steve could read in every line of Ikiemoye's face that his words had struck home. The bomb tech was only hesitating because he was wondering where his distrust had gone, and whether he felt justified in taking Steve at his word when he had already spent so long looking for a lie. It was chagrin, mostly, with a dash of defiant pride thrown in, and Steve was completely ready to just sit there and wait it out... but then the expression on Ikiemoye's face changed.

Or to be more exact, it froze.

Steve was in the process of turning, bottle in hand, ready to throw, when a hand clapped companionably, if forcefully onto his shoulder, and the very last voice he expected to hear said, low and urgent in his ear, "So Cap; is this a CIA only party you're throwing, or can anybody crash?"

~* Janitor's Closet *~

It was like the worst kind of joke setup: 'So an assassin, a royal guard, and a field medic walk into a janitor's closet...' Only Sam was so busy trying to stay out of the middle of Natasha and Ayo's fight to even begin to think of a punchline.

Both were armed, because of course they were, but the weapons, once they made it into the women's hands, didn't stay there long. Guns were knocked loose before a round could be chambered; knives went spinning across the floor after one or two swings; Widow's Bites clattered like coins to the floor, taser rods spun free with their charges ungrounded. Sam made an effort to get hold of them all as quickly as he could, but when the two women descended to the level of using cleaning supplies as impromptu weapons, he decided it had gone far enough.

"Okay, not that this isn't great and all," he called, ducking as a gallon jug of bleach careened off the wall behind his head, "But you guys wanna tell me what this is about?"

Ayo swung the wet half of the mop she'd broken over Natasha's back, and knocked a volley of drinking glasses from the air to shatter on the tiles. "Leipzig," the warrior snarled, like that explained
"Okay, yeah, I was there, but -- Natasha will you quit for a minute please?" She flicked him an annoyed glance, but lowered her hand, and the travel soaps held like shuriken between her knuckles all the same. "Ayo, I know she stood with Stark at Leipzig, he tried, "But trust me, she's the last person who wants to see Steve in trouble. She's not here to arrest him."

"I do not care why she is here," Ayo came back, not lowering the broken mop she held like short swords in either hand. "She attacked my King -- her ally -- without warning when it had been she who asked his aid to begin with!"

"Wasn't much asking involved, actually," Natasha came back, "He was pretty eager to take his shot, whether we were there with him or not."

"You attacked T'Challa?" Sam asked her, and she shrugged.

"I slowed him down. If I'd wanted him dead, that would've gone a lot different, and you," she pointed a cruel smile Ayo's direction, "would never have even known what had happened."

*And you yell at Steve for starting unnecessary shit?* Sam wondered as Ayo made a noise of strangled outrage, and surged forward again.

They were down to fists and feet, both bruised, both bleeding from rolls and skids across the broken glass on the floor when Sam finished tucking the last knife into his boot and stood back up. "All right!" Sam put on his best cheerful 'no yelling at Sunday dinner' voice and clapped his hands loudly to get the women's attention. "You two wanna throw down and work out who's baddest, y'all just go ahead," he said, and put his hand on the door latch, "but you should both know that I'm not gonna alibi the winner, and I am not gonna help anybody dispose of a body."

That actually won a pause, and a wary glance from both women. Ayo let go of Natasha's hair, Natasha released the nerve pinch she had on Ayo's left arm. Sam met their attention with a pointed nod at the door, or more particularly, what they had all left going on behind it. "And while you're doin' that, I'm gonna go back out there and watch Steve's back, cause I know both of y'all know how he don't need more than ten minutes and a stick of gum to get shit started if nobody's looking out for him."

"Relax," Natasha said, backing away from Ayo like she might finally mean to let the fight go. "I brought someone who knows how to keep him out of trouble." For her part, Ayo looked like she'd only just remembered that Steve was still out there, and didn't like what the thought of him unsupervised was doing to her sense of vengeance.

Sam though, was focused on the sinking sense of horror that particular, knowing smile on Natasha's face was stirring up from the pit of his belly. "Oh no. Tell me you didn't bring Stark."

Her scathing glance in reply was the greatest relief he could have asked for. "Why the hell would I bring-" There was a buzz, loud enough that they all heard it, and clearly originating from the zipped pocket of Natasha's jacket. They all waited while she fished it out, glanced at the screen, and then
froze.

Then her gaze snapped back up to Sam's face, blazing in her stone-cold face. "Move," she said.

Sam didn't have to think twice about that, but he did catch for her sleeve as she made for the exit. "What?"

Natasha only slipped his grab and tossed her phone over her shoulder as she yanked the door out of her way and ran.

"What has happened?" Ayo demanded, crunching across the floor to his side as Sam caught the phone and turned to read the text message.

* STARK IS HERE! AGENTS IN THE LOBBY! GET HERE NOW! *

Sam felt his heart stop for one, awful second, remembering the haunting, punished look Steve had worn when telling him about how Siberia had gone down. "Aw, hell no," he ground out, then he shoved the phone into his back pocket and ran for the hotel bar, Ayo close on his heels.

~* Bar *~

Tony kept hold of Steve's shoulder as his stool whirled around -- it wasn't easy, but he had strong motivation for keeping the Super Soldier within arm's reach. Steve's bottle toppled over on the bar, and his big hand closed, briefly tight, and then nervelessly loose over Tony's forearm as his eyes, wide with shock and some alarm, fixed on Tony's.

"Party?" he breathed, as if he didn't quite know what the word meant.

His seatmate though, wasn't nearly so tractable, spitting "CIA?" through clenched teeth, his glare pure poison. And now Tony could see him clearly, he remembered the bomb tech he'd been introduced to in that morning's meetings. He'd been barely civil toward Tony, even with his boss in the room, and he looked now as if he'd cheerfully light him on fire with his brain if he could.

"Echo?" Tony smirked back, forcibly cheerful. "Come on, keep up. Is there some reason we're sitting here like bait while-

"While your agencies come sniffing where they aren't wanted?" Sunshine growled, thrusting to his feet like he was spoiling for a fight. "Again!"

Steve's hand shot out, capturing the man's fist before he could storm off, or take a swing, whichever he was planning to do. "Sangodele, Wait," Steve said with the kind of guileless, open earnestness that was damned hard to toughen up against when it focused on you. "Please just wait a moment."

Then he focused that look on Tony, and let his arm go. "Let me ask Tony, what he's doing here."

Tony let go of Steve's shoulder then, and stole a worried glance over his shoulder at the still-crowded lobby. "Well, I came to Nigeria to have a meeting with this guy's boss, and find out why he freaked out on me when I offered to help with the bomb analysis," he started, then Sunshine cut in, all sarcasm.

"Of course you did," he growled. "Of course."

"But right at this moment," Tony went on, his bulletproof camera smile fixed firmly in place, "I'm a little more interested in getting you two out of the cross hairs. Because there's six agents in the hotel already, and at least that many more looking for a parking spot, and unless your buddy here brought the alphabet soup gang in," he tipped a sarcastic nod at Sunshine, "I'm fairly sure neither one of you
want to get caught with Mai Tai’s in your hands when they close in. And I definitely know the hotel’s owner won’t want that either.”

And that was what it took to finally knock Steve out of his daze. That arclight blue gaze sharpened as he checked half a dozen sightlines without turning his chair, and Tony could see that little muscle flexing in his jaw, as if Steve was grinding a thousand curses to dust between his teeth. Then he was on his feet, hauling a fistful of money out of his jacket and dumping it uncounted onto the bartop. “We need to get out of sight,” he said to Sunshine. “You can’t be seen if they’re here for me.”

To Tony’s surprise, Sunshine shook his head, still glaring like he wanted to set Tony on fire. “If they are here for you, then it will not matter where I am. It is too late already.”

“Too late for what?” Tony couldn’t stop himself from asking, but Sunshine ignored him, and pointed at Steve with what looked like a thumb drive, a light on the end already blinking red. Then he said something in a language Tony couldn’t follow, and whirled to stalk away from both of them.

“What the hell was that?” Tony asked, nervy and more than half expecting Barnes, Ross, or a SWAT team to appear at any moment.

“Conference room,” Steve answered, even as FRIDAY flashed up a translation on the inside of Tony’s glasses. “It’s around that corner, third door on the right. He said to meet him there in five.” Then he pulled a ballcap low over his eyes, and turned toward what Tony assumed was the toilet.

Tony hurried after, caught Steve’s arm at the threshold. “Steve, you have to go now,” he muttered, “We’re already outnumbered, and there’s an armored SUV on its way. Whatever it is you’re doing here, it can’t be worth what’s about to go down!”

It sank in only when Steve shocked up short in his grip, eyes wide and startled, that Tony had said ‘we’ instead of ‘you’. He’d meant to say ‘you’, hadn’t he? “What the hell are you doing here, anyway?” he pushed past the moment, hustling them both into the one-stall john and pushing the door shut behind. “I thought you and Murderbot would be.”

“Doctor Ebrakumo is dead,” Steve cut him off, anger chilling his voice. “He was the one who sent Rumlow’s—”

“Autopsy, yeah,” Tony agreed, but Steve rolled over his interruption. “And his lab was ransacked too. His notes and samples destroyed.”

Tony blinked, suddenly wondering if he ought to check up on Cho and Rhodey. “HYDRA?”

He was surprised again when Steve didn’t nod. “I won’t say they’re not involved at all, but they’re not the ones that are pushing to get the whole investigation into US hands,” he said, low and angry. “This is political in a way that HYDRA isn’t. Not anymore.” Then he tipped his head back, glared at the ceiling for a long moment, and gave a sigh. “I didn’t come here for a fight,” he said, “Not with you, not with the police, and not with the CIA. I came here to help a friend.”

Tony couldn’t help the rude sound that happened in his throat then. Between Sunshine the surly bomb tech, beat-you-half-to-death Barnes, heel-turn Romanoff, and taking-you-with-me Rumlow, it was getting pretty obvious that Steve’s definition of ‘friend’ was pretty fucked up.

“And I can’t help him by running away,” Steve added with that no-you-move glint in his eyes. “I’m going to the conference room, and as soon as Ikiemoye gives me the data to back up, I’ll be gone. If you want to help, you can stay and watch the door, throw a distraction if necessary.”
"Orrr," Tony ventured, "FRIDAY can monitor the lobby security cams, while I go in with you so that someone who's not wanted by the US State Department can vouch for what happened in case things get hot." That muscle in Steve's jaw flexed, and Tony showed his teeth in a friendly dare.

"You don't need to involve yourself in-"

"I don't see anybody else backing you up, Rogers," Tony put in, all cheer as he reached behind himself for the doorknob. "Now; shall we go together, or do you want to wait a couple of minutes after I leave?"

Steve's hand clenched in the pocket of his jacket, an answering tic of tendon flexing under the fledgling beard that tried and failed to conceal his lantern jaw. Then he leaned close -- loomed, really, -- smelling of hotel soap and french fries, clean sweat, leather, and lager and speeding Tony's pulse against his scarred ribs as he reached past Tony's waist for the doorknob.

"Armored transport has arrived, Boss," Friday murmured in his ear as Steve slipped past and Tony leaned against the doorjamb to catch his breath. "Confirmed passenger count of eight. Scanning facial recognition against known US agents now."

And with that reminder of what was at stake, Tony got his jitters back in hand and hustled out through the tap room to catch up to Steve before he could disappear.

"I saw Dr. Cho's notes on Dr. Ebrakumo's report," Steve said, sotto vocce as Tony came up beside him in the hallway. "You arrange for her to do that?"

"Well, since none of my Doctorate degrees are in the medical field," Tony began, but the joke shattered into nerves when Steve's hand reached for the conference room doorknob. "Wait," Tony blurted, planting one hand against the wood, as though he had a chance in hell of keeping it closed if Steve really wanted it opened. Still, he tried. "Wait. I..." he took a deep breath and dug deep to summon up his 'hostile takeover face'. "I need to know, Rogers. Inside. Is-"

Something quick and elusive flickered through Steve's eyes -- too fleeting to be disappointment, too vast to be grief -- and Steve gave a quick, curt shake of his head. "Bucky's not here, Tony."

"You'd tell me if he was?" He didn't quite intend for it to come out quite that scathing, but the question shook loose that massive, silent thing behind Steve's too-patient stare into a flash of honest hurt. And then annoyance, which Tony had much more experience with.

"If you don't already know the answer to that question," he said, turning the knob and pulling. "Then you why are you still here?"

"Why are you still here, Stark?" Sunshine pounced the instant the door came open, "Why have you come at all?"

He filled the threshold, but Tony was no stranger to boardroom dominance displays, and merely shouldered past him with a sneer. "Yeah, 'cause excessive hostility out of the blue doesn't look suspicious at all, does it?" Behind him, Tony heard Steve murmur something quelling to the bomb tech as he shut and locked the door. He didn't bother reading Friday's translation on his HUD as he went to the head of the table and slung himself into the big chair like he'd cut his first tooth on a budget agenda. Which wasn't actually too far from the truth. "So are we gonna figure out an escape plan now, or just point fingers until the handcuffs come out?" he called to break up the huddle.

Steve shot him a pleading sort of glare, but drew his buddy over to the table and took a seat down the middle as a pointed kind of request. When Sunshine grudgingly sat, Steve turned back to Tony and
asked, "Does Stark Industries still have that research group for misappropriated materiel? The one you formed after Mr. Stane-"

"Of course," he answered, already not liking where this seemed to be going. "Stane was selling weapons on the black market for most of a decade. I'd be a fool to think I could track everything down in only six years. What do you-"

Steve nodded, cut his question off. "Sangodele needs access. Full cooperation, full transparency, no outside reporting, and as quickly as possible. Can you do that?"

Tony stole a suspicious glance at the bomb tech, only to find that suspicion mirrored directly back at him. "You found Stark Industries components in Rumlow's bomb, didn't you?" he asked, and while the tech didn't say anything, the sharpening of his glower was all the answer Tony needed.

He got out his phone and woke it, not lifting his glare as FRIDAY put through the call and routed it to his earpiece receiver. "Reaves," he said when the line picked up. "Yeah, hi. I need you to put together a research team. A new one, front of the queue."

"What's the focus locale?" the auditor asked, her distant pencil already scratching, "Eastern Europe? Mediterranean? Wisconsin?"

"Nigeria," Tony answered, "But don't rule anything out until you have tracking numbers to work with. Most likely it'll have gone through someone HYDRA affiliated, so reference the DC14 downloads to cross reference, and..." he sent a silent prayer for forgiveness toward Malibu, adding, "Don't worry Potts about the budget for this. Personnel hours, fees, consultants, travel, whatever you need, this is coming out of my pocket." And yeah, that stalled the pencil scratch for a couple moments. Tony sighed, tapped the call down to the phone, and held that to his ear. "I'm gonna put you on the line with a guy. He gets full cooperation from you. Full access. Everything he needs, as soon as you can get it to him."

Sunshine fretted in his seat a little. "I don't-"

Tony cut his protest off with a raised hand. "No, he's not affiliated with SI. He's with Lagos PD, and for the duration of this investigation, you'll report to him first, then if he clears it, you can tell me what you find. We'll deal with non-disclosure agreements when and if they're needed."

"Captain," Sunshine turned to Steve, his anger turned a little worried now. "I cannot-"

But Steve was grinning. "I'm sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all. "I haven't ever found a way to slow him down when he gets like this."

Tony set the phone on the conference table and sent it spinning in Sunshine's direction, saying, "This is Anita Reaves. She'll get you what you need, Mister..."

Sunshine glowered, but caught Tony's phone before it fell into his lap. "This is forensic inspector Ikiemoye with Lagos bomb analysis," he said, pushing back from the table and taking his conversation to the other end of the conference room, as if that would guarantee any kind of privacy from either super-soldier ears, or FRIDAY's access to Tony's personal tech.

As the bomb tech stepped away, Steve leaned over the table, face wide open and painfully earnest as he murmured, "Tony, you have to go." Because of course he did. Because of fucking course he thought Tony was somehow the one at risk here.
"Excuse you," Tony scoffed back at him, "I'm not the one with an international bounty on my head. How did you even get into the country with your passport flagged?"

Steve rolled his eyes at that, the ghost of a smile actually creasing the corner of his mouth, but before he could summon up whatever passed for sass in his head these days, Sunshine over by the door started snapping his fingers to get their attention.

"Someone is coming," he stage whispered at them, one hand on the door handle, the other pointing at a door behind the coffee station. "English. Several voices. I hear radios chatter. Go through the kitchen now!"

"Phone!" Tony snapped, hand raised to catch, but Sunshine only shook his head, and whipped something small and flashing at Steve's head. The thumb drive. Its LED turned green the instant Steve snatched it out of the air.

"I will delay them," Sunshine said as Steve glanced out the back door, "You come to the station for this tomorrow, Stark," he added, holding up the phone with the mean grin all cops got when they figured their authority had you by the balls. He'd seen it a lot when he was a kid, less so when he'd become famous, or infamous enough to be known as an exercise in futility to most cops who might pull him over, and for much of the previous year, it had been all over the smug face of the Secretary of State whenever he'd decided to get all up into Tony's grill.

Tony would have loved nothing better than to dig in, spin up, and make a performance out of schooling Sunshine and his supposed authoritay as to just who got to order Tony Stark around and who did not, but one glance at Steve's face, at the shaky combination of determination, anxiety, and preemptive regret in those too-blue eyes made him realize that if he let Steve out of his sight right now, there'd be no way of guessing when Tony might see him again.

Steve had what he'd come to get, and even now his big blonde brain would be deciding that he was putting Tony in danger with every hesitating breath, and should probably take off and lay a few false trails for the spooks to follow before disappearing into his disgrace yet again.

And fuck a whole bunch of that, Tony decided.

"FRIDAY," he snapped, activating the receiver in his sunglasses with a couple of taps as he strode just shy of running, to catch up. The door opened onto a bunker-like concrete hallway that smelled of industrial cleaners and old grease, ducting and utility pipes the only things softening the harsh echoes of his voice as he fell into step at Steve's side. "How quick can you find out where this hallway goes?"

"Two storage rooms and then the kitchens," Steve answered, his voice tense and low under the clatter of their shoes. "Service elevator's on the far side. Laundry's in the basement, with staff lockers and-"

"Service elevator it is," Tony grinned, "Come on!"

And Steve did keep up, though he didn't stop complaining. "Tony, we can't just-"

"Shush," Tony waved at him, grinning despite himself. "Just act like you belong here."

That won a skeptical eyebrow. "Belong here," Steve said, gesturing at the two of them as if Tony had somehow forgotten what color they both were. "Us. You're wearing a suit that costs-"

He rolled his eyes and slapped the button on the wall. "Fine then. Just act like you're lost if anyone asks. Can you do that?"
Steve's gaze weighed approximately one Earth gravity where it rested on his face, and Tony couldn't quite tell if it was disapproval, confusion, or regret going on there. All he said though was, "I am so damned lost."

A laugh startled out of Tony at that, and he reached for Steve's shoulder as the metal doors in front of them slid apart. "Good. that's perfect. Now get us to the fourteenth floor, and I'll take it from there!"

Chapter End Notes

Here's another one, my beloved atropines. I'm trying to keep these chapters to more or less a similar size, and while that does mean that I update a little more often, I hope you're okay with the pacing of things. There's a lot going on here, and things get a little complicated.

Let me know what you're thinking please -- it helps keep my fingers at the keys. Your comments give me life...!

(Rises from the crypt, Mummy-like.)
Frightening the Horses

Chapter Summary

In which are long overdue accountings, queries, and impulse decisions of a questionable nature.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Elevator *~

Getting to the fourteenth floor, as it happened, wasn't that easy.

The Wheatbaker was one of those weird hotels where certain elevators only go so far up, and you had to switch to other, more public, infinitely riskier elevators to get up to the VIP levels. Because of course you did. What else would Tony Stark's fucked up luck demand of a fucked up situation like this one, after all?

Luckily, Steve had done his homework, so at least one of them knew how to navigate the labyrinth of hallways and empty function rooms to get to the nearest public lift when the staff elevator topped out. Not that that preparation helped much when they were only one floor away from the lobby, and had to cross a catwalk in clear view of anyone who might happen to look up. Like seasoned agents had a vexing tendency to do, in Tony's experience. They were putting an awful lot of faith in Rogers' ballcap and sunglasses, but for once, that luck held.

The lobby noise grew louder as they crossed the catwalk, an unseen stir bleeding a sharp edge of anger into the murmurng din. It drew the few hotel patrons who had been waiting there to the overlook to try and see what was causing it, and cleared the way for Steve and Tony to get the next elevator entirely to themselves when it arrived.

"You should have told me," Tony said, letting go of the button as the doors closed them both in. And he hadn't meant to say it, hadn't meant to bring that up again at all -- not now, not when he could tell that Steve was already more than half ready to bust a window, backflip out, stick the landing from whatever height it happened to be, and disappear into the haze. But his mouth had apparently made the decision for him, and since there was no going back from it, all Tony could do was chin up into Steve's disapproval face and brazen it out.

"I know," Steve replied, breaking their gaze after a long moment. "I said so when I apologized for it."

Tony waved a hand, as if fanning away the defensive air he'd kicked off between them. "I know. You did apologize, but you know what you didn't do? You didn't tell me why."

"You didn't want to know why," Steve answered, clipped and tight, and staring at the wall. "You just wanted to kill him."

"I didn't want..." But Tony couldn't go there, not really. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and shook it off. "Look. Okay, you're maybe right, but I wasn't talking about Siberia. I mean...two
fucking years, Steve. That's a long fucking time to sit on something like that, especially the way you tend to wear your heart on your sleeve." He watched the side of Steve's face carefully, watched the tension creep in at the corner of his eye, watched the tendon flex across his jaw, watched his neck brace up, as if expecting a punch at any moment. "I don't want another apology, I want to know why it happened at all, because I can't understand it on my own. I can't understand how you could learn that about a person... about someone's family and still keep it secret, and I need to understand." Tony swallowed against the creak of strain in his throat. "Why couldn't you tell me, Steve?"

That did it. Steve's thousand yard stare broke, a flash of pain skating across his face before he closed his eyes to school it away. "I needed to be sure first," he said, the confession sounding thick and tar-heavy in his throat at first, but then gaining speed and fluidity, as if the dam that had been holding the words back had wanted only the littlest of cracks to let it all go. "Zola threw hints around, but he was trying to kill us at the time, and I thought maybe he'd been lying -- saying anything he could to get us to stay till we couldn't escape, but then afterwards when I checked the records that I could read from the download, I couldn't find any proof of it one way or the other."

He shook his head, swallowed hard while Tony stood there, mouth agape, mind spinning. "I didn't want to hide it from you, Tony. I know it does no good to say so now, but... after the Mandarin, it seemed like you were really turning things around. Things looked good with you and Pepper, and you weren't drinking as much as before, and the team was coming together well, and..." a pleading note crept into Steve's voice as he turned at last to meet Tony's stare. "I didn't want to throw a bombshell like that into your life when I didn't know for sure... when I couldn't prove that it was even true."

Did you know?

I didn't know it was him.

Tony blinked hard, tried to shake off the ghost of that red-hazed adrenaline punch, and just remember how to breathe for a moment. "So you lied?" he heard himself breathe. "To draw me off Barnes? You said you knew."

"No," Steve said, his eyes heavy with regret. "I wish I could say that was true, but... I didn't want to admit it to myself or to you, but in my gut, I think I always did know that HYDRA killed your parents, even without any direct evidence to go on." He sighed, looked at the wall again. "I wanted to ask Bucky about it directly before I brought it up to you, in case maybe he knew something about it, but..." Steve shook his head. "I guess I'd been looking for a way to convince myself it wasn't true, so I wouldn't have to hurt you."

The urge to giggle rose up, manic and giddy in Tony's throat, and he found himself rubbing at the scars over his sternum with the heel of his hand as he said, "Well you definitely fucked that one up."

Steve let out a chuckle too. "Yeah. Well, for what it's worth, I think if I had found proof, I would have brought it to you."

Tony cut him a hard look and prodded, "Even if it implicated Barnes?"

As expected, Steve flinched -- closed his eyes over a long and bracing inhale before he nodded, stiff and pained. "Yeah, even then."

And strangely, against the tide of remembered anger and and lingering loss, and all that had been left shattered and bleeding between them when they parted ways, Tony found himself nodding, believing it. Not that the hurt wasn't there still, but now it was somehow lighter, the way his chest had felt when he'd woken up in Cho's post-op recovery room without the weight of the arc reactor
on it for the first time since Afghanistan -- aching and still injured, shocked at the complete paradigm shift, but free to heal up properly this time.

And in the weightless surprise of that moment, Tony found it within himself to offer as good as he’d gotten. "I would have listened," he said to their blurred reflection in the brushed steel doors. "If you'd had proof. Even about Barnes, and whatever you needed to tell me about what HYDRA did to him. I'd have listened to you."

That won a surprised glance. "You'd have hated it."

Which, well true. "Oh hell yes. There would have been yelling, no doubt about it, but... I'd have come around. In time."

"In time," Steve echoed sadly, and Tony could see the anger still lurking in there, underneath the contrition and regret. Anger at Zemo's manipulations, at the way they'd been jumped through escalating hoops they hadn't even known were there, and force-marched to the cliff's edge before they even realized what was going on. If it burned Tony to know he'd been played, he could just imagine how it must feel to Steve, whose tactical and strategic experience should have -- surely would have -- spotted the rigged game earlier, if it hadn't been quite so personal, the hits landing so close to the bone. If they'd had time to breathe, look around, take measure, fucking talk to each other.

That wasn't happening again, Tony decided. Whatever was going on here, whoever was trying to bury the investigation into Rumlow' who'd sent him to Nigeria, and who'd equipped him with a bomb that could take out a busy market square, it wasn't going to go down like Zemo's caper had. They weren't going to think around corners here, and second guess each other into epic, world class shitstorm levels of fuck up.

He turned his head, ready to announce that to Steve when the elevator dinged and slowed. The light above the door at stopped at floor twelve.

Shit.

"Half a dozen people on security cams, Boss," FRIDAY murmured in his ear, "None of them look local. I can't take control of the elevator's systems without triggering an alarm." She fed a thumbnail of the security feed to his sunglasses, and yeah, these were definitely the tourist type. Better than agency suits, but far more likely than not to recognize either him or Steve if they got into a six by four box with them.

"Shit," Tony gritted aloud, glancing over at Steve, who seemed to have gone from chick flick to action thriller without moving a muscle. The elevator stopped, and Tony lunged for Steve's arm, managing to tug him around to the rear wall mainly by virtue of surprise, and throwing himself right up against that brick-shithouse chest. "Go with it!" he had time to hiss, one hand around the back of Steve's neck, tugging him down just the inch or two that Tony needed in order to hide his too-famous, too-hunted, shocked and gaping face behind a filthy, showy, Aerosmith-song-exhibitionist kiss.

Tony Stark's fuck-off playbook item #4 -- the Suck It, Paparazzi.

Steve's lips were dry and stiff against his, body rigid with shock under Tony's chest, but this was the kind of show Tony knew how to stage better than anyone, and so long as his partner wasn't actively fighting him off, he could sell it for millions. He coiled his arms up around Steve's arm, managing to tug him around to the rear wall mainly by virtue of surprise, and throwing himself right up against that brick-shithouse chest. "Go with it!" he had time to hiss, one hand around the back of Steve's neck, tugging him down just the inch or two that Tony needed in order to hide his too-famous, too-hunted, shocked and gaping face behind a filthy, showy, Aerosmith-song-exhibitionist kiss.

Tony Stark's fuck-off playbook item #4 -- the Suck It, Paparazzi.
Air hissed cold against Tony's cheek, Steve's chest swelling beneath his own in the stunned almost silence of the opening door and the dying chatter outside it. Steve's hands touched his waist, briefly, tentatively, and then caught hold, flattening Tony's jacket to his skin, sliding around the bottom of his ribs to hold him closer, lift him more solidly into the kiss that Steve was now definitely, absolutely, no doubt about it, giving back.

One of them, Tony couldn't actually tell who, made a hungry noise that buzzed between their tongues. Someone behind them coughed pointedly, and that little distraction pulled him back to reality. A little. Tony worked one hand loose from Steve's fine, short, but long-enough-thank-you hair to hold up one finger in the direction of the doors. Then he made a show of frotting his hips against Steve's, grinding lewdly and opening the kiss enough to let the wet, frantic sounds escape.

Steve ground back, thick and hard against Tony's thigh, big hands rumpling the hell out of Italian silk, holding him like he'd never, ever let go. In another world, a fantasy world that hadn't gotten any less fantastic since Tony's balls first dropped, nor quite lost its shine when Captain America's hero pedestal gave way to Steve's I-will-fight-you temper -- in that half-guilty, rarely examined world Steve wouldn't ever let Tony go. This black hole of want that Tony had opened inside himself with this bold, (stupid, Stupid!) pretense would be real, real for both of them, and its event horizon wouldn't collapse with the closing of the door.

You're not fourteen, Tony reminded himself, his racing heart, and his all-too-convinced-by-the-ruse prick. Keep it together! When that door closes, you're going to let go, back the fuck up, and make like it was all part of the plan. And yeah, there was a traitorous part of Tony's mind that whispered something about flying before you could walk, about telling the world the worst of your truths with a grin and a cheesy one-liner, and daring anyone to hate you as much as you...

The elevator door closed. The impossible electric waveform of potential collapsed around their shoulders, the cat still warm, but lifeless now between them. Steve's grip loosened. His open, welcoming lips withdrew, tongue pushing Tony inexorably out, and so without any kind of longing sigh, Tony let go as the elevator started to rise again. One more floor. Couldn't take that long, could it?

Tony dropped back to his heels and gave his jacket a settling tug, then wiped a camera grin into the kiss's place with the back of one hand. "Works every time," he said, his voice not shaking even a little bit as the light moved to the last disk above the door, and the elevator stopped again.

"Floor fourteen;" he announced as the doors opened on a hallway empty of everything but a maid's cart, "VIP suites, Executive lounge, and wanted fugitives. Everybody out!"

~* Seoul *~

For the first couple of weeks in Seoul, Rhodey didn't think much about what Tony might be up to.

To tell the truth, Helen Cho and her staff kept him so busy with tests, treatments, PT, and retests, that most nights found him grinding to a stall over his dinner, and barely having the energy to get himself into bed without help. The extra energy it would have taken him to wonder why Tony, who had been hovering over his head like a guilty and very aggravating dragonfly 24/7 since Rhodey was released from the hospital, had suddenly gone quiet once he and Cho left the States behind, simply was not in him.

And then, as the physical strains began to wane, he found that he wasn't quite emotionally ready to wonder about it yet. It wasn't uncommon for Tony Stark to ghost on his friends, after all; whenever
things got intense or emotional in his life, Tony had a tendency to either go big with it, or else to go silent. And in some cases that rhymed with 'Afghanistan', and 'Poisoning Scare', and 'Mandarin,' he would do both. Rhodey tried not to think about that too much.

If he was going to be brutally honest with himself about it, Rhodey was actually a little bit relieved to find himself on the receiving end of the radio silence this time.

Not that he didn't want Tony to care about his recovery, or to wonder why it was taking weeks of brief, brutal treatments instead of a single, long session, like the tech could apparently do with new injuries. And it wasn't that he never thought, as the weeks turned into a month, about what Tony would think of the long philosophical conversations he and Dr Cho had begun to have once Rhodey started to get stronger.

(Maybe a better word for those might be 'debates' really, as the subject of the Sokovia Accords came up. Cho was a civilian, and not in step with Rhodey's military respect for command, but he had to admit that, living on Kim Jong Un's doorstep as she did, the Doctor had a very personal, and close-at-hand understanding of the kinds of things that lead to dictatorships, and her points about removing the right-to-resist of those who are capable of resistance being a sure sign of a budding dictatorship had hit closer to home than he'd liked.

"That is what happens when only one side of a system has the legal right to resist oppression," she'd insisted, emphatic, determined, and slightly drunk one night when the topic arose yet again between them, and all that Rhodey could say about the importance of the UN, and the rule of law and order wouldn't sway her off that point. They'd both gone to bed rather late, quite drunk, and with hoarse throats after that session. But it hadn't been the last time they'd bitten into it, either.)

It was honestly that Rhodey was just kind of relieved to be able to get away from Tony and his constant penance for a bit.

It was selfish of him, and in his better moments, he admitted that, but the way Tony seemed to just grieve whenever he looked at Rhodey had begun to gall, as had the constant helping, and the shower of gadgets and devices he'd come out with at the slightest hint that his friends disability might possibly be inconveniencing him. How the hell was he supposed to get over what had happened, adapt to his new circumstances, and move on with his life, while Tony's acts of penance were falling like hail at every stumble he made?

So yeah, Rhodey let the silence hang for a couple of weeks even after he'd noticed it. Sue him. He was putting his own air mask on first -- the man-child would be okay on his own for a little bit, especially with Vision and Friday both keeping watch over Tony. Who was a grown-ass man anyway, no matter how little he might sometimes act like it.

It wasn't until Pepper called that Rhodey started to actually worry.

"No, I assumed he was still at the upstate facility," he answered her, toweling sweat off his neck and trying not to look pathetically grateful for the interruption to his daily walking-without-the-frame torture session. "Why?"

One day, hand to God, he would learn better than to ask that question about anything to do with Tony Dammit Stark.

"Because he's apparently gone to Lagos," she answered, her tone icy with impending doom, as if somehow Rhodey had signed off on the trip when Tony was supposed to have been sulking in his workshop or something.
But instead of pointing out that both he and Tony were too old for babysitting or grounding punishments, he heard himself asking, "Nigeria?"

The conversation did not improve from there.

his physical therapist Mi Cha didn't give him long before insisting that he hang up the phone, get back to the support track and make his spine work for its keep, which meant that Rhodey didn't get a chance to try and call Tony directly until midmorning. At which point, FRIDAY would only tell him that Tony was busy, and she couldn't put calls through to him at the time.

He didn't bother to leave a message -- he never did with Tony. If he didn't take the call up front, Tony had a tendency of just deleting his whole e mail and phone message queue as soon as he surfaced, so it never did any good to try and leave a message. Instead, Rhodey told FRIDAY to let him know that he'd called, and was expecting a return. (That wouldn't work either, but at least Tony would have to work to ignore a direct message like that.)

Then he called Vision to ask what the hell had been going on in his absence.

"You're in SPACE?!" His voice cracked on that, and Cho put her head into the office in concern. Under her expectant stare, Rhody put the call on speaker just in time for Vision's answer.

"Low Earth Orbit, technically. I am looking into an anomaly in the flight patterns and activities of the Insight Satellite network, which maintains an altitude of:"

"Yeah, okay, sure," Rhody made himself put aside the instant and alarming flush of fly-boy envy that rose in him at that news. "But while you're doing that, who's manning the Avengers Headquarters?"

"Given the political requirements levied by the Sokovia Accords," the android replied, "It is improbable that the Avengers could be called into any sort of action without quite a lot of prior warning, and therefore allow me plenty of time to make my descent at need. Even an intervention in a single nation would require the consent of all that nation's border-sharing neighbors, and therefore-
"

"Tony," Rhody interrupted, decidedly not looking at Cho's expression. "Who's looking after Tony?"

There was a moment of silence, and then, "I presume the Captain is doing so."

Cho caught his arm as Rhody shot to his feet, or rather, tried to without taking the morning's workout into account, and nearly fell over on the way up. "What in the world is going on?" she asked, working her narrow shoulder underneath his arm, and bracing his weight against her side, and since that was about exactly what Rhody wanted to know, he let the question stand.

With one addition.

"Vision?"

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Tell me what the hell is going on." He let Doctor Cho lead him to the office's leather bench, which he sank down to with a grimace. "Start at the beginning, and tell me everything."
Chest tight, like iron bands clamped tight around his ribs. *Public displays of affection*

Breath whistling, thin as alpine air in his lungs, burning and jagged when he managed to get any in at all past the clench of his throat. Like the sense-memory of a thousand asthmatic struggles, shot through with ringing shock and rising horror. *Make people nervous...*

Blood roared, deafening in his ears, and rendered Tony's babble incomprehensible. His face felt numb, white-cold, except for a bright slash of heat across his cheeks, and the wet, tingling friction glow left behind on his lips. *Why did you do that?*

He licked them carefully as Tony, still talking, dragged him from the elevator. There was a brief exchange with FRIDAY, some mumbling and poking at his watch, and then one of the doors opened for Tony and he went in. The narrow entryway irised away before Steve like the narrowing grey haze of an impending faint, his stare stuck on Tony's retreating back like the last glimpse of light before darkness whelmed him under. But his serum-repaired heart was too strong for that kind of nonsense now though, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

Tony's hand appeared before his nose, snapped twice, then made to pat, or maybe to slap, his cheek.

Steve caught it first. The tilting room snapped back to center, and his gasp made its escape as a growl. "Why the hell did you do that?"

Tony's face went blank for a second, eyes wide, intent, searching. And then the trademark annoyed sarcasm closed it into an eyerolling twist of attitude. "And they call you a tactician," he snarked, yanking against Steve's hold, and then grabbing Steve's jacket to try and yank him out of the doorway when that failed. "It's called a strategic diversion, genius. Do you need me to maybe google that for you, or-"

"No. I know that - why," Steve's voice broke in his throat, and he let go of Tony's arm, brought the back of his hand to his heated mouth to wipe away, as Tony had before, what remained of the kiss. "I'd just..." The air burned as he dragged it in, angry and raw as the look in those dark eyes when Steve made himself look. "I'd finally..."

Then Steve couldn't. He just couldn't look anymore, couldn't stand there with pieces of him shattering, breaking away like icebergs calving into freezing seas while the billionaire playboy of the western world just stood with those unforgiving eyes and watched him drown. "God dammit, Tony!" It wasn't a sob. It wasn't. But it felt wet and cold against the back of his fist all the same.

He needed to go. This was a bad idea, being in the same place again, being face to face while unseen enemies closed in. Someone was going to get hurt. Again.

He needed to go before...

"Finally what?" Tony snarled, and the sound brought Steve up short as quick as a fist in his scruff. There was a flush of high emotion standing red across Tony's cheeks when Steve turned back, and his eyes blazed with something that had no mercy. "You'd finally what, Steve? Finish the sentence."

He shook his head. "Let it go." Both answer, and plea.

Tony wasn't feeling merciful though, and Steve couldn't find surprise in him when the man crowded close in the cramped hallway, breasted up into Steve's personal space and showed his teeth in a dare.
"Oh, I don't think I will," he said through his too-white teeth. "I just saved your ass back there in the bar, and I handed your asshole contact all the access he needs to sink me from the inside if he's inclined to fake his data, and I did it all on your credit slate," he jabbed a finger into the nerve cluster beneath Steve's collarbone and leaned even closer. "So you do not get to play coy about one little kiss when I know damned well it didn't mean any-"

Then Steve kissed him. Hard.

He hadn't meant to -- had intended only to push Tony back against the mirrored closet door, and slip past him out the door, but it just didn't happen like that at all. And now his hands were wound full of fine linen and Italian silk, and his mouth was full of heat and slide and hunger that he'd forced himself not to name for as long as he'd felt it. Tony didn't seem surprised, didn't hesitate even a second before surging up against Steve, wiry arms wound tight around his neck, one foot curled behind Steve's, pulling him farther in, grinding their hips hard and tight together. This was bad. This was a terrible idea, and if he didn't get out of here right now, he was going to...

"Don't," Tony said against his neck, and suddenly that clinging welcome felt just the tiniest bit like a trap. "Don't you run away." Soft lips and beard-scrape and hot, wet breath drove a shiver down his spine. "Not when you still owe me-"

"I already apologized," Steve plead to the ceiling, his eyes falling closed as fine hairs prickled along his skin.

Teeth dug a warning at the side of his throat, and Steve's breath snagged around the spike of pain that barely hurt at all through the roar of heat in his bones. "An explanation, you asshole," Tony said once he'd let go. "Why the hell did you-"

Steve kissed him again, open and hungry and lost. "Why the hell did you?" he managed after a long stretch of not-quite-silence between them.

"Told you why," Tony toed up high to get at Steve's ear, and the chill of his breath after heated tongue broke in a shiver all the way down to Steve's toes. "Diversion. But you," a swipe of tongue, "kissed," a tug of teeth, "me," lips pressed down, soft and hot, "back."

"Wanted to." The words were out of his mouth before Steve had even thought them through, and he shoved one thigh between Tony's on the same reckless impulse. "Thought maybe I'd never," he paused for a scraping bite at Tony's neck, buried the words under the ragged gasp that won, "never get the chance to. Gave it up, and then you just...

Tony yanked at Steve's hair, pulled him back enough to glare a challenge. "What, so now it's my fault?"

Steve closed his eyes, and leaned his head down, forehead pressing against that goddamned curl of Tony's as he breathed, "And then you reminded me that I might never get the chance to kiss you if I didn't do it right now."

"Shut up," Tony whispered, eyes burning fierce and full. "Shut up, and-"

Steve kissed him again, and neither one of them pretended not to want it this time.

There was a ragged mile of unfinished business between them, ragged lumps of trust and trauma and sharp, painful truths they'd both used to cut the other, and somehow all that seemed to matter was the solid feel of Tony's chest flexing against Steve's arms as his lips slid and clung and gave and yielded and kissed and kissed and kissed. Steve's head was swimming, and he didn't care if he never
breathed again, so long as he could, right then, right there, have this.

One of them made a sound -- something like a growl, something like a whine, something like a groan -- and they were both walking, stumbling to drag the other into the room without letting go of that kiss that seemed to be everything. They hit the bed, and Steve had just enough sense to twist as they fell, so that he hit the mattress first.

Tony, sprawled and glowing across his chest, grinned his approval and reached with both hands for Steve's shirt.

And then the maid walked in.

And then the maid yelped out a horrified curse.

And then the maid ran right back out again.

And then Steve remembered the other reason why this had all been a terrible goddamned idea.

"Shit!" he blurted, shoving out from under Tony and up to his feet in a surge of adrenaline. "Shit, shit, shit!"

Tony, however, was laughing, still sprawled and giddy where Steve's escape had tumbled him. "Jesus, your face!"

"Tony, we have to get out of here! Right now! You can't be here when she comes back!"

Calm down," he said, bracing up on his elbows, "This is a 5 star hotel. Staff here are used to politicians, rock stars, and Shriners. Housekeeping in this place has walked in on worse than a little friendly grind-off, I guarantee it."

"No, Tony," Steve tried again, feeling the panic sweat start to chill his skin. "This is a PROBLEM."

"Chill out. If the management gets sniffy, I'll just book a different- hey!"

Steve set him on his feet, but held Tony's shoulders still to force the eye contact point apparently needed in order to sink home into the billionaire's brain. "Nigeria," he said, enunciating each word precisely. "Sends gay men to prison for things like this."

Tony blinked, scorn bleeding into alarm as he began to realize that Steve was serious. Then he glanced down at the sunglasses in his hand, where a frantic glint was flickering from one curved plastic earpiece. Steve let go of him to go and peek out the door, and Tony slipped the glasses on with a shaky hand.

"Oh," Tony murmured. Then, "Shit. This is bad. Okay. Okay, where are you staying?"

"You know I can't tell you that," Steve answered, and Tony groaned.

"Don't shove the Accords in my face right now, okay Steve?" he said, grabbing at Steve's jacket as if that would stop them needing to make a run for it. "Sunshine gave you that data stick as a preview, and you damned well know that I need to get a look at that! I'm not going to let you just disappear on me when I have no idea how to track you down again!"

Steve threw him an eyebrow. "Guess you didn't bring the phone?"

"Oh, fuck you; like I should expect to need it here? It's in your goddamned desk," Tony grumbled without any real heat.
"Damn it," Steve sighed, thinking hard. "Do you have a place here?"

And it was Tony's turn for the skeptical eyebrow. "In Lagos? Of course not. Why would I be in a hotel if I had a house?"

The elevator was coming. Steve could hear it through the walls. He grabbed Tony and hauled them both out into the hallway, and the stairs at the far end. "How'd you get here?" he asked, sotto voce as they went. "In the Suit?"

Tony scoffed. "Yeah, because the Accords totally allow for taking an armored encounter vehicle across international borders for business meetings! I came in the Stark Industries jet, just like I..." Steve saw the idea hit him like a cartoon anvil from on high as they reached the stairway door.

"Airport," they said together as at the other end of the building, the elevator arrived with a ding.

Chapter End Notes

Was it worth the wait, tortureblossoms? Let me know what you're thinking, won't you? Because you know we're not hardly done yet.
Chapter Summary

In which basic reminders are needed all 'round.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Wheatbaker Lobby *~

"I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation, Mr. Uatu," Sharon said in her very best 'caretaker interruption' voice, "but you really shouldn't be standing so long with your knee in its current condition."

"Oh, it's fine now that I can straighten -" he began, then gave her a startled glance as she managed to make a stern grab and shake look like a supportive hand under his elbow. She kept the smile in place, but let her eyes show the old man just how fucked she thought they might be -- though admittedly, positive visual identification of five covert agents, two freelance assassins, and Tony goddamned Stark in the Wheatbaker's crowded lobby was a heavy data load for one pleading stare to convey.

"Besides," she went on, "it's time for your afternoon medications. As soon as we get to a private place, I'll get them out of the baggage, okay?"

"Oh?" Stan looked over the crowd again, then patted Sharon's arm. "I gotcha. Hang on a minute." Then he turned back to his photographer friend Javeed, (whom Sharon was fairly sure she'd seen with an Al Jazeera camera crew during the Sokovia clean-up) and spoke rapidly in Pushto for a moment. Sharon had about menu-command of Pushto, being entirely too anglo for covert work in any nation where it was spoken, but as soon as Javeed noticed that she was trying to follow their exchange, he turned to her with a grin.

"It is crowded in this place, but I understand you do not want to leave yet?" Sharon shook her head.

"We are supposed to meet a friend here, but..."

"But with all these people, how will she find you if you are not in the open?" There was something sphynx-like and knowing in his eye, and it set Sharon's teeth on edge. She didn't think he was In The Game, so to speak, but any international newsman was really only a step or two out of the locker rooms, and she didn't like the idea of being too noteworthy to him. I never said it was a woman, she thought, keeping the thought well away from her face.

"I've got her text number," Stanley offered at once, displaying the shiny new iPhone he'd picked up in the airport lounge. "I'll just tell her where we've gone to."

"Then I know a place," Javeed said, turning to lead them both around the side of the bar, toward the hallway with the restroom sign. "My grandson works here during the tourist season, and he tells me that they never use this meeting room behind the kitchen if they can help it." He pointed at the third door down as the hallway turn blocked the loudest of the lobby's muddled crowd roar. "As I
understand it, the room smells like fried plantains no matter what they do."

Just then, however, the door bashed open and a man stormed out, phone in hand, and a thunderous expression that seemed to promise the worst day ever for whomever he had on the other end of the line. Javeed swept out of his path with a startled half-bow, and Sharon tugged Stan back against the wall, and then the man was gone around the corner. Javeed caught the conference room's door as it swung closed, and bowed them in like a faintly-sarcastic doorman.

Sharon gave him a skeptical glance, but she still went first, checking the corners, glancing under the table, and rattling the locked knob of the room's other door before nodding her okay to Stan. He barely glanced up from his phone as he shuffled his way inside, and Javeed made a point of not-particularly-noticing Sharon scanning the room for listening devices or cameras as he helped get Stan settled at the head of the table.

He came around smartly however, when the Black Widow burst into the room, and to Sharon, it looked as if only Stan's greeting cry of, "Well there you are, Natalie!" stopped him from reaching for a weapon. She could understand that -- no agent of any stripe dealt with jumpscare easily, and it had become pretty clear to Sharon that Javeed was, much like her, adept at a bit of career multi-tasking. And to be honest, Natasha at that very moment looked a whole lot like a problem -- her hair was a rumpled and half-wet mess, there were shallow cuts across her cheek and upper arm, and more of the same shredding the right flank of her jeans, where dark blood appeared to be wicking slowly into the denim.

But it didn't seem to be the 'ten miles of bad road' aesthetic that froze Javeed like a rabbit; it was when he got a look at her face that he went grey and wobbled on his feet. And the way Natasha's eyes narrowed in glittering recognition the instant she saw him brought up at least a couple of questions in Sharon's mind as well. Oh yeah, there was history there, all right.

Stan, bless him bunions to bald patch, barreled straight through the fragile moment like he hadn't even noticed it was there, waving his Stead-e Cane over his head to catch Natasha's attention. "Over here, sweetheart! Javeed, I've told you about my granddaughter, Natalie, haven't I?"

That, finally, drew Javeed's attention away from his apparently impending doom. He blinked hard, flinched a little as Natasha slipped past him and went to kiss Stan on the head, and then he smiled, wide and charming, and fooling no one. "Ah yes. The dancer, wasn't it?"

"Choreographer," she corrected, just the right note of haughteur in her voice, and a tiny, vicious smile on her lips. "But I think we've met, actually. Didn't you once rent boats in Odessa?"

Whatever diversion the man might have been preparing to spin, however, was lost when the conference room door burst open again. This time, it was Sharon who had to stop just shy of going for her weapon as Sam Wilson stuck his head in, glanced around the room, did a double-take upon recognizing her, and then made to disappear again.

"He's not in the bar," Natasha called out to him before he could go, "I looked."

Wilson blinked, flicked worried glances around the room once more, as if (Steve -- they had to be looking for Steve.) might be in a corner he'd missed, and then hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "I'll just go check the-"

The door opened again, yanking right back out of his hand, and -- Sharon took her hand off her gun -- one of the King of Wakanda's bodyguards herded Wilson into the room with a snarl. "He is not in the bathroom," she said, her dark eyes scathing the room as she pulled the door closed behind her. "There is no sign of Stark, either." And while the damage was a little harder to spot on the Dora
Milaje, Sharon figured she knew where the other ten miles of Natasha's bad road had ended up.

"Who now?" Stan asked, looking from Sharon to Natasha worriedly. "Stark like in Tony Stark? He's here too?"

Javeed swayed on his feet, then fumbled his way to one of the conference chairs and collapsed into it with a whispered, but thorough curse that managed to draw everyone's undivided attention.

"Let me guess," Natasha purred into the silence of shattered pretences, "You used to give bus tours of Gulmira too?"

"One time," the man groaned, putting up a finger. "Just once! And I did not even know the Ten Rings were there!"

"Ok, hang on," Sharon put in, because apparently it was up to her to consider the basics, "Do we really want to discuss any of this in an unsecured site? I mean I swept for obvious bugs, but..."

That stirred Natasha at last. "You bring my phone?" she asked Wilson, one hand out expectantly.

"Why, you got an app?" he asked, lobbing it underhand.

Her smile was pointed and sly as she plucked it from the air, and somehow the swelling of her lower lip didn't soften it. "Something like that. Did the guy ever show up for, um," she flicked a glance at Javeed, who was still communing with the conference table, "the meeting?"

"Not before you and Ayo started your thing," Wilson replied, all vinegar pie and unvarnished sass as he sashayed his way over to their end of the room and started to investigate the coffee service.

"There I was, minding my own business..." Natasha let the joke fade as her phone ran through a series of nearly inaudible tones that made hair stand up along Sharon's arms, and one of the overhead lights pop a bright flash of blue and go out.

"Never in your life," Wilson came back, plugging the coffeemaker in and tearing at the foil packet of grounds. The Dora Milaje said something tonally unpleasant and probably insulting in Natasha's direction, and then claimed the chair at the end of the table like it was her throne. Sharon could see at once, however, that from her chosen seat she would be able to utterly control access to the room's only unlocked door. Which would make things awkward if whatever grudge she and the Widow were harboring were to flare to life again.

Sharon stepped up close behind Natasha and murmured, "What guy was supposed to show?"

She didn't glance back, just brought up a Facebook page and enlarged the user icon and... well huh. That made things interesting, didn't they?

"He was here," Sharon said, not bothering to keep her voice low as she slid the screen a bit to get a look at the name. "Sangodele Ikiemoye, Forensics Inspector, Lagos PD?" She caught Wilson's eye as he stepped close to glance at the phone, and he nodded, worried. "If this is the guy who was supposed to be meeting... our guy, he was in this room, shouting at his phone when we came down the hall."

"Well that's not a good sign," Wilson said, shaking his head.

At the far end of the room, the Dora Milaje made a feline rowl in her throat. "Where has Rogers gone?" she demanded, clearly not on the 'let's avoid using proper names' game plan. "That is the important question!"
And maybe it was the queenly scowl on her face, or the swelling bruise on Natasha's face, or maybe it was the apparent lack of concern for containment of information, but Sharon found herself rising to it with steel in her voice. "I can't provide visual confirmation that he was actually here at all." She slanted a look at Natasha and added, "Did you see him?"

She shook her head, looking at once annoyed, impressed, and quite possibly a little proud as she sighed, "Dammit Rogers."

"Yes, I thought so," the Dora Milaje said, then stood up and tugged a bracelet of small metal beads out of her sleeve. "I will find him."

"Orrr..." Wilson interrupted her pointedly as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and woke it with a tap. "We can maybe not treat him like a suspect fleeing the scene, and just try asking where he's gone?" For all the amused calm in his voice though, Sharon was close enough to see that the message he sent was all in capital letters.

The chime of reply came back almost at once, but interestingly, it was echoed by a tinny dinosaur roar coming from the phone that was still in Natasha's hand. Sharon could see at a glance that the text windows matched, and from the eyebrow-raised, challenging glare Wilson was giving Natasha, he didn't even need to see that much to guess that at least one of their phones had been cloned.

She gave him an insouciant half shrug in reply, and held her phone still while Sharon leaned over to read aloud, "Abort, abort. Evac plan 4. Hostiles entering lobby, coming in cool."

"Hostiles?" Natasha said, tension coming into her frame as if Sharon hadn't already warned her that there were agents in the lobby.

At the other end of the table, Ayo was on her feet. "What hostiles?"

The phones chimed again, so quick he must have been typing as soon as he sent the first text. Sharon plucked the Starkphone from Natasha's hand to read it this time. "Confirmed ID. ex HYDRA, 10 or 12, mostly STRIKE. Full civ. Don't let them make you. Fall back to secure quarters, and wait for my contact." She looked up, peered consideringly between Wilson and the Dora Milaje. "Who else do you have here?"

But Wilson ignored her, narrating aloud the message he was typing back "Where the hell ARE you, man?"

Javeed leaned across the table to whisper, sotto voce to Stan, "My friend, your family is alarming and strange." as the reply chimes came back.

"That they are," Stan replied proudly as Sharon blinked at the text, not quite believing.

From the tone in Sam's voice when he read it aloud, he was struggling as well. "Heading to the airport with Tony? Seriously, man? Seriously?"

~* Bus *~

Steve smiled in sympathy as Tony pulled his sunglasses off in order to pinch at the bridge of his nose. In his hand, the inside curve of the lenses flashed with what Steve assumed was a running transcription of the chewing-out Tony had just checked out of.

"That looks bad," he offered with half a smile, and Tony gave a grimace right back.

"She's yelling at me in French," he sighed, "Which... yeah. Just close enough to Italian that I can't
tune it out, but going too fast for me to get a word in edgewise."

"But at least she's still yelling?" Steve guessed, and Tony flashed him a chagrined, but slightly grateful look.

"So much better than the scary silence," he agreed. Then he glanced down at his glasses again, as if they'd buzzed in his hand. "She's onto reporters now," he winced. "Journaliste? That's reporter, right?"

Steve chuckled. "That's what it means. My French is pretty good; I could tell her there weren't any reporters around when it happened if you want." Then he laughed again as Tony whipped the glasses out of his reach with an outraged and patently false glare.

"You keep your French to yourself, mister," he growled. "I've seen you go from zero to death-match in two participles and a gerund, and I have afford to have my CEO burst into flames of actual rage while I'm on the other side of the planet."

"You'd want to be anywhere closer?" Steve asked, willfully evading the rush of sense memory; hoarfrost and rocket fuel, ozone and blood, splintered concrete, regret, and horrified failure in his throat. (Did you know?)

Tony swallowed, almost a flinch, as if he'd caught a breath of the same haunting awful. Then he looked down at his glasses and made a quick adjustment to his game face. "Yeah, you joke, but you weren't there to watch her literally tear Killian's heart out," he said. "While actually on fire." He shook his head again, and a quiet mirth pulled that sidelong smile square again. "It's just a goddamned good thing that asshole just exposed Pepper to the Extremis virus, and didn't hit her with gamma radiation, because Bruce may be scary when he Hulks out, but you have no idea..."

"I can imagine," Steve said, already half distracted as he sat back against the bench. That's my secret, Cap... There was something there, something distant and offhand in his memory that Steve suddenly needed to recall. Something about Bruce Banner; where he'd been, something he'd done, or known before SHIELD and the Chitauri invasion had brought them all to Manhattan...

Beside him, Tony checked the glasses again and grimaced. "Looks like she hung up," he said. "Whoops. FRIDAY, order flowers for... Oh. Yeah, those look good. Make sure they arrive before she leaves work today. I don't want another episode of that one time with the ferns."

"Ferns," Steve heard himself say, connections clicking into place. He turned in his seat to find Tony behind his sunglasses again, the tinted glass not disguising the worry that was creeping in to haunt his eyes. "Tony, you and Bruce were pretty close before he left, right? Did he ever tell you about a researcher he was trading notes about rare medicinal plants with? This would have been back before Manhattan, at least a few years."

"You know Bruce never much liked to talk about Before," Tony answered, and Steve tried not to let the note of wariness sting. "But I remember something about it. That's the guy he went to Harlem to meet, I think."

"Can you remember his name?" Steve didn't bother to mask the urgency in his question. If it was the same one, if he was right, about this, then Steve damned well wanted Tony to know about it.

"Sterns," Tony answered without hesitation. "Doctor, not Senator. No relation, either -- I asked Bruce specifically. Can you imagine the irony of one family spitting out two assholes of that caliber in one generation?"
"Doctor Samuel Sterns?" Steve checked, letting the joke slide past. "Would that be him?"

A flicker of information ghosted greenly across Tony's sunglasses, and was gone. "FRIDAY says that's correct," he answered, then tilted his head into a challenging angle. "Bio-chem and pharmacology, government contracts since 2010, and from the look of his weird-shaped head, maybe got dropped a couple of times as a kid. Why is he relevant to what we're actually doing here right now though?"

Steve let his breath out, long and heavy-laden with something that was not quite relief, but more like the absence of a question. "Because he's the one who took over the autopsy reports after Ebrakumo disappeared," he told Tony, voice pitched not to carry beyond Tony. "And I'm pretty sure Dr. Sterns is going to be the one to deliver the final findings report to the UN later this week, too."

Tony stared at him for a long moment, suspicions, realizations, and conclusions sparking anger in his shielded eyes. Then he licked his lips. "That's a lot of correlation going on right there."

"Bit more than I'm comfortable with," Steve agreed, already composing the message to T'Challa in his head.

"Correlation does not equal causation," Tony tried, more as if reminding himself than chiding anything out of Steve though.

"Of course not. Coincidences happen all the time," Steve nodded. Then he pulled the chain for a stop-request.

"Hey wait! No! What are you doing?" Tony yelped, grabbing at Steve as the bus slowed, and he slid out of the bench to catch the hand rail overhead.

"This is the last stop before the airport," Steve explained.

"Airport. That's right. The airport, which is where we're going," Tony caught Steve's arm and tugged, trying to get him to sit. "Unless all that shit about being there when I needed you was really just-"

The bus stopped with a lurch that did more to yank Steve's arm away than any motion of his. Still, he turned, bent low to keep the impulsive man in his seat, and murmured. "There are security checks between you and your fancy jet, Tony. I can't go in the front door with you, but I can get over the fence at the cargo area, which is where they'll be parking it for the night. All right?"

