Not About Superheroes (A Private Little War)

by AnnaFugazzi

Summary

In less than a year, Steve has been brought back from the dead, adapted to a whole new world, plunged right back into battle again, and moved in with a bunch of superheroes. He's handling everything remarkably well. Except when he's not.

Notes

Title taken from Not About Heroes, a drama by by Stephen MacDonald. And, um, a random Star Trek Old Series episode.

Thanks so much to scrtkpr, schemingreader, and tree00faery for beta!!
"With all due respect, Director, please piss off and let us do our job," said Cap, his voice tight with strain.

In retrospect, Tony thought much later, that's what should have been their first hint that something was off with their golden boy. At the time, though, he'd nearly wet his suit laughing, and Hawkeye's hastily choked-off giggle hadn't helped.

"Sure, Captain, I'll tell my agents to go back to their needlework, then," said Fury's calm voice over the comms, as though having America's favorite son telling you to piss off happened to him every day. "Let us know if you need anything. Ice tea, lemonade, scented towels. A magazine or two?"

"Sorry, Director," said Steve brusquely. He paused. "We could use SHIELD presence on the north perimeter. Iron Man's going to herd that thing to the pier."

"I am?" said Tony. "Herding. That's usually a term for more than one thing," he muttered. "Shepherding a giant wall of slime, how is this my life."

"It should dissolve in the water. That firehose seemed to irritate it before it got out of its range."

"Should. I'm sending you the cleaning bill if it doesn't." Tony sped off, blasting the giant wall of pink slime and earning himself what looked for all the world like an aggrieved glare, if a blob of amorphous pink could glare. The wall slowly started to shuffle towards him through the shimmering heat, and Tony congratulated himself over his air-conditioned suit, sparing a moment's sympathy for the rest of his team fighting on the ground amid the lovely New York-in-August miasma.


"Think that's Fury-es for I Told You So," grunted Tony, dodging swipes from the gelatinous fuchsia and trying not to think of what went into industrial lunch meat. "JARVIS, memo, never bring commercial processed meats into the Tower."

"Yes, sir. Organic only."

"Good man."

He caught a glint of sun off Steve's shield and glanced over at Steve, who somehow appeared to be single-handedly keeping a large group of poorly coordinated robots on the southern perimeter from attacking Natasha as she worked on the door to what looked like a control... outhouse. On wheels.

"How's Widow?"

"Still trying to get into the control room," Steve said. "Widow, out of the way, I think you've got that hinge weakened enough." He paused, then flung his shield at the door. The door cracked open with a sound that was almost the exact opposite of what a rickety wooden outhouse door should sound
like, heard even off-comm from Tony's position three blocks over.

"Cap, duck!" Hawkeye's voice was quickly followed by an arrow that passed over Steve's head and buried itself in a robot right behind him, shorting it out and causing it to spasm into the ones lurching up behind it. Steve nodded his thanks hurriedly, moving into the outhouse and picking up his shield on the way.

"Yes!" Tony crowed as the pink slime, goaded beyond reason - or what passed for reason for a house-sized blob of goo - sank into the water, hissing and, according to JARVIS's read-out, giving off a strong smell of cinnamon.

He looked around. The destruction had been minimal. There was no sign of whoever had caused all of this, his team and the SHIELD agents all seemed sweaty and tired, but uninjured, and the robots were twitching aimlessly in the bright sunshine. Apparently Steve and Natasha had dealt with the control... toilet.

Game over.

2.

"Director, I apologize for my actions today," Steve began, standing up as soon as Fury and Hill entered the briefing room.

Clint traded a glance with Natasha. This oughtta be good.

"At ease, soldier," Fury said mildly. "You were a little preoccupied and I was distracting you."

"I showed disrespect over an open comm line."

"And what a thing of beauty that was," Tony grinned. Clint covered his smirk by grabbing and chugging down the nearest water bottle; no point pissing off the boss, and while an involuntary - and slightly embarrassingly high-pitched - giggle over the comm might be forgiven, he wasn't gonna compound it by egging Tony on during a meeting.

"I'm not your superior officer," said Fury. "And SHIELD's not really a military organization."

Tony's eyebrows went up. Clint and Natasha's went down.

"Still, it was unprofessional of me."

"Fine, apology accepted," said Fury, waving a hand and picking up a water bottle for himself. "Now, can someone tell me what happened here?"

Clint cleared his throat. "Uh, looked to me like a giant wall of slime came down to find friends in Brooklyn, brought some robots that make Dummy look like the Iron Man suit, all controlled from an outhouse. I already wrote up my report," he said, and handed it to Fury.


"It's succinct," said Clint proudly.

"It's a nice try," said Hill.

"Thanks," grinned Clint.
"Try again," she shot back.

Steve leaned forward, his face carefully blank. "To be honest, that's pretty much the whole story, other than the outhouse wasn't really an outhouse, obviously. Just disguised to look like it. And, um, smell like it. We can fill in details in our reports."

"You're right," said Fury, and Hill shot him a look of bewilderment. "Any injuries?"

"Got a nasty cinnamon-scented nasal burn from the slime," said Clint.

"Dangerous?"

"No, I just really feel like getting cinnamon buns. Other than affecting my boyish figure, nothing dangerous."


"Some sunburns. Two agents were slightly injured on the northern perimeter," said Hill. "Bay cracked a rib and Wong twisted his ankle. Nothing serious."

"So, other than not finding whoever was responsible--" Fury began.

"Sorensen's got a team on that, sir," said Hill.

Clint frowned at her. "Sorensen? Why--"

"He thinks it looks like the work of the Verminator," Hill continued, ignoring Clint.

"AKA the Mean Teen." Fury rolled his eye again. "In other words, amateur night," he said. "Go home, folks. And thank you."

3.

"What's on tonight?" asked Natasha, entering the common kitchen. "Are we done with From Here to Eternity yet?"

"We finished it and On the Waterfront while you were with the Russian delegation," said Bruce, chopping some vegetables that Steve recognized, along with other stuff he was pretty sure was grown in his lab. "We're on to Marty now."

"Good," said Natasha with satisfaction. "I've already seen Waterfront and I don't like Brando. And the Eternal movie wasn't doing anything for me."

Steve started to make himself a couple of ham on ryes as Clint entered the room and took up a perch on the counter. "It wasn't that bad. Marty's better, though."

The Eternal movie hadn't done much for Steve either - or rather, it had done a little too much, what with all the overly-familiar-looking battle scenes near the end. It had actually been uncomfortable as hell, but it wasn't like he needed anybody to know that. This was supposed to be for his benefit, anyway, and there was no point in making them feel bad about it.

Tony had taken one look at Steve's 're-education' program, a month after the Battle of New York, and nearly pissed himself laughing. They'd been at SHIELD headquarters after a battle with Doombots (and it had only been the third battle with them, but even by then, Steve was beginning to get tired of them). Somehow, Tony had gathered packages on each of them, including the one named, 'Re-integration, Rogers, Steven.'
"How handy," he'd said, reading off his StarkPad. "They've got your schedule all color-coded and
everything. There's therapy, The History of America's Greatness, The History of Everyone Else's
Not-So-Greatness, military training... and your expenses, wow, a tiny apartment in Crown Heights -
good God, it's gone a little gentrified, have any of your neighbors tried selling you patchouli yet?
Must be close to where you grew up or there's no excuse for living there. Huh. A Quinjet's weight in
punching bags... and a set of pencils."

Oh, they'd been generous enough with those. And they'd given him a stipend while they worked out
back pay, and it was more than enough for him, but--

"You can't live like this, man," said Tony in disgust. "You're a national icon, you deserve better.
There's entire floors of the Tower ready for occupancy, right now, and nobody in them. Consider
membership in the Avengers to be your rent."

Steve had wanted to take offense, but Tony was still busily insulting everyone else's current life
choices.

"And Bruce, seriously, you can't be thinking of going back to your shack in India, not cool. Can't
have both you and Pepper skip out on me at the same time." He turned to Natasha and Clint. "And
you two? Barracks life? Really?"

"Some of us like barracks, Stark," said Natasha.

"I liked you so much better when you were my PA, Natalie from Legal," said Tony. "Natalie from
Legal would've been happy to move into a plush new apartment in the cushy part of town. With lots
of possible boyfriends in clubs nearby."

"Natalie from Legal would drink pink drinks with fizzy things in them," said Natasha. "And
umbrellas."

"And Natasha from SHIELD is a good little spy who lives in Spartan quarters and drinks vodka," said Tony. "You like working the stereotype?"

"I put fizzy pink things into the vodka."

"Hey, you don't need to convince me," Clint had said. "Cool new digs for free? When do I move
in?"

He hadn't said that he probably didn't want to go back to the barracks where there were empty rooms
because of him. According to Natasha - and from what Steve could see when he was at SHIELD -
nobody blamed him, not really. But the bare rooms were still there.

"And you, Spangles," Tony had turned back to him, with the same relentless determination his father
had always had. Though even then, Steve knew better than to comment on it. "You live in that tiny
little closet and watch documentaries. You need pop culture reintegration. I could help with that."

"Stark, your version of the twenty-first century is more likely to kill him than any Doombot," said
Natasha.

"OK, pop culture taken slowly. Watch any good reality TV lately?"

"I did look up some of the movies that won Oscars after I went down..."

"Really? Cap, I'm so proud of you. And you'll have to learn when not to say 'going down', context
can be a tricky thing sometimes. How far had you gone? Your plane was lost in 1945 - was that
before or after the Academy Awards that year?"

"I hadn't really been watching a lot of movies during the war, Stark."

"It's Tony. What have you watched?"

"Um, I was up to Gentlemen's Agreement."

And so they'd all moved in to Tony's tower, and the Oscar Project had begun. They watched a little while together almost every night, unless pink slime hit particularly hard. They'd worked their way from Hamlet to From Here to Eternity in the months of June and July, and were now on Marty, the winner for 1955. It was all still perfectly understandable to Steve. It was almost... nice. Familiar. If he ignored the blank stares of the people around him at some of the jokes and references that only he got, their impatience with some of the plot elements... it was almost like home.

"What's it like?" Clint asked now, breaking into Steve's thoughts and filching a piece of lettuce from Steve's sandwich. "Watching a movie about a war you fought in?"

Natasha slapped his hand lightly. "Get your own food. You mean Eternity?"

"Yeah. I kept wondering what it would be like to see stuff we lived through, seventy years from now," Clint mused, sneaking one of Bruce's weird veggies when he wasn't looking.

"Try a year from now," said Natasha. "That's what it feels like for you, doesn't it?"

"About that," said Steve, carefully keeping his voice neutral. "Sandwich?"

"Sure. Rye?"

"Yeah." He handed over the one he'd just made and started on another.

"Thanks," said Natasha, taking a bite. "It really shouldn't be any different from watching The Hurt Locker," she said to Clint. "You were in Iraq."

"Taking out shady underworld people for SHIELD isn't the same as defusing bombs for the Army, though. Cap here was actually fighting on the ground."

Steve shrugged. "I was never stationed in Hawaii though. It was fine."

"Huh. OK, then, I'd think you'd be upset about the whole officer's wife being unfaithful with a non-com," mused Clint. "Didn't upset your sensibilities, there, Cap?"

"People were having affairs before that movie," said Steve dryly. "I think the first one was recorded in 1936. I heard about it in art school." He tossed back a long pull of his Coke, wincing slightly as he set the glass down.

"Hey, what's up with you?" said Clint.

"What?"

"You get snarky when you're in pain," said Clint. "And when you're not watching yourself."

"Pulled a muscle, probably."

"That should heal itself in moments," said Bruce. "You probably dislocated something, then."
Steve shrugged again and started spreading mayo on his bread.

"And you didn't report it?" said Clint. "Hey, Captain Hypocrisy; you'd bench me if I did that."

"It's healing."

"So?"

"You have to report because we need to know if you're incapacitated," Steve pointed out. "I won't be. Unless we get called in in less than two hours, I'll be fine."

"You could use some painkillers," said Bruce.

Steve finished spreading the mustard. "They don't work on me. You know that."

"A high enough dosage should be enough to overwhelm your fast metabolism--"

"By the time the dose is high enough to affect me, it's also high enough to just about poison me," said Steve. "We tried during the War a few times. I just ended up throwing up. Simpler to just grit my teeth through any injuries." He closed the mustard and mayo jars and brought them to the fridge.

"Have you tried anything in this century?" asked Natasha.

He nodded and wiped the counter where he'd made his food. "Yeah, a few things. Acupuncture's OK sometimes. It's just unreliable, and kind of time-consuming."

"Yeah, and you know, acupuncture's great for when the problem is that you're in pain," said Clint, "but what if your problem is that you've got tiny needles stuck all over you?"

"What do you think was going on with Fury today?" Natasha asked Clint in a low voice as they brought their food into the living room.

"Mr. We're Not a Military Organization?" Clint shook his head, frowning. "News to me."

"Maybe Steve gets special Captain privilege?" Natasha gave Steve a smile.

"Maybe." Clint sat down on the oversize couch, putting a bowl of chips on the coffee table before them.

"Hill's not happy," said Natasha, settling down next to him and making room for Steve next to her.

"Hill's doing double duty," said Clint, and Steve winced. It was still sad to see just how much Coulson was missed. "She's also still answering to the damn Council every two days."

Natasha gave him a long look. "Think she's sold him out?"

Clint shrugged. "They're still breathing down his neck. Maybe."

"What do you think of this latest thing?"

"Nothing. Why?"

Natasha chewed her lip. "It just... makes me uneasy."

"Really? The Verminator? Mean Teen?"

"Not the Mean Teen. But the way SHIELD is handling it. Sorensen."
"Delhi, all over again," said Clint.

"More like Oordvarsk."

"Pettigrew."

"Fair enough."

Cryptic as always when it came to SHIELD, thought Steve as he bit into his sandwich. The Assassin Twins, that's what Tony called them, and mostly Steve didn't agree - they were just people, no stranger than anybody else on their team. Times like these, though...

"Fuckin' SHIELD," muttered Clint.

"Am I hearing dissent from our resident SHIELD representatives?" Bruce asked, coming into the living room and settling down on the loveseat. "Please tell me I'm hearing dissent."

Clint smiled. "Ooh, mild-mannered Doctor Banner has a snarky comment. How'd SHIELD piss in your tofu today?"

"Brucey's pissed because SHIELD's pressuring him to talk to their company shrinks," said Tony, settling himself down next to Bruce with a whiskey and immediately reaching for the remote to queue up the movie.

"They want you in for counseling?" asked Natasha.

"No, just helping their research into my 'condition.' And I'm not pissed off," he clarified. "I just think it's a little ironic that they'd think I'd trust anybody working for SHIELD with anything personal. Present company excepted."

"The shrinks aren't the same, though," said Clint. "They're pretty hard-core about patient confidentiality. They have to be."

"Really?" said Steve.

"Well, you'd know, wouldn't you, Cap? You've got therapy every week, looks like. You know you can tell them stuff. They don't report to anybody."

"They don't?"

Clint paused with a chip halfway to his mouth. "Are you kidding?"

"I just assumed they did."

"So..." Clint blinked. "You only tell them what you think Nick Fury'll hear and see?"

"I just assumed that's how it worked."

"So what do you talk to them about?"

"Adjustments to the twenty-first century. Issues within the team."

"Do you ever actually talk to them?" asked Natasha.

"About what?" asked Steve.
"You know, personal stuff," said Clint. "The stuff you're supposed to talk to therapists about. Hopes, fears, dreams, nightmares, all that shit."

"That's what we're here for," said Tony. "And if twenty-first century adjustments are what they're here for, you need to tell them about our Oscar Project."

"I already have," said Steve, keeping his voice neutral. Talk to SHIELD? Seriously? About the nightmares and insomnia and sudden anxiety and - what the hell?

"Yeah? What'd they think?" said Tony

"They approved."

"Yeah, see, why does Steve need SHIELD shrinks when he's got us?" said Tony, and turned on the movie, about a perfectly normal butcher from the Bronx. Steve silently thanked him for the distraction, and, once again, for the relative sanity of the world around him right now. Odd to have Tony Stark to thank for sanity, but this crazy, bewildering century he was in...

Not everything about it was bad, he kept reminding himself. In fact, much of it was wonderful and amazing. Medicine was much more powerful, and most of what Steve and his mother had struggled with was no longer a problem. Food was plentiful. So much that so many people he knew had struggled with had gotten so much better...

But there was so much to learn. Seventy years of newness to adapt to, in science, technology, culture, politics, society, language, people places and things. So much that he'd been taught and accepted as normal, to be thrown out. And he could do it, mostly, until it got completely overwhelming. Because just how much was he expected to change? Just how little of his old life - of his old self - was he supposed to drop, like it was old clothing? Like this generation dropped old clothing, the moment it got even the least bit frayed, instead of living with it, or even trying to repair it?

Sometimes it felt like his fingers were being pried, one by one, from the ledge of his old life. It made him want to cling on all the tighter.

He couldn't do that, of course. That wouldn't be adaptive or rational, as the SHIELD therapists said. And he agreed with them; he had to adapt. He didn't have a choice.

It wasn't that he wasn't grateful for his team, for SHIELD, for being alive and able to do something useful with his life. But there were days when the disorientation, the loneliness, the fear that kept him company during every single battle - if he thought about it, it almost felt like too much. The gnawing sorrow that he could never go home, the grief that never seemed to leave, the endless sleepless nights spent wrestling dark thoughts...

This, watching movies with the team, this felt normal. This was as close to normal as anything got.

4.

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Normal was good.

Not that abnormal was necessarily a bad thing. Steve's job, for example, was not normal, but that didn't make it bad. It was good to have a purpose, to know that he was good for something in this bizarre world. He might not be able to understand half of the gibberish Tony and Bruce talked about, Clint and Natasha baffled him when it came to internal politics at SHIELD, and he was almost as lost
as Thor when it came to understanding the loud, plastic world around him, but he was still good at military strategy and leadership. He was quick to see when the enemy was amassing, and good at listening to opinions. It was a heavy responsibility, but it was also gratifying to know that he could make a difference, that his team of highly skilled, strong-willed people trusted him, and listened to him.

Normally.

"Hawkeye, get off the roof."

"Can't, Cap," said Clint tightly.

"Why not?"

"I'll lose the line of sight--"

"If you don't, we'll lose you," said Steve. "There's a group of robots headed in your direction."

"No, I can--"

"Yes. Off, now."

"What? No--"

"Iron Man, get him," said Steve, and Tony blasted off.

"He's gonna be pissed at you," he said conversationally.

"He can yell at me after he's down from the roof," said Steve.

"All due respect," said Clint, "Cap, in a minute you're gonna need--"

"I said you're getting off the roof, Hawkeye," Steve snapped.

There was a momentary silence over the comm. "Um, Captain my Captain," said Tony. "That was very manly and forceful. I think Hawkeye and I may have wet ourselves in admiration." There was a slight pause. "I'm bringing him back, by the way. He's not kicking and screaming, but only because he doesn't want me to drop him."

"This is BULLSHIT!!" he could hear Hawkeye yelling. "I woulda been FINE, this is so FUCKING--"

"Iron Man, please make sure Hawkeye's comm isn't broadcasting to public waves," Steve said, and turned his attention to a fresh wave of robots cresting towards his position.

Oh, shit.

There were far too many of them. They were going to come over the overpass, and if he didn't jump into their midst they were going to start firing on the civilians cowering underneath, and this was what he was here for and it felt good to know exactly what to do and how to protect people, but at the same time--

They were going to be here any moment and, poorly made as they were, there were too many of them, and he'd sent Hawkeye off so there was no air cover, and Iron Man was probably still flying away from him, and Thor was occupied with the ones who were swarming over the east side, and he had no idea where the Widow was - trying to find the control tower, probably, using some kind of
weird power recorder, because Iron Man had determined that the controller had to be somewhere nearby - but the robots were coming closer and he had to give Widow just a few more minutes, and without another thought he flung himself into the fray. At least this, he could do. It was dangerous, and it would be painful as hell, but at least this, he could do.

5.

"The fuck was that, Captain?" Clint burst into the debrief room, totally pissed, and Natasha winced. She could've told Steve that Clint would not react well. "I can't protect the team if I'm taken off my perch the moment there's a fucking problem!"

"You were exposed--" Steve began.

"Of course I was exposed, you jackass!" Natasha put her hand on his arm, trying to sit him down, but he shrugged her off. "We're all exposed! I'm supposed to be your eyes! Why would you--"

"Because you're not here to take stupid risks, you're here to be useful!!" Steve snapped back. "Because I don't want to see you take a dive off a building - again - and know I could've stopped it! And that would've been the only way to get away from those robots--"

Tony whistled. "Ooh, over-protective Captain, I may swoon." Natasha snickered, then felt her smile slip as Steve brushed his hair back from his forehead with a weary gesture and she noticed his hand shaking. Tony was still speaking. "Hawkeye, you have to admit, he's got a bit of a Papa Bear thing going here. It's pretty awesome. And those things really were going to get you. Besides, what do you care? I put you down on another building, the view was fine!"

"That's not the point!" Clint slammed down his quiver and thumped down into the chair next to Natasha. "It wasn't fine. It was barely adequate." He glared at Steve. "And what about you, Captain? I saw those other robots coming; you stepped right into their path."

"I knew I could--"

"You're healable, sure. You're also our leader. What happens if you get taken out?"

"Iron Man takes over," said Steve.

"And that's a joy. He's usually busy punching and blasting things and flying around like a bat outta hell. You're our goddamn strategist, Captain. You don't get to take me away from my job and then blow off your own with stupid reckless--"

"I'm sorry, is Clint Barton really calling somebody else stupid and reckless?!" Hill asked incredulously, entering the room.

"He's the one who's supposed to be leading us! He flung himself into a god damn army of robots like they were a mosh pit!"

"A what?"

"Look it up later, Cap," said Tony. "Kids, we're not working and playing well with others today, are we?"

"Yes, boys, settle down," said Natasha firmly. "Hawkeye, I took out the robot controller, the Captain's fine, everything worked out." She looked at Hill, who'd sat down in the Director's chair. "Where's Fury?"
"Busy. I'm on this one. So, we found the teenage menace."

"Hey, don't underestimate teenagers," said Tony. "Even if this one has a weird taste in science projects."

"Is it actually a teenager?" asked Clint.

"As far as we can tell, yes," said Hill. "Doris Grey, fifteen years old, calls herself the Verminator."

"Can I talk to her?" asked Tony. "Her workmanship's shoddy, but I want to ask her about--"

"The World Security Council has already moved her."

Tony blinked. "What? To where? I--"

Natasha interrupted, alarmed. "Why would the WSC--"

"That's all I know," Hill said flatly.

"But we - the fight was over forty minutes ago," said Clint. "How did the Council - why would--"

"Because that's their prerogative. Now, Dr. Banner, I think you were still taking a look at that pink slime; we'll need your report on that. We're not sure why Grey didn't bring it out this time, but we'd like to make sure that if Grey has any friends, and they have the ability to make another wall of slime of any color, we'll be ready for it."

Clint and Natasha exchanged worried looks as Hill continued the meeting, distracted and hurried, and dismissed them just a few minutes later with a brusque, "Good work, thank you. I'll send your reports in to the Director."

"What the hell?" said Clint softly, as Hill left the room.

Natasha turned to look at him. "Clint?"

"The Avengers is Fury's baby," said Clint.

"I know."

"So..."

"You know he was planning on eventually cutting us loose, before," said Natasha. "I think he doesn't want WSC oversight on us."

"But isn't this a little extreme?" Clint frowned. "And where the hell is he? Coyne at the armory said he hasn't seen him in days."

Tony leaned forward. "Is Dad in trouble, kids?"

Natasha smoothed out her features automatically. "Possibly. It's none of our business. Let's go." She stood up and they left the briefing room, and she reflected that, though living so near to Tony was a lot more bearable than she would've ever suspected - pleasant, even - it certainly made keeping up with SHIELD news more difficult. And, to judge from Clint's closed-off expression, he was probably thinking the same thing.

"Look, Clint," said Steve as they exited the building, "for what it's worth, I'm sorry."
"What?" Clint turned to Steve, puzzled.

"The call I made today. I stand by it, but I'm sorry you felt it made your job more difficult."

Clint blinked, then nodded. "Yeah, whatever, it's fine. Next time, just... trust me a little more."

Steve nodded. "Trust me to make the call, though. I won't pull you off a perch unless I honestly feel you're in too much danger to do us any good."

Clint huffed out a breath. "Fine."

"Oh are we kissing and making up? I love this part!" said Tony.

Natasha gave Tony a slap upside the head and entered their Quinjet. "All right, let's go, we've got a movie to watch."

"What is it this time? Did we finish Around the World?"

"Yeah, tonight's Bridge on the River Kwai," said Clint. "'Cause the way to help Cap here to adjust to the twenty-first century is to make him re-watch World War II about a dozen times. JARVIS, how many more Oscar movies are set during World War II?"

"Six, sir. The Sound of Music, Patton, The Last Emperor, Schindler's List, The English Patient, and The King's Speech. The Last Emperor is not necessarily about World War II, though part of it does take place during the War."

"OK. Well, we've got a ways to go before we get to Patton. And The Sound of Music's not exactly battlefield-related."

"It's all right, I don't mind," said Steve, and Natasha noticed him wince as they strapped themselves in. "JARVIS, out of curiosity, what about the Great War?"

"There is only one movie on your list set partially during World War I. Lawrence of Arabia."

Steve whistled. "That's it? The War to End All Wars gets one Oscar-worthy movie, and the second one gets ten?"

"To be fair, Captain, there were two other Oscar-winning movies filmed before 1945 set during World War I: Wings, and All Quiet on the Western Front. And Cavalcade also took place partially during the War. But yes, your point is appreciated."

6.

Steve stretched his shoulder, covering a wince as the bone he'd pulled out of its socket during the skirmish with the robots let him know just how unhappy it was with him. He'd pushed it back into place as soon as the robots were gone and it was healing quickly, but it hurt. It hurt a lot. And there was nothing for it but to grit his teeth and concentrate on the movie. Even though this was yet another World War II film, Bridge on the River Kwai this time, and damn, the images of those soldiers in a Prisoner of War camp...

No. That was done. He wasn't going to think of Bucky, strapped to a table and babbling, suffering God only knew what, and Dum-Dum, and Dernier, and Morita and all the others.

Why couldn't all Oscar movies be about puppies and sunshine? Why couldn't they skip this thing, and go straight to Gigi, which was apparently a lighthearted musical comedy whose greatest
contribution to Western culture was a song called, "Thank Heaven For Little Girls"?

Briefly he considered asking to do just that. But that was silly. It was a good movie, everyone else was enjoying it...

Or maybe he could just say he was tired and go to bed. This wasn't a mission, after all, and nobody had ever said that any of them had to watch every movie all the way through. The rest of them - except for Bruce - certainly skipped out on enough of them. And even though this was supposedly for Steve's benefit, there was no law that said he had to stay all the way through every single movie. He could just go to bed.

Except the last thing he needed was to go to bed before he was really tired. That way lay nothing but flashbacks and nightmares and anxiety, and he'd had enough of all of that.

Briefly he considered talking to the therapist at his next appointment. He'd been open enough with the one they'd assigned to him right after he'd woken up, taking the man at his word when he'd explained the symptoms of PTSD and explained that SHIELD wasn't going to turf him for mental instability during his recovery. He'd worked with the man to get back on track, dutifully doing breathing exercises, working out, getting out to see the city, following all of his tips on how to deal with his troubles. All of that had been helpful.

But that was then, and this was now, and he was back on track. He couldn't very well go whining to them when he finally had a job to do and a purpose again. No matter how dark things got at night sometimes. And sometimes during the day.

Oh good. The Japanese soldiers were taking Alec Guinness out of the horrible little box they'd put him in, and Steve's stomach abruptly roiled.

"You know the Japanese officer this was based on apparently wasn't that bad a guy?" said Bruce.

"No?" said Tony, his eyes glued to the screen.

"No. The English soldiers under him testified on his behalf afterwards. Stopped him from being convicted of War Crimes."

"Did he ignore the Geneva Conventions?"

Bruce hesitated. "Well... the conditions were pretty bad, but the officer himself was a decent guy."

"So this was based on a true story?" asked Steve.

"Only very loosely. For one thing, the real English colonel pretty much sabotaged the building of the bridge."

"No 'showing them what the British soldier is capable of doing,' then?" asked Tony.

"Not exactly, no," said Bruce.

"I also don't think there was anyone who escaped the prison camp and then was forced to 'volunteer' to go back," said Natasha, coming into the room with a fresh bowl of chips.

Steve's stomach lurched again and Clint blinked. "What? When did that happen?"

"Oh - sorry, we're not there yet, are we?"

"Yeah, thanks for the spoiler, Nat," said Clint, and Steve debated pretending to take a sip of his Coke
to cover his nausea against the real possibility that he just might throw up if he did so. This was ridiculous. It was a movie. It shouldn't make him physically ill to think of a fictional character escaping from horror and warfare and then being asked to plunge himself right back into it. Just like Bucky, just like the other Commandos, just like--

Maybe he could take out his sketchbook, distract himself that way.

"It is disturbing that your people take true tales and twist them," Thor was saying.

"Yeah, disturbing." Tony took a long pull of his beer, his voice a little husky. Steve turned to look at him, avoiding the screen for a few moments.

"You know, I think maybe this is one movie not all of us need to watch to the very end," said Natasha a few minutes later.

"You thinking maybe Cap's not the only one who shouldn't be watching old war movies?" said Clint. He paused. "Especially with scenes of torture in them?"

Tony swallowed his beer. "What?"

"Afghanistan," said Clint.

Tony shook his head. "Hey, I'm fine. Got over it. Copious amounts of therapy, alcohol and all the very best meds."

"Well, I'm gonna go make pizza," said Bruce, standing up. "Don't stop the movie on my account."

"I'll help," said Tony, standing up. "Anyone else?"

Steve didn't realize he was going to stand up until he'd done it.

"Make mine with lots of pepperoni," said Natasha, and Steve shot her a grateful look and followed Tony and Bruce into the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

The movies watched/mentioned are

From Here to Eternity, 1953
On the Waterfront, 1954
Marty, 1955
Around the World in 80 Days, 1956
The Bridge on the River Kwai, 1957
"I swear, my ego can't take this much beating from little tiny women," groaned Tony as they left the SHIELD training gym a few weeks later. God, he was going to be feeling that last elbow-wrench for days. "Seriously, where does SHIELD get them?"

"The fairer sex can be fierce on a battlefield, my friend," Thor laughed. "Our sister Natasha is the equal of any man I know."

"Don't think I don't know that," said Tony, and Natasha smiled brightly. "Scares the crap out of me."

"She reminds me of the Lady Sif, from my realm. Though somewhat smaller."

"That's part of it, to be honest," said Tony. "I don't mind some large Amazon named Brunhilda squeezing the life out of me with her strong muscled thighs, but all these little girls SHIELD has, it's like they have a Waif-Fu Academy or something..."

Clint laughed, long and loud. "It takes some getting used to. Lemme tell you, though, you've not lived until you've had a pair of those strong thighs around you in a more, um, personal way."

"Ooh, we are gonna have to compare notes on that," said Tony. He glanced down at Natasha. "And I mean, the fairer sex and all that, I know many of you are capable of kicking our asses to hell and back, I just want to know how SHIELD gets so many of you in one place."

"They order us in bulk," she said.

"Mail-order ninja brides? Come to think of it, the instructor was what, Thai? Filipino? And then there's you, Russian, and the one who sent me flying through the backdrop was Argentinian..."

"How do you know that?" asked Steve.

"I believe the Man of Iron was attempting to acquire a bedmate during break-time," said Thor.

"I think maybe we're on to something, though," said Tony. "Tasha, are you saying our American girls aren't grown as tough as you outside varieties?"

"Not sure I said anything like that," said Natasha. "And don't let Maria Hill hear you saying anything like it either."

"Not if you like the location of your balls," said Clint.
"I'm curious, now. Where was your girl from, Steve? England?"

"What?"

"Love of your life, Agent Carter. She was from England, wasn't she? Pretty feisty, from what my dad said. Didn't she shoot you once?"

Steve's lips pressed together. "Yeah. England." He increased his stride until he was ahead of the others, who had slowed down, heading down the hallway for the change room. The silence in the corridor was sudden and baleful.

"What? What did I say?" said Tony, baffled, stopping and looking around at his team-mates.

"Tony," said Bruce quietly. "Try to remember, to you Cap's old life was seventy years ago. To him, it's not even one."

"Not sure that's quite long enough to just laugh off a 'love of your life' comment," Clint pointed out helpfully.

Tony's lips pressed together. Damn.

"An apology might be in order," said Natasha as she headed for the women's change room.

"Ya think?" Clint snorted. He gave Tony a sympathetic grimace. "Tony, it's not that you aren't a nice guy. It's more like you can't help being an asshole sometimes."

"Thanks, Legolas. Appreciate it."

"Hey, we assholes owe each other professional courtesy to point shit like this out."

They entered the men's change rooms, and Tony made his way to the locker where he'd left his clothes. He looked up as Steve came back from the shower, a towel around his hips, skin pink and steaming, rubbing another towel over his hair. Tony approached him cautiously, and Thor, Clint and Bruce headed off for the showers.

"Wow, king of the military two-minute shower," he said awkwardly, taking off his damp t-shirt. Steve glanced at him and took his clothes out of his own locker. The guy really had ridiculously well-defined pecs and abs, thought Tony irrelevantly.

"Look, I'm sorry, that was kinda..." He cleared his throat. "I'm, uh, ask Pepper how crappy I am at this, but I'm sorry I was kinda crass about your girl. We tend to forget that you - I mean, I tend to forget. It's... uh, yeah, sorry."

Steve's eyes were shuttered as he dropped his towel and pulled on his underwear and pants. "Don't worry about it." He pulled on his shirt.

"It just seems like all those people you knew... it was such a long time ago."

"It's all right," said Steve, sitting down to put on his shoes and socks. "It was all a long time ago. I know that. I got all their files when I woke up. They're almost all long gone."

"When did she die?" asked Tony quietly, sitting down next to him.

"Peggy? She didn't," said Steve evenly. He stood and started to put his workout clothes into a gym bag. "She's still alive. Ninety-seven years old, retired, in England."
Tony swallowed. "Really? Have you called her?"

"No." He zipped up the gym bag.

"Why not?"

"The past is the past, Tony. She lived a full life. I'm happy for her. There's not a lot I could say to her." He quickly ran a comb through his hair. "She's also got memory problems, apparently. I'd probably just confuse and upset her."