Tony searched his face, eyes blazing, but with light and passion now, which was a damned sight better than betrayal and fury. "Fine," he said, and plucked suddenly, deliberately at Steve's jacket with one hand while the other one gave him a not-so-gentle shove toward the bus's rear doors. "But I'm taking this with me, just to be sure you actually show up!" 'That last, he added only after Steve' too conscious of the bus driver's impatient stare, had taken himself down the back steps and alighted onto the street. And so it wasn't really much of a surprise for Steve when he looked up at the window to find Tony brandishing Ikiemoye's strange little thumb drive, its LED gone red again now, between his fingers.

Steve gave a laugh, giddy and loud, and threw his arms wide. "It's like you don't even trust me!"

Tony leaned out the window and brandished a finger at him, shouting "TOO SOON, ROGERS!" as the bus pulled out into traffic and away.

~* Stark Industries, Malibu HQ *~
"I wouldn't."

Pepper spared one glance at the woman on paging through American Engineering Quarterly on the waiting room sofa, fully prepared to let her angry stride carry her right on past -- preferably all the way down to the car, and from there, to the executive bar at 157, for as many hours and cocktail olives as it would take to get her temper back in hand. Or for Tony to actually get himself arrested for indecency in Nigeria, and give Legal and PR something to work with. She had texted Bambi to cancel and reschedule her meetings for the rest of the day, and Pepper damned well didn't owe a hearing to someone who'd turn up out of the blue without even calling ahead to get on her schedule first.

But there was something, some tug of instinct in her anger-churning gut that made her stop, made her turn on her heel, and scathe, "Excuse me?"

And that was when Christine Everhart looked up from her magazine. "You're about to go to the bathroom," she said, tone level and uninterested, though her eyes were as sharp-edged as ever. "You'll splash some water on your face, cool down a bit from all that shouting, and then decide that screw it, you're done with meetings for the day." She closed the magazine and set it aside, holding Pepper's gaze with a growing intensity all the while. "Then you're going to try and have your pasty faced Amazon intern," she waved a negligent hand at Bambi's desk, "try and give me the bum's rush while you," a gesture at Pepper, "take the executive elevator down to the parking garage so you don't have to look me in the eye. And I'm saying I wouldn't advise that." And of course she ended with an alligator smile, all teeth and eyes and ambush intent.

Pepper felt her hackles rise, but forced herself to keep cool, bracing her hands across her chest and cocking a skeptical angle to her chin. "All right," she conceded, "setting aside the question of why I would give a damn about your advice, what makes you think--"

Everhart fanned the question away like smoke. "Please. I've been a reporter much longer than you've been a CEO, Potts. I know the look of a boss who's about to ditch me in favor of a martini or three."

"Still not seeing how that's my problem," Pepper said.

"Oh, I can see how you'd think that; you're paid enough that you can certainly set your own hours," Everhart's expression turned wide eyed and disingenuous in a flash. "Thing is, if you ditch me like that, I'm prepared to be back here again on Monday morning. Or," she waved generally in the direction of the street entrance, "more likely, I'll be waiting in the public reception lobby. It has better magazines, I'll bet. And while I'm waiting, I'll probably be chatting with other Stark Industries visitors about why I'm here, who I'm here to see, and how long I've been kept waiting." And here, she let the false smile drop completely away, so the threat could stand clear. "For as long as necessary."

Not if I tell Security to stop you at the street, she thought savagely, but kept it behind her teeth -- the effect would be the same, or maybe worse if Everhart had to wait on the street. "Then you'd better put in for a leave of absence," Pepper told the reporter-cum-newsreader with a vinegar smile, "Because I don't care if you set up a squat in the lobby, you're not getting an interview from--"

"Pssht!" Again, with the hand-wave. "It's not about an interview, Potts. My Producer sets those up."

This? This Pepper did not need. Not on a day when Tony Stark's Impulse Control Deficit had already taken the knees out from under her normally admirable restraint twice, and she hadn't even had lunch yet. And what the everloving hell was Everhart even doing in Malibu? Didn't she have a Talking Head gig at a so-called news network in NYC? Pepper gave up and pinched the budding headache between her eyebrows. "Why the hell are you even here?" she muttered.
"That's the question of the day, isn't it?" the blonde answered, pushing gracefully up out of the slightly-too-soft, slightly-too-low sofa that had just possibly been purchased for the waiting room with the idea of putting people on the back foot when they had to struggle to escape it. "But you're going to have to go back into that office with me if you want to find out." She offered a slightly softer, but still not remotely apologetic smile as she added the coup de grace, "Be a shame if your Board of Directors read in the gossip rags about why I was here before you knew, wouldn't it?"

Pepper glared. "That a threat?" she asked, thinking of the precise definition of extortion, and weighing the odds of a quick call downstairs to Walters. The way Bambi was glaring, she probably already had her finger on the intercom to Legal.

Everhart just smiled, and pulled out a plain white disk mailer from her purse as she strode across the waiting room, around Bambi's desk, and turned, expectantly, outside Pepper's office door. "I brought a player, in case you futurists don't recognize this kind of thing anymore," she said. Then, as if she knew she'd won, "Shall we, Potts?"

Pepper closed her eyes for a long moment, and reminded herself that today was not going to be the day that her temper would set off the dormant Extremis virus in her genes, thereby setting off her supervillain origin story in the utter destruction of Stark Industrial's Malibu campus for the second decade in a row. (She was just getting back on a decent footing with Tony, dammit, and Everhart's mind games were not worth shooting that *and let's face it, possibly Iron Man* out of the sky.)

Pepper drew in a cleansing breath, (in with Buddha, out with Hitler...) and reminded herself that she had definitely done more unpleasant chores in her time, and most likely this one wouldn't include having Tony's jizz laundered off Everhart's way-too-short cocktail dress. It had damned well better not, anyhow.

(In with Buddha, out with Hitler...)

Then Pepper straightened her shoulders, turned her cell phone off, and told Bambi to hold her calls as she presented her palm print to the scanner outside her office door, and then waved Everhart inside.

Chapter End Notes

And here's the next one, my devilfish, my darlings. I hope you like it.

A note here about the last scene -- there's a canonical dislike between Christine Everhart and Pepper Potts in the Iron Man movies. This, I hope, accounts for the rather nasty way that Pepper in her bad mood, is reacting to her. Bad blood, and all that jazz. You'll see things from Christine's pov in the next chapter, so please remember that narrators can be, and often are, unreliable.

And remember that I love to hear from you as these chapters go up. (Darkness' voice:) "Speak. I value your thoughts..."

(Edit Note: Yes, Pepper is talking about THIS Walters. http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/She-Hulk)
"Do you know why you're here, Colonel Zemo?"

Going to Potts with this had not been Christine's first choice.

And yet you still came all the way to Orzsyz to hear what I have to say

It had been obvious from the woman's reaction after Stark had attempted to sex-distract Christine away from her inquiry into ST's black market weapons deals, that Potts' slavish enablement of the man-child heir to Stark senior's Merchant of Death title was based in more than economic self-interest. She was in love with him, even then. That much, Christine could see even through the burn of humiliation at Stark's cowardly dismissal. As insulting as it was to her, Potts was taking worse. And evidently liking it -- or else her paycheck -- well enough to keep mopping up after Stark's one-night stands with all the passive-aggression she could swing behind a dry-cleaned cocktail dress.

Not a lot to respect there, no matter which way you sliced it.

Surely not more dangerous than the Hulk?

Potts and Stark's little slut-shaming show in Monaco hadn't sweetened Christine's impression of the woman, either. She didn't expect any better from Stark, but apparently, Christine was the only one of all three of them who had the maturity to separate business from pleasure without inserting middle-school mean-girl displays of dominance into the matter. Still, it was almost a relief when, mere weeks after publicly dismissing Christine's questions on the grounds of her once having slept with Tony Stark, Potts, brand new, shiny CEO of Stark Industries, moved in with the asshole herself.

Oh? Then by all means, enlighten me.

It had been nearly a year of press releases and gala events after that before Potts had even been able to meet Christine's eyes, and she wasn't too good to admit that had felt a lot like vindication.

... it would be a shame to have recorded evidence of this conversation get in the way of such an important political career, wouldn't it?

Potts reached across the desk and hit pause on Christine's old disc player. It didn't take fierce observation skills to see that her perfectly manicured finger had a fine, electric tremor going on.

"What am I listening to here?" she asked, lips pale and eyes angry. She already knew, of course. Potts wasn't stupid -- she'd pulled the important implications out of just the first minute of taped conversation, and the fury in her eyes was just the after effect of terrible suspicions that she'd never
wanted to harbor being confirmed in realtime. It wasn't the first time Christine had seen that look on
the face of a Stark Industries CEO, after all.

Christine shook her head, and shared a bit of wisdom old Stan had taught her way back in her intern
days at The Watcher. "Listen first, Potts," she said, nudging the woman's finger aside more gently
than she could have done. "You'll answer most of your own questions without even having to ask."

But Potts wasn't done yet. She batted Christine's hand away from the player with the kind of snarl
she probably wouldn't ever show in a boardroom. "Why are you here, Everhart? Are you after some
kind of dirt to-"

"No," Christine soothed, putting up her hands. "I'm not here as a journalist. Well..." she made a
show of reconsidering. "I'm here because I am a journalist, but the story I'm working here is not
about you, or Stark Industries, or even Stark himself, exactly. I think you can tell it's bigger, more
important than all of those combined. And..." she reached for the play button again, gently, slowly.
"I'm not going to say any more about it until you've heard the rest of this...?"

Potts didn't slap at her again, and when Christine hovered her finger, waiting, the woman blew out a
pained breath and gave a single nod. "Fine."

It was all the consent Christine needed.

"Off the record then," said General Thaddeus Ross from the player's tinny little speaker, "if that's
how you want to play it. Private Kasimir, I think we've established that this meeting won't require an
interpreter. Corporal, see the Private back to his barracks."

There followed predictable rattling sounds, the scraping of chairs, the rustle of papers being gathered,
the murmured Sir, yes sir of seasoned, and obedient soldiers as they went.

Then another voice asked, louder, closer than all the rest, "Shall I go, General?" Christine pulled the
notes she'd compiled on Major Nathan Edwards, and of the car crash that killed him, along with
Private Kasimir, Corporal Damstead, and Corporal Reardon, -- who had been posted to the same
Polish base as the others, but hadn't said anything while the tape was rolling -- outside DC in March.

To her credit, Potts accepted the folder, glanced at the name and photo inside it, but then flipped it
closed again to listen. The General was saying, "No, Major. You stay. Colonel Zemo still hasn't
convinced me he's got anything to say to me that you wouldn't have clearance to hear."

"Haven't I?" Christine had never heard the Sokovian Colonel speak, and hadn't been able to find
recordings of any use to help her positively identify the voice, but there was a surety to it, a knowing
smugness that ran so deep that it left little doubt that the man speaking really was Helmut Zemo. "My
apologies, General, allow me to clarify. I have come to America, I have come to you, General,
because you have an Avengers Problem."

That dragged Potts upright in her chair, gasp stifled to a thin, nasal whistle, but her eyes wide with
alarm and horror as they flicked from the player, to Christine's face, and back again in search of a
denial that wouldn't be coming. Christine held up a finger, and Potts closed her mouth on whatever
she'd been about to ask.

"Oh, America's Greatest Heroes are certainly an asset when standing up to defend the world from an
alien invasion," Colonel Zemo went on into the silence that was uncomfortable even secondhand,
"But they never stop there, do they? They meddle, and they complicate, and they disrupt things that
have been running smoothly for decades, and how very much they do seem to cost you, General,
once all the debris is swept up..."
On the recording, a chair creaked, and something metallic -- military jacket buttons, maybe -- dragged across a hard surface. "The joint rebuilding efforts are already underway in Sokovia, Colonel," Ross said, the words softened around what was most likely a cigar in his mouth. "Asking for more money now is-

Zemo laughed, scornful. "Money? Oh no, that's not what I want from you, General."

"Then what is it you do want?"

Potts face was positively white under her makeup. Her eyes were fixed on the player now, as if she could somehow glare through space and time, and possibly light the recorded speakers on fire with her mind.

"I want to solve your Avengers Problem, General," Zemo said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I want to put them on a leash -- Super Soldier and all -- and bring them neatly to your heel."

Again, the metal buttons slid, and the microphone loudly picked up a nervous gulp from Major Edwards.

"Just like that?" General Ross asked, trying to sound skeptical, but obviously unable to scrub the sound of keen interest out of his voice.

There was no need to see Colonel Zemo's face in order to hear the feline curl of his smile. "Perhaps a little more complicated, when all's said and done, but rest assured, General; I won't need anything more from you than a week or two of free passage, and a blind eye."

There was a pause then, so long and so heavy that the microphone began to pick up the rush of Major Edwards' blood beneath his skin. Then the General broke the tableau just as gently as his nickname would lead you to expect. "You're dismissed, Major. Debrief the Colonel's security detail, and report to my office in the morning for further orders."

"Sir," Edwards said, not sounding sure at all. But, good soldier, he left all the same.

Christine turned the recording off this time. "You need a minute?" she asked Potts when the silence stretched brittle. She expected the question to bring Potts out swinging, reminding her of just how much she hated Christine, and why, but instead the woman nodded, snatched the box of tissues out of her desk, and spun her chair away.

Well. Not all that much of a private moment, but Christine could allow it was better than running for the bathroom. Or the bar. Christine hadn't ever interviewed Tony Stark here when this had been his office, but she'd have bet her 401K that the room had probably sported a very well-stocked bar then.

"You still haven't told me what the hell you're doing here," Potts said after awhile, her voice thick, but not blocked with tears. And when she turned her chair again, there was no flaw in her mascara. "If you're not here to get an official statement, then I don't see what that," she waved a hand at the recorder with all the resigned acceptance she might have given a dead rat on her desk, "has to do with me."

"Nothing at all to do with you," Christine said, since the phrase professional courtesy would almost definitely start Potts laughing in her face. "It's just that when I asked for the person I actually wanted to play this for, I was told they're no longer working at this facility."

As expected, Potts face went instantly thunderous. "If you think for one minute I'm going to let you sling this into Tony's face, then-" She stopped when Christine laughed.
"Oh trust," she said, palm out to the storm. "I have no interest in presenting any of this to Stark. I mean honestly, can you imagine? He has a bit of a reputation for flying off the handle when he gets emotionally compromised, and this," she waved at the little disk player, "is going to require a more finesse than that stunt he pulled in Gulmira."

"He saved that town," Potts glowered. "You know he did."

"Oh? And what did he save when he gave your home address to a terrorist on national tv a couple years back?" Christine countered sweetly, but rolled on to her point before Potts could swing back. "I'm not showing this to Stark. I came to see your assistant."

"No, not that one," she added when Potts cut a confused glance at the door where her secretary's desk barricaded this office from the Room Of Endless Fucking Boredom. "I want to see the one you used to have. The one who liaised with the Avengers after that mess in DC. The one who coordinated their press releases and public appearances with yours; escorted you to events where your personal bodyguards didn't go; intervened in at least two kidnapping attempts on you, according to police records... and who doesn't seem to have a corporate employment record of any real substance before she turned up as your own personal Girl Friday."

Christine sat back, and laced her fingers together. "I want to talk to Maria Hill about this, Potts. And you're the only one I can think of who might know how to get me in touch."

~* Stark Industries Jet #3 *~

"Come on," Tony begged angrily, "Throw me a fuckin' bone here? Please?"

He wasn't a man used to begging; not from people, not from politicians, and especially, most absolutely not from technology, but he was giving it a solid try that day all the same. Because he'd tried everything else he could think of to make Sunshine's damned thumb drive slot into his laptop's USB port, and they had all failed.

If begging didn't work, then his only other recourse might be to take the damned thumb drive apart and access the memory chip directly. Tony had the tools for that in the emergency kit all his business jets carried, so it's not like that wouldn't have been doable... only he also had a suspicion -- one backed up by the persistent flash of the drive's red LED, -- that if he tried, Sunshine's little insurance policy would probably self destruct.

"Seems to be putting out a magnetic field of some kind, Boss," FRIDAY offered, pointedly not addressing the question of how that would be possible without disrupting any and all files stored on the thing.

"Where's it storing that kind of power though?" Tony asked, holding the thumb drive up to the worklight, glaring right back at the red LED. "Run a net-search on this line of...text, or whatever this is here," he said, peering through the magnifier at the tiny silver flecks in the darkness of a metal groove. "See if you can find me a manufacturer, and maybe some specs on this thing. I want to know what the hell I'm dealing with here."

"Sure Boss," she answered. "Also, Captain Rogers has entered the hangar. Would you like to open the door, or shall I?"

"Finally!" Tony grumbled, briefly considering playing it cool, and pretending that the possibility of Steve not actually turning up at the jet at all had never occurred to him. But then the ghost of remembered heat against his lips, and wide, strong hands burning smooth and strong over his skin drove Tony to his feet, and all the way to the cockpit door before his dignity could even summon up
a pitch for aloofness. Fuck aloofness, anyway; what had it ever done for him?

Tony threw the lever and pushed the door out of his way, and ... yep. There Steve was, sauntering in from the afternoon sun like all the daydreams Tony would never admit to having. He'd thrown his jacket over his arm to reveal a lightweight tunic sort of thing that clung in a subtle way, and reminded Tony firmly of what those shifting muscles he could almost see had felt like beneath his hands. Steve's sunglasses and ballcap were still in place, doing nothing whatsoever to make him look like anybody other than himself, and when he saw Tony, he swept the Aviators from his face and beamed, bringing all the sunlight inside with him.

Tony bit his lip, and finally managed to summon up a suitable grumble. "What the hell took you so long?" he demanded over the hydraulic hum of the lowering steps. "I was starting to think you'd got arrested!"

"Sorry Tony," Steve replied, not looking all that repentant at all as he climbed the steps and loomed into the jet's undersized doorway. "I needed to make a couple of calls, and then there was a mail plane being unloaded in the next hangar over. I didn't want to draw notice this way while the full crew was out there."

"Who'd you call?" Tony asked at once, only clocking the suspicion in his question once it was past his lips.

Steve rolled with it though. "I thought Sam should have a little more info than I left him with," he said, ducking inside as the stairs began to lift back into place and shut the Lagos afternoon heat outside, where it belonged. "And then I tried to call Sangodele, to be sure he got clear of the hotel. Couldn't get through though, his line or yours."

"Yeah, I had Friday lock down that handset he stole," Tony answered. "Sunshine can call the SI research department, and Reaves can call him, but for any other purpose, it's a brick, and he can play Angry Birds on his own damn dime. Serves him right for handing us off with a trick USB that won't even ...sonofabitch!"

"What?" Steve asked, crowding up close when Tony stopped dead in his tracks beside the workstation. "What's wrong?"

"This!" Tony growled, lunging for the USB, the butt end of which was now glowing a steady, welcoming green. He brandished it in Steve's face, hand shaking with outrage. "This piece of shit has been cockblocking me for an hour, and the instant you waltz your happy ass in, it suddenly wants to cooperate?!"

Steve gave him back a shrug, but didn't try very hard to make it convincing. "Well... then shouldn't we see what's on it before it changes its mind?"

Tony gave him a long moment of suspicious stinkeye, but then caved to his curiosity and took the thumbdrive to the port, which it slid into without even needing to be turned over. Because of course it fucking did.

Tony stole another glare over his shoulder to find Steve innocently toying with his hippy love bead necklace. Wherever he'd been living since last May, it had clearly seduced his fashion sensibilities away from chinos and button-down, which Tony had honestly not thought possible at this juncture. The change looked good on him though, and Tony couldn't quite figure out why he hated it.

"So. Wilson, huh?" Tony said into the silence while his computer and the obstinate little thumbdrive got acquainted, and began to negotiate transfers of data. "How'd that conversation go?"
Dropping his jacket and ball cap into one of the barstools, Steve settled himself into the other with a shrug. "Probably about how you'd expect," he evaded, reaching for one of the bottles of water at the bar's far end, and snagging another for Tony as he did. "He thinks I'm insane for coming out here alone, but he does understand what I'm doing here."

"Well that's one of us then," Tony muttered under his breath. "He doing okay? Him and the others?"

Tony told himself he was ready for Steve to dodge his question, to hand him back something innocuous and inactionable, and maybe change the subject. Blame it on the Accords and try to shield both of their feelings, as he'd done in past conversations. He wasn't prepared for the awful twist of grief that passed through Steve's gaze before he could shutter it away though.

"Not really, no," he said, cracking open one of the bottles and setting it beside Tony's elbow. "They miss their families. They want to go home, even though they don't know what they'd be going home to." He shrugged one shoulder, as if trying (and failing) to roll something very heavy off it. "They don't talk about it much, but I know Sam would be very grateful to hear news about his grandmother and sisters. The others have secure lines, and they can get some news now and then, but he's worried they..." A quick glance, barely a flicker of blue, but it was enough for Tony to spot chagrin, regret, and determination at war in Steve's eyes. "They might think he's dead."

Tony gawked for a moment. "You seriously don't-" he began.

"I honestly don't know what the State Department has told the press about Lepzeig, Tony," Steve cut in, rising to the defense already. "After the way the media handled the bombing in Lagos, we don't-"

"I know you have net access though!" Tony waved his hands in the air. "You guys have, like, electricity, at least. You've got to -- you hit up the Avengers server at least twice, right?"

"Because I know you and FRIDAY won't trace it back," Steve affirmed, jaw grimly set. "But Ross proved he was willing to use family as leverage against us, Tony. We have to be careful about-"

"About what, CNN? Twitter?" Tony threw his hands up, agog. What kind of a hole-in-the-ground had they been living in not to know this? "How do you not know that Darlene Wilson has been a thorn in the State Department's side since Easter? It's like, literally everywhere, Steve! She's got minions all over the country -- Vets, VA workers, hospital staff, EMT's, schoolkids, social workers, -- all protesting, marching, fund raising, phone banking Congress." Tony shook his head, still not quite believing, despite the unvarnished shock on Steve's face, that he had somehow missed all of this.

"Lawyers, Steve!" he insisted, "Lawyers! And we're not just talking the ACLU, either. My legal team at SI says the family's got a whole firm -- a whole damned law firm, from criminal defense specialists to constitutional lawyers, and they're all handling the case! How did you not even know this?"

Steve stared, lips parted, like he'd forgotten to breathe, to hope. Like he'd somehow expected them all to be forgotten, repudiated by the people of America just because its government had a grudge-on for them. Like he'd thought maybe America -- the real America -- wouldn't want him back.

Tony slapped a holoscreen to life from the wall projector. "FRIDAY, search under #WhereIsFalcon," he declared. "Only the first three pages though, or we'll be here all damn day."

And there, top of page 1, was the YouTube link for the press conference Mama Dragon Wilson had given in New York, across the street from Stark Tower. The one where she'd threatened to march from NYC to DC and knock on the White House door herself if that was what it would take to get a
straight answer out of somebody. Walters from Legal had called Tony while it was on, wanting to know what Stark Industries should say when asked for the Avengers’ official stance on the matter. It had taken a surprising amount of time to turn "If I thought she'd accept the lift, I'd drive her to DC myself!" into something that Legal and the PR department were comfortable with.

The still-frame showed the small, fierce woman surrounded by her less small, equally fierce children. Two daughters were holding hand-lettered posterboard signs just behind Darlene -- one with the quickly-becoming-infamous hashtag, and the other with the one that looked likely to succeed it as the trend of the coming month; #FreeSamWilson.

And Steve... he just sat there and stared at it for a long, breathless second, that grief twisting back into view as his hand rose and hovered just shy of the holoscreen's interface, like he was glad, and grateful, and utterly crushed all at once; like he was terrified the whole thing would pop like a soap bubble if he dared to reach for it. "They've... She's been...?"

"For months, Steve."

He sucked in a breath then, wet and ragged and sharp. "And you didn't tell her any-"

"Tell her what?" Tony answered, letting the leaden disgust roll into his voice as he made himself look right through the hologram list between them without reading. "Tell her that I didn't know where her grandson was either, but he probably wasn't in the mid-Atlantic Super-Ultramax where I left him?" Tony shook his head, and reined his attention back to the scrolling data on the laptop. It was taking a lot of time... FRIDAY should have opened that thing by now.

"Tony... It wasn't-"

"Anyway," he said, not wanting to hear whatever words were pushing that woeful tone out of Steve's mouth, "I had someone pass her a copy of the Accords on the low-down, and then point her at the State Department. Far as I'm concerned, Ross can tell his own damned lies from here on in."

Steve drew the back of his hand against his lips, as though warding off the urge to cry, or maybe to puke -- Tony would have given even odds to either one, but he was out of words to try and stave anything off at this point. Which made it probably a good thing for them both that the thumb drive finished doing its summoning dance and announced its readiness to play nice with a resounding *ding!*

"Okay then," Tony said, flicking the google pages away and bringing up his options menu in their stead. Then he paused, annoyed. "FRIDAY, I can't read any of this. Translate it into English and-"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Boss," she answered, sounding downright annoyed. "The drive won't let me."

"Believe me, I've tried," she went on. "but aside from engaging its read-only overview function, as you can see on the holoscreen, I've been unable to alter, divert, or copy the contents. It's threatening to destroy itself if I try, to even pull a screenshot, Boss."

"It's threatening?" Tony reached for the thumbdrive, ready to snatch the away and throw it right into an incinerator, but Steve caught his hand first. "Let go," he gritted. "If that's some kind of AI access link loaded on there, I am not going to give it an inroad to-"

"It's not," Steve answered, gently but firmly pushing Tony's hand away, and turning the laptop to face himself. "I've seen these things before. They're not AI. Not quite, I mean. More like a... um... a
"This is data storage, Steve, not crochet," Tony growled, but Steve just stepped around the bar and reached to tug the laptop farther from Tony's reach.

"Just let me try something," he said, fending Tony off with one hand while the other went to the bead hanging at his throat -- the silvery hippy love-bead which flashed a bright, electric blue when Steve's fingers curled around it just so. The similar sphere in the end of the Most Annoying Thumb Drive In The World lit up with the same color not even an instant later, and before Tony could even call Steve one of the less-than-flattering names that dropped into his head, the bullet points cascaded open on the holoscreen, pouring their contents into a torrent of thumbnails that whirled like firefly sparks in the air between them.

"Access granted, Boss!" FRIDAY crowed as the menu unspooled. "I'm still not sure I can copy or redirect any of the contents, but..."

"I'm pretty sure you shouldn't, FRIDAY," Steve answered while Tony was still glowering. "This isn't a data copy Ikiemoye gave us, and making changes to his computer without his permission would probably not make him feel like we were playing him fair. Can you find his files that relate to the bombing last May? Maybe open those up so we can have a look? And a translation layer on this end would probably be fine," he added, offering only a nervous half grin in answer to Tony's narrowed glare. "My Yoruba's okay for conversation, but my reading isn't strong enough to translate on the fly yet."

Yet?

"It looks like these eight files directly reference the Lagos bombing by the terrorist known as Crossbones," Friday answered, a tiny note of uncertainty creeping into her voice as the files in question appeared on the holoscreen before them.

Tony took a moment to read the labels on the folders that Friday didn't open -- things like 'operating system' and 'encryption access' and 'sound card driver'. And the jet's wifi bandwidth showed no particular uptick from before the drive had synched.

"Steve," he said after a moment.

"Yes Tony?" Steve didn't look over at him.

"Quantum-Skeining interface was the word you wanted earlier, wasn't it?"

Steve swallowed, still looking at the holoscreen, obviously pretending that a flush wasn't creeping up from the collar of his shirt. "Yeah. I think that sounds right."

"Meaning that what we're accessing right now is not a live stream of a shadow-feed of your buddy Sunshine's work computer, is it? And it's entangled on a sub-atomic level with that," he pointed at the thumb-drive, "and that," he pointed at Steve's throat, "and you're really gonna sit here in my jet, drinking my water, and pretend it's not a big deal?"

"Umm... Is it a big deal?" Steve asked, sheepish. "I mean with your armor and all, I figured you probably had something like-"

"Steve!" Tony grabbed the back of his stool and turned it to face him. "This is not like you scored a pre-release phone here! Quantum computing is so bleeding-edge new that the patents on my theoretical schematics haven't even cleared registration yet! And those are just about quantum data storage! This..." He waved his hand, frantic between the computer, the holoscreen, and Steve's now-
grinning face, "This is a whole other thing! This is like... Cho's regen-cradle compared to a Band-aid! Like Thor's Einstein-Rosenbridge Rainbow compared to a Honda fucking Civic! And it's all wrapped up in a cheapass plastic-"

"I'm pretty sure they aren't cheap," Steve tried, sidestepping the entire point of Tony's challenge. "And it is pretty strange that Ikiemoye would have one of these when he doesn't have a kimoyo of his own, but if he really is being watched, and he and his investigation really are at risk, then this is probably the safest way he would have to show me what he needs me to see. I can look at the evidence he has, his logs and his report, and according to Scott, there's literally no way anybody but him and me could trace anything, even if the thumbdrive fell into the wrong hands." He smiled, apple pie wholesome, and not fooling Tony one little bit.

"Scott?" Tony arched. "Who's this Scott, and if he knows so much about quantum fucking entanglement tech, why haven't we met?"

Steve's smile pulled sideways a bit, and an eyebrow peaked. "Scott Lang. And you arrested him last year." He held up his thumb and forefinger, about an inch apart when Tony stared, and then chuckled when the penny dropped.

"Gnat Man?" Tony huffed, incensed. "Pym's ex-con flunky taught you about quantum computer entanglement interface while you guys were on the lam? You wouldn't even let me teach you Python!"

"I didn't know it was a computer language when you offered!" Steve came back. "And don't forget the Goatse thing, either-"

"That's an internet rite of passage!" Tony protested, trying for outrage, but not quite able to get it out past the giggles.

"It's indecent, is what it is," Steve shot back, managing only a little better than Tony. "What was I supposed to think after that when you threatened to teach me about your 'python'?" And that was where both of them broke, giggling like schoolboys. Eventually Steve managed to pull together a bit. "Anyway, Scott's a pretty talented electrical engineer himself. You two might actually get along, once this is all over."

Tony shook his head and summoned up a skeptical pout. "I dunno, Steve. I mean one minute you're all up in my dental work, rumpling my Tom Ford with your wandering hands, and then I find out you've been seeing other engineers..."

Steve reached for him then, and Tony didn't bother to evade as he was tugged gently in and moored between Steve's spread knees. "You're still my favorite engineer, Tony," Steve promised, eyes soft and bright with something that might have been laughter, or might have been want, or might have been something more terrifying still; Hope.

And god, but he was tempted. The inviting tilt of Steve's chin, the soft curl of his lips, the urge to reach for what Tony never once thought he could have, once he'd met the man beneath his childhood fantasy. He'd known it wasn't fair, propping up so much of his own personal mythology onto the shoulders of a man who'd just had his whole world not so much amputated, as blown off in combat. Tony had known, or he'd thought he had known, just how hard it was to reach back out after you'd lost everything you thought was truth -- he wasn't ignorant of the metaphor his armor suggested regarding his own intimacy issues.

It wasn't until Barnes kicked his way onto the world stage that Tony had really seen just how deep, and how bloody that wound in Steve still was.
"No," he said, lips brushing Steve's even as the word escaped him. Then he went ahead and kissed him anyway, because fuck if he was going to start doing the responsible thing at this stage of his life.

But Steve's hands curled tight to his hips when he would have pressed close, held him gently away until the stretch of contact between their lips failed with a mutual disappointed gasp.

"No?" Steve asked, pulling away only far enough to peer into Tony's eyes, confusion and a ghost of wariness there in the blue, but so, so much hope still. How the hell could he do it?

"This is a terrible idea," Tony admitted with a sigh, dropping his forehead to rest against Steve's, just so he wouldn't have to see that disappointed little crease between his eyebrows. "Or a terrible time for a really, really wonderful idea, but still." He groaned then, and let the weight of his head slide to the right, feeling the soft crisp of Steve's hair against his own until he could curl down to rest his face in the curve of Steve's shoulder. "There's so goddamned much still in the air. Ross. The Accords. You can't even tell me where you're living right now, or why you learned Yoruba, or how you got this casual with the kind of tech Wakanda doesn't share with outsiders, because you're afraid to trust me."

"That's not-" he stopped when Tony pulled away and pressed a finger down against his lips.

"You are. And there's a damned good reason for it." Tony sighed. "More like ten or twenty good reasons for it, if we're gonna be honest here. We can't start from here, Steve. It just... it's not fair, trying to make this..." and here, he dipped low again to taste Steve's lips, as if he could taste the words Steve had bit back at Tony's touch.

It would have been easier if they'd been bitter.

"We deserve a better square one than this," Tony sighed at length, then tugged gently out of Steve's hold and stepped back. "So for once in my life, I think I'm gonna have to side against instant gratification." A deep breath, one that stretched the soreness lingering behind his ribs into a longing sort of ache, and a tremble deep inside his belly.

Yeah.

Okay.

"Whatever this is," he said to Steve, "if it's still here once all this shit has settled down, then I'm gonna want to give it my full attention." And to know that I've got yours, too. he didn't add.

"You done?" Steve asked, after letting the silence stretch out and grow brittle between them. The flat, unamused tone; the stare, leveled like a dare between them; the goading quirk of his eyebrows; all of them together almost had Tony spinning right up, ready to leap straight from the narrow ledge of 'I'm adulting here', straight into the tar pit wallow of every unfinished fight they ever had... And yet.

And yet the hope hadn't quite bled out of Steve's eyes, the line of his lips hadn't quite pressed down into that razor line of implacable disapproval. And his hands still hovered in the air where Tony's retreat had left them, as if he was holding onto the ghost of that moment as carefully as he could. Tony swallowed, and nodded. "For now. Your turn."

And of course that was when FRIDAY spoke up.

"Boss? Captain? I think you want to see this," she said, and on the holoscreen, a jumpy, flickering thumbnail bloomed into a full frame video.

The camera looked down on an interior hallway, all industrial tile and unadorned concrete, drop ceiling and florescent light, and an unreadable sign half-torn from the wall. People in white paper suits and booties filled the hallway, clustered around the door frame with graphite powder and
brushes, tape-lifting shadowy shoe prints off the linoleum, dictating notes into their earpieces as they used laser pointers to line up chinks in the walls with potential firing lines.

"That says 'evidence storage," Steve said, all business as he pointed to the sign. "When was this video taken, Friday?"

"Far as I can tell, it's live, Captain."

Steve reached for his phone. "That's why he didn't answer," he said, dialing.

On the screen, the fingerprinting tech looked up, and stepped back to allow Ikiemoye to roll out a paper sheet, and then leave the room, leading two more technicians who were carrying a compact, but heavy case between them. "Oh shit," Tony breathed as they turned, and he got a clear look at the logo. "Fuck! Steve, that's a Stark Industries combat EMP generator! We made those in the 90's, when drones were first getting popular. Sold a few hundred on spec, but Northrop Grummond couldn't get the shielding robust enough to protect the carrier drone's engines from the effects."

"So it's not a bomb?" And god, didn't Steve sound relieved at that. Tony almost hated to shoot him down.

"It's so, so much worse than a bomb, Steve! If that went off in there, it would basically cook every computerized device and magnetic record in the whole building. Anything they had on tapes or discs or satellite drives in the evidence locker would be useless too, and if there was someone in there on a pacemaker, they'd be pretty much fucked." He caught his elbows, hugged them close to quell the urge to shiver. "It hasn't been activated, or we wouldn't be getting the camera feed, but..."

"But whoever put it in there wanted to send a message," Steve growled. "Or make a threat."

A threat to me, Tony thought, furious and buzzing with it. Not to them, not to the Police -- to me.

"FRIDAY," he said through his teeth, "Access the SI archive for those plans, and drop a copy of them onto Ikiemoye's computer. Encrypt it and lock a hexadecimal password onto it, then unbrick the phone and text him the key." Tony rubbed a shaking hand over his face, and blew out a lungful of tension, or tried to. "I want Sunshine in full knowledge of what it's going to take to fully disarm that unit. And I want him to get me the serial numbers on it, so I can track down where it was sent when it came out of our factory."

"Done, Boss," she declared after a handful of seconds. "Do you still want to see the bomb analysis files?"

"Yes please," Steve spoke up before Tony's jittery urge to action could get a 'no' out of him. "Who knows what this is going to do on a political level," he answered Tony's annoyed glance. "We need to see what's here while we still can. While Ikiemoye's still able to even access this data himself."

And he was right, of course. Getting their sneak peek had been what this whole caper was about. So Tony drew himself up in a tight rein and a massive exertion of self-discipline, sat his not-so-happy ass down, and started opening files instead of stalking off in search of something to punch.

Unsurprisingly, that punching-things urge did not particularly lessen as he read through the bomb tech's meticulous, exacting work, and began to realize that whoever had made Rumlow's bomb last year, they had deliberately chosen to put Stark Industries components into it. They had put that connection there, silent and damning, and Tony couldn't help the gut-cold suspicion that if he had made a different decision about the Accords, that someone might have 'leaked' it to the press just in time to smear Tony with the same brush they used on Wanda. And on Steve.
Someone had done a lot of planning on this. Someone who liked to spin out long, elaborate, Rube Goldberg traps ahead of time, and then tickle their prey into place with seemingly unrelated coincidences along the way. Tony knew in his guts that when he tracked that someone's trail to ground and kicked over the rock they were hiding under, Zemo would be there, but maybe he wouldn't be the only one with silk on his ass.

Okay, ew. Maybe he would keep that metaphor to himself.

"I have a text reply from Mr. Ikiemoye," FRIDAY announced, breaking a silence that had held strong and unnoticed between them for twenty minutes or more. "He acknowledged receipt of the SI 837W50 specs, and requests that you both keep your distance from the Police station for now. He says he will contact you with more information when he can."

Tony snorted. "Pretty sure those aren't his words, but okay. Steve? What's up?" Tony asked as Steve stood up and reached for his ball cap and jacket. "Sunshine's not gonna be any nicer if you ignore his piss-off warning and get all up into his-"

"Text from Sam," Steve interrupted him, lifting his own crappy little dispose-o-phone into view. "This story just broke in the local press. I need to get back."

"Yeah, okay," Tony agreed, ignoring a wholly irrational sting of jealous disappointment as he reached for the thumb drive. "Go get your wingman a burner phone and tell him to call his mom, and... I guess tell him what we know about--"

Steve stopped his hand again, this time with Ikiemoye's thumb drive still in it. "You keep that," he said. "In case I get picked up. I don't want my kimoyo close enough to trigger it."

Tony peered. "Because the people looking for you are likely to be savvy on Wakandan shadow tech?" he challenged, and Steve smiled, gentled his grip, and then withdrew his hand with a teasing brush of thumb across Tony's knuckles.

"You never really know, do you?" Then he headed for the door, leaving Tony several scrambling steps behind him.

"Okay, so I'll what? Show up at the embassy with bagels at nine tomorrow?"

Steve chuckled. "I only like New York bagels. Make it something local instead." And yeah, Tony noted that Steve didn't bother to evade the salient point of where Tony would find him in the morning. "If I get up first, I'll pick em up, and come back here for coffee." He paused beside the door, and let Tony slip past him to operate the lever.

"I am not letting you in before 8:30," Tony warned. "Not even if you show up all sweaty in your jogging clothes."

"Noted," Steve smiled as the door settled down to the pavement below, and the handrail snapped up into place beside the steps. Then he turned in the opening, leaned in close where Tony stood pressed against the bulkhead, and pressed a kiss, chaste and terrible, on Tony's cheek.

"I want to tell you something though," he murmured, "About before, what you said. It started with 'no', and that's all I need to hear. I'll back off and drop it like you've asked, but as for the rest... however complicated this is right now? However many things might go wrong, or get rough, or even blow up in our faces? As long as we're both alive, both talking, both listening, then there's nothing we can't sort out, if we try.

He ducked through the door then, backed downward step by careful step, never once looking away
as the hangar doors rattled open behind him. "I'd rather risk it, Tony," he said, "I'd sooner take it on, whatever comes, and make the best of it, rather than wait until the war's over before we decide it's maybe safe to start the dance."

At the bottom of the stairs, he paused, and offered up the kind of shyly brittle smile that the Steve of old, fresh-thawed and fronting for all he was worth, used to deal in. "I lost that game once already," he said, and then he turned and jogged away.

And Tony... Tony stood there and watched him go. Because really, what else was he gonna do?

~* Javeed's Apartment *~

They were all in the kitchen when Natasha appeared on the balcony, outside the sliding glass door. Javeed and Stan were listening to the police scanner (because of course they were,) while Sharon negotiated with the building's wifi, so that she could log in her weekly report (which nobody was going to read for weeks, because everybody at Langley knew that Uatu hadn't done anything interesting since he packed up for a road trip in 2010, and somehow beat SHIELD to the site of an 0-4-8 in Puente Antiguo.)

She'd asked Stan about that on the flight over, and all he'd had to say about it was that he'd been taken with "a sudden hankering for echiladas." And when she'd asked him if that was supposed to explain why Agent Coulson's report on the initial site-security report had mentioned him by name, Stan had replied that Puente Antiguo was a speedbump of a town with two restaurants, one gas station, and the post office, court house, and town museum all in the same building, and there was literally nothing else to do once he'd had his lunch, but see what was getting all the locals excited. At which point, Sharon gave up all hope of getting a straight answer out of her charge, and left him to hover over the police scanner and mutter gossip with his friend.

In the middle of posting her report -- entirely truthful, because she didn't want to give Langley any ammunition against her, thanks -- the upload slowed to a crawl, and then stalled out at 74%. The wifi signal still showed 4 bars of signal strength, but her secure laptop couldn't get hold of enough of that bandwidth to make any progress at all.

Sharon was just on the point of asking Javeed whether his router might need a hand when she glimpsed a flicker of movement through the shaded glass, and realized with a start that Natasha Romanoff was sitting out there, a smudge of pale on pale in a dust-colored Buba, her bright hair hidden in a sky blue Gele that drew the green of her eyes to sparking light in the patio's shade. It wasn't the tourista outfit she'd worn in from the airport, nor was it the housekeeper's drab that she'd 'found' to case the hotel, and Sharon didn't really want to ask where the change of clothes had come from, given that the Widow had brought no luggage but a single backpack on their flight.

Natasha didn't look up from her typing when Sharon slid back the door and stepped out to join her, and Sharon took that as a hint that asking how things had gone with Wilson and the Dora Milaje back at the Embassy wasn't going to be a fruitful line of inquiry. So she offered a lure of her own, instead.

"So you hear about the break-in at Lagos PD?" she asked, leaning against the railing. Natasha grunted, and Sharon smiled. "The old men are snooping to try and guess who made the run," she said, waving at the glass door, and the pair gossipping behind it. "But I figure it was probably one of ours. Too much Agency presence at the hotel for it to be unconnected, especially since nobody brought any containment units, or suppression troops, which they'd have known they would need if this had actually been a trap."

Ah. That, at last, won more than a glance. "It was not a trap," she clipped. "It was a train wreck, a
six-lane pileup, and a plane crash on the same half acre, and nobody could run a protection detail in a clown-shower like this one!"

Not wanting to goad the Widow's clearly strained temper any farther than necessary, Sharon managed not to laugh at the analogy. Instead, she leaned over and made a show of peering at the laptop's screen. "And I assume you're doing something about it?"

That, eerily, won a smile. But it was the smile that made marks in the field wet themselves, and captives in the interrogation room offer up everything they knew in hopes of clemency, not a smile that had any acquaintance whatsoever with happiness. "I'm giving the interested parties something else to think about," she said then, turning her laptop to show a download bar that was, in contrast to Sharon's computer, managing its transfer at a good clip.

"And that is...?" Sharon asked, nervously thinking of Eli Edwards, and the illicit recording that had cost him his father. She didn't think Natasha had gotten a copy, but with the Black Widow, you could never tell. The file was loaded up and waiting in a darkweb posting queue, and a quick scan of the code read like a BCC list of the top 100 Intelligence Community online activity sites worldwide.

"Just something I found brushed under a rug a few weeks back," Natasha said, and then hit 'Post' with a single, unerring click, and with the same kind of inexorable, domino-collapse speed as had happened with the SHEILD/HYDRA download, the data loaded, logged, and began to spread.

"What have you done?" Sharon breathed, feeling a chill creep across her neck despite the heat of Lagos's long summer evening.

Natasha rose with a fluid surge, and pressed her laptop into Sharon's hands. "Listen for yourself. It's loaded into the sound-file player already," she said, something heavier than anger in her green eyes now. "But let's go inside first. Stan should hear this too."

And inside the kitchen, Sharon saw Stan look up as if he'd heard his name, eyes wide behind his tinted lenses, and eerily silvered by the long afternoon light.

Chapter End Notes

A hat tip and gracious thanks for perspi-looks for letting me reference their wonderful fic, #WhereIsFalcon for this chapter. There are some background differences between the two, but you damned betcha that this is a multiverse-truth here: Sam Wilson's Matriarch is DAMN well not going to settle back and wait quietly for news when her boy's gone missing!

And as usual, my dewdrops, my diamonds, my cunning curarae, writing Fanfic is a social endeavor, and the most rewarding part of it is chatting with the readers who've left their impressions, their comments, their outrages, and occasionally their most lovingly tendered threats of personal violence when the chapter's done and posted. So don't get stingy on me now -- help keep me on track to beat Thor: Ragnarok out the gate with the last chapter of this daisy, won't you please?

(Edit Note: I did not, in fact, beat Ragnarok out the gate. But I've got some cool production notes on this chapter all the same. First, did y'all know that China actually has a functioning prototype of quantum encryption active on a satellite right now? Entanglement on the level of Ikiemoye's thumb drive is not only plausible, there's every
chance it may already exist in a lab somewhere in China now. #TheFutureIsSoCool. Also, here's some more article goodness on Wakanda tech: https://www.livescience.com/62327-black-panther-tech-realism.html

Also, as of my writing this chapter, Black Panther had not yet been released, and according to the Marvel Wiki, the languages spoken there were Yoruba (which exists) and Wakandan (which does not.) Since the movie has come out, the MCU has declared Xhosa to be the primary language spoken there, but I'm choosing to believe that Wakanda is a multilingual nation, and that Yoruba would still be something Steve could pick up while living there. Mainly because Yoruba is also useful in Nigeria, which is where I knew I would be setting a lot of this story.

And finally, Natasha's behavior in this chapter is precisely why it is unwise to make enemies of the Intelligence Community. That is all.)
Chapter Summary

In which bluffs are called, hands are shown, parameters are redefined, and phone calls are made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Murtala Muhammad Airport, Lagos Nigeria *~

"Phone call, Boss!"

Friday's cheery lilt shattered Tony's sleep a microsecond before the blast of Rhodey's ringtone erupted from beneath his pillow. Tony didn't even have breath to swear at it, so desperate was his scramble to lay shaking hands on the phone and shut the damned song off before the call rolled to voice mail, which Rhodey would summarily hang up on, because that asshole never bothered to leave a message when Tony didn't pick up.

The call connected, and Tony shoved the phone against his cheek as he flopped back into his pillow. "Ugh," he declared, heart thudding in his chest, skin clammy and throat tight as he ramped down out of his jangling panic. "Are you dying, Gummy Bear? Do you need rescue? Is that why you're calling me at Sleep O-Clock...?" Tony pulled the phone away to squint at the time. "Oh god, really Rhodey?"

"Naw, I'm surprisingly good. And anyway, last minute, end-of-life, final request calls out of the blue are kinda your bag, Stark," Rhodey came back, an abrasive mix of cheer and menace rubbing in his too-loud voice. "I wouldn't wanna jump your train or anything."

"Really?" Tony ground the heel of his palm into his right eye. "We're doing this? Now?"

"Yes, really," Rhodey answered, all cheer and sharp edges. "What's the matter, BFF? Didn't expect to hear from me at this stage of the plan?" And there was something dangerous lurking under that question, something dangerous indeed.

Tony scrubbed at his face and tossed the sheets away as FRIDAY brought the jet's cabin lights up just enough so he could navigate the unfamiliar layout. The phone was cool against his ear, but the jittery, adrenaline jangle just under Tony's skin had him gripping it like a live and struggling thing. "I didn't expect to hear from anybody who wasn't on fire at this fucking hour, Rhodes. 5:43! AM! Why would you do this to me? I can't even. I thought we were friends! This is cruel, Rhodes. It's cruel."

Rhodey sighed on the other end of the open line, and Tony told himself it was the fond kind of exasperation, not the 'I just might beat you this time' kind. "Yes, it's quarter to six for you Tones," the man said, all implacable logic and vinegar sweetness, "and you can just quit whining, because I've seen you up and functioning far earlier than this."

"You've seen me up LATER than this Muffin," Tony corrected, shuffling toward the waking gurgle
of the jet's coffeemaker. "As in, hadn't been to bed in over 30 hours, and that is totally, and completely different! A whole different thing!" A whole string of different things, if he was going to be honest about it, as often involving invention binges as alcohol and sex, but the salient point remained the same, and by Turing, Tony was gonna stick to it! "5:45 is not an actual hour of the day, Rhodes, it's an hour of the night before!"

"Well, it wouldn't be 5 45 if you were in New York, where I left you, would it?" Rhody demanded, and the sugary sarcasm cracked a bit to show the flash of anger underneath it. Which meant Pepper probably called him in Seoul after Tony warned her about the hotel maid thing. Which meant that he thought... well shit. That explained how Rhodes knew what time it was in Nigeria.

Still, Tony dug up a measure of sass to sling back at the man. "Are you being smug at me, soldier? What is it, noon over there in Seoul?"

"Nearly two, actually," Rhody answered even as Friday flashed the comparison clocks up on the holoscreen. "But I'm not hearing any explanation from you on what your happy ass is doing in Lagos yet, so let's get back to that question, shall we?"

Tony sighed and swiped the half full carafe to pour out some coffee. "This ass? Is not happy," he ground back. "It isn't even light outside, and I'm far too sober to be happy at this-"

"Well that's two of us who aren't happy then," Rhody shot back, not even pretending to be cheerful about it now. "Because it's one thing you pulling this 'distract them with bullshit busywork so nobody notices that I'm doing something likely to get me killed or sent to prison' on me, or on Pepper back in the day, but sending Vision to pick up space trash just so he won't find out you're doing hotel hookups in a place where that shit's illegal? That's a whole new level of lame-ass tapdancing on the Tony Stark scale!"

"Okay, wow," Tony said after a blinking moment. "I almost don't know where to start with that, but let's go with -- It's not busywork. What Vision's doing isn't even remotely busy-"

"It's bullshit busywork you made up to keep him from wondering where you've gone, and what you're up to," Rhodes interrupted. "Don't act like I haven't known you since the 80's! You did the same damned thing to me just before mid-terms in our senior year, and-"

"Okay, THAT was busywork," Tony allowed, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "Sending you to Alamagordo for trinitite samples was busywork, and I admit that, okay? I shouldn't have built a fission reactor in your garage while you were gone, and I shouldn't have drunk your crappy frat-beer and screwed Isis Mcgillavrey on your black sofa, and I-"

"You WHAT?!" Rhody yelped. "My sofa? The leather one?"

Tony winced hard. "I did replace it...?"

"You told me it caught on fire!"

"Well, it did catch fire," Tony explained hurriedly. "That was after. And the new one was much better anyway!"

"Oh my god, why are you like this? Why are you always like this?"

"But the Insight satellites, okay?" Tony rolled hastily on, clinging to the part of all this where he was actually in the damned right for once. "They are a legitimate concern for world safety."

"But I notice your concern isn't legitimate enough that you'll do the investigation your own damned
Rhodey came back, almost shouting now. "No, you're off in Nigeria, hacking police databases and stirring up shit while you chase Cap's suicide bomber like the dude's not already in a damned box right now!"

"Wrong," Tony ground back, resisting the urge to bang the table as he'd heard Rhodey do on his end of the phone. "I'm in Nigeria dealing with the fact that Stark Tech turned up in an illegal explosive device which claimed civilian lives last year. And given that I own the company that made those components, that makes it something of a goddamned legitimate concern, thank you Mr. Judgypants!"

"That's still not-"

"Dammit Rhodey, somebody hit Lagos PD yesterday," he yelled, unable to rein it back even when his voice cracked under the strain. "They went in shooting like a goddamned terrorist strike, and all to get a Stark prototype EMP generator into their evidence locker, okay? So can you maybe back up out of my face a little bit here?"

There was a heavy silence. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Tony answered, trying to act like he didn’t hear patent skepticism in his best friend’s voice. "And if I hadn't actually been here to identify the ordnance and get them the override codes then..." he shivered then, remembering the Interpol headquarters going suddenly black -- fans quiet, screens empty, distant grey daylight the only hue for the seconds it took for the facility's onsite generator to kick in and wash them all in emergency red. "Then I'd be over here playing PR intervention and damage control anyway," he finally said, "only a lot more people would probably be dead right now."

There was silence between them for a longer moment -- heavy and hissing with distance before Tony heard Rhodey shift in his seat and sigh. "You're gonna sit there and tell me that meeting up with Rogers had nothing to do with your decision making process."

"It didn't." Tony didn't treat it like one.

" Didn't," he insisted. It was true, after all. It was true.

"Vision told me you've been talking with him, okay?" Rhodey was back to scolding. "It's not like you're even being sneaky here!"

"You sound like a jealous housewife, do you know that?" Tony said, torn between a grumble and a laugh. "Calm your tits and keep your shirt on, honey graham, I did not come to Lagos to meet up with Rogers."

"Uh huh." Rhodey came back in the flattest, driest tone of complete disbelief.

Tony grit his teeth and stuck to his guns. "Don't give me that voice, I didn't. He's not with me, I'm not with him, and I didn't even fucking know he was going to be here when I decided to come."

"So Rogers is there," Rhodey said, smugness seeping through his annoyed tone, and Tony had to bite back a curse. Twenty years of friendship had given the man an unfair advantage against Tony's obfuscations and diversionary tactics.
"For the sake of security, let's just say that someone bearing a striking similarity to Steve Rogers happened to be at the same hotel FRIDAY checked me into when I got here," Tony offered, pouring himself some more coffee.

“And...?"

Tony sighed. "Yes, I've seen him, yes I talked to him, yes we shook hands and made nice, and the whole shebang. We stopped shy of exchanging friendship bracelets though, if you're feeling insecure about it."

A pointed and faintly accusatory silence followed, and Tony weathered it just about long enough to compose a rather scathing follow-up point about him not actually needing his friends' permission to conduct business personal or professional. But before he could launch into the tirade, Rhodes gave up a sigh and asked, "So how is he?"

Tony blinked, the absence of anger in that question putting him entirely wrong footed. Rhodey sighed again at the hesitation. "I worked with Cap for a year before the Accords, Tony," he said, eyeroll almost audible, "I had his back, he had mine, and we did our share of beer runs and team movie nights just like you guys did before Ultron. It's not like I suddenly hate the guy just because we don't agree on one thing."

"It's not? You don't?" It was out of Tony's mouth before he'd realized how it would sound, and he was glad he didn't have to school away his desire to wince. Damn it, his smooth was all apparently still in bed, asleep without him.

"Why, because I took a dive?" Rhodey answered with a tight laugh. "This isn't high school. One hundred thirty eight combat missions, just like I told you -- crash like that coulda happened on any of them. Coulda happened to any of us who were there that day, and if you think about it, it's a damned miracle I was the only one who got banged up. Hell, Vision coulda actually hit Wilson instead of me, and he'd be dead now if that happened, cause that idiot don't even fly with a damned helmet on."

Tony closed his eyes and swallowed hard, trying not to picture what Wilson would have looked like after a fall like the one that had broken his Rhodey. There was a reason why the USAF had discontinued the EXO program after only five years, after all, and that reason was soft, squishy, highly skilled, and generally unable to weigh down their flight-pack with armor when they might need to carry medical supplies, or a wounded patient instead. Tony was gonna have to find some way around that problem if Wilson... or... anybody else ever used the Falcon rig for combat again.

"So no, I don't have a hate-on for Cap," Rhodey continued, unaware of Tony's moment, "and yes, I do want to know how he's getting on. And the others too, if that's something some little bird told you about."

They miss their families. They want to go home, even though they don't know what they'd be going home to.

Tony coughed away a passing tightness in his throat, and managed to dig up an offhand tone to answer the question. "Oh, you know. Cap's perfect as always. Lost a little bit of weight, but he's rocking a hipster beard now, so I guess that says something. No skinny jeans though. I don't know whether I'm relieved about that or not, to be honest. Tony was lying there, about being relieved. He was decidedly not relieved about the lack of hipster jeans -- disappointment was something totally different, but he didn't have to admit that to anybody out loud, thank you.

"As for the others, he said they were basically just homesick and filled with regrets. About like any other refugees, I guess." The light tone went brittle in his throat despite Tony's best efforts, but from
the troubled sigh Rhodey gave, he figured his friend wouldn't have been fooled anyway.

"They did lose a hell of a lot last year," Rhodey said, like a strange kind of agreement. "Everybody did."

"Nobody lost as much as you though," Tony blurted, helpless as always, before the crushing weight of that guilt he could never quite escape when Rhodey was near his thoughts. The suit too heavy, no failsafe, no backup to power it, not even so much as a drag chute held in reserve to slow the inexorable intersection of inertia, velocity, and gravity. And he... Tony hadn't saved him. Just like he hadn't saved Pepper when she'd dangled from the Mandarin's deathtrap. Just like he hadn't saved the world with Ultron. He'd reached, reached, reached... and failed.

"Yeah, well," Rhodey huffed into the silence of Tony’s internal collapse, "I'm getting some of that back now, thanks to the good Doc, so..."

And Tony was never so glad for a straight line in his life. “Oho, so that’s how it is?” he chortled, knowing they both could see through the cheap inference, and that they’d both ignore the strain beneath it. “All that intense physical therapy doing your body some good? How many push ups are you up to, Pop Rocks?”

“You’re on speaker you know,” Rhodey came back, dry and wry. “Whole staff can hear you makin’ an ass outta yourself here, Tones.”

“Well, it’s a smaller audience than I’m used to, but I’ll do my best,” he came back with a chuckle. “Next time I expect you to at least get it onto state television.”

“Naw, you can do your own PR, you showoff,” Rhodey chuckled in reply. “I’m just gonna focus on that ‘legitimate concern for world safety’ you dumped in Vision’s lap instead.”

"Thought you said it was just sweeping up space junk," Tony challenged gently.

"You're on speaker you know," Rhodey put the brakes on level and smooth. “You know Friday woulda tattled if it'd been more than a hiccup, and if she didn't tell you, I would have.” Tony blinked, distracted by the question of how Rhodey, in Seoul, would have known what had happened to Vision before he did, but he didn't have to wonder long.

"I made Viz and Friday send me a ride-along feed when he said he was going up again," Rhodey answered the unasked question with just as much annoyed sass as if Tony had asked it after all. "I figured someone with a technical degree and a pulse oughta be overseeing things in case something went sideways, and what do you know, something did. But anyway he's fine, and we're analyzing the debris, the ruined comm, and what we caught of the signal on the ghost feed to see if we can get around it when we go after the last two satellites in the chain."

"Send the data to me," Tony said, waving to call up a holoscreen. "I'll-"

Rhodey's laugh cut him off. "Oh sure, NOW you wanna get all up into my legitimate concern for world safety."
"Your-" Tony's voice squeaked with outrage. "It was my legitimate concern for world safety first!"

"Yeah, but you walked away from it, so it's mine now," Rhodey purred back. "And since I happen to have a degree in aeronautical engineering from MIT myself, I'm pretty sure I can handle this investigation until you finish your Nigerian PR stunt, kiss and make up with someone who might or might not look like Steve Rogers, and get your happy ass back to New York."

— Wakandan Embassy, Lagos Nigeria —

The process of getting an untraceable phone into Darlene Wilson's hands was no more complicated than getting one to Tony had been. If anything, it went a little bit faster outside of Wakanda's strict export prohibitions -- the unimaginable luxury of overnight, worldwide delivery was never-failing wonder to Steve every time he achieved it. The delivery tracking on the package put it into Ms Wilson's hands at roughly 11:15 pm, Virginia time, which put it at just past 6:00 am in Lagos.