It was a good thing they all had their own apartments, Tony reflected a while later as they headed to the Quinjet and home. Good thing all-team attendance was not a constant thing in their lives. Yeah, most of them ate breakfast and dinner on the common floor, and whoever wanted to could hang out in there whenever they wanted and find someone to chat with, but for the most part they each had their own apartments and used them. Otherwise Tony'd probably be offending his team-mates on an hourly basis.

"So what's the movie tonight?" asked Bruce.

"*Ben-Hur*," said Natasha, lifting off from the SHIELD roof.

"God, Phil loved that movie," said Clint. "'Member, Tash? Every cheesy line, he'd say something snarky. It was great. 'Hate keeps a man alive. It gives him strength.'"

Natasha laughed. "'And so does spinach!'" She smiled sadly. "Can you imagine his face if we'd told him we were gonna watch *Ben-Hur* with Captain America?"

"Like a kid in a candy store. Though he'd probably be too shy to actually do all the catcalls."

"Why *Ben-Hur*?" asked Steve.

"Oh his aunt was really really Catholic," said Clint. "Every time she babysat him, they'd watch a religious movie. Usually *Greatest Story Ever Told* or *Ten Commandments* or *Ben-Hur*. He kinda loathed it, so he started to make fun of it out of self-preservation. He told me about it during a long stake-out once." He smiled softly. "Then one time we're stashed away in this little tiny hotel room in Tigrit, for like two weeks, and the only thing the hotel has on their English playlist is *A Chorus Line* and *Ben-Hur*. I thought I was gonna go crazy. Phil's running commentary was hysterical, though."

He laughed, then sighed. Natasha put her hand on his arm.

Tony looked away politely. It wasn't that he couldn't understand loss, and grief. He couldn't comprehend it on the scale that Steve had suffered it, maybe, but he'd been through his share. Why was it that he could relate to the Assassin Twins, still so shaken by Coulson's death, when he couldn't quite grasp Steve enough to not say stupid things to him?

He could understand Clint and Natasha a lot better, maybe. He'd known, for example, that it would take a while for Clint to get back up to speed after the number Loki had done on his brain, though he had no idea how bad it had been for him and suspected he didn't want to know. All he knew was the guy had gone on a road trip with Natasha for a few days, then been on 'Administrative Leave' for several weeks, then had shown up the next time the Avengers were called, looking cocky and talking constantly and only going quiet and pensive when Coulson's absence was felt.

Natasha... well, who knew what she felt, what kind of dark things were in her past and present. Tony still felt a little uneasy with her sometimes, if 'uneasy' could be seen as a euphemism for 'liable to occasionally be scared shitless.' But somehow he got along with her.
Steve, though, he couldn't grasp. Steve had come back from his own road trip and gone back to SHIELD, then accepted Tony's offer of a place at Avengers Tower, but Tony was very clear that it was due to his mistrust of SHIELD, not any deep-seated need to be around Tony.

They'd gotten along OK, mostly. Steve was an OK guy, mostly. If he was a little quiet, if he sometimes seemed a little withdrawn, that was fine; nobody expected him to be a party animal, and frankly, other than Thor and Tony and on occasion Clint when he'd been drinking, none of them were the life of any party. What drew them together was a passion for fighting the bad guys, not a passion for hanging around and having fun together.

Thank God Bruce was easy to deal with. A lab of his own, a little reinforcing on the floor meant to be his during the rebuilding, and it was all working out. And Thor was a no-brainer; Thor was all good humor and loudness and occasional culture-related hilarity. Not that he was around very much, what with Asgard and his pet scientist.

It was a good group. Tony got along with all of them. If he could just stop being an insensitive ass.

He looked around the movie room as he waited for the endless opening credits to stream by, and for his team to settle in for the movie. The room was comfortable, still a little generic, but already beginning to make itself homey with Natasha's crossed knives on the wall, Clint's arrows all over the damn place, and his own various tools. Thor had recently nailed to the wall what looked like half a Viking chest-piece; Tony was reminded every time of a line from a movie Pepper'd dragged him to, How to Train Your Dragon, where the main character inherited a helmet made from half of his mother's breast-plating, and called it his Breast-hat.

"All right, Ben-Hur, let's do this," said Clint, popping a cherry tomato into his mouth from the tray of veggies Bruce had put on the table. The movie began in earnest. "Oh and Steve, fair warning despite Coulson's devout aunt: heavy homoeroticism alert. We'll wait while you look up that word."

"I may have come across it once or twice," said Steve. "Art school, remember?"

"Stop it, you're shocking my delicate sensibilities," said Tony.

"All right, does nobody remember that I was in the army?" Steve shook his head in amusement. "I grew up poor in the Depression, went to art school, toured with USO girls, and was in the army. Did I mention that last part already?"

Tony laughed. "It's just that--"

"It's just that you're convinced that because I'm not from your decadent time, I'm completely naive and ignorant."

"You just give off this... pure vibe."

"You know," said Clint. "All morally upright and shit."

"I quit swooning over all the bare ankles around me just last month," said Steve. "And Google is my friend too."

"Speaking of which," Tony said, "you do know your Google searches are visible to other people, right?"

"Yeah. They told me so at SHIELD."

"Is there personal interest in the whole gay issue?"
Steve frowned. "Why?"

"Because the other day you went from Lady Gaga to cyber-bullying to Don't Ask, Don't Tell, to the Defense of Marriage Act, through a very interesting viewing of Zaphod Beeblebrox bar in Ottawa, Ontario, and then to Ex-Gay sites..."

"Wow, Tony, stalk much?" muttered Clint.

"And?" said Steve.

Tony grinned. "What did you think of it all?"

"It was interesting."

"Do you approve?"

Steve nodded, taking a sip of his beer. "Of some of it."

"Which parts?"

"I've never liked bullies. And I never believed you should be kicked out of the army for the mere fact that you were homosexual."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "But?"

"But I don't think gays should serve in the military if they're going to be open about their preferences."

Oh, nice. Bruce made a small noise in his throat and Natasha narrowed her eyes. "You do realize you're in the distinct minority on that, right?" asked Tony, amused. Hello, Captain Not-So-Perfect.

Steve shrugged. "It's bad for morale. A unit has to be cohesive, everybody has to trust each other; that can't happen if guys are wondering if one of their fellow soldiers is gonna make a pass at them."

"There's plenty of generals who disagree with you," Clint pointed out.

"Good for them."

"Would you refuse to serve with someone who was gay?" Tony asked. Natasha shot him a quick look.

"No."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't bother me. But I wouldn't speak for the other members of my unit."

"I can speak for the other members of this unit," said Clint. "I can guarantee you we don't give a shit."

"Are you sure about that?"

"I don't care," said Natasha.

"Neither do I," said Bruce.

"Nor I," said Thor. "Jane has spoken to me on this matter, and I confess I do not quite understand all
of the details, but I can only rejoice in the ending of a law that requires warriors to lie in order to remain warriors."

Tony leaned forward. "Besides, following that logic, why stop at soldiers? Do you think it's OK for gay couples to be told they can't live together, because that might make people uncomfortable too?"

Steve scowled at him. "That's just narrow-minded prejudice - and it was in my time too."

Bruce frowned. "Hang on... you're saying landlords can deal with their prejudices, but soldiers can't?"

"Have you ever been in the army?"

"No."

"I've seen what finding out one of your comrades is gay can do to a unit," said Steve grimly. "It's not pretty."

Tony sneered at him. "What did you do, get some guy turfed because he played kissy-face with another boy and it made the real men pop a boner?"

Steve's eyes blazed and he set his beer down with a thump. "I tried to help that soldier," he said, his voice steely. "I stopped him from being beaten to a pulp by some of the other men. Some of them wanted to court-martial him, even though the army wasn't doing that any more during the war, just sending people home. You have no idea how much it cost me to get the Commandos back on track, between the ones who didn't care, the ones who thought he should be executed, the ones who--" he stopped himself. "And all because one guy couldn't keep it in his pants," he said bitterly.

"What happened to him?" asked Bruce.

"Colonel Phillips and I reminded the brass that he'd been a prisoner of war for months and then volunteered to go back to the front. Told them he was suffering from shell shock. They sent him home. Blue discharge, not Dishonorable." He sat back. "Not that it would've made that much difference. Everyone knew what a blue ticket meant."

"And then what happened to him when he got back home?"

"I don't know. It was three months before my plane went down."

"Maybe you should look him up," said Tony. "Maybe he found true love and lived happily ever after with some other defrocked soldier. Maybe even got married."

"Maybe. You think it was worth what he put the rest of us through?"

Clint tilted his head to the side. "All right, then, what about gay marriage? You gonna tell us that's a sacred thing between a man and a woman?"

"It is."

"Why am I not surprised," said Tony. "So what are people supposed to do if they just don't go that way?"

"They don't need to do anything," said Steve. "They're still free to marry someone of the opposite sex."

"Would you, if you were?"
"Yes."

"Easy for you to say."

"Millions of people have done it, throughout human history. It's not a denial of human rights to reserve marriage as an institution--"

"It's absolutely a denial of human rights," Tony shot back. "And it's nothing but prejudice. It's easy for you to sit in judgment and--"

"Tony," Steve broke in evenly. "I fought against a power that believed in killing people because of their faith and race - and because of their preferences. That's violation of human rights, that's prejudice and cruelty and evil. Saying that you're not free to marry whoever you want, or that you're not allowed to go into any job you want? Don't try to equate the two."

"Just because something isn't as bad as the Holocaust, doesn't make it right," said Clint.

"Look, when I was told I couldn't serve in the armed forces, I was frustrated and tried to get around it," said Steve. "But I didn't feel that they were violating my rights."

"Maybe you'd feel differently if it was you being discriminated against," said Bruce. "If it was you being called immoral for something that isn't your fault."

"It's not discrimination. And freedom of speech means you have a right to call behavior immoral if you believe it to be. It's not personal--"

"Uh, yeah, actually, big guy, it is," said Tony, suddenly pissed off.

"Why?"

Tony lifted his chin. "I'm queer, Steve. Immorality's my middle name."

"No you're not," said Steve scornfully. "Unless you're a hell of an actor."

Natasha chuckled and Tony smirked at her. "Ooh, I made Captain America cuss."

"What about all the women you've been with? What about Pepper?"

"Bisexual."

Steve shook his head. "You're saying you can't make up your mind?"

"I don't have to. Bi. Means I like both. Double my pleasure, double my fun."

"Then why have I never seen a single picture of you with a man? You're all over the internet--"

"Yeah, well, Dad was a bit of a 'phobe, and Obie begged me to keep that one thing private. And I did, mostly. But I came out about a million years ago, and anybody who knows anything about me knows I've had some close encounters of the dick kind in the past. And loved it."

"What?" Steve was frowning now.

"Seriously," said Tony, grimly amused at Steve's expression. "Natalie Rushman here knew."

Natasha shrugged. "I knew that you were into girls. A lot. I thought the other was just youthful experimentation."
"Yeah, well. That's what it was played as in the magazines. It wasn't. See above re. 'phobe-Dad, and Obie trying desperately to keep me from tanking our profits with my 'antics'. That's the only reason I let them play it off as yet another Young Tony Makes Poor Choices story."

Steve's expression was unreadable. "And you're saying it wasn't?"

"No, it really wasn't. I'm not gonna repaint my suit in rainbow colors, but just keep in mind that when you say stuff that's disrespectful to queers, you're saying it to me."

Steve swallowed. "Noted." He paused. "Have I said anything disrespectful?"

Tony cocked his head to the side.

"I've said that I don't think marriage is for gays. Is it for you?"

Tony snorted. "I'm not the marrying type."

"And I don't think gays should openly serve in the military. Would you want to?"

Tony's face probably said it all.

"OK, guys, lets just watch the movie, OK?" said Clint into the silence. "Think we've missed about twenty minutes of homoeroticism, here."

"And I do not understand why that man is riding a small grey mammal," said Thor, squinting at the screen.

"Dude, I can't believe you just came out to Captain America," murmured Clint a little while later.

"Don't tell me you don't believe me either."

Clint snickered. "Pfft. I already knew."

"Never pegged you for a tabloid-reading guy," Tony commented.

"Nope, I never would've known, just SHIELD was thinking of sending me in to be your 'Cliff Baker from Legal' PA for about thirty seconds before they sent Natasha in instead."

Tony's eyebrows went up. "You do undercover?"

"Yeah. Mostly security guards, but sometimes other stuff. Bartenders, mechanics, counselors, ski instructors. Make-up artist once."

Tony tried to imagine what that would've been like. Cliff from Legal, fresh-faced and eager to please and taking notes on him for SHIELD the whole time. "So why'd they send her and not you?"

"She's better eye-candy, you seemed way more into women, she could bond with Pepper, and I can't file worth shit. Borderline illiterate, here."

Tony snorted. "Don't give me that." Clint played up his high school drop-out background, but it didn't take very long around him to realize that he was far brighter than he projected.

"Well I sure as hell don't speak Latin like she does. And trust me, my lingerie photoshoot didn't turn out anywhere near as fetching as Nat's."

Tony inhaled his whiskey and started coughing.
"I just don't see why we can't--"

"You can't because you're high profile now, Agent Romanov!" Natasha could see Fury's eye getting twitchy, even over the relatively small screen on the Tower deck's communication console, his patience obviously tried. "You can't just waltz in--"

"With all due respect, sir, leaving us on permanent standby in case of alien attack is a stupid waste of our skills, and you know it."

Fury sighed. "Why is it that any time somebody says with all due respect, they follow it up with something that shows no respect at all?"

"We respect you, sir." Natasha took a deep breath. "But this assignment wasn't supposed to be--"

"We're living in a damn frat house, here," Clint broke in. "It's fun, but we could be doing good for SHIELD."

"Stark and Banner have their science," said Natasha. "And Rogers has his re-education; we don't have anything to do but twiddle our thumbs--"

"We could train recruits," said Clint. "Not just do occasional drop-ins like today, but actually train them. We know there's a new team coming in."

Fury paused, and Natasha could see him seriously considering it. They were both good at it, surprisingly, and it would be a chance to--

He shook his head. "No. Until you get further notice, maintain your current activities."

He flicked the switch and Natasha and Clint were left staring at each other in dismay.

"This is bullshit," said Clint.

Natasha sighed and turned to gaze out over the city, its bright lights snaking off to the horizon, frustration seething through her. Grateful as she usually was to SHIELD and the opportunity they had given her, there were days...

"What happened?" asked Bruce, coming out onto the deck with a drink in his hand. "I thought you had a training session?"

"We did," Clint grimaced. "Obstacle course. Shepherding baby agents through mud. Two hours. And that's it for the next two weeks."

"You know what?" said Tony. "I think you need to go out."

"We are out," Natasha said, waving a hand at the deck.

"Out of this house. Someplace fun."

"We're fine."
"I wanna get out of the house," said Clint. "Come on, Mom, please?"

"Clint..."

Clint slapped the counter. "It was a shitty training session, and I feel grit in places nobody should feel grit, and I wanna go out." He grinned at Steve. "Let's call it Steve-cultural education. Make us feel like we're doing something useful."

3.

So here they were, at a club, and it wasn't as bad as some Tony could've brought them to. The music was loud and awful, it seemed most of the people were drunk or on their way, but there was room to walk between tables, tables where you could talk and actually hear yourself. The clientele tended towards young, but not as young as at most clubs. He and Bruce didn't look totally out of place.

Funny thing, he and Bruce were the elders here - if you didn't count Thor - and Natasha and Clint the (relative) babies, but Steve had this wise grandpa/lost little boy thing going that was disconcerting, to say the least. And he'd stayed at their table with Bruce, nursing a drink, while Tony, Natasha and Clint all took their turns on the dance floor.

And now Tony was more than a little lit. And more than a little horny, from the ambiance and from the fact that, damn, it had been a while since Pepper had packed up and given him the dreaded Let's Just Be Friends speech, and for some reason it was beginning to piss him off that Steve was still sitting there, chatting with Bruce, looking subdued, All-American good looks totally wasted, as he seemed to have no intention of hooking up with anyone. Of course not. The guy had youth, muscles, grace, stunning attractiveness to anyone who didn't know he had a stick up his ass roughly the size of Staten Island... and he was probably gonna warm that seat till they went home.

"What's up, Capsicle? Why so blue?"

"I'm not blue. I'm bored. And a little curious." He glanced around.

"About what?"

Bruce smiled. "Tony, is there a reason you brought us to this particular club?"

"Oh - oh, I'm sorry, Steve, are you feeling a little uncomfortable with some of the couples around here?"

Clint and Natasha rolled their eyes.

"Part of cultural re-integration again?" said Steve.

"Nah, just showing you my homies."

Steve blew out his breath. "Tony, enough."

"You still don't believe me, do you?"

Steve's expression said it all. "I'll go as far as to believe that you experimented. But that you're still actively bisexual? No."

"You don't think I can get it up for a guy?"
Steve gave him a pained look. "Frankly I'd rather not think about who you can get it up for. But you've proven you like women."


"And you disapprove, don't you?" asked Tony.

"It's not my business to approve or disapprove of your sex life," Steve protested.

"But you don't approve."

"Sex is supposed to be private. It's personal."

God, it was like talking to a nun. A big beefy blond nun with wide shoulders. "It's fun, Cap. Maybe what you need is to get laid."

"Maybe you do," Natasha told Tony. "There's no lack of willing partners here."

"Maybe I do," said Tony.

Clint looked over the people dancing. "Maybe I do too. It's been a while." He tossed back a shot. "First have to get the sand out of my ass."

"Thanks, we don't need to know about your ass," said Natasha. "I doubt too many people here would care, though."

"Definitely not the chick over by the bar," said Clint.

"Girl by the bar?" asked Tony.

"Blowie-girl."

Bruce choked on his beer and started to cough, excusing himself to go to the washroom.

Tony shook his head. "Wow. Now that's not supposed to happen at this club," he said. "Nancy'll be pissed." He glanced around to see if the owner was around.

"You gonna tell her?"

"What's not supposed to happen?" asked Steve.

"That girl just gave a guy a blow job under the bar," smirked Clint, gesturing towards a short brunette. "Then came out from under, and ordered a drink."

Steve blanched. "And that's normal?"

"Yeah, that's not really supposed to happen here," said Tony. He glanced around. "But the other stuff you're all uptight about - maybe those two girls with their tongues down each other's throats? That's perfectly kosher."

"I never said it wasn't."

"You're just about radiating disapproval."

"It's not for me. I'm not judging you or anybody else here." He paused. "But the way you're ogling those girls pretty much proves you're just pulling my leg with the bisexual thing."
"You think I can't ogle guys too?"

"I don't think you'd actually want to, or you wouldn't be looking like that at girls."

"Oh let me disabuse you of that quaint notion right now," said Tony, laughing. He glanced over at the dance floor. "See that girl with the long black hair? You wanna know what I wanna do to her? Pretty much what most guys would want to do. You know, feel her hair... kiss her... pull her close..." Steve swallowed, glancing at Clint, who was now looking at Tony with eyebrows raised. Natasha rolled her eyes and left for the bar, and Tony dropped his voice so that only the three of them could hear. "I wanna touch her tits and make her moan... feel all that smooth skin, and I want her to feel how hard I am for her. I wanna slip my hand under her skirt and touch her..." and Steve was probably gonna spontaneously combust if Tony went on. How he'd want to feel her wet and hot, taste her, smell her, and nearly come just from her scent alone, get inside her...

Steve was staring at him. Tony grinned. OK, maybe he'd had a little too much to drink. He hadn't done dirty talk to shock someone in a while - not that this would even qualify as risque to most people he knew, but considering the audience...

"But, the thing is, big guy, I wanna do all the same things to the red-headed beefcake dancing with her. I wanna feel his chest and his abs, see if they're tight and hard, I wanna run my hands down his back, and I want his hands on me too. I wanna know what his mouth tastes like. I wanna put my hand on his ass and squeeze. I wanna make him hard. I want him to touch me, make me hard too, and then I wanna take him home, and do all sorts of things to him that would probably leave you blushing even harder than you are now." Like having him push into Tony, taking Tony into his mouth, like finding out what he tasted like when he came...

"And you, big boy," he said, leaning back and smirking at Steve, "are looking a hell of a lot more interested than you were during my first soliloquy. Is this striking too close to home? You do know current conventional wisdom says a lot of homophobia's just repressed homosexuality, right?"

Steve's lips pressed together, his face flushed darkly.

"Jesus, Tony," Clint snorted. "You know I'm straighter than any of my arrows and that made me hard too. Hell, I'd do him right now." He turned and looked for the man Tony had been talking about. "Wait, which one is he? I'd hate to go try and fondle the wrong guy."

"Believe me now?" Tony asked Steve.

Steve was staring at him.

"Hey, don't worry, your virtue's safe with me. I won't be coming on to you. I don't do unreciprocated."

"Damn it," said Natasha, coming to plop down at the table with far less grace than she usually displayed.

"What? What's wrong?" said Clint.

"Fury called. He'd like us to go home."

"What? Why?"

"Because apparently a whole bunch of reporters are headed in this direction." She paused, glanced over Tony's shoulder. "And there they are."
He turned. Sure enough, there was a sizeable group at the entrance, looking like they were arguing with the bouncers to get in. "Wait, how did they know we were--"

"You're Tony Stark."

"How did Fury know--"

"He's Fury."

"What is it?" asked Steve.

"Papparazzi," said Tony. "I know you know what they are, Capsicle."

"Here? In a gay bar?" Steve rubbed the space between his eyes wearily. "Fantastic."

"Relax, it's not a gay bar, it's a... flexible bar. I'll handle it."

"You're drunk."

Tony laughed and patted his arm. "Steve, Steve, Steve, I have been taking on the press while drunk and stoned off my ass since I was thirteen years old."

"Maybe I should handle this," said Steve worriedly, as Bruce came back to their table and Natasha filled him in.

Tony chuckled. "Please. You? These two are experienced spies and they couldn't take these sharks."

"I could!" Clint glanced over at the cameras, and smiled at them politely.

"You look constipated."

"I feel constipated," he said. "Let me tell you about the grit in my ass-crack again."

"Please don't," said Bruce.

"Well Natasha's good at stuff like this," said Clint. "Playacting."

"I'm good at it too," said Steve. "I just hate it."

"Cap, I don't think the slavering paparazzi who think they have an exclusive of Captain America at a bendy pick-up joint are the same as the USO cameras for--"

Steve turned and looked over at the cameras, and flashed them an easy smile. Lights went off and Tony had to admit, he was impressed.

"You little ham, you." He paused. "So, can you play slightly confused, plucky, and stalwart?"

"I just might be able to manage that."

Tony stood up, making his way to the front of the bar.

"Yeah, hey, Mandy?" he smirked at one of the reporters. "Yeah, taking Captain America out, think maybe the music's not quite to his liking - no Charleston playing, is there?"

Steve gave a reporter a small smile. "I think he's confusing it with the Lindy Hop."

"Captain, what did you think of New York's night life?"
"Still adjusting to it. I'm sure it's very nice, but not really my style."

"Were you big on these places before?" asked another man.

"Too busy with the war," he said easily. "And too shy," he added, and Tony could see the reporters lapping that up.

"Captain America, did you see any same-sex couples in there?" yelled one from the back. "Were you shocked and disgusted?"

"No ma'am, not disgusted, just a little surprised," said Steve.

"Will you be coming back here?"

"Probably not, but I think my team-mates had a good time. I'm more of a movies kind of guy." He was moving quickly, and then they were past the reporters and at the private parking area.

"You go on, I'll walk," said Steve.

"You sure? What if you run into the press again?" asked Bruce.

"They're at the front entrance only," said Natasha, and how she knew, Tony didn't really want to know.

"Want any company?" asked Bruce.

"No, I'm fine," Steve said, and headed off.

Tony watched him go.

"You know what Steve's problem is," said Bruce, his voice pitched for Tony's ears only, as Clint and Natasha moved to the limo.

"What's that?"

"His problem is, he's both in his nineties and in his twenties."

"Which means?"

"Which means he's got an old man's morality, and a young man's certainty that he's right."

"Plus he's got the Captain thing going," said Tony. "I think he'll have the same certainty when he's actually in his nineties."

"Tony. Last year at this time, Steve lived in a world where a lot of people felt gays should be executed, or at least subject to electroshock therapy to cure them - and that was us, the good guys, never mind what the Nazis believed and did. Give him some credit for adapting as much as he has."

"But he thinks that--"

"You really don't know everything he thinks right now. Who knows? He may have some surprises for you." Bruce paused. "His attitude isn't going to be a problem, is it?"

Tony turned. "Are you kidding? Captain Homophobia can have whatever opinions he wants. Doesn't make any difference to me."
"Yeah, it does," said Bruce quietly, and headed into the limo.

Yeah, it does, thought Tony to himself. But what the hell. He wasn't really tempted to pick up some guy and rub it in Mr. Moral Uprightness's face tomorrow morning. Knowing Steve, he'd just politely offer the guy the newspaper and coffee, and then excuse himself to go work out. Which would not help Tony's mood at all.

Ah, to hell with him, then.

Chapter End Notes

The movies watched/mentioned are

Gigi, 1958
Ben-Hur, 1959

Also: sorry y'all, but for this story Clint really is straight. I can't make him the least bit bendy without immediately pairing him with Phil and turning this into a Phil Died and Clint Was Sad story. It's physically impossible for me.
"What possessed you to go to that particular club?" asked Fury, rubbing a spot between his eyes and staring at a Starkpad with the morning's news stories on it.

"It... seemed like a good idea at the time?" said Clint, catching a glimpse of Steve's face on the screen.

"Try again."

"Stark, sir," said Natasha.

Fury sighed. "Of course."

"Is it bad?" asked Natasha.

"It's not good," said Fury. "Some of the papers had fun with Captain America appearing at a pick-up joint."

"It wasn't a pick-up joint," Clint protested. "It was actually kinda classy, considering it was Stark's choice. Well, except for the blow job under the bar."

"Blow job under the--"

"It wasn't any of us, sir," said Natasha, and Fury relaxed slightly. "Sir, really, how important--"

"Luckily it's an election year so it wasn't anywhere near front page news," Fury said. "And luckily the Council's not used to caring much about the media." He paused. "The Council's always been more about results than anything else," he said quietly, staring down at his Starkpad.

"So what's changed?" asked Natasha.

Fury looked up. "What do you mean?"

"What's the difficulty now?"

"What makes you think there's difficulty?"

"You, sir," said Clint bluntly.

Fury gazed at them thoughtfully. "Things are more public. More dangerous. The stakes are higher."
"Sir..."

Fury ran a finger over the pad, making Cap's face disappear. "Well, he did all right last night. A few soundbites, nothing major. I was worried he'd stop to have a long chat with the reporters."

"It's a good thing he didn't," muttered Clint.

"Why?"

"He's got his own opinions, sir," said Natasha. "Not all of them will make him too popular."

"Captain America doesn't need to have opinions in public. He needs to protect us from the bad guys." Fury paused. "Out of curiosity, what kind of ideas?"

"He's not too thrilled with some of our more modern morals."

"No kidding. Neither am I."

"Yeah, but you don't care who fucks who, sir," said Clint glumly.

"Homophobic, then?" said Fury. "Bad?"

"Not bad," said Clint. "Not advocating the death penalty for perverted sodomites or anything. But not exactly puking up rainbow flags, either."

"PR disaster-level?"

"No, not really," said Natasha. "He believes marriage should be for straights only and he doesn't agree with the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

"So not that far off about half of the voting public of America, then," said Fury. "Is he obnoxious about it?"

"No."

"And he knows Stark plays both teams," said Clint. "Doesn't seem too freaked out."

"Do I want to know how he knows about Stark?" asked Fury, rubbing that spot between his eyebrows again. "Stark hasn't tried to grab his ass, has he?"

"Weirdly enough, no," said Clint. "And Cap's not gonna go off on a rant in public or anything, he's just not real comfortable with the modern world."

"Well, can't say I blame him. It's a different world than he went to sleep in." Fury sighed. "Keep him away from the press. Half of them will jump all over him for being politically incorrect, and the other half will have kittens because he's a public figure standing up for morality. And the last thing I need is the Council asking me what the fuck Captain America is doing on Fox News."

2.

**September 4**

It wasn't until Steve and Tony were clearing up the detritus from the next movie that Steve finally spoke up.
"If I've insulted you in the last few days without meaning to, I'm sorry," Steve said honestly. "It wasn't my intent."

Tony looked up from his stack of glasses, puzzled. Then he felt the penny drop. "You mean about me being bi." Steve nodded. "So you finally do believe me?"

"Yes."

"And you hate the sin, but love - or at least partially tolerate - the sinner? Gee, thanks."

Steve shook his head. "That's not what I mean."

"No, you're pretty clear on what you mean," said Tony, following Steve into the kitchen, both of them loaded down with dishes and leftovers.

"Why don't you let me in on it, then."

"You think a lot of what goes on around you is immoral."

"Yes, I do."

"And not just same-sex stuff; materialist culture. People hooking up in bars." Tony set down his dishes. "The movie we just watched."

"The whole idea of having an apartment just to make it easy for people to have affairs; you don't think that's immoral?"

"It's not illegal."

"It's lying. Breaking vows. Hurting families, spouses. You don't have a problem with that?"

Tony shook his head as he dumped leftovers into the trash, ignoring Steve's pained look at the waste. No way was he storing a half-eaten turkey sandwich. "It's between consenting adults."

"The one who's cheated on doesn't consent."

"I'm not gonna debate it." Tony picked up a half-empty beer bottle and drained it. "I happen to agree with you on that one."

"Really?"

Tony hesitated. "I've been on both sides. The cheater and the cheatee. Well - all three sides, technically, because I've also slept with married women, though in my defense I didn't know it at the time. Don't look at me like that, the cheating was in my... misspent youth, and it's actually one of the things I regret."

"You regret things?"

"More than you'd think," said Tony ruefully. "I've got entire years and product lines and wardrobe colour schemes I wish had never happened." He regarded another half-empty, decided against draining that one too and poured it down the sink instead. "That said, it doesn't make the movie less funny. It was supposed to be a comedy, not a behavioural how-to."

Steve smiled. "Fair enough."

They finished bringing in the cutlery and popcorn bowls, and Tony reflected that once upon a time
he would've simply made the robots do it. There was something comforting about doing this with another person, though.

"It's funny," mused Tony. "You didn't even blink at the thought of a black President, girls in the military, interracial marriage, all sorts of things. What makes gays different?"

"I accept them. I just don't think it's necessary to shove acceptance at everybody."

"Like in Boy Scouts? You really think they're going to diddle little boys?"

Steve shook his head. "No more than male school teachers are going to molest little girls. Maybe even less. That's not my objection at all." He opened the dishwasher and started to load it. "I just don't think that the Scouts should be forced to accept homosexuals when they're trying to teach a certain set of values."

"What about atheists?" Tony asked, reflecting that it was funny how Steve, who'd never seen a dishwasher before last year, was now far more adept at loading it than Tony was.

"What about atheists?"

"Should they be let into the Boy Scouts?"

"I don't know," Steve said after a moment, fitting a bowl into the bottom tray of the dishwasher. "I can see why the Boy Scouts don't think so. I'm not sure I agree, but I don't think the Scouts should be forced to accept them. I'm not saying I have anything against atheism. Or homosexuality. I just don't think either has to be forced in everywhere."

"Why not?"

"Because parents have a right to try to teach their children their own idea of what's right and wrong."

"And those kids who are being taught those ideas, if they grow up hating who they are because of that... no harm, no foul?"

"Tony..." Steve looked up from the dishes.

"No, I'm speaking from experience here. Thank God, not a lot of it, since by the time I realized I liked boys too I was already stunningly familiar with being a disappointment to my dad, so really, one more thing was like water off a duck's back for me. But other kids aren't as... lucky."

Steve looked pained, as he had been the few times Howard had been brought up. And uncertain.

"And what about the kids who are fed other bullshit by their parents?" Tony continue. "The abstinence-only, wait until marriage crap?"

"Why is that crap?"

"You do know what abstinence-only is, right? Teaching kids the way to prevent pregnancy and disease is by praying to keep the impure thoughts away? Check out some stats on how that works out for them. Also, spoiler alert: it doesn't."

"I know that. I still don't think it's stupid. Don't put the forks in with the spoons."

Tony scowled. "Condoms are the devil's rubber gloves? Really?"

"No, not that part. But I don't think it's stupid to tell kids to wait until marriage."
"Who the hell actually believes that?"

"I do."

Tony rolled his eyes. "God, your ideas... they're so rigid. So inflexible. It's like you don't accept people can be human."

"It's not rigid and inflexible to know what's right, and to want to live up to that knowledge."

"And you always do. You're perfect."

"I never said that." He moved a glass from where Tony had put it to the other side of the top tray.

"It's how you act."

Steve frowned. "No it's not. I'm as human as anybody else. I make mistakes too. I just think we all need to hold ourselves to a higher standard and not wallow in our mistakes."

"Oh so now I wallow?" Tony smirked and leaned back against the counter, watching Steve finish loading; no point in trying to help, when Steve was just going to redo all his efforts anyway.

Steve sighed. "Why is this about you?"

"You're telling me you think being queer is immoral, and people should be able to shield their children from it. That having sex before marriage is immoral. Well guess what; as someone who's had more than their fair share of horribly illicit premarital sex and would be celibate for life if I waited for marriage, I can't help feeling a little judged, here. Can't help feeling like you've got this... disapproving vibe. And it pisses me off."

Steve sighed again, and he looked tired. "I'm not a saint. You should know that by now."

"Oh, really. What have you ever done that wasn't saint-like? Other than be kind of anal about housework?"

"Plenty." He closed the dishwasher and set it.

"All right, I showed you mine, why don't you show me yours." Tony paused. "Let's start with this. You've never been married. By your standards, you should be a virgin. Are you?"

Steve picked up a dishcloth and started to wipe down the counter. "That's not..."

"Ooh, has the good Captain sullied himself with the pleasures of the flesh before that pleasure was sanctified by the Church?"

"You can believe in waiting until marriage without having been able to do it yourself."

Tony was caught between gleeful amusement and a sort of... pause. "OK. Have you?"

"Have I what?"

"Done the Deed? And was it a one-time, heartily regretted thing that you went to Confession about for the next ten years, or was it a regular occurrence?"

There was a long silence as Steve scrubbed the counter.

"Come on, Spangles, we're sharing here."
Steve stopped scrubbing. "Five times, all right?"

"What?"

"Five times. I've had sex five times."

Tony blinked, and abruptly wished he'd made some sort of bet with somebody about Steve's V-status. Clint, probably. Maybe Bruce. "Captain. You're not married."

"No."

"Isn't that sort of hypocritical?" And he would've thought he'd be jumping all over Steve's evidence of human fallibility with cheerful abandon, but somehow it just didn't feel appropriate.

"Yes." Steve pressed his lips together.