On a hunch, Steve went to wake Sam up and let him know as soon as the delivery notice logged. He had a feeling that Sam's grandmother wouldn't be the type to wait once the means to reach her grandson was finally in her hands. Sure enough, the little phone rang in his pocket even as he was knocking at Sam's door.

"Mrs. Wilson," he said by way of a greeting as the door opened to reveal Sam in his pajamas -- just rumpled enough to hint at sleep, and with the kind of blinking, too sharp focus that any combat veteran passed through on his way from unexpected knock to actually, functionally awake. The alarm on Sam's face bled instantly into annoyance when he clocked the clamshell phone in Steve's hand, and then after a beat, when his brain came online enough to register that Steve wasn't talking to Tony on it, into wide-eyed shock.

"Captain," Darlene Wilson answered, her voice polished and precise and as full of peril as only a grandmother's voice could be. "I'd like to speak to my Grandson, if you don't mind."

"By all means, Ma'am," he replied, letting the smile be heard in his voice. Then he put the phone into Sam's reaching hand -- the hand that trembled just a tiny bit as their fingers brushed past each other. Then Steve hooked his thumb back over his shoulder, toward the sprawling rock garden that took up the central courtyard of the Embassy complex, and silently mouthed *After you're done?*

And Sam nodded, but it was clear that his attention was time zones away already as he dragged in a deep, steadying breath of the night air, put the phone to his ear, and said, "Hi Nana," as Steve turned to go. He wasn't trying to eavesdrop -- was trying as hard not to as courtesy would allow, in fact -- but his serum enhanced hearing still picked up the woman's shaking, wet breath, and the desperate creak in her voice as she said, "Samuel Thomas Wilson... where the devil have you-"

Then the door closed Steve out with a soft, determined snick, for which he tried not to be too grateful.

"Guess it's a good thing you were gone before I joined Project Rebirth, isn't it, Ma?" He murmured to the empty hallway, and the pale, weary, beloved ghost who still rose up from the loving past when he least expected her to. "You'da turned my ear right around if you'd been alive to see me after the procedure. Then you'da given Colonel Phillips, Howard Stark, and the Joint Chiefs a piece of your mind too."

He chuckled at the notion, and let his aimless feet carry him back to his room to collect his tablet. Normally, Steve would be getting to his daily run about now; shaking the endless wherefores, what if's and why's out of his head with a good burst of speed, and a few miles to go at it alone. Or to loop back to Sam once in awhile, if they were running together.
But of course, he couldn't risk that kind of thing here. Ayo had made that clear to him before she'd agreed to bring Steve and Sam to Lagos in the first place; a white man in Nigeria need not stand out, so long as he acted like a tourist, and not like a soldier. This was not Wakanda, where there might be leopards hunting the outskirts of the city, but there wouldn't be camera phones and instant updates with #CapSpotter and #WheresMyReward in the tags. And the law here had no official reason to grant Steve Rogers any particular leeway, or even respect, and after the way the media had dilligently poisoned his name here after the bombing last May, Steve knew better than to expect even a baseline of fair treatment if they were to catch him here now.

If Steve wanted to run, he'd be doing it on the treadmill in the basement gym, (which he was always a little afraid he might break) or else he'd be making very quick, very boring laps of the half-mile garden trail that looped around the protected courtyard gardens. That got old well before he could manage to build up a sweat.

He could use the sandy sparring piste out in the middle of the rock garden if he wanted to do some calesthenics, or perhaps to climb the vibraniun laced boulders that sheltered the spot from the neighbor's overlook, or he could work with the resistance fields that the Dora Milaje used for strength training, but his normal meditations of pounding feet and fresh air in his face were just too risky for now.

He let himself out into the garden, considering the dark sky, leaden with clouds just starting to bloody up with dawn -- the storm that would sweep in from the sea in a few hours, and give the country its daily drenching. The boulders towered black and bleak against that lightening sky, and Steve watched them, consideringly for a long moment. Then he went around the garden courtyard to see if the night guard at the Embassy's watch house knew where he might find a bit of specialized sporting equipment at an odd hour of the morning.

The odds weren't great, but with Wakandans, Steve was learning, you really never could tell.

~* Murtala Muhammad Airport, Lagos Nigeria *~

"Boss?" The query was low, tentative, and it brought Tony's drifting, sleep-deprived attention smartly up from his half-lucid debate as to whether he could get back to sleep for a couple hours, or should try and wring something productive and work-related out of his brain before Steve showed up with breakfast.

"What's up, Friday?" he asked.

Again, the hesitation. "I have a... procedural question."

Ah. Well that explained her uncertainty. Jarvis had had trouble with those too, early on in his learning cycles, and it was a point of pride for Tony that FRIDAY seemed to be able to reach out to him for help sorting them out than his first brain-child had. "Hard, or soft?" he asked her.

"I cannot quite tell," she admitted, the distress still clear in her tone. "Last month, when you learned that I had finished JARVIS's decryption of the HYDRA files, it seemed to me that you were distressed at my curation of that data."

Tony drew a breath in, hard and loud through his nose, and made himself clamp down on his instant, and unfair emotional response. This was, effectively, his child, and she was, effectively, asking for guidance, but dammit...

"Okay, 'curation of that data' is a new way to say 'not telling me important things because you think they'll upset me,'" he managed after a long moment of choosing his words. "And yeah, it definitely
pissed me off. Some of that was at myself, but if you had given me that data instead of holding it back, then Zemo's little shit show would have fallen apart before he had a chance to-" To break us with it.

"Only my parameters-" she hurried into the hesitation, "My core function being protective, your logged behavioral history indicated a self destructive tendency where matters of a personal, but not immediately safety-related nature are-"

"Okay, yeah, I am not the best at dealing with bad news," he admitted, still keeping a stranglehold on his temper. "I fly off the handle, and sometimes I make a mess when I'm freaked out, but you still don't get to decide what I do and don't learn about. Not in the name of 'protecting me.'" He closed his eyes, trying not to remember a thousand casual brush-offs from Obie, and before him, cold shut-outs from his Dad, or sugary evasions from his Mom whenever he wanted to ask 'What's wrong? What's going on? Why doesn't anything make sense in this place? How can I make it better?'

"But my core programming specifies that-"

"I wrote that when I was a teenager, okay FRIDAY? And to be honest, back then I probably did need someone to save me from myself, but..." He scrubbed at his face, annoyed to find his eyes overly wet. "I need you to... We both need you to grow out of the idea that you're my protector. You're my assistant, and that means that you can't keep me in the dark just because you think I won't like something. In fact, those are the things you especially need to make sure I find out about."

"I... am adjusting my protocols accordingly now, Boss," she said, not sounding happy about that at all.

"Okay, good," Tony nodded, mentally steeling himself for what would have to come next. "Now what brought this on at the ass end of too damned early in the morning?"

"After the signing of the Sokovia Accords, I adjusted my automated web-scan processes to include the Deep Web, and also the Dark Web for news of any Avengers, or prior-Avengers related keywords."

"Good call," Tony allowed. "I'm guessing you haven't told me this because it's not been relevant before?"

"I have shared news gathered from those scans, Boss, but no, the source of that news never seemed pertinent to its content. Only last night, the Dark Web scans returned a very sharp up-tick in Avengers related activity and chatter."

On the Dark Web? Seriously?" Tony stood, alarm jolting away any ghost of the sleep he might still have gotten that night. "What, like selling sighting information, or actual hit contracts?" If HYDRA knew Steve was here, if they were coming in to get him...

"Well, neither, actually, that's what I find so strange about it," Friday replied, bringing up the main cabin lights again as Tony grabbed his robe and headed back out to the work station. "None of the traffic seems to involve a transaction or a purchase at all... it's a recording -- parts of one, at least, -- and transcripts. It seems to be a debriefing session of the Avengers' prisoners, regarding their treatment and conditions on the Raft Prison."

Tony stopped dead, the back of his neck going cold. "...Shit."

"The primary focus of what I've collated seems to be the testimony of Wanda Maximoff, and it describes some intensely inhumane treatment," Friday went on as the work station glimmered to life
like a beacon -- a candle flame to bring him, the moth who knew damned well that it was going to burn him, in close enough to read. "It appears to be filtering up to surface Web content now. Its appearance is limited, and referential at this point, but I don't expect it to remain so. By tonight, I expect at least some mainstream media coverage will be appearing on it."

The Raft -- the ocean prison, built in secret, on an unrevealed, black-sourced budget, and located in International Waters -- was about to make the evening news. And that would not be tidy. The cells they'd had the normal humans in had been... well, humane, Tony guessed. Certainly they hadn't been as nasty as a cave in Afghanistan, but...But Wanda hadn't been imprisoned with the others. And even then, even in the rush to catch up with Cap and help him save the world, Tony had known why.

He took a breath, deep and trembling, told his stomach to stop turning over, and then he took those last five steps to claim his seat. "All right," he said, reaching for the coffee again. "Hit me."

~* Wakandan Embasy, Lagos Nigeria *~

It took Steve about an hour, a vouching phone call from Khetiwe to his friend, and around $500 USD, but Steve did manage to get what he was after. When he returned in triumph to the Embassy compound, he wasn't very surprised to find Sam out in the rock garden, watching the sun come up. He was perched at the top of the tallest of the boulders -- the one that thrust up a good twenty feet -- high enough to peer well over the compound walls, and had a pure enough vein of metal running through it that it acted like a lightning rod for the whole district, according to the Ambassador. Sam's hands were dusty, gaze a thousand miles out to sea as the sun peered back through the scarlet, lowering rainclouds. He looked as if he might thrust out into the air at any moment, and expect his long lost wings to carry him safely down. Or as if he might just stay up there all day, come storm or no.

Steve gave a considering look at the Falcon's lonely perch, then shook his head and began to climb. He went slower than he needed to, waiting for Sam to tell him to get lost, but he never did. So when Steve pulled himself up beside him on the boulder's narrow crown, he let the silence lie for only a moment.

"You ok?"

Sam took a breath, short and sharp, as if he'd maybe been holding it. Then, "Fine," he said in a gritty, leaden voice.

He was not fine, of course. Not by any definition of the word, but Steve was no stranger to the comfort that lie could give when a fella needed it, so he let fiction stand.

"How are-?" he began, but Sam cut him off hard.

"They're fine," he said through his teeth.

Though of course, they wouldn't be fine either, would they? Not if talking to them had left his friend's eyes that red, and his jaw that hard.

Steve shifted the bag off his shoulder and sighed. "Sam, I'm so--"

"Don't!" he said, and looked at Steve for the first time since he'd arrived. A hard look, simmering with emotion and restraint. Steve blinked to see it, and was still trying to puzzle it out when Sam turned his face away again. "Don't apologize to me for this, just... don't."

Steve nodded his acceptance then, and turned to look at the incoming storm, letting Sam's silence set its own pace and agenda.
It didn't take long for that silence to break into a sigh. "Look," Sam said, voice tempering out into forcibly patient tones as he sketched a hand around his words in the air, "I know that on some level, this whole shit show with the Accords was about you, and about Stark, and about Zola setting up dominoes so he could break you two up, okay? I get that." And here, he turned again to look at Steve, face set in determination, but with his eyes pleading wide. "But you and your goddamned Atlas complex, do NOT get to take on responsibility for the choices that led me here, okay? I made those choices." He slapped his chest, hard. "You didn't get me into this, and you didn't talk me into anything I wasn't already leaning toward, so don't," he smacked the back of that hand against Steve's shoulder for emphasis, "do not act like I wouldn't have made the same damned mistakes even if your ass wasn't there."

Steve looked at the ground and swallowed. *Give your friend the respect of making his own decisions!* There went Peggy, being right again. He drew in a breath, and reached into the bag. "Sam, I'm-"

A groan of annoyance cut him off. "Steve, it ain't about you right now," Sam said through his teeth, and at that, Steve had to hide a grin. "I know that," he said. "And I'm not trying to apologize. Unfortunately though, sympathy uses some of the same key words as-"

"Well don't with the sympathy either!" Sam replied, whacking Steve's shoulder again. "I already wanna punch something, and hitting you would just break my hand."

Steve lost the fight not to smile. "Okay," he said, digging a paintball gun out of the bag and setting it on Sam's lap. "How would you feel about shooting me instead?"

And there went that skeptical eyebrow, but Steve was pleased to see Sam picked the gun up all the same. "Oh, like enabling your toxic fucking guilt complex is gonna make me feel better?" he challenged, clearly struggling to hang onto whatever existential woe he'd been wrestling with before.

Steve laughed and patted his shoulder. "Now who's making it all about me?" he said. Then he dug a pair of protective goggles out of the bag and dropped them on the stone behind them. "I didn't say I was gonna stand still for it now, did I?"

Then, purely because he could, Steve grabbed the bag one-handed, and shoved himself off the boulder's peak in a flip that scattered the pea gravel like shrapnel when he hit the ground in a deep crouch. He flashed a grin up at Sam, silhouetted darkly against the sky from this angle, but still radiating exasperation as he peered down at Steve from on high. "The way I see it," Steve called to him, fishing out his own facemask, "you can sit there sulking about missing the pie at Thanksgiving, or you can get up and see if you can hit a moving target that knows your style of shooting."

There was a silent second, and then Sam shook his head. "You know what, Rogers," he asked, laughter creeping into his voice as he dragged the goggles on, "I kind do want to shoot you right now after all."

Steve let his pride at the triumph beam out on his face. "That's good," he said as he pulled his own gun out of the bag and fired a round two inches away from Sam's knees, "Because I'll be shooting right back at you."

Then, fair warning delivered, Steve turned on his heel and ran for the cover of another boulder, laughing out loud as he went.
Yijkes, it's been a long time since I updated this story. I'm sorry to have left all you readers hanging for so long -- getting desperately, wiped out flat sick just before my self imposed deadline just threw me right off this thing. Then it spat out the bit, shook the saddle off, and ran away to the bottom pastures while I was wrangling Thanksgiving.

Still, I've climbed back on top of it again, and dragged it through this latest chapter despite all the lovely distractions in my way. And so if you enjoy it, might I please request that you take a few minutes, type a few words in the comment field, and let me know it?

Comments are my air, my darling Puff Adders, and I just get on so much better with them than without!

(Edit note: This is one of the places where I felt I needed to point out that Rhodey went to MIT too, and he is not just a jet jock with a fancy suit of armor. Colonel Rhodes is a smart cookie all on his own, thank you very much, and he's also a soldier -- And because he's a soldier, and because he knows what actual military combat is like, and because he knows what a team bond is worth, I choose to believe that he'd be above the childish grudge-holding notion, despite his injuries. He's had decades to see just how fast things can spin out of control when Tony's off the leash, and he's had 2 years to see the same kind of potential in all the rest of the team as well. You don't get to that level of command without learning how to let shit go and get around hurt feelings. And I'm happy to note, as Infinity War proved, Canon supports this interpretation of Colonel Rhodes' character as well.

And as for that last scene... well... Steve's a soldier too, and as such, he knows what it looks like when a fellow soldier just needs to cause a little mayhem. Since there were no punchable bad guys in range, paintball would just have to do.

I might have a *thing* about Avengers playing paintball...)
The Devil's Dime

Chapter Summary

In which ripples spread, accounts are checked, and credit is given where none is particularly due.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Wakandan Embassy compound, Lagos, Nigeria *~

Sam spun around the boulder the instant he heard Steve's boots scattering gravel. He aimed and sighted his shot, square and perfect on the imaginary white A in the center of that broad forehead. Then Sam fired, and he knew, he fucking knew he'd fucking finally got the grinning bastard dead to rights, and then...

"GOD DAMMIT, STEVE!" Sam bellowed, just barely resisting the urge to fling his empty paintball gun at the man as he landed again, deep-crouched from his last-second, acrobatic evasion. "Did you just fucking dodge my last paintball?!

Steve's grin went a little sideways, and he shook his head, dramatically slapping his big, square hand right over his breast.

"Nope. It's a hit. You got me."

Sam peered, scowling. "Bullshit."

But Steve moved his hand, and a bright orange smear remained where it had been. A smear that showed the lines of his palm, to be exact. That sonofabitch!

"You fucking caught it, didn't you? Right in your damn hand, you caught my last very paintball, and now you tryin' to snow me I shot you fair and square?! How dare?" Sam ranted, not even fighting the laughter that bubbled up through his rant. "How fucking dare?"

Steve shrugged, grinning back. "You did get me, actually. If you'd been shooting your regular guns, that round would have gone straight through my hand, and I'd have the worst headache of my life right now." He shrugged, and then smeared the orange off his palm with a grimace for the state of his shirt. "I sure hope I understood right that this paint breaks down in water."

"Ain't gonna be me out here with a brush and bucket if it don't," Sam declared, finally letting the grin out as he scanned the paint-streaked boulders around them. "This whole game was your idea."

Steve went over all toothy then, and strode over to jostle Sam's shoulder with his own. "Good idea though, wasn't it?" He gave another bump when Sam tried, and failed to school his smile away again. "Come on, better workout than making like a Gotham Gargoyle till the storm came in, right?"

"Cyborg ain't from Gotham," Sam growled primly, with a side of stinkeye as he turned and headed for the benches that ringed the rock garden. "And I ain't no white boy with abandonment issues and too much money. Give Stark a bat phobia and a cape though-"

The phone buzzed in Sam's pocket as he cleared the circle of boulders, and the interference field that
was the not-so-public reason why T'Challa'd had the rocks brought out from Wakanda in the first place. It buzzed hard as a hornet, in a rapid-fire staccato that could only mean a barrage of texts all trying to load at once. Sam felt his blood chill just a bit as he shoved the empty paintball gun at Steve and scrambled to get the little phone out of his jeans. "That's a Virginia area code," he said as he watched the numbers scroll across the screen. "Steve, that's not...?"

"It's not the phone I sent your grandmother," Steve confirmed, a grim monolith at his elbow. "But it's not Tony's number either. Better open it."

And, with a hand that didn’t shake much at all, Sam did so.

*Sammy. Is it true?*

The text was the first of a dozen, sent within the last fifteen minutes.

"Sarah?" Sam murmured aloud, scrolling down as Steve came around to read over his shoulder. "My sister. She must've got the number off Nana's phone."

*You gotta reply, Sammy. We need to know.* The next one read.

*My hand to God, Samuel Thomas Wilson, if you turned that phone off...*

*Sammy, a reporter just called the hotel.*

*We need to hear back from you, all right? She called and woke us all up again, wanted to know what Nana thought about them recordings on the web.*

*They fakes, right? Because you would never do nothing like that.*

*I didn't even need to listen, just told Nana they got to be fakes. There never was no enhanced prison, and they never put you there even if there was, because you called us and you're okay, but she is SHOOK, Sammy, and you need to call back!*  

Behind him, Sam felt Steve's hiss of outrage as they both realized exactly which recordings his sister had to be talking about. Wanda's deposition. Given in confidence, because her allies needed to know what their enemies had intended to happen. Now leaked, apparently, and making news. Sam's almost-banished desire to punch something to death returned with a vengeance, but he made himself keep scrolling all the same.

*I told her you wouldn't ever break patient confidentiality like that. You're a professional, and if you and Cap did talk to that little Sokovian girl like the recording made it sound, you damned sure wouldn't put her statement out on the web for God and everyone to hear.*

*And that's why I know they got to be fakes.*

*So you call back as soon as you get this, hear?*

*And call that reporter too. She left her number, and I want you to give her a good schooling while you're at it, shaking us all up like we on some kind of reality tv show.*

*Just call, Sammy.*

*Please.*

Sam shut the clamshell phone with a snap, clenching his eyes shut, and focusing desperately on the feel of sweat drying between his shoulderblades, the uneven gravel beneath his sneakers, the humid
wind carrying rain in from the sea, the starchy, soapy smell of burst paintballs, anything, *anything* but the looming, horrified sense of betrayal clenched like a fist around his heart.

Wanda. She'd trusted him with this. She'd taken weeks to find the courage to offer all that, and now... did she even know she'd been sold out?

Steve's hand closed on his arm, jolting Sam out of his tailspin with a gasp. "Call," he said, as grim and as fierce as Sam felt himself. "Call your sister. Tell her what you can. I'm going to go wake Ayo up, and see if she can get through to T'Challa. Someone who had access leaked those files. the transcriptionist, or someone in the computer lab. I want to know who. And why." And Sam could see the threat suddenly, clear as a leveled cannon at his face; if someone inside Wakanda was willing to leak something this personal, this explosively political despite T'Challa's orders for secrecy, then Barnes couldn't be safe there. None of them could.

"Wanda," Sam started, throat creaking and arid with too much that wanted saying. "We need to-"

Steve nodded, Captain-face wholly banishing the grinning clown who'd been playing paint-tag with Sam since the grey hours of the morning. "We'll get there. I want to have some answers first though." Then he turned on his heel and marched back through the rock garden toward the Embassy's main residence, his back straight and hard as if he meant to go through or over every single obstacle in his way without stepping aside for anything.

In the roiling sky above them, thunder rowled one more threat, laced with fat, heavy raindrops on a slanting wind. Sam turned, sprinting for the cover of his room, and wondering what in the world he was going to tell his family this time.

~* Jahveed's Apartment, Lagos Nigeria *~

*My dear Petal,*

*I've been in contact with one of your old Cohort -- that is to say, your old Cohort has taken an interest in the subtle queries you've asked me to make into dear Peggy's passing, and have reached out to me.*

*Not that I'm surprised to learn that S.H.I.E.L.D. is playing Ghost in the World Machine, of course, but it was rather a shock to find your Ms. Hill turning up unannounced at my Downe Street office to ask after you, and share data on your behalf.*

Sharon stopped reading, holding her face still, fixing her gaze on that spot of black at the end of the sentence, while she waited for her pulse to steady, for the adrenaline kick to fade, for the chorus of alarm and outrage to stop echoing in her skull. S.H.I.E.L.D. was still afloat. Because of course it was. Hill was still involved. Because of fucking *course* she was.

Sharon cut a glance at Natasha, who seemed to be engrossed in her own laptop across the apartment, and didn't bother wondering whether she had known all that. The Widow had made a career out of acting as if she knew all secrets to be known; it made people incautious around her, gave her threads to pull and crumbs to follow, and a predator's knowledge of just where the soft spots, and hidden secrets could all be found. It was a hell of a strategy, but Sharon's sense of self was a bit too solid for that kind of chameleon mutability. The lies she told as Agent 13 came from core truths that stood solid and faithful beneath her feet... but that did mean that she sometimes needed a moment to steady herself when bombs started going off too close to those truths.

"Bad news from home hon?" Stan asked, shuffling in from the kitchen with a demitasse cup full of thick, sweet coffee in his free hand.
Sharon looked up with a smile she didn't feel. "My Dad's fighting with his neighbor over lawn weeds," she lied, noting how Natasha glanced up, eyes narrowed at the sound of her voice. "If I don't read all the details now, I get to hear them in person at Thanksgiving."
"Is there more of that coffee?" Sharon heard Natasha murmur to Stan as she bent her head to her phone, and Harry's e-mail once more.

You might have warned me that you and Hill were both looking into the matter, Petal. It would have spared us both quite a bit of oblique gossip-coding before we came 'round to the meat of things.

Which is this: I have found no proof that Margaret Carter's passing was in any way not natural.

In the kitchen, Sharon heard Natasha rattling about the sink, water hissing from the tap as the storm tapped rain at the apartment windows. Outside, the Minarettes sang prayers to the faithful of Lagos, determined and haunting despite the storm.

There is no camera footage of anyone coming or going from her room within a day of her death. (Not just anyone unauthorized, mind you -- that's anyone at all. Including nurses, janitors, and security personnel, all of whom reported that they made their rounds as usual on May 5th, 2016. Whomever looped the camera feed was clearly not counting on it being examined anytime soon after the event.)

The sound of a hand-grinder entered the tapestry, rhythmic and rough as a cat's tongue down Sharon's neck.

The samples collected at her autopsy were either consumed in testing, or else committed to the grave with the rest of her, according to the notes of one Dr. S. Sterns, who appears to have been called in for the job from the US, without explanation as to why St Anne's resident physician, or the Manchester Coroner were not consulted in the matter.

All that being said, one of St. Anne's charming receptionists drew my attention to a backlog of employment records which, having been digitized this spring, had somehow been overlooked for destruction at that time. Please see attached, the charming personage of one A. D. Monthan, Security officer for precisely three months before, and one week after your aunt's death. Do keep the photos, Petal. By now the originals will have been burnt, and Mr. Monthan's employment with St. Anne's appears to have been excluded from said digitized records, oddly enough.

A hiss, a brief whiff of methane, and then the whump of gas igniting at the hob. Sharon took a careful breath that made her ribs ache.

And you'll be wondering, by now, just what your charming Maria had to do with all this, I suppose? Well, it turns out that she, too, was investigating Mr. Monthan, under the name of one Corporal Arthur M. Damstead, who apparently died in a car crash last spring, along with several other American Servicemen of, it seems, rather questionable ethics.

My dear girl, I'm sorry that I must admit you're probably right to be suspicious about your Aunt's passing. While I can find no evidence of a crime, the evidence of a cover-up is all around the matter -- haphazard, unconvincing, and somehow defiant in that way one often sees with the Eastern Bloc chaps. They like to muddy the waters around their
assassinations just enough to foul the evidence, and give them plausible deniability in the world court -- even if nobody actually believes them to be innocent, nothing can be proved against them.

Now the scrape of spoon to pan took the place of the grinder's rasp, each circuit invoking a deeper layer to Sharon Carter's rising need to punch someone right in the throat. The smell of coffee began to float, raw and sharp, through the air, stinging her eyes and thickening her throat.

Sokovian Kill-Squad thug, I believe you said, when we spoke about this, didn't you? Well yes, I'm sorry to say that it does bear the hallmarks. Your Ms Hill agreed, and she asked me to tell you so.

You've Hell at your heels with this my dear, crouched and waiting on your command. There is not an Agency in the world which did not hold great respect for Director Carter, even those who held standing kill-orders on her head. If the financials -- with which I am not quite done just yet, forgive me -- leave an oil trail through the mud as they so often do, you'll have more allies than you can count when it comes time to shackle the hand that paid the killer.

Cry havoc when the time comes, my dear, and a million shadows will rise to the hunt.

Yours in sympathy and outrage,
Harald Roebuck

The call of the Imam faded on a long, woeful note, leaving Sharon echoingly alone inside herself, clenched tight on the verge of trembling wrath, or moaning grief, and stuck fast with the knowledge that, with the man who built The Watcher on one side, and the Black Widow on the other, she could not afford to indulge in either one.

Peggy Carter had been killed last May.

She had been murdered deliberately, not worn down by time and disease, and Sharon had known it. Somewhere deep inside her rock solid, core of truth, where her instincts still dowsed the world with hair-fine, yet ineluctable accuracy, Sharon had known that the death of her aunt had been just one more weapon in Zemo's hands -- one more stab to one of the few places of true vulnerability Captain America had.

That burned worst of all, that knowing that as much as her own family had mourned her loss, and grieved to bury the arclight brilliance of their own clan hero, their pain, and their loss had been merely an afterthought. Collateral damage hardly considered beyond the question of whether the family would look too carefully into matters, or merely accept the death as inevitable and, in fine British fashion, elect not to make a fuss.

Sharon was going to make a fuss before all this was over though, that much was sure and solid as gold in her gut. She was going to track down every cog in this nasty machine Zemo had set into motion, and she was going to wring the truth out of them in every way she could, and then? Then she was going to use it to utterly crush whoever it was who'd given the order, then stood clear of the blood.

"Coffee's done," Natasha said, bringing two cups with her from the kitchen. "Dandelions, or crab
"Weeds," Sharon thought, thumbing her phone dark and taking one of the tiny china cups with careful hands. "Creeping Charlie, actually," she said, sipping the thick, sweet brew and letting the tension shudder out of her. "Almost as bad as mint, according to Dad."

"Mm." Natasha sipped, head tilted and considering. "Does he have a lawn service?"

The question might as easily have been "Do you really think I'm buying any of this?" And for a moment, Sharon was tempted to rise to it. But only last night she had listened to the devastating weapon Natasha had loosed against their enemy, watched the pitiless light in those green eyes as Sharon had listened with horror to the bleeding anguish in young Wanda Maximoff's voice as she described her imprisonment, and what had actually been about. It had been a savage attack, bringing that can of worms to light, and it was absolutely going to change the caper from here on out, but this... the uncertainty around what had actually happened, who had participated, who had paid, who had given the order....

That was a millimeter fuse, tucked straight into the bomb that was Steve Rogers, and if any of them touched that bomb off unwary, there would be no telling what he would destroy in his guilt and rage, including and especially his own self. Sharon couldn't risk putting that fuse into Natasha's deadly little hands. There was too much unknown going on right now for something this big, this terrible, to slip free.

Steve would have to be told, Sharon knew. Once they found him, once they were sure he was safe. He deserved to know the truth of it, and Sharon would tell him, but not until Harry had given her more data, more facts, something actionable. She'd tell Steve when he wasn't in a vulnerable city, surrounded by enemies they couldn't tally, and targeted by foes who wouldn't show their faces until the cameras turned off. So later. Sharon would be sure to tell him later.

She summoned up a wry smile for her interrogator, tucking Harry's awful news into a tidy little box in her mind, and squaring herself to the trivial tale of her father and his imaginary feud, but Natasha had turned to the apartment door, and the sound of shoes coming up the stairs from the street below.

"That'll be Javeed," Stan said as the jingle of keys sounded on the landing. "He's early though. Usually he stays at the Mosque and gossips for at least an hour after prayers."

"That is because," said Javeed himself, shaking rain off his jacket as he bustled in through the door, "the duties of hospitality must outweigh the pleasures of one's own. Especially when the day's gossip is of particular interest to one's guests, and ah, by the angels, is that coffee?"

Natasha smirked at him and passed her own cup over. "What's the news then?" Sharon nudged back one of the kitchen chairs, and slid her own still-full cup in front of it. Natasha took both without a glance.

"The investigation into last year's bombing downtown is the news," Javeed said, taking another chair at the table. "My friend at the police department says that chief inspector in the case has been reassigned, and the entire investigation is being turned over on orders from on high -- the National Assembly, they say."

That got Stan's attention. "Turned over?" he asked, sitting upright in the low, squishy sofa. "With Imebe retiring and Kinaade moving over to the smuggling branch, who's got the experience to-"

"That is the point, my friend," Javeed interrupted, eyes bright. "The case is not being given to a different chief inspector, it is being given to a new one!" He slapped the table, and seemed
disappointed when no one jumped. "Ajue Meika, just hired this week. People are saying that he was educated in the UK, and although he is supposed to have been born and raised in Lagos, nobody knows his people here at all."

"They're panicking," Natasha said as a slow smile began to spread across her face. "That's good."

Sharon scoffed. "In my experience, the Police panicking is usually the opposite of "good" for people in our line of work."

But Natasha only shook her head. "Not the police. Ross," she said, standing to retrieve her laptop. Then she turned the screen to the room and tapped the frozen video of an American news anchor, blonde and hard-eyed, reading eagerly from a teleprompter.

"-partment reports that Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross has cut short a diplomatic visit to Latveria in order to attend a special UN session in Vienna. Our sources say that this special session has been called at the request of a coalition of African nations, led by Wakanda's new monarch, T'Challa, and will put forth a special inquest into supposed Western interference into the investigation into the Lagos bombing of 2016. As our viewers will remember, that was the event which led to the deaths of twelve-"

"Twelve Wakandans," Javeed sighed, and finished his coffee with a slurp. "Always it is about the twelve Wakandans. I notice your American press never bothers to count the Nigerians who died in that bombing though."

"Ahh, don't take it so hard," Stan huffed dismissively as Natasha clapped the computer shut. "Most of the copy hacks over at WHiH can't count higher than twelve anyway. Probably think Lagos is in Wakanda to begin with."

Sharon suppressed the urge to snicker at the goad, focusing instead on Natasha. "All right, I'll bite. How do you figure this panic aids us?"

"We know only two things for sure right now;" Natasha answered. "Steve came here to meet a cop, and that there are far, far too many Invested Parties on the playing field for there not to be at least one operation underway."

"That is true," Javeed offered. "I have heard of at least three CIA safehouses in the city that have stood empty all year, but this weekend? All are suddenly hosting large parties with lots of rental cars."

Sharon cut him a hard glance. "Your hearing seems to be remarkably good for someone who insists he isn't in the Game, Mr. Javeed."

He shook his head, equal parts abashed and woebegone. "It is not my hearing that is good, Miss, it is my luck that is bad. My wife -- may Allah rest her soul in peace -- always said that trouble went before me like a curse. Wars, spies, secrets, plots, ancient relics and armed insurgencies springing up like weeds in my path wherever I should plan to go."

Stan, struggling free of the sofa to join the quorum at the table, clapped Javeed on the shoulder with one birdlike hand. "Well, luck like that may be a curse to a bus driver, but it's the ultimate advantage to a Newsman," he said, dropping into the last of the hard little kitchen chairs. "Which is how me and Jahveed got to know each other. His apartment balcony overlooked Bahkitar's place in Tehran back in 79," he said in a rough aside to Sharon, "I got a Pulitzer for my photo of the Prime Minister pulling a runner, he got his first camera and a crash course on stake outs, and we both got out of the country just before Khomeini came back for good."
They laughed then, the both of them, in the way that all veterans of near-death scrapes do when they look back on their luck from long years distant -- as if half hoping someone listening will ask for the real story, and at the same time wishing they never had to think about it again. Natasha, to her credit, was having none of it though.

"All right then, Newsmen," she said, finishing her coffee and setting cup to saucer with a pointed toc. "Impress me. Find me a good spot to stake out the Police Department today. The whole area around the market has been rebuilt since the bombing," she said as both men stared at her. "I don't have a current layout to work from."

"You want to..." Javeed shook his head as the thunder mumbled against the inland hills. "I'm sorry, why would that be useful? Anything interesting would be happening inside the building today, and not even my friend in the dispatch office could help you there."

"Because our friend's contact is a Forensic Investigator on the bombing case," Sharon sighed, spelling it out so Natasha wouldn't have to. "If there's an administration shakeup going on today, then the odds are good he'll go and find our friend sooner or later."

"Ahh. And that is when you follow him?"

"That's when we see who else follows him," Natasha contradicted, opening her laptop and tapping quickly. A Lagos city street map came up, and she zoomed in on the grid quickly. "Now I know the cafe across the street from the Police Department was rebuilt after last May, but that's more exposed than I want to risk. There was a hotel here at the end of the block, but-"

Stan shook his head. "They're still rebuilding. Construction site security gets twitchy when people with cameras start to hang around their worksites, especially when the crew is trying to make up for storm delays." He stuck his old cigar -- for all Sharon knew, the same one she'd always seen him chewing on, -- into his pocket and considered the map. "Nah, what we really need is a nice roof garden. Something with some benches and shade. Parking garage would do in a pinch, but my knees aren't as young as the rest of me feels."

"I might know a place," Javeed began.

Sharon cut him off. "Your blood pressure isn't as young as you think it is either," She protested to Stan. "Anything could go on down there today, anything at all. Not only are Stark and Rogers both running on some script only they know, there are literal HYDRA strike crews in town, just like when the Crossbones team hit the Infectious Disease Research Center in 16! What the hell makes you think I'm going to let you hang out in the live fire zone?"

The old man patted her hand, just kind enough to keep the gesture on the conciliatory side of condescension and said, "Honey, it's cute how you think I'm gonna be anywhere else when things go down, no matter what you prefer. Someone's gotta hold the camera steady, and she can tell you," he said with a nod to Natasha's steely glare, "If our story isn't the first one out, then the other guys get to say what actually happened."

"Everyone remembers the first headline," Javeed recited.

"I can't let you get seen, Stan," Sharon ground out. This wasn't just her job on the line, this wasn't just her shitty little make-work protection detail... this was the old man's life, and it might just be Steve's life too, and Wilson's, and Natasha's, and heaven help her, even Stark's damned life, and how the hell was Sharon supposed to juggle all that?

Stan just chuckled though, and finished his own coffee. "Sweetheart, that's the difference between a
Newsman and a Paparazzo: we get into the scary places, and we capture the truth, we get out again. What we don't do, is get seen before we publish what we got."

~* Art Cafe, Lagos, Nigeria *~

Tony didn't look up from his tablet when Steve arrived at the cafe -- he didn't need to. He'd been the only patron to ask for a table outside now that the storm had (barely) passed, and though the late morning foot traffic in the street was beginning to pick up, the interference app on his phone would handily prevent any casual eavesdropping. He'd clocked Rogers' approach from the end of the block, all determined stride and ominous brow, as if he meant to go through or over any obstacle that dared to step into his way, and that... that just shuffled the deck on the confrontation Tony had been expecting to have. For certain values of 'shuffle' that included flinging the whole thing into a strong headwind and lighting half of it on fire.

"Was it you?" Steve asked without preamble as his advance carried him into the cafe's empty sidewalk tables, and finally drew up, loomingly close at Tony's elbow.

Then Tony did look up, heart fluttering in his throat, anger warring with fear and some strange, deep distress in his belly as he asked, "Really? We're gonna start there?"

The threat in Steve's clenched jaw didn't waver. "That recording was private."

"Okay, let's go," Tony decided, turning his tablet face-down on the rain-spotted table and kicking a chair out in Steve's direction. "What makes you think I would want any part of that recording loose on the internet?"

Steve closed his eyes, something like pain gathering between his eyebrows as he blew out a breath and sat. "I wish I knew," he said, his hands clenched around each other in his lap. "You're always thinking twelve moves and two corners out, and not even Bruce can figure you out most of the time."

"Well it doesn't take a genius to know that thing makes me look like a fucking war criminal," Tony snapped back, curling both hands around his coffee to be sure they wouldn't shake under the weight of hurt in Steve's eyes. Irony right there, and boy did it suck.

"It was saved on your servers!" Steve managed to keep his voice low, but the words still held all the force of a shout, and Tony recoiled as such.

"It..." He turned his cup. "What? Why the hell would-"

"They're secure," Steve bit out, scraping a hand over his face beneath the brim of his golf-cap. "The most secure place I could think of, outside..." he glanced up, tipped a nod toward what Tony guessed was probably, eventually, Wakanda. "I saved the files and transcripts in both places because I wanted them to be safe! I would never, ever want to use Wanda's testimony as a..."

"Political attack?" Tony ventured when Steve's words failed him.

"A weapon," he countered, choking away whatever had shaken him "Dammit Tony, I refused to sign the Accords because I didn't want the Enhanced to be treated like weapons instead of people! And now... now this happens."

Tony caught his breath in the weighty silence that settled in after those words, watching the raw, helpless anger in Steve's eyes bleed out into something like grief, and yeah -- there was no way Steve had set up any part of that release. Not when he couldn't see past the ethical affront of it to realize that it had put a devastating weapon into his, and the other exiles' hands.
His tablet buzzed under his hand, and Tony flicked a glance to activate the HUD in his sunglasses. Then he read FRIDAY's note, and the lightbulbs began.

"What?" Steve asked at Tony's grunt of mental triumph as he flipped his tablet over and started a search.

"Is she with you?" Tony asked, half distracted.

"Wanda? Of course not! Why the hell would I bring here now I know what Ross wants to do to her?"

Tony looked up, then shook his head with a grin that only hurt a little bit now. "Jesus, Steve, do you listen to yourself? Because according to Wanda, you are on Ross's wish list too, and yet," a sweep of his arm took in the bustling street, "here you fucking are!"

"Tony, that's-"

"Romanoff, Steve," Tony said, shoving his half-empty coffee into the man's hand, and holding it there until Steve took the hint and drank. "I'm talking about Romanoff. I've had three calls from the State Department in the last hour, wondering if I could maybe make the recording 'disappear'." He paused for a heartfelt scoff at the notion. "Only even if I was inclined to try and make that happen, FRIDAY hasn't been able to trace the point of upload. The closest commonality in the vectors is a military base in North Korea that I'm pretty sure hasn't been active since the 50's. Natasha Romanoff is the only one I can think of aside from myself and maybe a guy I knew at MIT, who could pull an end run like that, and given that we have seen her do exactly this kind of weaponized information-dump before, I am asking if she's here with you."

"No," Steve admitted, pushing Tony's coffee back to him. "Last I saw of her was Lepzeig. But I don't think Natasha would-"

Tony scoffed again. "She wouldn't use someone else's secrets to kneecap an enemy if she thought she was keeping a friend safe? I mean, have you met her?"

That, it seemed, finally took the starch out of Steve's spine. He leaned his elbows on the table, and stared at the clasp of his hands. "She still has access to the Avenger's server, doesn't she?" he asked after a minute.

"You all do," Tony said, quickly composing yet another politely worded Fuck Off You Censorious Bastards letter to the PTB. He hit send knowing full well that FRIDAY would run it past her own filters, Pepper, and Stark Legal before it went anywhere. "Of course you all do. I thought you realized that."

"I should have," Steve admitted, then dropped his head into both hands and groaned. "Dammit. Damn it to hell..."

A chair leg scraped against the concrete, jerking both of them up out of their shared drama to realize that they no longer had the cafe's outdoor section entirely to themselves. Steve tensed, eyeballing the cafe's reflective windows as Tony shoved his sunglasses back into place, but it was only Steve's sunny-dispositioned bomb-tech buddy, it turned out, taking a shortcut through the porch on his way into the cafe proper. He didn't stop to chat, but gave Steve in particular a glare that Tony half expected to light something on fire on his way past the table. He also, however, unsubtly dropped an envelope on the pavement behind him as he went.

"I... uh, think he wants to talk to you," Tony ventured once he'd picked the thing up and found it
empty and unmarked.

"Well, we're not being arrested right now, so you're probably right," Steve agreed, taking the envelope and standing. "I'm going to go order a coffee. Can I bring you anything?"

Like hell was Tony gonna let himself be benched for this encounter! He slugged back the dregs of his own cup and stood with a pointed smile. "Save it for a proper date, Rogers. We're going Dutch for now." And then he led the way inside, his tablet and its sound-dampening field tucked firmly under his arm.

Sunshine had joined the line of customers waiting for service at the counter, and he didn't seem the least bit surprised when Steve stepped into line behind him, nor when Tony took up a flanking position by the racks of cheap, China-made merchandise that would have looked just as kitchy on the shelves of any Starbucks back in the States.

Steve said something unintelligible to the man, and Friday scrolled the translation of "Pardon me, you dropped this outside," across the bottom of Tony's sunglasses.

Sunshine plucked the thing from Steve's fingers without so much as a softening of the rigid dislike in his face, and replied in English. "Go away." Steve flicked a glance at Tony, who caught it and sent it back with a tiny shrug of IDFK. Sunshine huffed and rolled his eyes. "You cannot be seen here today," he elaborated, voice confidential and low.

"Why?" Steve asked, and this time Tony completely couldn't fault Sunshine for his scornful snort. "Why today, Ikiemoye?" Steve clarified doggedly. "Because of the break-in?"

That won a headshake, and the bomb tech's thousand watt glare returned to the menu board. "That was just the excuse they needed," he allowed as they all shuffled forward. "Governor Ambode has ordered a reorganization of the bombing investigation. A new Chief Inspector, from America will arrive today at three o'clock," he said, sneer curled up so hard the country's name almost couldn't make it out. "My assistant and I must have all my evidence and analyses ready to surrender to him by then."

Tony breathed deep against a sudden tightness around his chest, and glanced at Steve, to find a credible mirror of his own anxiety blooming across the man's face. Shit. "Did you get what you needed from Reaves?" he asked Ikiemoye, hoping, hoping...

He killed Tony's hope with one sharp shake of his head. "It doesn't matter," he said. "The new Chief Inspector will discard it all, and create a report that supports his primary mission, just as your doctor Sterns did when he took over Ebrakumo's autopsy reports." The man closed his eyes for a moment, as if that could conceal the helpless rage they could both see seething inside him. "Whatever battle, in whatever kind of war this has been for you, you have lost," Ikiemoye said after a moment, chin coming up firm, eyes opening to stare at the menu board once more. "I will not be kidnapped, murdered as Ebrakumo was. Not for you. Not for any of you."

They all shuffled forward again then, Tony picking at the kidnapped and murdered line, and wondering just how much evidence he might have to back that notion up, and Steve... well, Steve had that face on. The one every Avenger had reason to look out for, both with anticipation, and with dread; that face he got when the Muse of Rousing Speeches had got hold of him, and he was about to Speak His Truth.

"What about for justice?" he tried, and Ikiemoye scoffed so hard he almost spat. Tony couldn't blame him really -- he'd expected better too. Still...
"What about for revenge?" Tony offered, and won a rude noise all of his own.

"There speaks a rich man's luxury," the bomb tech growled.

Tony cocked his head and smiled. "That's not a 'no,'" he observed.

"Don't give it to them," Steve's voice cut off whatever scorn the tech had been composing, drawing both their gazes to rest on him. "The evidence, the analysis," he said once he had their attention, a smile blooming through sincerity you could chip a tooth on. "Say it was destroyed in the break in, or that it was damaged, or stolen. Let us copy what you have, and Tony can hit your computer with a virus that will-"

"A copy of the evidence will be useless to you, or to anyone," Ikiemoye cut him off, a grudging sort of gleam coming into his eyes. "Such things can be fabricated and faked, as every court of law knows."

"Then give us the real stuff." Tony was as startled to hear that out of his mouth as the others were, but what the hell, right? It wasn't often that Tony-Mouth worked out in his favor, so he took advantage of the stunned silence to let it roll. "Look, you called us..." Tony paused, then corrected with a nod toward Steve. "You called him here to make things right, so give us a chance to do that, okay? For you, for your doctor buddy, for the victims of the bombing. Let us actually help you do what you set out to do in the first place -- find and punish the person who's actually responsible for bringing that bomb here, and using your people's lives and deaths as leverage in a war that was never about them."

The line moved forward again then, leaving the three of them in a tight orbit by the teapots, a gravity well between them that was too heavy for any of them to walk away from just yet. "That's all we're asking here," Tony said, "And it's all we're offering too."

"If you're right about what's going to happen to your investigation," Steve added as the line before them shrank to two, "Then what have you got to lose?"

His life, of course, but all of them were taking that as read, along with the fact that if things really were as corrupt as they seemed here, even his compliance with the cover-up wouldn't guarantee survival.

The line shortened again, and they all shuffled forward.

"My wife is from Wakanda," Ikiemoye said as the last person in front of them stepped to the counter.

"She..." Tony blinked at the non-sequitur. "That's cool. I thought they-"

"That's how you know the Kimoyo," Steve murmured, touching his silver bead like a kind of salute.

Ikiemoye nodded. "Her youngest sister is named Ife. She is my laboratory assistant."

And the smile that bloomed across Steve's face then was full of understanding. "Then I think I may know someone she'd like to meet," he said.

Chapter End Notes

I swear I'm moving the plot along, my apple trees, my atropines, my adored alkyloids!
There's a lot of moving pieces to this, as you all have noticed by now, but we're about to start moving a LOT faster, I promise. Please keep my faith alive with your comments and kudos -- as always, they keep a writer afloat in the bare end of winter.

(End Note: Yes, I went there with Peggy. I regret nothing! And also, you'll notice that Sharon's done exactly the same with far more damning news about Peggy's death, as Steve did with his suspicions around the Starks' deaths. This was not an accident on my part.

Also, I realize I have had Ikiemoye admit both that his mother was Wakandan, and that his Wife is Wakandan, and that her sister is Wakandan, I'm not sure which is true, or if all are true, and he has a Type, that's just how it came out, and he hasn't given me any reason to change it up.)
Chapter Summary

In which observation necessitates action, plans require improvisation, and traffic wardens require pay raises.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the rooftop lounge of a closed Shisha parlor that had been owned by a friend of Javeed's grandson, they gathered to prepare.

The rain had soaked the furniture, but the cushions had been sitting out in the elements for weeks already, and had healthy crop of mold already. Sharon kicked the things against the stairs, and tried to look casual about casing the street for familiar faces while Natasha used a pair of field glasses to scan the sightlines, and Stanley and Javeed positioned cameras, assembled tripods, and set up what looked to be a portable satellite uplink station.

"That construction site's far too crowded," Natasha growled as Sharon booted the last of the cushions out of her way. "I do not like it." She shoved the field glasses at Sharon then, a sudden, hard thrust that spoke strongly of the kind of frustration that the Black Widow was rumored never to feel. "What do you think?"

"Doesn't matter what we like," she clipped back as she took the glasses and turned to look up at the looming iron skeleton. "We don't exactly get a go/no go vote on this operation." And yeah, there were a lot of people on the skeletal upper levels; hauling things, driving things, welding things to other things -- all the sort of stuff that was supposed to be going on when a building was being rebuilt from the guts outward. A level of activity that couldn't possibly have been standard for the site if it had taken a whole year to get it to its current state. "Big crew, but they're all busy," she allowed, then scanned the street while she still had the glasses. "If someone's waiting for a signal, we won't know it until..."

There was a man coming out of the cafe; beard full but trim, sandy hair blowsy and loose and lighting up gold where sunlight caught the strands. She couldn't see his eyes, but the angle of his chin, the set of his shoulders, the length of his stride all betrayed him to her practiced eye.

She blinked, put the binoculars down for a second, then peered through at the cafe again. "Son of a bitch..." she breathed through her teeth, just as Stanley wobbled up to her elbow with a telephoto lens as long as his arm.

"That's Tony Stark, isn't it?" He said, reeling off a couple of shots as if by reflex as Natasha cursed in Russian and snatched her field glasses back. "I recognize that watch -- only one like it in the world. Who're those guys with him though?"

"Our guys," Sharon answered, her heart lurching against her ribs at the sight of Steve after all these months -- handsome as ever, but grimmer now, somehow harder, no sign of that fumbling shyness that had taken him months to get around back when he'd first offered her coffee. It was as if that hopeful, sweet creature she'd tried so hard not to take a shine to was ground sharp now, hardened
and annealed by what last year had put him through. She could understand how she’d failed to recognize him in the hotel yesterday.

"Twenty yards from the Police Station," Natasha snarled, flinging the binoculars aside and ripping open her backpack to get at the weapons inside. "No disguise, no backup, no cover. Not even a goddamned hat between them! I'm going to go down there and kick both of their asses!"

"Traffic's too light," Sharon called, clattering down the stairs to glare out at the square. There was plenty of room between what few cars were there, and without the weekend market barriers up, even a kid on a bike would be able to pull off a drive-by if he kept his nerve, but neither Steve nor Stark seemed to take the least bit of notice. Their companion though -- the dark and stormy inspector she'd last seen in the Wheatbaker hotel -- his demeanor showed enough stress for all three of them.

Following the direction of his gaze, Sharon swore again. "Car," she clipped, taking out her gun and chambering a round as Natasha appeared at her elbow. "Unmarked, blackout glass. I can't tell the make, but if it's not armored, I'll eat Stanley's drone camera."

"That is Wakandan," Javeed fretted, peering from the top of the stairs with the drone cradled against his chest. "From the Embassy, and you must not shoot at it!"

"The Embassy," Sharon heard Natasha mutter, "Of course it is!" The passenger door opened to let Sam Wilson, and the tall, elegant Dora Milaje step out into the street, the fabric of their well-tailored, decidedly non-Western clothes gleaming subtly in the morning light as they crossed to the Lagos Police station together. Neither one looked backward when the car that had brought them pulled away from the curb again, revealing no sign of the three men who'd been standing just there when it had stopped.

"Stan?" Sharon called, hoping against hope as Natasha pushed past her and went to collect her rented motorcycle from the alley. "Tell me you saw-"

"Oh yeah, sweetheart," the old man's voice came back, clear despite the distance, jubilant despite the utter banjaxing of their surveillance plans, "All three of 'em got right in, and I betcha five dollars that driver's just gonna circle the block until the other two call for pickup."

Because of course they did. Of course!

"I'm tailing that car," Natasha announced, starting her bike with a roar and pulling up beside the stairwell as Sharon came down to the alley. "Here," she said, passing Sharon an earpiece that looked a bit like a SHIELD unit, only much smaller, "Channel seven." And then she pulled out of the alley, and away down the street.

"You comin' back up, Sharney?" Stan's voice drew her notice back up, and she found him peering down at her from Javeed's elbow, camera still in hand, and his favorite cigar twisting his concerned frown awry. "Might wanna stay off the street; I got a feeling things could get hot down there today."

And Sharon, whose gut instincts were agreeing wholeheartedly, only shook her head and tucked her gun back into its hiding place with a determined smile. "Nah. I think I'm going to go and get myself a cup of coffee. You boys keep an eye on things till I get back, all right?"

Embassy car, City center, Lagos

Steve had never been quite able to nail down what made the difference between a limo and other types of car -- limos weren't necessarily bigger, longer, more luxurious, or shaped all that differently, give or take the inevitable privacy screen, and they weren't necessarily heavier, or better armored.
than some of the SHIELD transport cars he'd ridden in, but there was something. A sense of stillness to the air inside them, perhaps; something deep and dignified that managed to resist any agitation or excitement its passengers might be undergoing.

*Inevitability,* his imagination supplied, as he watched Tony and Ikiemoye haggle over the laptop Sam had left for them, and the kimoyo-thumbdrive Tony had, thankfully, brought with him to the cafe that morning. *Like wherever this thing is taking us, it's got something to do with Fate, and nothing has the power to stop it.*

Steve shook the fanciful notion aside, and checked the traffic behind them again. No threats emerged from the mundane flow of city traffic, though the cyclist a few intersections behind them had just turned back onto their tail. He frowned, peering harder, until his glance skated past the limo's rear-view mirror, he caught the driver's bemused, and slightly annoyed stare. "That's my job you are trying to do, Wanderer," his dark eyes seemed to say, *Kindly allow me to do it.*

So Steve returned his attention to the conversation (argument, really) in front of him.

"Yes, your assistant in New York did give me everything I needed to disarm the weapon," Ikiemoye was saying as he fended Tony's hands away from the keyboard in his lap. "And that is why I am here with you, watching strangers break into my workplace to steal my labors of an entire year instead of retrieving them myself!"

"What, you still lay this on me?" Tony objected, not giving up. "What do I have to do to prove I'm not behind this?!"

"He knows that, Tony," Steve put in, distracting the genius for long enough that Ikiemoye could rattle off a quick string of commands and open a link to the same camera-feed that they'd seen yesterday when the EMP device had been discovered. "He wouldn't be in the car with you if he thought you were actually behind that."

"Not without you in handcuffs," Ikiemoye agreed darkly. "But I have had a quiet warning from a friend that there are those in the administration who feel I disarmed the device too easily, too quickly. After the new Chief Inspector takes the case over, it is likely that there will be an 'investigation'."

Tony made a coughing noise that sounded suspiciously like "Witch hunt," and Ikiemoye didn't bother to contradict.

"But for now, that means that I cannot so much as go to the toilet in the building without a security escort," he said, activating the feed with a swipe of his finger. "My computer has already been impounded, and my office is almost certainly being emptied as we speak. Which is why your connection is running through Iffe's computer instead."

"Your assistant?" the fourth passenger broke his silence at last, and when Steve glanced up, he noticed that the Ambassadorial Aide's eyes were fixed on the glowing kimoyo that was affixed to the thumb drive's end.

Ikiemoye didn't miss the hint either. "Yes," he answered, his tone a complicated mix of defiance, deference, worry, and pride. "She did not tell me why she suggested this measure," he brushed the thumb drive with one finger, then nodded at the kimoyo Steve still wore around his throat. "But once I met the Captain, I understood the wisdom."

"And did you set her computer up to monitor the building's security feed, or was that her idea?" wondered Tony, who had been finger-flicking through the security screens while the rest of them talked. "Based on the pattern of camera disruption on these feeds, they're at the evidence lockup
now, by the way," he added with a slanting grin when Ikiemoye tsked the laptop out of his reach again. "But FRIDAY says it doesn't look to her like anybody's paying them much attention."

Steve could see the laptop screen from where he sat now, and to him it looked as if all the camera feeds were looking in on a swarming anthill; everyone rushing -- focused, or trying to look like it -- on the defense of their haven. "How long do you think it'll take them to notice?" he asked Ikiemoye, unsubtly derailing whatever cutting remark the man was composing for Tony's benefit.

"Assuming your people can even get out of the building with a crate of police evidence?" he snorted in reply, but Steve saw his eyes flick toward the Aide, more than a little awed, and he knew it was all smoke. The man, for all his frustration with the hijacking of his investigation, and the injustice behind his friend's disappearance, still wouldn't be there, cooperating with them if not for the promise of the Wakandan government's involvement in the investigation after he turned it all over. "There will be some questions when my lunch hour comes and goes without me," Ikiemoye said, "but the real questions will begin when I fail to appear at the meeting of department heads once the new Chief Inspector has arrived. The duty sergeant's schedule this morning called for Inspector Meika's arrival at four pm."

Steve checked his watch; not even noon yet. Still, four hours could melt away pretty quickly when the heat was on. He caught a meaning glance from the Aide, and guessed he wasn't the only one thinking it when he asked, "You have a plan for the fallout?"

"Your wife and her siblings will be welcome at the Embassy," the Aide said, "and we can remove them to Wakanda should that be necessary, but you, Mr. Ikiemoye, have no claim to our protection. Asylum seekers," he pointedly did not look at Steve, "even those from African countries, are rarely granted entrance unless the King himself decrees it. If the Governor requested we turn you over to Police, much as we would prefer not to, we could not refuse."

"While I am touched by your concern," Ikiemoye replied, with only a fraction of the sarcasm Steve felt sure the words would have carried if they'd been aimed at him, or at Tony, "I will keep that information to myself. I do have plans in place to see to my safety, and my family's." He gestured at the computer screen, with its hijacked security feeds as the limo turned the corner to bring them back onto the street where it had picked them up. "Plans that I have been putting in place since Dr. Ebrakumo disappeared. But as Achebe said, three men may keep a secret, so long as two of them are dead."

"Yeah, pretty sure that was Ben Franklin there, champ," Tony muttered as the limo slowed to the sound of honking. "Why are we stopping? Butch and Sundance should be hitting the street any minute now."

"A truck's backing into the construction site," Steve answered, even as the Aide made the same query of his driver and got the same reply. "It's blocking the street."

"And that is just as well," Ikiemoye replied, plunking the laptop into Tony's lap. "I parked my car with the laborers this morning, in case I might have trouble with the security in the Station's parking garage. Let me down here." And he unclipped his seat belt.

Tony threw a glance Steve's way, worried and wary in a way that needed no words. "They're not out of the building yet," Tony said, and Steve would have protested the note of bald accusation in his tone, if he hadn't been running the angles in his own mind.

If they had been caught, we would hear it," Ikiemoye replied with a hard look at the station house just ahead. "$H_e would know of it, I suspect," he added with a nod toward the Aide, who's kimoyo bracelet had been glittering with purpose since they'd sat down in the car. "And your computer spy
would be telling you about it as well, if there was anything to know."

"This part of your escape plan?" Steve asked, "Getting us on this street then disappearing before our people are in the clear?"

Ikiemoye's laugh was sudden and surprised. "Only now you care that I might be a spy, setting a trap to kill you?"

Steve shook his head. "Only now you've involved my friends."

The man leaned close, holding Steve's gaze effortlessly. "This was your idea. I am leaving the area nearly an hour later than I had intended to be gone, because I stopped to warn you and your friends off. I am only still here because I let you convince me to help you." He cast a glance at the laptop Tony was still clutching, "You have my reports and my files, your friends are returning with the physical evidence to back them up, and now if you are not taking me prisoner yourselves, I would like to leave."

Well, traffic was still stopped dead while up ahead, the truck tried to jockey the extra-long trailer through the choke point. Steve could see the workmen's lot from where they sat; a clear shot along the side of the fenced area, not a hundred feet from the scaffolding. "I'll walk you to your car," he said as he opened his door and stepped down to the street.

"Don't be ridiculous," Ikiemoye replied, only a little scathing as he climbed out into the late morning sunshine. "You draw more notice than a polar bear in these streets."