"How old were you?"

Steve paused for a long moment. "I was... I was sick, a lot, when I was a kid," he said quietly, carefully hanging the dishcloth to dry. "I was usually in bed trying not to die of asthma, or boredom. And I was surrounded by nuns a lot of the time. Even when I was healthy, it's not like there was a long line of girls wanting to... tempt me."

"What happened?"

"The Serum."

"It cured you, and you got a normal, healthy young man's libido?"

Steve leaned against the counter too. "It increased my metabolism by four, Tony."

"You mean..." Tony's eyebrows went up and he whistled. "Wow. Some men would kill for that." He paused. "I'm seriously thinking about it right now."

"It's not that great. It's a distraction. Especially as a single, inexperienced man surrounded by showgirls during the USO tours."

Tony laughed, and Steve finally gave him a small smile. "If you're trying to make me feel sorry for you, I'm here to tell you you are failing epically. Young, healthy, good-looking, raging sex drive, and the only guy surrounded by girls. Beautiful girls. Must have been awful."

"It wasn't all bad," Steve admitted, blushing. He got himself a clean glass and filled it with water from the tap, and Tony suppressed the urge to remind him that he had perfectly drinkable filtered water in the fridge.

"So, five of the USO girls went all the way with you? Or was it one girl five times?"

"I..."

"Come on, spill."

Steve hesitated. "There were a couple of girls I sorta... dated. Or, well, we, um, fooled around a bit. I was still... still in love with Peggy, but I didn't know if she... I hadn't seen her in a long time, and I spent some time with the girls, and when we fooled around, I kind of didn't stop myself a couple of times."
"How many USO girls did you fool around with?"

"Four."

Tony whistled. "I guess just because you wore the uniform didn't make you a Boy Scout. And you didn't stop yourself with a couple of them?"

"Yeah."

"So that's two of the five times."

"Well, twice with Shellie, once with Marla." Steve swirled his glass, staring down at it.

"And the other two times?"

"I was with the Commandos." He took a drink.

Tony's mouth fell open. "As in, with the Commandos? One of them?!!"

Steve nearly spat out his water. "Are you insane?!"

"Hey, you said--"

"That would've been completely illegal! They were my men--"

Tony leered. "Oh I bet they were."

"No, I mean they were under my command--"

"Under your command? Is that what the kids called it back then?"

"Tony!" Steve glared at him. "No. I didn't... no, of course not."

Tony snickered. "You know it's not unheard of for soldiers in wartime to fool around together, queer or not."

"I know that, thanks. But I never did."

"So, who then?"

"French girls."

"Really? When did you find time for romance?"

"It... wasn't romance."

"What was it?"

Steve looked away. "It's not a proud moment, all right?"

"What?"

"Look, there were... there weren't a lot of girls around."

"And?"

"And I was... distracted."
"You mean horny as hell."

"All right, yeah." Steve ran a hand through his hair. "And there were French girls around in towns, but I didn't speak French and we weren't there long enough to get to know any of them--"

"What did you do? Hire hookers?"

Steve flushed deeply and drained his glass.

"Holy shit," Tony said, somewhat stunned. "Captain America purchased French booty."

"I'm not perfect," said Steve bitterly. "I told you."

Tony paused. "So what makes you so inflexible about this kind of thing?"

"What's wrong is wrong," said Steve simply. "People are fallible, and we make mistakes, but we shouldn't just turn around and tell ourselves it was so great that it must be okay and we should do it all over again."

"Maybe there's also such a thing as having standards that don't make sense," said Tony. "And feeling guilty over things we don't need to feel guilty about. Like being human, and needing sex."

"Nobody needs sex," said Steve. "And maybe we have to agree to disagree." He brought the glass to the sink and rinsed it, dried it, and put it away.

Damn, it was like living with a maid. Tony idly wondered if he'd been a neat freak as a child, or if it had been drilled into him at the orphanage where he'd gone after his mother died, or by the army.

"Why haven't you dated again?" Tony asked curiously, breaking the silence. "In this century, I mean."

Steve's shoulders stiffened slightly. "Who would I date?"

"And the whole raging libido thing?"

"I can handle it a lot better now."

Tony sniggered. "I bet you can."

"What? No, not like that," Steve said, flustered.

"Oh really? Please don't tell me you also bought into the whole 'if you touch yourself you'll go blind' crap, because I gotta say my eyesight is 20/20 and Hawkeye's--"

"No, of course not. I just meant it's not as distracting any more."

"Well, let me know if you want any help in that department." Tony caught himself and laughed. "The dating other people part of it, not the handling it. Not that I know a lot of girls who are willing to wait until marriage, but for Captain America, they just might be."

Steve's mouth quirked up slightly.

"What?"

"Sorry, I'm trying to picture who you might set me up with, and..."
"And? JARVIS can call up my little black book in a jiffy."

"It's a little terrifying."

Tony smiled. "What do you know? Captain Tightass has a sense of humour."

"What was it Natasha said? Your idea of cultural catch-up would do me in faster than any Doombot?"

"Probably. So would Katie. And Eileen, and Mara. Mara's very... creative. But very gentle. I could--"

Steve shook his head, looking amused, and pushed off the counter where he'd been leaning. "Good night, Tony. I'll see you tomorrow."

"You sure you don't want me to--"

"Good night, Tony," Steve said firmly, and headed off to his floor.

Huh. That had gone surprisingly well.

Damn, though. Steve Rogers, twenty-five year old virgin, horny, confused, surrounded by pretty girls, trying so hard to live up to his own morals - which were probably outdated even then. Probably jerking off every chance he got, and then guiltily hiring French hookers when that wasn't enough.

That... wasn't an entirely unattractive image.

Tony groaned. Oh, shit, no, not going there. Absolutely not going there.

3.

September 8

*Avengers still refuse to pay for damage to downtown New York*

*Avengers Tower blocking cell phone signals?*

*Avengers: present at the Boston Lizard Incident, but not at the Albuquerque Acid-Fire Anomaly?*

Clint scanned down that story as he read Natasha's Starkpad over her shoulder, seeing a summary of places they'd been, pointing out how many of them were Northern, Eastern, West coast - and otherwise blue-state - and how few Southern and Midwest.

He gathered his arrows and sat down next to Natasha, angling the Starkpad towards him so that they could both keep reading as he carefully inspected each one before putting it back in the quiver and Natasha meticulously oiled every part of her guns.

"Tasha? What the hell is this?"

"From SHIELD. Haven't you accessed your mail today?"

"Wanted to get to the range as soon as Tony said it was open. Who sent this?"

"Our new liaison."
"What? Why?"

"I guess they want us to get to know what's going on."

"Why? What do we care?"

"I think it's to make us feel bad. At least if you go by the headlines."

Iron Man: Not enough to protect us, but still unwilling to share his technology for the common good.

Iron Man: His Troubled Past Comes Back?

Clint scanned it quickly, seeing a picture of them leaving that club, Tony looking in good spirits and Steve looking... well, slightly confused, plucky, and stalwart.

...and there was a nice little mention on how the club was known for its rather wild times, and for same-sex couples who danced and made out openly on the floor. Small blip about how Stark, famous for his wild women, has also admitted to involvement with men in his youth...

"Oh, fuck me," Clint muttered.

"Probably not a good idea, team-dynamics- and publicity-wise," said Natasha, putting away her guns and snapping her case closed. "And if you're going to get yourself taken care of outside, please make sure it doesn't end up on a front page. I don't think Fury's ulcer will appreciate it."

"Screw Fury."

Natasha made a face. "Also not a good idea."

How will the Avengers vote? asked another article as they read on. Tony was pegged as an Obama supporter despite belonging to the 1%, Bruce probably pro-Obama due to his scientific background (what?), Natasha and Clint complete unknowns (excellent!), Thor, being a monarchist, probably going for Romney, and Steve also an unknown, probably going for Romney except for possible concerns over Romney's Mormonism. The article noted that he had worked comfortably with blacks during the War, but that he came from a time of stricter values and would be more sympathetic to Romney's conservatism than--

Christ, what a load of crap.

"So what are we supposed to do about this?" he asked Natasha.

"I don't think we're supposed to do anything. As I said, I think it's just to make us feel bad."

Clint carefully finished maintenance on his bow and put it over his shoulder as they left the range and went up to the common floor.

"We'll have to let Tony know it's an awesome weapons range, Tash," he commented as the elevator went up.

"I know. The targets move so quickly. Nice terrain simulations, too." She glanced at him sideways. "So what's wrong?"

"Nothing wrong. Just... it's not the same as the range at SHIELD."

"It's not. It's better."
"And it's not at SHIELD," said Clint.

The ceiling was high, the targets were shiny, the arrows were cool. One of them gave off purple sparks - useless except as a distraction, but very cool.

And it wasn't SHIELD. With this on hand, why would he and Tasha ever want to leave?

"Did you hear there was a cinnamon-smelling pink entity spotted in downtown Manhattan yesterday?" asked Natasha.

"What? How come we weren't we called in?"

"Not sure. Maybe it wasn't that important? SHIELD operatives herded it towards the water and it dissolved, anyway. It wasn't that big. Only about the size of a bus."

"Still. We should have been called in. And why are we getting this news shit sent to us, instead of info on the pink slime?"

"They probably sent samples of it to Bruce and thought that was enough."

The elevator doors opened and they entered the common area. Bruce and Steve were already there, Bruce frying something over the indoor grill and Steve watching curiously. A range of hamburger patties and all the fixings sat waiting on the counter next to them.

"Do those really taste like meat?" Steve was saying, and Clint glanced at the grill. Ugh. Tofu burgers.

"Yeah, kinda."

"Don't fool yourself," said Clint. "They taste just like regular burgers, until you actually have a real burger. Then you realize you've been eating rubber."

"No you don't," said Bruce.

"How long since you had a real burger?" asked Clint, putting together a platter for himself.

"About twelve years, I think."

"So how would you know? Here, have a real one." He waved his plate at Bruce.

Bruce grimaced. "Ugh. No thanks."

"Can I try one of yours?" asked Steve.

"Go ahead," said Bruce, waving at one of the veggie patties on the platter next to him.

Steve started to assemble his meal. "Have you heard we have a new liaison?" he asked Clint and Natasha.

"Yeah. Who is it?" Clint asked, taking a large bite.

"Agent Tom Sorensen."

"Sorensen?!" said Clint, the burger nearly going down wrong. "Fuck me."

"What's wrong with him?" asked Steve.
Clint's mouth suddenly tasted like ash. "They were going to put Phil as our liaison. Phil, not this douchebag."

"There's nothing wrong with Sorensen," said Natasha.

"He's a weasel," Clint said angrily. "And Fury doesn't trust him. Why would he assign him to us?"

"Maybe it's not Fury's choice. Hill doesn't mind him. Relax. He might not be so bad." Natasha got herself a platter full of veggies, placing a veggie patty without a bun on her plate. "Bruce, did he send you samples of the pink slime?"

"Samples?" Bruce asked, adding mustard to his bun. "Yeah. I don't know why, though. I already had some. Though these were a little different."

"They didn't tell you why you were getting these?"

"No, I just got them in the SHIELD mail."

"Sorensen, you fucking incompetent," Clint muttered, feeling a slow burn of anger. "Bruce, they're not from the Mean Teen. She's still in custody, as far as we know. These are from an incident yesterday."

Bruce swallowed hastily. "Damn. Really?"

"Yes. He probably wanted you to compare them--"

Bruce grabbed his veggieburger and headed off.

"Hey! Aren't you going to watch the movie?" said Clint. "It's West Side Story!"

"I've seen Romeo and Juliet," said Bruce. "Pretty sure I know how this one ends."

"Still feeling good about Sorensen?" asked Clint as the door closed behind him.

Natasha shook her head doubtfully. "He's new. Give him time."

4.

September 14

Steve looked tired, thought Tony as he looked away from the stars to watch him enter the deck. And no wonder; it was three in the morning. Normal people slept around this time of night. Or so Tony had been informed by Pepper. Repeatedly. Usually around three in the morning.

Steve also looked a little disgruntled to see Tony up here. "Tony. What are you doing up?" he asked, joining him at the railing.

"Relaxing. Looking out at the stars." He paused. "Having trouble sleeping. You?"

Steve hesitated, the light breeze on the deck rustling his hair. "A bit. I was thinking of drawing. Do you mind?"

"Be my guest," said Tony. Steve nodded and went to set himself up near one of the deck lights, and Tony reflected that it was handy how Steve's favourite medium was pencil drawing and not oil
painting or sculpting. A sketchbook, box of pencils, hard surface, and he was ready to go.

And it was a nice enough atmosphere up here, if you were going to be up late anyway. It was still warm, the late-night traffic sounds muted from far below, the sky almost cloud- and smog-free. He drew away from the railing and sat down next to Steve, glancing at the picture Steve was drawing. It looked like a set of dancers in skirts, and Tony leaned in to get a closer look. "West Side Story?"

"It had good visuals," said Steve.

"Better than Lawrence of Arabia," said Tony, though it had been a pleasant surprise to realize that he could look at all that sand and not get nervous or flash-backy. "What did you think about it?"

"Which one? West Side Story?" Steve said. Tony nodded. "I was surprised Maria lived. Wasn't she supposed to be Juliet?"

"Maybe they thought the traditional ending was too much of a bummer."

"Maybe. Though it was depressing enough, I suppose."

"Hey, it beats watching the news."

"No kidding."

"Are you? Watching the news, that is?"

"Of course," said Steve, frowning slightly.

"Right. Civic duty and all? Election year?" Steve nodded. "You feeling informed enough to vote?"

"Yeah. Don't ask me who I'm going to vote for, though."

"I can probably guess."

"I doubt that," said Steve.

"Why's that?"

"Because I don't know myself."

"Really? I thought you'd be... traditional."

"There are all sorts of traditions, Tony." His eyes were slightly bloodshot, Tony realized, watching him colour in a fuchsia skirt. "Not all of them are conservative."

"You don't like the Republicans of today?"

"I don't like the tone of either side," said Steve slowly. "But especially the Republicans. Some of them are decent people, and I agree with a lot of what they're saying, but some of them... the loudest ones..."

"Gibbering assholes," Tony nodded. "Though I don't hear most of what they say. My PA filters that kind of thing for me."

"Some of it's pretty vile. And has been for a while."

"I think both sides are guilty of that."
"The Democrats wouldn't have booed a soldier, even if they disagreed with him." Steve finished shading in the skirt, then moved to another sketch, shading in the arching line of a male dancer's leg.

"I keep forgetting you missed Vietnam," Tony commented. "And when did the Republicans boo a soldier?"

"Last year, at their candidate's debate. Some gay soldier asked about the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and the audience booed him. Mind you, Romney didn't say he agreed with them doing that. It's still disgusting."

Tony shrugged. "People are idiots."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"I'm not a soldier. I have a lot of friends who are, but it's not my fight." He paused. "Happened last year? Weren't you still on ice?"

"They had a clip of it on the news yesterday. Among other things." Steve sighed. "I'm better off watching old movies."

"Aren't we all. You probably shouldn't take any of it so seriously. People are always gonna be idiots, on both sides of the aisle."

Steve glanced at him. "You were taking it seriously a few days ago."

Tony shrugged, conceding the point. "I probably shouldn't. It's not really my fight, any of it. I mean, like you pointed out, it's not like I'm in any hurry to become a soldier. Or a Scout leader. And I'm not the marrying type. It's all theoretical for me." He watched the pencil adding a shadow under the dancer. "Just be glad it's theoretical for you too."

Steve's pencil paused. "It's not theoretical to me, Tony."

"What?"

"It's personal." Steve took a deep breath, and met Tony's gaze evenly. "I served in the army. I still think of myself as a soldier."

"Yeah, OK, but you're not--"

"Yes I am." He leaned forward, putting down his pencil. "All of this? Serving openly, being able to get married? It's not theoretical, and I'm not being a hypocrite. I know exactly what I'm talking about. Personally."

"You're..."

"Gay."

Tony's mouth dropped open.

"Are you serious?" he said after a stunned moment.

"Couldn't be more serious. Five on the Kinsey scale. And that's mostly due to previous experience."

"Holy shit." Tony blew out his breath. "Jesus. So when I teased you at that club, about - shit."

"I knew exactly what you were talking about," said Steve grimly. "About the guy, not the girl."
Tony shook his head, his mind spinning. "So... Jesus, Steve, what's with the backwards attitude, then? You're a smart guy. You can read, and you can think. You don't need to be like those poor losers who hate themselves because of some damned Dark Age--"

"I don't hate myself."

"Yeah, but - if you don't, then--"

"You know, I worked out, way back during the War, that if the Serum cured my asthma but not my homosexuality, maybe homosexuality wasn't an illness. I did that all by myself, without your genius or your enlightened modern age."

Tony frowned, bewildered. "So why stop there, big guy? Why not embrace your non-illness?"

"I'm not ashamed of it," he said quietly. "Not any more. I wasn't particularly ashamed of it at the time; I'm definitely not now. I believe what I've read, that it's innate and I could no more choose it than I could choose to be deaf or blind." He held Tony's gaze. "But I'm not proud of it, any more than I would be proud of being deaf or blind. And if I could, I would absolutely change it. Same as if I was deaf or blind. And I don't see what's wrong with that."

"As a matter of fact, there are plenty of deaf people who are proud of being deaf, and who don't want surgery to improve their hearing. But never mind that; you're still talking like it's a disability."

"It is."

"How?"

"For starters, one of the things everyone wants is to get married and have children--"

"Speak for yourself."

Steve ignored him. "And if you're gay, you can't. If you could find some way of correcting that? Why wouldn't you?"

"You need to Google some more, my friend. A lot more. Because, newsflash: you can in fact do both."

"Not without going against the teachings of most of the major religions in the world. Not to mention simple biology."

Tony blinked. "You actually believe that crap? You wanna 'fix' something about yourself because some outdated piece of desert morality?"

"It's not outdated to me. I may not be a regular, but I still go to church." He gave Tony a low-level glare. "And if we're gonna do the respect thing, try to remember that when you insult Christians, you're insulting me."

"Well plenty of other Christians have no problem with gays. Maybe you should read what they have to say."

"I have. I just disagree with them."

Tony paused. "Where did you... OK, how did I not know you were looking into all of this? I mean... pro-gay Christians? Kinsey scale?"

"Libraries existed before your server."
"Why would--"

"I live with you and two spies, and work for SHIELD. Not one of you has any sense of privacy. I Googled the bare basics from here, but beyond that, I didn't want anybody else to pry into what I was doing. And I still don't."

Tony fell silent, and watched Steve colour in the background of his drawing, his pencils making idle lines. It didn't look like he was paying particular attention to it any more; just fiddling around with it, at this point.

"You know, this is more of a mind-trip for me than it should be," he finally admitted. "And I gotta say, part of me's picturing Fox News if they got a hold of this. Can you imagine, Captain America, gay?"

Steve shuddered. "I'd rather not."

Damn, thought Tony, he had that world-wise grandpa/lost little boy thing going again.

And damn, Tony thought he'd outgrown thinking of the man in terms of what his father had always said; gotten past the Captain America surface and come to know Steve Rogers, at least a bit. Steve sure didn't look much like the man Tony's dad obsessed about right now. He was tired, withdrawn, up at three in the morning and wearing a rumpled t-shirt and sweat pants as he supported his sketchbook up against one knee and selected another pencil, and Tony wondered if he'd tried to sleep or had gone down to the gym before coming up here.

And yet he was still Captain America. Still representing Mom and apple pie and good old American values and...

"Hang on, Spangles," said Tony. "You were in the army before Don't Ask, Don't Tell. How could you expect to be a role model for Americans if you were breaking the law? You had to lie just to get in."

Steve's lips quirked into a humourless smile. "You already knew I lied to get into the army. I lied about where I was from, because they kept rejecting me but I felt it was my duty as an American to fight."

"This is different. The army was actively trying to keep people like you out. How'd you justify it to yourself?"

"For one thing, I didn't join the army to become a role model. I joined to go to war. Even the SSR wasn't supposed to be about symbolic leadership; there were supposed to be a lot of us. I wasn't supposed to be unique."

"So you didn't think it mattered that you'd lied to get in?"

"Not as much as getting in mattered."

Yeah, Tony maybe should've guessed that part. "Greater good and all that?"

"Something like that."

"Weren't you afraid of being found out?"

"Why would I be? You were kicked out as an undesirable if you were a homosexual but didn't commit homosexual acts while in the service, and dishonourably discharged or imprisoned if you
did. I never did. I felt my preferences were none of the army's business, and I intended to conduct myself honorably while I was in the army. And I did." He grimaced. "Except for the thing with the French girls, which the army actually encouraged."

"Go army."

"Don't Ask, Don't Tell was a pipe dream back then. Not even."

"Nice."

"I thought, when I first read about repealing it, that it was terrible that they were going to get rid of this enlightened thing and bring back witch hunts and courts martial."

"Thought you agreed that it was a bad thing to have people serving openly."

"I did. I do." Steve paused. "I just never thought witch hunts served any purpose. I never felt it hurt the army to have gays serving if they were discreet."

"So what were you going to do? Just... be in the closet forever?"

"Why not?"

"Jesus, Steve." Tony shook his head, appalled. "Doesn't it worry you now? The media? They're pretty nosy these days. Aren't you worried they'll find out?"

"How would they? Unless you tell them, how would they ever find out?"

"Steve. Buddy, at some point, you're gonna wanna get some action. You're gonna get... you know, unfrozen."

"Not that way, I won't."

"Are you serious?" Tony sat back. "OK, I get that you might not want to head up a Pride Parade or have a church wedding and adopt Corgis with your sweetie, but you're gonna wanna date. Especially if you've got the whole four-times-as-horny thing going on."

"I'm not."

"You've gotta be shitting me. Vow of celibacy? You know those don't work out too well, right? I can share all sorts of literature on that if you'd like."

"Why would I take a vow of celibacy? I might want to get married some day."

"To a woman."

Steve nodded.

What the... "Can you even get it up for them? I mean, I know you said five times, very impressive... but seriously? You'd marry a woman even though what you really want is a man with a slow hand?"

Steve grimaced. "You can't always have everything you want. That's life."

Tony stared at him. "OK, see, I don't believe in sin, but if I did? What you're talking about? That's a sin. Lying to a woman when--"

"Well, I can't believe you. You are attracted to women, aren't you?"
"The proof is on the Youtube."

"You - to you, being with men, it's just a thing you decide to do. If I could be like you, if I could be attracted to women, don't you think I would? And never even think about doing anything with a man?" His jaw clenched for a moment. "I loved Peggy. I would've spent my life with her if I could have, even though I was almost totally disinterested in her that way."

"And you don't think that would've been unfair to her?" Tony challenged. "To be with a man who didn't actually want her?"

Steve looked away. "I wanted her. Marriage isn't just about sex. Just because you don't want to have sex with somebody doesn't mean you don't love them. And just because you want to have sex with someone doesn't mean they're good for you, or you for them."

Tony opened his mouth, then closed it. Damn. What a time for his normal eloquence to utterly desert him.

Steve stared down at his drawing for a long moment, idly putting a little more colour onto the page before putting his pencil down and picking up his pencil case and scanning through it. "Damn. Left the pencil sharpener in my room," he said. "Think I'll go to bed." He started to gather up his pencils, neatly tucking them into their box. Tony watched him, glancing at the page he'd just finished, the skirts, the dancers' legs, arms, bending together, the bright colours such a contrast to Steve's subdued movements and mood.

"Good night, Tony," he said, and headed downstairs.

Tony stayed on the deck, still faintly stunned.

And it suddenly struck him, just how young Steve was. Only in his twenties, so inexperienced in so many ways, and he wondered if Steve had ever told anyone what he'd just told Tony.

He was so damn young. So vulnerable. Tony felt a bizarre urge to protect him, to shield him from himself, from his own wrong-headed ideals.

Which was ridiculous. Captain America didn't need protecting; he was the one who protected others. Right?

5.

Steve turned over in bed, replaying his conversation with Tony over and over again. Wishing he hadn't decided to come back downstairs and try to sleep again. Unable to decide whether he wished he hadn't said anything, or felt relieved that he had.

Didn't he want to date, Tony had asked. Didn't he want to be unfrozen.

God, yes.

God, yes. His accelerated libido was a lot more manageable now - mostly because there was plenty of other stuff to distract him these days - but desire still lay there, and a need to touch, to feel, to get close to someone. Mostly women, because that's what he was used to, how it was supposed to be. Screwed-up as he was, he wasn't blind and he'd noticed several of the women he met at SHIELD. Thought about getting to know them, been curious about them, as he had been about girls in his own time. They were so different from the girls he'd grown up with: just as foreign, just as otherworldly,
but doubly incomprehensible to him because of cultural differences.

As for the men...

No, he didn't want to go there. The men he lived and worked with were distracting in their own ways. Bruce didn't do much for him, but Thor and Clint were the kind of guys he'd have had wet dreams about as a kid, whenever he was healthy enough to have wet dreams. As for Tony...

He'd noticed Tony's attractiveness right away, of course, but been put off by the abrasive personality. Now... ever since Tony had told him he was bisexual, he'd started to see him, more and more, to notice him. He was getting along with him. Felt closer to him, both drawn to and repelled by his unapologetic acceptance of who he was.

He rolled over in bed once more and buried his head in his pillow, angry at himself. God, Tony Stark. Of all the men he could pick to have inappropriate feelings for, Tony Stark had to be at the top of any list. Damn the Serum, and damn his hyperactive sex drive.

He sighed. This wasn't just his annoying libido, though. He knew that. It was loneliness. Not just romantic loneliness; he'd lived with that his entire life. This was general, all-over loneliness.

He was just so damn lonely. It made everything so much harder to deal with.

The fear and the pain he lived with now had been there with the Commandos, and the grief when he lost men, but they were his men, it was his time, and he had Bucky. When the pain from his injuries got bad, he could spend time with the Commandos, listening to them trying to pick up French girls, telling each other dirty jokes. He could find comfort in Bucky, remind himself that he'd finally been able to save Bucky, as Bucky had saved him so many times, remind himself that they were protecting the world from Hitler. From evil. It was worth it.

He still was. Saving the world, that is. Loki and the Chitauri and Doombots weren't Hitler; they were worse.

But what world was he saving?

It got so strong, sometimes, the desire to just not deal with this any more. To not have to feel that fear, to not feel so tense all the time, to not experience something perfectly innocent and abruptly feel like he was going to lose it, to not fear that some day he would lose it and someone would notice. To not feel like it just wasn't worth it any more, that he didn't know how to keep going. Sometimes he felt like screaming, like telling everyone to fuck off and just let him be. Sometimes it felt like all he wanted was to cry himself to sleep - and sometimes he did. But then he woke up, and couldn't go back to sleep, and there was nothing to do but go to the gym and let the memories, the loss, sweep over him, until he broke another punching bag. And then, too jittery to get on his motorbike, go up to the deck and try and fail to lose himself in a drawing, and then watch the sun break over the rooftops of Manhattan and know he was going to have to do it all again.

And there had been those two nights when he'd seriously considered just giving in to the fear, to the pain and loss. When he'd seriously considered not being there the next day, not living through yet another night.

When he'd seriously thought of just ending it.

Which was ridiculous, because his job would do that for him soon enough.

If he couldn't sleep through the night, if he couldn't adapt to this strange, loud, ugly world, if he couldn't deal with the loss of Bucky, Peggy, his entire life, it didn't really matter, since in all
likelihood, he was destined to go down in a blaze of glory anyway. There was no need to kill himself like a coward; surely a Doombot or an alien or a blob of slime or random high-tech projectile he couldn't quite dodge would be obliging. There was no need to fear a long life of endless nights of no sleep, of loneliness and pain.

So he kept flinging himself into the path of danger, mostly just doing his job and saving his team, but - if he was being honest with himself - not exactly avoiding an untimely end, and ending up with nothing but sore bones or broken skin that healed quickly but hurt like hell.

If SHIELD knew, they'd stop him. They'd take him off-duty, and then where would he be? No chance to even be useful. No chance to make his life worth something.

He sat up, rubbed his face, and tried to focus on the breathing exercises the SHIELD therapists had told him about in those first sessions, when he was still thinking adaptation would take a few weeks and he'd be fine. Tried to focus on positive accomplishments.

He was feeling more familiar with the world around him. That was positive. The movie nights were useful, as he spent time watching things that felt familiar and slowly moved out of his comfort zone, while getting to know his team-mates better and occasionally being able to share knowledge that he had and they didn't.

He was an effective leader in combat. That was good.

He was getting better at finding beauty in this modern world despite its hard lines and overly smooth surfaces. Getting better at understanding modern technology, modern society.

He felt closer to his team.

Feeling closer to Tony... not such a good thing. That, he'd have to work on.

Well, he couldn't do much about the sleepless nights. Or the nightmares, or the sick feeling of fear when he saw something hurtling at him and knew it was going to hurt, or the crawling horror of the thought of losing yet another comrade. The sense of loss and anxiety and God please, I don't want to be here, please make this better, please fix this for me.

But God helped those who helped themselves. And at least maybe he could deal with his sexuality. There'd never been time or reason, before. It had always just been something that he'd resigned himself to. First too sickly to care about it, knowing that it was unlikely he'd ever need to feel desire for a girl because no girl would want him. Then too busy with the war, and knowing it didn't make a difference how he felt about some of the men he noticed; he may have been horny as a dog sometimes but if all else failed, he could go to a hooker and feel a bit better for a while. And there was Peggy. He knew, once it was all over, he'd be with Peggy, if she'd have him. And he'd figured either his unwelcome feelings for men would go away, or he'd find some way to exorcise them, for Peggy's sake if not his own.

Peggy was lost to him now. But maybe there was something he could do to deal with his feelings anyway. And maybe if he could make that right, maybe he could find someone else to live for - and not be distracted by men any more, especially Tony. And then maybe he could adapt to this bizarre world. And then maybe, if he could adapt, he might not have to stay up nights wishing he was back in his own time. He might even be able to sleep.
1. The movies watched/mentioned are
   The Apartment, 1960
   West Side Story, 1961
   Lawrence of Arabia, 1962

2. Anybody know a good beta or two who might be willing to help out with a chapter here and there? My betas are the most awesome in the world, but this fic is multi-chapter and, well, they have lives and fics of their own, and I'm feeling kinda bad about bugging them all the time...
1. September 21

"Sorensen's not working out as SHIELD liaison," Tony began bluntly, dropping into a chair as the rest of the team found places around the table.

"Which means?" said Fury.

"Apparently he's pissing off the Avengers, sir," said Hill. "He's second-guessing Rogers' command decisions in his reports, pressuring Barton and Romanov to return to SHIELD barracks, and making noise about Thor, Banner and Stark not having any SHIELD training. And demanding Stark turn his paperwork in on time."

"That's all stuff Coulson might've done too," Fury pointed out. "Particularly the last."

"Coulson wouldn't have pissed us all off doing it," said Clint darkly.

"Coulson threatened to taze Stark. Repeatedly."

"Maybe Stark's into that, sir," Clint shot back.

Tony smirked, but reflected that probably the comparison to Coulson wasn't the best way for Fury to have started this meeting, at least as far as Clint was concerned. Of all of them, Clint seemed to despise Sorensen the most, and Tony could bet it had a lot to do with Sorensen trying to step into shoes that really, nobody could fill. With anybody, but particularly with Clint.

"Is this unanimous?" asked Fury. He glanced around the group, encountering uniformly grim expressions. "Captain?"

"Not entirely sir," said Steve. "I stand behind my team and their complaints, but personally I welcome the opportunity to learn from Agent Sorensen's feedback on my command decisions."

"Even when he's a douchebag about it?" asked Clint.

"How long has Sorensen been with SHIELD?" asked Tony. "How much experience does he have?"

"He's the Council's boy toy," said Clint derisively.

"What does that mean?"

"It means the Council dropped him into SHIELD not too long ago, without even asking Fury. He didn't train as an operative. He was just brought in--"

"So were a lot of our operatives, Barton," Hill pointed out. "You. Romanov. Coulson."
"I went through accelerated training. Fury himself qualified Natasha. And Coulson was a Ranger."

"And Sorensen was approved by the Council," said Hill. "They have their reasons."

"Since when do they insert themselves into our Human Resources?"

"Since the Chitauri," said Hill. "Now, you can either play nice, or find someone else to play with."

The door opened and Tom Sorensen walked in, his mouth in a grim line. "Sorry, for some reason I wasn't told there was a meeting."

"That's because you weren't invited," said Tony. "We're talking about you behind your back."

"Sit down, Agent," said Fury.

God damn it. Tony watched Sorensen set himself and his files down, and manfully resisted the urge to throw a spit-ball at him.

Of all the things that pissed him off about Sorensen, the worst was how the guy went after Steve relentlessly. Steve himself seemed to take it in stride, but Tony had barely restrained himself from flattening the guy last time they'd barely finished a mission and he'd immediately started picking at everything Steve had done. While Steve was still being patched up by the medics.

He still kinda wished he had decked Sorensen, but... yeah, probably not such a good idea. That way lay showing Steve that Tony was maybe starting to have a bit of a... thing for him. Calling Sorensen a 'petty asshole who can't handle being around a living legend who's a better man than you'll ever be' might have been a bit of a giveaway though, and the gleam in Steve's eye and firm pressure of Steve's hand on Tony's back as he gently steered him away from Sorensen had made Tony wonder for one brief moment if he noticed. And maybe even returned the feeling.

OK, really not the right time to be thinking about any of that. Sorensen finished spreading out his files and Tony firmly called upon his Inner Pepper ("It's time to be act responsibly, Tony, there's a time and a place for everything"), and turned back to Fury.

"So where were we?" Tony said. "Oh that's right. Play nice, or find someone else to play with? Don't take it personally, Nick, old buddy," he said, turning to Fury. "But I'm not sure we actually want to play in your sandbox." He glanced at Sorensen. "Some of the new kids are meanies."

Fury shrugged.

"You're being awfully lackadaisical about all of this," noted Tony. "Makes us think you don't love us."

"It's your life," said Fury. "Your team. You run it as you see fit. You aren't part of SHIELD. Neither are Dr. Banner or Thor."

"What about your homegrown talent?" said Tony, nodding at Natasha and Clint.

"They're free to take an extended leave of absence if they want to," said Fury. Sorensen frowned and opened his mouth. "This has already been discussed," continued Fury before he could interject. "The Avengers Initiative began with SHIELD, and is associated with SHIELD, but is not fully integrated into SHIELD."

"It can be rediscussed," said Sorensen darkly. Fury fixed Sorensen with a bland look. Sorensen cleared his throat. "Provided you want to, sir," he amended.
"What about Captain Iceman?" asked Tony.

"He's free to stay or leave as well," said Fury. "SHIELD has no legal hold on him."