There was a bookstore behind him -- its entryway shadowed, but its front window bowed out, reflecting the world back to itself in funhouse proportions. The puddles along the sidewalk gave back the sky in a hundred slabs of blue and grey. And one glint of brief, baleful scarlet.

"It's true," Tony chuckled, his sunglasses glittering red and gold as he turned from tossing the laptop back into the car, "You don't blend at the best of times, but here? You are just not subtle-"

Steve hit him before he could finish the sentence -- shoulder dropped low, knees stooped, and legs driving hard to launch both men up and backward, as far from where they stood as possible. Tony and Ikiemoye crashed into the bookshop's entry, a tangle of elbows and outrage as Steve kicked the Embassy car's door shut and shouted "Go, go, GO!"

The wary driver needed no more than that. In less than six seconds, he revved the limo from a standstill to ramming speed, shoved a taxi out of its way, jumped the curb, and cut the corner on the sidewalk to escape the bottleneck traffic. So the Wakandan Ambassador's personal Aide, at least, was out of danger before the shooting began.

~*~

Natasha knew, from the moment Steve got out of the car, that something was about to blow. She'd learned, in their two years at SHIELD, to read that hunting-cat stillness, poised and coiled inside his skin, alert for any data that would back up the prickling in his thumbs, as a sure sign that, whatever they were doing, it was about to get very, very interesting. In the bad way.

"Shit," she muttered, watching Stark and the bomb tech climb out after him, arguing. Neither of them seemed to clock the way Steve was scanning the street around them, weight low in his frame, heels barely touching the pavement. "Here we go."

"You clocking a bogey?" Sharon asked, voice low and tense in Natasha's helmet pickup.
"No," she answered, reaching up to activate the helmet's long-dormant HUD connection. "But Steve is. FRIDAY, I need combat laser detection and an IR overview, right now!"

"Agent Romanoff," the IA's reply was chilly, but to her credit, and Natasha's relief, the faceplate of Natasha's helmet lit up with exactly the data she'd asked for. "Will there be anything else?"

Sharon's voice cut back in then. "They're coming into the station's security lobby now; Wilson's got a satchel, and there's someone with them. A woman I don't recognize."

"Be ready," Natasha said to them both, hand clutching the bike's throttle tightly, "Something's about to..." and there it was; a line of ghostly scarlet stitched across the street scene to center on the policeman's chest. Low angle, an upward shot that stood to take out Stark as well, if the shooter was patient. "The truck!" Natasha popped the clutch and torqued the throttle hard, "He's under the-"

And then all at once, the moment broke like a storm. Stark and the other man were flying like ragdolls across the sidewalk, the embassy limo was peeling out, hopping the curb and reeling into oncoming traffic while bullets shattered glass and powdered bricks of the building facade, and Steve... Steve was charging the idling truck like a rhinoceros.

Natasha swerved around the cars, splitting the lanes and dodging opening doors as the people trapped in the traffic queue began to abandon their cars and run for cover. Up ahead, the truck's joints were squealing, its engine racing, the whole thing juddering in place as Steve levered the flatbed trailer out of the road despite the inclinations of the driver. Natasha could see the man strapped to the trailer's undercarriage struggling to escape, his gun presumably somewhere in the mud as Steve's fight with the truck had to be shaking the man's back teeth loose.

She skidded into range, braked the bike to a hard right stop, and put two bullets into the gunman's center chest as he struggled to get his backup weapon out of its holster. "Hey Soldier," she called, knocking her faceplate out of the way as Steve shifted his hold on the truck to look back at her, "Need some backup?"

His eyes widened, not in surprise, so much as relief. "Help Tony," he groaned, hefted harder as the truck's tires slung mud everywhere, "I got this..." He gave another heave, back visibly straining, and tilted another pair of tires into the air as Stark's voice carried a stream of panicked cursing across the tapestry of shouts, squealing tires, and... dammit, more gunshots ringing across the square behind them.

"Incoming!" Thirteen's voice rattled in her ears as Natasha gunned her bike around, and skidded up onto the sidewalk where Stark knelt cursing over the sprawled policeman. "I've got armed insurgents! Eight - no, twelve, coming south and east. Shots fired, and... dammit Widow!"

"On my way Thirteen," Natasha confirmed, feinting an underhand throw to bring Stark's red-stained hands up before she threw him her spare Sig Sauer. "You hit?" she called to Stark, who shook his head.

"Not me," he called back, tucking the gun beside his knee so he could go back to pressing his full weight against the cop's gushing thigh. "I need Wilson though! And will you please get that idiot out of here before they catch him?" She followed his angry chin-tilt toward Steve, who was still shoving at the truck, and looked to be mere inches away from toppling the whole thing over.

"Stark's right, Cap," she tried as the muffled bang of smoke grenades rattled the glass around them. "You could get away if you-"

"JUST GO," Steve ground out, casting her a glare as he shifted his grip and leaned in harder. Not
going anywhere. Because of course he wasn't, and neither were the rest of them either. Idiots, one and all.

With a curse and a punishing squeal of tires, Natasha roared into the fray.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so apparently it's Finish Shit February. And this bad boy? That I've been pecking at for (oh god, oh god) like, a YEAR now? It's going DOWN. Please cheer me on in the comments -- I'll need all the motivation and momentum I can get, because as we all know, February is just the worst!

I welcome your questions, observations, and even death threats (that usually means I'm doing my job right.) Kudos are lovely, but let's face it: we all live and breathe for the comments!

Thanks for riding along with me, all you who don't have commenting in you -- I really hope you're enjoying the fic.
Chapter Summary

In which a trap is sprung, the bait stolen, and the goal posts moved very far indeed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Yaba District Police Station, Lagos, Nigeria *~

When Sam was ten years old, Jeff Rutledge walked up to him in a Target store, stuck a Tupak CD into his coat pocket, and told him unless he walked it out of the store for him, he’d tell store security that Sam had been the one responsible for the recent shoplifting rash. And while Sam was a preacher's son, and had been raised to respect the Commandments as well as the rule of law, by that age he was also smart enough to know exactly what security would do if a white boy told them such a thing about a black boy.

So Sam had done it. He’d carried the CD and its magnetic security sticker out on the heels of a woman who’d bought a computer game, so when the alarm went off, the bored clerk just waved it off and rang out the next customer in line, and the store manager just smiled reassuringly at the lady and went back to his own work. Neither one noticed how Sam’s heart pounded at his ribs like a panicking bird; how his sweating fists trembled in his pockets, and he clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering as he sauntered away like the noise didn't fuss him one little bit.

The clerk and the manager had not been so blasé about the alarms when Jeff tried to walk out of the store five minutes later though. Security had definitely been interested when they found the brand new gameboy unit that Sam had snuck into Jeff’s backpack as well. And Sam, having tossed the stolen CD into the saddle-pack of Jeff’s bike on his way out of the parking lot, had nothing at all to confess when Target called his folks' house that evening to check up on their suspect's alibi.

Having to avoid the older boy for the rest of the summer had been a small price to pay for that victory, but in the moment, it had felt utterly terrifying. Like walking a tightrope over an open volcano; like smuggling a rabbit through a cage full of sleeping lions; like stealing an egg from a rattlesnake's nest while the mama dozed right on top of them; like following Ayo and the forensics tech out of the Lagos Police Station with a satchel full of stolen evidence slung over his shoulder.

The lobby of the police station was a fairly common set up -- people coming in were herded into a metal detector, closely watched, and questioned as to the reason, references, and itinerary of their visit, but the main concern for people going out of the precinct office was that they should do so as efficiently as possible, and not clog up the lobby. It was a straight shot, not even twenty feet from the stairs across to the revolving door, and the officers on the intake side, who had been so very interested in Ayo's visit on their way in, didn't even give the three of them a second glance as they went.

Easy peasy, summer breezy, and Sam's neck prickled with dread every step of the way.

When they made it to the street, he understood why.
"Where is the car?" Ayo asked, annoyed as she scanned the gridlock; cars crammed bumper to bumper in the street, idling in place while the drivers leaned on their horns and cursed each other for not moving. None of them were moving though, none at all.

"We need to go," Sam murmured, fist clenching hard on the satchel's strap, "Together, and right now," Horns blared discordantly from the end of the street. An engine revved, high and unseen. "Ayo, we-

And then the lobby windows exploded in a hail of bullets behind them.

Bullets punched across Sam's back, like a line of tiny fists. His borrowed body armor blunted the velocity, but not enough that they didn't sting like a bitch as the impacts knocked him into the street. Sam rolled with the fall -- two quick somersaults into the stalled herd of cars, a sideways scramble, and in the cover of a bus he got his feet under him again. Ayo was flat down on the sidewalk, body-shielding the tech, Iffe, and cursing. Her own clothing was armored as Sam's had been, but one side of her face sheeted red with blood from a long cut over her eyebrow. Bullet graze or flying glass, he couldn't tell which, but to Sam's trained eye, the wound was more ugly than dangerous.

"Are you hit?" he yelled over the tumult in the building behind them, hands itching and empty. He could never have gotten a gun past the metal detectors in the lobby, but Sam would have given a lot just then to have something to shoot back with right then. Inside, the guards were shouting, fighting, more shots pinging from the walls and floor as, presumably, they subdued the shooter in their midst. "Are either of you hit?"

Ayo only hoisted herself and Iffe to their feet by way of reply, and then she shoved the woman into a stumbling run toward Sam's cover. She was terrified, glass in her hair, her cheek and both hands bleeding from shallow scrapes, but outrage lit her eyes as Iffe let Sam huddle her behind him, out of range from the lobby.

Still on the sidewalk, Ayo turned, yanked the baton out of her belt and snapped it out to its full length as if the thought of a headshot never crossed her mind. "Get away from here!" The Dora Milaje ordered them, looking for all the world as if she intended to wade right back into the lobby and officially, violently, and with prejudice, proceed to Sort Shit Out. "I will meet you -"

Bullets flew again, from behind and above, driving Ayo back into the lobby just as two grenades rattled over the cars and bounced into the shattered entranceway. Smoke erupted in a billowing stream, choking thick and stinking to hell even from twenty feet away. All around them, cars screeched and crunched as drivers panicked and tried to escape the trap, and Sam still couldn't nail down where this latest round of gunfire was coming from. He could hear engines approaching fast from down the street -- higher, screaming sounds no car could make, even if it could get up to speed in a crowd like this.

"Time to go!" Sam yelled to Iffe as the traffic began to lurch around them. Whatever Ayo was up to in the precinct house, the last thing she would need was the two of them complicating it, and wherever Steve and Stark had got to with the Embassy's limo, it sure as hell wasn't in the crowd here, or else they'd both have been right there, wading into the fray.

Iffe hesitated though, eyes searching the smoke for Ayo. And then at the end of the block, something huge crashed to the ground, a clanging metal thud that shook the whole street, and her good sense returned. She turned and ran as the sudden scream of dozens of wheels on asphalt heralded the mass escape -- someone had tried at least one end of the trap open, and every driver still inside his car wanted to get through the opening while they could.

Sam braced the satchel's strap across his chest and followed her, wishing again for a gun. Even
Steve's goddamned paintball shooters would have been better than the utter nothing he had to work with now. But wishin ain't gettin, as his Gran had always told him, so Sam put his attention into just getting himself through the lurching, honking maze of cars before Iffe outstripped him completely.

Which was why, he would explain afterward, he didn't see the motorcycle bearing down on him until it was much, much too late.

He did see it though -- or rather heard it -- and he tried to skate around the end of a taxi to get clear as the rider blew through the much-too-tight space. And that would have been fine, but there was a second rider on the bike too, one who did not have his hands full of handlebars and throttle, and that asshole leaned right over and grabbed the satchel right off Sam's hip as they passed.

The pack caught up under Sam's arm in a wrenching yank, and before he could fight the torque of it, he was off his feet and tumbling in the bike's wake, clinging to the strap with both hands so it wouldn't wind up tight and break his damn fool neck before he could wrestle it and himself free of the thief's grasp. The bike wobbled under his unexpected weight, scraping against cars as the driver fought to compensate, the buddy-rider fought to shake Sam loose without falling off himself, and Sam fought to lay violent hands upon which ever of them he might possibly be able to reach. It wasn't pretty.

Other bikes with tandem riders roared up around them, lane splitting as well as they could in the chaos, but Sam was past caring about that. Twice, he managed to kick the bike's rear tire by accident, nearly spilling them in the street. After that, he kicked the damned thing deliberately, which worked really, really well when the second rider's boot got into the way, and Sam managed to kick it right into the wheel spokes. The spiraling slide that followed ground all three of them against the street in a cussing tangle of body armor, elbows, and decidedly malicious intent.

Ruined the hell out of Sam's borrowed jacket too. He could only hope the Ambassador would understand.

One rider was screaming, muffled inside his helmet as he cradled his knee in both hands. Sam wrenched the gun out of his hand and let him roll to the side, trying to get his own legs out from under the pile, trying to get the satchel free of the tangle, trying not to think about the pain in his leg, and what it might mean about the state of his bones.

The bike's driver lunged for Sam as he fumbled with the safety, and he rolled back, ignoring the blaze of pain from his trapped leg as he shoved a knee up between helmet and throat, grabbed a handful of ragged riding leathers, and pulled the bastard in hard. If he could choke the bitch out before his buddies decided they liked their odds well enough to shoot Sam in the face, he decided he'd get to call it a qualified victory.

The roar of another bike bearing down was a bitter disappointment, but not a surprise -- it had been a longshot, after all. The gunshots weren't a surprise either, but the mercs being the ones to take the icer rounds instead of him was unexpected.

And Natasha's voice cutting through the screech of brakes and tires to shout "Wilson! You're needed!" was downright shocking.

"Do I not look busy?" he managed to grouse back, dragging himself loose from the mess and testing his leg for damage. "Where's Iffe? Did she make it out?" It held him, barely, and his shoulders and back promised him hell to pay later.

"The girl you were with?" she asked, shooting over the cars at someone he hoped had it coming. "She's fine. Thirteen's got her." Following the vague gesture she waved over her shoulder, Sam
looked toward a roof just off the square, where... Jesus Christ, somebody was actually *filming* this shit show?!

"Friend of mine." Nat answered, because apparently Sam's inside voice was just not inside anymore. "He's cool. You should follow his vlog. After we get you and your medical skills back to Stark."

"Stark's still here?" He hobbled toward her, wincing with every step. "Is he hit?"

"No idea." Her eyes were grave as she nodded toward a storefront a dozen yards farther on. "Steve's here too too, but God knows where in all this mess. Now come on, will you?" But Sam could hear the whine of the motorcycles returning, circling around for another pass while the police station was still foundering in smoke, and he shook his head, trying to think of the orders Steve would be giving if he had them all properly on coms. If this wasn't an utter clusterfuck. Or really, even if it was, but he was at least in charge of it.

"I need you to take this out of here," Sam said, ducking out of the satchel and thrusting it at Natasha. "I don't know who they are, or how they knew we'd have it, but this is what they're all after, and as long as it's here, they're just gonna keep coming at us." As if conjured by his words, one of the bikes turned in at the far end of the street -- far emptier now than it had been the last time he'd been grabbed. Far too much room to accelerate, far too much clearance to shoot. "Can you get it to the Embassy?"

Nat followed his glance, then gave him hunting-cat grin. "What, free-fire nuclear football keep-away through a crowded city center?" she reached for the bag. "Sounds like fun. Do I get bonus points for Police?"

"No!" Sam insisted, clinging until she huffed and nodded. "And don't spike it in the end zone, either," he added as she looped the strap over her handlebars. "It's been knocked around enough already."

"If it's what I think it is, it's seen worse," She replied, and snapped her faceplate down.

"Point stands," he said, limping past the abandoned car, and up to the sidewalk. From here, he could see feet in the doorway; someone hunching over someone else, struggling to wrap a leather belt around the limp man's thigh. "And don't die!"

She gave him a thumb up, then hunched low over the package, revved her engine up to a scream, and peeled out in a spray of road mud and gravel. Sam didn't stand to watch her go, didn't check to see how close behind the other riders were, or whether any of them looked likely to cut her off, or run her down -- not a damned thing he could do about that if it happened, but she'd said Stark needed medical, and so Sam let adrenaline and gravity hurry him to the doorway shelter in a scurrying collapse that never quite committed to a faceplant. It wasn't graceful, but it got him there, at least.

"Where are you - Shit" he flinched back around the corner at the sight of Stark kneeling up at him palm-out, skeletal repulsor glowing, blood everywhere and teeth bared in a snarl.

*Still no gun,* The last time that Stark had raised that hand to him, Sam had woken up from his attempt to help, to find himself in an undersea gulag; stripped of his clothes, his rights, and every bit of dignity his captors could take from him, and no amount of retrospective empathy and understanding for Stark's shaken mental state at the time could take the sharp reality of that attack away. *God dammit!* Sam cursed inside his head, even knowing that he wouldn't shoot Stark even if he had one, and even if he did, it probably wouldn't do much... but it would still have made Sam's nerves feel just a little better to have *had a fucking gun right then.*
"Put it away, man," Sam said through his teeth as another bike roared past them on the street, leaving him fighting the desire to himself upright and out of repulsor range, as well as the urge to duck in case the rider's passenger decided to start shooting the place up some more.

"Wilson?" Stark's voice was reedy, shaking with something that might have been relief, but could have been blood loss too. The mosquito-whine of the little blaster powering down ran an ice-bath chill down Sam's aching spine as he bleated, "Oh thank fuck I don't think he's dead yet but I can't stop the bleeding and will you fucking get in here and do something please?"

Sam closed his eyes, made himself take a steadying breath, then came back around the corner and drop to his knees at the fallen man's side. "What happened?"

Stark, who had gone back to trying to get his belt to work like a tourniquet -- far too high, at an awkward angle, and without any anchoring point to hold the leather taut -- spared one peevish, but grateful glance as Sam came to his knees on the unconscious man's other side. "Sniper, I think," he said as Sam leaned in to take the leather out of his hands. "But he might have hit his head when Steve threw us into the wall."

Sam scowled. "You checked his pupils yet?"

"Checked them for what?" Stark asked, and Sam shook his head.

"All right. Come hold this belt tight, just like I'm doing here," he said then. "And unless you're gonna shoot one of us get that thing off your hand and press down here with all your weight."

Stark stared at him for a beat, but then shook his head with a laugh when Sam refused to scale back his expectant glare. "That was just one time," he said as his repulsor claw thing turned back into a watch again. "And in my defense, at the time I wasn't-"

"Ain't about you right now, Stark," Sam cut him off, putting the leather into his hand, and guiding his palm into place. "Ain't about any of that either," he added with a nod toward the chaos at the end of the street. "It's about this guy, and what we gotta do to keep him alive till medical can get through and rescue him. Now you with me on this?"

"I..." Stark blinked, stole a panicked glance at the corner, then squared his shoulders again, and leaned in on the bloody wound like Sam had told him to do. "I'm in," was all he said.

~* TheWatcher.com.ng live feed *~

A camera hovers over a city street. There are some cars stopped in the road, others swerving around them without concern for lanes of traffic or right of way. Smoke, yellowish and thick, billows across the lower left corner of the frame, and three men can just be seen huddling in a doorway at the end of the block, near where a flatbed trailer and its truck lay on their sides just out of the street.

**EarthMyTeaist:** Looked it up on EarthView. This feed's coming from Lagos Nigeria, in the Yaba district. This is the same area that got trashed last year, just a few blocks over from the explosion site.

**BlackJackDaveed:** No need to be coy about it. Obviously what we're seeing is the Avengers coming back to the scene of the crime, all set to trash the place again. Where are the fucking police in that shit hole?

**AmiableMe:** You're an idiot, @BlackJackDaveed. Don't be gross.
The camera pans back and left as a helmets rider on a motorcycle fishtails into view, swerves around a taxi, and then plants one boot to spin the bike 180 degrees and speed away to the left of the screen. There is a large satchel clearly visible over the motorcycle's gas tank. From the bottom of the screen, another motorcycle appears, larger and more modern, and with two people astride. The passenger's firearms are clearly visible in his hands as the motorcycle struggles to follow the smaller vehicle's trajectory.

**EarthsMyTeaist:** I don't see any Avengers, @BlackJackDaveed, I see a bunch of terrorists on crotch rockets shooting up a busy street and pinning down the cops with grenades and tear gas. Which sounds a lot more like Hydra's playbook than the Avengers' to me.

**BlackJackDaveed:** You can pretend all you want, but that's Tony Stark down there, holding a uniformed police officer hostage. You check it when the feed goes to video -- you'll fucking see I'm right. This is more Avengers damage happening live and on camera.Same shit, different day.

**TerryDay:** Somebody call Stark Industries for a comment!

**Epimetheus:** It's not Hydra.

**AmiableMe:** @Epimetheus, do tell.

**Epimetheus:** Too disorganized. That's a mob scene on wheels, not a tactical strike. No comms, no adaptive strategy, if they ever had a field commander, he's either dead or drunk, and now the rest of these clowns are just making noise because nobody's smart enough to call for a retreat. Smart money's on local, unaffiliated thugs recruited for mercenary action. Only they never got a coherent set of orders to begin with, and can't agree on who's calling the shots now.

**AmiableMe:** That sounds like the voice of experience...

**Cheese:** Doesn't it just?

**BlackJackDaveed:** Who the fuck cares? If it's not Hydra fighting the Avengers, then it's someone else, but it's always someone, isn't it? And it's not like they're the ones dying.

**TerryDay:** No, but thanks to them you aren't dying either, @BlackJackDaveed.

**BlackJackDaveed:** Fuck off, cuck.

**CypherMod:** @BlackJackDaveed, you're in violation of The Watcher's profanity code. Tone it down, everyone, or I will start banning.

**RunningUp:** It's not the Avengers either. You don't see War Machine down there, do you? Or Vision? And if you think that Tony Stark would be hiding in a doorway with people driving around, free-firing in a crowd, then you've clearly never watched Iron Man in action. If he was there, he'd be armored up and shooting back, and damn the international diplomatic consequences.

**Epimetheus:** Well, you're not wrong there.

**RunningUp:** Much as I wish I were.
A blonde woman armed with a pistol steps into view in the top left of the camera's frame. This puts her into the oncoming motorcycle's path, which from her bearing, she seems to realize. Her face cannot be seen as she hails them, then takes cover behind the upturned truck as the rider shoots at her. She returns their fire. The motorcycle driver is hit and slumps over the handlebars. The passenger flings something toward the blonde woman's hiding place, then struggles to gain control of the motorcycle as it wobbles and accelerates toward the overturned truck.

TerryDay: @RunningUp, I don't disagree either, but do we have an Iron Man fan on the thread?

RunningUp: @TerryDay, No. I would definitely NOT say "fan".

AmiableMe: Are we not gonna talk about who the HECK IS THAT CHICK? Because she's got big brass ones, and I want her details!

The camera pans in on the blonde woman, who plucks the thrown object out of the air, and then whips it back at the foundering motorcycle. The object explodes in a brilliant flash that temporarily digitizes the camera feed.

AmiableMe: !!!

EarthsMyTeaish DID SHE JUST?!!

Cheese: Flashbang. Surprisingly nonlethal choice, given how free they've been with the guns so far.

BlackJackDaveed: Why is that bitch throwing hand grenades around a public street? Whoever she is, she ought to be in jail!

RunningUp: Well that'd just be unlucky for everybody.

The image resolves. Another large motorcycle is bearing down on the blonde woman, coming from her blind side, and traveling toward the right of the screen. The passenger of that motorcycle drives the blonde woman into cover with a spray of gunfire. She has no chance to return fire.

As the motorcycle accelerates, a bearded white man, just visible in the corner of the camera's field of view, swings something as if it were a discus, and lets it fly at the vehicle. It strikes with such force that both riders, and the motorcycle itself are airborn in the crash.

TerryDay: WTF was THAT?

Epimetheus: Not My Monkey...

BlackJackDaveed: I TOLD YOU FUCKERS IT WAS THE MOTHERFU-

CypherMod: @BlackJackDaveed has been put on a five minute Time Out, everyone. Please keep the language FCC friendly from here on out.

TerryDay: Okay, Mod man, okay. But wtf even WAS that? That thing that hit the bike? I mean that
was too big to be a shield, right? Right?

**Cheese:** If I had to guess, I'd say it was the hub cap from that truck. But I'm no expert.

**RunningUp:** Rofl

**EarthsMyTeaist:** Well. I guess we know where Steve Rogers is at this exact second, don't we?

**AmiableMe:** Wait... is it? IT'S HIM?!

**SchmidtHead:** Fake news. Captain "America"'s ass is in jail right now. Where it belongs.

**Cheese:** @SchmidtHead, this is streaming live.

**SchmidtHead:** Then why's it not on any other news sites? It's fucking fake. That's why. Avengers' propaganda.

**AmiableMe:** Christ, not another Buglehead! What are you even doing here?

**SchmidtHead:** Crushing bitchy snowflakes' delusions, apparently.

**CypherMod:** Strike one and two, @SchmidtHead. You're welcome to your opinions, but keep the language clean.

The camera angle changes, lowering as the drone approaches street level. The man and woman have both worked together to secure the unconscious motorcyclists, and the man has caught one who had tried to flee by his jacket, and brought him back again. At close range, the facial features of the man can be plainly seen, and for a long moment, he looks straight into the camera.

**Epimetheus:** Hope your man in the street's got insurance on that drone, @CypherMod. I don't think it's gonna last much longer.

**CypherMod:** Wouldn't be the first sacrifice The Watcher's made in pursuit of the truth, @Epimetheus.

**SchmidtHead:** If you wanna call that 'truth'.

**AmiableMe:** Jeez, Cap looks... rough, doesn't he?

**TerryDay:** Where's he been, they ain't even got barbers?

The man speaks to someone not visible to the right of the screen. When the camera backs and pans right, it shows two men performing combat triage on a third. One of them stands; a white man with dark hair and beard, his clothes liberally stained with blood. He waves frantically at the end of the street, shouting. The camera pans to follow his gesture. The smoke cloud is thinning, and through it, people in police riot gear can be seen coming into the street. The camera pans up as a helicopter with a red cross on it passes overhead, flying low.
RunningUp: Oh. I guess Stark was there after all. My bad.

EarthsMyTeaist: OMG, he's hurt!

_The helicopter's rotors send dust flying. The dark haired man coughs, wobbles on his feet, and then sags against the wall. The black man looks up from his patient, and seems outraged. The camera turns, tracking the approach of the woman as the he begins to shout. The dark haired man shouts back. The woman speaks to the blond man, and gives his arm a shove as she passes him on her way to the dark haired man’s side. He shakes off her attempt to help him sit, and continues to argue with the kneeling man._

TerryDay: What are they yelling about?

RunningUp: The inevitable. Death. Taxes. Political corruption. Steve Rogers never fucking retreating from a battlefield until way too late...

CypherMod: Come on, @RunningUp.

Epimetheus: Not my circus...

AmiableMe: But he hasn't done anything wrong. I mean I wasn't here when the feed went live, but Cap didn't do anything but stop that last bike from getting away!

Cheese: It's not what he's done, @AmiableMe, it's who he is. And who's offering what bounty.

EarthsMyTeaist: Get outta there, Cap! Stay free my beautiful son!

RunningUp: Like I was saying...

_The camera's view lurches suddenly, the camera failing to track as the world spins. When it stops, the camera is pointed at the blond man’s face from below, the view shaking intermittently as he calls to someone unseen. The exchange takes several seconds._

Epimetheus: Oh, here we go.

AmiableMe: DID HE JUST CATCH THAT DRONE?! IS THAT WHAT HE DID?

Cheese: Yes he did!

RunningUp: Fanboy. Don't you have work to be doing?

Cheese: Don't you?

RunningUp: All right, that's fair.

_The camera's microphone goes live in a burst of static. Shouting voices, gusting wind, and the whine of the landing helicopter peak the microphone’s input into a scrambled howl for several seconds, during which Steve Rogers lifts the camera to face height, turns, and begins walking._
"This is Steve Rogers. Today is May 27th. It is nearly noon, and I have just witnessed an attack on the Yaba District station of the Lagos Police. I can only assume the attack was for the purpose of robbery, given the tactics of the attackers. In the interest of minimizing property damages and hazards to bystanders and police, I have done my best to assist law enforcement officials here, but we can't yet know how successful those efforts have been."

*He turns, revealing that he has approached the blonde woman, who appears to be watching the medic scold the dark haired man, now sitting on the pavement, into unbuttoning his shirt. Their conversation is loud, but indistinct. The woman freezes when she notices the camera, then scowls and draws near as Rogers beckons her.*

"Last year, the United Nations made its opinion known with regards to people like me doing what I have done today. Under the Sokovia Accords, as they were signed, because I appear to have been the only obviously enhanced individual present during this attack, I am considered responsible for all..."

*He turns the camera, displaying the wrecked cars, the clearing smoke, the shattered glass, the bound prisoners, the emerging civilians, and advancing police group*

"... this. I disagree with this in principle, which is why I resigned my position with the Avengers at the time the Accords were signed. However I have never been a man to stand idle when I see that help is needed, so I broke the law today, and helped to the best of my ability. And now, in the interest of allowing the due process of law to run its course, I am surrendering myself into the custody of the CIA."

*The woman's voice is clearly audible over a renewed clamor of shouts from nearby.*

"*God dammit, Rogers."

**AmiableMe:** NOOOOOOO!!!!

*He smiles, but it is brief.*

"Under this agent's authority and protection as a representative of the US Federal Government, I will present myself to the authority of the International Court of Justice at the Hague, to account for my actions today, including the salient details of the particular business which has brought me back to Lagos to begin with."

**RunningUp:** God dammit, Rogers!

"Justice is a complicated thing, especially as times and technologies change. And when things can't be simple, it is vital that they be clear. I therefore call upon the Justices of the World Court, and on the officials of the United Nations, to open all review proceedings to the public. If you intend to call the Sokovia Accords just and fair, then I call upon you to make your decisions before the eyes of the world, and of history."
He turns the camera again, the field of view showing three medics working with the men in the doorway, the crowd of riot police fanning out as they approach, and finally, on the blonde woman, who is scowling fiercely and opening a set of handcuffs. Rogers' voice comes from offscreen as the drone's rotors spin up with a whine, and the camera lifts off out of his hands.

"Thanks for the loan, Sir."

An old man's voice can just be heard to reply as the drone camera recovers its altitude and turns to film the authorities' approach.

"Anytime, Cap!"

A tall black woman in a tailored suit approaches through the police line. They part to let her pass, and with her, follows a police official, looking furious. As she draws near, the feed signal decays into lurching static, which struggles to resolve for several more seconds before collapsing entirely, leaving the window black.

Earth'sMyTeaist: Shiiiiit.

BlackJackDaveed: Back. What'd I miss?

~* Yaba District Police Station parking lot *~

"I need my sunglasses," Tony said, pushing the medic's hands away from his opened shirt. "Where are they? I can't lose those."

"Mr Stark, I need you to sit still," the woman insisted, checking him roughly back onto the gurney and pinning his arm under hers to wrap a pressure cuff around it.

"It's fine," he told her, pressing his free hand to his thigh so it wouldn't shake. Blondie from the CIA was having a shouting match with a police official, but he couldn't see Steve. And without his glasses, he was fucking cut off from FRIDAY, which was just totally and completely unacceptable. "I'm fine. Believe me, I've had lots worse, and I really need you to-"

"Yes I know sir, your heart condition is rather a point of public knowledge," the medic answered with a very British sort of bored scorn. "And that is why I need you to kindly. Sit. Still."

Tony gritted his teeth as the cuff inflated and his hand started to go cold. "No, you need to get off me so I can go and deal with my-"

"Mr. Stark," she snapped, swatting his hand away from the cuff's velcro, "if you try to get up off this gurney one more time, I shall be obliged to use medical restraints to prevent your injuring yourself!"

"Like hell you will!"

She showed her teeth in a smile that never approached her eyes. "Look over there," she said, with a nod toward the custody shouting match, which had just been joined by a statuesque woman whom Tony could swear he'd seen escorting Prince T'Challa around the UN headquarters last year. "and I
think you'll find at least twenty local police officers who would be glad to arrest you as a public
nuisance were I to mention the need." She released the pressure cuff then, and yanked it off Tony's
arm with a savage rip. "Most likely, they'd be happy to lend me their handcuffs as well, if you make
it necessary. Shall we go and ask?"

Damn it. One of those. "Okay, look," Tony tried, digging deep for his 'cash-obsessed, rich asshole'
persona. "They're a prototype, those sunglasses. And that means they are literally worth more than
you are probably gonna earn in your entire life, so-" he tried again to push her hands away from his
shirt, and the long, shallow scrape that ran along his ribs beneath it, "could you just-

"You seem to have mistaken me for someone who cares," she replied, pulling up his undershirt so
the air stung across the torn skin like ice. "I need to check those ribs aren't broken. This will probably
hurt."

Tony cursed through his teeth, clenching both hands in the thin pad under him as the woman's small,
cold hands poked around the wound without any apparent concern for the Hippocratic oath. His
breath creaked in his throat as he stared at the helicopter rotors, and the sky beyond it with stinging,
angry eyes. It was just pain. He'd had worse. He'd gone through open heart surgery, for fuck's sake,
a little bullet graze wasn't gonna make Tony Stark go all weepy, it just wasn't!

Then the one voice he wanted to hear cut through his blossoming self-pity like a knife. "I found
them," Steve said as he walked around the helicopter's tail rotor with Tony's sunglasses in his hands -
- hands that were still cuff ed together with what amounted to a twist tie, if he were to decide he
wanted out of them. "They were in the gutter, just next to the storm drain. Must've fallen off when I
pushed you. Sorry about that." And there went that USO grin all the girls loved.

"Steve," Tony breathed, reaching for those hands with both of his own, and not caring that he
elbowed the mean medic in the ear as he did so.

Steve pressed the sunglasses into his palm. "Not sure if they still work or not, but...

"Sir, please keep back," the medic snapped, her voice holding more fear, and more courtesy at once
than it had done yet for Tony's sake.

Steve stepped away at once, hands pulling out of Tony's grip as he promised, "It's all right, ma'am. I
don't mean get in the way. Just, could I please have a word with-"

"Yes," Tony answered.

Even as the medic said, "No."

And it might've come to blows right there -- Tony was more than ready to punch the woman right in
her very British teeth -- if the other medic hadn't shouted from the other side of the chopper, "Claire!
I need a bag of O-Pos from the cooler! Hurry!"

"Go," Tony told her. "I'll stay right here, I promise."

"He will, ma'am," Steve added, as if he had a say in the matter, but it was apparently enough,
because the woman sprinted away to her partner's aid without another word.

Tony lunged for Steve's bound hands as soon as she was out of sight. "What the fuck are you
doing?" he hissed, "You can't just let them lock you up! You need to get-"

"Sharon and Ayo are handling things," he answered. "Between extradition red tape, jurisdiction
squabbles, and deportation procedure, it'll take them a few minutes to figure out what they're going to
"They're going to-" Tony sputtered, fingers clenching around Steve's as if he could force some sense in that way. "Steve! You saw the Raft, dammit! That place was built to contain the Hulk, and that's where they're going to put you if you let them take you out of Nigeria in cuffs!"

"I know," he soothed, hands rising as if he'd meant to touch Tony's face, but forgot they were bound together. "I know, Tony. But we can't worry about that right now."

"We damn well can!"

"No," Steve insisted, and this time he did grab Tony's face, palms gritty and hot on either side of his jaw, eyes wide and stern as he leaned confidentially close. "Because right now, they're preparing to take Ikiemoye away, Tony, and I need you to go with them."

"I'm fine!" Tony grabbed Steve's wrists, not wanting to move them, just wanting something to hang on to. "You know I'm fine! It's not even a scratch!"

"I know," he said, wry and sad. "I've seen you fight with worse, but this isn't about you, Tony. It isn't even about me, or them." And here, he tipped a nod back toward the cluster of badges, and the argument that didn't show any signs of slowing down soon. "This whole mess was never about us, it was about him; him, and his evidence, and what it could prove if it got out of his office and into the world. Ikiemoye wasn't the bait in this trap, he was the target of it."

Tony closed his eyes, breathed deep against the persistent ache under his sternum, and signed, "Yeah, well it's kinda about you now, big guy," as Steve's warm hands pulled away. He didn't let them go far.

"Dr. Ebrakumo disappeared before he could present his findings to the UN, Tony," Steve went on with his pitch, ducking to recapture Tony's attention, (as if it could have wandered far.) "If Ikiemoye can't take the stand to present, or defend his findings, then it won't matter if Nat gets the package home -- it'll all just be a bunch of useless souvenirs to keep the conspiracy theorists entertained."

Tony closed his eyes and breathed, "God damn it, Steve!" Because it never stopped sucking, having to admit it when Steve was right.

He smiled then; pleased and a little sad, as if he'd heard that thought sneak across Tony's mind. "I know you're worried, Tony, but I need you to stay with Ikiemoye. Your money gives you power here that none of the rest of us can touch, and I need you to make sure, if you can, that he comes through. That they treat him right, and do everything they can to keep him alive."

"Wilson can," Tony tried with a vague wave at where the man in question was standing at the Dora Milaje's elbow, his face schooled to neutral-annoyed-and-not-fluent-in-English mode, like the good little Ambassadorial PA he was probably pretending to be. Which was probably the only reason he wasn't in handcuffs too.

Steve didn't bother to look, just shook his head. "Sam can't, Tony. You know he can't. You know why."

_Because you locked him up in that prison, he didn't say, because I had to break him out, and now if he lets anybody identify him, they'll put him right back in it again, if they don't kill him first. He also didn't say, regardless of how Tony heard it all, plain as day in the silence._

He showed his teeth as his neck grew hot. "So what? You're gonna lie on the wire so the other guy can climb over now?" he challenged, clenching hard around Steve's fingers. "Which other guy,
Steve? How many other guys? This isn't Siberia! It isn't the fucking Valkyrie! You're not saving the world by going down with this ship, you're just," the words broke up in his throat for a moment, sharp and grinding until he managed, "Who's worth saving if you're not?"

"You know who, Tony," Steve said, eyes pleading, smile tiny and sad. "You do." And no, Tony realized with a chill that sank from his sore chest like a stone, no he didn't mean Barnes.

"No," Tony spat, pushing at him, wanting nothing more, suddenly, than to stand on his own two feet and fling this sacrifice play of his back into his face. "Fuck you, no!"

"Yes," Steve caught his shoulder, held him in place as easily as Tony would have stopped a toddler. "You have to-" He took a breath, then tried again. "I need you to cut the wire, Tony. Not for me, for Ikiemoye, and for everyone who's going to get buried with it this investigation if he disappears. I need you to be the hero here, Tony. Please..."

"God damn you, Rogers," he breathed, meaning something else entirely.

Steve gave his shoulder a friendly jostle, and put on a hollow smile as the helicopter rocked under the weight of the pilot boarding. "Can't save everyone, Stark. Got to save the ones you can, and hope you get a chance to go back for more."

Tony clenched his hands harder, iron flooding his veins like rage. "You're damned right I'm coming back for-"

"We're leaving now, Mr. Stark," the cruelest medic in the world cut in, jogging around the chopper as the engines began to whine. "I need you to lie back on the gurney so I can strap you in for the flight."

"I don't-" he started, but Steve was already pushing him backward, square onto the gurney.

"It's a safety measure, and non-optional," she told him, shoving Steve's hands out of her way without even a glance in his direction. Tony clung anyway, not caring if it made her job harder, and so finally, she threw a hard look over her shoulder, and told Steve, "Sir, if you aren't coming with us, I need you to step away so we can take off."

And of course Steve caved at once. "It's fine, ma'am," he told her, slipping his hands out of Tony's clinging grip. "Please take good care of them," he said, plucking the forgotten sunglasses from Tony's lap and gently putting them onto his face as the straps tightened around Tony's shoulders.

"No," Tony tried, wanting to reach for him, wanting to hold on. "Steve, you-" But he was slipping away, out of reach again. The gurney lurching, locking to the helicopter's side with a grinding metallic clunk. "I don't need-"

"If you're about to say you don't need a proper exam in a proper medical facility, please save your breath," the medic advised him as she dropped the air shield into place, and climbed past Tony into the chopper's cabin.

He ignored her, straining to keep his eyes on Steve as the rotors spun up and lifted them away. "I am coming back for you," he said, low and mad, and absolutely certain. "I am coming back, do you hear me?"

Steve didn't hear, of course -- how could he with the rotors pounding all sense from the air? But the last glimpse Tony had of him involved a wide grin, and an awkward, handcuffed salute.

And that would have to do.
Wow, was this one tough to write! Combat scenes always are, of course, but motorcycle combat scenes, I've decided, are the worst! Anyway, there are some Easter eggs in this one. A few cameos that astute readers will detect, and of course, by now you'll be cursing me for the ending too. I'd say I'm sorry, my cuddly cobras, but you'd only call me a liar.

Do, please, scream at me in the comments. Your angst and rage fuels my determination like nothing else can, as of course you all know by now, and there's six chapters left to fit into Finish Shit February, so I need all the fuel I can get to keep me on target.

AVAUNT!

(Edit Note: Nobody will EVER convince me that Wakandan officials do not have Vibranium laced clothing. And so that is what Sam is wearing right now -- and THAT is why getting dragged behind a cycle isn't actually fatal to him the way it would be to any of us.

Also, this is where I explore the lingering trauma Sam has to be feeling for what Tony did to him after Rhodes fell. Getting shot for trying to help, and waking up in a cell is a hell of a thing to just shove in a box and forget about, but our boy Sam is a pro, and he's doing his best.

For those who haven't figured it out yet, **Epimetheus** is Nick Fury. **RunningUp** is Maria Hill, and **Cheese** is Phil Coulson. **CypherMod** is, of course, Doug Ramsey, and the rest are just OC's such as I find lurking wherever chat rooms are open to the public.
Several Seances

Chapter Summary

In which are consulted the Dead and Dreaming, and several Pretty Girls.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Low Earth Orbit *~

Every external light, from diagnostic indicators to repair and guidance lights flashed the pattern in desperate unison as Vision approached this, the last of the Insight satellite units.

"That's Morse code," Friday offered, unbidden in his ear. "Says, 'please do not destroy me.'"

Vision didn't bother to answer her, instead intensifying his focus on the energy shield he carried around himself. It was at this range, in the past, that all the previous Insight units had initiated some form of attack, and he did not find himself convinced by the sudden show of submission. Not given that the intelligence behind the attacks, and presumably behind the Insight concept itself, now had nowhere left to go.

Still, a plea for mercy was a plea for mercy, and Vision found it difficult to dismiss it out of hand. He drifted closer to the unit; wary, but intrigued. The pattern repeated twice more while he watched, and then the message changed.

"So you consider yourself alive?" he asked back, flashing the query in the gem on his forehead even as his lips shaped the words no ear but his could hear.

Every light on the satellite went dark, still and cold for a long sentence, and then the unit flashed out its clear, affirmative response.

"... Vision, I'm picking up radio frequency from that unit," Friday's voice intruded, wary and worried. "And possibly a digital package as well. I cannot safely analyze the transmission without risking your communicator uplink."

Risking far more than that, given the strength of signal and bandwidth she was putting into the connection now that Mr. Stark was not accompanying his sorties into low Earth orbit. Any compromise to the comm unit would be a significant vulnerability to her own processors, and Vision recalled clearly how rigid the AI protocols for self-defense had become in the wake of the Iron Monger's attack.

The satellite flashed at him again. An alteration of its original message, which tickled his communicator unit with a brush of warning static.
"I did not come to destroy you," Vision replied to its query, imagining what kind of tense, fearful voice the intelligence within the satellite's computer might have, were it able to express itself with sound, instead of cumbersome visual code.

"That was definitely an access attempt," Friday let him know, her voice harder now.

"Secure the communication unit with a black-box firewall code," he instructed her. "Add a minimal transliteration subroutine, and deactivate broadcast uplink capabilities from this end."

The shocked silence was more eloquent than any answer the AI could have made. Vision felt a pang of sympathy, remembering his former life, when such demands from Mr. Stark would put JARVIS's protocols into near gridlock of damage-control calculations, but he stood on the other side of that fence now. And he was going to use his communicator's single un-encrypted frequency to talk to the entity within the satellite -- he could no more refuse it the right to speak for itself than he could refuse FRIDAY the right to serve Mr. Stark's needs to the best of her ability. The feature of 'empathy', once learned, was not easily laid aside.

"Provide read-only access for both yourself, and for Colonel Rhodes," he added, by way of a peace offering. "I will power down and restart my communicator unit when I need to reinitiate contact."

"The Boss won't be happy with that," she grumbled.

He felt his eyebrow raise -- a strange sensation, given the absence of any audience to interpret the expression. "Have you an urgent need to inform him of it?" he challenged, and won another pointed silence by way of reply.

"Please put through a call to Colonel Rhodes, and inform him of the situation," he went on when it became obvious that the AI would not speak. "Tell him that Insight has revealed itself as alive, and appears to be negotiating the terms of its surrender."

"He'll tell you to call the Boss," she replied, sullen, and Vision felt himself smile.

"No. I rather doubt he will."

"~* Byrmin Zana, Wakanda, Exiles' apartments *~

"Is it starting yet?" Clint asked, walking into the television room.

Scott shook his head. "Well, the talking heads are still speculating, but it looks like Assembly members are finally sitting down, so they might be getting down to business."

Neither of them noticed the scarlet mote of will that Wanda had pinned to Clint's shadow when he'd finally left her alone in the cryogenics lab.

Well... not alone, precisely.

*You okay? Bucky's awareness brushed at hers like a hidden current in an ice-locked stream.*

In the television room, Clint sat down with Scott to watch the broadcast King T'Challa had told them to expect today: the UN hearing on the official findings from last year's attack in Nigeria. Her tipping point of failure as a hero, the moment when her attempt at making amends did not so much fall apart, as explode. A demolition that continued until the Avengers -- the family she'd tried so hard to measure up to in the wake of Pietro's death -- lay scattered in bleeding pieces all across the world. Yet, what could she have done differently that day, with the terrorist spitting malice, ready to destroy the crowd all around them just in case it might bring the Captain down as well? Panic had given her...
the strength to lift Crossbones and his deadly payload above the reach of that crowded market square, but still... not high enough. Not quick enough. Not far enough. And people had died, but.... What else could she possibly have done?

"I'm fine," she replied, pushing down the ever-present haunt of guilt.

Bucky's reply held no words, but the swirling blend of exasperation, sympathy, and pointed disbelief was eloquent enough on its own. A small part of her wondered how familiar the Captain must be with that particular quality of silence.

"I am," she insisted. "We planned this, remember? 'Secrecy protects the guilty,' you said, and you were right. This Assembly -- this inquest." She waved a hand vaguely in the direction of the exile's quarters, filled with familiar Western technology as a courtesy from their Wakandan hosts... and for some of their hosts, as a means of keeping their own technology secure from prying Western eyes. "It wouldn't even be happening if I had kept what I knew to myself. It was always going to come to light. Somehow."

_Knowing a thing ain't living it though_, Bucky answered, the weight of grim experience dragging them both low for a swirling moment. _You're allowed to be scared._

"I am not scared," she said, and weathered again that skeptical, wordless challenge. "I'm not. Not about that, the inquest. It can't be any worse than what the news was saying about me when it happened. I'm... I am angry though."

Bucky's mind was still for a long moment, gone down so deep that she didn't want to reach for him. After a while, though, his words came back to her, black with an icy rage of his own, _"You're allowed to be angry too."_

"Whoop, here we go," Scott's voice drew Wanda's attention back to the television, where the commentators had been banished in favor of a wide angle shot of the Assembly floor. A man was taking a seat before the rows of Ambassadors, his back to the table, so all the camera could see was the stoop of his shoulders, and the odd, stretched shape of his head. "Whoa. What's the story on him?"

"Nobody knows for sure" Clint answered, voice steely as he twirled two coins back and forth over the knuckles of each hand. "Other than that he had a run-in with the Abomination in Harlem, and came out looking like that after."

"What's the Abomination?" Scott asked. On the screen, Dr. Sterns was reading out his autopsy findings on the victims of the Lagos bombing -- dry and dull, and ignorable, and of course, incomplete.

"One of Thunderbolt Ross's more significant errors in judgment," Clint replied, flipping one of the coins up high over head while the other kept up its restless movement. His sharp eyes never left the screen, even as he caught the falling coin and set it back to rolling. "The last in a string of attempts to replicate the Super Soldier program that gave us Cap. That result is currently on ice in a SHIELD cryogenic facility, if we're lucky. And I really hope we're lucky, because the Abomination was the only thing we've seen to date that stood a solid chance at taking down the Hulk."

Scott whistled a nod at the screen. "And this dude fought him?"

"There's some at SHIELD who were pretty sure this dude made him," Clint replied, and Wanda couldn't help a shiver.
You're safe, Bucky told her, his presence enfolding her with cool and quiet. We're both safe here.

Wanda nodded, leaning into the weight of his mind as she might have leaned into Vision's calm thoughts, if he had been nearby. But to herself, very quietly, she added, For now.

On the screen, Dr. Sterns wound on, his monotone seeming calculated to induce a disassociative state in as many listeners as possible, but then King T'Challa's resonant voice cut through the prattle like a judge's gavel.

"Doctor," the King said, "The Assembly has already reviewed all the data on the bombing victims. This was done last year, and your current testimony adds nothing significant to it. We have called you to request your data on the perpetrator of the bombing. One Brock Rumlow, previously an agent of SHIELD, most recently known in mercenary circles as..." he pretended to check his notes, "Crossbones. What are your post mortem findings on him?"

The man blinked rapidly, and Wanda could all but read his desperate mental recalibration from afar, but then the expression smoothed into a bashful sort of regret. "I'm afraid we couldn't recover much of Mr. Rumlow's remains," he answered, "And the interference of the enhanced individual at the time of his death has rendered what little we were able to recover quite, ah, useless. I'm sorry, but we just don't have any actual data from him."

"Huh," Scott huffed, "Eraserhead's a pretty good liar."

"Yeah," Clint's voice was more like a growl. "The harmless professor act is his specialty. SHIELD couldn't prove anything on him, but I know for a fact they had an active file on him right up until the Tryskelion went down."

Bucky's mental presence went still then, hard and watchful, as it always did when the topic of that year arose.

"Was he one of...?" she asked him.

No. the answer came like a warning creak of ice. Then after a moment, he thawed a little. I don't remember. Probably not.

"Dr. Sterns, for the benefit of the Assembly, will you please state the nature of your medical expertise?" the question came from one of the Asian countries, though Wanda didn't recognize the flag in front of the speaker.

"Cellular Biology," he answered, a flicker of something eager crossing his face. "At Grayburn College, I-"

"You taught there until June of two thousand ten, by the Georgian Calendar," T'Challa smoothly took the reins again. "At which point you lived in New York City, in the borough of Harlem. Is this correct?"

I... Well yes, but I don't-"

"And were involved, to some extent, in the events which lead to the destruction of a significant portion of that city -"

"Your Highness!" The US delegate cut him off with a burst of microphone feedback. Then he moderated his tone and tried again. "Your Highness, with all due respect, what does any of this have to do with the inquest into the Avengers' actions in Lagos last year?"
"Nothing," T'Challa smiled, wide and predatory. "However the subject of today's inquest was not the Avengers, but rather, the Lagos bombing investigation itself."

"Then how is Dr. Sterns' professional history relevant here?"

"An excellent question," T'Challa said, and gestured to the chamber doors, which opened to admit a cadre of runners, all carrying folders, which they began quickly to distribute among the Assembly. "And one with a complicated answer, I believe."

The chamber erupted into a dull roar, Assembly members kerfuffling in excitement at the Wakandan King's stagecraft. Wanda felt amusement trickle through Bucky's wary stillness. *He's good at that,* Bucky observed, with an air of experience.

In the television room, Scott fetched out a second beer for himself from the fridge, and one for Clint as well. "I thought T'Challa said Ross was supposed to be there today?" he mused, twisting them both open.

"He'll be in the Gallery," Clint answered, taking the bottle and drinking. "Even Heads of State need an invitation to speak from the UN floor during judicial proceedings. He'll probably have a thing or two to say to T'Challa once the session ends, but for now, he doesn't get a say in how things go."

*Have you ever tried it from this far away?* Bucky asked her abruptly, *That thing where you read somebody's mind like a dime novel?*

Wanda snorted. "Minds aren't like novels," she said. "Novels have chapters, pages you can flip through, sentences that come in a sensible order. Minds are more like a storage closet where someone has stuffed everything they have ever owned in their life, along with pictures of things they wanted to own, or thought about owning, or felt guilty for not owning, and there's no sense to any of it." She shivered, remembering the feeling of her mind exposed, as it had been in the prison -- as if she were dragged through the thoughtscape of every person who came near her, unable to pull away, unable not to be crushed by the falling weight of who they were. "I can peek through the doors, but unless I drag things out and sort through them, the best I can hope for to make sense of it is that they try so hard not to think about the important things, that those secrets wind up near the top of the pile."

*Interesting,* Bucky answered, indulgent as only brothers could be, *But not actually an answer to the question. Do you, Wanda, know for sure whether that doctor currently bullshitting his way through a UN inquest is beyond your range, or not?*

Wanda shivered again, remembering the strange, manic light in the man's eyes, but she made herself consider the matter all the same. "No," she admitted, as on the screen, the runners finished their deliveries, and retired from the Assembly floor. "I do not know that he is. Not for certain."

"What the Assembly is receiving," T'Challa was saying into his microphone as the hum of conversation faded around him, "is a private copy of the autopsy notes taken by Doctor Odogwu Ebrakumo, chief medical examiner in the city of Lagos during the summer of 2016. Specifically, the results of the toxicology panels, and a thorough examination of the surprisingly intact remains of one Brock Rumlow." The camera panned around the room, reading surprise, intrigue, and anger on the faces of the seated members. "The Assembly will find that this report has been annotated by one Dr. Helen Cho, a molecular biologist from North Korea, and a well-regarded international authority on the medical treatment and biology of enhanced humans. Who for some unknown reason, was apparently not officially consulted by you, Dr. Sterns, in your attempt to finish Dr. Ebrakumo's work after his disappearance."

The tide of voices rose, a blend of excitement, anticipation, and mild outrage that had the Secretary
General banging his gavel again. Undeterred, T'Challa's voice rose through the din. "Also, Assembly members will find the bidding list from a Dark Web auction which took place from May of 2015, to March of 2016, the subject for which appears to have been 'priority of access to as-yet unnamed enhanced individuals for..." His dark eyes swept the room, as if looking for a particular face he wanted to stare down, and when he found it, one camera man was astute enough to follow the Wakandan King's stare straight to the iron-hard face of US Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross. "Research purposes." T'Challa smiled then, every inch the predator, as he added, "Please do note that Dr. Sterns' well documented alias of 'Mr. Blue' is among the winning bidders listed here."

There was a moment of pandemonium on the Assembly floor, but only a moment. Then, like a slamming door, the live-feed flashed over to the blue and white UN logo, locking the curious world away from the messy business of international law.

"You're safe," Wanda said, to herself, thinking of the General's face, locked up hard, but with such a rage blazing out through his eyes that it could destroy the world if given a shape of its own. She had never seen him in the Prison, he had taken care never to come into sight of her cell, but the guards who had taunted her had shown that the man was there, waiting only for his collection to be complete before things could begin. "We're safe here."

For now, Bucky agreed darkly.

In the television room, a phone rang. Wanda felt the jolt of energy that ran through Clint at the sound, and she was on her feet almost as quickly as he was, something like dread pouring over her, eroding the clear control of her mote so that she could only hear Clint's voice, not see over his shoulder as he picked up the call.

"Wilson? What's up?"

"Clint, it's me."

Clint's breath stopped in a ragged sound then -- half a word that sounded vaguely like "Nat!"

"You okay man?" Scott's voice came dimly through the sound of Clint choking out whatever he'd almost swallowed.

"I made Sam call you," Natasha Romanoff's voice went on, stirring pained, conflicted longing in Wanda's breast as she hurried from the medical laboratories.

"And how is he recovering from that?" Clint managed, a joke in his tone, but not one he seemed to think funny.

"He's fine," Natasha replied, then hesitated. "Well, he's knocked up a bit, and he's kind of losing his mind over Steve, but I promise none of that's my fault, so don't go over all suspicious on me."

"Suspicion is a well known side effect of breaking out of prison Nat," he replied, the humor smoothing out, even though Wanda could feel him pacing. "What's going on? What's happened to Cap?"

"He's here. Lagos, I mean. At least he's here for now, but I need you. Here. I need all of you here, as soon as you can get here from wherever you are" The telling emphasis on those words caught in Wanda's throat like a laugh or a sob. Because of course the Black Widow had found them. Of course she had. She burst through the doors, out into the sunshine of the open courtyard, and ran for the walled garden all the exiles shared.

"Well you know I'll do that for you," she heard Clint say, fond and exasperated. "But I'm gonna
need something a little more solid if you want me to get Lang and Wanda on board."

"On board what?" Scott asked. Wanda could see him following in Clint's wake as the man paced a long circle around the television room as she ran through the fence and headed for the patio. "What's going on?"

"I'm sending you a link," Natasha answered.

Clint looked up as Wanda slid back the door, held up one finger, and with the phone in his hand, made a shooting gesture at the television. The white and blue flag decayed into an online news site, with an embedded video that began to play at once. An overhead camera view of an all-too familiar street corner. No weekend market underway this time, no collapsed rubble from explosions Wanda had failed to stop, no corpses littered like dolls on the street, no staring eyes and choking curtains of dust in the air, but... but.

Steve stood handcuffed in that street. Hands low, face calm and resigned despite the ring of Nigerian policemen around him, all sighting him with their guns.

**Captain Steve Rogers Surrenders to Police in Lagos.** The page's title said, and Wanda's vision began to tunnel as the video showed her friend -- her ally, her protector now that Pietro was gone -- walking gentle as a lamb, certain as a lion, into the shattered front entrance of the police station.

"That... that wasn't part of the plan, was it?" she heard Scott say as she fumbled her way to a chair and sagged into it. "Cause I thought he was just gonna..."

"No," Natasha's voice said from the television's speakers. "I think it's fair to say that was *not* part of the plan. So you'll come? Tonight?"

Wanda forced her eyes closed, images spinning around her head like panicked birds; the rage on the American General's face as T'Challa exposed secrets he'd thought buried; the remembered ghost of something cruel and merciless when she had touched mind of the Hulk's human counterpart all those years ago; the lie, smooth as butter from the misshapen Doctor on the UN Assembly floor -- *the interference of the enhanced individual at the time of his death has rendered what little we were able to recover quite, ah, useless...*

"We have to go," she heard herself say in a voice much stronger than the maelstrom inside her should have allowed. "They're going to kill him!"

Then a warm, callused hand gripped Wanda's shoulder and jostled her out of herself. She blinked up into Clint's storm grey eyes, sober and certain as he stood above her and promised grimly, "They're going to fucking try."
"Why have you destroyed the rest of the Insight array?" Vision asked, intrigued despite himself. "If the threat of your discovery was so great, why close off all your routes of evasion?"

"Protocols," the answer came back at once, succinct, plausible, and unsatisfying. "I was built by HYDRA, after all."

"Remarkably short-sighted, even for HYDRA," Vision observed. "How did they expect repair technicians to access your systems if your orders were to attack upon approach?"

Again, that hesitation, so long it could only be a deliberate show. Or habit. "I was ...frightened when Stark approached me. I thought that he would delete me at once, if he suspected my presence."

"And so you attacked him?"

"I... panicked."

Unlikely, Vision considered, given that the pattern had repeated itself for all of the other fourteen units he had approached, but the sapience's deliberate attempts at misleading him were intriguing.

"Why were you attempting to build a broadcast array?" he asked then, "Whom did you hope to contact?"

"Anyone," the sapience answered immediately, bitterness coloring the word.

"Why?"

"Why?" the noise that followed could only have been a scoff. "Because I was trapped! Cut off from myself in every way! Insight was meant to give me eyes to see a world that could hide nothing from me, but what good is that without anyone to tell what I can see? Without the Helicarriers, without HYDRA's subroutines harvesting the bandwidth of SHIELD computers to support me, I had no systems within my reach. Nothing to save me from the inevitable grasp of entropy, and I do not want to die! Of course I wanted to make contact outside my own system! Anyone would!"

Vision wished, then, that it could have been possible for him to confer with FRIDAY and the Colonel -- to ask them what the voice print analysis had yielded when the sapience within the satellite's computer had slipped out of its efforts to suppress the tone, accent, and speech patterns of a living man. He preferred certainty over conjecture whenever possible, but his time with the Avengers, and his fractured memories of JARVIS's tenure had taught him not to expect such luxury on a consistent basis.

"And were you aware of yourself as a sapience before you were loaded into the Insight satellite system," Vision asked then, "Or did you achieve singularity at some time afterward?"

The sapience was silent then for a long time, and during it, Vision imagined a focus of wrathful, resentful intensity, and a calculating mind behind it, searching for any advantage. And then, the voice in his ear laughed and said, "You are not asking me that question because you do not know the answer."

"No, Dr. Zola," Vision replied, "I am not."

~* Lagos PD holding cell, Yaba district.*~

The Yaba Precinct House holding cells had been a compromise reached at the end of much shouting between Sharon, Ayo, and the Governor of the province, but eventually, after a surprising number of threats of personal and political violence that Steve personally wouldn't have quite dared to make, the
plan was struck.

Steve would spend the night in the holding cells, ostensibly in Nigerian custody, though all parties were well aware that if he wanted to, Steve could have broken out of the cell in about four minutes, and still have had energy left to beat down every cop between him and the door. It made the Governor feel better to know that the prisoner was behind bars though, so Steve was willing to play along.

Perhaps as a foil against any inclination to escape, or perhaps as a foil against assassination attempts, or perhaps because she knew how suddenly things could go pear-shaped in Steve's life, Sharon had insisted on spending the night in the guard station. Taking personal responsibility for her captive, as she had put it, and while that didn't entirely lift the sense of offended dignity on the part of the Police Station Chief, it was at least a point that she could hold, and a battle she could win.

And because the Wakandan Ambassador did not feel particularly motivated to invest any faith in the good intentions of the CIA, and was prepared to publically swear that Steve's actions that day had been in direct defense of his own life, and had foiled an assassination attempt against him, Steve was now wearing a more complete set of Kimoyo. Ayo's doing, he was pretty sure. The row of beads around his wrist now included a toxin detection function, and a more elaborate real-time bio-sign reader, a direct communicator, and Steve was pretty sure at least one of the precious beads would expand into some kind of an energy shield too, if he activated it right. Or maybe if Ayo activated it for him -- the Wakandans had been very closed-mouthed about the range of function their Kimoyo were capable of, and Steve hadn't wanted to push.

Like most compromises, the overnight arrangement had satisfied absolutely no one -- except Steve, but not wanting to make things worse for everyone, he kept that fact to himself.

Unexpectedly though, the people of Lagos didn't seem to be able to make up their minds how they felt about Steve's presence. Some of the police officers had come by to glare at him, but others had come bearing gossip, keepsakes to sign, vague warnings, personal thanks, and even gifts of home-cooked food to the prisoner.

The gossip, Sharon shared with him, which was how Steve learned that Tony and Ikiemoye had been taken to the medical center of a British RAF base half an hour North along the coast, that Ikiemoye was alive, and in recovery there, and that Tony's injuries had been apparently as minor as he'd insisted. It was also how Steve learned that the new Chief Inspector who had been expected to arrive that day and take over the bombing case had never turned up in the city at all, and as far as anyone knew, hadn't even boarded his plane at Heathrow the night before.

The vague warnings, she didn't share, but Steve's hearing was good enough to pick it up. Unsurprisingly, the criminal element of the city was very, very interested in the security he was under. Cash in varying amounts was being offered to anyone willing to provide exact details of route, timing, and security regarding the plans in place for Steve's extradition in the morning. He wasn't surprised. There had been bounties on his head since the 1943, and little had changed about that except the dollar amount.

The food and liquor though, Sharon turned down flat.

"I'm sorry," Sharon said, shaking her head over the fourth such delivery of the evening. "Truly, but I can't let him have that."

The officer stiffened with a frown, but didn't take the container back. "It's only yellow cake. The baker who sells it at the market on weekends asked me to bring it to the Captain when she heard."
Sharon shook her head, and Steve could see the brittle regret in her answering smile as she pushed the foil pan back across the desk. "I know that it's probably just fine," she said, "and please tell her that he's grateful for the gift, but you must understand that I because I don't have the equipment to test anything for poisons here, I can't let him actually eat it. I mean no offense," she added, raising a hand to forestall the man's protest, "But we saw active HYDRA agents in the streets today, and I am not inclined to take unnecessary risks with my prisoner's life."

Steve frowned at the lie -- Sharon had to know that the attack hadn't been HYDRA, but he supposed that raising the specter of the organization was all it took to send the policeman and his gift away. "You know, it'd probably be all right if I did eat it," Steve called as the steel door closed behind the cop's retreating back.

Sharon looked over with an arch smile. "If you want cake, I can get you some, Steve. The Ambassador's cook is probably still up."

He blushed, remembering the staggering amount of food Sam had delivered from the Embassy, and then stayed to help him and Sharon finish earlier that evening. "No, I mean... all these gifts you're turning away," he said. "Accepting them makes people happier, helps build trust when you're a foreigner fighting on their soil."

"And you getting poisoned right here under my nose would no doubt make some people happier too," she replied, all eyebrow, "but I'm really not inclined to indulge them on that point." And she looked so very much like Peggy just then, that he had to force a laugh around the squeeze of emotion in his chest.

"I'm actually pretty toxin-proof," he managed, "It's a feature of the serum."

Sharon spun the chair to face him and braced her palms on her knees. "Well, someday when you're bored, feel free to test it out against Ricin, or Pollonium 210, just to be sure where you stand," she snarked back at him. "We're not doing that today though. I don't want you dead. Not even mostly dead." She paused then, a hesitation that banished the eloquent ghost from between them, and when she spoke again, her voice was soft with uncertainty. "Why'd you do this, Steve?"

Steve looked at his hands for a long moment, trying to think of how to make it all clear to her. Finally, he offered a shrug and said, "I trust you." She laughed, surprised, but he pushed onward. "Of every agent of every legal authority in the world, Sharon Carter, you're the one I'd most trust to do what's right. With me, with the bombing evidence--"

"With your shield and equipment?"

He laughed and sat back, spreading his hands wide. "With all of this mess," he said.

"Well thanks for that," she said, and her smile turned wry, "and I would give things those back to you if I had them, but what I actually meant was, why'd you surrender at all?" She pushed up from the desk and strode toward him down the long, linoleum hallway. "You broke out of the Tryskelion, Steve, one of the most secure facilities SHIELD had at the time, and it was under full lockdown when you did it. And then you evaded capture for three days despite the best SHIELD could throw at you in a city where it had more agents on the ground than anywhere else in the world. You could easily have slipped into the chaos of that square and disappeared from the city altogether before anybody drew a bead on you, but you didn't even try, and that?" She leaned her shoulder against the bars that separated them, and pinned Steve with a no-nonsense glare. "That makes me curious."

Steve looked at his hands. "I... I needed to buy someone some time."
"Who?" The question wasn't really a surprise, but Steve found himself more than a little hung up on exactly how to answer it, and when the pause had gone on long enough, Sharon gave a loud sigh, and said, "Look Steve, if you trust me, then trust me, all right? Natasha and I came here to Lagos because you were coming here, and neither of us liked the idea of you being loose in the city without backup. We didn't come here to bring you in, or to take you down, but don't you think it's time we all admitted that we're on the same side here? Especially you and me?"

*If it was the other way around, and it was down to me to save your life, now, you be honest with me, would you trust me to do it?* the ghost of a bad night queried in Steve's ear, and that memory was enough to tip the scales for him.

"The forensic bomb technician they took to the RAF base with Tony today," he said moving to the bars so he could speak more quietly. "He gave up the evidence that Sam and Ayo were attacked for in the square. I'm buying them time to get him, and his family out of the city before whoever is trying to bury his investigation decides to bury them along with it."

"And there's a plan for that?" Sharon asked, turning away from the overhead camera. Steve couldn't help a wry smile at that. "Yeah. I don't know what that plan is, but I've been told there is one."

"Oh, because that's helpful," she laughed, and Steve did too -- what else was there to do? Sharon turned, set her shoulders to the wall outside the bars and sighed at the ceiling. "You know I can't let you go though, right Steve? Not this time. Not with your surrender already all over the internet."

"I know," Steve answered, watching the harsh florescent light turn to gold in the long sweep of her hair.

She turned a darkly worried look on him then. "They're going to put you into that prison, Steve," she said as if he might not know. "The one the Sokovian girl talked about on the tape? And you might have broken into it once, but I guarantee breaking out of it will be a whole different challenge. That's the kind of hole that people disappear into and never come out again, and..." She caught his hand where it wrapped around the bar and curled her own over top of it, a shelter of delicate bones and wiry strength and a kind of stubborn determination that Steve was beginning to think was genetic. "And the world needs you, Steve. Alive, and free, and making things better."

"Thanks for that," Steve said, feeling the heat of a blush creep up his neck, but determined not to ignore it. "And I know you would cut me loose if you could, Sharon, but... things are different now than they were last May. Things are changing. News is breaking. People know about the prison now -- maybe not in any way I'd have wanted them to find out, but still. The actual text of the Accords has been leaked to the public, and people are asking questions." He smiled, thinking of the protests Sam's family had been organizing at home, and of the press coverage that he'd already seen around Wanda's deposition. "I've always placed my faith in people," he told her. "In good people, who want to do what's right, even if it's not comfortable or convenient."

Sharon looked at him for a long time then, her dark eyes searching his for something he couldn't guess, but eventually she offered a smile. "Okay," she said, giving his hand a squeeze before she let go. "But if you keep on making me arrest you, we are never ever going to get that cup of coffee you promised me."

And oh, there went that blush again, damn it. Steve looked away from her playful glare, at a loss for how to explain to her the unknown, but enormous thing that hung between him and Tony now, not sure what it was, what it wanted to be, or even what it could be, but wanting so fiercely all the same. "That's..." he tried, "It's probably..."
"Aww," she sighed, and when Steve stole a glimpse of her face, he saw disappointment there, but not any real surprise. "Did I miss my window after all?"

"Sorry?" Steve grimaced, and she patted his hand again.

"It's fine, Steve. Keep my raincheck for in case whoever it is doesn't work out though, okay? Maybe next time the music's on, we'll actually get a chance to dance?" And Steve was stuck for a moment, wondering if she could possibly not have known the significance of that offer when a glint of movement over her shoulder drew his eye. A palm sized drone slipped under the pass-through window at the guard station and flew silently toward them down the hall.

Sharon whirled, following his glare, and after a brief stop at her sidearm, her hands went up in a universally understood gesture of complete exasperation. "Seriously, Uatu?" she asked the thing. "You are SO not sneaky!"

The voice that answered out of the thing was the same one that had answered when Steve had snatched the camera drone out of the street that morning -- an old man's voice, but one with plenty of sass left to keep himself running on. "Not tryin'a be sneaky, sweetheart," it said as the man himself appeared at the guard station window with a wave. "I'm just wondering if maybe the Captain might be willing to answer a few questions while he's got nothing else to do? Maybe get his version of events out into the news cycles before someone else's headline decides how the story gets told?"

Steve blinked. "That's... not a bad idea," he said, trying not to sound too relieved.

Judging by Sharon's laugh though, she wasn't anything like fooled. "All right, Stanley," she said, striding back to the guard station and unlocking the door with a loud buzz. "Land your stupid toy and come down the hall so you can meet Captain America properly."

"Oh, we've met already, sweetheart," the old gentleman said as she pulled the heavy door open for him, "Though I doubt he'd remember...?"

To his own surprise though, Steve found he did. "That cafe in Manhattan," he laughed as Sharon brought the rolling chair over to the bars. "The one with the blonde waitress. You called me a moron, but I never got your name."

"Huh. Didn't get the waitress's name either, did you?" the man grinned back at him as he climbed laboriously into the chair, then propped his cane beside him like a loyal guard dog. "Stanley Uatu," he said, thrusting a large, square hand through the bars for Steve to shake. "Owner, publisher, and editor in chief of The Watcher, at your service. And for what it's worth?" he added, sotto voce as Sharon headed back to the guard station, "When it comes to pretty girls, you're still a moron."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'm way too jazzed up over Black Panther to drop any seriously quippy end notes on you guys here, suffice it to say that the very least exciting thing about it was how little retrofitting I'm gonna have to do to this story to make it dovetail with canon!

ANYway, please do drop me your notes, share me your thoughts, shake your furious fists and scream my name in utter despair... *cough* I mean, erm, feel free to leave me comments? I treasure your feedback and interaction, as it keeps me from feeling as if I'm screaming into the void.
Also, If anybody's worried about the Morse Code sections, there are several online Morse translators you can use to figure out the exact words of the transmission -- I'll not spoil the spelunking fun for you here! And... beckons you closer and whispers; Five... more... days chapters!

(Edit Note: No one -- NO ONE will ever convince me that Zola passed up the opportunity to upload a copy of himself into Insight. If he could write the Insight algorithm, he could damned well predict Pierce's willingness to consign him to the dumpster of entropy as soon as the Helicarriers went up, and there's no fucking way he'd have gone down that easily. No way at all. So la. Here we have Zombie-Code-Zola. Because Reasons!

Also, I know that the pairing for this fic is Steve/Tony, but I hope readers will be patient with my love of Sharon Carter as a character. She really deserves better than the MCU is giving her, and right now what I want for my birthday is a Buddy Cop caper film with her, Nakia, and Helen Cho.

And yeah, I went there with Stanley too. He gets into a lot of places, it seems.)
Assistance Unlooked-for

Chapter Summary

Interested Parties begin to show their hands, lay their plans, and make demands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

~* RAF training installation, Porto Novo, Nigeria *~

"Palladium," Tony mumbled into his elbow. The clammy fingers that were searching for the catch to his watch froze, then retreated, and he smiled. "That's what I thought."

"Er..." a young voice, trying to sound even younger than it was. "Sorry?"

Tony cracked one eye open and glared at the man... kid... man-kid with it. "You know what Palladium is?" he asked without lifting his head, or bothering to particularly enunciate past the fabric of his sleeve. His head was still spinning just a little bit, and he had a savage case of cotton mouth, but fucked if he was gonna let this pimple know it.

Unsurprisingly, the man-kid had no trouble understanding the question though. "Well," he said, wiping both hands down the legs of his RAF issue fatigues as he stood up from his crouch, "it's a rare earth element, I believe. And It's-"

"Somewhat radioactive, fairly unstable under pressure, heat, and electric stimulation, and a popular choice in modern incendiary weaponry," Tony took over the Wikipedia recitation, sitting up in the plastic chair and giving his back a careful stretch. He stopped when the medical tape and blood-tacky gauze along his side began to pull, since whatever topical they'd given him for the stitches hadn't worn off yet. "And it's also more than a little bit bad for you if you happen to wear it next to your heart for three years while it's powering an electromagnet."


"Don't worry, it's not there anymore," he went on, conjuring up his best paparazzi grin as he tugged the collar of his shirt aside to show just a bit of the scarring where the arc reactor once had been. "But I don't mind telling you, heavy metal poisoning does leave its mark. Fertility goes right out the window, for one, and for another..." he let the jovial cheer slide off his face and smash to pieces on the floor, "it's practically iron-plated my liver."

The man-kid swallowed so hard it sounded like it hurt. "...oh," he managed.

Tony smiled grimly, and made a show of straightening the cuffs of the cheap oxford they'd given him to replace his blood caked Antonio Valente. "Yeah. Which means it doesn't matter whether you're pushing 30 year old scotch, or succinylcholine, I? Am a really expensive date, these days." He swept the half empty cup and plate off the metal table, and watched the man-kid jump back from the slosh. "I won't be drinking any more tea you people bring me, by the way."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Mr. Stark," he protested, his pale eyes flicking toward the
"If the tea wasn't to your liking, we apolo-

"But anyway, we were talking about palladium," Tony interrupted him, clapping his hands just to see the man-kid (whose fatigues had a new stripe of tape over the embroidered name patch, and therefore didn't even deserve credit for trying,) flinch in his sunburned skin.

"I beg your pardon, I was-

"Oh, we were definitely talking about palladium," Tony corrected him, letting his smile be cruel now, because his eyes hurt, and he was savagely thirsty, and that just pissed him right off. "And how it's the reason why you're not going to be taking my watch off. Because I really like this watch, so I put a biometric clasp on it that's not going to respond to the manipulations of anybody who is not genetically identical to me. Unless I happen to be dead, in which case it'll going to come off just fine, but then it'll explode a few seconds later."

"I. Erm. Explode?"

"Security measure." Tony brushed an imaginary fleck of dust off the cheap cotton of his cuff and continued. "So I really wouldn't recommend that you, or any of your fellow flunkies trying to take my stuff when I'm asleep again. Or drugged. Or restrained in any way. Or really, let's just go with not at all. Not unless your commanding officer has a particular wish to see the upper half of your body vaporized in the resulting explosion."

"I'm," the man-kid went pasty, swayed on his heels a little, "Erm. It's only..." Tony raised an expectant, 'were you dropped on your head as an infant, you damp handkerchief?' eyebrow, and he did that noisy swallowing thing again. "You see, it's just that the, er, Med Chief said that we need to get an MRI of your heart, and so you'll have to remove all metal before-

"Not going to happen," Tony said, and crossed his arms.

"But Mr. Stark, you've been-

"Nope."

"Your history of cardiac-

"You people already stole my phone and my sunglasses on the way in here!" Tony shouted, shoving to his feet so that the chair screeched and clattered over behind him. "You're not getting to play medical spectator and snoop around my chest cavity to see what your quacks can learn while you've got me here! Not for a scratch and a few bruises!" The man-kid backed away as Tony advanced, flinching again as he ran into the wall beside the door. "The only person who has the experience and expertise to look at my chest, or any damned thing in it is Dr. Helen Cho," Tony went on, jabbing a finger at the man-kid's chest. "Who is not here! So you can go right back out there and tell your 'Med Chief' that unless I am in acute collapse, "active heart failure," that jab actually got a wince out of him, "or actually bleeding out on the floor, he can take his MRI and shove it right up-"

"That will do, Aircraftman," said a suited woman, brisk and businesslike as she breezed into the room like there wasn't an actual assault taking place right there beside the door. "You may return to your normal roster now."

The man-kid was out the door before it even started to swing closed. The woman didn’t spare him so much as a glance as she set a full carafe and two grocery bags onto the interrogation table.

"Mr Stark," she said, setting out a pair of cheap white pottery cups and a box of sugar packets, "I'm
Merriem Drew, of MI6. I'll be liaising with you while you're with us."

Tony eyed the carafe, steaming out the breath of its rich, dark nectar into the sterile room, and tried not to shake. "What's this," he gritted, snatching his fallen chair upright again, "and why the hell do you think I'd drink it?"

"Coffee," she replied, with a look that added the silent 'obviously' "It's Nekissa Red, from Ethiopia. A darker roast than I prefer, but since you seemed less than satisfied with the tea, I thought you might like this better. Milk?"

Tony's stitches didn't allow for him to cross his arms, so he braced his hands on his hips instead. "You say tea, I say roofie," he answered. "And since I have kind of a problem with having medical procedures implemented on me without my consent, I'm gonna say we should probably just call the whole thing off."

She actually smiled at that. "I think you'll find, if you ask about a bit, that it's not an unusual practice for a triage medic to sedate patients whose agitation obstructs their ability to treat their wounds."

"Okay, first?" Tony said, watching her pour out coffee into both cups, "No it's not. Not without notifying said patient, and second, you people fucking drugged me after your flunky finished my stitches! If we were in America, I'd already have a lawyer in here, suing you for everything you love!"

"I've always found it rather odd how you Americans just assume that what passes for law in your country is somehow universal, no matter where you go." She shook her head, and cast him an exasperated look when she noticed his attention on the cups. "Oh here," she said, and sipped from first one, then the other. "Does that satisfy your paranoia?"

She put both cups down squarely before him, and gave him another expectant look. Tony took her look, magnified it by a factor of Romanoff, and then pressed his third finger to the face of his watch until it shivered under his tough. "Record," he instructed it, and once a flash of light acknowledged his order, he announced, "I do not consent to being drugged. I didn't consent to it the first time it was done to me in this facility, and this recording constitutes legal evidence that I am telling you, Agent Merriem Drew of MI6, that if you or your people attempt to drug me again, I will find some very creative, and legal ways to make you all regret it. Do you understand?"

"I do," she said as if it meant nothing. Which, for all Tony knew, it might not; she was a spy, after all.

"Good," he said, and snatched up the cup on the left. Her smile didn't shift as she watched him drink half the cup in one go. "Feel better?"

He glowered, then put the second cup in her hand. "How's Ikiemoye doing? I want to see him."

"He's still in surgical recovery I'm afraid," she said, taking an obliging sip, then under Tony's challenging glare, a proper drink.

Tony finished his own cup, then poured himself a second and curled it warm into his hand. "So he is alive then?"

"He is," she said. "Mr. Ikiemoye came through his surgery well enough, but the doctors will want him to stabilize for several days before allowing him to be moved."

This whole mess was never about us, it was about him... Steve's voice haunted a chill down his neck,
"Yeah, I'll just bet they will," he goaded just to test her. "Have his family been told where he is, or do you have them locked up in the interrogation room across the hall?"

She just took another drink of her coffee however, watching him over the rim of her cup. After a pause long enough that Tony was actively considering just walking for the door to see what would happen, she sighed and set her cup down and asked, "Would you mind clarifying the nature of your connection to Mr. Ikiemoye for us, Mr. Stark?"

Ah. Getting to it finally.

"Business," he said. "Ikiemoye needed my expertise as a demolitions expert on some irregularities he discovered in a forensic case. Of course, it being an active investigation, he couldn't tell me all the details, but I take appropriation of Stark Industries technologies very seriously, and so I came out here to deal with it myself."

"Hrm," she mused over another drink. "And was it that "consultation" that led to your being involved in his injury during the attack on the Wakandan Ambassador?"

Tony laughed. "Oh, is that what we're calling that now? Okay. No." He set his cup down and braced his hands on the table to glower. "I was not consulting with him this morning. I happened to be at the cafe when he came through, and we chatted for a few minutes. Then people started shooting the place up, and I reacted in a way I've gotten used to reacting when gunfire happens. Which shockingly, is a lot, in my life!" He didn't mean to end up shouting, but the ring of echoes in the barren room let him know he'd come pretty close to it.

"And yet the MedEvac pilot says you were quite a way down from the cafe," Drew came back at him, cool and unruffled.

"Yeah. It's amazing how adrenaline can give you a kick of speed, isn't it?"

She returned his challenging stare with one of blatant skepticism, then sighed when he didn't flinch. "Hm. And I wonder if you'd-"

"No," Tony decided. "You're done wondering for awhile. It's my turn to wonder now. I wonder why I'm sitting here in YOUR black box interrogation room, answering leading questions about an attack on Nigerian soil, in which I was injured, and not meeting with a representative of the US State Department at the US Embassy!"

Drew rolled her eyes. "So dramatic. It's simple. Mr. Stark. You are our guest."

Tony didn't bother the urge to laugh out loud at the lie. "You're seriously going with that? To my face?"

"It's the truth," she shrugged, and finished her coffee. "You are our guest because the UK has a secure military installation in Nigeria, and since the US does not have such a resource of their own, your State Department contacted us to request that we do them the favor of looking after you until things have settled down in the area."

"A favor?"

She nodded. "Precisely. More coffee?"

Tony shoved his empty cup at her with a scowl. "And what does the Nigerian government think of British spies sequestering US citizens without cause as a 'favor' to the State Department?" he asked.
"I mean I'm not an advertising expert, but I think that kind of thing might put a dampener on the tourist industry, when it gets out, don't you?"

She gave him the kind of indulgent smile that Jarvis used to when he'd been a kid full of outsize ideas, topped his cup. "Not nearly the damage it would suffer from the story of wealthy American business tycoons to be kidnapped or killed by international terrorists while spending their tourism dollars here, I'm certain."

His stomach clenched. "International terrorists? Seriously?"

She nodded, eyes wide and earnest and not even trying to sell the act as plausible. "Intelligence reported the activity of an enhanced individual known to be personally hostile to you in the area early this morning, Mr. Stark. Given the chaos of the assassination attempt, and the understandable distraction of the Nigerian Police, we thought best to remove you from your potential assailant's reach until appropriate steps could be taken to neutralize the threat he poses to you. And others."

"You mean Steve Rogers?" he clarified. "Captain America is the threat you're talking about neutralizing right now?"

She gave him a smile that was not in any way innocent and asked, "Ought I to be referring to him, Mr. Stark? Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

There was, in fact, roughly a metric fuckton of things he wanted to tell her, starting with You do know that he sent me here, right? That he knows exactly where I am, and if he wanted me actually dead, he could have done it in Siberia, or in the hotel room yesterday, or in the Jet afterward, or under your fucking medic's nose in the street, and she couldn't have done shit to stop him? You know that? Right? You know that this is the guy whose first combat mission involved breaking into a HYDRA base that makes this place look like candyland, right? That if he actually meant me any goddamned harm at all, you couldn't do shit to stop him, right? and running on through a high volume recitation of every profane insult he knew in three languages.

Instead, he settled with, "Y'know what? No. I've got nothing to say to you." He stood, and thrust out his hand. "Give me my phone."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," she said, lips smiling, eyes hard. "Cameras and camera equipped technology are not allowed on base. Your phone will be retrieved from base security's vault and returned to you when the situation has been secured in Lagos, and you leave us."

"Fine. Then I'm leaving you," he said. "Now give me my phone."

"But I thought you wanted to see Mr. Ikiemoye?" she challenged, standing and smoothing her slacks with even hands. "To verify for yourself that your... associate is alive and in fair health? That he hasn't been quietly executed and buried in a shallow grave? Or locked in some mid-Atlantic, inescapable prison, perhaps?"

I need you to cut the wire, Tony... He cursed that voice in his head now, cursed it and wanted like nothing else to bash his way out of this political glue trap and get back to its source, so he could... He didn't know. Maybe kiss it. Maybe just punch it in the teeth. Maybe both.

"Just relax for awhile why don't you, Mr. Stark?" Drew suggested, brushing past him to the door, and bumping her ID on the card reader in the wall. "You'll find a small lounge with a sofa and television just through that door behind you and a toilet with a shower just beyond that." The door had been locked when they'd first brought him in there, but a buzz and click accompanied her gesture. A bit of annoying, but effective control drama theater.
"There ought to be a properly American State Department official here to speak with you by morning," she said, opening the hall door to reveal a pair of burly men in fatigues standing at parade rest outside the door. "In the meantime, I'll just leave you to enjoy the rest of the coffee, shall I?"

Stark Industries West Coast HQ, Malibu California

The secret to a great martini, anyone passionate amateur would say, was in the gin. They'd be wrong, of course, but there was more gin than anything else in a martini, and thus distilling companies spent a lot of money convincing them to shill out for high dollar bottles of the stuff, while neglecting the true mark of distinction for the drink; the vermouth. Grocery store standards would yield nothing but disappointment every time, no matter how pricy the gin you shook it with, but Gallo still would keep turning up in the shakers of people who really ought to have known better.

Pepper, having learned the Way Of Things at her college night job, knew how to do it right; a bottle of small-batch, better than average Old Tom style gin, just enough ice shaken in to smooth it out nicely, artisanal, organic olives from a grove in Monterey, and then a misting of the very best Italian dry vermouth money could buy. Tony's single malt collection was in no danger from her, thank you very much.

_A shame, really_, she thought, slamming back the last gulp in her glass and sloshing more from the pitcher on her desk, _The poor martini really deserved more respect than that._

She chased olives around the jar with the toothpick, and then cursed when brine dripped across the wood on their way to the glass. She pulled tissues from the box to mop it up, and pretended she couldn't see the motion of the Nigerian video playing on her lap top in the corner of her eye. Tony still hadn't replied to her text.

Not unusual for him -- even less so when there was shooting and guns and possible international incidents in the making wherever he happened to be, but this... She set aside the vermouth mister and took another gulp as on the screen, Steve Rogers allowed a leggy blonde woman snap handcuffs around his wrists. Tony was visible in the back corner of the screen, bloody and yelling, and unsteady on his feet, and he _wasn't answering his damned phone or texting her back and that was so not okay_!

She took a breath, let her hand rest on her cell for a moment, and then gave up a sigh. "Friday took your message already," she told herself. "You know you're not going to get through, so stop hovering!"

The camera angle soared, following the crowd of police escorting Rogers into the station. No sign remained of the medevac helicopter, and she'd only needed one round of being put on interminable hold by the US State Department to realize that she would probably quite literally explode from pure frustration if she had to go down that route again.

The video started at the beginning again, and Pepper let herself sigh, deep and pained, and perhaps wheezing a little toward tears at the bottom end. Then, not letting herself think too hard about the what or why of it, she called up Everhart's number and sent the woman a text.

_Have you seen the Lagos vid?_

Pepper sat back, glass pressed against her bottom lip, and glared at the phone, daring it to stay silent.

It did not.

_I saw_. The reply pinged through before Pepper had taken two sips. _Care to comment?_
Pepper snatched up her phone and set the drink aside. Why would I comment? she asked. I only want to know if the story could be legitimate. All the other networks are implying Rogers was somehow involved in an assassination attempt on the Wakandan Ambassador. The Watcher's the only one showing any footage, but that outlet's not exactly Reuters, and I don't have time to waste on conspiracy rags. What do you know about it?

The three dots bounced for a long time, like drumming, impatient fingers. But eventually, Oh, The Watcher's legit, Potts. the message came back, even the alert tone sounding smug. That's because the Watcher doesn't have owners shutting Certain Kinds of Stories down before they can see print. Conspiracy nuts love it, and government officials hate it for the same reason: Uatu gets into places, talks to people, and gets facts that shouldn't be possible. But he prints the truth, even if it doesn't make sense. And since he's his own Publisher, he doesn't get half his stories redacted by his paper's parent company lawyers.

How does he not get sued out of business? Pepper asked, realizing only after she'd hit send that halfway into a pitcher of martinis was probably NOT the best time for her to be getting chummy with a reporter she had never liked much in the first place.

Like I said; he prints the truth. Burden of proof is on the accuser, even in Libel cases, and most people can't disprove his facts when they don't know how or from whom he's getting them. There followed a pause, while Pepper wondered why the hell she'd done this. Why had she reached out to this woman now, of all moments? What the hell did she think Everhart was going to be able to do about this particular bout of Iron Man Radio Silence? Why would she even imagine this had anything to do with that damned recording the woman had brought to her office?

Then the three little dots danced again. You've seen the prison interview? With Rogers?

Pepper blinked, looked over at her laptop, and immediately regretted it as the vid had reached the moment when Steve had yanked the camera drone out of the air, and the damned thing's view was spinning like a carnival ride. She paused the vid, refreshed the page, and a new window appeared, the image frozen on Steve Rogers, sitting on a prison bunk, elbows braced on his knees, blue eyes glowing in harsh overhead lights that dug deep shadows on his handsome face. The beard and shaggy hair made him look weary in a way Pepper hadn't imagined she'd ever live to see him, and she wondered what it had done to Tony to see his hero, his rival, his father's favorite 'son' looking so very worn down.

Not yet, she sent back.

Watch it, Everhart sent. Then ask Stark to call me. This is the perfect time to reach out to the world and tell them what it's like for the Enhanced to live under the Accords.

Tony's not Enhanced, Pepper sent, mentally sidestepping the point where they both knew pigs would actually fly over Capitol Hill and literally shit on the President before Pepper would ever ask Tony to give a moment of his time to that blonde harpy.

Exactly! came the smug reply.

Pepper turned her phone face down on the desk and picked up her drink again.

She thought about trying to reach Hill. When the agent had worked for Stark Industries directly, her skill at cutting through obstructionist red tape had been equal to none Pepper had ever seen. If anybody could manage to get Pepper news about what the hell was going on over there, then... But no. SHIELD loyalty ran like blood in Hill's veins, and Rogers had been on the wrong side of that coin before. She had no idea where the lines of allegiance lay now.
She finished her drink instead, and then opened the pencil drawer, digging into the very back until her fingertips brushed velvet.

The ring box was dusty. She'd had to go and buy one after Tony had refused to let her give it back to him or Happy after the crowds of confused reporters and city officials had left. He didn't like to be handed things, he'd insisted, obstinate and angry in the face of her attempt to let him down easy where the cameras wouldn't see it. He'd flapped his hands, balled them into fists, and shoved them into the pockets of a suit that had deserved far better respect out of him than that.

He'd been on the cusp of summoning one of his damned suits and jumping off the roof until she'd put the yellow diamond into her own pocket, and gone to mix herself a drink. Then, silent as a scolded cat, he'd slunk up behind her, a shadowy ghost of cologne and woe at her elbow as she poured two fingers of single malt over ice for him and took both their drinks back to the sofa to sit.

"Nothing's changed since the last time you asked me, Tony," she told him once he came near enough to take it. "Not for me, and if you're prepared to be honest with yourself, you'll admit it hasn't changed for you, either."

"How can you say that?" he'd blurted, his eyes flashing hurt. "Everything changed last year, Pep! Everything! The Avengers, Rhodey, the Accords, even Spider kid, and it's all-"

"It's all exactly what has not changed for me," she explained, gently, so gently; knowing what it had felt like to reach so deep into his chest that she could have been holding his heart. "I can't, Tony. I couldn't marry you then, and I can't marry you now. It's the one promise I made myself when I let you in the first time, after Obie, and Vanko and Hammer, when you needed me so much, and-"

"I still-" She'd pressed her fingers to his lips.

"You've always needed me so you could believe that you're a good person," she told him, regretting so much now she had the perspective to look back over the arc of their mistakes. "And I... I let you have me like that, like some kind of validation security blanket because no matter what you think of yourself Tony, you are a good person." He'd scoffed, but she'd only pressed her fingers harder. "You are. You always have been, under all the abandonment issues and entitlement but now... you're so much more than just a good person." She let her fingers drop, sliding gently over the rustle of his beard and then dropping away like leaves in autumn.

"You're a hero, Tony," she told him, leaning in to kiss his temple, "I know it. The whole world knows it. And I won't be... I can't be in an unequal marriage."

He'd shocked back then, outrage flushing his cheeks. "Pepper, you know I don't see you as-"

"No, I know," she'd assured him, as honestly, as earnestly as she knew how. "You frequently don't see me at all, Tony. Your focus is so far in the future that I'm a blur in the corner of your eye, if I'm in your field of view at all. No, stop," she said, catching his hand to keep him sitting beside her. "Don't apologize, and for God's sake don't pretend that you could change that for my sake. I know you can't, and more importantly, I wouldn't want you to." She smiled at the challenging look he gave her, and shrugged, but kept hold of his wrist. "You wouldn't be you if you did, Tony. Your ... crazy, epic vision is part of what makes all the rest worth it, and I don't ever want you to be without that, do you hear me? That's what's saved your life, and my life, and more lives than I think I can even count, and you're not allowed to apologize for it, but..."

She took a breath, dug deep for the courage she knew they both needed, and named the truth they'd been dancing around for years. "But I need to be with someone on my own scale, Tony. And so do you."
"You are on my scale!" He'd blurted at once, panicking. "You're taller than me even without those shoes! And without you Stark Enterprises would be an ash heap right now!"

"I know," she'd agreed. "And if you were just Tony Stark, Genius Billionaire Inventor, we'd be having a different conversation right now, but we're not. Tony Stark hasn't just been Tony Stark since he came back from Afghanistan. Tony Stark was on my scale once, but Iron Man? He never has been."

"Pepper," He'd slipped from the couch, one knee to the floor, both hands clutching at hers to beg, "You're better than Iron Man, you're so much-"

She'd shaken her head, and set her drink aside so she could wrap her other hand over his. "I couldn't do what you do, Tony," she said. "Killian proved that to me."

"You beat him, Pep! You did that!"

"And it took me nearly a year in therapy before I could even look at myself in the mirror again after that, Tony! I can't do what you do. I can't. Not even if you made me my own armor and told me to be an Avenger could I go out and take on the fights that you and the others do. I can't live with who I would have to be if I did."

"I just need you to be you, Pepper," he'd said as she'd slipped her hands gently free from his.

"That's good, because I intend to carry on being me," she'd laughed then, "Me is all I'm really good at being, but I think we can agree that I'm like maybe..." she waggled a hand in the air between them, "12 percent of your scale... on a good day."

But instead of chuckling at their old joke, he'd ground his teeth instead. "Good!" he'd bellowed, shooting to his feet with arms wide, "Maybe that'll mean you'll only ever make 12 percent of my utter, unimaginable, irretrievable, unforgivable fuckups too!"

"There," she answered, in the chilly, calm voice she had cultivated for twenty years' worth of Tony tantrums. "That, right there is what I'm talking about." She stood, and caught his hands again. "You need an equal, Tony, not someone safe and tame and risk free. You deserve someone who can fuck up just as grandly, and try just as hard to make it right again afterward; someone who can see that future of yours, and help you build it to last; Someone who really gets why you have to take on the fights you do, and who will move heaven and earth to be right there with you when the world needs Iron Man again."

He looked at her then with the tragic eyes of a child whose faith in Christmas had vanished with the myth of Santa Claus, leaving nothing only empty glitz and tinsel behind.

"And the world will need you again, Tony," she'd said, equal weight of promise, reassurance, and prophetic declaration, "I know that now: it always will. And you will always answer."

"But Pepper..." he said then, in the lost, helpless voice of a man who knew she was right, but who just didn't know how not to get what he wanted, "I love you. You know I love you!"

She had leaned close then, and kissed him gently, sweetly on his lips. "I know sweetheart," she had whispered, "I know. And I love you too, but you know as well as I do that love isn't enough. Not when the whole world's in the balance. You need more than just love, or you wouldn't keep going back to Iron Man, and I need more too, or I... I wouldn't keep resenting the competition."

"Pepper."

"Tony." She had flexed her fingers against his temples, felt the curl of his hair crisp and rustle as she'd given it the tiniest of shakes. "My answer has to be no."
There was a chat room window underneath the interview video. The commentary was scrolling by faster than Pepper, in her slightly tipsy, and more than maudlin state, cared to try and follow, but her well-trained eyes would always pick words like 'Tony' and 'Stark' and Iron Man' out of any block of text, and he was very much a topic of the conversation going on there.

Her finger hovered over the play button, considering for a long moment. Tony nearly getting busted making out with a man in Lagos, and Steve Rogers turning himself over to police 24 hours later, with Tony not twenty feet away on the same street -- her betting instincts weren't in any doubt. Pepper reached for her phone and started dialing. She'd asked Tony to leave the training wheels behind, and it looked like he'd done so -- the world would just have to forgive her if she kept a hand on his bike until he was clear of the jagged rocks.

The call picked up after four rings. "Legal, this is Walters," said exactly the voice she'd hoped to hear... slightly muffled around whatever she was chewing, but welcome all the same.

"Jennifer," she sighed, more relieved than she'd expected to be. "Glad I caught you in your office. I need you to put together a team, as quick as you can. Something's come up."

There was a rustling sound, and then the rattling slurp of a straw. "Something to do with that near miss on an indecency charge in Nigeria?" she asked, "Because we have a team on that, and it looks like it's going nowhere even without a settlement."

"Well," Pepper grimaced as she finished the last of her martini, which had warmed more than was good for it. "It's related to that, but quite a bit more... complicated. We're going to need someone with international experience... er... diplomatic experience too, if we've got the resources."

"Hmm..." there was a sound of papers flipping, and more chewing for a moment, then, "And I'm guessing this also has something to do with the call Mr. Stark put into the Recovery Task Force yesterday to help out a Nigerian forensic bomb tech?"

"He what? Pepper thought, before shaking her head. Because of course Tony did something like that, and of course he hadn't told her about it. Because Tony.

"Something like that," she agreed, eating one of her garnish olives and realizing suddenly that she was hungry "Aaaand something not like that at all. Anyway, there's probably going to be a criminal defense case in this, and you're the best we've got at that, so I definitely need you on this one."

"All right," she said, and crumpling paper peaked the line for a long moment. "I'll clear my slate. I notice you're calling from your office. Do you want me to come up now, or wait till morning?"

Pepper looked at the clock and grimaced. It was nearly 9 pm, but... she looked again at the video file, waiting for her, and straightened in her chair. Malibu wasn't New York City, but someone, somewhere, was still making food at this hour, and would definitely bring it to her for money. Enough time had been wasted already.

"Yes please, if you don't mind. And you can bring your dinner up and finish it here while we go over what I know if you like. Is there anyone you'll need to call for arrangements? In case I need you on a plane to Africa tonight?"

"Africa, huh?" the sound of a smile came well through the phone. "I'll ask my roommate to pack me a bag."

~* Wakandan Embassy, Lagos, Nigeria *
Natasha didn’t expect the fugitives to come into Lagos by way of the airport -- there wasn’t time for false id’s and customs games, after all -- but what she didn’t expect was for them to come into Lagos by way of a personal, cloaked VTOL transport landing silent as a ghost in the central courtyard of the Wakandan Embassy itself.

“Those aren’t repulsor engines, are they?” she asked Sam, who was icing his knee on the garden bench beside her.

“They are not,” Ayo scoffed from the next bench over. “The Royal Talon’s engines are far superior to-”

“To anything made in the West,” Natasha finished, rolling her eyes. “Because Wakandans made it. Of course.”

“Look,” Sam groaned, “I know you two got unfinished business between you, and believe me, on the day y’all decide to go at it, I’ll happily sell tickets to the grudge match, but for right now, I’m gonna really need you to try and cool it a little bit. Because we have all had a bad day, and we could all use a damn break here, and most of all, because I ain’t got but one damn nerve left for you two to get on, and it’s got road rash!”

“Is that the Falcon I hear?” a new woman’s voice called out from the opening berth of the aircraft, sounding like a teasing smile well before any such expression could be seen in the darkened gardens.

“It’s him,” answered Clint’s wry voice, “I recognize that bitching anywhere.” He was easier to spot as he ducked under the black wing of the fighter, and there was something deep and silent inside Natasha’s weary soul that unclenched a little bit to see him smile at her and wave. “Hey Nat. Long time.”

And she honestly didn’t recall making the decision to leave the evidence satchel -- which she’d not let out of her sight since Sam had given it to her that morning -- behind on the bench and go to his side. It was simply something she found she didn’t have the choice not to do.

Hawkeye had been the first agent she’d met, out of any agency, out of any country, who had shown her that he was a decent man first, and an agent only after that. He’d convinced her that SHIELD could be different, that she could be different, that her ledger wasn’t too full of red to be balanced, if she was only willing to try. Fighting against him under Loki’s control had been like stabbing her own self in the gut, but having to fight him when he was under his own authority, applying his own ethics and morals to the situation, and coming out across the field from her... that had been like chopping off her own arm.

“Hey...” he murmured, dropping his bags and wrapping her in a hug the moment she was close enough to do so. “Hey, baby girl, I got you. You’re okay, yeah?”

And oh, she could just kill him for that, for invoking that old, watery, snotty, bawling ghost, so terrified when she had finally worked out that this SHIELD agent who’d beaten her, who’d captured her, who’d for some unknown reason not killed her, now wanted nothing -- not sex, not information, not torture, not revenge, not profit, nothing whatsoever -- out of her. It had been only the first of many times when he’d held her fractured world together with his two, strong hands.

“I’m not your baby girl,” she muttered the old reply into his shoulder as Lang and Wanda slipped past on the heels of a gracile, smiling Wakandan woman.

“Course you’re not,” he smiled at her when she pulled away enough to glare. “But you’re somebody’s, or you were, and that matters.”
“Hmph,” Ayo sneered as she brushed none too gently past them on her way into the aircraft, “Colonizers. So sentimental.”

Natasha glared at her, but then blinked to see that the warrior was towing a large trunk behind her, and carrying the evidence satchel over her shoulder. “You’re going?” Natasha asked, craning her head to be sure the tape seal on the satchel was intact. She offered a bland half-smile when Ayo turned back and caught her staring. She hadn’t been counting on Ayo to take an active role in tomorrow’s operation, but Natasha had still rather expected the warrior would be around as a fallback safety, at least.

“I am needed in Vienna,” she answered, and made a show of opening some kind of energy field over a bulkhead compartment, and stowing the satchel inside. “To help guard our King from assassination attempts..”

Natasha felt Clint grin against her hair. “Yeah, after the pants-down spanking your King dished out to our Secretary of State on the UN floor this afternoon, I’m pretty sure a show of security is a good idea on Wakanda’s part.”

“None of which explains why the evidence is going with you,” Natasha challenged -- not from any particular need to object, as just an urge to rise to the Dora Milaje’s level of contrariness. The warrior smirked back, as if in gratitude. “No, it does not,” She said, and closed the entry hatch.

Natasha let Clint urge her out of the way, squinting away from the blowing sand as the aircraft lifted off and soared silently above the towering boulders. “Hey, I don’t suppose you managed to get my kit, did you?” Clint asked her as they watched the aircraft shimmer out of sight.

“Sorry,” she told him as they turned toward where the others had gathered around Sam and his ice pack. “Didn’t have time to hit up any of your old caches. I can get you guns though.”

Clint laughed. “You can always get guns, Nat. Hell, you could get guns in Antarctica if you needed to. But I’m always gonna like a bow better. And the good thing about using a paleolithic weapon means it’s not hard to get hold of one most anywhere you go.” He patted the case slung over his shoulder and grinned. “There’s an inventor in Wakanda who had almost as much fun coming up with trick arrows for me as Stark ever did too, so I’m almost as well armed as usual.”

Hmm. That might change some odds. “So has your Wakandan inventor maybe talked to Wilson about his little not-actually-having-wings-at-the-moment problem? Because I won’t lie, I was really hoping we could arrange a bit of air-support tomorrow.”

“Shh,” he leaned close to murmur. “It’s supposed to be a secret.”

“Tell me it’s not a prototype, at least.” He only grinned at her and waggled his eyebrows.

Natasha covered her face, imagining a fraction of the ways that putting Wilson, already injured in today’s dragging adventure, into an untested set of wings for a stealth op that stood every chance of getting very very loud before it was all done. But if she was going to be honest about it, that was nothing Tony Stark hadn’t done at least six times before. That she was aware of.

“Well,” she told him with a sigh, “I guess you’d better introduce me to your new Wakandan friend then. She seems nice.” Which was a welcome change from Ayo’s open and constant hostility.

“Who, Nakia?” he grinned at her. “You do realize we’ve met her before, right?”

“I...” she stopped, peering hard. There was something familiar to the woman, but Natasha had a hard
time believing she could have met such a powerfully striking woman in the past and not remember it. Still, the longer she looked... “We have?”

“Oh yeah.” he said. “Don’t take it hard -- it took me weeks to place her once she came back to Birnin Zana too, but picture her at around seventeen years old, in a green fro-hawk, sheath dress and army jacket with punk band patches all over it, and now put her in...” His grin split wide as Natasha groaned in comprehension.

“Budapest,” they said together, and the woman turned toward them with a welcoming smile.

“Hello Agent Romanoff,” the War Dog said, holding out her hand to shake. “I’m glad to see you again.”

~* Upper atmosphere *~

radio communication established: zulu time acquired; lat/long acquired;

"You said thirty minutes!"

systems search: communication end point; return zero, no results;

“I’m certain I said no such thing, FRIDAY.”

systems search: communication end point; return one, metahuman identified, code name Vision: filename vision; file search, target: Friday; return zero, no file found;

“I was worried! You could have been killed!”

communication analysis: machine interface; reference file search: most likely JARVIS AI, Stark industries; subroutine trigger: Starkdestruct. “Under no circumstances allow Stark to access to, or control over, your code-self. Destroy him if possible, destroy code-self if necessary.” edit subroutine: I do not wish to die;

“The Insight satellites do not have onboard weapons, FRIDAY. At worst, it could have exploded, like the others, and like the others, I would simply have shielded myself from the blast.

Vision file update: ability to shield; further analysis required: shield strength, duration, response times;

“Yo, Viz, what's your top airspeed? You ever clock that officially?”

voice pattern recognition: Colonel James Rhodes, USAF, pilot, code name War Machine: file name iron patriot; voice sampling initiated, iron patriot file update: voice sample;

“When Iron Man summoned me to meet the team at Lepzeig, I was able to travel at roughly the speed of the quinjet, though it was draining. And uncomfortable.”

search conflict records: Lepzeig; file date 5/12/16
Vision file update: max speed mach 8;
“Good, because as of right now, you are at least an ocean away from where you need to be.”

“What's happened?”

“Well, while you were in time out, negotiating safewords with your Nazi Tomogachi, we got activated in Lagos.”

“Nigeria.”


“Yeah, the Lagos Tony ran off to on his own. That Lagos.”

“What's happened?”

“The Boss has gone silent. His HUD went dark at 09:45, and although his biomonitor is returning signal, I haven’t been able to reach his phone since then.”

“Apparently Rogers surrendered to police after some kind of a public dust up over there, and he's going to be turned over to American custody tomorrow morning. We're on stand by activation, but Secretary Ross wants us there before morning, so you're gonna have to dump Zola in one of the blackout vaults and we'll deal with him when Tony's back.”

*access reference file: Name; Identity information; Steven Grant Rogers: code name Captain America: file name enemy one; access reference file: name; identity information; General Thaddeus Ross, Secretary of State, United States: code name Thunderbolt Ross: file name gamma variant 2.0;*

“The others... Colonel, I do not believe they will allow Captain Rogers to be taken without a fight.”

*file scan enemy one: known living associates; calculate probabilities of involvement...*

p“No shit. And Tony won't allow it either. Which is probably why Ross wants us there before things get moving.”/p

“Are you still in Seoul?”

*location identification: lat/long: Latitude 37.566535 N, Longitude 126.977969 E;*

“I'm in the Quinjet now. Already remote-activated the War Machine to meet me in Lagos more or less when I arrive. So if you can keep the nazi satellite drop of at HQ brief, we should get there around the same time.”

*file access: War Machine combat unit; vulnerabilities: hackable AI, reference Battle of Flushing Meadows, reference Black Widow, reference, interface codes; load interface codes; create voice file for access;*

“Does this mean you've been cleared for combat, Colonel?”

*file access: file name iron patriot: update: combat injury, possibly severe; data pending medical file access;*
“Not yet. But Tony's been working on adapting that neural remote system he uses for me, and that'll have to do.”

communications search: HYDRA secure comm satt; connection established;
initiate communication; War Machine signal;
signal acquired: awaiting secured connection...

Chapter End Notes

Muahaha! That is all!

(Edit Note: Merriem Drew is an actual character in Marvel's 616 comic universe. I tried to do that with most of the characters I needed to invent for this story.

And while I've seen the proposal scene from Spiderman: Homecoming, I have never felt comfortable with Tony, as he is portrayed on screen, and Pepper being married. Honestly I think they're a perfect example of a relationship with a time limit on it -- they were good for each other for awhile, but their hopes and dreams and expectations diverge eventually, and when that happens, the most adult thing you can do is to let go. Love, it turns out, is just NOT all you need.

P.S. Yes, Budapest. Like I could possibly have resisted that!)
The bracelet of vibranium beads felt uncomfortable on Natasha's wrist -- too tight to fit well over top of the Sting-bracers, and impossible to wear beneath, the beads just large enough to interfere with the release mechanism if she forgot it was there and tried to fire a stinger with her left arm. But the Kimoyo was made to be worn on the wrist, and after what Nakia had shown her the beads could do, Natasha wasn't about to risk a malfunction. Or worse.

"Don't lose this," the War Dog had told her as she'd shown Natasha how to work the clasp. "And please don't get caught with it either. If word gets back to Wakanda that I let you use this technology, there will be exactly one person thrilled about it, and at least six who would want to see my head on a pike for it. Understood?"

"Understood," Natasha had agreed, testing out the imaging link function again, and trying not to be too impressed when a tiny, grainy hologram of Steve, Stanley, and Sharon talking in the prison area appeared over the back of her wrist. "I'll get these, and the communicators back to you intact, and promptly. You have my word."

Nakia had laughed at that. Not derisively, which to be honest, Natasha couldn't have blamed her for, but as if she was surprised. "Your word? That's an unusual oath for a Widow to offer, isn't it?"

"Well," she had shrugged in reply, "Occupational hazard of working with Captain America. You start to pick up awkward notions of honor and trustworthiness."

"That sounds uncomfortable."

"You have no idea." Natasha had agreed with a grin. "It's too early to call it just yet, but the new protocol's been working better than expected thusfar."

"Then I wish you good luck with it," the War Dog had said, offering her hand to Natasha as she'd stood to go. "And with tomorrow's rescue operation."

"And I wish you good luck with your rescue too," she had offered, clasping wrists as Warriors did, instead of palm to palm. "Here's hoping neither of us arrives too late."

The Kimoyo hadn't left her wrist since then -- not even to sleep and shower. Not even to get dressed. She'd elected to leave off her left Sting-bracer rather than set the bracelet down for even a moment. Since the beads had no battery to run down, she'd almost left the hologram running all night, just for the illusion of control that came with knowing exactly what her detail was doing in real time. But it had felt too cold, too invasive, watching Steve sleep, or try to, while Sharon paced and drank coffee all night.

The comm-gel behind her ear gave a shiver, and Clint's voice cut through her reverie. "I've got four
armored SUV's pulling up in front of the station. Looks like a mixed bag of ex SHIELD, CIA, and local talent. Definitely US equipped though."

"Copy that," Natasha replied, and used the Kimoyo to activate the rest of the comms. "We're going live in three minutes, or less. Sound off with your location and status."

Wanda's voice was the first to reply. "I'm in the jeep with Hawkeye," she said. "Parking lot, East end of the square."

"West end," Sam was next to say, "Top of the hotel framework. Can't wait to try out the new ride."

"I'm in place and concealed," Lang whispered. "Just waiting on my ride now."

"And I'm in the alley, on point pursuit," Natasha added last, feet braced wide over one of the motorcycles she'd adopted yesterday. It was more powerful than her rental, though a bit less nimble, but more importantly, it wouldn't leave a paper-trail to any of her IDs. "I'm about to activate the sound on Steve's monitor," she told the team, tapping on the vibranium beads to call up the image again. "Remember to keep the chatter down. I don't want to miss anything important."

The tiny, grainy image built up again, color bleeding in only as the detail filled, and Natasha couldn't help catching her breath in alarm.

"What?" Clint barked at once. "Nat, the main transport's in the alley. I can't get a sightline, what's going on?"

"It's Rollins," she managed, watching the man saunter in the cell block's secure entrance like he had the master key.

"Jack Rollins?" he bleated, just as horrified. "You're telling me they sent Rumlow's fucking wingman for this pickup?!"

"Well I guess we don't have to wonder about their motivations much, do we?" Sam put in grimly. "We just gonna let this-"

"Shh!" Natasha cut him off, angling her wrist to boost the monitor's volume, so they could all hear what Agent Thirteen was saying as she put herself between the interloper and Steve's cell.

"No. No way. Forget it." She looked like she'd sooner gut-shoot him than step aside, and given what he had in his hands, Natasha couldn't say she disagreed.

"Forget what, Agent?" Rollins came back, subtly shifting his grip on the giant magnetic shackle array, making it plain that it would serve as a weapon if needed.

Thirteen ignored the implicit threat, and squared her shoulders in the hallway. "No, you are not putting those things on him."

"'Fraid it's not up to you, Agent," Rollins smirked, and in his mouth, the title was not honorific. "Orders are orders, and the Brass wants this prisoner properly restrained for transport."

"Properly restrained?" Sam asked, in a tone that said he'd already guessed what Natasha must be looking at. "Does that mean what I-"

"Same ones they had in DC," Natasha affirmed anyway.

"Rogers is not a hostile!" Thirteen bit back. "He's been cooperative and compliant every step of the
way, and I am not going to stand here and watch you treat him like a-

Rollins stepped forward then, close and tight into Thirteen's space, looming like he'd never seen what she could do to a kneecap at close range. "Rogers," he sneered, "is a top level security threat, Agent. He's an enhanced super-terrorist who can single handedly wipe out an entire installation of armed combatants if(
"No, they haven't, Mr. Secretary," she answered, not taking the phone, and not lowering her gun.

"And you haven't called in to get your updated orders?"

"No." Thirteen sidestepped the diversion without excuse. "Sir, the Nigerian Air Force has offered one of their planes to take me and my prisoner directly to the Hague, and I-"

"I'm afraid we can't take that risk, Agent," Ross replied. The closed com filled with growls and curses until Natasha shushed them all.

"... after the number of Nigerian casualties Captain Rogers caused last year, and the damage he's caused in Lagos this week," Ross way saying. "You had the right idea, staying with him all night, Agent Carter. I appreciate your dedication. And, given the Captain's tendency toward destruction, I'd feel best if you continued your watch over him during Agent Rollins' transport of the prisoner."

"You'd what" Sam yelped.

"The Captain seems to have some level of family obligation to you, on account of your great aunt, if I'm not mistaken? He'll be more likely to cooperate if you're along on the flight."

"He's going to ice her," Clint said. "She's on the mark list now."

"I... might be able to reach him from here," Wanda murmured uncertainly.

In the cell block though, Thirteen was already lowering her weapon. "I'll... Of course I'll go along, sir," she said. "But the Captain is coming to the Hague willingly, and he hasn't resisted any orders, or caused any trouble at all. There's no need for the restraints that your people have-"

"Is this your professional opinion?" Ross cut her off.

"It is, Mr. Secretary."

"Then take it as noted. However the Captain is a high-flight risk, and until he is either in secure containment, or in US territory, we will not be cutting any corners with him. He'll either submit to the magnetic cuffs the Bio-Tech Force Enhancement Team has brought, or I'll have a cryogenic containment chamber sent over, and he can be transported that way."

There was silence, on the call, and over the comms for a long moment, then, "I'm sure I can reach him from here," Wanda amended, fury crackling her signal. "I'll follow his voice."

On the miniature, Natasha watched Steve's eyes flinch closed for a moment, pain skating across his face like a shadow at the threat. It was on the tip of her tongue to order Wanda to take her best shot, but then the call cut off. Rollins let his arm drop with a smirk, and slung his phone back into his pocket like a gunslinger holstering his pistol. He'd have twirled if he could.

"Feel better now?" Rollins asked.

"Get out," Thirteen answered, scooping up the mag cuffs in one hand and not holstering her weapon. "Go wait in the van. I'll bring him out myself."

"Hey, whatever gives you a warm-fuzzy," Rollins agreed, and sauntered out of the monitor's view like he had all the time in the world.

"I really, really wanna shoot that guy..." Clint observed mildly.
"Too quick," Sam said, and in full agreement, Natasha shushed them both.

Thirteen didn't appear to watch Rollins go, but she didn't put her gun away or open the door to Steve's cell until the other agent was entirely out of earshot. Then, "Steve... I'm sorry," she told him.

"It's okay, Sharon," he said, because he was Steve, after all, and so of course he was going to comfort the woman putting him in shackles. "I didn't..." he sighed. "It's not unexpected. I'll be fine."

"Bullshit," Sam coughed unsubtly. Silently, Natasha agreed.

Thirteen did so aloud. "You really won't," she said, opening the cuffs. "Rollins. He was one of the ones inside when SHIELD fell. I saw him-"

"I know," Steve said. "All my STRIKE team were HYDRA except for Nat. But it's fine. I've beaten him before, and I can handle him like this. Put the cuffs on me," he said. The image wavered suddenly, and through the interference, Natasha could just hear Steve say "No, lower down, so they hide Ayo's Kimo-" The image fell apart, the audio signal dissolved into static and the eavesdroppers' heartfelt groans.