"Excuse me?" said Hill, turning to him in surprise. "SHIELD invested--"

"SHIELD rescued him and gave him medical care and housing for the first few months after his rescue," said Fury. "He doesn't owe us for any of that, since he wasn't even conscious to consent to the rescue or initial rehab at the time. And even if he was, his back pay from 1945 has been calculated, and he could pay us back and still have plenty left over." He gazed dispassionately at Hill. "What would you suggest as an alternative, should Captain Rogers decide to end his ties to SHIELD? Indentured servitude?"

"So I'm to take it that there is a general feeling of discontent here?" asked Sorensen, breaking the silence.

"There's a general feeling that you're trying to fix what ain't broke," said Clint.

"Ain't broke? Your missions in Albuquerque, Hoboken and Richmond don't need fixing, according to you?"

"How could Hoboken have gone better?"

"You could have maybe captured the perpetrator."

"We could have maybe left Hoboken a field of rubble," Clint shot back.

"If you had followed proper SHIELD procedure--"

"If you had taken your head out of your ass--"

"Proper SHIELD procedure wasn't appropriate for the initial stage of that operation," said Steve, giving Clint a quelling look.

"What about afterwards?" Sorensen pressed. "There are regulations to be followed in the aftermath of any mission. You people seem to feel you're above that kind of thing."

"We are," snapped Tony.

"It's not a question of being above them," said Steve sternly. "That's not the point."

"The point is, you called us for three battles over a six-day period," said Bruce.

"You're supposed to be super-heroes."

"We're still human beings. We were called in on the 16th, 18th, and 20th. That's not enough time to recover between missions, let alone do paperwork."

"And Richmond - what was that?" said Tony. "A weird weapon used as a gun, for a bank robbery. We didn't need to be there."

"SHIELD deals with robberies," said Sorensen.

"We're not SHIELD," Tony shot back. "And Hawkeye had already been hurt in Hoboken; he shouldn't have been called out to--"
"Then he should have been benched by your leader," said Sorensen.

Natasha tsk'd impatiently. "Hawkeye has a piss-poor sense of self-preservation--"

"Hey!" said Clint.

"-can crawl through the vents at the Tower, and knows where the Captain sleeps. Maybe Cap knows what would happen to him if he tried to bench Hawkeye over a sprained ankle."

"Are you saying you're afraid of your fellow team-mates?" Sorensen asked Steve.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Clint muttered. Steve didn't bother to respond to Sorensen, staring at him in disdain until Sorensen dropped his eyes and took another tack.

"I do agree that Hawkeye should not have been there, that's obvious," said Sorensen. "Valuable time was taken up getting him off his perch, losing his line of sight--"

"That had nothing to do with the ankle!" Clint exclaimed. "That was because the robbers went behind and--"

"And Widow's hand-to-hand could have been useful if she'd been sent in during the hold-up. That's what she's good at."

"She's also good at breaking in, you ass," said Clint. "That's what she was supposed to be doing. And she did it. She got us in without Iron Man or Hulk having to blast the bank wall open."

"And why was Hulk only used in one of these missions? In fact, in only three missions since the Avengers Initiative began?"

Steve leaned forward. "The Hulk is for emergencies. Alien army invading emergencies. Otherwise we rely on Dr. Banner's other talents."

"Otherwise it's like getting an enema for indigestion," Clint put in.

"And speaking of Dr. Banner's other talents," said Bruce, "he can't help if he doesn't have good intel."

Sorensen frowned. "I sent the pink slime--"

"You sent it with no explanation," Bruce shot back. "And you have not shared S H I E L D information with me that might have been useful. Widow found out that S H I E L D suspected the Mean Teen - sorry, the Verminator - had an associate based in Hoboken. It would have been nice to know that before we went in. I could have examined the area more closely before it was fully destroyed."

Sorensen turned to Steve, ignoring Bruce. "The one time you've sent Hulk in since I've been here, the only command you gave him was, 'Hulk, smash.' What kind of directive is that? He--"

"The Other Guy is not exactly a Rhodes Scholar," said Bruce impatiently. "He can't understand much else. He knew what the Captain wanted, and he did it. Because he trusts him and is willing to follow his lead. And he likes smashing things."

Sorensen's lips pressed together.

"Anything else?" asked Steve.

Sorensen lifted his chin. "As a matter of fact, there is." He flipped open a file. "Your colleague Thor,
I'm sure it's very useful, but he is not here for most of your engagements, not to mention most of our debriefings. It's not--"

"He's an alien god," said Clint. "When we say he's on another planet, we're not being smart-asses."

"And we have no idea what that weapon of his is made of, what its true capabilities are. We should examine it, and--"

"Trust me, you do not want to touch that man's hammer without his permission," said Natasha. "And that's not a euphemism."

"Furthermore, he has no documented combat training," said Sorensen. "Half of you don't. It's not enough to come in on an informal basis whenever something on our training calendar strikes your fancy; I'm talking about formal mandatory SHIELD combat training, preferably geared to your capabilities."

"So, you want me to put on the Iron Man suit and we go a few rounds in a formalized curriculum of your design?" Tony laughed. "What about the Hulk? Would you like him to show up for lessons so you can instruct him on how to use his talents? Can I watch?"

Clint and Natasha were openly laughing now, and Bruce's mouth quirked up slightly, and Tony could swear Fury's eye was glimmering with amusement as well. Steve, however, was drumming his fingers on the table and did not look nearly as amused as the rest of them.

"I don't think SHIELD has the budget to do formal combat training for me, Thor, and the Hulk, Sorensen," Tony said.

"Speaking of budgets, what's the price of the range in Stark Tower?" said Sorensen.

Tony blinked. "Sorry, what?"

"It's being used by SHIELD agents. We require a budget and specifications as to its design and safety features."

"Sorry, what?" Tony repeated.

"If our people are going to be using the space, we need to know what we're using. I've heard that Widow and Hawkeye are both using your range, and I've noticed some arrows that were not developed by SHIELD's R&D. We need to see--"

Tony sat back. "My toys. My house. You're not getting any specs from me. You can kiss my genius ass--"

"If you are going to use SHIELD resources and personnel, you will be expected to comply with SHIELD regulations."

"SHIELD regulations can line up to kiss my ass."

"All right, this is getting out of hand," Steve broke in. He turned to Sorensen. "Agent Sorensen, we do appreciate your efforts on our behalf," he said. "And we appreciate our association with SHIELD. Consider this a meeting to air out some concerns."

"Consider it a reality check," said Bruce.

Sorensen gave them a hard stare.
"I'd think about what they're saying, Agent," said Fury mildly. "They're throwing you a bone. I suggest you take it."

"They're being a hell of a lot more diplomatic than I'd be," said Tony. "I'd say you're a douchebag--"

"That's my word," Clint objected.

"Iron Man. Hawkeye. Enough," said Steve. His eyes were steady on Tony's, and his head was shaking slightly, asking them silently to stop.

And he was pissed off. Blue eyes frosty, face pale, lips slightly pressed together. Sorensen, the idiot, probably thought Steve was too good a little soldier to take any of this personally. He was wrong.

"Fine. Sure, Captain." Tony sat back.

"Whatever you say, Cap," said Clint. He stood up. "Director, can we go? I think we're done here."

"Where are you going?" asked Sorensen.

"Our regular team bonding exercise," said Bruce. "It's very important. Helps us deal with our daily fuck-ups."

Fury waved in dismissal, and they stood and started to head for the door. Tony reflected that, unenthused as he was over Tom Jones - watching some idiot seduce his way across England in period costume was not in fact Tony's idea of fun - both were a marked improvement over spending any more time in Sorensen's presence.

"Director," Sorensen began, "if this is an Avengers activity, I should be present to supervise--"

"Hell to the no," Clint spat. "I'd rather dive into a bucket of pus."

"What kind of team bonding is this?" asked Sorensen.

"We watch a lot of porn," said Clint.

Fury had a sudden coughing fit and Tony wasn't imagining it, Hill's eyes were glinting with amusement.

Sorensen's eyes narrowed. "Assuming that were true, it would be completely inappropriate," he said stiffly. "For one thing, it's sexist, and Agent Romanov should not be expected to put up with it."

"I select most of our movies," said Natasha.

"Except Shaved in Shelbyville," said Tony. "I got us that one."

"Iron Man," said Steve reprovingly.

"OK, Cap recommended it."

Steve blinked, then gave Sorensen a bland smile. "It was very artistic and tasteful," he said, and they walked out the door.

2. September 27

Steve sat up and threw off the bedcovers, flinging himself out of bed. He couldn't. God, he couldn't take one more moment in his bed, in his bedroom, in his apartment, he had to get out, had to. The last
battle, the aftermath, the last debrief, was playing through his mind like a newsreel and he wanted out, wanted to not think about how much the burns down his left shoulder-blade and back had ached today, how much he'd hated the off-hand way the SHIELD medic had checked him over and then made some crack about Super-Serum, how much it burned to watch Sorensen's blank face as he watched the clean-up and listened to the medics and typed into his Starkpad, and he had to get out.

Out. Out of here.

He passed through his living room, hesitating, eyes darting around for something to do, anything.

He couldn't read any more, couldn't draw, would probably ram his motorcycle into a wall if he tried to drive, he didn't want to look over the stuff he'd got from the church...

OK, the common floor. It was a big tower, he could wander. He could maybe get himself something to eat, look out the large window - not that his own wasn't large too, but his apartment felt like a cell right now.

Thank God. The kitchen was empty.

A beer. A walk around the outside deck. Then he'd go to bed and try again.

Or maybe take a dive off the deck.

God, stop it.

He closed his eyes and took two deep breaths, stuttering to a stop as the elevator door opened and Tony and Natasha came out, chatting.

"Fuck."

He made himself wave at them casually and turned back to the fridge, taking out a beer and moving aside as Natasha reached in for a fruit juice, still talking to Tony about the mission she'd apparently just returned from.

"A lot of nothing; the worst part of it was missing the eating scene in *Tom Jones*. It's what most SHIELD ops turn out to be, but I'm not complaining, I'm just glad to finally be able to - are you all right?" asked Natasha, stopping short. Steve turned, realized she was talking to him.

"What? Yeah," said Steve.

Her eyes narrowed. "No, you're not. Your breathing is too fast, and your hands are unsteady." Tony turned to look at him in surprise.

Shit. "Had a... nightmare," said Steve. Yes. Nightmare. Better than 'sleepless anxiety for no god damn reason.' "It's nothing."

"You get a lot of those?" asked Tony.


"You don't sleep a lot, do you?" said Natasha.
"Slept for seventy years," said Steve lightly. Natasha shook her head. "Why are you up?"

"Just came back from Kolkata."

"And you?"

"Pepper was CEO'ing me from LA," said Tony.

"Oh."

"Well, I should really go to bed. Good night," Natasha said. She prodded Tony. "So should you."

Steve ran a hand through his hair, relieved, as they both headed for the elevator. He'd barely had a chance to let out his breath when the elevator dinged and Tony came out again.

"Seriously, are you OK?" asked Tony without preamble as he approached.

"Yeah, sure."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, fine." Steve took a sip of his beer, forcing steadiness into his movements. "You didn't come down here to check on me, did you?"

Tony smiled sheepishly. "I might have. Sorry." He paused. "How come you drink beer if you can't get anything out of it?"

"I still like the taste."

"Hey, whatever works after a nightmare. I had some doozies after Afghanistan."

"Yeah."

"OK. Well, don't tell Natasha, but I'm gonna go down to the workshop. Hang on," he leaned past Steve and reached into the fridge, and Steve forced himself to not tense up. Calm and steady. Nothing to see here, move along.

He turned away so that Tony wouldn't see him close his eyes tightly, would just go away before he could embarrass himself even further. Twisted violently as he felt Tony's hand on his shoulder, and felt his beer start to slip through his fingers.

"Steve - ah, shit!" Tony blurted, and the bottle tumbled to the floor, and Steve's body reacted with no input from him whatsoever, turning Steve around and sending him against the counter in a frantic whattheFUCKwasthat?! attempt to get away from the loud noise.

He stared down at the puddle of beer and broken glass at Tony's feet, his heart racing.

"Damn it - hey. Hey, Steve?" Tony's voice was closer now, right next to Steve's ear. "Hey, are you OK?"

Steve's entire body was shuddering, his breath fast and laboured.

"Steve, hey, it's OK," said Tony uncertainly.

"I know that, damn it!" said Steve, and turned away from Tony.
"OK. I'm sorry. Um."

Steve gripped the counter and put his head down. Shit. Shit, shit, shit, this was what he'd feared, losing it in front of somebody else - and OK, at least this was a team-mate and he wasn't in public, but--

"Hey. Breathe deep."

Steve made a questioning sound.

"You... um, Steve, looks like you're having kind of a panic attack."

Steve shook his head slightly, trying to slow down his breathing. Bring it down, count from ten to one, focus on the breath...

"Does... this happen a lot?"

"Not a lot," Steve managed. "Just... when I've had a nightmare."

"Or when something happens that reminds you of something nasty?"

Steve lifted his head and narrowed his eyes at Tony, wiping his forehead. Fuck. Beads of sweat. He probably looked vaguely green - he'd seen himself in the mirror during one of these, and it wasn't a good look.

"Anybody talk to you about PTSD?" Tony said quietly. "What with having been deep-frozen, near-death experiences, and all that?"

"Yes. SHIELD medical said I wasn't suffering from it. I don't get... flashbacks, or anything."

"Maybe you need a second opinion."

Steve stiffened. "What the hell for?"

"Um, because you don't seem to sleep a lot. You get jumpy sometimes. And you may not be hearing bombs when you drop a bottle, but you're wound tighter than Hawkeye's bowstrings."

"I'm fine. A few nightmares. I can deal with it."

Tony put a hand on Steve's shoulder. "You sure? Remember, 'heroes are mortal and not divine'?"

"Yeah." Steve took a deep breath. "I can handle it."

"OK." He paused, and looked a little uncertain. "Just - if you, you know, can't sleep or something, you can always come down to the shop and see if I'm up. And if I'm not, don't worry about waking me up."

Steve shook his head.

"Yeah, never mind." Tony gave him a small smile. "I mean, offer stands, but don't worry, I can understand why you wouldn't take me up on it. I'm not the first person people think about talking to about anything important. Pepper had all sorts of ideas about why. She's probably right about all of them--"

"Tony," Steve interrupted him, disturbed by Tony's defensive tone. "You're the only person I've told I was gay. In this century, I mean. Obviously you're not that off-putting."
"Really? I wondered about that." He paused. "What about in your own time?"

"I told one of the nuns at the orphanage. And the priest. And Bucky knew."

"Was Bucky..."

Steve found himself chuckling unexpectedly. "God, no. No, he tried really hard to set me up with a nice girl. Or twenty."

They were silent for a moment. OK. This was OK. He wasn't shaking any more - not much, anyway - and he wasn't hyperventilating. Tony didn't seem bothered by his small panic attack. Which, really, hadn't been that bad - his asthma attacks used to be much, much worse.

"So... how about that election?"

Steve blinked. "What?"

"I can't ask you 'How about those Mets' since I don't know shit about baseball but I've been told you're probably still pissed that the Dodgers moved to L.A."

"So you thought talking politics would be better?"

"Um. On second thought that's maybe not as great an idea as I thought."

"Probably not," Steve gave a small laugh. "Everyone seems... silly. There are real problems, and people are focussing on the most incredible things. Have you heard about the Birthers?"

Tony threw back his head and laughed. "Oh God. You. You've been to Birther sites. That's hysterical."

"They're as bad as the sites with all the people who think they know what we think, politically." Tony smirked and Steve continued. "You're used to it, I guess. I'm not."

"You should set them straight," said Tony. He paused. "No, on second thought, bad idea."

"Yeah, no, I don't think Fury's heart can take the Council asking what the hell Captain America's doing on Fox News."

They laughed. "You'd get great ratings. You're a natural with the cameras."

"I hate it. You actually seem to like it. And you're good at it." Steve suddenly realized how admiring he sounded, and hoped he wasn't about to blush. He had noticed Tony was good at it... but really, he didn't need to put it like that. He cleared his throat. "All right, I should probably..."

"Hey, no, we were doing the mutual admiration thing, I love that," Tony said with a smile. "We were having a moment."

Steve huffed a small laugh. "Were we?" He looked up at Tony and suddenly caught a serious look on his face.

"I don't know," said Tony, his voice uncertain. "Were we?"

Steve couldn't look away. This wasn't Tony's regular cocky asshole look. This wasn't his flippant look either. This was something else.

"Were we?" Tony asked again.
Steve swallowed. Tony put a hand on his shoulder and damn, that should not feel as gentle and good as it felt.

He was still shaky from the dropped bottle incident, from Tony and Natasha both seeing him so off-balance - he should back up and walk away before this became anything more than it was: two friends, late at night, dealing with demons. Right now this could've been any night with the Commandos.

It didn't look like Tony wanted that.

Steve sure as hell didn't. Which was why he should back away.

There had been something growing between them in the last few weeks, Steve realized, his heart simultaneously sinking and racing. Glances that held a little too long, Tony being a little too vehement in Steve's defence, Steve feeling a glow at that that was totally different from how he felt when any of the others went to bat for him. A lot of other hints here and there. He'd been an idiot for not admitting it to himself.

He swallowed, unable to look away from Tony, seeing what he normally didn't let himself notice -- and Tony's eyes were really incredibly beautiful, he thought irrelevantly. His body so strong, wiry, his hands so deft and skilled, his hair just begging to be played with--

Damn it, he was staring. His body, still in fight-or-flight mode, was tensioning in an entirely different way and he was helpless, helpless to stop it. Goosebumps were rising on his arms, his fingers suddenly itching to reach out and touch Tony.

Tony reached for him, slowly, and he should be backing away, he should be putting distance between them before this turned into something very different and they crossed a line.

Tony's hand was on his, and they were gazing at each other, and Steve licked his lips. Tony's gaze lowered and he raised his eyebrows slightly.

Steve took a deep breath. "Tony." He swallowed.

"I--"

"I know. But I... I can't."

"You seriously don't want this?" Tony paused. "Because I've had a lot of experience with seeing what people look like when they want me." It was amazing how he could say something so egotistical without the egoism that usually accompanied everything he said, up to and including 'I'd like eggs for breakfast today.' "And you want me."

He took a deep breath. Yes, God, yes, he wanted this - wanted Tony - more than he could remember ever wanting anything in such a very long time...

Tony leaned forward, and Steve drew in his breath as their lips touched. His lips were warmer than Steve had expected, and it was... his beard was coarse, and prickly, but his lips were soft and hotter than Steve had expected. They kissed for a moment, lips moving gently together, a lot more chaste and hesitant than Steve had expected, and through the dizzying rush of adrenaline and aching desire part of him wondered what it was that Tony was trying to prove here.

Then Tony kissed him again, cupping his cheek and tugging him closer, and a shiver ran through Steve.
"No." It came from deep inside him, and he made himself step away. "No, you know, becoming another notch in Iron Man's bedpost is not as attractive as you might think."

"What?" Tony's voice was low, his eyes slightly dazed.

"You heard me."

"You think I--"

Steve clenched his fists. "I think you do this kind of thing all the time. Maybe not with men, but with people you don't care about and sometimes don't even know."

Tony's mouth dropped open. "You're not one of them."

"No, I'm not." He stepped away, his body shivering, the warmth of Tony's hands on him, the tingle of their lips having touched, still on his body like a hot brand. "I'm not gonna be part of your indulging yourself."

Tony's eyes had narrowed and his chest was still heaving, Steve noted distantly. "I have a rep, yeah. But I thought you'd learned that the rep isn't all there is to me. And maybe you shouldn't be so attached to your own rep. Maybe you should do a little indulging yourself for once in your life."

"You don't even care what's right or wrong," said Steve, disgust beginning to rise - at Tony or at himself, he had no clue. "You just take whatever you want and--"

"You know what?" said Tony. "I'm starting to get insulted here. I may not be as ridiculously upright as you are, but if you don't get, yet, that I can actually care about people, then--" He broke off and stepped back, and he and Steve stared at each other, about a dozen different horrified thoughts coursing through Steve. What the hell had he done, what the hell had he said, how could he have lashed out at Tony like that, what the hell was wrong with him--

"No. OK. Sorry," said Tony. "This was a bad idea. I'm good at those." He stopped, then went around the broken beer bottle. "Go to bed. And don't worry about the bottle, the kitchen bots can clean it up." He cleared his throat. "I meant what I said about you coming down to the workshop, if you want. I do know about not being able to sleep. I won't... this won't happen again. We'll both just pretend it didn't happen. Good-night." He left the kitchen.

Steve leaned against the counter and put his head in his hands, more ashamed of himself than he had ever been in his life.

Chapter End Notes

The movie watched/mentioned is

Tom Jones, 1962
Chapter Notes

Thanks to scrtkpr, TheKinkyPet, and CariZee for your beta!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1.

September 28

Pretend it never happened. If only it were so easy.

True to his word, Tony hadn't mentioned anything at breakfast or dinner or movie night the day after they'd kissed. There had been no outward indication from him that anything improper had happened between them.

Of course, to Tony, it probably wasn't improper.

Steve sat on his motorcycle and watched as the sunlight gently touched down, beam by beam, on Central Park, gilding the autumn leaves and bushes. There hadn't been any point in even trying to sleep last night; the team had finished watching *Tom Jones* and he'd said good-night to everyone and then just taken the motorcycle out, weaving through the sparse night-time traffic, occasionally stopping at dark abandoned parks, passing time and waiting for dawn to come.

What had happened between him and Tony had been wrong, had gone against everything Steve had been taught, everything he had promised himself as a teenager and then promised himself again after the Serum. He hadn't signed up to be a moral symbol, he'd been telling Tony the truth about that. But he'd seen, after freeing Bucky and his comrades, what the uniform had done for them and for so many others. He'd seen how they looked up to him - not just him, the little guy from Brooklyn, but Captain America. And he'd vowed to never let them down. To never disgrace the uniform. No matter how much he wanted things he shouldn't want, no matter how much his new body confused him with urges that left him reeling, no matter how much that handsome lab tech from Howard Stark's lab distracted him. He'd never give in. It wasn't an option.

It had been easy then, in a way. Not only would giving in have been completely illegal, but, confusing as his new body was, he was often too busy to desire much other than food and a clean bed at the end of the day. He'd even been amused at the paranoia of those who felt men like him shouldn't be in the service where they'd be so close to so many fit young men, because living in close quarters with soldiers wasn't sexy. He'd often thought it would take a much bigger deviant than him to find their squalor, their unwashed feet, their dirty underwear - Dum-Dum's greasy muttonchops, Dernier's morning breath, Morita's relentless night-time flatulence - arousing. If anything, he'd thought once or twice, homosexuals who wanted to go straight should be encouraged to spend some time living among sweaty, stinking soldiers. Steve might be gay as the day was long, but a week in the field with the Commandos and even he could get it up for a dame. Peggy had been like a breath of fresh air - literally. Pure and sexy and almost enough to make his head spin.

She was gone, though.
And Tony was here.

And he refused to let himself think about what it had felt like to kiss him, how desperately good it felt
to have someone touch him, to feel close to someone - to feel close to Tony - how insistently his
body had clamoured for more...

And, even more unforgivable, how he'd turned on Tony, pushed him away, blamed Tony for Steve's
own failure, and said hateful things that Tony in no way deserved. He'd tried, haltingly, to apologize
to Tony the next day, but Tony had cut him off almost immediately. Steve didn't blame him.

He would've been able to resist temptation, had he only stayed in his own time. In this time, with
everyone heedlessly pursuing their own pleasure, with images of sex and half-naked people of both
genders pushed at him night and day, with Tony singing a siren song of Steve, you owe it to
yourself...

Steve checked his watch, got off his bike and looked around.

Morning in New York. So similar, yet so different, from what he remembered. Many of the outlines
of the buildings were familiar, but the windows, fronts, and signs were all machine-made, the
pictures bigger and brighter and more garish, the words foreign - especially when they were
technically English - and often ugly.

He found a familiar restaurant - still closed, but the outdoor tables were available for early-morning
commuters and joggers to use if needed. He claimed one and took out his sketchbook, idly pencilling
in another building front, trying to make himself see the beauty in it. See its clean lines and
impossible architecture as fanciful, exuberant.

It was ugly.

One thing hadn't changed. The city really never slept. It just got slightly quieter at the darkest part of
night, and then the rhythms of the morning were the same. Hot dog stands, newspaper vendors, and
delivery trucks; it was too early yet for all the people who sold incomprehensible little gadgets that
Tony had told him he could get far better from Stark Industries.

He started slightly as his favourite waitress from this restaurant, a young blond woman, appeared
beside him.

"Don't usually see you here so early," she said, smiling her shy smile.

"Not usually here so early, no," he said. "I didn't know you worked the morning shift." Her eyes lit
up, and he blushed a bit as he realized that could be taken to be a low-level come-on.

Ask for her number, you moron, an old man at the next table over had said to him once, one day that
he'd been sketching the Stark Tower - before the Avengers - and she'd been working here and
possibly flirting with him.

He hadn't really wanted to then, and he certainly didn't now. And it wasn't just because he was pretty
sure she knew he was Captain America and that made things... awkward.

Why not, though? Why shouldn't he flirt with her? With any of the women he met on a daily basis,
really? If he meant what he'd said to Tony, that eventually he wanted to get married and have a
family like any normal person would, it sure as hell wouldn't happen if he never did anything about
it.

"Um, how often do you work the early shift?" he asked the young woman - Beth, if he remembered
correctly - as she gave the table next to him a quick wipe. She smiled at him, pleased but also obviously surprised. Right, because he never spoke to her first, though he was polite enough when she spoke to him.

"Not too often. I'm doing a favour for a friend." She finished with the table and moved to another one. "You, uh, up early a lot?"

"Sometimes."

"What do you do?"

"Um." Perhaps he should've thought this through before engaging. But he'd thought she knew. "Kinda hard to explain. I work for the government, I guess?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm in... security."

She nodded easily. "OK." Yeah, she knew. She smiled at him. "You like to draw a lot, don't you?"

"Yeah. Went to art school."

"Which one?"

"City College."

"Yeah? Me too!" She looked around at the empty tables and sat down, and he glimpsed her name tag. Beth; he'd been right. "I'm getting my Early Childhood Education licence."

"You like kids?"

Beth thought for a moment, her chin propped in her hand. "I do. I really do, I'm just not sure I want to work with them for the rest of my life, you know?" She grimaced. "Sometimes I think I'd rather just be a waitress. The pay's not that bad, and I get to spend time with my friends."

He nodded.

"My parents want me to do more, though."

He smiled, and they both turned as an elderly woman in a business suit approached and sat down. Beth stood up with an apologetic smile at Steve and went to serve her. Steve breathed a small sigh of relief as she flitted about and another customer showed up and the tables began to fill. He'd really had no idea what else he was going to talk to her about, though she seemed friendly enough that maybe it wouldn't have been a problem. Besides, he was too sleep-deprived for this, damn it.

This was what life was supposed to be like. Meet a nice girl, get to know her, fall in love, get married. He might only be sexually turned on by a deep voice, broad shoulders, strong arms and hands, might be rapidly becoming almost obsessively drawn to Tony, but the world was meant to go two by two, male and female. What could a pair of men possibly do together, once the sex was done? Yes, the world had changed and it was no longer expected that somebody like Natasha would be in charge of all the cooking and leave wage-earning to a man (in fact, he couldn't really imagine that Peggy would've taken to that kind of thing either) but the thought of two men - or two women - setting up housekeeping together seemed silly. Ridiculous. Wrong. Not to mention trying to have kids together. The idea of deliberately trying to bring up children with no mother, or no father...
This was why he had to do more than just read the literature he'd gotten from the church, or pray. What had happened with Tony, and how Steve still felt about him, had proven that he couldn't resist his feelings on his own, not in this world. He needed help. And yes, the reports of what went on in some of the organizations that offered help might be frightening, and many of the people involved narrow-minded and wrong, but surely there had to be something of worth to learn from some of them. Something of value if he was going to resist temptation and never, never again do what he'd done two days ago.

He checked his watch, stood up, gave Beth a small wave, and headed off.

He thought over his research as he made his way to the church, threading past commuters on their way to work. So much of what he'd read had been repellent. Electroshock, aversion therapy, all sorts of things that sounded barbaric and misguided and just plain wrong. Or ridiculous - at least for him - like telling homosexuals to be more 'manly' in order to cure their urges. Because if Steve's day job wasn't manly enough, he didn't know what was.

'Taming sexual addiction,' that was another one that caused him to simply shake his head and move on. How could you be addicted to something you'd never had before?

As for all of the places that frothed about hell and eternal damnation... the God he believed in bore no resemblance to anything those people ranted about. The God he believed in was compassionate, understanding, and infinitely forgiving. He didn't cast you into eternal hellfire just for being human. He understood your failures and let you try again.

The church he'd found sounded a lot saner. They just talked about unlearning desires, getting to know triggers, avoiding situations that would be detrimental to pursuing healthy heterosexual relationships. A lot of their work seemed geared at people who were already married to somebody of the opposite sex and wanted to stay that way. Which, OK, didn't exactly fit Steve, but he was willing to try it out. Even if a lot of their literature sounded like how to avoid real burgers so you could make a life-long commitment to veggie burgers.

...what a completely crass way to look at human sexuality. Maybe he was adapting to this century faster than he thought. The thought was really, truly depressing.

He paused at a street light, hit by a sudden sharp wave of homesickness. God, if only he was back in his own time. If only he could be back with Sister Barbara or Father Brauer, with their sympathy and patience, reassuring him that what he was feeling was perfectly normal, that lots of boys went through doubts but ended up just fine. They'd encouraged him to think ahead to when he was a grown man with a wife and children. They'd reassured him that, if he was willing to be patient and not give in, God would help him through this. Father Brauer had talked a lot about sin and hell too, but even at age fifteen Steve hadn't been particularly moved by that particular tack, and Father Brauer had let off pretty quickly.

And Bucky; Bucky had been fierce in his determination to not let him feel like a freak. He'd pushed girls at him and told him he just had to get laid and it would all go away. He'd been jubilant when he'd wormed out of Steve what had happened with the USO girls, and, despite his disgruntlement at Peggy's complete disinterest towards Bucky himself, had heartily approved of what she and Steve had together, tentative as it was.

He crossed the street. What he wouldn't give to have Bucky here with him now.

God's Peace, said the small plaque on the side of the church. Steve checked his watch one last time. 9AM.
He opened the door and headed inside.

2.

October 2

Natasha crouched, waiting, behind the low wall on the roof, and watched Clint find his perch on the roof across the street.

"Guy calls himself the Delineator?" Clint said over the comm.

"Spare me," muttered Tony. "Why can't we get super-villains with cool names. Instead we get Verminator. Delineator."

"We get called in for a Deluminator and I'm outta here," Bruce's voice came in.

As far as Natasha could tell, the name didn't even make any sense for what the guy was supposedly using as his super-weapon: a spray that made anyone who came into contact with it extremely pliable, though, happily, it didn't quite leave them with as much of their knowledge and skills intact as Loki's spear did.

"You know, this could be a tempest in a teacup here," said Tony.

"He's got a spray that can make everyone do his bidding," Natasha protested. "How is that not a threat? If he figures out how to use it in non-aerolised form and gets it into the water supply - if SHIELD Intel is right, he could do anything with it."

"Or he could use it to get his enemies to make him cheeseburgers," said Tony. "People can be pretty petty. Maybe he just wants people to listen to him and do what he says."

"I have no idea what that would be like," said Sorensen. Nobody laughed.

"Maybe gangsta-talk annoys him and he just wants people around him to speak in a refined manner," Tony continued. "He could be Professor Higgins, except using a Loki-spear-in-a-can instead of creepy emotional abuse."

"Iron Man, what are you talking about?" Sorensen's irritated voice came over the comm.

"My Fair Lady," said Tony. "Linguistics professor takes a working-class girl and turns her into an upper-class lady, very Svengali-like, all sorts of connotations of building your own perfect mate and-

"Sure, Iron Man," said Sorensen. "Maybe you can stop talking on the comms unless it's necessary."

"Hang on - somebody coming to the third window from the left, top story," Clint said, his voice muffled slightly by his gas mask. Natasha tensed. "Target... no, target not sighted. I think that's one of his minions. Large woman with a kinda weird hat. She's got some kind of - hey, she's got a spray bottle of some kind."

"Is she pointing it at anyone?" asked Cap.

"Can't see anyone else in the room. Coming to the window. She's opening it. Oh shit."

"We don't need the profanity on the comms, Hawkeye," said Sorensen. "Does she look like she's pointing it at our people? Are we blown?"
"Funny, when Cap tells me to watch my potty-mouth, I fucking well listen to him," Clint commented. "She's... ah, fuck me, she's just spraying the plants in the window box. Son of a bitch."

"Hawkeye," said Steve.

"I mean, son of a gun. Gosh darn, this is taking a long time. Is he ever gonna come outta there?"

"Maybe he's agoraphobic," said Tony. "Maybe this is all a plot to get other people to get his groceries for him." The woman kept spraying. "Or maybe he's just trying to get petunias to do his bidding."

"Wouldn't that be loverly?" Clint muttered.

The woman finished the plants and closed the window.

"So, Iron Man, does this mission meet with your approval?" asked Sorensen snidely.

"Thought we were keeping quiet on the comms," said Steve.

Natasha rolled her eyes and maintained her post, adjusting her mask. They'd determined that she and Clint would almost certainly not be directly involved in this fight; the spray, from SHIELD Intel, seemed to get past ordinary air filters and masks, and they weren't even sure Iron Man's suit and Captain America's enhanced biology could stand against it. They definitely did not need the merely human Avengers taken over - and Clint, especially, did not need to be controlled by an outside agency again. It would be disastrous for him, never mind the media fallout.

The damned media. Natasha blew out her breath. It was a good thing it was an election year, they all kept telling themselves, because the media was a pain in the ass. Somehow they'd gotten into the habit of pointing out that Iron Man wasn't really a very good role model, that he wasn't enough to protect America - and then in the same article sometimes would point out that Captain America, who belonged to everyone, sometimes took unnecessary risks and that it would be a national loss if he were seriously hurt. So Iron Man didn't do enough and Captain America did too much. In fact, the Avengers themselves weren't active enough - but they put themselves unnecessarily at risk. In her more paranoid moments, she was starting to suspect Sorensen of being a media mole.

"This is why we need procedures in place," Sorensen had said the last time there'd been a negative story.

"What procedures?"

"SHIELD procedures on what is and what isn't acceptable risk. It wouldn't make any difference to you trained personnel--" he said, nodding to Clint and Natasha.