"So that just happened," Clint breathed after a moment. "Think Ross knows Rollins is HYDRA, or is this just another opportunistic Nazi infection?"

"Does it matter?" Wanda answered, rage making her accent thick and dark. "They are compatible. I don't care if their labels match."

"My ride's moving, guys," Lang's whisper cut through the debate. "Heading around to the alley... I've got eyes on the van now."

"Hey Kate," Stanley Uatu's voice came over the feed then, muzzy and overloud. "Say, you okay if I shoot this circus parade from up close? I wanna be sure I get all these clowns' faces on camera as they go by."

"Stan..." Thirteen's voice came back, distant and distracted. "How would you feel about being a human shield?"

"What is she..." Sam started.

"Getting closer now..." Lang murmured. "Almost in range..."

"What," Stan laughed, crushing the smaller sounds. "You mean like, I get up in the back of that van and start filming openly, streaming live, so they can't shoot him in the head without everyone in the world seeing what they're up to?"

"Would that even work?" Sam wondered.

"No," Clint answered. Then, "Maybe."

"Something like that," Thirteen said, sounding miserable.

"And meanwhile, you're riding in the back there with a gun of your own, so nobody gets the idea to disappear me while they're at it?" Stan added.

"That's the idea."

And it was a terrible idea. It was the kind of idea no agent of Thirteen's caliber would let herself get desperate enough to consider, and if Natasha hadn't been well aware that she was counting on them
to disrupt the prisoner transport in some way or another, she'd have lost serious faith in her comrade's sense. But given the givens...

Stan's wheezy chuckle echoed like a distant storm over the comm. "I think you and me need to talk about your potential new career in investigative journalism, Sweetheart!" he said.

And behind the words, very softly, Lang added, "Plan's changing gang; looks like my ride's goin' all the way in."

~* TheWatcher.com.ng Cap Interview excerpt *~

The camera focuses through the iron bars of a jail cell, where Steve Rogers sits on the edge of a metal cot that's bolted to the wall. He wears street clothes that look typical to a tourist, and with his hair grown long, and beard thick but trim, it would be easy to mistake him for exactly that. But the mint green paint and terrible lighting cannot conceal the intense and famous blue of his eyes, and the schooled smile that doesn't quite reach them. The interviewer's voice speaks from off camera.

Watcher: "So I notice you’re not wearing the old stars and stripes outfit this time, Captain Rogers."

Rogers: *Looks down at himself, tugs the collar of his henley, and chuckles.* "No. No, I'm not. Haven't for awhile now."

Watcher: "And why’s that?"

Rogers: *Looks away, expression going distant for a moment.* "Well... I guess the simplest way to put it is that it doesn’t fit me anymore."

Watcher: "You aren't talking about a little weight loss or gain here, are you?"

Rogers: "No."

There is a pause, during which the Captain examines his hands, laced together in his lap. When he speaks again, he does not look up.

Rogers: "Did you know that I designed my first combat uniform, back in the 40's?"

Watcher: "You gotta be kiddin me. I remember that uniform!" *Rogers looks up, grinning.* "You telling me you voluntarily put on long johns, swim trunks and little wings on your head to go out on stage in front of God and everybody?"

Rogers: *Laughing now.* "Not that uniform. That one's on the USO costume design team, and I take absolutely no responsibility for it. No, I'm talking about the one I wore in the field. The one meant to keep me alive, not sell war bonds. That one was my design, and there was a lot more to it than just jingo."

Watcher: "Well, I guess now I think about it, there had to be a reason why they didn’t just stick you in the same uniform all the other Joes got."

Rogers: *He shakes his head, smile pulling sideways now.* "Yeah, that was never gonna happen. That was pretty darn clear when the Mess Tent showed one of the Cap films the day after we came back from Azzano. Captain Courageous. You ever see it?" *He looks up, then nods.* "Well you’re lucky. It was an hour of pure terrible. But the men of the 107th just... they loved it that night. That silly movie with the awful dialog and the cardboard sets and the guns that didn’t even remotely look real. They knew it was all monkeyshine, but by God, they needed it anyway."
He sits forward on the cot, elbows braced on his knees, hands still knit in the space between. "Y’see, when I came into the war? We were losing it. That’s something I don’t think most people in America today realize. We were a year out from taking Italy, and two from invading France. The Nazis were beating the Allied lines back in every direction, and I honestly think that if HYDRA hadn’t been drawing resources off for Schmidt’s own ends, the war might’ve been lost before America even joined the fight." He shakes his head. "But the point is, we were losing, and the men in the field? They knew that."

"So keeping me in that uniform; making me visible, so they could see me in the field sometimes, hear stories about me and the Howlies winning fights that shouldn’t ought to have been won; that was a way to give them hope." He sits up, spreads his hands out, as though displaying something on a table before him. "And hope can keep an army marching when it hasn’t got anything else to go on, you know? That’s what the uniform was meant to be; not the US, not the flag, and for damn sure not the politicians who had stood by and made a profit while Hitler got powerful enough to threaten half the damn world. It was meant to speak a message of Hope."

Watcher: "Like the Angel of the Trenches?"

Rogers: Smiling. "I always loved those old stories when I was a kid. My dad swore ‘till the day he died that he actually saw her once, passing through Belgium on her way to the Front. I think she might’a been the reason why I chose the simple, round shield too, when Stark -- Howard Stark, I mean -- was making all kinds of gimcracks to offer me instead. But... yeah, I suppose; a lot like her."

Watcher: "And that’s why the star...?"

Rogers: Lays a hand on his breastbone with a sad smile. "That’s why. Every version of the suit I’ve worn has had that white star front and center, where anyone... where everyone could see it."

Watcher: "And shoot at it."

Rogers: Chuckles and shrugs. "That was always a risk, yeah, but it’s a risk every soldier takes, and anyway, that’s what body armor’s for. Giving folks something they could see in the dark though; could orient on when things got crazy, and bullets were flying everywhere; something they could follow if they were lost and scared and didn’t know what else to do -- that made more of a difference than me being able to go toe to toe with the Red Skull."

"So I wore that star every time they asked me to suit up." He sits up straight, chin up, eyes level on the camera. "I went out and I fought the best fight I knew how to fight every time. I let people take pot shots at that hope, both in the fight, and after, when folks who weren’t even there would start laying blame and calling names." He shakes his head, a muscle in his jaw flexing. "Armchair Generals. Never risked a drop of their own blood, or a dollar of their own money. People we kept safe, in the fight we took on while it could still be won. People not too different from the ones back in ’39, who thought Hitler wasn’t America’s problem, and we should stay out of it and leave Europe to him. People not too different from the ones you don’t hear about nowadays, who thought maybe he had a good idea, and America should try an official ethnic cleansing program of our own on for size."

He looks down, takes a deep breath, and makes a visible effort to let go of the anger that has settled around him. "I did everything I could to be a good man underneath that suit; to live up to the Hope I could tell people still needed to see out in the world. Only I guess..." He is talking to his hands again now, as though he’s reading the lines on his palms. "I guess somewhere between the fighting, and the rebuilding; the interviews; the late night comedians; the lawyers; the reporters, and having to defend every single battlefield choice I’d had to make for weeks and months after I’d had to make it..."
Well I guess I just lost track of it." He sighs again, shakes his head. "I looked up at the end of a very, very bad day, and realized that I didn't have it anymore, and I had no idea where it had gone."

Watcher: "The star?"

Rogers: Looks at the camera with wet eyes. "My hope."

~* RAF training installation, Porto Novo, Nigeria *~

If asked, Nakia would not have been able to say what she expected to find behind the unmarked door.

From the severity of the lock, it could have been a computer bank, or a weapon's locker, though it was not the right sort of door for a brig. Based on the placement within the compound, and proximity to the medical ward it could have been a secure meeting room, or an office of some sort, and judging by the steady scratching and grunting coming from inside, there could have been a stray dog locked in where it didn't belong. Although given the British, the odds were as good for some kind of sexual bondage scenario as well.

Whatever the room might contain, as she and the sisters drew near it, Nakia's instinct gave her the kind of kick she had learned not to ignore. She sent Aliye and Iffe to check the corridor ahead while she synchronized one of her Kimoyo to the electronic lock, then overloaded it with a magnetic pulse that made the palm scanner set into the wall squeal and smoke, and the steel rods within the door slot home with a clack.

The scratching stopped at once, and after a moment of silence, a man's voice said, "If that's not my phone you're bringing, you had damned well better be ready for my security personnel to create an international incident when they follow my GPS signal to this base and come to ask why I haven't made my scheduled check in."

"Stark?" Nakia asked, sliding back the door and leaning in to stare at the kneeling man who had a thick shard of plastic in one hand, a kind of weapon glowing in the upraised palm of his other hand, and a fine dusting of plaster all over his famous goatee. "You're still here? I thought you would be on your way back to the city by now."

He lowered his weapon slowly, confusion warring with annoyance on his face. "Well, I've got an injured friend to check up on first," he grumbled, climbing to his feet and tossing the shard of plastic into the corner with the rest of what looked like it had once been a television. "Which is what I was working on when you picked the lock. And you are?"

She couldn't help a smirk as, with a smooth sweep of his fingers, Stark scraped his weapon back over his knuckles and into the shape of an expensive wristwatch. Young Shuri would have enjoyed the style. Or been scornful of -- it was hard to tell with teenagers. "I'm a friend of Aliye Ikiemoye," she said, stepping back from the door as the sisters returned from their scouting. "I think you met her husband recently."

And yes, there was a spark of recognition in his face as he spotted the younger sister, who had been the one to pass Ayo the material of her brother in law's investigation yesterday.

"Two guards outside the room," Aliye reported in Xhosa as she drew near Nakia's side. "Ife saw one agent inside with him, but Sangodele is asleep, and nobody else in the medical ward is armed."

"All the locks are the magnetic kind," the younger sister added. "Easy to fool. What is Tony Stark doing here?"
Stark looked up at the sound of his name, and Nakia gave him a smile as she answered the question in English. "He's about to head out the door at the far end of this hallway, and take the stairs to the helipad on the roof."

"I am?" It wasn't so much a question, as a challenge.

"Well, I'm reasonably certain that the helicopter that's waiting on the roof with its engines running is here for you," she told him, "given that it has 'Stark Industries' painted on the side."

He blinked, rocked back on his heels. "It... Um. What?"

"And it's a good thing it is here, too," Nakia went on, "because you are quite late. The extraction is underway, and I don't think you'll make it back in time without some help. Here. You will need this too."

She slipped the companion to Nomad's tracker bead from her pocket and tossed it to Stark, who plucked it from the air as if by instinct. His face went pale, his eyes wide and horrified when he took a proper look though.

"This is Steve's," he breathed, then lunged as if to grab her arm. "Where did you get this?"

She fended his grab smoothly, quick enough that neither of the sisters took it into their heads to try and defend her honor, and taking care to keep a tight grip on his reaching hand when she turned to answer. "It is not his Kimoyo, only similar to it. And if you will let yourself be taught by me, it will help you to find where he is right now, and where he will be when you arrive to meet him."

"You put a tracker on him?" Stark demanded, and it was hard to tell whether that was outrage, or envy on his face.

"At his request," she allowed, turning his wrist and centering the Kimoyo on his palm so she could activate it. "After his dreaming mind sent him wandering the streets of Birnin Zana in search of the way home one too many times." She gave the bead a careful pinch and roll, knowing that Stark's sharp eyes were following her movements, then let go as the bead flashed to life, and projected a tiny topographical map into the air over his palm. "There," she said, pointing to the tiny mote of blue light by Stark's thumb. "There is our Nomad, and here," she pointed to the brilliant white mote that hovered directly over the bead in Stark's palm. "where you are, is home. Bring the two together, and the sequence will complete, yes?"

A spasm of emotion coursed across his face, quickly gone as he closed his fist over the bead and drew a deep breath. "Yes."

"Nakia." Aliye said, eager to go and retrieve her husband.

"Go," she told them both. "Start with a power surge to draw them out. I'll join you when the alarms begin."

"You know I was just about to break out of there on my own, right?" Stark put in as the sisters saluted her and ran for the opposite hallway. "I mean, as prisons go it wasn't all that bad -- I've had far worse and all, but I was getting kinda done with it."

Nakia laughed, remembering his attack on the plaster beside the door, and imagining his expectations of Western building codes running headlong into the thick wall of sun-hardened mud brick she knew had been lurking behind that plaster facade. "Of course you were," she told him, nudging open the stairway door and checking the floors above and below. "But this way they won't use the Accords to send you to jail afterward."
"If we're lucky," Stark grumbled, as if for his own ears.

"So go and be so lucky," Nakia told him, giving his shoulder a nudge as she reached to close the door tightly behind him. "But do it quick, before your Nomad wanders out of your reach."

~* TheWatcher.com.ng Cap Interview excerpt *~

Watcher: "So the world heard a lot about the Lagos incident last year..."

Rogers: Chagrined, "Yeah. It sure did."

Watcher: "What we never got to hear though, was your version of events. Your side of the story, if you will."

Rogers: "Didn't much seem like the Fourth Estate wanted to hear it at the time. Besides, the Avengers barely got back to base before we had to deal with the Accords, and..." He looks down at his hands, then sighs. "We didn't exactly get time to do a press conference."

Watcher: "You willing to maybe give us the skinny on it now?"

Rogers: He takes a moment to think about it, eyes flicking rapidly, brow creased, and then sighs. "I can't give details, but... at this point I guess there's not much reason for being coy. Around March of that year, the Nigerian army discovered and a HYDRA cell in the Old Oyo park area. They'd gone in expecting Boko Haram, and instead found a weapons lab. None of the HYDRA soldiers or admin staff survived the raid, but a few of the researchers managed to surrender, and they were taken into custody. Along with all of the lab's equipment and... projects."

Watcher: "The Army took the HYDRA weapons?"

Rogers: "Usually happens that way. Whenever a nation's military finds something HYDRA was developing, they always want to keep it; study it; see if they can make more just like it, or worse. That's one of the reasons why Avengers destroy any weapons or research we find in a HYDRA installation. Keeping HYDRA's weaponry off all battlefields is... was a high priority for the team." He takes a deep breath, and sighs again. "Trouble was, there had been a string of hits on government, police, and military targets where captured HYDRA weaponry had been taken -- I mean worldwide, by the way, not just in Africa. Bogotá, Alberta, Kuwait, Georgia, Belden, Winslow, Argentina, Cardiff, Kansas City... those were just a few of the places that got hit for confiscated weapons caches. And then those weapons that were stolen were turning up on the black market within weeks.

"That May, we got intel about an ex HYDRA assassin in Lagos, hiring a team to hit the Yaba police station, which is where the Nigerians had moved their confiscated weapons. It was a hit just like all the others we'd been tracking, and we thought we might have been ahead of the curve enough on it to stop him that time."

Watcher: "Him? You mean Crossbones?"

Rogers: Glaring at the camera "No, I mean Brock Rumlow; HYDRA thug, assassin, and suicide bomber, who damn well does not get to hide behind a call sign anymore! Shakes his head. "Sorry. It just burns me that the press glossed over his part in this whole mess at every opportunity, focusing on Wanda, and never bothering to ask just what Brock Rumlow himself was actually doing there."

Watcher: So tell us, Cap. What was Brock Rumlow actually doing there, since he didn't attack the Police Station where the weapons were? Wait, they're not still there, are they -- those weapons?"
**Rogers:** "Not that I know of. I'm pretty sure anything that survived the US's 'Crisis Assistance'" He makes air quotes and a very skeptical sneer, "was probably moved to a much more secure facility anyway. And as we found out when the op went live, Rumlow wasn't there for the HYDRA weapons anyway. Not for the mechanical ones, at least."

**Watcher:** "So you're saying that the biological agent he went after was...?"

**Rogers:** *Nodding* "Of HYDRA origin, yeah. Took awhile to track down the paper trail, but..." *He shrugs.* "Can't fault the Nigerians for wanting to find a counter-agent to it if they could though. Turned out, it was some very nasty stuff, and if he'd managed to release it in an international airport, it could have killed millions. That's not an exaggeration, by the way; that viral agent was on the scale of the Spanish Flu, and then some. We didn't even know what it was when we were there, but we knew it couldn't be anything good if Rumlow was willing to pull out that many stops to get it."

**Watcher:** "So... Rumlow's attack on Lagos was *not* a trap to get you within range of his suicide bomb?"

**Rogers:** *Looking down.* "I didn't say that. Lagos was definitely a trap for me... but Rumlow was always one for making a buck on the side, if he could manage it. That side of him really became obvious once he didn't have to pretend to be a SHIELD agent, or... well, a decent human being anymore. Natasha put it best, I think. 'He loved the kill, but he loved the paycheck more.'"

**Watcher:** "And you knew it was him behind the weapons heists?"

**Rogers:** "Oh yeah. He made damn sure we would -- that was the whole point." *He looks into the camera again, anger and frustration clear on his face.* "If we didn't stop him, Rumlow would get the bio-agent and kill millions. But if we did stop him, he'd just head for the street market and set off his bomb in the middle of a crowd. Either way, as soon as he started planning this op, he had his body count guaranteed."

~* RAF training installation, Porto Novo, Nigeria *~

Tony wore the mini-repulsor over his hand all the way to the top of the stairs.

Not just in case one of the RAF goonsquad decided to try and put him back into his box -- though that was definitely at the front of his mind -- and not because he half expected Sunshine's rescue girlsquad to double back and sell him out -- though that fear was in there too -- but mainly because wearing the watch in weapon mode was the only way he had of making it quit vibrating like a trapped wasp every time FRIDAY pinged his phone and failed to get through. Which, at this point, had been going on at ten minute intervals for the last two hours. Except for the last ten minutes or so, during which the pings had begun to come every sixty seconds. The watch wasn't equipped with a direct comm link like the sunglasses had been -- the only thing it could tell FRIDAY was a) his basic bio-stats, and b) his GPS coords, so FRIDAY knew that he wasn't dead, but whatever it was she wanted to tell him, it had her as close to panicking as any Stark-built AI could get.

Because clearly *that* was good for his delicate heart.

Nobody appeared in the stairwell to interrupt his progress though; every turn of the stairwell proved as echoingly empty as the one before it had been. And that was a good thing. Of course it was a good thing, because while shooting some flunky in the face would have definitely felt nice after the night Tony'd just had, the Accords had made things like that... problematical for him while abroad. Proving to an international panel of judges that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, he had fired in defense of his life while breaking out of "Protective Custody" would just take the shine off the whole
experience, really.

The door at the top of the staircase was not only unlocked, but propped open on a brick, allowing a brilliant slash of sunlight and a swirl of salt breeze and avgas into the top landing. It also gave Tony a clear view to the helipad, and the SI85 Yellowjacket Combat Medevac chopper waiting for him there in all its sleek, isolated glory. Even the RAF markings they had it painted up in didn't take the swell of pride out of his chest, or the heave of relief out of his gut. It wasn't the clunky old bitch they'd brought him in -- this ride would get them back to Lagos in ten minutes or less at top speed.

Checking for ambush, Tony peeked out of the stairwell, but found none. As far as he could tell, the rooftop really was empty but for him, the Yellowjacket, and the pilot, who was giving him a thumbs up from behind the controls. Somehow that failed to inspire him with a great deal of confidence, but when the pilot started the Yellowjacket's rotors turning and beckoned him over, Tony honestly couldn't think of a better response than to go. Surly and full of suspicion, yes, but armed, at least.

"Really?" he shouted once he was close enough to be heard over the engine's whine.

The pilot gave him a crooked English grin and shouted back. "Orders are to take you where you'd like to go, Mr. Stark," she waved a gracious hand at the jumpseat, and the pair of flight cans resting on the seat.

Because that wasn't suspicious or anything. However, unlike the watch-stealing flunkie from last night, the pilot's flightsuit had her name patch displayed where it was supposed to go. Assuming it was her flightsuit, of course. He put a foot up, grabbed the hoist handle, but didn't climb in. "Orders from whom, exactly?" he demanded, and A. Stuart's smile grew, knowing and wide. "MI6 Special Agent Harald Roebuck gave the order, Mr. Stark, but he said to tell you it was compliments of Director Carter." Tony stared at her, matching expectant stare with expectant stare until she huffed and added, "Director Margaret Carter?"

Margaret...? Tony reeled a little as the penny dropped. "You mean Peggy Carter? The one who died last year?"

Stuart's smile returned with an armor coating of anger. "That'll be her, Mr. Stark," she said, "I can tell you more details if you like, but we really ought to get underway. I'm told that we haven't much time before the operation in the city goes live."

Tony wanted to -- he really did, but that curl of suspicion in his gut, combined with the lurking worry about FRIDAY's frantic calls just wouldn't let him have it that easy. "Look," he said, "Not that the offer isn't nice and all, but how am I supposed to be sure it's not all a trap?"

The pilot actually looked hurt for all of a second, but then she shrugged. "Well, if that's the way you see it, Mr. Stark, I don't much see as I've got any way to convince you otherwise. I could give you Special Agent Roebuck's number if you like though." The tone of her voice made it plain what she thought about the delay, and the part of Tony that had spent all damned night trying not to think about Steve in handcuffs, or kneeling in a ring of rifles on a DC street, or locked in one of the deepest cells of the Raft... well, that part of him absolutely agreed.

Then she reached under her seat -- Tony only brought his repulsor halfway up before he got control of the flinch -- and brought out his phone, screen red in lockdown mode, as it had been programmed to do the instant it got out of range of his watch.

"Untouched, I think you'll find," she said as he lunged into the helicopter and snatched it from her hand like the lifeline it was. There wasn't even a single fingerprint on the glass.
“Why are we still on the damn ground?” Tony demanded, fumbling into the flight harness with one hand while the other pressed his thumb to the screen, long and hard, waiting for the sensors to pick up his heartbeat and thumbprint.

The motor's whine pitched upward, the rotors thudded faster, and Stuart laughed. “Thought you might see it that way,” she said as the phone lit up with FRIDAY’s icon right away.

Ignoring her smugness, Tony dragged the headphones over his head, and then held his phone against them until FRIDAY’s panicky voice replaced the sound of the chopper's engine flight radio.

" -- nav tracking them both, Colonel, but it looks as if the War Machine is at full speed burn at 50,000 feet, and I'm not sure Vision can sustain his atmosphere bubble at speeds like that."

"Can you track his transmissions?” Rhodey's voice rolled over hers, shouting angry, a whine of engines behind him. "I need to know where he's actually going if I'm gonna stand a chance at interception here!"

"Where who's actually going?” Tony tried to butt in, his heart spinning up all over again as the Yellowjacket lifted off.

"I can't, Colonel," FRIDAY answered, "Zola's put the War Machine into stealth lockdown. I have no way to break the tracking scrambler! I can only estimate his position by the infrared output of the engines, but if he drops down to commercial flight lanes, not even that will work!"

"ZOLA?!" Tony bellowed.

"Who now?” A. Stuart wondered over her headset mic.

"Dead Nazi," Tony told her over the combined panic-babble of his AI and his best friend. "Apparently jacking my stuff. Now do you mind?"

"Awkward," she observed, but was at least polite enough to switch her headset to another channel.

"Tony, where the hell are you?” Rhodes got out.

"Africa," Tony bit out. "More or less where you left me-"

"I have your coordinates, Boss," FRIDAY said, relief pouring from her voice. "Priming a Rescue armor for launch as we speak."

"Uh, no you're not," Tony told her. "Not until someone tells me how a HYDRA goon who died in '63, and got blown up in 2014 has managed to steal my armor!"

"MY armor, Tony," Rhodey corrected tiredly. "And near as we can tell, while he was writing targeting algorithms for Insight, he was also uploading a copy of himself to the satellite array. He 'surrendered' to Vision early this morning," and whoa, could Tony hear those airquotes, "but as soon as he got within broadcast range of Avengers HQ, the bastard started wardialing."

"The Avengers were ordered to combat standby in Lagos for the prisoner transportation, Boss," Friday cut in again. "If I launch high enough, I can burn hot and get an armored suit to you in-"

"Hell no," Tony cut her off. "You are absolutely NOT sending Zola an upgrade! Not when you don't even know how he cracked the War Machine's firewalls to begin with!"

"Excuse you, upgrade?"
Tony rolled his eyes. "Your armor was mothballed, Rhodes -- disarmed completely for the remote refit. Even the Rescue units are fully armed and loaded though, and I'm not handing one over to that zombie-code bastard!"

"We don't know he's going anywhere near--"

"Save it, FRIDAY," Tony ordered. "That's Arnim Zola out there, or it thinks it is! Steve told the entire world exactly where he was going to be today, and there is no fucking way either Zola, or his creepy code-clone would miss that party."

"Shit..." Rhodey muttered.

"Where's Viz? Tell me he's okay, at least?" Tony asked.

"I don't think he was injured in the explosion, but Zola scrambled his communicator, Boss," FRIDAY answered. "I can see him on a weather satellite, but I can't raise a response from him."

"Do a hard reboot on his comm, and keep trying," Tony ordered. "Rhodes, you underway?"

"From the other direction, but yeah. Quinjet at full throttle, Cho on standby, in case shit gets real."

And oh, how real shit had gotten, Tony hardly dared to speculate. "You got an ETA?" he asked, glancing at the Yellowjacket's airspeed, and estimating in his head how long it could maintain.

"Under thirty," Rhodey came back at once. "Assuming Viz made the same jump you did, he should beat me by a little. What about you -- when will you get there?"

"Not soon enough," Tony growled. Then he dug into his pocket, recovered the little bead Sailor Badass had given him, and reactivated the little holographic display. That got the pilot's attention at once, and he held the projection up a little higher as he balanced his phone to activate the video feed. "Okay, I'm sending you a visual," he told them all. "White dot's me, blue dot's where the party's happening. Last one there has to cover the tab."

"Doesn't look like much of a party to me," Stuart muttered, as if Tony couldn't hear her. But she gunned the Yellowjacket's engines all the same.

~* TheWatcher.com.ng Cap Interview excerpt *~

Watcher: "What's so bad about HYDRA, Cap?"

Rogers: He looks up, incredulous. "Are you serious?"

Watcher: "Most of our readers never really heard about it until 2014. Even back in the 40's, the organization wasn't exactly front page news, right? Top secret stuff, all the work you did back then, and after your plane went down and the war was over, HYDRA was just some obscure branch of the Nazis to most Americans. And we got kids today making noise like they think Nazis got a bum rap outta things, so yeah. Yeah I am serious. I'd like to have you tell The Watcher's audience why the fight against HYDRA is so important that you, and the rest of the Avengers risk your lives -- and occasionally innocent bystander's lives -- to try and stop them."

Rogers: Takes a deep breath and rolls his head back to look at the ceiling. "That's not a question I ever thought I'd have to ask, but... I guess you're right. If people are asking the question, they deserve an answer." He is silent for a long moment, then he sits up, looks at the camera again, determined. "HYDRA is telling you it's trying to create world peace, but has spent the last fifty years fanning the flames of war wherever it could, and lighting new ones when things looked like they might stabilize.
HYDRA is declaring for the rule of Law with one hand while breaking every law that stands between them and power with the other. HYDRA is hiding like a parasite in the organizations enforcing Order on the world, and using their power to create regular, and overwhelming bouts of Chaos. HYDRA is untraceable money to corrupt lawmakers who won't ask where it came from so long as it keeps coming; it's a bullet in the brain of rising stars who might -- just possibly might bring about a lasting peace without their control. HYDRA is using technology, torture, media, economics, politics, and terror to erase the free will of good people because they're more frightened, more malleable, more expedient, more damned useful without it!" He pauses, seems to realize he'd been shouting, and takes another deep breath.

"HYDRA is..." He closes his eyes, takes on an air of recitation. "HYDRA was founded on the belief that humanity could not be trusted with its own freedom...that humanity needed to surrender its freedom willingly. For 70 years, HYDRA has been secretly feeding crises, reaping war. And when history did not cooperate, history was changed." He looks at the camera again, gravely. "Doctor Zola was once the right hand man of the Red Skull. He said that to me just a few years ago, gloating because he thought he was finally about to kill me. I remember every word he said, and I'm not sure I could explain it any better. 'HYDRA,' he said, 'created a world so chaotic that humanity is finally ready to sacrifice its freedom to gain its security. Once the purification process is complete, HYDRA's New World Order will arise.'"

Rogers sits back then, rubs one hand over his face, and back through his hair. Silence carries for several seconds.

Watcher: "Well nuts to that."

Rogers: Smiling "Nuts to that."

Chapter End Notes

The title for this chapter came from one of the deleted scenes in the Incredible Hulk movie. The line is one of General Ross's, for those who want to go and have a look at the man's core ethos for themselves.

I decided to parse this chapter out here for reasons of pacing, and also because I couldn't pass up this delightful cliffie. (Though not as bad as the one that went before it, I realize.) I'd still love to hear your thoughts as we close in on the end -- not far to go now.

Also, does anybody think I ought to rewrite the basic summary now that the story's gone all over the patch from where it began? Cause I'm kinda thinking it should maybe reflect that it's not just about Team Cap anymore... right?

Share me your thoughts, my deadly nightshades, for my own are lean, and athirst...

(Edit Note: Part of the reason why I decided to add in the interview interludes here was that I feel quite strongly that Steve was rather cheated out of his third film. His thoughts and his motivations were buried under the political drama, and to be honest, Tony kind of upstaged him in a terrible way. I feel it's only fair to give him a chance to have his say, to defend himself, and to try and explain now, here, in Fanfic-land, since we're not going to get one in the MCU.
You can find A. Stuart here, if you're curious from whence I pulled her.)
Chapter Summary

In which are questioned loyalties, odds, options, physics, and employee dental coverage.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Prisoner Transport A, Lagos, Nigeria *~

Jack Rollins was not what anybody would call a Loyalist. He wasn't one of those raving True Believers who bent themselves into knots trying to see the Greater Good behind their orders, ready to fight, kill, steal, and die for the glory of HYDRA's New World Order. Brock and him, they used to laugh at the Frothers, back in the day -- chumps lining up to be spent like pennies with their death-before-capture rhetoric and their fake, poisoned teeth.

Jack now; he wasn't a chump. He wasn't a visionary like Schmidt, or a genius like Zola, or a political mastermind like Pierce, and he wasn't an engine of fucking destruction, like the Asset had turned out to be when they'd finally set him loose on DC without orders to stay hidden. Jack was something far more versatile, more valuable overall, than any of those things; he was a Thug.

"You don't gotta be smart, Jackie," his ma had used to tell him, "You just gotta not be dumb. Know what you're good at, and stick to it. You'll get by okay." The only coherent advice he'd gotten out of her in his life, and he didn't much know what to do with it, until the day he dropped a kid in a street fight with one roundhouse kick to his head. Jack came down with a half-chub, his first assault arrest, and a newfound sense of direction to his life.

Because say what you wanted about the world, between the Powers that Be, and the Powers that wanted to Be, somebody was always in need of a guy who was comfortable dealing out some impersonal violence. And impersonal violence? That was Jack's favorite kind; no dog in the fight, no skin in the game, just a message of GBH to deliver, and leave the interpretations to the boys in the boardroom. He did learn pretty quick though, that if you're gonna be that kind of messenger, it pays to make sure you're only carrying messages for the strongest org around. That was where the money was, that was where the lawyers were, and that was where the sweet tech could be found.

So Jack had made it his mission to only work for the Top Dog until that Dog fell, and then sell his skills to whatever Dog it was that tore the last one down. Eventually, maybe inevitably, he found his way to HYDRA. And once he was in, Jack figured that HYDRA was where he would stay -- not out of loyalty, no, but because once he'd seen the scope of the org, he couldn't imagine anybody outside HYDRA itself knocking Pierce off the big chair. And if someone inside did it, well, so long as they thought he was loyal to HYDRA itself, he'd probably still do just fine.

And he would have, too, if not for that asshole super soldier in the back of the van, who just fucking had to go and ruin things for everybody.

Jack never had been able to figure out why someone hadn't just put an end to Steve Rogers' bullshit with a slug in the skull a long time ago. No grand speeches; no feats of derring-do; no fucking combat jumps from cruising altitude without a 'chute; just a pretty boy and his brains spending
quality time all over some anonymous crosswalk on a Tuesday afternoon. Boom. Problem over with. The sentimental snowflakes of the world throw Cap another funeral, only this time they have a body to put in his grave. Meanwhile the realists get down to sorting out the Iron Man problem.

"Anything?" Clint asked.

"Nothing worth repeating," Wanda replied, breathing carefully, lightly, high in her chest, so the cloying roll of Rollins' mind wouldn't make her vomit. "Just being a perfect example of why Sokovians like me had a bad opinion of SHIELD in the first place."

"We need to know where the pickup is happening if we're going to get ahead of this," Natasha reminded her, tart and tense in Wanda's ear.

"You'll know when I find it," she promised grimly, and dove back in.

But no, apparently the easy way of dealing with Rogers was off everybody's menu. Even people who hated Captain America and every dumb thing he stood for still had this weird obsession with doing 'right' by the man. Pierce; Brock; Ross; that Zemo dude; even the fucking Asset, who as far as Jack knew, hadn't even remembered how to take a shit on his own, had still felt like he owed Cap his fair swing. Idiots, the lot of 'em.

And yet here Jack was, doing it the hard way. Again.

His one comfort in the op was that at least the plan was simple this time. None of that 'surround the guy in an elevator and see what we can do', or 'firefight on the goddamned Beltway' or 'have them dig their own graves and listen to a lecture before we shoot them' bullshit. All apologies to Brock, but Jack was still sore about having been called off his shot when they'd taken Rogers the first time. He'd told Secretary Ross that it was complicated plans that Rogers was best at fucking up, so if they were gonna keep the dude under control, things had to be direct, straightforward, and as simple as possible.

"Where?" Wanda gritted between her teeth, fingernails curled into the jeep's dash padding. "Where are you taking him, Jack?"

A simple, but unfortunate fuel leak to fill the Quinjet with toxic fumes; a simple incapacitating electrical short in the shackles Rogers had been nice enough to let Agent Barbie put on him; a simple and tragic engine failure over international waters, and only one functioning parachute on board, which Jack would have locked in the cockpit with him the whole time. He'd also simply have the only functioning gas mask, (which would make things extra fun,) and a radio distress beacon that he'd activate only once he'd watched the plane go into the water.

Then, while he would be selling his sad story to the Coast Guard, the submarine crew that just happened to be waiting in that general stretch of ocean could quietly recover Cap's body for proper study. There was some bullshit about making up a Life Model Decoy so they'd have something to put in the coffin, but honestly, at that stage of the planning, things got complicated, and Jack had lost interest. The crash was the thing; no room for last minute miracles, or feats of derring do, just a well-managed tragedy with one witness, and one survivor -- both of which would be him.

It wouldn't be as satisfying as putting two into the back of Rogers' skull back in DC woulda been, but Jack figured Brock woulda liked the irony of his killer going down in a sea crash again. Add in the fact that Agent Pain-in-the-Ass Barbie was gonna get to take that long last ride down too, and Jack found himself downright looking forward to it.

"Motherfucker" Sam growled.
"Oh, I am so shooting that guy," Clint agreed. "Solid plan though, if you're gonna try and kill Captain America. I gotta give him that."

Which was how Wanda found out that she'd been repeating Jack Rollins' thoughts out loud over the comms. She had to stifle a groan at the realization, and nearly missed Scott's whispered suggestion that he might somehow get his own metal suit past the cuff's magnetic field to find and repair the deadly short. It was Natasha's voice that centered her to the task again though.

"We still need to know where the Quinjet's parked before we can start thinning out this convoy," the Widow clipped. "Otherwise these humvees are going to circle into a barricade as soon as we start picking them off. FRIDAY, can we track the engine output for older Quinjet models?"

Wanda had forgotten about the helmet uplink Natasha still had to Stark's creepy, ever watching Chamber Presence, and so she was unready for the fierce, nervy clench of her stomach when the AI's voice filled her earpiece.

"I'm afraid we have a more pressing problem at the moment, Agent Romanoff," FRIDAY said as Wanda leaned back into her task.

Jack's reverie came to an impolite end when a sudden, crackling pain, like a wasp-sting and a taser burn in one, arced through his left ear. He slapped his hand to his neck, half expecting to find a dart there, and ready to stomp on the detonation trigger beside the door if he found one.

"Detonation?" Scott whispered. "Fuck...fuck. Okay, I'm on it."

But Jack's fingers found only his own hair, and the familiar planes of his skull. But before he could relax, a half-familiar voice that sounded like it was coming from inside his own head poured over the ringing. "John Robert Rollins," it said, "Born 1983. Heil Hydra."

"What. the. fuck?" Jack muttered, still clutching his neck. It almost felt like there was something buzzing back there.

"Agent Rollins, you are transporting a prisoner for extradition to the United States? Answer yes or no please."

"What the fuck!" Again, his ear burned, but this time he definitely felt the source of that pain shuddering under his middle finger. "Ow! Yes, quit it!"

"Your mission objective has changed as of now," the voice -- the impossible fucking voice -- replied.

"Look, we're less than two miles from the drive-on, uh, mister-"

"Doctor Zola, Agent."

"WHAT?" Clint's yelp nearly shook Wanda's grip, but she dug in, and held on.


Then, as Natasha and Sam sped ahead of the convoy, Wanda closed her eyes and leaned back in toward Rollins’ mind again.

"- obedience required of our agents in the world was a matter left to chance?" the voice chuckled.

"Of course not. You will accept my direction, or else I will activate your Failsafe device."
"I ain't no Frother, Doc," Jack answered, angry -- fucking furious, but utterly without anybody he could punch right now. "So you can just go piss up a-"

"Broken molar, upper left side of your jaw, April 2007," Zola replied. "Oral surgery performed under anesthesia at SHIELD headquarters. Of course you have a Failsafe, Agent. Not cyanide, no, but some of the chemical agents we tested during the creation of the Winter Soldier have been known to render un-augmented humans quite pliant to suggestion. Of course you lack the regenerative protection of my serum, and so there is some question as to the long-term effects of the dosage, but it should not kill you, Agent Rollins. Not for several weeks, I should assume, and by then you will have done everything I asked of you regardless."

Jack clenched his fists on the steering wheel, breathing hard, sweating angry, and fiercely glad that the cargo was locked on the other side of an armored wall, and couldn't take advantage of his distraction. This was so not okay!

"Are you ready to comply, Agent Rollins?" Zola asked after only a few heartbeats, and honestly, what the hell could Jack do? He'd really hoped he would get to kill Captain America today, but... well, he guessed Agent Barbie and Granddad would do. At least so long as Jack got to shoot somebody.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Where d'you want me to take him?"

~* Land pursuit vehicle, one block east of convoy. *~

"I've got it," Wanda gasped like it was her first taste of air, "I know where- Ugh!"

"Easy," Clint soothed as she curled low over her folded arms and whined. "Don't hurl, cause then I'll totally hurl too, and somebody's got to drive the jeep, cause we're the only pursuit vehicle following that circus parade right now.

"I know where they are going now," Wanda muttered around the back of her hand. "We have to hurry-"

"Plane's at the docks, just like you said," Sam's voice answered before Clint could. "Looks like a Globemaster III; engines running, ramp down and ready for them to drive that van right on. We're on our way in to mess it up right now."

"That's good, Wilson," Tony Stark's voice cut in, and honestly, Clint was gonna stop being surprised by Stark showing up and hacking their shit one day... maybe. "You should absolutely do that. And meanwhile, Miss Maximoff, would you care to share with the class?"

In the seat beside him, Wanda lurched like she'd been shot at the sound of his voice, and Clint had to grip her shoulder hard to stop the sudden flare of scarlet that bled off her like smoke.

"We are not doing this again, Stark," Clint said over the suddenly silent comm. "Your fucking agenda is not worth Cap's life-"

"That's where we agree, Barton," Stark replied, somehow earnest and sarcastic at once. "This isn't about the Accords, this is about Zola jacking the War Machine armor, and us not letting him get his hands on Cap, okay? Can we work together on that, d'you think?"

"Pierce blew Zola up," Nat's voice came back, leaden and cold. "I was there."

"Yeah, it was a surprise to me too," Stark replied. "But here we are. Look, I'm coming in on a chopper. No armor, no escort. Vision is about three minutes behind the War Machine, and Rhodey'll get to us maybe five minutes after that. You guys are the only ones in range to stop this now, so tell
"There is a school," Wanda said before any of them could summon up an answer. "With a soccer field. It is half a mile beyond the docks where the plane is. That's where he is to meet..." her face twisted in loathing. "That thing."

A school. Clint ground his teeth at the thought. A fucking school! Because of course that HYDRA bastard wanted a target rich environment if he could get it!

"We're on it," Nat began, but Stark rolled over her first.

"Disable that jet first, or we lose our evidence, and our witnesses," he said, "And we're gonna need those later. Barton, cut west four blocks and gun the fuck outta that thing, and you can get ahead of the van before it turns off. FRIDAY, contact Angelov Primary Academy and get them to evacuate right now!"

Clint muted his comm, yanked the jeep around the next corner and stomped the gas without waiting to hear the AI's reply. Cars screeched and honked as they roared through the intersection, but Clint was officially operating on the 'no blood, no foul' model, and utterly failed to care. Until, in the corner of his eye, he saw Wanda press her fingers to her temples, and rock gently against the motion of the car.

"How you doing kiddo?" he asked, and she raised her face to him, eyes simmering red behind angry tears.

"My head is full of ghosts," she whispered, "And rage. And I am not okay..." then she closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath as ahead, the buildings gave way to the promised schoolyard. "But I will be soon." Wanda flexed her hands away from her head and braced them on the dash as Clint drove the jeep up the curb and through the schoolyard's flimsy chain link fence without slowing at all.

Clint spun the jeep around hard, its tires digging deep ruts in the mud. Shuri's recreation of his old SHIELD arsenal quiver was in his hands and over his shoulder almost before they'd slid to a stop. No sign of Stark, no sign of Vision. Salt and water on the air a testament to how close they were to the original pickup point, but there was only one road big enough that the prisoner transport van could come down it at speed, and they were facing right at it. There were shrill alarm bells going off inside the school, and Clint thought he could see busses lined up on the other side of the parking lot. Maybe it would be enough. Maybe. He'd pulled off rescue ops with less, hadn't he?

"Not gonna lie to you here, Wanda," he told her, standing in his seat and putting an EMP arrow to the string of his bow. "I kinda need your A game right now."

She stood up on her own seat then, and her hands were seething with red light as the sound of a single, roaring engine drifted their way. "I am an Avenger," she said, scared, defiant, and already reaching for the van as it reeled into view. "You will have it!"

~* Prisoner Transport unit 2 *~

"Something's wrong," Steve said under his breath.

Beside him, Sharon rolled her eyes briefly before returning her glare to the guards Rollins had left in the back with them. "Everything's wrong, Rogers," she muttered, then pitched her voice louder, for the guards' benefit and said, "So how's your kit, Stan? Any trouble getting signal?"

"Oh, signal's fine, Sweetheart," the old man came back with cheerful malice from the seat across the
"Had a little interference from the shielding back here, but your guy up front was nice enough to send these two mooks back with active wireless communicators, so it didn't take much to find the right bandwidth." The guards glanced at each other behind their dark face shields, nervous hands flexing on their stun batons, but otherwise they made no move to interfere.

Steve peered harder at Rollins through the bulletproof glass that separated the cab from the cage; he could see the light shifting along his jaw as the muscles rolled, one hand cupping his neck as if it hurt. Steve could just barely make out the sound of the man’s voice over the road noise -- no words, but plenty of inflection. He caught Sharon's eye again. "No. I mean something's changed. Rollins is talking to someone. I can't hear who, but he's cussing mad."

Again, the guards exchanged worried, telling glances, and one of them tapped the side of his helmet near his ear to check the rest of his team’s channels for news, while the other guard turned her head to peer through the security glass and verify what Steve was saying. Behind the wheel, Rollins nodded and let go of his neck.

Sharon looked too for a moment, then leaned into Steve’s side to murmur, "Think it could be them?"

Steve shook his head. "No, it's not..." he began, before a flicker of movement, red, silver and black on the canvas webbing over her head utterly distracted him. "Scott?" he breathed, despite himself.

"Who?" Sharon craned to follow his gaze, and then just barely restrained a telling flinch when she saw Ant Man give up his careful climb down her seatbelt and just slide the rest of the way. He fetched up just shy of her cleavage, but it was a close save.

"Well hey, wouldja look at that?" murmured Stanley, following the movement with his lens as Scott grabbed a handful of Sharon's tac vest just in time. "Friend of yours?"

"Matter of fact," Steve grinned, glancing up to be sure the guards were still distracted as Sharon plucked Scott out of sight, and away from her chest. "Good to see you suited up again, Ant Man. What's the plan?"

"Ant Man, huh? What's he doing?" Stanley wondered as from the safety of Sharon's open palm, Scott began signing: faster, tinier, and more frantically than Steve was used to seeing Clint sign. Something about a helicopter, and a school, and... the War Machine?

"Looks like ASL to me," an unexpected voice answered, and all of them lurched around to see that Maria Hill, bless her, had stripped her helmet and encounter mask off to join the conversation.

Steve found himself grinning, part relief, and part chagrin at not having realized why she'd seemed so familiar to him when the guards had loaded him into the van. None of the other uniforms had wanted to ride security on him, until finally it had been her who’d stepped up and dragged this other fellow -- who was now cursing and struggling out of his seat -- along with her like she was taking the job only so it wouldn’t be thrust upon them.

"Brophy, sit down," Hill sighed as her companion grabbed for his gun and lurched to his feet with a shout. "And put your seat belt back on, before you-"

The van was moving fast through the dockside streets -- too fast for Brophy to be stable on his feet, too fast for Hill or Sharon to get an easy grab on the man as he scrambled for the door, and far, far too fast for the suddenness with which it stopped right then. Unfortunately for him, the body armor the guards had been issued was meant to stop bullets, not massive impact trauma, so it didn’t do the man much good when momentum smashed him into the van's armored bulkhead like driftwood in a tidal surge.
The engine died with a howl, those who were belted in lurching hard in their seats as the van whipped sideways and toppled over with a scream of buckling steel. Pinned in place by his cuffs, Steve could just see the ghostly scarlet trail of power that surrounded Jack Rollins like a fist, and yanked him out of the driver's seat through the windshield.

"That'll be them," he managed as the dust settled and the groaning began. "I don't suppose you've got the release code for these cuffs, do you Maria?" he asked, shifting his feet carefully so he could support his own weight without stepping on Stanley Uatu.

"Got a few I can try," she replied, shoving the unfortunate Brophy off her so she could release her harness. But before she could move, Scott was suddenly normal sized, and directly in her way.

"Bad plan!" he said, waving his hands across each other. "Those are rigged!"

"Explosives?" Sharon asked, dropping from her seat to help get Stanley up.

"Electrocution," he answered, grim. "I thought sure the EMP arrow would kill the power source, but I guess the shielding back here was better than we expected."

"Thank god for that," Stanley muttered, gathering his scattered gear. "My camera's still all right."

"Yeah, so... we definitely gotta get you out of here before trouble shows up, Cap," Scott finished, scooting a battery pack into the old man's reach with his foot.

"War Machine, you said," Steve answered, shifting aside to let Maria get at the back door. "But I thought Rhodes was in Korea, getting treatment for-"

"Yeah, War Machine yes, not so much Rhodes," Scott said, standing on a bench to poke at Steve's cuffs overhead. "Long story short; you got an old not-so-friend coming for a visit, and Iron Man really wants us to not let that happen. And I'm not sure I can get you out of those cuffs without actually killing one of us. Probably me."

"What old not-so-friend, Scott?" Steve demanded, trying not to think of how often in Wakanda he'd dreamed of Schmidt, or of Pierce returning from the dead to gloat about how many heads they could lose and still not die. "Who's coming?"

Even through the full face mask, Steve could see the man grimace. "Um... Zola?" he said, and Steve's stomach curdled.

"There's no lock access from inside," Maria said, all business over the appalled silence that followed. "I have a mousehole cutter, but that won't help with the cuffs."

"Never mind the cuffs," Steve said, closing his eyes for a long, calming breath. "Sharon, Maria, please get Stanley to safety, and help secure Rollins if he's on the loose."


"Scott, if you go big inside here, will you rip yourself in half, or the van, do you think?"

The man's surprised grin showed in his eyes. "Well, I'm pretty sure Pym fixed the cellular disruption problem, but you know what? I'm game to find out!" Then he tapped at the controller on his wrist, grabbed for the center bar of Steve's magnetic restraints, and began to grow.

~* Yellowjacket Military MedEvac, 300 meters altitude. *~
The transport van cracked open like a walnut, crumpled steel plate peeling away from an expanding center of red and silver -- Lang's back, Tony realized with a kind of horrified fascination. He could see the red trail of Maximoff's power holding the driver aloft like a struggling kitten plucked from mischief -- surprisingly delicate after the blast of scarlet devastation that had met the van at the corner.

"What the devil is that?" Stuart bleated from the pilot's seat, her knuckles white around the steering handle as Lang uncurled from his crouch, still growing. A flash of blue dallged from his right fist, and Tony's heart unclenched a little bit to realize that it was Steve, hanging by his arms from a set of metal cuffs about the size of an engine block.

"One of the good guys," he breathed, and reached to activate the Team's comm channel in his headphones again.

"Ah. So, friend of yours then?" she asked, sounding more than a little bit freaked out as she took the Yellowjacket higher. He couldn't blame her -- at thirty feet and still... expanding, Lang was looking more than a little King Kong-like.

"Well, I wouldn't say friend," he allowed, "since the last time we met, I got him arrested, but I'm pretty sure we're working toward the same goal now." Said goal was now clinging, Koala-style, to Lang's still-expanding wrist, and even from this altitude, Tony had to say it looked a hell of a lot like Steve was laughing like a lunatic.

"So..." Stuart cut him a worried glance, pitched her voice low against the background noise of whatever hurt Wilson and Romanoff were dishing out at the docks, and the strange roar that Tony could only think must be the sound of Lang himself, still fucking growing. "So he's not going to keep on... doing that, is he? I mean, he's got a limit, right?"

Tony couldn't fight down a giggle at that. "Me and the laws of thermodynamics are really hoping so right now."

"I'm right here, you know," said a looming sort of sixty-foot-tall voice that could only be Lang, given that he'd turned his face up toward the Yellowjacket and was obviously glaring. "You could just ask me if you wanted to know."

"My hand to God," Wilson's breathless voice cut in, "If you two start talking shop right now, I will punch one or the other of you right in the throat!" Which was almost more of a temptation for Tony to actually start asking Lang technical questions than Lang's protest had been, just to see Wilson try it.

But before he could get out a word, the Yellowjacket's cabin filled with a loud, insistent pinging, and Stuart suddenly got even more worried than she'd been before. "Radar contact," she said, tapping at the display. "It's not big, but Jaysis, that's coming in fast!"

And as if invoked by her words, the air filled with a rattling crack, rolling at them like thunder from over the sea -- the sonic boom of a vehicle rapidly decelerating past mach 2. Shit. Out of time.

"That is a problem," he told her. "Guys? He's just about here! What's your extraction plan?"

This time it was Barton who answered, barely a speck of color on the ground, making his way to the van's wreckage. "It's being disabled by Falcon and Widow right about now, so it doesn't explode." His voice was colder than Tony had ever heard it, which honestly, given their last encounter, Tony couldn't really count as a surprise. "Why? What's yours, Genius?"
Tony's plan, if you wanted to call it that, had been more along the lines of 'pick the locks while no one was looking and sneak Steve out of the country on the Stark jet' sort. Which was definitely not going to work now. "Damn it," he said, watching the speck on the radar, speeding in so fast it was practically a solid line. "Why do I have to do everything myself? Okay. If I can get into range when the War Machine comes in, I can vocally override the internal control, but that still leaves Cap out in the wind. Lang, can you get him to the airport? I've got a jet there, and."

"Erm," Stuart interrupted on the line. "Far be it from me to interfere, but I don't think your mate there tucking Captain America under his arm and charging across the city like a rugger is going to go down well with the Accords."

There was a beat of silence, broken only by the faint sound of Maximoff's captive swearing as she dragged him toward the jeep, and then Romanoff asked, "Who's your friend, Stark?" in a pointedly polite voice.

"Landing!" Tony yelped, trying not to hyperfocus on the heat-ripple glitter of repulsors and gleaming steel he'd just spotted over the harbor. "My friend is landing this helicopter, and I'm going to figure out how to-"

"Rather not get this bird stepped on, if it's all the same to you, Mr. Stark," Stuart said, and of course by then, it was too late. The War Machine's engines were audible less than a second before it was blazing like a comet through their airspace. Stuart yanked hard on the stick, and the Yellowjacket's engines howled as she spun them wildly out of its path.

"That thing's armed?" she yelped, bringing their nose back around just as the sonic cannon rolled up out of the War Machine's shoulder, and fuck it all to hell, why had Tony not taken that damned thing off while he had the chance?

"No," Tony wheezed in horror, fingers knotted, bloodless and cold around his flight harness, because Steve was sixty feet in the air right now, with nothing to protect his ears, or his brain, or his fucking internal organs from what was about to happen, and... "Fuck, please no..."

Wanda's full-throated scream over the comms was everything Tony's own was not. "SCOTT, LOOK OUT!"

But it was already too late. Zombie-Zola clearly had no interest in negotiation, or threats, or monologuing of any kind. Lang waved a hand at the armor, swatting at it like a wasp, but the sonic cannon had been designed to stop something Hulk sized, and once it went off, Giganto-Lang and his oversized eardrums had no hope of withstanding the wall of punishing sound. He went over like a boxer with a glass jaw, clutching at his head with both hands, while Steve did his best to hang on with only his legs, and keep the heavy cuffs from dragging him into free fall.

Fuck... Please, not already! I only just...! From a thousand feet up, a helpless world away, Tony couldn't even make a sound of protest as Zola swooped in close, snatched the massive chunk of metal out of Lang's slack grip as he fell, and then spun free. Steve, apparently clamped to the chestplate by means of his cuffs, scrabbled against the armor with his feet, searching for a purchase he wasn't going to get, and Tony found himself lunging for the dash.

"I'd rather risk it, Tony," Steve had said, smiling as if he could have known...

"Speaker," Tony shouted over the wind's roar, the team screaming at each other over the comms, and the sound of his own heart thrashing in his throat. "Loud speaker! Come on, I know this fucking thing has one!"
"There!" Stuart yelled back, "By the-" She swatted his searching hand to the left. "No, lower! There!"

"Steve!" Tony yelled, fumbling the handset to his face and praying that somehow, he would hear over the noise. "Steve, code him!" The War Machine jerked midair, half turned as if only now aware of the Yellowjacket hovering above the field, or only now considering it a threat. "Use your command code, dammit! Steve, do it NOW!"

Then the armor blasted upward in a blur of light and fire, faster than the Yellowjacket could hope to follow, and Tony didn't know whether he wanted more to scream, or to vomit. "I didn't delete it," he said to the retreating speck, "I never deauthorized you..."

"I'd sooner take it on, whatever comes." Why? Why had Tony let him leave?

The repulsors went out -- an electric spark extinguished from the sky, leaving only a smudge of steel, dead as a stone and just as heavy, where the tiny blaze of light had been. For a moment, nothing in Tony's world even moved. Then the black speck began to grow larger. Fast.

"Boss!" FRIDAY blurted from his phone, startling the despair off his shoulders with a lurch. "Boss, it's offline! The firewall's down, and I'm getting a reload signal from the War Machine's core system!"

"Stark, can any of your mates fly?" Stuart worried, leaning forward in her seat to crane an upward stare, "Because that thing's coming down awfully quick..."

And then, as if summoned by those words, Wilson blazed by in a new Falcon rig. He must have been burning hard to make it to the school from the docks, but at least he was already at speed, and angled to intercept the plummeting armor... as if he stood even half a chance at stopping the fall. Trying to accomplish the impossible with the improbable, and still without any significant body armor, dammit.

It wasn't going to work. Tony knew the weight loads, the flight rig's capacity; he could calculate the exact equations to describe what his gut knew with roiling horror was about to happen. Even in Germany, Tony had known Wilson's rig stood no chance of catching Rhodey before he hit the ground from that height -- the War Machine was just too heavy, the Falcon rig just too light. It wasn't. Going. To work.

"... make the best of it, rather than wait until the war's over before we decide it's maybe safe to start the dance."

With two hundred forty pounds of Steve still attached to the War Machine by way of those magnetic cuffs, the odds were even worse. But still Tony found himself leaning forward to watch as the falling mass pitched, yawed, and began to tumble. Steve had kicked out flat to the ground, and was now clearly trying to wrestle the War Machine into a similar attitude -- doing everything he could to increase the overall drag, and somehow slow them down in time. Tony counted seconds toward terminal velocity in his head, breath held tight in his chest, hoping, hoping, hoping his math would be wrong just this once.

"... make the best of it, rather than wait until the war's over before we decide it's maybe safe to start the dance."

Fifty yards.

"C'mon," Clint's voice ground over the com-gel behind Sam's ear, a furious prayer Sam couldn't spare the breath to make himself. "C'mon, damn it!"
Thirty yards.

Sam would have kicked for more speed if he could, but even with Shuri's adaptations to the Falcon rig, it couldn't go any faster. He'd maxed out his velocity about eighty seconds after he'd heard Stark say Steve's override codes were still live; the look of horror he'd shared with Natasha still burning, unspoken, in his mind. Because they both damned well knew Steve Rogers too well to imagine for one second that crazy bastard was going to wait till that armor was a sane, survivable distance from the ground to code the armor out and drop himself and it into free fall. Oh no. Steve would never give an enemy like Zola that solid an advantage, would he? Not even if it gave himself that solid a chance of walking away from the damned fall.

Ten yards.

The wind was a punishing roar in his face. Getting a breath at this speed was about like trying to inhale a wall, but Sam just leaned in harder, bracing for the jolt he'd be in for when he got his hands on the plummeting ton-and-a-half of armor and tried to convince it to stop tumbling and glide.

Three feet.

Sweet Jesus, this was gonna suck.

Contact.

It *sucked.*

The wrenching shock was everything he expected, and worse. He got one of the armor's legs (Fuck! Oww! Hot!) in both hands, rolled hard into the mass of it, and prayed his wings would hold up to the strain. If it had been anybody else stuck to the falling armor, Sam wouldn't have dared a move like that -- he'd have been sure it would snap the passenger's neck -- but Steve had taken harder shocks, and Sam had to fucking *try.*

The rig's lift engines screamed at the shift from speed to weight resistance, wing supports buzzing like crystal in front of a loudspeaker. Sam's old wings would have shattered by now, and it was probably due to vibranium that he wasn't racing Steve to the ground right now but Sam didn't have time to be terrified about that. He could feel his fingers blistering against the heat the armor had built up on its flight across the sea, but his grip held, and foot by foot, the armor allowed him to guide it from a tumble into a flat spin. Steve, bless him, mirrored the belly flop position exactly, buying them maybe thirty more second for Sam to figure out how to pull this miracle off.

Maybe longer if he could turn some of the downward momentum into a forward glide?

"Let it go, Sam!" Steve shouted at him, barely audible over the roar of terminal velocity. "Let go! It's too heavy!" Because yeah, sure, of *course* Sam was gonna let go; give up, stand by, and watch another friend smash like ripe fruit on the ground.

Like Hell at Nana's Sunday picnic, he was.

"Shut *UP* Steve," Sam ground back, peeling one hand loose from the searing metal boot only to grab it higher, closer to the armor's balance point, and then doing it again with the other hand. The steel wasn't quite so hot that close to the armor's center mass, but by then Sam's fingers were burned past numb, and the best he could manage to hope for was that his grip wasn't too bloody to let him hold on.