"Oh yeah, because Hawkeye always follows procedure," said Tony.

"All it would take would be some practical training--"

"You don't want me to do some of those obstacle courses," said Bruce.

"And I don't work or play well with others, training or no," said Tony. "It's on my file."

"I appreciate the opportunity to train and learn," said Steve. "I won't speak for my team, though."

"Nobody's asking you to," Sorensen had snapped. "You're their leader on the field. Other than that, you're nothing."
Tony's eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me?"

"He's more of a field commander than a leader. The actual authority--"

"Is sure as hell not SHIELD, and it's sure as hell not you!" Tony had said, his usual bratty nonchalance replaced by surprisingly fierce anger.

"I see something," Clint's voice broke into Natasha's thoughts. "Movement inside the building. People moving down the stairs."

"Coming out?" asked Natasha.

"Possibly. Hard to tell how many; I'm estimating maybe eight or ten?"

"We don't know how many are in the building, though," Natasha worried. "Or how much independent thinking they can manage."

"Remember, Hawkeye," said Steve. "SHIELD Intel says they're all wearing some sort of mesh that protects them from small projectiles. You can't stun-dart them."

"Yeah, I'm gonna try anyway, in case Intel's wrong. I got nothing else."

"That would be a waste of SHIELD resources, Hawkeye," said Sorensen.

"Here they come - hey, target sighted," said Clint, satisfaction in his voice. "It's definitely him - oh and he's nicely color-coded, too, yellow shirt and green pants."

"All right, Iron Man and I are going in," said Steve. "I'll distract him by engaging his people; Iron Man, you provide air cover in case he's got that vehicle Intel warned us about, and take out his spray bottle as soon as you can do it without hurting his human shields. Thor, we don't know if this will affect you, so stay away unless you're needed. If I'm taken over, do your best to take me down. JARVIS'll shut down Iron Man's suit."

"Good luck, Captain, Man of Iron," said Thor.

"I don't want Captain Rogers in there," said Sorensen.

"Sorensen, we went over this," snapped Tony. "Cap and I are going in first."

"It should be you and Thor. The newspapers will go crazy if Captain America is taken over by this controlling substance."

"I'm less likely to be taken over than most of the others," said Steve. "Drugs don't work on me, remember? I metabolize them too quickly."

"Thor can--"

"I fell to the influence of that substance called 'Margarita' that the Man of Iron provided last movie night," said Thor. "Whereas our Captain remained upright with ease. I agree with his request to hold back unless I am needed."

"You think too much about the media, Sorensen," said Tony.

"And you people don't think about it enough. You are not to engage, Captain Rogers," said Sorensen.
"You are not to keep interrupting with your stupid-ass opinions," said Tony.

The door opened, and a tightly arranged group of people came out. The large woman with the interesting hat was in front, followed by three burly-looking construction-worker-types and five businessmen. On either side of the Delineator were two very good-looking young women, neither of whom looked more than twenty years old.

A criminal mastermind or military genius this man was not; he seemed to have been recruiting from a Sears catalog. Not one of the minions surrounding him looked capable of hand-to-hand. Though looks could be deceiving...

Clint tsk'd in annoyance. "I don't have a shot. He's too surrounded. He's a little guy, the others are all tall or wearing hats, all moving around him."

"Iron Man, I'm going in," said Steve.

"No, you're not," said Sorensen.

"Agent Sorensen, go off comm," said Steve.

"Oh, thank fuck," said Clint.

Sorensen's shock was palpable even over the comm. "Excuse me? Captain, what are you--"

"Get off the comms," Cap repeated.

"JARVIS, block Sorensen from my comm," said Clint.

"Mine too," said Natasha, with deep satisfaction.

"Mine too," said Bruce.

"And mine," said Thor.

"You heard them, JARVIS," said Tony. "Think you've just been kicked out of the audial playground, dude."

"OK, Hawkeye, take a shot," said Steve. "Close as you can to the Delineator."

There was a twang, and Clint swore. "Nope. Bounced right off. Intel was right."

The Delineator's crowd was alert now, and staring all around for the source of the dart.

"I'm going in," said Steve. Natasha watched as Steve ran into the street. Within moments, the door of the building had opened and over a dozen more people came rushing out, swarming Steve.

"Guess he's not as stupid as we thought," Steve's voice came over the comm, slightly out of breath. He was fighting steadily, his shield holding off attackers while his kicks and punches slowly brought him closer to the Delineator, but Natasha could tell the effort of not being able to hurt the civilians was making it difficult, and there wasn't much Tony could do to help. Other than occasionally blast something near the attackers to prevent them from swarming Steve too much, and even that wasn't all that effective when he was blasting only to startle and frighten, not to harm.

The Delineator knew that, too, damn him. He kept ordering his people forward.

"Shit!" Tony blurted. "Cap, he just sprayed you!"
"Is that what that turpentine smell is?" Steve bit out, dodging a kick. "No effect, far as I can tell."

"Not all of them are being controlled, I don't think," said Clint. "I'm pretty sure at least some of the ones who came out in the second bunch are with him willingly. If they are, he must have an antidote to this stuff."

"I agree," said Natasha. "It's hard to tell who's who though."

"Some of them have training, too - ow, damn," Steve grunted as one of them connected a kick to his ribs.

"Cap, you know I can do hand-to-hand in the suit too, right?" said Tony, sounding frustrated.

"They're civilians," said Steve. "Don't wanna risk it."

"The one in green track pants is a pro," said Natasha.

"And the one with the blue tie and the big redhead," said Clint. "I'm pretty sure they're free-thinking, too. Get 'em, Cap."

"You sure?" asked Steve.

"I'm sure," said Clint. "Get 'em."

Steve quickly ducked under a fist and flung his shield, which hit Blue Tie in the shoulder and ricocheted to smack Green Track Pants in the face, and Tony dipped down to grab the redhead and toss him down the block. They all went down, groaning and swearing, but the others pressed in.

"Captain, this is taking too long, and you are being injured," said Thor a few minutes later. "It is unlikely that I will succumb to this strange substance."

"All right, come on in," said Steve breathlessly. "Target the ones Hawkeye and Widow have been pointing out."

"I'll just keep floating up here," said Tony. "Admiring the puppy pile this guy's got around him and feeling... fucking useless."

"Join the club," said Bruce.

Thor appeared on the street, carefully leaving his hammer far enough away that it would take a few moments to pick it up if he were taken over, and Natasha tensed as he approached the melee. He waded in, easily fighting hand-to-hand but constrained as Steve was by the need to not hurt the civilians.

"The Delineator just aimed some of that spray at you, Thor," said Clint. "Feel anything?"

"No," Thor panted. "Not yet." He stopped a kick with his hand and pushed back the kicker. "Although there is a scent of Pop-Tarts in the air. Is this what turpentine smells like?"

"Don't think so. Don't worry, dude, you've got no meshy thing on you. You start to turn, I got your personal stun dart ready, and Iron Man'll blast you."

"That is comforting."

"Might even make me feel like I'm earning my keep here," said Tony.
"I hope to keep you feeling useless," said Thor.

"The one in the purple's definitely under the influence," said Natasha. "But she's got good moves so-"

"Oh crap," said Clint. "I think our boy just got tired of fighting."

The side of the building crumbled and a brightly gleaming silver and flaming orange vehicle with some sort of spinning rotors came speeding out, hovering ominously over the crowd. Natasha whistled. It was huge. It could probably carry the Delineator and all of his minions, though its size and the flashy thunderbolts on the side didn't exactly make it the stealthiest of getaway vessels. Impressive, though.

"Iron Man!" Steve called out.

"Finally!" Tony was already in place, blasting the thing, and it crumpled unceremoniously half a block away from the Delineator's group. Suddenly the tight crowd around the Delineator parted, and Natasha heard a sharp twang.

"Got him!" Clint crowed. "Grab him while he's pissed off, Tony--"

Tony swooped down and grabbed the Delineator, lifting him up. There was a startled grunt over the comm.

"That was your containment arrow?" asked Natasha, pleased.

"Yeah, that was it. Got the spray bottle covered now - thanks, Iron Man," Clint said as Tony manoeuvred the Delineator so that he was hanging by one hand, and Clint fired an arrow that enmeshed him completely.

"What happened there?" asked Natasha. "Why was Iron Man able to grab him?"

"He got mad when his Hot Wheels got smashed," said Clint. "He raised himself over the puppy pile for a moment, so I took a stun shot."

"I thought they all had mesh barriers over them," said Tony.

"It didn't affect him, just pissed him off. Like throwing a spit-ball." He paused and chuckled. "You gonna tell Sorensen on me for wasting ammo?"

"We'll think of something," said Steve, panting. "Good shot, Hawkeye."

"Three good shots," said Tony. "Spit-ball the bad guy, contain his Spray Bottle of Doom without smashing it, and wrap up said bad guy with a nice little bow. Nice work."

It was just clean-up at this point, Natasha realized. About two-thirds of the Delineator's force were looking around in confusion, clearly uninterested in fighting anybody. The rest were easy enough for Steve and Thor to finish off, especially as they didn't need to hold themselves back any more. Their opponents weren't fighting very hard, what with their leader trussed up like a turkey and still dangling pathetically below Iron Man.

"I think it's safe to come in," said Steve, taking off his cowl and wiping his nose, which was bleeding slightly. "The bottle didn't burst, and the people affected by the spray don't seem to be under any more. Widow?"
"I'll come down and make sure," said Natasha, taking off her mask and hurrying down to street level.

"Maybe the Delineator's will has to be focussed on them for the spray to work," mused Bruce. "It'll be interesting seeing what it's made of."

A pretty rousing success, all in all, thought Natasha as SHIELD gathered the Delineator's dazed former allies and took them off to be taken care of. And all with a minimum of civilian casualties or property destruction. A few blast holes in the pavement, smashed side of a building - the Delineator's building, and caused by the Delineator himself - and some broken windows.

"That was completely unacceptable!" Sorensen's voice could be heard from miles away, and Natasha realized she hadn't missed it at all.

"What the fuck," said Clint, coming down the ladder of his building. He and Natasha approached the SHIELD car that had just stopped next to Steve and Tony.

"Well done, people," said Fury, getting out. He glanced at the civilians being helped into waiting ambulances, the Delineator's vehicle sitting in a dejected heap of flashy scrap.

"Well done?! They turned off their comms in the middle of the op!"

"You have got to be kidding me," said Bruce.

"He was a distraction, sir," said Natasha.

"They all did it! They were unprofessional in the extreme," said Sorensen.

"What's more professional than a complete win, asshole?!" said Tony.

"The SHIELD liaison is there to provide backup and ideas," said Hill. "He can't do that if you freeze him out."

"He provided his back-up and ideas," said Steve, speaking around the SHIELD medic checking his already-fading bruises. "And then he stopped. We were still in communication with each other. And we got the job done."

"This was not according to procedure," said Hill. "And that will have to be taken up."

"For fuck's sake," said Clint. "Are you serious?"

"Save your breath, Hawkeye," said Tony. "And let's go home."

"We're still debriefing!" said Sorensen.

"We have more important things to do," Tony shot back. "We're starting The Sound of Music, and Hawkeye and I are going to teach the others how to sing four-part harmony to 'My Favorite Things."

3.

October 10

"Why don't we quit SHIELD?" Tony, still vibrating with frustration. They'd finally finished the clusterfuck of meetings over the fallout for the mission that had gone right, god damn it, but had turned to shit because Sorensen and Hill got their panties in a twist about fucking comms, for fuck's sake. And nothing seemed to simmer down Tony's anger over it; not the media's approval, not
designing a new set of pants to preserve Bruce's post-green modesty, not *The Sound of Fucking Music* that they'd just finished watching - not even Clint teaching them all the dirty version of 'Climb Every Mountain.'

No chance of sleeping when he was this riled up; Tony had already given it a good shot. He'd come down to the common floor, intending to maybe tweak the kitchen appliances, only to find their resident neat freak, wearing an old shirt with what looked like oil paint stains on it, finishing off cleaning inside of the fridge.

"Seriously, why don't we quit?" he repeated. "Tell them to go to hell. Pepper would kill me but Stark Industries could probably fund--"

"Because it's not that simple," said Steve, putting away the eggs. "Breaking from SHIELD would be a logistical nightmare. Besides, why would we?"

"Because I don't think they're dealing straight with us! I don't want to be anybody's puppet, and it feels like that's what we are." He paused. "Because we deserve better than this, damn it!"

"So we have an ass for a supervisor," Steve snapped. "It happens."

"He is not our supervisor," said Tony, too wired to even tease Steve about his language. "We are not in the army. Don't you feel it? Something's off about the guy. Even Clint and Natasha feel it, and they're SHIELD!"

"Tony, don't," said Steve impatiently. "Stop being paranoid." He started to put the jams back in - wow, he'd cleaned the jars off too. Captain America, the Avengers Maid Service.

"How do you stand it?"

"I have to."

Damn it, it wasn't fair. Tony felt like blowing something up, and Steve, the one really getting pummelled by Sorensen, the one who had to deal with that asshole picking apart every single thing he did, was dealing with it was so much more grace...

"Damn you." Tony looked away. "Half the time you make me want to be a better person--"

Steve huffed an incredulous laugh as he lined up the jars. "Do I?"

"--and half the time you make me want to poke you with something electrical, just to get you to react."

Steve shook his head, half-amused, half-irritated, finished the jars and put away the milk.

"You're playing at being such a good little soldier, you keep a lid on everything. Even when things are going your way, you don't let go. Fuck, even the other night, watching the Presidential debate - your candidate was wiping the floor with--"

Steve scowled at him. "Stop calling him *my* candidate! You think I - you know what? You don't know a damn thing about me!" Tony felt a pang of alarm. Steve set the butter dish on the counter with a thump. "You want a reaction from me? Let me correct a few things for you, then. First off, I don't know who I'm going to vote for! And when I say that, I'm not being coy about my political opinions; I really don't know!" He glared at Tony. "Wanna hear a few others? I'm not Catholic, even though I was raised in a Catholic orphanage. And I am not a 'good little soldier' - I sure as hell didn't intend to be in the army for the rest of my life! And for the record, I don't like working for Sorensen
Tony blinked at him, realizing his mouth was hanging open. "OK. Um, never heard Captain America actually swear before. I'm, wow, having a moment here. This does bother you, then."

Steve looked away from him. "A lotta stuff bothers me, Tony," he said, his fists clenched. He picked up the butter dish again, carefully placed it in the fridge and closed the door.

"Why hold it in, then?" Tony paused. "Why not go after Sorensen? You could take him any day with your eyes closed!"

"Yeah? What would be the point of that?" Steve started to wipe the counter that had held all of their fridge food.

"Hey, don't act like you don't know how to let go and be pissed off. You wanted to go a few rounds with me in my suit when we first met."

"That was Loki's spear talking," Steve snapped. "Not me."

"And without something like that, you just go along with everything? Yes sir, no sir, how high, sir?"

Steve glared at him. "Go to hell, Tony." He finished wiping the counter and washed the dishcloth, his movements angry and tense.

Tony shook his head and stepped closer to Steve, put a hand on his arm. "Why hold yourself back so much, all the time? Why is what you want to do always the wrong thing to do?"

"Sometimes it just is. Can't you see that?"

"Sometimes it isn't." Tony shook his shoulder gently. "Steve. Fuck. You keep everything inside. You... Bruce needs to let go of his anger. You need to let go of... everything."

"No, I don't." Steve dried his hands and took a deep breath, obviously trying for patience and not reaching it. "Look, I know what you're trying to do. I appreciate it. But please don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not you! I don't feel like letting go."

"Seriously, dude, maybe if you did you'd sleep better. Not be so tense all the time."

Steve shook his head and Tony realized he was still touching him, but Steve didn't seem to mind. In fact, he was leaning towards him very slightly, and Tony suddenly wondered if he was even aware of it.

"Why do you push so much?" Steve asked, exasperated.

"It's... what I do?" Tony hazarded. "How I show affection? Possibly emotionally maladaptive?"
Steve chuckled unexpectedly. "Possibly." He turned slightly, closed his eyes and rubbed them.

"Don't you ever wonder what it would feel like if you did what you want?"

Tony felt Steve shiver under his hand. "Sometimes." Steve paused. "All the time."

"So why don't you? For once, just..." Tony trailed off as Steve opened his eyes and gazed at him for a long moment, then leaned closer, slowly raising a hand to Tony's cheek.

Oh.

Oh shit, this was not what he'd intended at all - or, oh shit, had he? - and if this was anybody else, especially anybody else Tony was this attracted to, he'd be on them so fast... but this was Steve, and Steve's eyes were dark and hungry, his cheeks flushed, his expression determined but nervous. And nobody had been this important to him since Pepper, and after what had happened the last time Tony had let his stupid impulses do his thinking for him - if he pushed him at all Steve just might--

Steve's hand moved to the back of Tony's head and he tugged him closer, and Tony went, sighing in relief as Steve's lips touched his and they kissed, Steve's mouth parting under his, a small soft sound at the base of Steve's throat as their tongues touched and Steve immediately deepened their kiss.

God, this was so different from the first time. Then, Tony had been hesitant and half-convinced Steve was going to push him away - which he had, moments into their kiss. This time, Steve was pulling him close and their kisses quickly turned hard and bruising, exhilarating. Steve's hands ran down to Tony's waist, pressing them together chest to waist, and whoa, Steve was hard and so was Tony, and he wanted to touch every part of Steve, have him moaning under him, on the floor or against the counter, but who knew what the hell Steve wanted from this...

"Tony... I don't know what to do next," he panted, breaking their kiss, resting their foreheads together.

"Whatever feels good," Tony said breathlessly. " Seriously. Whatever feels good. I'm up for it." He took Steve's mouth in another kiss.

Oh my God. He hadn't meant for this to happen. He'd told himself to respect Steve's boundaries, told himself that what had happened between them once had been an anomaly and that he was going to be a responsible, mature adult just to see what that was like. Rise above the ugly (and mostly true) things Steve had said about him. He'd told himself that maybe Steve was just curious, not really into Tony at all, it was just that Tony was the only queer guy he knew, and that was why he'd been so angry at them both: because it didn't mean anything, and Steve Rogers did not do meaningless...

But this didn't feel meaningless at all. This felt incredibly meaningful, and hot as hell, as they pressed together and Steve practically inhaled Tony, hands caressing him everywhere, down his back, into his hair, and it was ridiculous but Tony was gonna get hard every time he smelled oil paints and kitchen cleaners from now on. Steve's lips, his entire body, felt hungry and desperate, one hand slipping in under Tony's shirt, sliding up his back, the other cupping his ass, and Tony instinctively thrust against Steve, a groan escaping him as Steve copied the motion and shuddered against him - and holy shit, if this was what Steve was like when he let go, it was--

"No. No, I can't. Fuck, I can't." Steve pushed himself away from Tony, and Tony felt a moment of complete disorientation at the sudden absence of all contact before Steve reached out and grabbed his arm, holding him in place, his chest heaving, his eyes closed tight. "Fuck, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I can't, I can't."
Tony's entire body was on fire. No, fuck no, not again. "Why not? Is this - why did you--"

"I - I can't." He opened his eyes and met Tony's, his eyes haunted. "I don't, this isn't on you, I shouldn't have - it wasn't your fault last time either, what I said back then was wrong, but I just--"

"Why not?" said Tony, and winced at how close to a whine that came out.

"Because this is wrong."

Tony wiped his mouth with his hand, panting. "'This'? What's wrong? Going for a guy, or going for me? What is it?"

"It's not that it's you, it's - Tony, I can't," Steve said, his voice anguished.

Tony licked his lips, still reeling. "So - so what are you going to do? Make sure you never make out with a guy? Seriously try to date women instead?" He paused. "Going to stick with soyburgers for the rest of your life?"

"Tony." Steve gave him a pained look.

"You know, that would be fine if you actually liked them, like Bruce does. But you don't. You said you don't."

Steve ran an agitated hand through his hair and hung his head.

"Seriously, what are you gonna do? Go to one of those ex-gay places?"

Silence. Steve bit his lip.

Tony's breath caught. "Oh my God. You wouldn't seriously..."

Steve's lips pressed together and he took a deep breath.

"Are you - you were raised by nuns, and you're still listening to their outdated morality? Even most Catholics don't believe in that shit!"

Steve was silent for a long time, the only sound in the kitchen their labored breathing as they both brought themselves back.

"First off, I told you, I'm not even Catholic," said Steve, finally letting go of Tony and starting to straighten his shirt with unsteady hands. "Second, I'm not a sheep; I don't follow my religion just because that's what I've always done. I follow it because I believe in it. And I just want to live my life without giving in to this."

"So you're going to... what? Pray the Gay Away? Do you honestly think it'll work?"

"I don't know."

"I can show you all sorts of research on these places--"

"I can read, Tony," said Steve quietly. "I know there's been a lot of controversy, and I know a lot of people say they're 'cured' but aren't really. I know there are a lot of hacks out there. But that doesn't mean they're all hacks. And it's my life, and my choice."

"There's nothing wrong with you, god damnit! You just need to relax a little, and be who you are. Don't make yourself into something you're not!"
"Don't you try to make me into something I'm not. I'm not your Eliza Doolittle, and you'd make a piss-poor Professor Higgins."

"I--"

"Let me have this, for God's sake!"

"For God's sake?"

"For my sake, damn it!"

Tony stopped. Steve was on an edge here, and much as everything in Tony told him to push him off of it, he... couldn't.

"Look, I can't go back home," said Steve, his voice shaking. "I can't have any of my people back. I can't... I can't have any of my own world back. Let me have the dignity of at least trying to do what I feel is right."

Tony gestured helplessly. "You do what's right every day, Steve. You're one of the best human beings I know."

"So respect me enough to not interfere in my life."

Tony blew out his breath.

"All right." He stepped back, his body protesting at the distance between them. "Fine. You go climb every mountain, ford every stream, all that bullshit." He paused. "Just one thing. Going to one of those ex-gay places... listen, go ahead, I can't stop you. But don't tell anyone else about it. If it works for you, it works for you; but those places are poison. You'd do a lot of harm if you publicized going there."

"Trust me, I'm not publicizing anything," said Steve, his voice low.

Tony's blood was still pounding, and his body was screaming at him to push back, to make Steve see that he was being an idiot and completely irrational and - and Steve's body language was radiating tension, and regret, and dejection, and Christ all they'd done was a bit of grab-ass and the guy looked like he'd just committed an axe-murder.

Tony took a deep breath. "Fine. Fine, what do I care, it's your life. I'm going to bed."

Chapter End Notes

1. The movies watched/mentioned are

My Fair Lady, 1963
The Sound of Music, 1964

2. City College of New York offers a Fine Arts degree today, and was around when Steve would've been going to art school, but I don't know if it offered Fine Arts degrees at the time. ::hand-wave at history::

3. Speaking of art, I made some! Alas, it is not Avengers art. It is, however, vaguely
related to this story in that it's sketches of Oscar-winning movies. If you want, you can think of it as Steve's Oscar sketchbook, and reconcile the lack of quality in it (despite Steve being an art student) by telling yourself it's Steve's extremely rough sketches. Like, took him maybe two minutes a piece to draw. ::clears throat:: Yeah, that's it.

http://annafugazzi.livejournal.com/292902.html


Chapter 2 (Gigi, 1958, Ben-Hur, 1959)

Chapter 3 (The Apartment, 1960, West Side Story, 1961, Lawrence of Arabia, 1962)

Chapter 4 (Tom Jones, 1963)
In the Heat of the Night

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to scrtkpr and NotAllGirlsAreGlass for beta - twice!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1.

October 18

"What the hell is your problem, Captain?" said Fury, and every other time Tony had seen him, he'd looked in control. This time he looked like he was about an inch away from punching Steve, however ill-advised that move might be. "Do you think this is some sort of joke?"

Steve didn't so much as blink in the face of Fury's blistering - well, fury - though since Steve still had a gash from his right eyebrow to his chin, it was hard to tell if he was unaffected or just didn't want to move his facial muscles. "I considered the alternatives and--"

"You could have sent Iron Man in!"

"Iron Man was busy," said Steve. "Those things were going to--"

"Iron Man was busy saving a bunch of people from a bus pinned down under a collapsed bridge. You could have taken those people to safety. He has armor, Captain. And repulsors. Those things had sixteen-inch fangs and spiked tails that were taking chunks out of buildings, and you went after them with a fucking shield and brass balls, and that is not acceptable!"

Tony swallowed. It had been a terrifying moment, and he could still remember the sick lurch in his stomach when he'd realized he couldn't get there fast enough to help Steve, not without abandoning the civilians.

To be honest, he was still a little terrified.

Steve shrugged the arm that was not in a sling. "I took out five of those things--"

"That's because Hawkeye exploded four of the others before they could kill you!"

"So I did my job too!" said Clint hotly. "Which is why we're a team, right?"

"Except he'd told you to watch over the warehouse and mall roof, and he's just lucky you happened to be glancing in his direction!"

"The Captain knew Hawkeye could do both," said Natasha.

"The Captain didn't know any such thing," said Sorensen.

Fury leaned forward. "Damn it, we did not fish you out of the ocean so you could make stupid-ass decisions and get yourself killed!"
"Why the hell did you fish me out, then?!" Steve snapped. "You wanted a soldier? You got one! If you don't like my calls, then find yourself someone else who--"

"We just might," said Sorensen.

"We just might not," snapped Fury, not bothering to look at Sorensen.

"You aren't the only authority," Sorensen muttered.

"Sir, with all due respect--" Hill began hastily.

"Agent Hill, when I want your opinion, I'll ask for it! Or if that's not enough for you, you can tell it to your people on the WSC! Right now, I'll thank you to keep your mouth shut! That goes double for you, Sorensen!"

Fury turned back to Steve.

"Captain, I personally have never had a problem with any of your calls over anybody's safety but your own," he said, his cold voice a contrast to his words. "But today you were stupid and reckless and while I may normally think Agent Sorensen's opinion isn't worth the paper it's printed on, this time I may have to sign off on his report and agree with it, which is doing nothing for my ulcers. Get it through your thick head that your job requires you to risk life and limb more than enough as a matter of course. And for fuck's sake, make use of the resources you've been given instead of assuming the answer to every life-threatening situation is 'Throw Captain America at it!' You're supposed to be a strategist; do your damn job! Because this time, you nearly killed yourself; next time, your death wish just might get somebody else killed!"

"That's not fair!" said Clint.

"He hasn't put any of us in danger!" said Tony, finally breaking his silence because damn it, that went over the line.

"Yeah?" said Fury. "Widow was disabling their vehicles and setting traps and expecting backup from Captain America. He gets taken out? She's left going up against eighteen of the human goons by herself--"

"I would've been there--" Tony began.

"Your suit suddenly lets you be in two places at once? And even if it did, do you really want to suddenly find yourself in the middle of a firefight with no leader, and no idea what he was gonna do next, because he was so eager to get himself killed that he actually succeeded this time?"

"Any of us could get killed; it's the nature of the job," said Natasha. "And if anything happens to the Captain, Iron Man takes over. He's done it before."

"Iron Man takes over if there's no other choice," Fury shot back. "Or if shit happens and things go wrong. Not if your fearless leader throws his damn life away!" He glared at Steve. "Have I made myself painfully clear, Captain?"

"Crystal, sir," Steve bit out.

Fury glared at the team. "Does anybody have anything to add? NOT you, Sorensen!" he added without turning his head.

There was a ringing silence.
"Will that be all, sir?" asked Steve.

"For now. You have not heard the last of this, Captain. Dismissed."

"Yes sir." Steve stood up and left, and the team followed him silently.

2.

**October 22**

Natasha stepped onto the deck, Steve and Tony's raised voices floating over to her.

"--then you should've said so at the debriefing!" Steve was saying angrily.

"I didn't want Sorensen to have any leverage on you," Tony shot back. "But for once he's right! You should have sent me in!"

"Then why not put it in your report?"

"I don't want this to be official. Damn it, I'm on your side, Steve! I'm trying to help!"

"I've told you before, I don't need your help!"

"Look, I am not saying a word about the rest of your fucked-up personal choices! I don't say anything about that place you go to, but this isn't--"

"Natasha?" Bruce called out from inside, and Steve and Tony whipped around, spotting Natasha.

"Are you boys all right?" Natasha asked, a little disappointed that Bruce had called out when he had.

"Fine," they both snapped.

She raised an eyebrow. Interesting definition of 'fine.' Tony was vibrating with tension, but that was par for the course; Tony was a bit high-strung. Steve wasn't doing well, though. She and Clint had been around SHIELD agents in distress enough times to recognize the signs. Too many missions all in a row - plus the debacle the other day, the reports filed this morning, and Sorensen constantly on their backs - were draining all of them, and obviously getting to Steve as well. It was subtle, but there; if he could be showing tiredness and fragile temper even with the Serum, he had to be under a hell of a strain.

Not that she blamed him. They'd all read Sorensen's final report this morning; it hadn't been pretty, and Fury and Hill's signatures and additions at the bottom had been icing on the cake. The team all supported Steve, but apparently Tony had some doubts, and that had to sting too.

"Whenever you two are done, it's movie time." She went back inside, letting them finish their argument in peace. Steve's 'back the hell off' vibes were so strong, it was surprising Tony hadn't backed right off the deck. He certainly wouldn't appreciate her interference.

"You know, we can watch the ending of *A Man For All Seasons* again if you want," said Bruce as she came back in. "I know you wanted to see it."

"Clint told me about it. I'm kind of glad I missed it, to be honest. Something about taking ethics to that self-destructive a level is off-putting."

"It was inspiring," Thor protested. "A truly worthy ending for a warrior."
Clint laughed. "Thomas More wasn't a warrior. He's the patron saint of lawyers."

"I have been told your lawyers are warriors for justice," said Thor. "Though I have also been told many less savoury things about them. Including how many lawyers it takes to illuminate a room."

"No, Thor," said Clint patiently. "It's 'How many lawyers does it take to change a lightbulb.'"

"Indeed! 'None will change it, but if you seek one to screw it...'"

"Do you even understand that one?" asked Bruce, queuing up the new movie.

"Not at all," Thor admitted, and beamed as Natasha sat down next to him on the sofa and offered him a bowl of Doritos. "Ah! Thank you. This Midgardian food truly is unique."

"Clint, get your own bowl," said Natasha, slapping his hand away from Thor's.

"What's this one about?" asked Steve, coming into the room with a bowl of nachos as the credits began. He settled down next to Bruce, his body language still stiff.

"Crime drama and racism in the Sixties," said Tony, coming in and taking up a perch on the arm of the couch next to Clint. On the opposite side of the room from Steve, noted Natasha.

"Also, Sidney Poitier," said Clint. "'They call me Mr. Tibbs' himself, and the only black actor to ever win a Best Actor Oscar in the twentieth century."

"What?" said Steve, pausing with a nacho halfway to his mouth.

"Yup. And that's actor or actress."

Steve blinked. "That's... pretty depressing."

"Not what you were expecting?" asked Bruce.

"It's just I remember Hattie MacDaniel being the first black person to win an Oscar right before the War. Guess I assumed it wouldn't be an issue any more."

"There were some Supporting Actor and Actress. Just not top billing."


"I've figured that part out all by myself, Tony," said Steve sharply. "It's still depressing."

"Hey, you're pretty comfortable with other kinds of -isms, I don't see why--"

"Don't start, Tony," said Bruce firmly.

"Yeah, Mom and Dad," said Clint through a mouthful of Doritos. "No fighting in front of the kids."

Steve and Tony would be all right, Natasha decided after observing them for a moment. She firmly turned away from them and focussed on the screen, reminding herself not to bring work home by continuing to watch them for clues. This was part of why she was living here; Clint had pointed out, and she had eventually agreed, that she needed to learn to not be on the job all the time, and at SHIELD quarters, surrounded by spies, she couldn't turn that part of herself off. Whatever was bothering Steve and Tony was none of her business.

She settled back to watch the movie.
October 24

Steve turned over, putting his pillow over his head, and tried to clear his mind of disorganized, distracting thoughts. Empty field. Grass blowing. Walk. One step, two steps, three steps, look at the grass. Nondescript field, could be anywhere in the world.

No, it couldn't. It was too much like the small open lot behind his mom's apartment building in Brooklyn, two blocks from the orphanage where she'd worked, where the nuns had taken him in after her death. How many hours had he spent there, when she was alive, drawing and wishing he wasn't so sickly and weak, and could help her out at home? How many hours had he spent there after her death, wishing she were still alive?

He'd gone back once. The apartment block and the open lot were now a large boxy building that sold fridges and stoves; the orphanage was now a coffee shop with three floors of one-bedroom apartments over top.

All right. Not a field, then. A forest. A forest with trees that reached to the sky, leaves underfoot. Walking along a forest path, no sounds but the rustling of leaves...

And bombs going off in the distance, men running, frantic effort to save the men looking to him for leadership while his right arm burned from a bullet he'd taken trying to save Shaughnessesey, who'd died in his arms anyway, blood all over Steve's uniform and fear in the men's eyes as they all wondered if they'd cut it too close this time and if Shaughnessey would be the only name missing from the Commandos if and when they made it back to the base...

He turned over in bed, firmly stopped those thoughts and concentrated on bringing his heart-rate down, slowing his breathing, as he'd been taught in the first weeks after waking up.

He cleared his mind again. Outside settings were not working. And imagining an empty city street... tonight it would just turn into yet another battle scene with Doombots or slithering biological obscenities and leave him covered in sweat and wanting to throw up. Not conducive to sleep at all.

So. Long empty hallway, lots of closed doors. Count the steps down the hall, count the doors.

...and he was at SHIELD, handing in his report on the last battle, Fury and Hill's signatures under Sorensen's report burning in his mind's eye.

Captain Rogers' actions could have seriously compromised the team's objectives and Agent Romanov's safety, had Agent Barton's fortunate actions not saved the situation. It is recommended that Captain Rogers be formally reprimanded...

Although Fury hadn't gone as far as to agree to a formal reprimand, Steve had had to try to justify actions that really couldn't be justified, and in the end had handed in a report that fully acknowledged his failure in judgment. He should have sent Tony in. But he'd just been so fucking tired, and he hadn't slept in so long, and he'd known going after those creatures would hurt, but didn't everything, and he'd wanted so much to just fling his shield at the damn monstrosities - they didn't even have a name for them - and leave it there, go home, let them damn well destroy the stupid pointless mall the Avengers were supposed to protect, who cared. But that wasn't an option, and so he'd...

He'd fucked up. Sorensen knew it, Hill knew it, Fury knew it, and his team knew it too, whether they said so or not.
No. This wasn't working. He wasn't going to get any sleep like this. His thoughts were all over the damn place, zipping from one random connection to another, impossible to settle.

He got up, pulled on a pair of jeans and headed for his studio, for something complex enough to occupy his mind for a while. He had those oil paints that he hadn't realized he missed until that battle with the Delineator and what Tony had dubbed the Loki-spray. The smell of turpentine had reminded Steve of art school and the joy of being able to use media he'd been too poor to afford as a child, so he'd gone out and gotten himself some oils, but they hadn't seen much use yet.

He'd been happy at art school. His constant illness and physical weakness hadn't been an issue, except when his asthma made it hard to attend class.

They still taught oil painting at City College. They also taught digital photography and 3D design, but the place itself was still familiar. At least it hadn't been turned into an electronics store or yoga studio.

He didn't belong there any more, though. And tonight he probably didn't belong in his own studio, he realized as he looked around. Too restless; he'd probably just end up covered in paint stains, with a ruined canvas and dried oils, and, much as he kept telling himself that he could afford it, he shrank at the thought of the waste.

He glanced over the charcoals and pen and ink.

God, no. Last time he'd started doing an ink drawing he'd ended up sketching Tony's hands and hair, and pushed the paper away from himself like it burned him.

Besides, even if he could paint, it might not be such a good idea tonight. He glanced at a half-finished canvas against the wall. Last time he'd picked up his paints, he'd gotten halfway through a portrait of Peggy before he was overwhelmed by the desire to call her and damn the consequences, damn the fact that she probably wouldn't remember him. Because at least she was something, some connection to the person he'd been before, the person who was disappearing more and more every day--

Fuck it, the person who should have disappeared seventy years ago, along with that damn plane.

He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, blocking out Peggy's full red lips and warm brown eyes. The SHIELD therapists had warned him that he'd probably have some PTSD about icy water closing over his head, about drowning. And he remembered it, clear as day, remembered Peggy's voice keeping him company until the very last moment, remembered the sharpness of regret that he'd never get to dance with her, never have another kiss, never live in peacetime or have sex again or get married or have children, remembered with crystal clarity the water freezing him on the outside even as it poured into his lungs and burned him on the inside, the darkness taking him. It had caused him a number of nightmares when he was first rescued.

Except now, he wished for it back. Thought about it with nostalgia. He remembered how desperately he'd wanted to live, how fiercely he'd fought to hold his breath even when he knew it was hopeless, and wondered what it would be to feel like that again, when all he seemed to want now was to go back in the water and never come back out again.

He blinked as cool moisture spilled over his cheek, and backed out of his studio.

No. No, God, this wasn't going to help, he realized as he pressed his fingers to his eyes. This was not just a regular restless night. This was gonna be a bad one. One of those long nights when he spent the entire night arguing himself out of seeking the peaceful nothingness of those icy waters, ending
everything, telling himself all the reasons why he couldn’t, wrestling thoughts that just got darker and
darker till he wanted to scream.

Like having his mind helpfully point out that it wasn’t even really up to him; if crashing into the
ocean and drowning in ice wasn’t enough to kill him, who was to say anything he could think of
would do the trick? His bones and tissues and organs healed miraculously; they’d done so multiple
times. The best idea he could come up with was a gunshot through the heart or temple, but who
could guarantee even that wouldn’t heal before he ran out of blood? Maybe his body would slow
down to the point of near-death... and then restart.

He wiped his cheek impatiently, rubbed his eyes and took deep breaths until he had himself under
control again.

OK. He glanced back at Peggy’s half-finished portrait and closed the door.

Upstairs. He headed for the deck, breathing a sigh of relief to find it empty, and went to the railing.
The city spread out below him, quite beautiful from up here in the dark, streetlights streaming away
in orderly lines, cars moving swiftly through the streets. The crass neon signs less visible right now -
- at least the writing on them harder to see, many of them quite pretty from up so high.

He took a deep breath. The air was chilly, crisp. The deck was all clean lines and glossy surfaces.

It wasn’t where he wanted to be. Nowhere was where he wanted to be.

OK, think of positive things. The air up here was pleasant. The building itself was nice to look at, at
least on the inside; the outside still bothered him, with its ungainly leaning structure. The people he
lived with, his team, were solid. His... friends, now. He could probably call them that. They had his
back, as much as they could.

I’m on your side, Tony had said, and Steve knew that, but he couldn’t have Tony on his side. Or
anywhere near him. If he’d learned one thing with the church, it was that he had to keep his distance
from Tony.

Even if being with Tony was one of the only things that felt any good lately. Talking with him,
following his thoughts - trying to, at least - getting to know him, hearing his ideas. Finding himself
laughing at the bizarre connections Tony came up with, distracted from his own problems by the
mental leaps and bewildering jokes and comments that, from anybody else, would make him
confused and irritated but from Tony just made him curious, made him want to understand. Finding
himself intrigued by the way Tony hid caring beneath egoism and obnoxiousness and admittedly
poor social skills.

That wasn’t all there was to it, though. If it was only that, he could handle it.

It was the way Tony looked at him, the way he pushed Steve to think about himself as well. The
way he seemed to worry about Steve, care about him, the way nobody had since Bucky and Peggy.

The way Steve didn’t want to just talk to him.

They’d been alone together few times since that last time. He just couldn’t afford it. The memory of
what had happened had been too much, too seductive.

He’d tried so hard to resist all his life, damn it. He’d honestly thought, as a kid, that if he could sleep
with girls, his attraction to men would go away. But it hadn’t. And what had happened with those
girls - exciting as it had been, naked skin pressed up against his, hands that weren’t his own running
over him, lips and tongues drawing all sorts of sensations from him - what had happened with Tony
had been different as night from day.

God, he'd had sex before, come inside another human being before, and yet the press of Tony's body against his had lit him up in a way none of those girls ever had. The taste of Tony's mouth, the sound of Tony's gasps, had stayed with him for days afterwards, and made him wake up moaning and hard, was sending a thrill through his body even now, and he suspected he wasn't ever, ever going to be able to forget. It was one of the only things that hadn't felt ugly or artificial or painful or bewildering in months. He'd made Tony shiver, made Tony's eyes darken with desire, it had felt right and perfect...

...and he couldn't have it. Not if he wanted to hang on to even a shred of the man he used to be. The man he should be.

Because he wasn't anything like that man any more. That man wouldn't have used one of the only friends he had, twice, wouldn't have pushed that friend away and hurt him the way he had. Because he had hurt Tony. The memory of Tony's eyes widening with surprise and pain for a moment before shutting down to his usual distance still burned.

Fuck, he wished he could get drunk. Wished he could stop his brain, somehow - sleep, drugs, blow to the head, anything. Anything to stop all of this.

But there wasn't anything that would work. There was no relief from his scattered, jagged thoughts, no relief from his memories and regrets and fears, any more than there was any relief from pain when he got injured.

He bowed his head, eyes filling with tears again and hoped to hell nobody took it in their head to come up here at this time of night because--

"JARVIS," he said, and damn it, his voice was shaking. He cleared his throat. "JARVIS, could you please tell me if anybody heads towards this floor?"

"Certainly, sir," said JARVIS, and Steve nodded his thanks.

He rested his elbows on the railing and put his face in his hands, allowing himself a moment's weakness and letting the tears come. Just a few minutes, just a few minutes of not holding on so tight, just a few minutes to feel sorry for himself, for not being able to forget what Tony felt like in his arms, for not being able to stop missing his own time, his life, Peggy, for not being able to stop wishing for Bucky to come along and joke him out of his mood.

He shuddered, tears slipping through his fingers, chest aching. Just a few minutes to let himself mourn the fact that Bucky hadn't survived the War because of Steve, that Steve had survived the War when he shouldn't have, that he had survived to no good purpose because he just couldn't adapt to this world, couldn't do it without losing himself - possibly couldn't do it even if he was willing to lose himself...

It would be so easy to pull himself over this railing and land below. Not even the Serum could fix that. And at least he wouldn't put his team in danger during a battle. He'd kill anybody he landed on, and God help whoever had to clean up the mess tomorrow, but...

God, this wasn't helping. He shivered, pulled himself up, wiped at his face and held his breath, forcing himself under control.

Prayer, maybe. Prayer had worked a few times during these nights. Not to ask for a miracle or for God to solve everything for him, but just for the strength to not give up, for one more day.
Nothing came to mind. No matter how long he stood there, how desperately he searched for words.

None of the prayers he'd learned at any of the churches he'd known: not the one he went to with his mother, not the one near the orphanage, not the one he'd dragged Bucky to near City College, not the one he went to these days when he could, with its artificial candles and grape juice instead of communion wine. Not even the church he was going to for counseling.

The only prayer he could think of was the one he and Bucky and the other three Protestant boys had learned at the orphanage, when Sister Anne brought them back early from their own service and they snuck into Catechism.

*My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong, and failing to do good, I have sinned against You...*

He couldn't finish it.

*God, please help me, I can't do this without You.*

He gazed down at the city, and the far too tempting drop.

*I can't even do this with You.*

He couldn't.

And he couldn't drag anybody else down with him when he finally failed.

"JARVIS," he said, his voice sounding far away to his own ears. "Where is Tony?"

"He's in the workroom, sir."

Steve took one last longing look at the street below and backed away, heading for the elevator. He pushed the button to the workroom, straightening his clothing and scrubbing at his face with the heel of his hand. Far too soon, the elevator door opened and he was at the door of Tony's lab, looking in to see Tony, head pillowed on his arms on the table, a hologram spinning slowly above, and fine tools scattered all around him.

Steve hesitated, watching Tony sleep. His face looked so relaxed with his eyes closed; none of the frenetic inventing and observing and reacting evident, none of the sharp wit and constant stream of consciousness ready to be let loose on his audience. The soft glow of the arc reactor through his threadbare t-shirt lit his forearms with gentle blue light, echoed by the slowly spinning hologram. Steve suddenly itched to draw him, to commit this to paper: Tony in his natural environment.

He shouldn't have come down here. Steve started to back away.

"Sir?" JARVIS's voice startled him. "Perhaps I should inform you that Mr. Stark has been asleep for fifty-four minutes and I am about to awaken him."

"What? Why?"

"He claims to be 'too damn old to sleep for more than an hour on a lab table like a frat kid' without throwing out his back."

Steve hesitated. "Can you let me into the lab so I can wake him up?"

"Certainly, sir. You have been cleared for access to the lab any time you wish."
Steve nodded and stepped through as the lab door opened and Tony's loud, jangling music washed over him, and he made his way to Tony. He gazed down at him for another moment, then reached out and gently touched his shoulder.

Tony's soft breathing hitched, and he slowly blinked open his eyes. He squinted up at Steve for a moment, clearly disoriented, then closed his eyes, rubbed them, and sat up, yawning.

"Steve?" He yawned again. "What are you doing here? Volume down, JARVIS. JARVIS, did I fall asleep?"

"I was about to wake you up myself, sir," said JARVIS, as the music fell to a muted background roar. "Captain Rogers happened to be here instead. You did say he was allowed to enter any time."

"Yeah, no, that's fine, JARVIS." Tony blinked up at Steve, the fuzziness of sleep dissipating rapidly. "Steve?"

"I... sorry, you said I could - I didn't come here to wake you up."

"Steve? What's wrong?"

"I can't... can't keep doing this."

"Doing what? Are you all right?"

"I - no."

"What's wrong - Jesus, you look like shit," Tony said, fully awake now, staring up at Steve. "What can't you do?"

"Lead the Avengers any more."

Tony frowned, obviously totally lost. "What? Are you - Christ, is this about that thing the other day? It was a calculated risk, that's all--"

"Stop it."

Tony blinked, then stood up. "What are you talking about?"

"I can't go on being your leader. I'm not fit to be."

"Says who?"

"Fury was right. I do have a death wish." He took a deep breath. God, why was this so painful to say? How much of a coward was he? Tony's eyes were wide, and it was so hard to make himself go on. "I just spent the last half hour arguing myself in and out of throwing myself off the deck, Tony. I can't..." he closed his eyes against the stunned disbelief in Tony's face.

"Are you - what, are--"

"I want to die, so fucking badly, and I can't keep trying to lead this team - shouldn't even be on the team, I'm a danger to all of you like this." He took a deep breath, eyes still closed, not wanting to see the anger, or worse, pity, in Tony's eyes.

At least it was out in the open, now. Who knew what the hell would happen to him now, but at least he wouldn't have this dirty secret dragging him down like a lead weight in his stomach.
He breathed evenly. He'd done all he could. He wasn't competent to handle his own life, obviously. Maybe Tony would have better luck. Or maybe he'd just be locked up somewhere, forgotten and isolated and then maybe he could end it without guilt.

His eyes popped open as Tony put his arms around him, drawing him close. He stayed stiff, unsure of what to do, feeling Tony's entire body start to tremble.

"Jesus. Jesus, you're suicidal, and I had no fucking clue," Tony whispered. "Jesus, Steve, why the hell didn't you say anything?"

"What would I have said?"

"Anything. Christ. You didn't have to... how long?"

"A few months."

"Holy Christ."

"I didn't want to worry anybo--"

"You think we wouldn't want to be worried?" Tony said, pulling away slightly. "Christ. OK. OK. I... I have no idea what to do. Pepper. Pepper'll know." He reached out and grabbed the nearest Starkphone.

Steve bit his lip. Of course Pepper Potts would know how to deal with anything, get him put away somewhere discreetly, handle this efficiently... he nodded, and pulled back. The thought of involving anybody else made his skin crawl, but he'd put himself in Tony's hands and told him, he knew everyone would have to know eventually. The thought of beautiful, capable Pepper Potts knowing, looking at him with pity and disappointment - never mind Fury, and his teammates and... he drew in on himself. He didn't have a choice now. It was out of his hands. Whatever happened now would be for the good of the team. He stepped away from Tony, a shiver running through his body.

"No, wait - no, don't pull away." There were tears in Tony's eyes now, and fear, but no pity, no disgust, and his hand tightened on Steve's arm. "Please. Just... Pepper'll know what to do. You'll be OK. I swear. You'll be OK."

Steve stared at him. OK? How could he possibly be OK?

"I - I don't know how. But you'll be OK."

He nodded again and Tony opened his mouth, then closed it, searching Steve's eyes anxiously and looking almost as helpless as Steve himself felt. Then Tony looked down and dialled, keeping a hand on Steve, cursing as the phone rang and rang. "Fuck, where the hell is she, she can't still be at the office can she - what time is it JARVIS where's Pepper right now hang on she's in LA, right, JARVIS what time--"

"It's one o'clock in LA," said Steve numbly.

"She'll still be up - Pepper!" Tony heaved a deep breath. "Pepper, Jesus, thank - what? No, no I'm fine, I - no, no I'm not working, I'm - Pepper, hang on, sweetheart, please, OK, please just let me talk." He took another deep breath, taking Steve's hand in his and holding on tightly. "OK. It's not me, I swear, I'm fine. It's Steve. No, he's not - can you just, I won't be able to finish this if - Pepper, I love you, please shut up." He closed his eyes tightly for a long, tense moment. "Pep, he's not doing so good. He's, he's kinda depressed. As in, really really bad, suicidal ideation and hang on, I'm gonna put you on speakerphone 'cause he's right here--" and Tony made a signal and Pepper's voice flowed
"What do you mean, he's - Tony? Tony, what's happened? Were you hit with something, some--"

"It's not an alien anything, Pepper, he's just depressed." Tony turned back to Steve, his hand tightening on Steve's. "How long did you say? A few months, now?"

Steve nodded.

"Has he seen anyone?"

"He's probably been a macho asshole trying to cope all by himself all stiff upper lip but he just came to me tonight and woke me up--"

"Steve?" Pepper's voice was gentle. "Steve, can you talk to me? Tony sounds like he's freaking out a bit."

"Yeah, just a bit," said Tony.

"Yeah," said Steve.

"Why did you come to Tony?"

Steve shrugged helplessly. "I don't know." He watched Tony's nervous motions, felt Tony's hand in his own, feeling far away. "I couldn't do it any more. Couldn't take it."

I can do this all day, he used to say when guys twice his size were crushing him into the dirt. And now he couldn't even last the night against his own demons.

So this was what giving up felt like. He bowed his head.

"Hang on, Pep," he heard Tony say, and then Tony pulled him into his arms again and held him tightly, and Steve felt something inside him start to crumble, a wall weakening. God it had been so long, so long since anyone had touched him, held him, since he'd felt human skin and warmth and life, and he felt the unbearable tension seeping out faster than he could call it back - and then he didn't want to any more, and he let out his breath, barely stopping himself from clinging to Tony like a child. Tony's heart was beating quickly, his breathing harsh in the relative quiet of the workroom. One of his hands slid up Steve's back and to the back of his neck, fingers running quick, soothing motions through his hair.

"Steve. We'll figure something out. OK?" Tony pulled back and gazed at him seriously, his eyes dark and determined, and waited until Steve nodded before taking his hand and moving to sit down. "Pepper can do anything. We'll figure this out. You'll be OK."

He let Tony pull him down onto the bench next to him, Tony's arm warm and steady around his shoulders, let Pepper's reassuring voice wash over him, and put himself in their hands.

4.

"You're WHAT?" Clint blinked blearily, staring at Cap. Too damn early for this, and he hadn't had a coffee yet. "You're quitting? What the hell for?" He paused. "Hold on, is this because of fucking Fury--"

"No, Clint. Shut up," said Natasha, pushing a chair out for him with her foot. "He's got PTSD."

Clint blinked some more, trying to make sense of the scene at the breakfast table. Steve, face pale
and drawn, arms crossed and eyes fixed on the floor; Bruce, Natasha and Thor gathered around him and looking way too solemn for this time of the morning, no coffee, tea, toast or eggs in sight; Tony talking quietly into a phone by the counter. He sank into his chair. "So... you're resigning? Over PTSD? Like over half of SHIELD doesn't suffer from--"

"As in, major PTSD," said Bruce quietly. "Suicidally depressed."

Clint's mouth dropped open. "Depressed? So fucking take a leave of absence, Jesus, get some therapy and shit but don't quit on us!" Tony thumbed his phone off and joined them, dropping into the chair next to Steve. "Fuck, who's gonna lead us if you're not here? It was bad enough when Tony took over when Fury had you in Frankfurt a couple weeks ago, but I'm not putting up with him permanently."

"No, and I wouldn't want to do it permanently either," said Tony - and whoa, Tony looked like crap too, his eyes bloodshot and his face lined with tension. "I keep telling him--"

Steve shook his head. "But I - I can't--"

Natasha sighed. "You need help, obviously. But you'll be fine."

Clint nodded. "Dude, go to the SHIELD therapists. Some of them are douchebags, but Dr. Engelssen, he was awesome. I was really fucked up after Loki, remember?"

Steve looked uncertain. "I remember you were out for a while."

"Where do you think I went? I was tranqued out of my gourd for days, which actually wasn't that helpful, and then I spent some time in soft walled rooms sobbing 24/7. Just ask Nat. I was a mess."

"Complete mess," Natasha agreed.

"But I didn't eat my gun, and I'm all right now," said Clint, leaning towards him. "And you will be too."

Steve glanced at Tony, then at Clint and Natasha.

"Steve, I've dealt with PTSD too," said Natasha gently.

"So've I," said Tony. "It's hell, but it's treatable. You know--"

"It's not just PTSD," Steve broke in. "I told you that."

"No, I know," said Tony. "But--"

"I didn't come to you because I wanted to save my job," said Steve. "That's over. I just..." his voice trailed off and he cleared his throat.

"I - I know." Tony blinked rapidly and then quickly drew a hand across his eyes. "Steve, I know," he said, his voice rough. "I'm just saying, don't dismiss coming back. Nobody but you thinks you should quit permanently." He turned to the rest of them, one hand on the back of Steve's chair. "Please, OK, help me out. He wouldn't even listen to Pepper on this."

"What did she say?" asked Thor.

"Same thing I'm saying. Leave of absence, therapy."

"Why are you opposed to that?" Bruce asked Steve gently. "You know it's doable. You... you know
what I tried to do when I got low. Do you think I shouldn't be on the team?"

"All of us are screwed up in one way or another," said Clint. "Hell, if everyone at SHIELD who had
a little trouble went and quit we'd be nothing but empty halls. Christ, Coulson was a recovering
alcoholic, Sitwell--"

"But how can you trust me to lead you if I can't even--"

"Because you're a damn good leader," Clint interrupted. "Because we need you. Come on, dude.
Get Fury to put you on Admin Leave, get you sorted out. You don't need to quit."

Steve stared at him.

"Fury probably won't even blink," said Natasha, elbows on the table now as she spoke urgently. "He
and Coulson were expecting you to be a lot worse off. Nobody's ever gone almost seventy years in
ice before; we really didn't know what to expect."

The phone rang and Tony answered, gesturing them all to be silent. "Fury," he mouthed, turning
away from the table but drawing his chair very slightly closer to Steve's.

Clint got up, feeling jittery now. Coffee. They all needed coffee, like, to mainline. This was too big
to deal with on an empty stomach, and he was suddenly overwhelmed by a longing for Phil's
steadiness, his calm competence. God damn, what he wouldn't do to have Phil here.

"The last thing that happened to him was that he was basically forced to commit suicide," Phil had
said one night, when SHIELD had been deciding what to do with the unconscious man in medical
quarters. "That's the last thing he remembers - we hope, because God help us if he remembers the
ice." He shook his head and tossed back a Coke, eyeing it like it was offending him by not being
scotch. "And the Council wants us to wake him up in a fake little room, made up to look like it's
1945, fool him into thinking - he's gonna see through that, Fury and I can both see it. We'll be lucky
if he doesn't suffer a psychotic break and kill a few people."

Clint and Natasha had traded a glance, not used to seeing their unflappable handler so upset.

"They're even gonna put on a baseball game on the radio. And the morons..." Phil had shaken his
head in disgust. "The game they found is from before he went down, and whoever found it didn't
even check. I started to point it out, but you know what? The hell with them. I'm not doing their job
for them."

Natasha's eyebrows had climbed to her hairline. Phil was a fixer. Doing other people's jobs for them
was what he did.

"Phil--"

"Natasha, the earlier he figures it out and we stop lying to him, the better. It'll be hell trying to gain
his trust after that anyway - but better he mistrust SHIELD than he mistrust the entire world around
him, or his own ability to figure out what's real and what isn't."

"Does Fury know about the mistake?"

"He seemed suspiciously unsurprised when told I him. In any case, he's not saying anything either.
Fuck 'em if they can't do their jobs."

Phil swearing was such a rare thing, but so understandable when it came to Captain America. Phil
would've been right here, he would've known how to get through to Steve, but instead of Phil, Steve
"Oh Jesus, fucking Sorensen," said Clint, and Thor gave a low rumble of dismay. "He's gonna have to know."

"Yeah, no," said Tony, turning off his phone. "Pepper got in contact with Fury first, he's coming over. In fact, he's--"

The door opened and Fury came in.

Steve paled and stood up, swallowing hard. "I'm sorry I let you down, sir," he said after a moment, his voice low.

Fury sighed. "Son, I think that's my line," he replied, waving him to sit back down. Steve didn't, so Fury pulled out a chair and sat down himself, gesturing to Steve to follow suit.

"All right." He put his elbows on the table. "Believe it or not, we were expecting this."

"What?!" Tony said.

Clint shrugged. "Told you," he said, putting down the pot of coffee he'd made, and placing cups on the table.

"Not quite to the extent that Ms. Potts talked about," Fury told Steve briskly, pouring himself a coffee. "But we never expected you to just recover and go on your merry way. When you seemed to adapt quickly, we counted ourselves lucky and didn't dig deep enough to make sure you were on solid ground. That's on us, not on you." He was speaking in his regular asshole voice, and it seemed to be putting Steve at ease.

"Our people deal with all sorts of shit, Captain, and it fucks us up," said Fury. "No shame in needing help. We should've insisted you understood that. I'm just glad you went to your team instead of throwing yourself out the window." He took a sip of his coffee. "You didn't trust us, and that's also not on you. I told you, when we first woke you up, that the whole business with the fake room wasn't my choice, and I think it's come back to bite us in the ass."

"Sir, what are you gonna do about Sorensen?" asked Clint. "He's been riding Steve since--"

"He didn't cause this," said Steve flatly.

"He's sure as hell not helping," Fury pointed out. "Look, Tom Sorensen is an idiot who can't wipe his own ass without filling in a form in triplicate and checking with the WSC. It was not my choice to dump him on you. I can't do much about him, but I will keep him off your back while you're on leave, and when you come back - and you will come back - I will do what I can to keep him... manageable."

"I'm giving you my verbal resignation," said Steve stubbornly. "I'll put it in writing if you want."

"That's nice. I don't accept it."

"Thank you," Tony murmured.

Steve's jaw clenched briefly. "I thought you said SHIELD didn't do indentured servitude."

"Call it looking out for your best interests while you're in no position to do so yourself," said Fury. "You can quit as soon as our therapists clear you for duty, if you still want to. Your team can witness
to that."

Steve frowned. "But--"

"Captain," said Thor, uncharacteristically subdued. "Listen to the Director. You will still be free to choose your fate at a later time, when you are better able to choose wisely."

"Stark and Ms. Potts already spoke to you about some options available, here or at SHIELD Medical," said Fury. "I've brought your therapist from SHIELD with me, but we have others. You've established a good working relationship with the man, but he's feeling like an ass for letting you get away with just talking about the merits of iPhones versus Starkphones for months, and I'm not about to make him feel any better right now."

Steve stared at Fury, and Clint was forcibly reminded of his own days after Loki, after Phil: the agony of talking through everything, the meds that took the edge off, the tranquillizers for when he just couldn't deal with the memories any more, the heaviness of slogging through the aftermath. The ache of having to process so much shit, the way Steve hadn't. And Steve wouldn't even have meds to ease him through it; Steve would just have to do it all on nothing but spewing out all of his pain to a white lab coat, helpful as SHIELD therapists could be. And there had to be a shitload of pain in there for the guy to be where he was now.

"Captain, come with me," said Fury, more gently than Clint had heard him speak since Sitwell's young daughter had come to visit SHIELD Medical when Sitwell was injured. He stood up. "Go up to your apartment, talk to Dr. Sanjay, listen to what he has to say, let him help you figure out what to do next. I swear, whatever you say to him - or whoever you end up talking to - will remain private. The only thing that'll make it into your file will be whether you are fit to return to work or not."

Steve stared up at Fury uncertainly, then stood up. He paused and glanced around the table at the rest of them.

"Um. Thanks," he said. His gaze stopped at Tony, who looked more lost than Clint had ever seen him. "Thanks, Tony," he said quietly, then turned and followed Fury out the door.

Chapter End Notes

OK, well, that was exhausting to write :(

The movies watched/mentioned were
A Man for All Seasons, 1966
In the Heat of the Night, 1967
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much, scrtkpr and TheKinkyPet, for your wonderful, wonderful betaness!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1.

November 1

"You know, I was pretty enthused about Fury not letting you quit," said Tony worriedly, combing his hair as he walked into the movie room. "I'm not so sure any more." He dropped down onto the couch next to Steve, taking in Steve's pale-faced exhaustion and slow movements.

"I'm fine," said Steve, clumsily taping his right hand where the last two fingers had been crushed by a crate of medical supplies. How he'd managed to shave like that, Tony couldn't imagine.

"You're working too hard," Tony said, taking the tape from him.

"We're all working too hard, Tony," Steve pointed out tiredly. "Federal emergency? Don't know if you noticed?"

"Here, engineer," said Natasha, taking the tape from Tony, her own movements wearier and less graceful than usual. "I've been taping people up all day. One of the only nice things about not being super-powered in the middle of this mess."

Tony glanced out the window as Natasha started wrapping Steve's fingers. The rain still lashed the panes, though its fury was markedly lower than the last few days. The city was an unholy mess though, with water and damage everywhere, the subways barely functioning.

"Well, federal emergency or not, you're helping too much," said Tony. "You're on medication, don't you noticed?"

Steve made a face. "I noticed. I'm puking my guts out every two hours; it's hard to not notice."

"I thought the implant was supposed to compensate for your metabolism," said Bruce. "It's supposed to be dialed in steadily."

"It's a work in progress," said Steve, glancing at the spot where the tiny dispenser had gone into his left upper arm. He swallowed. "They're doing what they can."

Not for the first time, Tony wished he could pick Steve's brains about the implant - what they were giving him, how the hell they'd figured out how to overcome the Serum, just how experimental the whole thing was - but Steve's entire body language screamed Back Off so loudly whenever it was brought up that he squashed down his curiosity. "In any case you shouldn't be out there," he said instead. "You should be on Admin Leave. That's what you talked to Fury about, isn't it?"

Steve gave him a glare that would've been a lot more effective if it hadn't been accompanied by a jaw-cracking yawn. "Nobody's on leave right now," he said. "We're all helping."
"Well, not all of us, and can I say again Brucey, I totally stand behind you on that one," said Clint, wearily plodding into the movie room towelling his hair. He dropped down next to Bruce. "I still can't believe anyone called for the Other Guy's 'help'. Because what we need when Mother Nature is bearing down with her full fury is a big green guy yelling at her."

"The Other Guy shouting down Hurricane Sandy would've been a sight to see," said Tony. "I'd've paid good money for that."

"Tony, you're still busy paying for levees," Bruce pointed out.

"Call it entertainment."

"I'd rather watch a movie," said Clint, grabbing the remote.

"As would I," said Thor, setting down a huge plate of pastries that had been delivered to the Tower by a grateful Staten Island bakery. "Your people's idea of what is helpful is interesting. I am still unable to understand the logic behind asking me to call down for more thunder."

"They thought maybe you could move the storm from here to somewhere else."

"I have explained that it does not work that way."

"Skippy's Blog begs to differ," said Bruce.

"Who?" asked Steve.

"There's about a thousand different ways people think we could make this better. Most of them make no sense, but they still post them online."

"Yeah, well, a lot of people are grateful for what we're doing," said Clint, his mouth full of pastry.

"Well some of us are doing too much, Capsicle," said Tony. "You're exhausted."

"So's everybody, Tony," Steve said impatiently, and Tony backed off and started to deal with his own scrapes and bruises, as Bruce fiddled around with the sound system for the movie and Thor rearranged the couches to give everyone more room to sprawl out.

The problem was, Steve was right. They'd all been working frantically - Tony flying around, lifting heavy things and blasting stuff but also helping to coordinate supply materials, Bruce helping with computer models, Clint, Natasha, Thor and Steve providing muscle for the relief efforts. In Clint and Natasha's case it didn't amount to much more than extreme stamina, but Thor and Steve had had some pretty good photo-ops, with their vastly superior strength allowing them to carry people and materials much more easily than normal humans could. Not to mention rescuing people from a tall boat replica that had capsized.

It had been relatively simple to downplay the fact that Cap wasn't doing much more than heavy lifting, because it wasn't like anybody expected the Avengers to have any special talent for dealing with natural disasters. The fact that, had Steve been well, he probably would have been leading some of the rescue and supply teams, was easily glossed over. The fact that he would've been working without pause for the entire time, had he not been laid low by medication, was also simple to ignore. It wasn't like anyone expected him to be able to not take any breaks.

He did need a break, though. Tony had seen him get tired in the middle of a fight, but it always took him only a few minutes to catch his breath. Now, though... he was totally drained, pale with exhaustion, despite having been back in the Tower for an hour, with a chance to take a shower and
Damn stupid timing for Mother Nature. At least Sandy hadn't struck the first days after Steve had gone on leave, when he still looked like he'd been run over by a train and couldn't seem to meet any of their eyes - and was dealing with the implant SHIELD Medical had put in his arm, which had given him his first real solid sleep in months, but also made him violently ill.

So far, what with that and Sandy, Admin Leave didn't seem to be doing much for Steve.

Except for one thing: Sorensen was blessedly absent. Tony had no idea what Fury had done to make that happen, but he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. The man had been out of sight since the hurricane had hit and had only shown up at SHIELD for the first time an hour ago with plans for a television spot.

"You're going to do what? Watch a movie? Now?" he'd said, standing at the door of the Quinjet as the rest of them climbed in. "Are you insane?"

"Fuck off," said Tony, and closed the door on him. It had been a distinct pleasure to finally see a smile on Steve's tired face as they'd lifted off and left Sorensen waving and shouting on the ground.

"I need to speak to Captain Rogers," Sorensen had said a few minutes later, patching in to the screen on the Quinjet. Steve had wearily moved to take the call and started when Bruce had placed a firm hand on his shoulder and kept him in place.

"I'm sorry, Captain Rogers is unavailable at the moment," Tony had said pleasantly, moving into view.

"I've lined up a publicity spot with a local news--"

"I've lined up a round of showers for everyone," said Tony. "You have no idea what it smells like in this Quinjet. We've all been up for forty hours and we're taking a break until tomorrow."

"You could've showered at SHIELD."

"We could've agreed to do that striptease to raise funds for Staten Island. We're not going to do that either."

"I realize Captain Rogers is technically on leave, but I've told the reporters that--"

"You'll have to untell them," said Clint.

"I want to speak with Captain Rogers."

"Good for you. You can speak to me instead," said Tony.

"You can talk to me too," Clint had said, a shit-eating grin on his face. "It'll be fun. What do you wanna talk about?"

Steve had actually laughed as Sorensen sputtered to no avail, and settled against the back of the Quinjet's seat, closing his eyes. They'd landed back home at the Tower, stumbled out and gone to their respective apartments for much-needed de-griming before congregating at the movie room for the first time in days.

The movie began, and they watched for a little while in unusual silence, Natasha combing her hair, Clint fiddling with the bandaging on his cheek where he'd been hit by a falling beam during a rescue
"Please, sir, may I have some more?" said the little boy on the screen, holding out his empty bowl for gruel.

"Boy, this is cheerful," muttered Clint. "There's nothing more heart-warming than child poverty and hunger, is there? Especially to people who've never been hungry kids."

Tony tilted his head, intrigued by his bitter tone. "Were you ever hungry as a kid?"

"All the time," said Clint. "Not so much in the circus, but then a lot of what I ate was leftovers from the audience."

Tony winced.

"Me too," Steve said quietly. "Used to drive me crazy during the Depression. All those cartoons of skinny little kids in the papers. Like we were just symbols."

Bruce blinked. "I knew you two grew up poor... I didn't realize how poor."

"My dad drank away most of his paycheck, when he had one," said Clint.

"My mom spent most of her pay on our doctor's bills," said Steve. "And then I was at an orphanage."

"A place such as that?" Thor gestured at the screen, appalled.

"Not hardly," Steve said. "New York in the twenties wasn't England in the 1800s. The nuns were mostly OK. We had more than gruel to eat. It still wasn't exactly luxury."

Steve had a Brooklyn accent, Tony realized. He'd never really noticed it in the first months that they'd worked and lived together, but when he was tired it came out.