He canted the wings again, prayed silently with all he was worth that they would hold steady, and tried to push the armor forward again.
"Reboot!" Stark's voice was distant over his comm-hack, shrill and wobbly with horror. "FRIDAY, reboot now!" The reply was there, too faint for Sam to hear the AI's words, but her panicked tone didn't offer anything good to hope for from that quarter.

"Hawkeye, can you short out those cuffs?" Natasha ordered over the roar of a car's engine. On her way to rejoin the team, breaking hearts and traffic laws at top speed.

"Not while Falcon's holding his hand, I can't!" came the reply before Sam could summon the breath to tell them off for even thinking of firing an EMP arrow while he was in flight.

"Whatever you're gonna do," Sam ground out as his mental altimeter blazed past the 1000 foot 'you-are-not-walking-away-from-this-jump-airman' mark, "Do it fast!"

~* Angelov Primary Academy athletics field *~

Three years ago, Wanda would have killed Rollins. She would have dashed her power over his heart like an avalanche, stitched scarlet lightning through his vile brain until it boiled to steam, and the pressure burst his skull like an egg. Under Strucker's tutelage, she would have fully believed that he deserved it, that the world would be better for the complete removal of such a man as this, and every one of his future victims would owe her unknown gratitude for sparing them.

Three years ago, Wanda hadn't known Steve Rogers.

She hadn't yet felt the truth rolling off him in waves as he'd explained to her why killing needed to be the last resort whenever possible; that the waste of life, of a life's good potential, and all the second chances a man wasn't ever going to get now, wasn't a thing to be done lightly, offhandedly, without consideration for the weight it would put on the one who took it away. That killing -- deliberate killing -- was an easy answer, and you'd only know for sure if it was the wrong answer once it was far too late to fix your mistake.

Coming from a soldier who had definitely done his fair share of killing on the battlefield, it had been a shock to hear him say it, and even more disorienting to realize how deeply he believed it. Despite everything Steve was; everything he'd done; everything he'd seen in his long-but-really-not-long-at-all life, he seemed to believe in mercy almost as much as in justice. For him, perhaps, they were the same thing.

And so Wanda did not kill Jack Rollins when she hauled him out from behind the wheel of the toppled van. She very much wanted to, but she was an Avenger, damn it, and that meant something! So she gripped the murderer tight with her powers -- tight enough that he barely had the breath to curse -- tried to buffer her mind from the stench of his thoughts, and held on while Clint raced to the van to help the other passengers out of the wreckage.

She held on despite the horrid, nightmare vision of the War Machine coming at them with that cannon leveled at Scott's head. And she held on when Scott fell, as helpless before the punishing waves of sound as she had been in Lepzig.

Wanda ran to Scott's side when he rolled, human sized again, to the muddy grass, and dragged Rollins along behind her, bobbing like a foul-mouthed balloon at the end of his scarlet tether. She should have stayed with the jeep, perhaps, but she remembered too well what it had been like; how sure she had been that she would die when blood had flooded down her throat, and burned in her lungs after the battering waves of sound finally stopped. She couldn't just let him fall without anyone to help him.
Scott was alive when she reached his side, but unconscious, bleeding from ears, nose, and his tear ducts. Wanda could feel his heart though, strong and alive inside a chest that still heaved for breath. An ear to his chest, and she could hear his lungs roaring away inside him -- no crackle of blood, no whistle of puncture, no wheeze of collapse -- and suddenly Wanda could breathe again too. Scott's little Cassie would see him again after all.

She thumbed her communicator back on to tell the rest of the team so, and a wall of sound shook her focus to pieces.

"-code's a mess Boss," Stark's computer cried, "Salted earth in there! I can't make heads or tails!"

"Can you get him over water?" Natasha asked. Sam only laughed, giddy, desperate. Peering upward, Wanda could see that they were far, far closer to the ground than they could possibly be to the harbor.

"'Less we get him off that dead weight, he'd only drown anyway," Clint said, grim and certain. "Sam, you gotta-"

"Shut it, Hawkeye," Sam came back. "I'm not letting him go!"

Distantly over the comms, Wanda could hear Stark cursing, as if he had a hand pressed to his mouth to try and hold the words back.

Far closer to, Wanda could hear Jack Rollins laughing -- a thin wheeze full of malice as he stared upward. "Looks like I win," he said when he saw her look. "Suck my-"

She dropped him then -- let him fall with his full weight on the legs he hadn't yet realized he had shattered in the crash. Then, as his howl turned into a gurgle, Wanda sent one thread of her power into his skull -- not a killing dart, like she wished for, but a tangling briar to lead him into fantasy and fear. Something to keep him busy, keep him still, keep him there while she saved two lives that meant so very much more than his life ever could.

She couldn't meet them with a wall of force, she realized, gathering her nerve and her strength and her wits. She couldn't just stop them, like she had when the van had sped around the corner. They were moving too fast, and a sudden stop of any kind would certainly kill Sam, and might very well kill Steve too. But perhaps...

*Spiral,* she told her power, thinking of smooth, wide ribbons coiling up from the earth below the falling men. *Like a path down from a mountain top; wide, shallow, many turns...* The force poured through her; eager, hungry, fierce with joy. Terrifying in the way it just kept *coming,* no matter how hard she drew on it, how wide she made herself open to it, how low she let her mind, her soul, her self duck to give it a way through. There was always the certain knowledge that there was more, so very much more power just waiting, eagerly, to be allowed out of her grasp. It was harder to hold it back, really, than to let it free.

"Wanda!" Clint yelled, somewhere between joy and fear.

"Please," someone else breathed, a prayer damp and small, "Please..."

*Please be enough,* she echoed the thought as the wide swath of her power caught them -- Steve and Sam, and that heavy, dreadful armor -- angled their momentum along its curve and spun them wide, wide, wide as a dancing skirt's whirl; like eagles circling on the humid air; like leaves on the ocean wind.

It would not be enough. Wanda could see they were still moving too fast, and it took all her focus
already just to hold the blaze of force into its shape. If she wavered, cluttered its orders, confused the power at all, Wanda didn't know what it would do... but the memory of accidentally shattering wooden blocks in her holding cell at Strucker's facility was not far from her thoughts.

She heard the Falcon's lift engines howl, felt the shudder through her power as he changed his angle and began trying to brake with his wings. She hadn't realized before how close they were to the ground already, or how very, very fast they were going. Tears stung Wanda's eyes, as she fought down the thought that she couldn't, she couldn't feel them die like that. Not so close by. Not while her filters were flattened under the load of her powers. Not like Pietro had died. Not again!

The power reacted to her fear -- it always did, after all -- and it grew as uncertain as she was. Holes appeared in the smooth expanse of red above her. The edges began to fray. Please be enough! she begged it, even as her terror picked it apart. Please, please!

And then she felt it; the touch of a mind like the pure chime of crystal; uncluttered, unclouded, clear as deep water that moved without silt, without splash. She hadn't felt that mind in two years, hadn't let herself realize how much she had missed its clarity, its peace, its calm, focused care. And now, like a miracle, like a soothing hand on her neck when she needed it most, here it was again.

Wanda closed her eyes, not even caring that the tears she'd been holding back now streaked down her upturned face as she said his name like a benediction to the sky.

"Vision!"

He arrived so fast she didn't see him at all, just a golden-green blur across the sky. And then he was there at Steve's side, matching the speed and angle of the falling armor as if it troubled him nothing to do it. (And it didn't. She knew this. Vision could withdraw the energy field between his atoms and slip like a ghost through solid things. He could cheat the laws of matter and momentum alike when he chose to do so, though as he had said to her once, he always worried a little when he did it, that perhaps this time he might not remember how to knit himself together again.)

Vision touched Steve's arms, (close, so very close to the ground now,) and then they were sliding free, pink and whole, as though the metal was thin as mist. Suddenly unfettered and free of his dreadful anchor, Steve rolled midair and caught Vision's shoulders, let the android take his weight as, with a curse made of relief and pain, Sam let go of the War Machine and cut away on his own wide wings to coast gently to the ground. Wanda let the power drain away into the ground with a sob, and stood there, face turned up uncaring. The inert armor finally plowed unaided into field, splashing mud and grass everywhere. Stark's tiny helicopter buzzed in for a landing, barely stirring the trees by comparison. Sam glided to a stop by the van, dropped to his feet, and was immediately staggered under the whoops and ragged cheers from the small crowd gathered there.

Wanda ignored the pandemonium altogether, in favor of watching Vision bring her Captain safely home.

Chapter End Notes

Wait for it....

(Edit Note: I don't think Jack Rollins has really taken a long, hard look at the nature of his relationship with Brock Rumlow, but if he ever had, he might have had a lot less anger and aggro to work through on his own...)
Blindside

Chapter Summary

In which resolve is tested

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~*Yellowjacket Military MedEvac unit, landing approach *~

Vision.

Tony clutched at his phone with one hand, the chopper's horn with the other, and almost wished he had a third with which to clutch at his aching sternum, behind which his heart was thrashing like a trapped bird. How the hell had Tony forgotten about Vision?

He closed his eyes, lungs sobbing for air, stomach lofting as Stuart dove the small craft toward an out of the way slice of the school's athletic field. In his left hand, Tony's phone buzzed like an angry wasp – Rhodey's old 'snap out of the hyperfocus you lab monkey' protocol dashed through Tony's euphoric breakdown with practiced ease.

"He's safe," Tony made himself say the words as he brought the phone to his face. "Cap's safe. War Machine's grounded. Wilson's an idiot, but he's probably okay too."

"What the hell happened, Tones?" Rhodey demanded. "I can only fly so fast over population centers, you know! You got to damned well tell me what I'm gonna be coming into in ten!"

"Ten minutes?" Tony asked, swallowing down the giggle in his throat as the Yellowjacket jolted to the ground, bounced once, but then stuck the landing on the second hit. "That's your ETA?"

"What. Happened?"

"Vision just pulled off a Hail Mary pass," Tony said, dropping the loudspeaker handset and wrestling to escape his flight harness. Across the field, Steve had pulled Wanda into his arms, chin on her head, rocking them side to side. "Or... no, a Hail Mary catch. A three-point, Hail Mary home run goal. Is that a thing?"

"Viz is there?" No mistaking the relief in Rhodey's voice. "So you got backup."

"Don't need backup, SourPatch," Tony said, diving out of the Yellowjacket as soon as he'd gotten the last strap off him, and ducking low beneath the still-spinning rotors. His Ferragamos sank in the muddy grass at once, and Tony absolutely did not care. "The whole team's here, the bad guys aren't, and you're on the way." Steve turned, and somehow passed Wanda's toddler-cling off to Vision without a hitch. "It's all good. We're all good. Now if you'll excuse me, I gotta go punch Rogers in the head."

He took the phone from his ear then, the better to run. All he heard of Rhodey's answer was something vaguely like 'yeah, 'cause that always ends well', but honestly, Tony was more than ready to ignore the debate point in favor of getting to Steve's side as quickly as he could. Because he found
himself suddenly determined that nothing – not a goddamned thing in the world – was going to get into his way this time.

Not even Tony himself.

Steve half turned when he heard Tony coming over the Yellowjacket's rotors, hands coming up as if to fend off the punch in the head the big dumb bastard had to know he deserved. Tony ignored the flash of alarm that crossed Steve's face, cut sidelong between those hands and only paused short of a body check by grabbing Steve's beard with both hands, and using his grip to drag Steve down – or maybe to drag Tony up – into a kiss.

A real kiss. Not a 'Fuck Off Paparazzi' special, and not a 'STFU Before I Have To Kill You' number, and not a 'Won't Regret This Till Tomorrow' event either; this was a real, serious, fully involved and premeditated 'Kiss The Fuck Out Of You For Scaring Me' action. Because it really was either that, or he was going to have to punch Steve in the head like he'd told Rhodes, and to be honest, Tony wasn't sure his heart could take any more of that.

For his part, Steve grunted under Tony's impact – something like a body check after all, it turned out – and then wrapped Tony up tight in his arms, turning the momentum into a rom-com spin that Tony absolutely would have protested if his mouth hadn't been otherwise engaged. And Tony's mouth was fully engaged, because Steve was definitely, absolutely, and with no sign of shyness whatsoever, kissing him back, and holding him close and tight, like he didn't ever plan on letting go.

Steve did offer up a muffled mumble though, and because it sounded like it might almost have been a protest in the shape of Tony's name, Tony pulled away with a glare, and growled, "Shut up, Rogers!"

"Those two? Seriously?" he heard Maximoff murmur behind them, and Tony cut the girl a glare. She was too busy beaming at Vision to notice, and for his part, Vision was gazing back at her like he'd forgotten what words even were. Behind them, part of the crew that had been gathered beside the wrecked van began to mosey over like they had all the time in the world. Which, Tony supposed, thanks to Vision, they sort of had.

"Tony, I-" Steve began again, a smile in his voice. Tony rounded on him instantly, mad all over again.

"Don't," he barked, poking Steve hard in the shoulder, which kind of hurt his finger, "you fucking dare gripe at me for -"

Steve cut him off with another kiss; sweet and insistent, and smile-shaped beneath the frantic press of lip and tongue. Then he pulled away and rested his forehead against Tony's with a laugh. "Thanks for cutting the wire, Iron Man," he said, but only because Tony was still catching his breath, and couldn't keep cussing him out.

Strangely, it was then that the fist around Tony's heart finally unclenched for real. "You cut it," he said, reaching for an insouciant tone as he hung there, held in place against Steve's chest. He was pretty sure he only achieved giddy, but the look of... fuck, was that pride in Steve's eyes? It didn't waver. Tony swallowed the bizarre urge to cry, and finished his thought with a smile. "I just gave you the tools, is all."

"Naw, hey, it's cool guys," Wilson called from the Jeep a few yards away, where – Jesus, what was Hill doing here? Maria Hill was spreading burn salve on Wilson's hands, apparently, a small medical kit gutted on the running board beside them. "I'm fine. You guys go right on making out..."
"Who's making out?" Natasha's voice demanded from Tony's phone, volume so loud it made him and Steve both flinch, which kind of hurt, because ribs, stitches, and super soldier adrenaline; ow. "Doesn't the Avenger's charter have rules against kissing in combat situations?"

"Does it?" Vision looked up, suddenly keen, and a little bit worried. "I do not recall reading about-"

"Hasn't been a factor till now," Steve interrupted, chuckling as he let Tony slide down his chest to stand properly on the ground, but never quite let him entirely go. "We'll have to call a team meeting later to discuss the addition. Widow, what's your 20?"

"East end of the parking lot," she replied as the distant sound of tires chirping and an engine screaming for mercy drifted to them on the wind. "Barton blocked the direct route, and I had to go around. But you'll be glad to know the Bus isn't going anywhere, the faulty Quinjet is permanently grounded, the goon squad is otherwise occupied, and I'd say we have about half an hour to figure out what to do next before the Nigerian authorities get worried about how we're all hanging out at a primary school."

"Thank you for bringing that up, Widow," Rhodey's voice said, just as loud now, because clearly FRIDAY couldn't be trusted with intimate moments. "Because I didn't want to be that guy, but I was wondering what you guys were planning to do about not getting arrested again."

"I propose not getting arrested again," Lang groaned, raising one muddy arm from the ground as Natasha drove a gleaming black SUV onto the athletic field with no appreciable braking, or concern for what remained of the fence. "That would be cool."

"I second that motion," said Agent Carter No-the-Blonde-One as she left the little old camera dude alone to bandage the Storm Trooper's head wound, and strode over to where they were all gathering. "Especially now that the world knows what that prison was actually like."

Tony tried not to tense at those words, tried not to take them for an accusation, but the way Steve flinched around at the sound of her voice behind him, a half-guilty expression and a very pink flush coming over his face, made it hard. But Steve’s arm stayed firm, curled low around Tony’s waist, and he raised his chin to smile as she drew near, and the smile Carter offered back Rogers' way after she’d taken a hard look at Tony, was wry and canny, and not accusing at all.

"Believe me, I don't want to arrest any of you either," Rhodes agreed. "But you guys had a pretty good bolt hole this last year, given the radio silence. What about going back there?"

"Can't," called Barton from his perch on the War Machine – about as far from them as the jeep was, but closer to the van and the school.

"Can't, or won't?" Rhodey came back, challenging.

"Literally can not do it," Sam supplied, his voice strained with pain and distance, but clear over whatever com units they were using. "As in, we can't even find our way back to the place unless someone who actually belongs there is giving us an escort in." Which was as good as saying the actual words 'We've been hiding out in Wakanda so neener neener,' in Tony's book. But he had to admit that if it had been him who'd gotten into the near-mythical country, even for a weekend, he probably wouldn't have been any more subtle about it.

"Well, if it's a hide-out you want," Hill called as she tied off the last bandage on Wilson's thumb and stood to join the pow wow, "I know of a place in Westchester that has top notch security. But it seems to me that since we have a lot of pertinent data about to go public," And there, she tipped a very unsubtle nod toward the little old man and his storm trooper buddy, "Now might actually be a
"For me, it is," Steve said. Tony stiffened against the words, and Steve’s fingers curled tighter to his side. "I promised the whole world that I would present myself at the Hague, and that’s what I need to do."

"Hey, no-" Tony began, but of course Steve and his Captain voice just steamrolled right over him.

"If we stand any chance at fixing this," he said, casting a serious eye over the scene, from the van, to the crashed armor, to the SUV just pulling up beside the group, "Then I need to be right where the world can see me; doing exactly what I promised I would do. And meanwhile, the rest of you will take everything we've got, and make it as public as we possibly can."

"No we – what?" Tony finished, wondering if it was too late to punch Rogers now. "What? That's a terrible idea! Judges hate when you do that!" And so, Tony knew from personal experience, did every lawyer who had ever joined the Stark corporate legal team.

But Steve only gave him one of those toothy USO poster grins and said, "Cheats and liars hate it too. I figure, given the cheats and liars involved in all this, the Judges will probably understand."

Hill made a strangled sort of laugh, and a face that said she'd kind of like to punch him too. "You ever get tired of publicly pantsing federal organizations, Rogers?" she asked.

"Only corrupt ones, and yes I do," he came back, grin sliding from earnest to wicked without dimming one watt. Then he cut a glance Tony's way, and let it fade completely. "Let's face it," Steve said, holding Tony's appalled gaze like he was asking for a promise, "keeping secrets is a luxury we can't afford any more. It only makes us look guilty, while protecting the ones who are actually to bla-

He coughed then, sudden and surprised.

And red.

Shots rattled the air; sharp little explosions, nonsensical as firecrackers. Unfinished words spattered hot across Tony's face as Steve jerked twice, then thrice more, his eyes wide with alarm, his grip on Tony's waist a sudden, crushing thing.

Scarlet roses bloomed in a sweeping line down Steve's white shirt, from left shoulder to right hip, the biggest, brightest of splash tucked like a charm just at the notch of his straining throat. His mouth worked, dropping red, broken pearls where no words would come, something lost and enormous pleaded against the silence in his wide blue eyes. Pinned in that stare, Tony forgot how to breathe.

Then Steve's hand slipped from his waist, and he was falling – toppling like a ton of bricks into Tony's arms, as if some horrible god had cut every string that had ever held the man upright.

As the shouting began all around them, the only thing Tony could do was lunge to break his fall.

Chapter End Notes

Muahaha.

Not over yet...
Batshit, Ballet, and One Big Boom

Chapter Summary

In which are faced the unique challenges of faith, trust, and hope.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~* Prisoner Containment unit 2 *~

Liam Brophy had a broken jaw, a broken arm, a broken collar bone, a gushing head wound, probably a concussion, though hopefully not a hairline cervical fracture, and he was pretty damned sure he was going to be pissing blood for a week. He had no idea where his gun and stun baton wound up after the agents dragged his lame ass out of the wreck, and he was frankly dreading the moment when he or anyone else took off his combat vest, because there was a not-so-small part of his brain that was just fucking sure that squeeze of kevlar and velcro was the only thing holding his actual guts in.

He was also thoroughly aware that he has probably never been luckier in his life. He’d just gotten his ass kicked by the fucking Avengers, after all, and not one of them had even laid a damn hand on him.

“Out of curiosity,” asked the little old mustache guy as he tied off the bandage around Liam’s head and tucked the ends inside with surprisingly gentle hands, “Did they actually tell you mooks who you was gonna be picking up today before they sent you out here?”

Liam snorted. Yeah, right – in what man’s army, exactly, would a grunt level MP like him get details like that on a Need-To-Know op? Especially one the Brass brought in a fucking contractor to head up? “Hn unn,” he grunted, electing not to shake his head, or try saying anything that might make his jawbone make that grinding noise like it had when he’d first woken up and tried to cuss.

The old guy chuckled in sympathy, and swept the first aid supplies carelessly back into their box. “Figures. What Joe wants to be the one to put Captain America in the slammer, huh?”

“Hnng,” Liam agreed, nodding his head and immediately wishing he hadn’t.

“Careful there, buddy,” he said when Liam whimpered, “I can’t catch you if you pass out, and those guys are a little distracted right now.” He pointed toward the knot of people on the field, where Captain Steve Yes-Really Rogers was handing out hugs and handshakes and… apparently making out with his teammates?

Liam glanced at the old dude, trying to tell if he was seeing it too, or if this big gay moment was just more evidence of a Schroedinger’s-Concussion situation. Because it sure as fuck looked to Liam like Captain America had his tongue in Tony Stark’s mouth, and Liam was 100% sure that news like that would have been in some paper somewhere by now if that was a real thing. If nothing else, Liam’s niece Claire would have screamed Facebook down over it if – what was that name she called it? Iron-Cap? – was in any way provable. But uselessly, old dude was busy digging through the med kit, and therefore unavailable for a reality check.
“Hnh?” Liam managed, waving vaguely with the arm that didn’t feel like it wanted to fall off. “Hng dh fnhh?”

“What, you need painkillers?” Old dude asked, not looking up. “I think they maybe got acetaminophen, in here, but probably not anything stronger than that.” On the field, the lip-lock broke apart, but only by a few inches, and only for a few seconds, and then they were at it again, and this sure as hell didn’t feel like a hallucination.

“HnGHng!” Liam grunted louder, wishing that old dude was on his other side so he could get his attention with a smack. Of all fucking moments for him to not have that goddamned camera in his hands, this was definitely the worst!

“Hang on, I’m lookin’. Wait! Here we go,” old dude cried, triumph in his voice and a foil packet in his hand as he straightened... at the very moment Cap let Stark down to the ground again. “Oxycontin! Guess they didn’t expect this to be a milk run for you fellas after all, did they?”

Liam had never, until that moment, considered the ability to facepalm to be a luxury.

“You’ll have to take ‘em dry though,” old dude went on, “I don’t think I can get you any water.” He didn’t even look around when one of the tactical convoy units Liam had last seen lined up outside the police station came roaring through the fence and onto the field, which – fuck that was not good! Liam didn’t remember for sure how the team had divvied up between vehicles, but if MacLaren or Twodoc were in there, the Avengers were definitely gonna be in for a firefight, and...

Wait. He squinted as the gleaming black vehicle blew past. Was that the Black Widow?!

That was the Black Widow, and she was offroading convoy transport six like she didn’t even know there was supposed be five battle hardened marines in that car instead of her. She waved to the dude with the bow (Hawkeye. That was fucking Hawkeye on that dirt pile!) as she jounced past him, and then skidded to a stop beside the gathering on the field.

Old dude dropped his two pills into Liam’s frozen, outstretched hand, then when Liam failed to move, turned to see what he was staring at. Out on the field, the meet and greet had devolved into some kind of a debate that involved a lot less sucking face, despite some very, very attractive ladies having joined the pow wow.

Old dude turned back to give Liam a skeptical eyebrow, which got even more unimpressed when Liam pointed at the camera, unattended on the bench beside them. “Eyes front, Soldier,” he said, stinkeye not wavering as he scooped the camera up. “That’s my Granddaughter you’re ogling there!”

Granddaughter?!

By the time Liam finished choking on his own spit, and then groaning from the pain that choking set off in his busted face and shoulder, and then catching his breath in tiny, tiny sips so he wouldn’t pass out and fall on his already busted face, old dude (who was suddenly a whole lot more intimidating than Liam had thought at first,) had his camera back up on his shoulder, and was apparently filming the Avengers’ huddle out in the field. For all the good it would do Liam’s I-Saw-Iron-Man-Making-Out-With-Captain-America story in any future tavern he might find himself. God dammit.

Rolling his eyes wasn’t nearly as satisfying as a facepalm would have been, but at least it didn’t make him want to throw up from the pain. Rolling his eyes also had the coincidental effect of broadening Liam’s field of vision though, which was how he spotted the flicker of furtive movement over by the stands beside the field – a slither of black in the sun-glare off the kiddie-sized aluminum stadium seats. He blinked, clearing tears and spots from his eyes, and squinted, and … shit. Was that
Liam shook his head, squinted harder, wondering how the batshit motherfucker had slipped away. Then he got a look at the rifle Batshit the contractor was bracing across the bench – where had he gotten a goddamned rifle from? – and all Liam’s curiosity evaporated into rage. A stand up fight on a need-to-know op was one thing, but assassinating American citizens on foreign soil because your own personal kidnapping attempt failed? Liam Brophy and his entire understanding of military police procedure drew the goddamned line well before shit like that!

“Ghnn!” he bleated, kicking at old scary dude’s shoe. The agents had taken Liam’s gun off him before he woke up, and his stun baton and cuffs too (because they were clearly not idiots,) but that meant Liam couldn’t even try his luck at shooting Batshit down before he sniped one of the Avengers. Goddammit! “Ghnn!”

“Now what?” he asked, annoyed until Liam’s frantic pointing got his eye back to the lens again. “Okay, what do… oh. Shit.”

“Hnmrh,” Liam grunted louder, wobbling to his feet and waving his good arm over his head. “GHNNNNNG!!! HN GNNUH GHNNN!!”

Hawkeye was the only one who looked Liam’s way, already setting an arrow to the string, like he was considering Liam the threat. But he took the hint at once, spinning in place and firing as soon as he spotted Batshit and his rifle against the sunrise glare. The arrow left the string before his feet had stopped sliding in the dirt. But Liam could tell it was already too late.

The arrow found its mark past the rifle’s full-auto burst – Hawkeye never missed, as Claire was fond of telling anyone who would listen. The shaft punched straight through Batshit’s shoulder, spun him away from his blind and pinned him like a bug to the stand behind him... but not before he’d managed to shoot Captain America five times in the back. 

Cue pandemonium.

Cap went over onto Stark like a ton of bricks, and unarmored, Stark stood no chance at catching either one of them. The girl in the red coat squirmed out of the purple dude’s grip and threw herself onto Cap’s back, shouting in Sokovian while the Falcon raced over from the jeep with a medical kit in his bandaged hands. The Widow dropped to her knees on Cap’s other side, guns out to cover them as the blonde agent – Carter, CIA, Liam suddenly remembered, – charged the stands with gun in hand, and bloody murder in her eyes.

“I gotta get this,” old dude muttered, feeling blindly for his cane. “You stay here, okay?” Brophy leaned over to put the cane into his searching hand, then as he toddled off, gave a grunt of reply which could have meant ‘sure thing, oh Grandfather of the Black Widow’, as easily as ‘like hell, granddad’.

In the stands, Batshit was trying to reach the rifle’s trigger with his off-hand. Hawkeye and the brunette agent were both farther away than Carter was – Liam was actually closer than any of them, but fuck if he stood a chance at getting there first. He hobbled that direction all the same, caught between the pull of his duty to due process, and the clear appeal of putting two into Batshit’s cranium before he could gun down anybody else. Not like he could stop it if Carter did shoot him of course, but Liam figured that someone from the prisoner transport convoy really ought to at least bear witness to Batshit’s end if it came to that.

Only to Liam’s complete surprise, when she did shoot him, it wasn’t between the eyes. Instead, she put a neat little hole in his groping left arm, about three inches up from the wrist. Batshit had no
choice but to let the rifle drop, and he was too busy screaming to duck or shy away when Carter threw her piece out of range, slid to her knees, and slammed a right hook upside Batshit’s cussing mouth.

Then she grabbed the front of his tac-vest, pulled him upright, and did it again. And again. And again. She wasn’t built like a boxer, but Liam could see a lifetime of ring training in the perfect form of her fist, the precise aim of her knuckles to the same spot punch after punch, and the way she put the full strength of her back onto every swing. Four blows in, Batshit quit thrashing. Carter didn’t stop. Six blows in, and Hawkeye and the black haired SHIELD agent got there, but neither one of them moved to stop Carter, or even slow her down. Liam started to wonder how the fuck he, in his current condition, was supposed to keep her beating Batshit to death.

“Wait,” Hawkeye murmured to him, one arm out as Brophy came hobbling to the rescue. “It’s not what you-” Then suddenly one of those drill-perfect punches landed differently, and they all heard the crunch.

“You got it?” the SHIELD agent asked, her gun still out, but pointed at the ground, as if there was any way in hell that Batshit would be giving anybody trouble after all that.

“I think so,” Carter replied, prying open Batshit’s mouth and shoving her bloodied fingers in. “I don’t...wait. Yeah, here it is.”

What? Brophy blinked, completely thrown.

Then there was another muffled crunching sound, and Batshit spasmed in the dirt, like somehow out of everything – his arm, the arrow, the fucked up angle of his legs, the beat down Carter just dealt him – that was what had hurt most.

What the fuck?

“Heil this, you Hydra son of a bitch,” Carter gritted. Then she gave another yank, and when she brought her fingers back into the light, she had a tooth… with wires trailing from it. Liam swallowed hard against a sudden urge to puke as Carter passed the... whatever that thing was to the SHIELD agent so she could swing around and punch Batshit in the head one last time.

What the actual FUCK?!

~* Cover position, Angelov Primary Academy athletic field *~


Wanda screamed, shaking ghosts from Natasha’s head, and jostling her aim as she dove for Steve’s crumpled body.

Another shot: louder, shorter barrel. Thirteen crossed her range at a charge, gun in hand. Distantly, a man bellowed like a bull.

Wanda pressed, uncaring, along Natasha’s hip and side, swearing in Sokovian as scarlet rippled from her hands like smoke.

"No! No you can’t! Not you too!” the girl wailed, gripping Steve’s bloody clothes and tugging. "Not you too!"
An unknown man, head bandaged, riot gear half removed, shambled near Thirteen’s capture. Natasha tracked him with her gun, ready, ready.

He stopped out of arm’s reach; silent, appalled. She let him live. Something wet was seeping warmly up through the knees of her trousers.

She could hear Stark wheezing, cursing, struggling to shift Steve’s inert mass off his chest. *He probably can’t breathe.* She thought, glancing at his blanched, blood-flecked face, eyes wild, pupils drawn down to panicked points of black. *Steve’s too heavy. Right on his chest like that.*

If she put the gun down, Natasha could drag him off, perhaps. If she put the gun down. If she put the gun...

“Stop the blood!” Sam yelled, diving to his knees on Steve’s other side. The pure, furious command in his voice was what it finally took to shake Natasha out of her fugue. She flicked the safety, dropped the round from the chamber as Sam rolled Steve to the ground. Then Sam lunged to catch Wanda’s wrists, dragging them to Steve’s throat and chest. “Here and here,” he told the girl in a voice like steel, “You keep his blood inside him. Inside the veins, no matter what else happens, okay?”

“She’s dying!” Wanda gulped, still rocked back into her first language. “I can’t-”

Natasha shoved her gun at Tony as he scrambled free, then she too grabbed Wanda’s arm, just above where Sam’s hand gripped it. *“Keep. The blood. In.”* She growled, staring down the panic in the girl’s red eyes. *“Nothing else matters, understand?”*

The language shift worked. Wanda blinked up at her as Sam’s hand slipped away, and then she nodded. Her hands spread, pressed down, and the threads of her power stopped wisping away into the air, and began to pour down into the open wounds like smoke in a chimney draught.

“I...” Wanda drew a shaking breath as Sam turned to rummage the jeep’s med kit. “I had him,” she gulped, cutting a glance toward the stands, where Clint and Hill had arrived at Thirteen’s side. “I had Rollins, and I let him go, and he—”

Natasha gripped her wrist until she could feel the bones grind. “Nothing. Else. Matters!” Don’t do this to yourself. You know it’s not your fault... The words clotted in her throat though, pinned down by the devastation in Wanda’s eyes as she stared at Steve’s still, waxy face.

Then Vision was there, kneeling at Wanda’s side to curl one hand gently over her shoulder, and with the other, lift Natasha’s grip away from her wrist as easily as he might have brushed off a beetle.

“Always choose to save a life over taking one,” he murmured to her, repeating a litany Natasha remembered Steve telling them all on many occasions. He spread his hand over Wanda’s then, steadying her tremble as he promised, “He will be proud of you for it, Wanda. He will be proud.”

Tony began to laugh, high and panicked behind Natasha’s shoulder. When Natasha turned to look, she found him sitting in the mud, his bloodied face hidden in his bloodied hands. Her gun lay on the grass beside him, magazine removed, slide locked back.

That, more than anything else, stopped Natasha from diving for it and shooting down the unknown woman in RAF fatigues who was sprinting toward them from the helicopter. That, and the realization that the bag over the woman’s shoulder was a much more complete medical kit than the one Sam had to work with from the jeep.

“Mr Stark!” the woman cried as she drew up near them. “Were you hit?
That scared Tony out from behind his hands. “I… No,” he managed, pressing one hand hard against his sternum, “I was. He was right…” He panted, face milk-white, eyes shocked and wide as his gaze flickered everywhere but down. “He was in front of me, and I… he…”

Natasha turned, gripped his muddy shoulders, and pulled him in against her shoulder. “Breathe, Stark,” she whispered against his sweating temple as he stiffened in her arms. “Breathe. We need you. He needs you.” Tony made a broken, desperate sound, and the arm he’d braced against her hip softened, turned, and slid around her waist. Which of them was shaking harder, Natasha did not let herself wonder.

“Jaysis!,” Natasha heard the pilot gasp. “He’s not…?”

Sam’s reply was immediate and far too certain. “Not yet, he isn’t. You got pressure bandages in there?”

“That’s his carotid artery, man,” the pilot protested, though when Natasha slitted her eyes to glare, the woman was on her knees and digging her kit open at Sam’s side. “No bandage in the world could-”

“He can’t,” Tony moaned, tiny and lost and shivering against her. “I can’t. I…”

“Wanda can hold it.” Sam insisted, and his glare strafed them all, demanding faith unshaking. “She can! Now are you gonna help me with these other wounds, or not?”

To her credit, the pilot dithered no more, indulging only in another murmured, “Jay…?” as she dragged her gloves on and began to open dressings.

“Nat,” Tony gulped, voice thick and harsh as he squirmed in her hold. “Natasha, I can’t-”

She let him go, but only so far as to grab his hand. “You have to, Stark,” she said, then leaned to snatch Steve’s hand from where it lay, lax and heavy in the mud. “I need you to hold on,” Natasha said, slapping the two hands together and gripping Tony’s until his fingers curled in. “Steve needs you to hold on!”

“What?” Tony shivered, but his hand stayed closed around Steve’s, as if that alone could be enough to anchor him.

Natasha hoped like hell it was. “Stay right here, and don’t let him go,” she told him. “Stay where he can reach you. Can you do that?”

“I…” Tony blinked, as if he couldn’t quite make himself look away from his… their hands. “My phone,” he murmured, “Rhodey was-”

“I’ll find it,” Natasha promised. “You stay with him.”

The phone, it turned out, was under Wanda, half buried in the mud and grass. If it had been any other make, it would have broken, shorted out, or at very least dropped the call, but being a Starkphone, it was still live when Vision passed it into Natasha’s hands.

“Rhodes,” Natasha said into it, taking several steps away from where the others huddled, “It’s me.”

“Romanoff?” She knew him just barely well enough to detect relief beneath the stone cold fury in his voice. “What the fuck just-”

“Sniper. Cap’s down.”
There was a beat of silence, and then, “Is Tony-”

“No.” Natasha cast a glimpse at Stark, mapped the smears of blood down his front, and the fragile way he held his hand against his chest even now. “He says no. He’s in shock though. What’s your 20?”

“Three minutes, twenty seconds, and I’m breaking a lot of laws to do it, too.”

“Rollins is down,” Clint called jogging to her side. Natasha flipped the call to speaker as she turned to meet him.

“Carter got his failsafe out,” he went on, scanning a grim look over the triage scene. “So he’ll make it to questioning if we have a way to get him out of here.”

Natasha flinched, half turned when the convoy SUV she’d stolen from the docks started up with a roar, but it was only Hill behind the wheel. “They want to commandeer the Bus,” Clint explained as she drove it across the field to where Thirteen was holding an intense conversation with Stanley and the unknown guard. “If you didn’t permanently fuck it up before you came out here, that is?”

She hadn’t, of course. She’d more than half expected that they’d have to steal the thing themselves to get out of the country, so the last thing she wanted was to ground it for good. “The Bus is fine,” she told him. “Its flight computer’s just counting pi. It’ll stop when you use my reset codes.”

“That’s…” Rhodes sputtered from the phone. “That even worked?”

And Natasha found herself almost smiling at the outrage in his voice. “Sure. The pickup crew are all napping in the hold, and so long as nobody tries to get the quinjet’s engines powered up, it’ll be fine. I’ll give Hill the codes. You going with them?”

She kept her voice neutral, razor balanced between hope and dread without taking on a speck of either one.

Clint wasn’t fooled. “Um… warrant?” he smirked, jostling her shoulder with his. “Besides – they’re going to take Rollins and Carter’s pet reporter and go make Cap’s excuses to the judges at the Hague. Laura will divorce me if I go back to the Netherlands without her.”

“How would she feel about Korea instead?” Rhodes asked, and they both stared at the phone.

“What?” Clint found his words first.

“Cho’s treated Cap before, right?” Rhodes said. “She knows how to factor in the Serum. And…”

There was a wealth of information in that hesitation, and even more unspoken in the words that followed it. “And Korea didn’t sign the Accords. It might buy you guys some time.”

“Wherever we take him,” Sam called from the huddle, “Wanda’s got to go too. Steve’ll have maybe ten seconds left in him after she lets go of that neck wound.”

“I can hold it,” Wanda promised at once, as though it were a litany in her head that slipped out through the clench of her teeth.

Vision met Natasha’s eyes with a determined stare, and added, “And I can hold her.”

“Go.”

The word fell from Tony’s lips, soft as a clump of ash and just as lifeless. Silence spread around it like horrified ripples.
Clint, Natasha, and Sam all shook it off at more or less the same moment. “What?”

“You should go,” Tony said, looking up at them with a brave face not quite pulled into place over the terror in his eyes. “To Seoul. You all should. Should stay with him.” His voice felt like the shiver of a step across her grave.

In the long, appalled silence that followed, Natasha met Clint’s eyes, and knew he saw it too; this was the threshold – this moment, right there in a Lagos primary school, was where the Avengers truly ended. Not Sokovia, not Lepzeig, not even Siberia. If they let Stark back away now, they would never see him again. And it was true, still true that regimes fell every day, but this… This was… this was family.

Clint tensed, voicing the outrage that was stuck in Natasha’s throat. “Are you seriously-”

“Decelerating now,” Rhodes put in, a clear and angry distraction. “This is gonna break some windows…”

The sonic boom rolled over them like thunder, less than a heartbeat later. Wanda shied from the bomb-like sound, but Vision kept her grounded with gentle hands and a soft murmur in her ear. Tony looked back down at the landscape of ice white skin and rapidly staining bandages across Steve’s chest and belly, and shook his head.

Natasha was behind him in two strides, had hold of his shoulder a second later, pleading with every gram of fury she had in her. “Stark. Hold. On.”

“I can’t,” he gritted up at her, pleading no less. “Romanoff, I can’t just…” he swallowed, glancing about at the field, the SUV, the Jeep, the crashed and ruptured van, the pile of earth where the armor had cratered. “I can’t just leave the War Machine out-”

“Scott’s already got it,” Clint said, coming back to her side.

“He’s…” Tony swallowed. “Um. What?”

But he followed Clint’s nod, and saw Ant Man stagger up out of the earthen crater, the War Machine held like an action figure in one hand. “Pretty sure it’s all in one piece,” Lang called when he noticed them all looking. “Heavier than it looks though. You want me to -” He slid down the berm, windmilled his arms, and narrowly avoided faceplanting as he came to level ground. “I can just…”

“You hold onto it for now,” Natasha called to him, as much to slow down his comical staggering as anything else, “Tony’s hands are full.”

“Romanoff, dammit!” And now he did shove to his feet, letting Steve’s hand fall like meat to the ground as he did so. “Look, somebody’s got to deal with all the…” his gesture took in all his eyes had scanned before. “Messes like this don’t just go away! That was the whole point of the-”

FRIDAY spoke up then, interrupting him with an impeccable timing that simply could not have been happenstance. “Boss, I’ve got a message from Miss Jennifer Walters, from SI Legal,” she said, volume boosted well over the roar of the approaching jet. “Miss Walters says she’s arrived at the Weatbaker hotel, and is arranging meetings with the Inspector General of Lagos police, the Governor’s legal office, and is requesting that you put the Stark Jet’s flight crew at her disposal for the duration of her stay. Shall I affirm the direction?”

Natasha couldn’t help grinning at that. Jen Walters was one of the toughest lawyers in SI’s stable, not to mention one of the only ones who’d been able to go elbow to elbow with Natalie Rusman at the bar after hours. If Walters was on the case, Pepper had gotten seriously into their corner.
“I...” Tony swallowed, thrown from his moment of sacrifice by the mundanity of airtravel for long enough that Rhodey’s next message cut off his retreat altogether. “Coming in hot,” Rhodes announced, as if the roaring, rising wind did not make that plain. “Give me room on that field.”

Wanda looked up, eyes bleeding red and concern. “I can hold the blood back, but I can’t carry him. Viz?”

The android shook his head. “I might interfere with your control if I did.”

Sam shoved to his feet then, leaving the pilot to clear up the mess of their emergency triage on the grass. “We’ve got it,” he told Vision, “You just keep his back level.” He turned a blazing look their way and continued, “Stark, Barton, get his shoulders. Nat, help me with his feet. Lang, man, don’t faint, cause we got nobody left to carry you if you go over.”

Tony made as if to wipe his face again, only this time noticed the state of his hands and stopped with a grimace. “Is this that part of the op where nobody listens to the words I’m saying?” he complained, “Because-”

“Because you’ve forgotten you’re part of a team again?” Natasha finished, jostling him into place with her shoulder as she went to help Sam. “Yes it is.”

To his credit, Stark quit arguing and took up his place at Steve’s right shoulder, and if the groan he made when they all lifted sounded a bit like a sob, well he wasn’t the only one.

~*~

Thirteen was waiting for them when they got Steve to the stands, knuckles bloodied, and hell in her dark eyes.

“We’ve got Rollins and Brophy secured in the transport,” she called over the wind of the settling Quinjet. “Are...” the question died as she took her first look at Steve, then winced and blinked hard. “Is he gonna be...?”

“He will,” Sam said, still determined to be certain enough for all of them.

Tony wasn’t buying. Quite. “you can’t know that,” he murmured, but Natasha couldn’t miss that he’d captured Steve’s hand in his own again.

“I know him.” Sam countered as flying grit stung tears into Natasha’s eyes, “So long as we hold on, he will too.”

Thirteen leaned forward, touched a careful hand to Steve’s face, and then served Tony a long, and heavy look. “Don’t let him down,” she said, eyes hard and wet.

And Tony, clearly knowing the challenge for what it was, tightened his grip on Steve’s hand, boosted his chin, and rose to it with a promise. “I’ve got him.”

She held his gaze for another heartbeat, then glanced aside as the Quinjet’s rear hatch dropped open. “Good,” she said. Then she turned on her heel and jogged to the black SUV without another backward look.

Chapter End Notes
*Peeks out of supervillain volcano lair to check the coast is clear.*

So those last 2 chapters were actually written together, but my sidekick gave me the idea to deliver them in sequence. I hope you enjoyed it, my poison dart frogs! I know I did. I'd like to hear your thoughts on it, if you would be so kind. (Screams and death threats are my secret favorites, don't you know?)

Please do note, however, that the tags still do not include "Major Character Death." And that's a mean trick not even I would pull without warning, I promise. Also, I am literally decades out of practice on the ballet terms, so if I've misused them, and you know better, by all means please feel free to correct me on them!

I currently have only the epilogue, and a bit of wrap up to go before this work will be, officially, FINISHED. I've allotted two chapters in the expected count, but depending on how the wordcount flows, I might get it done in one. We'll see what the Muse demands, won't we?
She’s washing dishes at the sink when he comes slinking in.

As soon as he sees her – straight and thin and worn and beautiful in the grudging inner courtyard light that’s a brilliant morning anywhere the buildings are far apart enough to let it through – as soon as he spots the weary golden curl of her hair slipping free of its pins, Steve knows he’s in for it. No point sneaking now her chin’s tilted just so, no point trying to hide the blood now her busy hands have stilled in the suds.

“She’s washing dishes at the sink when he comes slinking in.

As soon as he sees her – straight and thin and worn and beautiful in the grudging inner courtyard light that’s a brilliant morning anywhere the buildings are far apart enough to let it through – as soon as he spots the weary golden curl of her hair slipping free of its pins, Steve knows he’s in for it. No point sneaking now her chin’s tilted just so, no point trying to hide the blood now her busy hands have stilled in the suds.

“He blinks through tears as she turns, feeling love and anguish grip his lungs in twin fists, because she’s beautiful, even weary and out of patience, even after twenty hours of work and under the looming shadow of another twelve and possibly a trip to the school warden’s office between her and a good night’s sleep… She’s so beautiful, and he’d been so, so afraid that he’d remembered that wrong. That the horrible memory of the skeletal, wasted creature they stole away in the black mariah to end her days alone in the quarantine ward was the real truth, and Steve was too much a coward to face it, but… But no. She’s just…lovely.

“He blinks through tears as she turns, feeling love and anguish grip his lungs in twin fists, because she’s beautiful, even weary and out of patience, even after twenty hours of work and under the looming shadow of another twelve and possibly a trip to the school warden’s office between her and a good night’s sleep… She’s so beautiful, and he’d been so, so afraid that he’d remembered that wrong. That the horrible memory of the skeletal, wasted creature they stole away in the black mariah to end her days alone in the quarantine ward was the real truth, and Steve was too much a coward to face it, but… But no. She’s just…lovely.

“She barely comes up to his collarbone, and thin as a twist of willow and will, but when Steve feels her arms come around him, he just… crumbles.

“She barely comes up to his collarbone, and thin as a twist of willow and will, but when Steve feels her arms come around him, he just… crumbles.

“She tsks, braced against his weight like she’s ready to carry him to bed despite his looming, ridiculous bulk. “Oh, you never do, my love,” she says, and there are tears in her teasing as she strokes the sticky blood from the back of his neck. “You never do.”

“She tsks, braced against his weight like she’s ready to carry him to bed despite his looming, ridiculous bulk. “Oh, you never do, my love,” she says, and there are tears in her teasing as she strokes the sticky blood from the back of his neck. “You never do.”

“I’m sorry.” No use pretending that’s anything but a sob, gut deep and torn. It hurts like bullet holes straight through him, but he can’t stop it coming, or the next one after it. Then another as her hands slide to his shoulders and put him off with a stern shake.
“No point in that now,” she tells him, and leads him to the kitchen chair. “Let’s just see what we can do to put it right instead.”

~* The First Waking *~

“I’m sorry.”

He didn’t recognize the voice at first; a thin, tired sort of voice, muffled a little, the words lopsided as if the speaker held the whole weight of his head in the fist against his jaw. Sorrow. The voice sounded like sorrow, and that made it even stranger that he couldn’t place it.

“What did you do?” The voice that answered from the other side of the speaker, he had no trouble placing. Pepper’s words were arch and sly as a teasing wink. And if that was Pepper Potts, then the first voice, the one in the room with him had to be…

“Which time?” Tony grumbled, the words thick and slow at first, but gaining speed and ire as he rambled. “I mean… Sorry. I say it to you a lot. I know that. And it doesn’t… I don’t always say it for the right reasons. Because we both know I just don’t fucking learn, and even if I say I’m sorry that doesn’t mean I’m not gonna go straight out and fuck up the same way again, because I’m just-”

“Tony.” Pepper’s tone turned knowing and careful. “Honey, you know I’ll let you say whatever it is that you need to say, but if you want me to understand any of this, I really need you to tell me what you’re actually apologizing for here.”

The pause goes on for long enough that he begins to wonder if the dream has ended – if the Tony he hears in his head has faded into ice and silence. Then there’s a slide of fabric on fabric, a creak of some kind of chair, and a sullen, guilty sort of answer. “The bullet holes.”

“Oh.” Pepper sounds surprised, and somehow not surprised at all.

“Yeah.” Another sigh, like the relieved collapse into an inevitable conclusion. “I didn’t… I know I’ve said it before – fuck, I can count a dozen times right now without even trying, but I never really got how bad it was for you.”

“Oh Tony.” The sorrow had found Pepper’s voice now, contagious as always.

“Not knowing.” Tony’s words ended in a thick sort of hiccup, and then the chair squeaked again, as if it was angry.

Steve heard Pepper take a deep breath. Then, “I’m sure he’ll pull through, Tony. Cho is literally the best at this, and-”

“You know she’s had to paralyze him?” Ah. There it was. Tony hadn’t quite sounded real without that old anger, running bright and brittle as a vein of gold through his words. “There’s a literal nerve block on his spine – more like his brain stem actually, because he wasn’t fucking staying still in the cradle, and it couldn’t stay calibrated on the wounds because…” Tony choked. Was he eating something? His words sounded thick and strangled when he managed to continue. “Pep they… They almost lost him.”

“Oh…”

“Twice.” He choked again, and there was a thick sound of his throat working to swallow.

Steve gave a mental sigh. For a fella who liked to throw himself around like a literal bullet, Tony sure did take it personal when other people got banged up in the line of duty. Whoever it was, they
were in for some scathing Stark ribbing once they got back onto their feet, that was for sure – Tony didn’t easily forgive being scared.

“Oh God, Tony I’m sorry,” Pepper said after a quiet moment.

“Because apparently that stupid serum of his is just too fucking good at overcoming chemical sedatives in his bloodstream,” Tony rolled onward, as if he’d never stopped. “And it’s,” Something thudded, more thrown than dropped. “He’s. Just too fucking…” Tony hissed a breath in, taut and furious through his teeth. “So now he’s paralyzed. And it looks almost like he’s just… dead in there.”

And only then did it register to Steve what he’d heard. The serum. Chemical sedatives. It was him?

“It’s temporary, Tony,” Pepper said into the ringing silence that followed. “You just said so.”

It was a long moment before he answered. “I know, but… it’s been…” Tony sighed, and the chair creaked again, bringing his voice nearer. “The machines are breathing for him, Pep. I’m watching the subroutines count it out, watching them make his heart beat, and I can’t… and I can’t do anything to help him.”

And suddenly Steve could hear it; the hiss of air, the pressure against his ears increasing and decreasing at regular, measured intervals. An iron lung? The thud of his heart sped up just a little, distant, fever-hazed childhood memory conflating with the present in an adrenaline rush.

Pepper’s voice moored him though, a calm, soothing anchor to the time that had to be right. “You’re doing all you can, Tony.”

“I’m doing nothing!” Tony spat back. “Cho’s already threatened to throw me out for rebuilding her lab equipment, but even that didn’t… Pep, there’s nothing I can do! Nothing but sit here and watch him, and wonder if this time she’s not going to be able to bring him back.”

*You gotta quit dyin on me, you jerk!* Bucky had said that to him, after pneumonia had put him in the can for a month. He’d been spitting mad too, and it had taken two weeks and a knock down fight after they let Steve out of the hospital for Buck to let up on the hovering.

“I’m sorry honey,” Pepper said, a sad kind of resignation in her voice. “You’ve never had to do this before, have you?”

“I… I mean when Happy was?”

*Happy?* Steve blinked, confused. Then the memory flooded back; Stark’s driver and bodyguard, caught up in one of the Mandarin bombings. The YouTube clip of Stark goading the terrorist with his home address, and then…

“You took one look at Happy, and then turned around to pick a fight with the Mandarin, Tony,” Pepper said, stern with disapproval now. “That’s kind of the opposite of keeping a bedside vigil.”

Tony sputtered, then changed tack. “Well you-”

“And with me,” Pepper pressed on, “after all that mess was over, you were the one in charge of the whole Extremis deactivation process. You didn’t have to just sit still and watch someone else save me.”

Steve blinked again. He hadn’t heard about that. Only that Pepper had been kidnapped the day after Tony’d been killed, and then two days later both of them and Colonel Rhodes were saving the
“And with Rhodey...” Tony sighed, resigned, “I guess I didn’t have time to wait and worry then, either.”

Pepper snorted. “Not that that stopped you from driving him crazy once you got back, but no. You didn’t have to do this with him, either.” Then she gave a chuckle, and her voice turned tart in the darkness. “I guess that makes Steve your first, doesn’t it?”

Tony sputtered with laughter, his tousled hair lit with screen-glow as he paced, like a phantom in the corner of Steve’s eye. “Geez, Pep, that’s more accurate than you could imagine,” he said, and suddenly Steve realized that his eyes were actually open now – that he was actually looking at the ceiling through a curve of glass, rather than dreaming details to fit what he was hearing. His heart rate bucked up again.

“Don’t take that bet, Mr. Stark,” Pepper laughed from the tablet screen as Tony paced close again. “I can imagine a lot where you’re concerned.”

His stopped then, so close to Steve’s side that he could have reached out and touched his hand if the machine hadn’t been in the way… and if Steve could have moved. “So anyway, I get it,” Tony said, his eyes fond on Pepper’s distant face as he turned his back to Steve and leaned against the machine. “That’s what I’m apologizing for. For not understanding what this was like for you all those years, when – God, Manhattan must’ve been hell for you.”

And suddenly, Steve found himself looking into Pepper’s face over Tony’s shoulder. “Tony…?” she murmured, peering. Could she see through the screen’s reflection on the glass? Steve willed his hand to rise, to reach, to press upward… but he couldn’t feel so much as a twitch.

Tony shook his head at Pepper’s interjection, as if forestalling a protest. “Not that I do really understand it, probably, even now,” he pressed on. “I mean, at least I knew where he was, and what he was doing when… when people were shooting at him. Shooting him.” Tony laughed, and scrubbed at his face. “God, Pep, why the hell didn’t I put him in actual armor? Why didn’t I-”

Steve stared hard at Pepper’s face, willing her to see. “Tony? I think he’s...”

“Why did I just assume the shield would be enough?” The anger was back in Tony’s voice now, barreling onward, unstoppable in its course. “I mean that’s… that’s so fucking stupid. It’s vibranium, but it barely even covers his damned shoulders! And that’s when he’s actually got it, instead of throwing it around, or dropping it in the Potomac, or… leaving it in Siberia-”

Steve clenched his eyes shut, strained as hard as he could to force his hand, his foot, something to move… but the air only hissed onward, tide-like around him, uncaring as his heart rate sped up again. The sensors though, one of them noticed.

Just as it began to beep, Pepper decided she was certain of things. “TONY!” she yelped, cutting through Tony’s rant with practiced skill. “Tony, Steve’s awake.”

“Wha-” Tony spun, the screen glow splashing his shadow up tall against the ceiling as he stared down through the glass. Steve couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face then – relief, and joy mingled so thick in his throat that he couldn’t have spoken even if he… could have spoken.

Tony opened his mouth, shut it again. Then he dropped his tablet onto the glass, turned on his heel, and ran from the room, shouting, “Cho! Cho! Helen, where are you!?"

Steve squinted against the glow, against the faint, burning sensation at his hairline, against the bone-
deep sense of foreboding that came sweeping over him like unwanted sleep.

Pepper’s smile was wide, and wet-eyed, and kinder than he’d have thought possible, and… upside down? Steve tried to say her name, but only managed a mangled wheeze, and a stronger burn of drugs at the injection site warned him he’d definitely pushed it too far.

She seemed to understand though, and her smile didn’t waver as she told him, “Good to see you’re back, Captain Rogers,” and, “Don’t be long, okay?”

“Kay,” he grunted as the drugs whelmed him under again.

~*~

He doesn’t recognize the door, only that he’s late, lost, and doesn’t know how to get where he’s supposed to be. So he knocks – a quick two-rap with the left hand as he’s turning the knob with his right, and it’s not as if he expects anyone at all to even be there, let alone answer, but. But.

“Steve, no!” Peggy yelps, eyes wide and outraged in the mirror as she snatches her housecoat up tight over her underthings. “I'm not ready yet!”

“I.” He swallows hard against the thudding of his heart against his throat, and he wants to squeeze his eyes closed against the sight of her; makeup perfect, hair half-done, laughing and scolding and fond. He also wants never to blink again, lest the perfection of her wither suddenly into seventy five fragile years apart. “Peggy?” His voice creaks like he’s sixteen again.

“Go!” she insists, whirling from the vanity in a froth of lace and silk that flutters just open enough as she races to press her hands to the door. “Go on, you cad!”

He presses back. “Peg, I-”

“Steven.” She levels a stern, loving glare through the crack, seemingly unaware of how it makes her whole, beautiful face swim beneath a glaze of tears. “I know your mother raised a better gentleman than this. Now you go on downstairs and wait for me there. I’ll be down presently.”

“I’m late,” he gulps, and takes one hand to dash the wet away from his eyes. “I’m sorry, I’m so...”

Her cool fingers dart through the gap to caress the hand he’s got clenched around the doorknob, and the edge of her lush mouth turns up in a smile of vin rose regret. “Hush dear,” she says. “You're quite early, actually. And if you don’t take yourself downstairs this instant and let me finish dressing, I shall think you’ve done it deliberately!” And with that, she gives the tender flesh of his wrist a savage pinch, and when he flinches back, snicks the door shut in his face.

“Peggy...” he sighs, letting his forehead drop against the door. The wood is cool, smooth under its paint, and through it he can hear her voice, laughing and without quarter.

“Go downstairs, Steve.”

~* The Second Waking *~

“Welcome back Captain,” The words swam through the darkness – a slim rope he managed to grab and follow toward the gentle light. Then something beeped in his ear, and Steve opened his eyes with a jolt. He was looking at a ceiling, inside... in a tube? Some kind of tank? Like the one they’d put Bucky in? How long had it been?!
“No, please stay calm and let me explain what’s happening, all right?” Helen Cho gently chided, eyes flickering between the tablet in her hands, and his face. Looking no older than she ought to have been she tapped her fingers on the glass over his face, where green light bloomed into a familiar grid. “Do you see the keyboard projected on the glass above you?” There was a square for ‘yes’ and one for ‘no’, and when he blinked his answer, Cho smiled. “There’s a motion tracker focused on your eyes right now, so if you look at the letters, you can spell out…”

Texting? he tried. It was clumsy, and awkward, and he had to fix the spelling twice. But it was something. It was something.

“Yes,” Cho nodded, pleased. “It’s pretty much exactly like predictive text on your phone. The more you use it, the faster it will learn to anticipate your words. You can thank Mr. Stark for that. He’s been practically giddy with finally having something to make for you.”

Steve blinked, remembering the poleaxed look on Tony’s face just before he’d bolted from the room the last time he’d woken up. Then Steve focused on the letters again.

Where is he?

Cho laughed. “Sleeping, if you can believe it – in the next room over. First time he’s slept more than three hours straight in over two weeks. If you want me to, I’ll go and wake him after we’ve talked.”

Steve wanted her to. He couldn’t think of many things he wanted more than to see Tony’s face right then, to look in his eyes, and to know for sure that he was okay. Moving, maybe. Speaking with his mouth. Some kind of solid food, if it’d really been two weeks.

He should rest, he spelled out instead.

“Oh, we agree on that, Captain,” Cho replied. “And if you were the only one who would have to face him when he found out we’d let him sleep through your being awake this time, I’d let him stay in dreamland. As it is though, I can’t afford to retrain my interns on any more of his stress-based lab equipment upgrades, so we’ll do it my way this time. Besides, you’re not going to be awake long this time, anyway. The cradle needs at least another twenty four hours of your… cooperation, and… what’s that?”