"I find it disturbing that you would have hunger in your land at all," said Thor slowly. "Although your numbers are impressive, your resources are certainly enough to ensure adequate food for all."

"Yeah, they are," said Bruce. "It's not a priority, I guess."

They watched a little longer. Who decided this thing was worth an Oscar, Tony wanted to know, because for the life of him he could not see the blatant child cruelty as anything other than depressing, no matter how amusing the costumes and singing and dancing.

"Well, dunno about you all, but I think this movie sucks," said Clint finally. "And speaking of hungry, I'm gonna go get more snacks." Tony glanced at the table. Sure enough, hungry as they all were, they'd plowed right through all the baked goods.

Although he couldn't recall Steve eating any of it.

"Clint, you wouldn't know your way around the kitchen with an itemized map. I'll come and help." Natasha glanced at the screen. "Something about children being forced into a life of crime isn't as charming as I thought it would be."

"We could go on to the next one--" Bruce began.

"Nah, it's fine," said Clint. "It's probably a good movie, just not what I wanna be watching when I already feel like shit." He rotated his arm gingerly. "Besides, the next one's not much better."
"Don't forget male prostitution," said Bruce. "And terminal illness."

"Sounds great," Steve mumbled, head resting against the back of the couch. "Can't wait."

"I think whatever they're giving you's too strong," said Clint. "You're not reacting to the shocking immorality of an X-rated movie getting an Oscar."

"I could," Steve muttered. "Jus' don't feel like it."

"You sound drunk," said Clint.

"Don't feel drunk," said Steve. "Just really tired." He blinked and started to sit up, and Natasha gently pushed him back down.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Here, you can stretch out on my side of the couch, I'm going to be in the kitchen."

"No, I should go up to my place--"

"If you fall asleep, we'll wake you up when we come back with more food."

Steve frowned at her. "I can--"

"You're not eating enough," she said with finality. "Lie down." Steve frowned at her again but got into a slightly more comfortable position, not quite lying down but resting his head against the corner of the couch.

Tony turned back to the screen, his mind only half on the movie as the kids sang and danced their miserable lives around. This movie... kinda sucked. Clint was right. He supposed it was funny or possibly even inspiring in its own way, the music wasn't bad, but...

On the other hand it was slightly more cheerful than watching a super-storm barrelling down on them, helpless to stop it, knowing that real people were being hurt and real destruction was happening all around them and nobody was going to make any of it charming by singing and dancing their way through the chaos. Knowing that their city, which was still recovering from the Chitauri, was now going to be recovering from even more mindless random destruction, as the storm surge topped The Battery and flooded the subway and the Hugh Carey Tunnel. And that the destruction couldn't be contained in the city centre, like they'd been able to contain the Chitauri.

It did feel good to be able to help though. He should've known there would be no way to make Steve stay back and just watch the destruction on the screen. He glanced over at Steve, who hadn't said a word in a while.

Steve was deeply asleep. And while it wasn't unusual for most of them to nod off during one of these - the movies weren't always everybody's first choice of entertainment, and some of them hadn't aged well - Steve and Natasha had never relaxed enough in the presence of the others to actually fall asleep.

Tony watched Steve, his chest rising and falling softly, his eyes shadowed, hair falling onto his forehead. This wasn't relaxation, wasn't a healthy show of trust in his team. He was simply too exhausted to stay awake.

Tony rubbed his eyes wearily and tried to push away useless guilt. He was still kicking himself for
not having seen the signs that Steve was falling, for the fact that it had been a total shock to him when Steve had shown up in his workshop, with haunted eyes and at the end of his strength, but that wouldn't help Steve. What they all had to do was take care of him now, not bemoan the fact that they'd helped him get where he was.

Because the signs had been there, had they cared to look. They'd all realized it that morning after Fury and Steve had left the kitchen. He and Natasha had seen him that night he'd had a bit of a panic attack. Clint and Natasha had known SHIELD was worried about him - hell, they'd all heard Fury say he had a death wish, and even fucking Tom Sorensen had known something was wrong. They'd all known he wasn't talking to his SHIELD therapist, they'd all seen that he cared about everyone's safety during missions except his own. Most of them had dealt with PTSD in some form or another, Bruce knew what suicidal depression felt like firsthand, Thor had apparently witnessed troubled self-destructiveness throughout his brother's youth... and yet all of them had missed the fact that their team-mate was falling apart right in their midst.

They all owed him, big time. They knew that.

And Tony owed him most of all. It was nice that Steve had trusted him enough to come to him that night; the problem was, he shouldn't have had to. Tony had known, better than anyone else, that Steve didn't sleep well, that he sometimes ended up on the deck late at night, that Steve was dealing with, on top of everything else, issues about his own sexuality. Issues that Tony had done absolutely nothing to help with.

And he didn't even know what he could have done to help. He didn't know if he should have pushed Steve harder to not go to that the church - because Christ, the guy was vulnerable enough already, he shuddered to imagine what the hell had they'd done to his psyche - or if he should've been better at backing the hell away. He almost certainly shouldn't have let his hormones gallop ahead of him and made any moves on a man he knew was trying as hard as hell to avoid facing his own desires. No matter how much Tony had wanted to, how much he'd loved it - before it ended so abruptly - no matter how much he wanted to do it again.

At least that was one thing he could do for Steve now. He could stay the hell away from him in that particular way. He could observe boundaries, the way Pepper said he was incapable of doing.

In fact, he'd been careful around him ever since the night Steve had come to see him. That night he'd touched Steve unselfconsciously, more for his own shattered nerves than for Steve's benefit if he was honest with himself, and Steve had seemed to respond pretty well - just about melted into him at one point. But Tony didn't need his Inner Pepper to tell him that Steve would probably want to keep his own space unless he was in extreme distress. So Tony was keeping his distance physically, or trying to at least, and hoping Steve appreciated it.

He looked up as Natasha and Clint came back with chips, cold cuts, and a fruit platter, the movie utterly ignored as they all turned to look at Steve.

Steve hadn't been eating much, they'd all noticed. The medication was messing with his appetite and ability to keep food down, but he'd also been working way too hard, and often throwing up what he ate - though every two hours was an exaggeration - and he still had that enhanced metabolism that required enormous amounts of fuel.

Unfortunately, he also desperately needed sleep. Natasha put the food down and knelt down next to Steve, pulling a blanket over him.

"Should we wake him up?" asked Clint quietly.
"We said we would," said Natasha.

"He needs to sleep, though."

"He needs to eat more."

"Nat, he'll just puke it up."

"He also probably isn't going to sleep very well on the couch," Bruce pointed out. "No offense, Tony, your couches are very comfortable, but we all need bedrest right now."

"No, Thor, I don't think he'll appreciate you carrying him to his room," said Natasha as Thor started forward.

There was a long pause.

"Well? What do you think?" asked Clint.

"I think maybe we shouldn't be talking about him like he's not here," said Natasha. "I think he's a grown man who doesn't need us to hover over him like this."

Bruce took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes wearily. "He didn't do so good taking care of himself."

"I'm assuming the movie's a wash?" Clint said, and turned it off at the communal shrug of indifference.

Natasha smoothed the blanket over Steve. "Maybe he could sleep a few hours, and then we can wake him up and make sure he gets something to eat."

Tony picked up a pad and moved closer to Steve on the couch. "I'll do that. You all go to bed, I've got my pad, I can do some work here for a couple of hours."

"Man of Iron, you also require rest," said Thor.

"I will, I will," said Tony. He shrugged. "I'm a little too wired to crash right now anyway," he lied, suppressing a yawn.

"Are you certain?" Thor asked.

"Sure, yeah. I'll be fine."

The team exchanged glances, then started to move off, Clint picking up some cold cuts and pieces of fruit before leaving. Tony waved goodnight to the team and settled down with his Starkpad, pushing away his own weariness.

It was pathetically inadequate, but it was just about all he could do for Steve.

Steve suddenly shifted, his breath catching and a frown passing over his features, and Tony automatically reached out to him, hesitating before tentatively placing a hand on Steve's shoulder. Steve's features smoothed out and he sighed, sinking into a deeper sleep.

2.

November 6
"No movie tonight?" asked Natasha, surprised. The large screen was filled with color-coded maps of the states. She stepped into the warm kitchen, where Bruce was making veggies and dip, with Steve's help.

"It's election night," said Bruce, passing Steve a bowl of leafy vegetables to chop.

"This is arugula?" asked Steve.

"Yeah."

"I thought you'd grown it in your lab. We never had this." He chopped a few, then put the knife down, shook his hand out briefly, and took a quick breath before continuing. "What's wrong with plain lettuce?"

"Nothing. Except it has almost no nutritional benefits whatsoever. Arugula has more antioxidants and Vitamin C and K, and a bunch of other stuff I don't remember off the top of my head. Here. Can you scrub the mushrooms instead? I'll do the chopping."

"I can do it," Steve said quietly.

"I know, but so can I," said Bruce, taking the knife. Steve was kind of jittery, Natasha noticed. He'd been tense this morning too, at breakfast. Probably not conducive to working with sharp things, all amazing healing properties aside.

"No movie tonight?" said Clint, coming into the kitchen. "Christ it's hot in here."

"It's election night," Bruce repeated, as he and Natasha put together a tray of veggies and dips and Steve finished cleaning the mushrooms.

"So?"

"So we're watching the results."

"Why? Everybody did their civic duty, everybody voted, why do we have to watch it all in excruciating detail?" asked Clint, swiping some carrot sticks as Bruce walked past into the movie room.

"Because," said Bruce.

"Don't you care who wins?" asked Steve.

"That's what Starkpads are for," said Clint, puzzled. "You can refresh whenever you want while the results come in."

"It's Cap's first election in the twenty-first century," said Bruce.

"And first on TV," said Tony, coming into the kitchen.

"Mine as well," said Thor. "We do not have these events in my realm."

"So who'd you vote for, Steve?" asked Clint. There was a small silence. He glanced around. "What?"

"Wow, and I thought I was the most socially inept," said Tony.

"Clint, you don't ever ask that question," said Natasha patiently.
"How come?"

Natasha smiled. Funny how often she and Clint had to explain to each other the finer points of North American etiquette. "It's private. It's like asking what positions people prefer when they're having sex."

"...and you're not supposed to do that either?" said Clint slowly. Natasha threw a mushroom at him and he laughed, catching it. "Hey, how was I supposed to know? Nobody I grew up with ever voted for anything. Except the Tattooed Lady and Snake Guy, and they were weird. And I've almost always been out of the country whenever there's been an election." He grabbed another carrot stick. "Besides, did you know there's a whole website about how we're voting? If strangers can talk about it, why can't I ask?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "I saw that one." He grabbed the remote and fiddled with it for a moment, calling up a website onto the large screen. There was a breakdown of each member of the Avengers, with their supposed political leanings. Interesting.

"I am not a subject of your realm," said Thor, highly puzzled. "Why would I choose your leader?"

"It's the internet," said Steve, frowning at the screen and rubbing his arms. "I don't think any of it has to make sense."

"Here, put that back onto the election reporting," said Natasha. She glanced at Steve. "Sit. You're making me nervous."

"Yeah, Cap, relax," said Bruce, a hand on his arm as he tugged him down. Steve startled slightly and sat down next to him.

"You're not nervous about the election, are you?" asked Clint. "I know Sitwell's kinda squirrelly over--"

"No," said Steve sharply. "No. The election's fine. It's interesting."

They watched for a few moments, then Steve got up.

"Dude. Sit down." Clint glanced up, taking in his tense expression. "Or don't. What's the matter?"

"Feel like I'm gonna shake apart," he said tightly. He rubbed his arms again.

"And you're still cold?" said Bruce.

"Why didn't you say so?" said Clint. "JARVIS, turn up the heat in here."

"You were just complaining about it in the kitchen," said Steve.

"So? I can go down to undershirt if it gets uncomfortable. Is it the meds?"

Steve clenched his jaw slightly and gave a brief nod, and Natasha wished, not for the first time, that Clint wasn't so oblivious to privacy concerns. Steve very obviously didn't want to talk about this.

"Are they trying to find an anti-depressant or anti-anxiety thing?"

Steve nodded again. "That and pain relief."

"They're testing that on you at the same time as anti-anxiety and anti-depressants?" asked Bruce.
Steve shrugged. "I told them I don't really need it, but they said they might as well."

"What do you mean you don't need it?" asked Tony.

"I heal. Quickly. Super Serum, remember?"

"Yeah, but you get hurt pretty damn often. Just since we've known you, you've had chemical burns, broken bones, road rash, bullet wounds--"

"And they all healed."

"But it took hours," said Tony. "The chemical burns took two days. And you didn't have any pain relief in the meantime?"

"I didn't have any back in the War either, Tony."

"That was the nineteen-forties! Better living through chemistry, remember? Is it possible we've found better alternatives now? Why didn't they bother to try anything when you first started getting hurt?"

Tony got up, looking pissed, and grabbed Natasha's blanket from the loveseat, shoving it at Steve.

"I told them I didn't need it," said Steve, wrapping the blanket around himself. "I told them I did fine in the forties."

"OK," said Bruce, placing a calming hand on Tony. "How did you cope, in the War?"

Steve shrugged, irritated. "I don't know. I... I spent time with the men. I talked to Bucky. Peggy."

"And none of them are here now."

"You're all here," Steve pointed out.

"We're not the same as your best friend or your girlfriend," said Bruce.

Steve's eyes darkened. "She wasn't my girlfriend."

"You had a picture of her on your compass," said Clint, puzzled. "What?" he said as the rest of the team looked at him curiously. "You couldn't hang out with Coulson for long without getting a little Captain America-stalkery. You mean you guys really weren't sleeping together?"

Steve shook his head and pulled the blanket tighter around himself, still shivering.

"Christ, and you wonder why you have trouble sleeping," said Tony. "You put yourself into the line of fire over and over, knowing you're going to end up suffering, with no pain relief. If that's not enough to trigger PTSD, I don't know what is."

"I get better," Steve said stubbornly.

"Yeah? Labor gets better too. I still don't know a lot of women who'd want to do it more than two or three times in their lives. You do it all the time. It's like you're giving birth every couple of weeks."

Steve grimaced. "Nice image, Tony."

Tony blinked, then chuckled. "Sorry."

"Lack of pain relief isn't a tragedy," said Steve stubbornly. "Most people around the world don't have the kind of access to the drugs you take for granted. They're fine. And soldiers have done it...
through all of human history."

"First off, soldiers had at least booze," Tony shot back. "Second, we're not talking about boo-boos in your case; we're talking about serious eleven-on-a-scale-of-ten pain. And third, yeah, people go through a lot of pain without painkillers all the time, but not all of them are fine. A lot of them are traumatized for life. We're trying to avoid that, here. I mean - fuck, even going through that once, can seriously--" he abruptly snapped his mouth shut and clenched his jaw, and Natasha winced. Afghanistan. She'd read his file: chest ripped open and connected to a car battery, some alcohol poured down his throat to keep him from thrashing around too much, but mostly just held down screaming until he passed out from the pain. Whether Tony's 'booze, therapy and all the best drugs' had really gotten him over it or not, apparently this topic was hitting a little too close to home.

Bruce gave Tony a worried glance. "All right, in any case, you're cold now," he said, turning back to Steve. He paused. And jumpy as hell, Natasha could hear him deciding not to say. "I'm gonna make a pot of herbal tea. Peppermint all right?"

Steve nodded reluctantly and sat back down, huddled in the blanket and giving Tony a curious look. The cold wasn't all that was wrong, Natasha realized as they listened to a rambling prediction of which way Florida would fall. Steve was still vibrating with tension, and the pointless blither on the screen wasn't doing much to help.

"You know..." Bruce said slowly as he came back with the tea and handed out cups. "I hate to say this because we'd be up a creek without you, but... the pain problem wouldn't be an issue if you had another job."

"Dude, don't go there," Clint said. "We're trying to keep him, OK?"

"Yeah, bad words, Brucey," said Tony, scowling.

"Besides, what else would I do?" Steve asked.

Tony turned to him, eyebrows going up. "Wait, what? You're good at other things too," he said. "You were in art school, right?"

"What, I should become an artist? Even if I could make a living at it, I'd be disappointing a lot of people. You said so yourself, I'm a chemistry experiment. An expensive one."

Tony's scowl returned and deepened. "And you think you owe it to... who, exactly, to keep being that chemistry experiment? Everyone who ever worked on that croaked years ago."

Steve turned to say something sharp to Tony, then swallowed and looked away, and Natasha was reminded that Tony's own father had been one of the people he'd just callously dismissed. "S.H.I.E.L.D rescued me," Steve said after a moment.

"You never asked them to. In any case, you can't live your life feeling like you owe a bunch of dead people. If you decide to stay doing what you're doing, it's gotta be because you want to do it."

"Oh so you want me to quit, now?"

"Hell no," said Tony vehemently. "I want you to do what you want to do."

"It's so simple for you, isn't it?"

"It doesn't have to be complicated for you either. What do you want to do?"
"I... don't know."

"You were going to quit a few days ago. What did you think you were going to do?"

Steve shrugged. "To be honest, I wasn't thinking that far ahead." He paused, looked down. "Just... just wanted out." He shivered.

Natasha frowned. No. He didn't want to talk about this. And he was doing enough talking these days. Better to just let him be.

"How are you liking your first twenty-first century election so far?" asked Natasha.

Steve blinked at the abrupt change in topic. "What? Oh. Uh, well, it's not as tense as the last one I saw."

"Which was that?" asked Clint.

"Roosevelt-Dewey, '44."

"How was that?"

"Um. Interesting, I guess. People were pretty upset about Pearl Harbor and the War, so it was pretty intense."

"Who'd you vote for?"

"Clint!" Natasha elbowed him.

"What? Come on! It was seventy years ago!"

"Roosevelt," said Steve. "His third term, too." He gazed down at his teacup, swirled his tea.

"Didn't they make an amendment after him to make sure nobody could run more than twice?"

"Yeah, I read about that," said Steve.

"It's funny, though, 'cause it wasn't 'cause everyone hated him," said Clint. "I mean, even I've heard of Roosevelt. Did everyone love him back then too?"

Steve shook his head. "Not hardly. A lot of people hated him." He glanced up at the screen and put his tea down on the nearest coffee table, almost knocking it into Thor's mug of ale, and swore under his breath.

Jittery and clumsy. And still shivering, unable to keep his attention on the election, uninterested in conversation, and Natasha had enough. She gave Clint a look and he nodded.

"OK, you know what?" he said, standing up. "This is boring the crap out of me. Cap. Let's go down to the range. You said you wanted to learn about archery."

Steve gave him a level stare. "You want to give me sharp objects, right now, and trust my aim?"

"OK, bad idea. How about the punching bag? Or, hang on, no. Let's spar. Two on one: Super-soldier versus scary ninja assassins."

Steve hesitated, looking at the screen.
"We'll get Tony to call down whenever a state's called," said Natasha.

Steve finally nodded and stood, following Natasha and Clint down to the gym.

3.

**November 9**

Christ, this was getting difficult, thought Clint at the breakfast table a few days later. Steve had been jumpy the last couple of days, speaking tersely, overly sensitive to light and sound, setting everyone's teeth on edge. An air of barely restrained violence hung about him, and everyone was trying to not get sucked in but it was bloody difficult not to. Thankfully he didn't seem to be freezing cold any more, so the common areas were back to normal temperatures, but frankly at this point Clint would happily take the sweltering heat. Whatever SHIELD Medical were giving Steve right now... just couldn't be healthy.

"Bruce, did you finish that Geggen experiment?" asked Tony, breaking the strained silence.

"No, still watching the Caltrek values."

"I didn't think those were still changing,"

Go Geek Talk, thought Clint as they devolved into scientific babble that somehow missed its usual level of enthusiasm. Still incomprehensible. "Steve, were you still awake for the ending of *Midnight Cowboy*?" asked Clint.

"No," said Steve.

"Did you want to know how it ended?"

"Bruce told me while you were out yesterday," said Steve. "The guy died."

It might not be the new medication, Clint mused. Steve was probably still feeling pretty raw about yesterday, the first time the team had been called in without him. That had been a conversation Clint wished he could forget, as they'd waited for the Quinjet to pick them up on the deck and glanced over the SHIELD report, and Steve had immediately noted that SHIELD was grossly underestimating the danger level they were facing.

"Thor won't get here in time," he'd said. "And you're going to need somebody on the ground--"

"That won't be you," Tony had said immediately, his suit snapping into place.

"You'd still be in charge--" Steve began.

"You'd be a distraction, Cap."

"You're not cleared for the field," Clint had pointed out, doing a quick check of his arrows and replacing a few of the explosives with acid-tips.

"We'd be worried about you," Natasha had said. "You know we want you back," she'd added gently, reading the dismay in Steve's eyes. "But only after Medical's cleared you."

"And you're totally welcome to let me know just how much of a hypocrite I'm being when I'm being bitchy next time I'm benched," Clint had added. "But right now, get out of the way."

"It's all right," Clint had heard Bruce say as the 'jet landed and the rest of them started to climb in.
"You'll be back with them soon."

"Yeah? Would you clear me any time soon?" Steve asked. "I wouldn't clear me."

"Come to the lab with me," said Bruce. "It's too populated for them to call me in either, so let's go monitor how they're doing, and you can help me put the medical supplies together."

"I can also make sandwiches for when they come back," Steve had said bitterly.

Now Clint stirred his coffee and cast about for something else to say, to break the terse discomfort.

"Did you hear they lost the Mean Teen?" he asked Natasha.

Natasha nodded, taking a spoonful of her weird yoghurt breakfast concoction. "From the Joneville facility, I heard. Hill's sent a team to figure out what happened."

Clint blinked. Hill had sent the team; not Fury. Fury had not been seen or heard from in a while, and rumor had it he was at a disciplinary hearing. For what, nobody knew. And for an institution that lived and breathed scuttlebutt as much as SHIELD did, the fact that nobody knew was frightening.

He traded a glance with Natasha. Probably not a good idea to discuss what that might mean in front of Steve; he certainly didn't need anything else to worry about.

Clint glanced at Steve, who was determinedly making himself plow through a stack of toast - apparently the appetite wasn't back yet, not that his body let him slack off on feeding it - and reflected it was a good thing Thor was visiting his girlfriend right now instead of the other way around. She'd probably get into it with Bruce and Tony over some geeky thing and then Thor would boom in delight at her lady's mental prowess and Steve looked like the slightest thing was going to make him jump out of his skin right now. They were all walking on eggshells; Thor didn't do eggshells real well.

"Nat, did you--" Clint reached for the juice jug, encountered Steve reaching for the bacon, and the jug tipped over.

"Christ! Sorry!" Steve grabbed at the juice as it spilled over his bowl and Clint's, and the jug shattered on the floor.

"Hey it's OK--" Clint began.

"Shit!" Steve stared at the mess on the floor, shaking with nerves. Bruce quickly got up and reached for him, freezing as Steve jerked his chair back.

"Steve, dude, calm down!" Clint said, standing, and immediately regretted it as Steve snapped around to face him and he took in the look of panic and distress. Steve had mentioned feeling hypersensitive to sights and sounds recently; this must be like a million light bulbs going off in his face at once, and he plainly could not handle it.
Steve made an inarticulate sound and shoved the table away from himself and it crashed against the wall, and the stunning array of shattered pottery, glass and food brought them all to their feet. Clint met Natasha's eyes and nodded towards Bruce as they silently tried to figure out how to take Steve down before he set off the Other Guy and Steve shoved his chair away, sending it against the wall and nearly cracking it in half - and then Tony stepped in.

"Hey hey hey hey--" Steve spun around and Tony stepped forward, hands outstretched, and Clint swore under his breath because what the hell was Tony thinking, the least equipped to deal with super-soldier strength on a 'roid rage--

"Steve!" Tony said firmly, and Steve, miraculously, checked himself and punched the wall next to Tony instead of Tony himself.

Tony didn't so much as blink, stepping forward again and putting a hand near but not on Steve. "Dude, come on," he said. "Cap, look you know I'm a huge fan of rage-based redecorating, and normally I'd just be tickled pink seeing you try to outdo our Jolly Green Giant here, but Pepper's gonna shoot me if you wreck any of this shit she calls art, besides Paolozzi never did anything to you, come on, let's go to the atrium, I've been dying to knock the whole damn thing down ever since the Chitauri missed it..."

Steve heaved a deep breath, limbs still vibrating but the violence temporarily held at bay by Tony's chatter. Tony cautiously reached out for his shoulder, blowing out his breath as Steve allowed the touch and relaxed slightly.

"OK, what, no come on that's not fair - I'm telling you, don't get it under control at least until you've trashed the paneled doors in there, those things are an insult to glaziers everywhere..."

Steve closed his eyes, chest still heaving, and put a hand over Tony's.

"Hey, hey what's this," Tony murmured, putting his arm around Steve, and Steve swallowed hard, taking deep breaths as he tried to bring himself back under control.

"Capsicle, hey, it's OK," Tony said softly. Steve shook his head. The silence in the room was absolute.

"It's not OK," Steve whispered, bowing his head, obviously ashamed of his outburst. The trembling in his limbs died down and he looked lost and vaguely nauseated. He swayed.

"Here, Steve, you better sit down," Tony started to guide him back to the chairs, but Steve put a hand behind to steady himself on the counter, then sank down to the floor of the kitchen, too shaky to make it to a chair. Tony sat down beside him as Steve drew up his knees and put his head down on his arms.

"Steve, it's fine. It was crappy furniture--"

"It's not fine," Steve said, his voice muffled. "What the hell is wrong with me..."

"Um, off the top of my head I'm guessing it's that you're suffering from depression and PTSD and the effects of being pressed into service as a science project for overexcited chemists."

Steve huffed a startled laugh, catching his breath and drawing further in on himself. "Oh, hell," he said hopelessly, as his breath caught in a sob.

Tony put an arm around him again. "Steve, it's OK," he murmured. He glanced at the others, who were still standing and gaping.
"What can we do?" Bruce asked quietly, and Steve shook his head, body tense, breath held in.

Tony shook his head too. "We're OK," he said. "Steve, let it go, nobody's gonna judge you." Steve was still silent, shoulders hitching slightly, and Tony ran a gentle hand over his hair. "You want them to go or stay?"

Steve took a deep, shaking breath, and whispered, "Go, I'll be fine, Tony." He started to pull away and Tony tightened his arm around him.

"Yeah no, that part's not gonna fly," he said. "The rest of 'em are gonna scoot for now but you're stuck with me."

Clint nodded, picking up his cup of coffee from the floor and looking around at the broken furniture. They all filed out, Bruce stopping briefly to pat Steve's shoulder, and left Tony and Steve still on the kitchen floor, Tony murmuring quietly into Steve's hair.

Fuck. What a mess. Maybe Steve would be better off where Clint had checked in to spend his post-Loki downtime after all. SHIELD Medical wasn't the cheeriest place in the world, but they'd probably be better equipped to handle Steve than his team were. It was pretty obvious that, as far as taking care of their leader went, they weren't doing much better than when they'd all let him get depressed on them in the first place. Other than Tony - and seriously, who would've guessed he could ever drop the cocky asshole act and be the only one Steve would let near him like this? - they were useless. Maybe it was time to stick to being Avengers, and leave being competent medical professionals to the professionals.

Clint scrubbed a hand over his forehead and cursed under his breath, heading for his apartment. He couldn't escape the feeling that if Phil could possibly manage it, he'd come back from beyond the grave and smack them all to hell and back for being such fuck-ups. And at this point, Clint wouldn't even bother to put up a fight.

Chapter End Notes

The movies watched/mentioned are:

Oliver!, 1968
Midnight Cowboy, 1969

The MCU Timeline (and how cool is that, that such a thing exists?) says that Steve's plane went down in 1945. Roosevelt died in April of 1945; I'm going to decide that Steve was already iced by then. Just because otherwise he'd probably have something to say about being there for the death of a President, and... yeah. Chapter already too long.
"It's OK, they're gone," said Tony after the others had left. Steve was still tense as hell, but a little of the rigidity was gone, and Tony shifted himself slightly, trying to get more comfortable on the kitchen floor.

"I can be on my own, Tony," Steve said, his voice muffled by his arms.

"Yeah, well, good for you," said Tony. "I can't, though, tough guy. So suck it up. I'm staying."

Steve nodded, taking in a shaking breath.

"Babe, just relax, OK?" said Tony, stroking Steve's hair and wincing slightly at the automatic endearment, but Steve just nodded and let Tony hold him, then, after a moment's hesitation, leaned closer to him. Tony shifted towards him, encircling him with his other arm, gently tugging on Steve's head until he rested it on Tony's shoulder.

Tony felt the tension in Steve flow out, felt it when Steve finally let go. Though 'letting go' for Steve apparently meant near-silence, trembling, occasional shuddering breaths, and dampness slowly seeping Tony's t-shirt. At this point, Tony would take what he could get.

Shit, what must it be like, he wondered, to always be so much in control, and then to lose control so completely? To be a leader, used to commanding others, and then to not even be able to command yourself?

And what must it be like to have one thing going for you, your superior health, and then to have to hand that over? Put yourself at the mercy of lab coats and let yourself be buffeted by confusing, disorienting sensations, physical and emotional weakness, all in the name of helping you in the long-term, when what you really needed was simple peace in the short-term?

He stroked Steve's hair absently, squeezed his shoulder, and wished he didn't feel so... helpless. Wished he had some way of telling Steve, you're not alone; I'm here, we're all here, in a way that Steve could hear and understand. To do anything but just sit, more useless than tits on a nun, while Steve wept silently in his arms, riding out the winds of his internal struggle.

A long time later, Steve scrubbed at his face and sat up. "I'm sorry," he said hoarsely, wiping his nose on his sleeve. "I... fuck, I'm sorry."

Tony made a sound in his throat and didn't let him pull away. "It's OK." He reached up to the counter and found a napkin, handed it to Steve.
Steve wiped his face, not meeting Tony's eyes, and looked around the kitchen. "Fuck. What a mess." He drew a deep, shaking breath, and sat up. "OK. I'm, I'm OK. Um, thanks. I'm... you can tell the rest of them it's OK to come in, I'm fine. I'll just... I'll clean this up."

"Steve, no, come on." Tony gazed at Steve, with his eyes and nose reddened, defeat in every feature, refusing to meet Tony's eyes.

"JARVIS, tell everyone it's OK to come in," Steve said, raising his voice slightly.

"JARVIS hold off on that," Tony said quickly. "Steve." He put a hand on Steve's shoulder, keeping him on the floor through force of will alone. "You need some time to--"

"I've had time. Everyone's got stuff they need to get done today, I'm just--"

"Fuck, Steve, they can wait to come get their damned briefing notes--" Tony stopped himself as Steve drew his shoulders up and gathered himself in again. OK, moment over. Tony sat back as Steve got up and started to pick up shattered glass. "Steve, you're gonna cut yourself--"

"I have to clean this up. It's my mess - oh. Shit." Steve paused, hand on a piece of broken cereal bowl, closed his eyes briefly, then let the bowl fall and hurried to the washroom. Tony heard retching. Great. He'd thought the current medication wasn't nauseating; apparently, he was wrong. Or maybe the emotional upheaval had affected Steve's stomach. Either way, everything Steve had forced himself to eat was now getting the heave-ho. He looked around the kitchen at the broken table, bowls, glasses, juice jug, shattered mugs, upended chairs, dented wall...

Steve came back, grey-faced and wiping his mouth.

"Seriously. Steve," said Tony, still leaning against the cabinet on the floor. "Let the kitchen bots deal with this."

"I'll make me feel better, Tony," said Steve wearily. "It's just about the only thing I can control right now. And JARVIS, tell the others they can come back in."

Tony pulled his knees up, arms going around them as he leaned back and watched Steve pick up the unbroken dishes. Natasha hesitantly came back into the room, nodding to Tony and then looking over at Steve.

"Can I help?" asked Natasha.

"No. Um, thanks," Steve added, not meeting her eyes, getting himself a broom and starting to sweep up the broken pieces.

God damn it. Back to this again. Back to Steve feeling like shit and keeping them at arm's length, and there didn't seem to be anything the rest of them could do to help.

2.

November 12

The days had started to bleed into each other, thought Steve as he went at another punching bag. Wake up, go for a run and work out, breakfast, waste time, therapy, lunch, work out, waste time, dinner, movie, sleep.

Therapy was starting to bleed into itself too. Talking about his childhood, the loss of his parents, the Serum, the War, the Howling Commandos, his orientation. Bucky, losing Bucky, Peggy, losing
Peggy, losing everyone and everything, the Avengers, the church, Tony...

And it was all so pointless. So much talking about stuff he didn't even want to think about, let alone talk about. Trying all sorts of different medicines, none of which could adequately handle his enhanced biology. Drawing. Playing checkers, cards, chess and video games with whoever was around, listening to music, wasting his time and plodding on until all he wanted was to scream and break things and go to sleep and never wake up again.

If he'd just kept his mouth shut that night, he could've avoided this.

Or he could've ended up dead. And would that be so bad?

No, he had not just thought that. That was counterproductive.

He finished his workout and headed for his apartment, stepping into the shower with relief, trying not to think about this morning's therapy session.

"What I don't understand is... you keep saying mental illness is just illness, right?" he'd asked his therapist this morning. "You keep harping on that, saying you need me to understand it's not moral failing or... whatever it is you think I believe."

"Yes?"

"The Serum was supposed to make it so I couldn't get sick."

"We don't understand all of it either," said Dr. Sanjay. "Maybe Dr. Erskine's knowledge of mental health wasn't as thorough as his knowledge of physical health. Besides, you can probably still become physically sick, you know; you just haven't come across any virus that'll take you out yet. We know that your physical ailments were cured, and you were blessed with higher mental capacity than you had before, and got what looks like a perfect immune system. But just as it is possible for you to become injured, it may still be possible for you to become physically ill, and it appears this is also true of mental illness."

Steve wasn't terribly convinced. "Mental illness? Caused by a virus?"

Sanjay smiled and shook his head. "Maybe our own knowledge of mental health isn't as thorough as we'd like it to be either," he said. "You're in good company regardless, though. Not only are you aware that many of your own team members have dealt with PTSD, but I can rattle off the names of dozens of famous high-functioning, high-achieving people who battled depression and anxiety disorders and other forms of mental illness all of their lives. Sir Winston Churchill, Charles Dickens, Abraham Lincoln..."

"Lincoln?"

"Absolutely. It's no shame to be ill, Captain Rogers."

The pain of it was, he wasn't that ill. If he'd had a regular office job he would've been cleared for light work within a week or two, said his therapist. Unfortunately, his job required him to be in top-notch mental condition and be trusted to not commit passive suicide by Doombot. So SHIELD refused to clear him. And he didn't blame them in the least.