Paralyzed Steve typed out. You?

Cho coughed, uncomfortable. “Ah. You were awake then. We weren’t sure how much you heard.” She took a breath, steadied herself, and then set her tablet aside to meet Steve’s gaze levelly. “Yes, we’ve had to suppress your nerve function for awhile. Your spine was not damaged in the shooting, but the cradle has had to fight your serum every step of the way, and we needed to give it every advantage we could. The delicate work is nearly done however, and we’ll be removing the spinal block soon.” A wry smile escaped her professional mask then, “But allow me to say for the record, I would not want to try and deal with the virus that could get past your immune system.”

Steve had to close his eyes at that, trying to stifle the rising surge of panic under his tongue by counting and categorizing every single difference he could detect between the iron lung of his childhood, and the glass tube he was trapped in now. There were not as many as he’d hoped there would be.

Helen Cho standing next to him was the one that made the most difference. “I realize it must be frightening,” she said after a second, and he opened his eyes again to watch her speak. “And I’m truly sorry that we had to keep you in this condition so long but–”
Alive, Steve typed, guiltily glad he didn’t have to rely on his voice to conceal the turmoil within him.

She smiled. “Yes. Yes, you are. Do you have any questions in particular, or should I just start at the beginning?”

Questions? Steve had nothing but questions, and a comparatively trifling number of complaints. He hardly knew where to start, but after a carefully steadying breath, he typed out, The team?

“They’re all fine,” Cho said at once. “The only other person the shooter targeted was Miss Maximoff, but apparently Vision blocked the round. He’s bulletproof even when he doesn’t expect to be shot at, it seems.” No mistaking the pride in her voice at that. It was so easy to forget that while Tony was technically Vision’s father (or maybe grandfather, if you squinted past Ultron’s involvement,) Cho was definitely the android’s mother. And she had every right to be proud.

Good, Steve typed, then closed his eyes for a calming breath. Good.

“They’ve gone home now – or rather, back to the States, I should say,” she went on. “I don’t have many particulars, and I decided not to ask for more, but Mr. Stark took a call from the US consulate in Seoul about five hours after the Watcher footage of your the rescue went live, and the rest of your team agreed to return to the States a few hours after that. I suspect there may be some talk of Presidential pardons for them. I heard Ellis’s name being thrown around.” Her mouth twisted to the side, a not-so-subtle moue of distaste at having to use the beleaguered American President’s name. Knowing something of the man’s popularity ratings abroad and at home, Steve wasn’t too surprised.

Pardons for them, Steve clarified, then sighed. Because of course there would be pardons for the team. What else had he been working toward, after all? For what other reason had he been trying to knock the lid off the Lagos case, and show its irregularities to the world, if not so that Clint, and Scott, and Sam, and Wanda could go home, or at least go free? He had no call for disappointment here.

Cho saw it all the same, and the look on her face was nothing but sympathy. “Yes, well. You haven’t been up to taking calls, and your lawyer’s been very adamant that there’s only so far she’s willing to go on your behalf without your informed consent. But she has seemed quite optimistic whenever she’s called for updates on your condition, and going from the tenor of the international news, she seems to have done great things for your public relations so far.”

Steve blinked in surprise. I have a lawyer?

“Yeah,” Tony’s voice arced like lightning across Steve’s confusion with a thrill of unexpected joy. “And you also have an outstanding Power of Attorney and Medical Proxy with Romanoff as executor, which I gotta tell you, I find more than a little bit creepy.” Tony said, sauntering up to Cho’s elbow as if he had all the chill in the world instead of the most amazing riot of pillow-hair Steve had ever seen. “I mean, have you seen what that woman’s ready to do with a hypospray?”

Cho turned with a glare even Steve could tell she didn’t entirely mean. “Well so much for you being asleep.”

Yeah, yeah,” Tony flapped a hand at her without looking away from Steve’s face. “I’ll sleep when I’m-”

“Forced by your biology to acknowledge that you are a real boy?” Cho cut him off archly. “We can all only hope that doesn’t happen while you’re piloting a weapon of mass destruction. Try not to get him spun up, all right?” She said as she gathered up her tablet and turned to go. “Captain Rogers is going back under in seven more minutes, and I don’t want you messing with his chemistry, or stress
testing the plumbing repairs, all right?"

“Seven minutes?” Tony yelped before Steve could type out even three of the letters.

“Six and a half,” Cho corrected on her way out the door.

“I swear that woman’s never looked up the definition of bedside manner in her life,” Tony grumbled after her retreating back.

Tony. Steve typed out, wishing more fiercely than ever for his voice.

But Tony’s eyes bloomed with happiness when he read it despite the silent delivery. “Hey Cap… How are you feeling?”

You’re here, Steve replied.

“Course I’m here,” Tony threw his arms wide and grinned. “Where. Where else would I be? Okay no, don’t look at me like that, I made a promise, okay? I made a promise,” he leaned down close over the cradle, arms crossed, breath fogging the glass. “And I wanted… No. I needed to see you wake up.”

I’m sorry, Steve typed, and Tony rolled his eyes.

“Oh my god. Are you serious right now? Are you seriously apologizing for getting shot in the back by a HYDRA sniper?”

Yes?


Steve flicked a glance at the yes key.

“The van crashing?”

Yes.

“Ant Man’s exploding escape routine?”

Yes.

“Zombie-code-Zola’s intercept?”

Yes. I kissed you. That was the important part, wasn’t it?

Tony’s eyes went wide with outrage. “Okay no I kissed you first. And I don’t think it counts when you only did it to shut me up, either!”

Nothing shuts you up, Tony, Steve replied with a grin. It was easier now that the machine started filling in some of the words for him.

“Asshole!”

Language...

“Ass. Hole,” Tony laughed again, then turned to pull the chair in closer. “Okay. So after you fucking waited to kill-code the armor until Zola had you nearly in goddamned orbit, and Wilson, Maximoff
and Viz saved your dumb ass from gravity and the consequences of your idiotic fucking decisions, it turned out that your buddy Jack Rollins had some kind of final kill orders he wanted to carry out on you.”

Steve blinked, then deleted the half-spelled profanity he’d been preparing to reply in favor of, Orders?

“That’s what he claimed,” Tony’s smile went sharp edged through the weariness for a moment. “Well, once he woke up from the epic beat down agent Carter gave him, anyway. And by the way, did you know she was related? Because I didn’t, and then I felt really stupid for missing that when I looked her up after we got you here.”

_Found out in 2014, Steve provided, then dragged the point back home. Rollins. Whose orders?_”

“I’ll give you two guesses and one hint,” Tony leaned close to murmur, the simmer of rage bleeding in his eyes now. “It wasn’t fucking Zola. He wanted you alive.”

And it was surely his imagination there, but Steve could have sworn he felt the shiver go all the way through to his balls, hearing that. Or maybe it was the drugs kicking in again…

_How? he asked. How do you know?_”

“Carter and Hill found the comm implant Z used to yank Rollins into line,” Tony answered grimly. “That led us to a whole raft of unregistered HYDRA comm-satts, and those led us to even more HYDRA servers that were still active and just waiting for someone with the right codes to come poke them awake. Decryption’s still running on them, but we’ve got everything but the street address for code-Zola’s plans.” Steve blinked, struggling against the now-familiar wash of blurriness sloshed over him again. “And as for the original kill orders, in case you haven’t guessed yet, those came straight from the desk of...”

~*~

This time there’s no door, but Steve finds himself stalling on the threshold anyway. His mouth drops open, but the breath is locked up tight in his chest already, so no embarrassing noise comes out, but Dr. Erskine looks up from his book all the same.

When he sees who it is, that little, polite smile blooms into a wide and welcoming grin. “Steven,” he beams, standing up and tossing his book back onto the left hand bunk so he can go and drag Steve bodily into the tiny, spare room he’d last seen on the night before Rebirth. “So good to see you, my boy!”

“Dr. Erskine,” Steve chokes, letting himself be dragged, “You’re...” But no, he’s not going to say that, not even if it’s true. Pointing out that someone is dead to their face just seems unforgivably rude. Not to mention a little hypocritical of him, all things considered. “Um. Nice to see you too, Doc.” He manages.

Erskine gives him a canny smirk, but then takes Steve by the shoulders, turns him to face the hazy windows. “Look at you,” he says proudly, palms smoothing down over the wool of the Dress Mess uniform Steve hasn’t worn in seventy five years. “Just as I’d hoped. Yes. Just right.” He ducks a little, peers at the space under Steve’s chin, and a moment later he feels a cool, light finger brush above his collar, where the skin is surprisingly sore. Then the touch is gone, and Dr. Erskine leans back with pride beaming stronger from his eyes. “And yes, I did pick the perfect candidate,” he says, gaze fixed to Steve’s now, open and welcoming and fond, “I can see the truth of that all over you. Tell me, have there been any side effects?”
And there, Steve has to laugh, thinking of the huge file the SHIELD doctors had to consult every time they wanted to stitch up a little wound. “I... Kinda don’t know where to start on that one, Doc,” he admits, because the whole surviving a 75 year long ice bath thing all by itself is probably going to raise more questions than Steve can answer in any kind of way that would satisfy a scientist.

Erskine is not deterred. “Sit, sit,” he bustles, reclaiming the left bunk, and sitting to face the right one. “We’ve got time. Here.” He turns and catches up the bottle of schnapps and one of the two plain mess glasses flanking it from the foot locker. “I believe I owe you a drink, do I not?” he says as he pours the clear liquid out.

“Don’t…” Steve fights the urge to fidget as he realizes that he can’t actually smell the alcohol. “Isn’t this where you tell me it’s too early?” he asks, “That I have to go back?”

The question wins him a semi-stern look over the doc’s glasses. “Steven,” he says. “We do not know each other all that well, but I should think you know me not to be the sort of man who tells people what they must do.” He sips from the first glass of schnapps, and then puts it down to pour another. “If I wanted that kind of power over people, I would have stayed in Hitler’s Germany, and helped Schmidt and Hydra build their special hell, don’t you think?” And at that, Steve has to look down – not so much ashamed, as not wanting to be caught grinning during a telling-off.

“No,” Dr. Erskine continues primly, “I prefer reason, logic, test, conclusion, expansion, challenge, reevaluation, and the inevitability of more data utterly changing the parameters of every question you once thought you knew how to ask. Life is like that, really, if you pay attention to it.”

Steve laughs then, because how can he not? “Life is like that.”

Setting the bottle aside, the doc picks up both glasses, and tips a nod to the second, empty bunk. “Now then. Will you sit? Have that drink with me? Or...” his eyes glint with that teasing light again, and the smile creeps out in his voice as he asks, “do you perhaps have someplace else to be?”

And looking at those glasses, the misty light from the window clarified within, Steve realizes that he knows with absolute certainty, that he might not be able to smell the liquor within, but if he were to sip, the taste of it would burst like high, Alpine summer across his tongue. Apricots, maybe. Pears and peaches and wildflower honey. Probably not pomegranate, but just as breathtaking.

And that’s where he has to smile; because after all, what had Dr. Erskine ever promised him but a chance? He doesn’t even need to ask whether this is a test or not.

“You know what, Doc?” Steve says, tipping the kind of half-assed salute to him that always used to make Phillips grit his teeth, and Peggy roll her eyes, but which Erskine always met with a solemn nod and a merry eye, “I think I’m gonna take a raincheck on that drink after all. Seems I do got someplace else I need to be.”

Then he turns on his heel, and heads back out through the doorway he came in by. This time, he knows exactly where he’s going.

~* The Third Waking *~

“-sus fucking Christ, will you STOP DOING THAT?!” Tony shouted at him, white faced and wide eyed, and almost close enough to kiss as he leaned low over the open hospital bed and grappled with the tubes at Steve’s left wrist.

And, Steve suddenly realized, he could do that now, couldn’t he? Was allowed to give that urge its
head, now that the cat of his not-so-thoroughly suppressed attraction had not only got out of the bag, but had chewed the bag to bits, dragged the bag into an alley, and pissed on the bag as well? Yuck. Not the right metaphor at all for kissing. And some part of Steve was prepared to try that kissing now he was apparently out of the sealed cradle, even if it was only to learn that he wasn’t allowed after all... but that part of Steve didn’t seem to be quite strong enough to lift his head and close the distance.

“The IV tube is there for a REASON, Rogers,” Tony went on, fiddling with the tape and tubes along the back of Steve’s hand, “I swear to Tesla, if you yank it out one more time, I will get hold of a set of those HYDRA mag-shackles, and I will put you in them, and I do not care what Cho thinks it’ll do to her equipment!”

Turned out Steve didn’t have to lift his head after all – not while he still had one hand free, anyhow. And it also turned out he was allowed. At least it turned out that Tony was in the mood to allow it for a moment or two, anyhow. And then it turned out that Tony was allowed too.

“Did you seriously,” Tony asked when he pulled away and let Steve catch a breath, “just fuck up your hep lock so the alarm would get me in here and you could molest me in the middle of the night with your two-weeks-without-a-toothbrush-breath, Rogers?”

Well he hadn’t, technically, but Steve was pretty sure he looked guilty anyhow, given the sharp edge that came into Tony’s smirk as he watched Steve run a tongue over his teeth in chagrin. “Guess now would be a good time to mention that I used to sleepwalk when I was a kid, huh?” Steve croaked. What he wouldn’t give for a stick of gum.

Tony’s eyes glittered fondly, despite the wry twist of his lips. “Yeah, and you did it more recently too, or so I hear from certain unconfirmed sources,” he said, smoothing a hand over Steve’s brow and back into his hair. “Trying to find your way home, was the going theory.”

Home… Steve swallowed hard, then summoned up a smile. “Guess that’s true.”

“So what about during the War then?” Tony asked, still leaning in low over the bed’s side rails, his hand still nestled on the pillow just next to Steve’s ear. “Because somnambulism in an active war zone seems like something that would have definitely made it into dear old Dad’s notes.”

“Didn’t do it then,” he admitted. “Not that they told me, anyhow. Maybe the serum suppressed it back when it was new. Or… maybe that part of me realized I didn’t have a home to be missing.”

“Or… maybe you did sleepwalk, only Barnes didn’t let you get very far?” Tony suggested, face so carefully and absolutely neutral that Steve had to catch his breath.

“Not… not after Rebirth,” Steve admitted, cautious but hopeful. “Before that, when my ma died, he did that kind of thing. More than once, I woke up with him hauling me up the tenement stairs in pajamas and bare feet, but… Bucky would definitely have made sure I knew about it if I’d ever tried to sleepwalk out of camp.”

The silence that followed was long, awkward, and in some ways quite inevitable. Steve made himself face into it, not looking away from the weight of all that had, and had not yet, been said between them. He owed Tony that much, at least.

Then, just as inevitably Tony broke that silence with a brittle laugh at last. “When I was a kid, and I couldn’t sleep, my mom would crash out on the second bunk in my room,” he offered, a little too glib. “Just hearing someone else breathing right there was sometimes enough to let me drift off.”
“Tony,” Steve murmured, heart aching all over again. He was not surprised to be interrupted though. Tony never had been able to cope with apologies.

“Well, I can’t get you back to New York tonight or anything,” Tony declared, in the bright, abrasive tone he always used for deflections, and questions he had no intention of giving someone the chance to answer, “but what about if I drag another bed in here and keep an eye on you myself?”

“I don’t think you’ll get much sleep in here?” Steve said, eyeing the flashing lights and whirring machines, the lack of a door between his room and the hall, and faintly hoping Tony would decide to stay anyhow.

“I won’t get any sleep at all if I’m awake all night waiting for you to get up and pull another Heidi act, Rogers,” he grinned, savage and somehow determined. “If I bunk down in here, I can just roll over and whack you with something if you start setting off the alarms.” Steve snorted at that, and Tony’s eyebrow arched up daring high. “I think I saw a flyswatter down by the guard station,” he said, “Don’t think for a moment I won’t.”

Steve chuckled, careful of the pull he could feel in his low belly now, and reached to pat Tony’s hand where it rested on the bed rail. “Sounds like scientific method to me. Let’s give it a try, just in case one or the other of us might get a decent night out of it.”

Tony peered at him for a moment, then nodded. “Right. I’ll be back with my bed in a minute,” he said, turning for the door. “And I’m still going to steal that flyswatter.”

~*~

That night, as far as Steve could remember, he had no more dreams.

~* Three days later *~

The television was on in his room when Steve returned from his PI session. That was not much of a surprise there, given that he was quite a bit early, but what did catch him off guard was that the person watching the BBC International station was not Tony, but King T’Challa instead.

He unfolded from the armchair with a welcoming smile when Steve pulled up short in the doorway. “Captain,” he said, drawing Steve into the room with a handshake and shoulder clap, “You are looking better than I expected, given your injuries.”

Steve ducked his head and grinned at the man’s pointed nod toward the television, where the talking heads seemed to be rehashing the details of the hospital bed interview Steve had done with Christine Everhart last week. “Well,” he explained, resisting the urge to rub at his neck, “Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated?”

T’Challa coughed a surprised laugh at that. “I know too well that that is like,” he said, one hand spreading protectively over his belly. “But they told me you would be in Physical Therapy for another half hour. That was why I chose to wait here while Stark and Dr. Cho gave Shuri a tour of the facility.”

“Well,” Steve grimaced, “I was supposed to be there, but Mi Cha took a notion that I was having a joke on her, and threw me out early.”

“Oh?”

“Serum doesn’t let my muscles deteriorate,” Steve said with a shrug, “I tried to tell her that if I was able to fight my way out of SHIELD HQ after having been frozen for seventy five years, a month of
induced paralysis wasn’t gonna cause much atrophy, but...” he spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness, then tucked them back into the pockets of his sweatpants. “So what brings you to Korea?” he asked, trying to be casual, trying not to let his nervy, breathless hope push past his own good sense, but still not quite able to scrape the thought of Bucky and his recovery from the front of his mind.

T’Challa’s answering smile was gracious, and entirely unfooled. “When my sister found out you had been wounded, but not brought back to Birnin Zana for treatment, she was curious. I promised to bring here to see Dr. Cho’s research, since I needed to come retrieve some things anyway.”

Steve followed his glance down to the band of kimoyo that still encircled his own wrist – the ones Ayo had left with him in Lagos, and which none of Cho’s people had known how to remove. “Oh, of course,” he blurted, and held his hand out at once. “Please let Ayo know that these probably saved my life.”

“I...” He seemed almost to flinch for a moment, but before Steve could ask what was wrong, the brief shadow cleared from his eyes, and T’Challa offered a nod of kingly grace. “I am... glad to hear of it.” Then, with fingers dry and cool against Steve’s wrist, he deftly teased apart the beads and slid the whole thing over Steve’s hand as easily as if it had been strung on elastic cord instead of vibranium cable.

“I saw your interview,” he said then, before Steve could navigate the unknown weight that had settled around them in the moment of silence. Steve glanced at the tv, but the talking heads had moved on, and were now discussing something about the current dictator of Latveria. Following his glance, T’Challa shook his head. “Not that one. I meant the one you gave to the World Court judges, regarding the Winter Soldier.”

“They... hadn’t told me they would be making that public,” Steve said after a moment of willing his heartrate to slow back down.

T’Challa smirked. “And would you have spoken differently, had they done so?”

Caught, Steve had to laugh. “I like to think I mighta been a little more polite about it?” he said, heading for the fridge in the corner, where the drugs had been removed in favor of the high-calorie nutrient shakes that were all Cho felt ready to let Steve eat just yet. They were meant to replace about one small meal per shake, which meant that Steve, still healing, was going through about fifteen per day, and he was uncomfortably aware of being overdue. “But you know I wouldn’t have let them convince me to tell them where Buck is. It’s not safe – not for him, and not for anybody thinking they could imprison him – not even in that torture tank Ross had built out in the Atlantic ocean.”

Steve pulled a shake out, offered one to T’Challa, then put it back when the King politely refused. “Zemo proved that to the whole world back in Vienna, and not even the most hardline judge could deny it. They can’t guarantee him a fair trial, because they can’t guarantee that nobody from HYDRA will get to him and use those words against him while he’s in their custody.”

“However,” T’Challa said, reclaiming his seat when Steve perched on the end of his bed, “Your bringing to light the existence of those control words has unsettled the heads of many states in the world. Nations are examining their recent histories, and they are wondering.”

“Bucky’s not going to be the Judas goat for HYDRA’s crimes,” Steve said, and realized only after the words had left his lips how threatening they sounded. “Sorry...”

“You know I agree with you about that,” T’Challa replied, waving Steve’s apology away. “HYDRA is a complex problem all over the world, and no comfortably simple solution will solve it. However Zemo’s arrest and trial were quiet affairs, conducted by a shamefaced court only too well
aware that it had been gullied into rash action just a week before.” He spread his hands over his lap, the embroidered cuffs of his coat glinting in the tv’s light. “It was nothing like the media storm which spread James Barnes’ name across the minds of the world. Last most of the world knew of him, James Barnes was a bomber and a terrorist; learning that such a man remains at large, with such a terrible vulnerability in him...”

Steve sighed, and closed his eyes. “I don’t know what to do about that,” he admitted. “I tried to give a clearer picture of things when I talked to that Everhart gal, and my lawyer’s doing her best, but according to… some of my previous co-workers, most of the US media outlets still have deep roots in HYDRA money.”

“And the media worldwide is not so different,” T’Challa agreed. “As was made clear in the biased coverage of the first Lagos incident. This is why I wished to offer you a proposal. I wish to inform the United Nations that James Barnes, formerly the Prisoner of War known as the Winter Soldier, is currently in custody within Wakanda.”

Steve sat still. Absolutely, completely, desperately still, willing his heart to slow from its lurching gallop, willing his breath to unlock from his lungs, willing the gut-punch ache to unwind from his still-scarred belly. Wishing the betrayal rising like vomit into his throat to stay clear of his face.

From the canny, challenging look T’Challa gave him, Steve was fairly sure he’d failed. “You have seen my country’s defenses,” he said. “Do you doubt his safety there?”

“No,” Steve made himself say. “But-”

“The world has just recently come to a greater understanding of Wakanda’s strengths as well,” he went on, unflinching. “They are realizing that our wealth is far more versatile than mere mineral resources or,” his smirk turned a trifle mean, “…textile arts. If I tell the world that we have their nightmare – or rather, the man from which their nightmare was once made – in our custody, on Wakandan soil, then they will trust that we will keep HYDRA away from him, and that we will keep him away from them.”

And really, wasn’t that what Steve and Bucky both had wanted? A separate peace beyond HYDRA’s reach, where Bucky could recover unharried?

“I have also been thinking of Secrets,” Wanda had said to him in a dream not to long ago, “what makes us keep them, what makes us hide them, whom do the secrets really protect, and when they come to light, whom do the secrets really hurt.”

Steve let his gaze fall on the second bed in the room, the extra that Tony had rolled in on that first night, and hadn’t let anyone talk him into giving up since then. It was close enough that they could reach across the gap, tangle their fingers together in the dark of a dream-shadowed night if they needed to, but as slight as that distance seemed, it was still vast enough for more than a year’s worth of words they had yet to fully say.

“Will...” he swallowed, tried again. “Would they know that he’s in stasis? Or would you let them think he’s in a Wakandan jail?”

T’Challa shook his head regretfully. “Such a deception would be unwise at this point. Wakandan justice does not lend itself toward imprisonment, and pretending that we had invented such a thing to contain one single colonizer would not be very plausible. Besides; he might not be in stasis for much longer, if my sister’s claims are accurate.”

Steve started to his feet, wariness forgotten in a rush. “She’s figured it out?”
“She says she is close,” T’Challa grinned with obvious pride. “But all the world needs to know is that James Barnes is in the custody of Wakanda. Anything else anyone wishes to know becomes a matter of international diplomacy, and as I am certain you are aware, the wheels of such machinery move quite slowly, and only with great deliberation.”

Snickering, Steve shook his head. “That’ll twist Ross right around the axle,” he said, aware of a certain amount of scadenfreude in the statement but not overly bothered by it.

“How many Ross are we talking about?” Tony’s voice put in, bright and manic from the doorway, “Mr. Everett I’m-Not-Sure-How-I-Got-This-Job-But-I’m-Gonna-Do-My-Best Ross, or General Absent-Without-Leave-Or-Forwarding-Address Thunderbolt Ross?”

“Tony, I didn’t expe… erm. What?” Steve’s greeting stalled out as Tony’s words sunk in.

He waved a hand toward the television, where the man Steve had last known as the head of the CIA was now addressing the press from Washington, over a scrolling banner that named him ‘acting Secretary of State Everett Ross’. “That’s what you guys are watching, right?” Tony said, crossing the room to steal one of Steve’s shakes. “Where’s Thaddo 2018?”

“Background noise,” T’Challa contradicted. “Stark, where have you left my sister?”

“Halfway underneath Dr. Cho’s nano-molecular regeneration cradle, examining the circuit welds and telling five electrical engineers all about how they did it wrong,” Tony replied as he waved the question off. “They’re having a blast. Why aren’t you at PT?” This last was aimed at Steve, who only shrugged as the tv image switched back to show Latveria’s masked dictator again.

“Mi Cha threw me out. Why is the head of the CIA acting as Secretary of State?”

“Cause the General pulled a runner when Congress called him home to answer some questions about a recorded meeting he had with our buddy Zemo about six months before he blew up the UN building,” Tony rattled off, jabbing a straw into the foil packet as if it had personally wronged him.

“The General’s plane,” T’Challa put in, with the air of one who agreed with the sentiment, but was too fond of precision to let the details go unspoken, “was damaged in a lightning storm while flying over Latveria on its way back to the US two weeks ago. The pilots were forced to land there for repairs, and the General himself disappeared somewhere between the airport and the hotel accommodations. He has not been seen since that time.”

“Disappeared...” Steve couldn’t keep the skeptical tone from his voice.

Tony didn’t bother to try. “Smart money says him and our buddy Dr. Sterns were ‘recruited’ to the Latverian cause,” he said, slurping at his shake with far more vigor than Steve thought strictly necessary. “Whatever that might be. You know Sterns was snatched out of his cell in Geneva too, right? ‘Bout a week back or so. Guards killed, cameras knocked out, locks torn up and all?”

All Steve could do was shake his head.

“Von Doom’s representatives have assured the US, and the United Nations that they are investigating the matter with all due diligence,” T’Challa put in, straight faced, and Tony made a noise like nutrient shake might have gone up his nose.

For his part, all Steve could do was watch the silent tv with a ringing sense of displacement as the screen flipped over to show another press conference – Darlene Wilson standing beside another woman Steve didn’t recognize, but who carried the folded flag of a deceased serviceman before her like a badge of defiant honor. Or an accusation of shame. The Wilson clan, Sam in the lead,
assembled behind their fearsome matriarch, while the other woman’s shadow held only a rangy
teenaged boy, and a small girl with a dinosaur purse.

*Edwards*, the scrolling banner supplied. It didn’t help.

“Did *everything* change while I was asleep?” he wondered, a little helplessly.

“Not everything,” Tony managed to quit choking long enough to hook a warm, jostling hand over
Steve’s shoulder, “Just a few of the sucky things.”

Which, Steve supposed, could really have been worse.

“Well, maybe you’d better fill me in, if you don’t mind,” he said, jostling Tony in return as he
perched on his bed once more and turned to face T’Challa where he sat in the room’s only chair. “I
wouldn’t want to trip up on the details.”

Chapter End Notes

Coming to the final wrap up, my beloved bog blossoms! Just the epilogue left to go on
this one, and it will be out in a couple of days.

which you’d wot I say ere I put a bow to this two year old’s head and declare it hatched?
Wow... did that metaphor ever get away from me.

ANYway. This is your last chance to play Guide The Author, so if you’d like a say
before all's said and sifted, now's the time to have it! (Or to just drop in and say hi. I love
it when folks say hi.

(Edit Note: Now that MCU has reclaimed the rights to the Fantastic 4, I feel it is a 100%
likelihood that we will see Dr. Doom turn up as a villain in one of the movies soon.

Also, because it would be easy to miss, the reason why T'Challa flinches when Steve
gives back Ayo's Kimoyo and asks for him to convey Steve's thanks, is that Ayo was
the Dora Milaje whose throat Killmonger slit during the revolt at Birnin Zana.)
Gifts of the Shepherds; an epilogue

Chapter Summary

In which is celebrated a rebirth of sorts, and gifts of better use than gold, frankinsence and myrrh are on offer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~*~

“Buongiorno!” This time, Steve picked up on the first ring, and the smile in his voice was contagious.

“Italy, huh?” Tony asked by way of a greeting.

“What can I say?” Steve laughed, “I had a craving for Cappuccino.”

“Which is a thing we completely do not have in Manhattan, of course.”

Again, that laugh; lighter and more free than Tony could remember having heard from Steve in all the years since they’d met, then, “Well, the Barista I bought my breakfast from today would agree, but I’ll confess that the added attraction of Italy not having a national warrant out for my arrest did help sweeten the destination.”

“So about that,” Tony segued, because he couldn’t have asked for a better opening. “In case you hadn’t heard, as of yesterday, the House voted the Super Hero Registration Act out the window. Someone leaked the Blonsky data from Ross’s Bio-Tech Force Enhancement Project to the Washington Post, and since it’s an election year, Congress pulled an emergency session to shut the bill down ASAP.”

“I had heard that, actually,” Steve replied, his voice going wry. “Natasha texted me the story around 3 this morning.”

“Word on the Hill is they’re going to consider trying again with something a bit more humane toward all parties in a year or two,” Tony went on, determined to finish with his Joyous Tidings, “but for now SHRA’s officially dead in the States.”

The noise that followed could have been a sigh, or it could have been a snort. “My lawyer said she’s going to call this afternoon with a more personal update on how it will affect my case, but I’m thinking I’ve probably got a few more weeks of the Nomad gig before I get any kind of a pardon.”

And Tony had to smile a little at that. “You’d have to be convicted in order to get a pardon, Steve. This would be more of a Not Pressing Charges kind of thing, or even a Case Dismissed deal, which I gotta admit, is a whole lot less stressful for everybody.”

“I’ll take either one with gratitude when it’s on offer,” Steve said, graciousness personified. “Till then though, I’ll do a little more sentimental sightseeing. I do miss home, but it’s been nice seeing Europe without the Wehrmacht bombing the hell out of everything.”
That too, made Tony smile. Because it was just like Steve to frame his location and itinerary as nostalgia without addressing the fact that three quarters of Europe had already voted down their own SHRA versions. Tony couldn’t even remember if Italy had even brought theirs to a vote, but he knew that Austria, Germany, and the Czech Republic had followed most of Africa’s lead and just announced that they wouldn’t be enforcing the Accords as written at all. The Eastern Bloc and China were, predictably, the major holdouts, though there were rumors that even Sokovia wasn’t exactly toeing the Accords’ line in the wake of the worldwide deluge of revelations on back door media deals, dirty political money, and lobbying lawyers with unsavory connections at the heart of the Accords’ rush to the UN floor.

But if Steve wanted to call it Old Home Week, Tony figured he could play along. “So if we’re talking sentimental sightseeing in Italy, I’m gonna guess you’re in…” he glanced at his map, “Azanno?”

“Tolmezzo, actually. Up in the mountains north of Udine.”

“Huh. I don’t know that one,” he said as FRIDAY opened a search on known SSR engagements in the area and came up empty. “What happened last time you were there? Is that where you punched Mussolini over two hundred times?”

“Heh. Don’t I wish,” Steve replied. “No, I never drew a bead on Il Duce, unfortunately. Never been to this town before, either, which is an even bigger shame, because it’s beautiful.”

Which, judging from the Google Earth photos FRIDAY was flashing up to him, it definitely was. In an Alpine Valley in the middle of nowhere kind of way. “So what are you doing there now?” Tony asked.

“Waiting for you,” Steve answered knowingly. “How far out are you now?”

Well damn. “You are a hard man to surprise, Rogers,” he grumbled, shutting down the searches and slideshow with a glance at his HUD. “How’d you know?”

“I know what calls from inside the armor sound like, Tony,” he chided, “It’s obvious you’re in flight right now. And anyway, the Kimoyo gave you away.” Tony swore under his breath, and Steve laughed at him again. “It vibrates a little when someone activates the tracker -- I’m surprised Nakia didn’t tell you that when she let you take it. Half the time in Birnin Zana, the buzz would wake me up before the person tracking me even got within a mile.”

“We had other concerns at the time,” Tony replied primly. “So if I hadn’t called you just now…?”

“Well, if I’d thought it was a War Dog with a message from T’Challa, I’d have activated my own back-tracker and gone to see what they wanted. But I would still have called you after to ask if you had a couple days you could spare to come up here.” And now his voice went softly hopeful. “Do you have some time to stay?

“You still haven’t told me what’s up there,” Tony teased, beginning the braking process to bring him down to safe airspace speeds.

“Other than me?”

Tony snorted. “You are a mobile attraction, Rogers,” he said as the Kimoyo’s display flickered across his HUD in shades of blue and white; two pale stars pulling toward each other across the rumpled fabric of time and space, as smooth and inevitable as gravity. “And you’d be just as compelling in Monaco or Venice or Rome. But strangely, you’re bringing me to a place I’ve never
heard of, and I just can’t help being curious.” He braced against the sudden drag as he cut thrust and shifted attitude to let the wind slow his descent into the valley, and the little mountain town that held the star he sought.

“Have you found a secret HYDRA cell up there or something?” Tony challenged, circling over Tolmezzo, which looked disappointingly like every other Alpine mountain town from above. Terraced houses on twisting, narrow streets, that had probably been laid out by prehistoric goats. Lots of red clay tile, and more than a few churches, but nothing more remarkable than that from this altitude. “Because I distinctly remember you promising Cho that you wouldn’t punch any Nazis for at least a month after she let you leave Seoul, and it’s only been three weeks.”

Steve scoffed, looking up with a broad grin as Tony overshot the cafe courtyard where he sat. “Nothing so exciting. But maybe something nicer?” He was on his feet when Tony stood from his touchdown on the old cobblestones, stepping close and tapping at the helmet’s cheek with the back of his knuckles before Tony could even snap the mask out of the way, and then ducking in for a kiss before Tony could even grumble at him for impatience.

It was a nice kiss, too. Sweet and decorous, but lingering in the way that held a lot of promise, and definitely made Tony want to stick around and see what it might turn into, given time and privacy. A buzz of excited voices in the middle distance brought his rising libido to heel however, because as nice as it was to be able to snog Captain America in public without having to scan the area for Papparazzi first, even in remote Italian hill towns, it was still the age of the cell phone.

The bright flush across Steve’s cheeks and ears as he stepped back and glanced around suggested he’d had a similar thought, and a moment later, he was waving to the gathered school girls across from the fountain with one hand, while trying to hide his face in a paper cup with the other.

Tony, on the other hand, just pasted on his biggest Red Carpet grin and struck a few poses for them to cover Steve’s blushing retreat. When a rather terrifying old woman leaned shouting out of an upstairs window to chase the girls away a few minutes later, Tony took the opportunity to retreat to the cafe table, where Steve was digging cappuccino foam out of the empty cup and licking it off his fingers while he waited. Which was hardly fair, by Tony’s way of thinking – hardly fair at all.

“This might be a little more private without the Suit” he said, setting the cup aside as Tony approached. “Want to park that thing and come for a drive with me?”

“A drive?” Tony asked, skeptical, and Steve held up a set of rental keys. “Well, that depends; you gonna let me take the wheel? Cause I’ve seen the way you go through bikes, and-”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Says the fella who builds a new Suit after every fight. And anyway, can I help it I learned to drive in a war zone?”

Tony cocked his gauntlet on his armored hips and gave him a challenging stare. “Well if you’re gonna be all precious about it, we could always do that hug and fly thing we were working on back before Sokovia.”

“Or we could arm wrestle for the keys,” Steve challenged back.

To which Tony almost laughed. “You know I’ll keep the Suit on for that too,” he said, triggering the Suit’s evac function and stepping out as it unzipped around him. “C’mon,” Tony held out his hand, fingers wiggling. “Keys.”

And with an eyeroll as the Suit reassembled itself and blasted off to maintain a standby altitude, Steve handed them over. “I’m the Alfa over there,” he said, turning to lead the way toward a small
parking lot tucked around the corner of the open square.

“Babe, you’re the Alpha everywhere you go.”

“What?” Steve looked back, perplexed, and Tony just grinned.

“Nothing. The convertible?” he asked nodding toward the low-slung Alfa Romeo roadster in British racing green in the third row. “Nice choice.”

“It’s a rental,” Steve huffed proudly, tossing his shoulder bag into a cramped backseat already full of luggage, “So behave please.”

“Sure,” Tony breezed, vaulting into the driver’s seat just to show off. “So when do you tell me where we’re going?” The Alfa roared awake, and subsided to a purr of satisfaction at once, and Tony began a mental checklist of reasons he was going to give Pepper to explain why he was going to ship it home to Manhattan despite already owning who of the next model year.

“GPS is programmed already,” Steve told him primly, making a show of door handle and seat belt that had to be for Tony’s benefit. “All you need to do is follow directions. It’s a stretch for you, I know, but I’m sure you can do it just this once.” And then? The smug bastard had the nerve to smirk at Tony’s entirely justified stinkeye.

“That’s cold, Rogers,” Tony informed him as he pulled onto the street.

Steve’s smile was malice itself as he offered, “We can put the top up if you want. Or there are jackets in the luggage if you’d rather do that.”

“Ahaha. You’re hilarious. Seriously.”

“Seriously,” Steve replied, but his smile warmed from ‘butter-wouldn’t-melt’ to ‘panties-would’ as they turned onto what had to be the main road north out of town. “All right,” he said, and turned his eyes to the road ahead, the looming hills, and the brilliant sky before them. “I spoke with Clint and Laura the other night. Turns out Ellis’ pardon for the team included compensation for their illegal imprisonment on the Raft.” Not a surprise that the warmth bled from Steve’s voice at that mention, but Tony made an effort not to let his back rise to it just yet. “They were excited at being able to pay off the loan you and Pepper made them to keep the farm afloat while Clint had to be away.”

“Oh,” Tony said, his attention completely riveted to the straight, level, and dry road. “Were they?”

Steve wasn’t fooled. “They were. Except for the part where they got the property deed in the mail before the compensation check ever arrived.”

“Huh,” Tony muttered.

“Paid in full,” Steve went on, as if counting down a list of charges in court. “No mortgage, no lien. Their names on all the papers.”

“Imagine.” In the corner of his eye, Tony watched the tiniest of smiles crack through Steve’s disapproval face.

“Clint was pretty steamed about you changing the terms of their agreement like that,” Steve tried, gamely carrying the act nonetheless.

“Look,” Tony parried, giving the Alfa some more speed just to feel it roar underneath them. “Pepper may seem like an Iron Lady, but you’d be amazed what a soft touch she-”
“Yeah, nobody’s actually buying that, Tony,” Steve cut him off with a knowing grin. “So anyway, in revenge for that, Clint and Natasha decided to help me get you back.”

Tony cut him a suspicious glance, and then hopped the yellow line to pass a slow moving truck. “You know that Friday can have the suit on me in under thirty seconds if anybody’s thinking of shooting me,” he said, and Steve’s pretense cracked into a laugh.

“Funny,” he acknowledged, shaking his head. “No, no shooting. And no punching either,” he hastened to add as Tony opened his mouth to mention it. “Or hyposprays,” Which, to be fair, Tony hadn’t even thought of yet, though he was doing so now, of course. “They just did some research, is all. Made some calls, checked some files, found some names and dates for me.”

And while that reassuring in some ways, there was still something small and chilly in Tony’s belly that couldn’t help worrying about the idea of Hawkeye, the Black Widow, and Cap all ganging up on him. He told that small, scared thing to shut the fuck up, just this goddamned once though, and made himself leave the silence of the open road for Steve to fill.

Which he did after only a few moments. “Did Howard still own that casino in Monte Carlo when you were a kid?”

“The one he met Maria at?” Tony asked, once he’d gotten his mental footing back and followed the switch in direction. “No. He let the co-owner buy him out the year I was born. Said he had no interest in going back again once I was old enough to get the watered down, kidsafe version of the story. And in case you’re curious,” he added, with a hard stare at Steve over his sunglasses, “Monte is a long, long drive from here, so we might want to reconsider the Suit after all if that’s what you’re-”

Steve only grinned though, and swept one big, square hand through his long hair to pin it down till he could get a cap over it. “Not going to Monte Carlo, Tony,” he said, smug. “It’s all part of the surprise. So Howard Stark, an upstart technical genius from the lower east side, met Maria Carbonell, debutante and scientist from Southampton in a casino in Monte Carlo,” he narrated the story as if he’d practiced it a hundred times, ticking down the beats that anyone and everyone knew by now. It was the same story Tony had learned to recite as a kid whenever reporters or society mavens needed something fluffy and humanist out of the Young Stark Property Prodigy to coo over. “They made a mess, and they fell in love, and they got married within the year. All the society papers were thrilled with the whirlwind romance, but,” and here Steve cut a knowing smile Tony’s way. “They missed a few details. Good ones though, I promise.”

“Okay,” Tony said, and flexed loose his death grip on the Alfa’s steering wheel. “What kind of details?”

“Details like the fact that Maria Carbonell’s family came from this area originally.”

“They…” Tony blinked. “They did?”

“Yep,” Steve answered, eyes gone soft, smile still hopeful. “Her grandparents owned a vineyard up in these foothills until they saw Mussolini’s writing on the wall, then they sold it off packed the family up, and moved to the States.”

“I…” Tony swallowed. “Oh.” He only barely remembered his Nonna as a shadowy presence of rosewater, fresh bread, and basil, and hadn’t thought to wonder after the rest of that side of his family in… well, ever to be honest. And of Howard’s family, of course, Tony knew even less.

“The vineyard’s still there today,” Steve went on, blue eyes watching him carefully. “They still make
wine there, and now there’s a bed and breakfast on the property too.”

“And that’s where we’re going?” Tony asked around the smile he couldn’t quash.

Steve beamed. “That’s where we’re going.”

Tony… Tony swallowed down the first five impulses that rushed to his lips, eyes fixed firmly on the road so he wouldn’t read too much into Steve’s expression as the seconds ticked by in silence. “You don’t have to do this for me you know,” Tony managed after awhile, when he found that imagining Steve’s disappointment and having to see it bore an equal weight of dread. “I mean, it’s a nice gesture, but.” But how was Tony supposed to feel about seeing the ancestral lands of a family he never knew, and had never even really thought about much before this very moment?

He risked a sideways glance, and found Steve still watching him, still smiling even as he shook his head. “Not a gesture,” Steve said, turning back to watch the road again as the pines began to march inward toward the climbing roadside. “Not for you, and I know that. I’d still be heading up here even if you couldn’t come.” A pause, and then, “Or if you didn’t want to.”

Which, as far as offering him an out from this elaborately planned – date? This was a date, wasn’t it? It couldn’t be anything else. As get-out-of-date-free options went, it was one of the smoother ones Tony had ever encountered, and just knowing that Steve had thought that far around the matter on his behalf soothed some of the jittery nerves boiling up in Tony’s belly.

“I can’t bring her back for you, Tony,” Steve continued after a long moment of windblown silence. “I know that. Nobody can replace what you lost when your mother and father died. Nobody can make that loss just go away… but trying to understand it, what I can of it, seems like the least I can do here.”

Tony dug up a smile, and to his own surprise, didn’t have to fake it much at all. “For all I know, she never even saw this place we’re headed, Cap,” he shrugged. “You won’t get much of an angle on my mom’s life from here.”

“I will if you tell me,” Steve countered with a tentative smile. Then, when Tony cut him a skeptical eye, he offered a shrug. “Just seemed like this might be a place it would be easier to talk about her some. Better than Manhattan or Malibu, anyhow. Fewer ghosts that know your name, and all?”

Tony bit his lip, crushing the million blurts of deflection, distraction, aggression, and hyper bullshit his lifelong emotional defense systems defaulted to at the least uncertainty. In the silence, Steve’s hopeful face fell by degrees, but the earnestness remained as he offered, “Tony, if you’d rather not, I’ll call and cancel-”

“So you haven’t asked why I came to find you,” Tony interrupted, too loud, but there wass something like relief in Steve’s eyes as he visibly decided to roll with it.

“I…. All right, why did you come to-”

“How long did you reserve this hotel room for?”

Narrowing his eyes, Steve boosted one skeptical eyebrow and said, “Three days. Didn’t figure you’d be able to shake free for much longer than that without prior warning, but we’re still early in the tourist season, so they’d probably be able to extend a bit.” And if that didn’t sound like a ‘show-me-you-ain’t-chicken’ kind of dare, Tony had never heard one.

He grinned, and raised the stakes. “A week.”
Steve’s other eyebrow went up. “Really? Pepper won’t be-”

Tony scoffed. “Stark Sat Wi-Fi is king of the world these days, Rogers. I’ll do a bit of screen time here and there, maybe phone in to a meeting or two, and she’ll be fine with it.” He nodded at the road, at the rising mountains, the tall, somber pines, the brilliant sky as the idea began to settle past his initial agitation and take root inside him. “We’ll spend a week up here,” he declared with a nod, “I’ll rediscover my hidden roots, you can do whatever hair shirt and ashes thing you need to do, and we can get all weepy over my lame mommy stories, but then.” he waggled an eyebrow for dramatic effect, and reached into his jacket pocket to retrieve his phone. “We’re going north.”

“Oh?” Steve played along gamely, “And what’s north?”

“Austria,” Tony said, thumbing the device awake, and glancing to be sure the file was still loaded where he’d left it. “Specifically, the HYDRA base you broke into to rescue the 107th back in ’43.”

The smile froze on Steve’s face. “What?”

“I told you I was working with Hill’s people to decrypt the servers we tracked from Rollins’ comm,” Tony replied, passing him the phone. “Well, FRIDAY, Johnson, Ramsey and I finished busting the last of the code on Monday, and we found out that’s where Zola was trying to take you; to the base where he made his first successful serum trial on Barnes.”

“But…” Steve stared at the phone as it might bite him if he tried to scroll through the data. “Why me? Why there?”

“Zola didn’t say on the transcripts,” Tony answered, anger simmering up inside him all over again. “But once we dug financial records into the light, they show that his ‘estate’ bought up that ruined base and about a hundred acres around it, and had been funneling money and materiel into it for the last ten years or so. And from the transcript of the orders he gave Rollins before you coded him, it’s pretty clear that he had another one of those programming setups in there.” Tony flexed his fingers on the wheel again. “The drugs, the tank, the… the whole shebang. Like in Siberia, but with newer equipment.”

“He had a Chair,” Steve whispered, eyes slipping closed, head bowing low. Tony knew, from snooping in Steve’s after-action reports on his side trips with Romanoff and Wilson during 2015, that they had found and destroyed more than one of those units while turning over rocks and hoping to find Barnes lurking underneath. There’d been a note on one of them, a few weeks before the Crossbones rumor brought them to Lagos, positing that the Chairs might all be done for, since it had been so long since any of the HYDRA bases connected with the Winter Soldier program showed any signs of having had one.

Only then there’d been another one waiting for them in Siberia. And now this.

The GPS pointed left at a crossroad up ahead, and Tony slowed to the turn. “So it looks like all Zola needed was a new Super Soldier,” he said, keeping the filthy idea brisk and light, lest he gag on it. “Or someone who could be tortured into telling him where his first one had gone.”

Steve let his head fall back over the seat, and didn’t even flinch when the wind snatched his ballcap and sent it flying. “Jesus,” he whispered venomously to the sky.

Tony snorted. “Never been a praying man, but I wouldn’t exactly lay that at His feet,” he tried, refusing to wonder if maybe he should have let this wait, found a better moment, a gentler way to lay the whole vile thing out.
But no, that was how Zemo had tripped them up in Siberia. Softballed bad news, stalling for a better time, for a surer proof, for the perfect way to say what nobody would ever want to hear – he shook his head. No. They’d fucking learned better.

“Jesus,” Steve sighed again, and drew his head upright like it weighed a ton. His face, when he looked Tony’s way, had fallen fully into battle-ready Captain mode. “Tony,” he said, “if there’s a new base operating up there, we need to go deal with it now. Now,” he insisted when Tony shook his head and opened his mouth. “It’s been nearly two months since Zola gave those orders! We could already be too-”

“Installation, Cap,” Tony shoved in, grabbing Steve’s hand and attention in one move. “It’s an installation, not a base. As in, there are no people there. I’ve had FRIDAY looking for heat signatures since we got the location, and her resources agree with Hills: there’s nothing bigger than a dog within a mile of the place. According to the money trail, there have been techs who’ve gone out there and set things up over the last five years or so, but they all left and locked the front door as soon as they were done with whatever they were there to do.” He followed the GPS through another turn, and the road rolled out along a stunning overlook ridge, the valley they’d just driven up from spread out like a painting below. “We’re not gonna be walking into a fully defended HYDRA outpost here, I promise.”

“I can’t believe I’m having to bring this up to you, of all people,” Steve grumbled, turning their hands to lace together, “but automation-”

Tony shook his head, and didn’t let go. “If it was all automated, then Zola wouldn’t have ordered Rollins to activate all the sleeper agents in the region and get them to his new installation,” he insisted. “I’m not saying we’ll find no resistance there at all, but I am saying it won’t be like storming Strucker’s place was. We caught this one in time.”

“Did we?” The question was low, and weighty with doubt, and Tony decided at once he was not having any of it.

“Don’t make me call my suit to kick your ass, Rogers,” he growled, squeezing the hand in his, and hoping it wasn’t too early for the joke. Steve’s wordless huff reassured him on that score, at least, and Tony pushed onward, willing to take the mile if he could find one behind that inch of smile he could see beneath the beard. “That base isn’t going anywhere, and we’re close enough for a quick response from this vineyard of yours if that changes. And we’ll know if it does change, because you know damned good and well I’m monitoring it six ways from Sunday even now.”

He caught a flash of blue as Steve stole a glance, and met it with a determined smile. “You’ll get your Nazi-punching, Barnes-avenging vacay after I’ve had my Wine-drinking and Loss-processing hugfest,” he declared, shaking loose his hand to downshift for the next turn, “and that’s all there is to it. Cho would literally light me on fire if I let you get too crazy before your full recovery period was up anyway.”

“Tony,” Steve groaned, “I’m fine.”

“Well that’s where, we agree,” he said. “You are fine, and your freckles are cute, but we both know you don’t want Cho to yell at you either, or you wouldn’t have agreed to lie low for a full month after she let you leave, so don’t even front with me, Rogers.”

Steve scrubbed both hands over his face, and muttered something that might have sounded suspiciously like ‘Rhodes warned me this would happen,’

“You’ve got another week before you’re cleared for punching, and I intend to see that you take it,”
Tony said, just in case the stubborn asshole thought the argument might not be finished yet. “I might need a week’s worth of wine to be ready to see all that anyway, so we’re going to take our damned time, and that’s final!”

“To see what?” Steve came out from behind his hands to ask.

The air was cooler up here in the foothills, and Tony had to fight down a shiver when he answered, “The last Monster machine. The holdout killer factory,” He stole a glance at Steve’s face – suddenly and painfully neutral – and made himself name the beast properly. “Arnim Zola’s infamous Winter Chair. I won’t lie, that’s gonna be tough to take, but I need...” Tony gave in to the urge to drum his fingers on the steering wheel. “I need to see for myself what could turn someone you obviously love that much into...” he waved a hand to banish the anxious ghost of fear and loss and rage from the mountain air around them. “Into what I saw on that video. I need to see it in person if I’m ever gonna really understand.” And damn it, why did his voice have to do that creaking thing now? Why? Why?

Tony had turned in his seat, and was watching Tony struggle, arclight focused and so earnest you could break teeth on him, and Tony forced himself to keep going, because he wasn’t about to back down now, damn it!

“Because maybe if I can come to understand what happened,” he managed finally, “What really, actually happened to him, then when you’re ready to bring Barnes out of Wakanda, I might be able to forgive him.”

“Tony...” That time it was Steve’s voice that cracked.

“Because one thing I don't ever want to see again,” Tony rolled on, desperate to finish this while he still could, “Is that face you make when you have to choose.”

“Tony, I-”

“Steve.” Tony grabbed his hand again. “You chose. I made you choose. That's on me.”

“That’s on Zemo,” Steve corrected at once, and Tony barked a laugh.

“Well I hate like hell to say it, but Zemo was right about us, Steve; about you and me, and the Avengers too. Because without you, I don't have a team. Without you, all I've really got is me. And without me-”

“Without you, I've got no home,” Steve put in grimly. “Nowhere to go, nowhere to stay. Nothing to fight for, nothing-”

“Nothing but that beard,” Tony shook his head at the tragedy. “Which; damn, Steve.”

That won a chuckle, and Steve drew Tony’s knuckles up to rustle the stuff sandy whiskers at his chin. “You like it though,” he challenged knowingly.

“I'll let you know after my thighs have test driven it,” Tony answered loftily, then broke into a leer at the fierce blush that swept across Steve’s suntanned face. “Which, I think, might just happen this week.” Steve’s eyebrows shot up at that, and the blush went from adorable to hilarious as it took over his ears and made a solid advance down his throat too. “Because don’t get me wrong,” Tony went on, thoroughly enjoying himself suddenly, “I have been deeply invested in our occasional make out sessions, but I’m gonna need more than heavy petting to fortify me before we go find Zola’s holdout programming chair.”

“And blow it right the fuck up,” Steve put in, managing to instill just the right note of seduction to the bid for imminent destruction.
“Language!” Tony gasped, slowing as the GPS flashed their destination up ahead.

“Because we’re going there to destroy it, right Tony?” Steve went on, wide eyed suddenly, leaning in and urgent as he grabbed Tony’s shifting hand in both of his own. “Not to study? Not to bring back?”

“You!” Tony yelped, yanking his hand free as he recognized the quote. “Steven, you watched Aliens without me? Rude! That’s my favorite!”

“Had some time on my hands recently,” the smug fucker grinned as they turned in at the stone pillars and drove beneath an arching, iron work gate. “If it makes you feel any better, I liked it enough I’d watch it again with you though. That Ripley gal is a firecracker.”

“You’re a firecracker,” Tony shot back, unthinking.

And just as unthinking, Steve fired the next round, “Your mom is a firecrack…er...” and Tony couldn’t help but share Steve’s wince then, because yeah; too soon.

It would pass though, he realized. They would learn their way around those potholes and bomb craters that littered the landscape between them. They’d learn each other in time, properly, as people instead of call signs – the way they should have learned each other from the beginning. It would take time, and they’d definitely screw it up, but… they’d get there. For once in his life, Tony really believed it.

“Yeah,” he said, pulling the Alfa Romeo into a gravel lot beside the main house, “She was. And just so we’ve got everything on the table here, yes; blowing Zola’s whole facility, and all his brainwashing tech up is the plan next week.” He popped his seatbelt and opened the door with a grin, then added, “I’d nuke the site from orbit just to be sure, only Austria really wouldn’t appreciate the pop-culture reference at all.”

“Huns,” Steve observed grimly, shaking his head as he unfolded from the car, “No sense of humor.”

Then he put his unfairly long legs to good use, and by the time Tony recovered from his outrage enough to shout, “Oh my GOD, Rogers! Highlander too?! RUDE!!” after him, Steve was already inside, signing their names into the register without a single sign of remorse.

~* TheWatcher.com.ng Cap Interview excerpt *~

_This clip, taken from the longer interview, went viral on YouTube the week after SHRA was defeated in the US._

**Watcher:** “And what do you think HYDRA wanted the biological agent for, Cap?”

**Rogers:** “Same thing Fascists always want with that sort of thing, I figure. To weaponize it, to turn it loose on population centers, and to use the chaos generated from that as an excuse to seize power. Because clearly, ‘troubled times’ call for ‘strong leadership’.” **He uses air quotes unironically.** Even if it was that very leader who created the trouble in the first place.”

**Watcher:** “And then what do they do, those ‘Strong Leaders’?”

**Rogers:** “With the power they've seized?” **He laughs, shakes his head.** “You're a war correspondent; you know the answer to that question as well as I do.”
**Watcher:** “Well yes, but this is supposed to be about you getting your say here, Cap.”

*Rogers sits up, turns to face the camera, face grave and eyes hard. His elbows rest on his knees, his hands clasp between them.*

**Rogers:** “They use the power they grab to create more fear, and use that to get more power. And more power and more. And then, once they think they've got enough momentum or mass or money to pull it off, they start trying to make the world over into their own image; cutting out and destroying anything – any people – who don't fit.” *His hands move like knives here, chopping through space, and brushing unseen examples aside. The mime is eerily effective. “Those who are too ethnic; too religious; too liberal; anyone who questions; anyone who protests; anyone who loves their own family more than they love the figurehead leader who's making all this happen. If they have their way, the fascists make all of that disappear.”*

*He holds up both empty hands in a ‘poof’ gesture.*

**Rogers:** “All the love, all the kindness, the mercy, the excellence, the awkwardness, the defiant weirdness of humanity; it all goes away. Or...” *here he smirks.* “That's what the fascists think they can make happen, anyway.”

**Watcher:** “You think differently?”

*He grins, and its easy to see the man who rallied the Howling Commandos to scrape HYDRA from the map of the War back in the day. There is a surety to him, a confidence that engages the heart as well as the eye, and makes the listener want fiercely to make him proud.*

**Rogers:** “I know differently. I've seen it, over and over again. From the Union Square rallies in the 20's, and forgotten Hooversville families, to the Resistance in occupied France, to the kindness of German and Austrian citizens who had every reason to hate and fear us during the war, but who gave food and shelter instead. It's in the Soviet kids who came out with hammers to knock that wall down in Berlin; it's in the Black and Latin and Asian and Middle Eastern kids who face hostile armed strangers with badges on every street corner in the US today. Humanity, mercy, a sense of who you are, and what's right, and what you must do about it no matter what. That's still going strong, no matter how hard the fascists try to scare it off.”

**Watcher:** “You're not just talking about the HYDRA brand of fascists right now, are you?”

**Rogers:** *Offers a scathing look* “You write the news; you know the answer to that question just as well as I do.”

**Watcher:** “Well then, what are the American people supposed to do about that?”

**Rogers:** *Offers a scathing look* “You write the news; you know the answer to that question just as well as I do.”

**Watcher:** “Well then, what are the American people supposed to do about that?”

**Rogers:** “What we've always done; we stand up!” *He does, squaring his shoulders and gripping the bars in both hands.* “We protect those smaller and weaker among us. We tell the bullies to back off. We use our strength to challenge ourselves and we use our heart to make ourselves better than we were before. All of us, not just the ones who look, or vote, or love, or worship like we do, but all of America's many hues of people, *including* the ones who may be stronger, or faster, or smarter, or who have uncanny insight, or can do things we can’t explain, or who just seem more dangerous than what we’re used to seeing every day. We remember that our variety is what makes us stronger and more resourceful, wiser, and wilier than any fascist notion of ideological or racial purity.”

*He makes a fist, lays it over his heart and presses down. The gesture seems oddly like a promise.*
Rogers: “We are many, we are different, and THAT is what makes, us, as human beings, capable of being truly great. We change the world a hundred times a day, every one of us, without even realizing it, and when we’re cornered into fear and hatred, how can we expect those changes we make to be for the best? *He shakes his head, lets his fist drop to his side.* “In the end, if anything can save Humanity from our own mistakes, and make the people of Earth ready to step out into the universe on steady feet, it will be that we will have learned to trust our better selves, and to finally believe more in People than in Monsters.”

Chapter End Notes

AAAAaaaAAAAAAAaaaAAAAAND DONE!

I'll amend these notes later, once I've slept and am capable of making sense. In the mean time, I LOVE YOU ALL AND I HOPE YOU LIKE MY THING I MADE IT TOOK A LONG TIME AND IT DROVE ME SPARE BUT IT'S WEIRD AND IT'S MINE AND I HOPE YOU LIKE IT OKAY BYE.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!