So here he was, still off work, almost three weeks later. Still feeling like shit, not in control of damn near anything any more, and not liking the irritated and puzzled frowns on Dr. Sanjay's face over his bloodwork or the tests that Medical had him going through.
There was not much good to grasp at any more, either. No positive self-talk about being useful, because he wasn't, or being a member of a team, because his team were treating him like he was made of glass - and he couldn't blame them after the other morning - or being able to adapt to this time, because he clearly couldn't. Culture Shock was the other label they'd put on him.

He couldn't even think about any progress with medical stuff. Nothing was working. Whether they were trying out established drugs at high dosages or new concoctions made just for him, everything made him sick in some way and didn't do all that much to brighten his mood or calm his anxiety or make him feel less pain. About the only thing any of it did was let him sleep - and even that was fractured and uneasy, unless he was sleeping during a movie.

The latest try wasn't the worst by far, just one of the more inconvenient. The nausea wasn't so bad - thank God, because he was getting really sick of feeling like he was starving to death but repulsed by food - but it was resulting in hyper-sensitivity. Because it wasn't enough that he'd felt nauseated and freezing and jittery and exhausted; now he felt every touch on his skin, good, bad and indifferent, intruding on his consciousness. Which, among other things, tended to made him horny as hell.

He'd had an appointment at the church this afternoon, but God, that was just another form of therapy, and combined with the side effects of the current round of meds he'd lasted about half an hour before he felt like putting his fist through the stained glass windows and left, apologizing and claiming a headache.

A headache. He hadn't had a headache in years, until this medical nightmare had re-introduced him to the experience. That wasn't the problem today, but he sure as hell wasn't going to explain that to the nice folks at the church.

He'd also left with the promise that he would attend a social event being given at the church, other people seeking to go against their preferences. He'd been waffling on that for a while. He just couldn't help thinking of what Tony had said: that it was unfair to date a woman when he felt nothing for her. Granted, any woman he dated through the church would probably be feeling next to nothing for him too, but...

No, it would probably be good for him. Really. If he could just work up some enthusiasm between now and then. It would get him around other people, for one thing, which couldn't help but be a good thing. Especially if those other people weren't Tony.

He leaned back in the shower, thinking of Tony. He'd seen Tony in the gym this morning, and though they'd spoken briefly, Tony had claimed business and left fairly quickly.

In fact, Tony hadn't been alone with him for weeks, except for the other morning. He should be grateful - scratch that, he was grateful. Unfortunately, he was also horny and not thinking straight, and couldn't help feeling a longing for Tony that seemed to permeate him down to his bones.

He shouldn't feel that way. He didn't want to feel that way. Tony was being helpful by being distant. Maybe he'd gotten the message that Steve really didn't want anything to happen between them. Maybe he'd been turned off by Steve being so incredibly fucked up. Whatever the reason, it was a good thing, it was moving them from whatever dangerous thing had been sparking between them to becoming simple friends and colleagues again.

Never mind that that wasn't what Steve wanted at all.

He rested his head against the shower tile, warm water washing over him, indulging in it despite the waste. Normally he was in and out in moments, but right now he was tired, and tired of ignoring his body, ignoring things that felt too hot or too cold or too good, trying to work past the distraction of
senses bombarding his consciousness. It felt like when he'd first been getting used to the Serum's changes, and kept getting startled by how good air felt when it rushed into his lungs unimpeded by asthma; how satisfying it felt to aim a kick or a punch at a training target and hear a solid thwack as it hit dead-on; how quickly he could go from zero to hard as a rock when an attractive man went by.

He groaned and ducked his head under the water again, automatically reaching down to palm himself as his body reacted to that last thought. He caught his breath, Christ that felt good - he'd done nothing but wrap a hand around himself and he was almost dizzy already.

He was turned on enough that he probably didn't need any thoughts and fantasies to get off and should just think of the physical sensations, the rush of endorphins, the water running down his body, but his traitorous mind was supplying him with images anyway, memories of how Tony had looked this morning, how beads of sweat lined his brow, how his shoulders shifted and muscles played over on his back as he went at a punching bag. How his eyes were bright with adrenaline, just like that night they'd kissed--

He clenched his eyes shut and placed his hands on the tile wall. No.

All right, think of the USO girls instead.

He reached back down. There had been Teresa, the tall blonde who'd first asked him to walk her to her billet when he was still so shy he couldn't say more than two words to any of the girls, and then asked him inside, in direct defiance of the USO chaperone's strict rules. She'd kissed him, taking the lead, and he'd gone along with it right up until she'd started unbuttoning her blouse and then he'd made stammering apologies and left.

Amazingly, she hadn't been angry; she'd thought he was sweet, and had made it her personal mission to get him more comfortable around girls. They'd fooled around a number of times after that, until she'd gone back home to Charleston...

No, Teresa wasn't doing it for him.

All right, then, Shellie, the little brunette who'd first gone down on him, her perky breasts rubbing up against him whenever they fooled around. She'd teasingly pushed his limits, again, and again, and eventually left him so breathless that he'd decided one night, in for a penny, in for a pound, and went along eagerly when she'd popped her mouth off of him, lay back on the couch of her billet, and pulled him down on top of her.

He still remembered slipping into her for the first time, finally understanding what Bucky had always gone on about. And vaguely wishing he wasn't losing his virginity on a couch with a chorus girl, but thinking that resisting the girls, his newly healthy body being what it was, was a losing proposition anyway. He might as well do it with one he liked as much as he liked Shellie.

The memories of Shellie weren't enough, though. She'd been beautiful and exciting and he'd loved it, but thinking of her didn't do much for him. He was still hard and panting, but unable to reach release. If anything, trying to think of her was a distraction, like thinking of algebra while jerking off. There was a theory that if you could get yourself excited physically, then pair that physical excitement with fantasies of the right gender, you could train yourself to be excited by that gender. It... really didn't work for Steve.

Maybe you needed to be bi for it to work. Tony could probably manage it, no problem, if he thought it was necessary. Which he didn't, the lucky bastard.

His hand sped up, remembering Tony's arms around him. Tony thrusting against him. He bit his lip.
Tony had kissed him back so hard Steve would've almost had bruises the next day, and it had felt amazing. He'd been all smooth planes and angles, his scent spicy and male, his arms and hands so strong. Steve had felt like he was drowning in him, wanting everything all at once, and his hand curled around himself now as the water ran in rivulets down his stomach and over his aching flesh. He squeezed, groaning, remembering Tony's lips nibbling up his neck and to his ear, breath hot against his cheek, Tony's hands sliding down and pulling them together, feeling Tony hot and hard against him, itching to touch him, to rip their clothes away and feel all of him, skin to skin.

"Anything, I'm up for it," Tony had gasped, and Steve's mind had almost blanked out at the possibilities - Tony's lips wrapped around him, sinking into Tony's body, feeling Tony come - and Steve's hand sped up, tension ratcheting up unbearably as the water felt like a million fingers caressing him and he almost felt Tony's teeth catch his ear and Tony's hard length rutting against his own and--

He cried out, releasing in spurts against the shower wall, shuddering heaving breaths and feeling like a wave had knocked him over.

He leaned against the wall, panting.

God damn it.

He shouldn't have done that. He didn't need the nice people at God's Peace to tell him that.

He shouldn't have done that, shouldn't be letting himself think of Tony like that. Even thinking of Tony physically close to him in a perfectly innocent way, the way he had been when Steve had broken down and Tony had pulled him close and held on - even that wasn't a good idea. This... this was just stupid, and completely counterproductive.

Just like it had been the last three or four times he'd done it.

He got out of the shower and checked the time, drying himself off and pushing away the guilt beginning to curl in his gut. Too early to go down to the common areas; he was spending too much time there, and so was Tony, and the thought of facing him right now, after jerking off to thoughts of him, made him feel raw, exposed.

Idleness, yet another problem, he thought as he finished getting dressed. The rest of the team were still being called out, and had ongoing follow-ups on recent missions. He had nothing to do. Nothing useful, anyway. He'd started watching non-Oscar movies on his own, but it wasn't the same. And as for television... the less said about that, the better. Mythbusters and The Walking Dead were interesting albeit incomprehensible, but he'd turned off his TV in the middle of an episode of Jersey Shore a week ago and hadn't been able to bring himself to turn it back on since.

He could go out onto the deck, get some fresh air - though for all he knew that might throw JARVIS into a panic and bring security running. He could to Central Park, go climbing on some of those boulders on the south side... though he wasn't sure he wanted to have his therapist speculate about as to whether Steve actually wanted to exercise, or just be somewhere with a steep drop again. Not that the piddly height of those boulders in Central Park would be useful for anything involving steep drops.

The studio it was, then. And to occupy his mind and stop it from wandering to thoughts of what he'd just done, he'd listen to Clint's Music History 101 playlists. Clint had decided that it was a crying shame that the last seventy years of music were a blank to him except for a vague idea that today's kids mostly listened to what sounded like factory noises with some shouted Korean words. So Clint - who also turned out to play a passable guitar and had a surprisingly good voice - had put together
playlists for him. They started at Big Band and moved through rock, folk, country, disco (Oh God), techno pop, grunge (surprisingly, not bad), metal (incomprehensible but surprisingly good to have in the background as he pummelled punching bags), hip hop, rap (not that unfamiliar, like talking blues but sped up), and ending with what Clint swore was an over-representation of Korean boy bands, though Clint swore that K-Pop was the single most significant development in popular music since Chuck Berry's "Maybellene."

He picked Clint's Sixties playlist, wandered into his studio, and rifled through his rough sketches from the Oscar project for one to expand into oil paint. My Fair Lady, maybe? Lawrence of Arabia?

An hour later, halfway through what was turning out to be a decent desert scene and in the middle of realizing that no matter how many times he listened to "I Get Around" he was never going to be able to find any reason whatsoever for its popularity, he put down his brush and checked the time.

Finally. Movie time. He cleaned his paintbrushes and covered the canvas, heading for the common floor and finding Bruce already there, in the kitchen as usual.

Steve sighed as he watched Bruce work. He didn't feel like eating. Nothing tasted good. The knot of hunger in his stomach was a constant discomfort, and he choked enough food down to keep it at bay, but couldn't force himself to eat enough to make it go away.

He headed over to help Bruce anyway, noting with relief that although it was still a little distracting to be feeling physical sensations so strongly - the crispness of the broccoli, the coldness of the water he used to clean the vegetables - at least his hands were steady, and his mood relatively stable. Stable in terms of feeling depressed and useless, but at least not liable to fall apart for no reason. Again.

He looked up from the kale and endives (turned out Bruce didn't grow this stuff in his lab either), to see a vaguely familiar-looking man coming out of the elevator with Tony.

"Whoo!" the man stopped short, his mouth falling open, and Steve tried to figure out where he'd seen him before.

"What--" Tony had noticed his friend's lack of movement. "Oh right. Steve, Rhodey, Rhodey, Steve."

Right, Colonel James Rhodes. Steve remembered him now, from Tony's files: one of Tony's oldest friends, from his college days and from working with the military when Stark Industries was still making weapons. The man really looked like he had no idea whether to shake Steve's hand or salute or possibly start jumping up and down, and it was a little disconcerting.

"Captain America. Sir. It's - it's an honor to meet you, sir. I mean, it's--"

"Rhodey, don't you outrank him?" Tony said, smirking.

Rhodes blinked. "Well technically - but, I mean--"

"Good to meet you, Colonel Rhodes," said Steve, and it looked like they were mutually deciding to forego the whole saluting thing, so he held out his hand. "Tony's said a lot about you."

Rhodes shook his hand, glanced at Tony. "Has he?"

"Relax, some of it was good," Tony laughed. "Some of it was even true. And I never even breathed a word about the burrito incident in the girls' shower room in the MIT dorm."

Rhodes gave Steve a weak smile. "Don't listen to him. It's - it's a real honor to meet you, sir."
"Uh. Thank you," said Steve, feeling off-balance. Not that he'd ever felt terribly comfortable with hero-worship, but getting this kind of thing from a kid or a civilian while he was in uniform and actually doing something was very different from getting it from a fellow soldier - who, moreover, outranked him, and had done quite a bit of hero-work of his own - after he'd basically quit. After he was essentially at home and doing nothing more useful than wasting everyone's time and being a burden on his team.

Maybe Tony hadn't told him? It wasn't supposed to be common knowledge, but it was hardly a state secret, and this man was supposed to be one of Tony's closest friends. Surely he didn't think Steve was still out there, making a difference?

Except apparently he did.

"I'm, I mean, it's really..." Rhodes cleared his throat. "I've been a big admirer of yours for a long time - couldn't believe Tony got you to come live in the Tower, I was stationed in Munich for a while now and I, um, I studied all the reports about the incident with the Chitauri, which, if I'd known, I mean it would've been a hell of an honor to work with you on that one - well, on any of what you've done, Tony's been filling me in--"

"You do know I'm benched, right?" Steve finally broke in, unable to take the man's misplaced admiration. "I'm not going on missions right now."

Rhodes's eyes widened a bit. "Uh... yeah, not for the last few weeks." Steve stared at him, puzzled. "You're... you're still Captain America."

"Seriously Steve, Rhodey was second only to Phil Coulson in his fanboyness. I think he joined the service because of you."

Rhodes closed his eyes briefly, and Steve had the feeling that if his skin had been lighter it would've been brightly lit up by a mortified blush. "Tony, my dad was a Marine," he protested weakly.

The elevator door opened and Clint and Natasha got out, looking supremely pissed off.

"Oh crap," said Tony. "Assassin Twins looking thunderous. Everybody take cover."

"Have you read the news today?" said Clint, brandishing a Starkpad and nodding a perfunctory hello to Rhodes.

Bruce made a sound in his throat and went back to chopping. Steve and Tony shook their heads.

"No, I was in the lab and then I went to get Rhodey," said Tony. "Why?"

Clint tossed the pad onto the counter, and Steve had a moment's reflective thought that it was a good thing Tony made his electronics far more durable than most things in this flimsy, throwaway age, before he caught sight of the headline.

*Captain America Quits Avengers?*

Steve pulled the Starkpad closer and felt a wave of nausea. He scanned the stories quickly, picking up bits here and there, as Tony and Rhodes stepped closer to read over his shoulder.

...not seen since Hurricane Sandy ... insubordination? ... rumors of psychological breakdown... mysterious SHIELD agency is answerable to whom?

"You didn't know?" asked Rhodes, and Steve shook his head. "You thought--" Rhodes shook his
head. "Tony didn't tell me, Captain Rogers; I read about it in the news this morning."

Steve wanted to close his eyes at the breathless speculation. He'd seen this so many times with media from this time; the sensationalism, the viciousness, the endless back-and-forth babble. And now they were going after him.

*Speculation of problems with his adaptation to twenty-first century life ... Does Captain America have Combat Stress Reaction? ... PTSD: Real Problem, or Over-Diagnosed Cop-Out?*

Oh and his team were coming under fire too:

*Iron Man quits as well? ... Who is the Black Widow? ... Captain America turfed for another female presence on Avengers roster? ... Affirmative Action among superheroes?*

"I'm surprised it took this long, to be honest," said Bruce.

"I thought SHIELD staffing was supposed to be confidential," said Tony. "So what if Steve hasn't been there the last few times we've been called; we've all missed a few missions."

"True," said Natasha, "but between the administrative staff, support agents, and SHIELD Medical, a lot of people knew."

"I suspect Sorensen," said Clint.

"You suspect Sorensen of everything," said Natasha impatiently. "If you could, you'd pin the Lindbergh baby kidnapping on him."

Steve pushed away the Starkpad, feeling ill. "Lindbergh baby?" he said, grasping on to something familiar. "It was that Hauptmann guy, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was the Hauptmann guy," said Natasha. "Anyone who says otherwise is just a conspiracy theory nut." She gave Clint a significant look.

"There were a lot of anomalies in that investigation, and in the defense," Bruce protested, and Clint nodded and opened his mouth.

"No, no way," Tony forestalled him. "We're not going to talk about the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, are we? With two super-spies and a guy who's a little too paranoid for his own good in the room, if we get into this, we're not gonna let it go--"

Steve turned off the Starkpad. "Beats talking about the news," he said wearily. There was no way he wanted to read that crap. It was no more meaningful than any of the stories about how they had voted, or whether Natasha was sleeping with Clint or Bruce this week. "Funny, when my plane went down I thought the Lindbergh baby kidnapping was solved and the Titanic lost forever. Now I find out there's people who grew up knowing about the Titanic but didn't realize it was ever lost, but the Lindbergh kidnapping is a common conspiracy theory."

"I wouldn't call it common, but it's out there," said Clint. "There were a lot of anomalies--"

"No, Clint," said Natasha firmly, put Bruce's vegetables onto a platter, and handed it to Clint. "Go. Bring that into the movie room and get the movie started," she said, giving him a push and turning to Steve. "Steve? Are you all--"

"I'll read the news stories later," said Steve firmly. "Thanks for letting me know, but--"
"But you'd really rather not talk about it," Natasha finished.

Steve nodded. "At all."

"Fair enough," said Bruce, following Clint into the movie room. "So what's on tonight? Are we at *Patton* yet?"

"Great American hero, that's probably why Rhodey's here," said Tony as they all grabbed drinks and headed in. "I told him what we were watching tonight."

"That's not why," said Rhodes. "I'm finally home and on the East coast after three months in Germany and I decided to come visit. If anything, I'm here in spite of your movie choice. I heard Patton was an asshole."

"He was," said Steve.

Rhodes looked at him, surprised. "You met him?"

"A couple of times. The Germans were scared of him, but he was a loose cannon. I wasn't the only one hoping he'd get permanently shuffled off after the slapping incident." He shrugged. "He got results, though, which I guess is what matters."

Bruce went to put on the movie. "Steve, are you really OK with watching this?" he said quietly.

"Yeah, fine," said Steve.

"'Cause really, we can skip to the next one," said Tony.

"I'm already benched, I'm already off-duty," said Steve, annoyed, "and I'd like to watch the damn movie. I will leave if it's - what's the word, triggering?"

Rhodes gave him a sympathetic look. "Tony, lay off. Remember how you threatened to fire Happy and Pepper for hovering over you after Afghanistan."

The movie started and Steve had to admit, he was impressed by the man playing the General. He had him down to a tee, from bushy eyebrows to mannerisms, and he was just as Steve remembered him: brash, rigid, unpleasant, cocky...

"Was he really that big an asshole?" asked Rhodes asked as they watched him berating soldiers.

"He really was," said Steve.

"And he slapped a soldier who had battle fatigue?"

"Two, actually," said Steve. "He was a bully. The uniform didn't make him any less of one."

"He was disciplined for that, though, wasn't he?"

"Not enough. Eisenhower made him apologize, and for a while it looked like his career was over." He sipped his beer and shrugged. "He bounced back."

"I thought people still thought battle fatigue was made up back then," said Clint.

"A lot of people did," said Steve. "That wasn't the point. He showed lack of self-control. Mind you, I would've decked him myself if he'd done that to any of my men."
"Did you have any soldiers with battle fatigue?"

"Are you kidding? The stuff we did? And after half of them being prisoners of war? I personally signed three men back home. Had to fight to do that, too." He paused, remembering his men, remembering how hard he'd had to work to convince Chuckie Allen that he'd done enough, how he'd finally had to talk over Jerry Mason's mother, for God's sake, who'd arranged an international telephone call to insist her son didn't need to be 'molly-coddled' and could finish out the War on the battlefield. "A lot of people thought they were just cowards. Including them."

There was a silence, and he looked up to find the entire team gazing at him.

"But you didn't," said Clint.

"What? No."

"I'm just wondering why you thought it was wrong for Patton to slap soldiers for battle fatigue," said Tony, "and you fought to get your men out when they needed to get away from combat, but then you hid it from all of us when you did. For months."

Steve swallowed, feeling exposed. "It's not the same."

"Things are different now, you know," said Rhodes after a long, uncomfortable moment. "Soldiers are only human. We've gotten better at understanding that. Not perfect, but better."

Steve gave him a level gaze. "My Starkpad begs to differ. Or did you not read what I read?"

"That's a few journalists and other civilians who don't know shit," Rhodes insisted. "It's different now. In the military at least." He paused. "And I'll drop it if you want, Captain." Steve nodded gratefully.

"Hey, actually, Rhodey, tell him how different," said Tony.

"What?"

"Tell him how different the military's become," said Tony. Rhodes glanced at him curiously. "The wedding you went to last month?"

"Oh - you mean Welles and his guy?"

"Welles and his guy."

Steve rolled his eyes at Tony and Rhodes blinked, obviously lost, but acquiesced. "Yeah, one of my Lieutenants," he said to Steve. "Been with the same guy fifteen years, finally able to marry him without losing his career. Not that it was such a secret thing; they'd been living together ten years. The 'roommate' thing was pretty transparent."

"Nobody cared?" asked Steve.

"Not really. I figured it out a few years ago. Obviously I didn't say anything, but the longer time went on the less he bothered to hide it." Rhodes grinned. "Besides, he's the only one who could handle our tracking systems snafus, and he worked real well with the liaison from Hammer Industries when nobody else could stand the son of a bitch, so nobody wanted to rock the boat. Guy made himself indispensable."

"Steve here had a different experience," said Tony. Rhodes looked at him curiously.
Steve shrugged. "One of my men got found out. It was bad for morale."

Rhodes nodded. "It's not any more. Really. I mean, I'm sure there's problems in some places, but--"

"You wanna tell him--" Tony began.

"Tony, stop," said Steve. "He doesn't need to keep making the point."

Tony's eyebrows shot up. "Why? Don't tell me you've changed your mind on that?"

"You know my objection was that it hurt unit cohesiveness. I did a lot more reading, talked to a few people at SHIELD. Colonel Rhodes isn't the only soldier who's said they don't care. If they don't, I guess I shouldn't either."

"Good for you, Captain," said Rhodes. "Most people would rather rip their tongue out than admit they've changed their minds."

"Hey I never asked, did you watch that link I sent you?" asked Clint. "The soldier who came out to his dad after Don't Ask Don't Tell was over?"

"Yeah, I did."

"What did you think?"

"I think if I'd been his dad I would've been pissed off at him for putting that on the internet. But he seemed like a decent kid. And the other videos where he talked about how people in his unit took the news - well, they were one of the things that changed my mind." He turned back to the movie pointedly. "I've conceded the point already, right? Can we get back to the movie?"

"So... what about gay marriage?" Clint asked, and Bruce groaned.

"Enough, guys. One major milestone at a time."

Steve gave Bruce a grateful nod though he reflected that really, he should be more appreciative of the fact that the team was making an effort to be normal around him. Rhodes' presence was proving distracting; they forgot they were supposed to be treating him with kid gloves. Thank God. Especially in the aftermath of the (somewhat garbled) news of his Admin Leave finally coming out in the press. If he saw one more swiftly covered look of worry, he was gonna punch a wall. And he'd only just finished repairing the one in the kitchen.

The stories in the news weren't such a big deal, he supposed. Yes, it was unpleasant, but he'd known the news would eventually come out, and he supposed it was no worse than any of the other news crap Sorensen had been sending them since he'd taken over as liaison. And in any case, there was nothing he could do about it but wait for it to pass.

He forced himself to down a few tacos and carrot sticks as the movie went on. The carrot sticks looked more appetizing, but the carbohydrates would keep the hunger away for longer, force him to eat less. There was that hummus stuff that Bruce liked so much, too, also fairly filling.

This movie wasn't so bad, Steve realized. He supposed that was an upside to being hyper sensitive to physical sensations right now; he was too distracted to be overly bothered by the scenes of combat on screen. Which was fairly screwed up if he thought about it, so it was probably best not to think about it.

"All right, time to restock, replenish, and take a leak," said Clint at the end of a particularly intense
battle scene, and Steve got up along with the rest, deciding to visit the washroom.

"...can't wait to go to an American cafe," Rhodes was saying as Steve walked back into the kitchen a few minutes later. "I mean, don't get me wrong, German places are great, but I wanna hear English spoken by a pretty waitress with an American accent, and I want pie. Not strudel; real pie. Like, pumpkin pie. Maybe pecan."

"Steve can help you with that one," said Clint.

"What? Pie?" Steve asked.

"That place we went to the other day, when I showed you that bookstore."

"Oh. Yeah."

"The one with the pretty waitress," said Clint. He smirked. "The one who seemed to know you real well."

"Beth?"

"Ooh, she has a name."

"Yeah, of course she has a name. I go there a lot. I remember names."

"She sure remembers you." Clint grinned. "And not just because you're Captain America."

Steve blew out his breath.

"Come on, don't pretend you never noticed she's pretty hot for you--"

"Clint," said Natasha.

"Oh come on, she was practically throwing herself at him. In a very demure way."

"Clint," Natasha repeated.

"What? He said he wasn't sleeping with Agent Carter, and oh my God Phil would've killed to get the inside scoop on that. So it's not like he's still--" Natasha elbowed him and he blinked. "Or, never mind, maybe... sorry," he finished lamely.

"No, it's all right," said Steve, squashing his annoyance at Natasha's over-protectiveness. "I'm not you don't have to - I'm not in mourning over Peggy. That waitress just isn't my type."

"Really? So come on, dude, what's your type?" He paused and looked at Natasha. "What? He said she wasn't his girlfriend! So maybe it's not too soon for him to date, and I sound like a maiden aunt trying to fix him up with a nice girl at the church youth group don't I, ugh, I'm just asking a simple question."

Steve shook his head, a chuckle escaping him.

"What's your type? Hell, I didn't even know Captain America had a type. Tall and leggy or short and curvy? Stacked or perky?" He glanced at Natasha, rolled his eyes, and said, "Or, OK, bookish or sporty? See, I can be not-shallow."

Not that it matters, but my type is standing next to Colonel Rhodes, he thought of saying as Clint went on, and for a brief, insane moment, he wondered what would happen if he said just that. And
he was suddenly tired of it. Tired of all of it. He was in all those news stories, and his life was an open book already to his team-mates, and less than three hours ago he'd jerked off to thoughts of one of them, and he didn't feel like listening to Clint speculate any more.

"Dude, give me something here," Clint was saying.

"My type is more... male."

Clint's eyebrows shot up. "Um. Do you mean, like, tomboyish, or male?"

"Male."

The cessation of all conversation was actually pretty funny, now that he thought of it. Except for Tony, all of them were gaping at him. Tony's mouth was drawn up in a half-smile and he was gazing at Steve with... Steve didn't even know how to classify it. Warmth. Surprise. Approval. Affection. Admiration.

"Um. Are you kidding?" Clint said slowly.

It was weird, he should be feeling nervous or exposed or relieved or... something, but all Steve felt was a distinct glow of satisfaction at leaving Clint so completely off-balance. "No. Why would you assume that?"

There was a general exchange of glances.

"Because... because we're supposed to be spies and we had no idea," said Natasha, carefully putting down her butter-knife.

"Because you're a national icon and there's never been any hint of anything like this, and you have five biographies written about you," said Clint. "And trust me, if there had been even the tiniest clue, Phil would've known all about it and would've discussed it like for-fucking-ever during stakeouts."

"Because I think Welles - and a bunch of other folks - would flip out if they ever found out," said Rhodes.

"Because of your opinions," said Bruce.

Steve couldn't help chuckling. "Fair enough. I'm still not kidding."

"So, hang on, hang on," said Clint. "Just to get this straight. Except, you know, not straight. You're telling us you're bi too?"

"No. I wish. Gay."

"Peggy Carter really wasn't your girlfriend."

Steve shook his head.


"Are you... how long have you known?" asked Bruce, suddenly noticing he'd left the water running and overflowed the ice tray he was filling, and turning it off.

"All my life," said Steve.
"And you were serious, weren't you," said Clint. "About not getting married. Serving in the closet."

"I served in the closet, Clint," said Steve impatiently. "I know exactly what it means. It wasn't that big a sacrifice, considering the alternative."

"Tell that to Welles," said Rhodes. "You did it for how many years?"

"Two."

"Try a lifetime."

"I'm not arguing the point," said Steve. "Just saying I really didn't have much of a problem with it."

"No, I know that," said Rhodes. "I'm just glad we don't lose good people over it any more."

"Must've been hell, back then," said Bruce. "Growing up like that. And in a Catholic orphanage to boot."

Steve shrugged. "Not really."

"No?"

"Not compared to the Depression. Or being sick all the time. Or the War."

Natasha made a small noise in her throat. "And now?"

Steve shrugged again. In the grand scheme of things? No, it wasn't that big an issue. Compared to the sense of not belonging anywhere? Losing an entire world? Feeling completely out of control in every part of his life?

"Seriously?" asked Clint. "But, like, wasn't it - how did anyone date, if everyone was in the closet?"

"I wouldn't know," said Steve.

Clint's eyes widened. "You mean you... never?"

"No."

"Wow. That's one thing for you to look forward to in this century, I guess," he said. Steve frowned, and opened his mouth to correct him.

"Great, Clint," said Tony. "Now you sound like a maiden aunt trying to fix him up with a nice boy from the church youth group. Maybe you're the one who needs to hook up, so you can lay off your team-mates' sex lives."

"OK, so, is this a state secret?" asked Rhodes. He glanced around the room. "Because I take it nobody here knew. Did you know?" he turned to Tony.

"Tony knew," said Steve quickly, and Tony shot him a look of relief. "I told him a while ago."

Clint turned to Tony. "Holy shit, Tony, discretion. Who knew you had it in you?"

"Thanks, Hunger Games," Tony scowled at him. "You do know I ran a weapons company, right? I've actually heard of confidentiality."

"And this is confidential," said Steve. "I don't care about any of you knowing, or Thor or Pepper, but
I don't much want to see it in the papers."
"No, of course not," said Natasha.
There was a short silence.
"We can probably go back in to the movie now," Steve suggested.
"I'm sorry, what are we watching again?" said Bruce, and Tony laughed.
"Patton."
"Right. Right." Bruce picked up a bowl and headed out, still shaking his head, slightly stunned.

Tony leaned past Steve to pick up a couple of bottles of beer, touching his shoulder on the way past. "Steve. Holy shit. Good for you," he said, his voice low. He gave Steve a small smile and tossed one of the bottles towards Rhodes, then headed back to the movie room. Steve followed, forcing down a completely inappropriate surge of warmth at Tony's words, at the touch of his hand on Steve's shoulder.

They all moved back into the couches, food in hand, and Steve breathed a sigh of relief. He'd told a group of coworkers what he'd always been taught was one of the most shameful secrets a man could have, and it was just another piece of information to them. A surprising piece, of course, but it really didn't change how they saw him. Not that he'd expected any different, given all of their previous conversations on the topic, but it was something else again, sensing their complete acceptance.

They started up the movie again, and Clint threw a piece of popcorn in the air and snagged it with his mouth before asking, "So Steve, you never did give a good answer: what is your type?"

Natasha reached over and slapped him upside the head as Bruce and Rhodes burst out laughing.
"What? I'm just asking! Big and muscly, or lean and wiry, or - Nat, lay off!"

Steve made himself smile as he shook his head and turned back to the screen.

*My type is sitting next to Colonel Rhodes.*

3.

**November 20**

"Agent Romanov," said Hill, entering the mostly empty SHIELD gym. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Agent Hill," Natasha nodded, not breaking her pattern. Twin forearm block, upward punch, middle punch in fixed stance.

"I thought Avengers Tower had its own practice range," said Hill, beginning her warm-up exercises.

"It's always good to change things up," said Natasha, doing a downward strike.

"I see." Hill got into position for push-ups, then glanced over at Natasha. "Spar, once you're done your pattern?"

Natasha considered for a few moments as Hill began her set. It wouldn't really be a fair fight;
Natasha's rather brutal upbringing made her unnaturally skilled, and Hill was just a woman with a
great deal of combat training, but it wasn't possible for Natasha to always spar people who could
challenge her.

Middle punch in left walking stance, low block with the left forearm.

And Hill probably wasn't asking out of a deep desire to have a challenging workout.

"All right," she said.

"How are things going at the Tower?" asked Hill, moving to sit-ups.

"Fine," said Natasha, moving to a right walking stance, middle punch.

"How's Captain Rogers?"

"He's fine," Natasha did a side piercing kick and double punch.

"His new medications working out any better?"

Natasha frowned at Hill, then turned for a middle guarding block and finger thrust. 'Working out any
better'... that was a difficult question to answer. His mood had been subdued but relatively stable
recently, but the side effects had been a little brutal. Blinding headaches that doubled him over for
two days until he refused to continue. One that seemed to screw with his eyesight, to the point where
he'd bailed out of The Godfather screening before ever hearing the immortal 'made him an offer he
can't refuse' line. Another one that had apparently caused mild seizures.

Turn, middle guarding block, two turning kicks.

And it was really none of Hill's business, as far as Natasha was concerned.

"He's fine," said Natasha.

"No trouble to report there?"

"No trouble."

"I'm not asking you to divulge anything confidential," said Hill.

"No, of course not," said Natasha, turning into a low block.

"You seem a little reticent. I checked with Medical and some of the more recent ones didn't go well.
Didn't he go into convulsions?"

Natasha looked straight ahead as she did three middle punches. "We do have separate quarters, you
know."

"It is important to know as much as we can about what's going on with every member of the team.
It's unfortunate that your liaison's been so busy since Captain Rogers has been on leave." Natasha
tried to read Hill's tone. Not deep respect for Sorensen, certainly, but definitely not the same
contempt Natasha and the rest of the team felt. And, very nice, she'd underlined the 'liaison' thing.
"Director Fury has him chasing down some leads with on the Verminator's disappearance." Was Hill
pissed off about that? "How are you doing without him?"

"We're managing."
Hill got up to do practice kicks. "We're very happy that the team has bonded well, you know."

"I'm sure you are."

"Does he talk to you?"

"To me, specifically, or to the team?" Pressing block, elbow thrust.

"Either. His therapist believes they're making progress - though obviously he can't divulge any specifics - but we're also concerned about his emotional support system outside of therapy."

Natasha tried to imagine Nick Fury saying the words 'emotional support system.' "He's said that he misses his friends from back in his time," she said, doing the two side front blocks.

"Apparently I'm grieving," Steve had noted the other day, his voice tight. "I'm sure glad SHIELD has professionals around to let me know these things."

"What about his PTSD?" Hill asked.

"It's hard to tell. He's a pretty private guy." Natasha did the last two knife-hand guarding blocks, held the final block for a moment, then moved back to ready posture. "I wouldn't be surprised if he's a little reluctant to trust right now after those stories came out in the paper last week."

"That blew over. We knew it would."

"His Admin Leave wasn't supposed to be on the news." Natasha broke ready stance and picked up her water bottle, taking a sip.

"There was no way to keep it a secret forever. To be honest, we didn't really try. Obviously the details are to be kept confidential, but we couldn't exactly hide the fact that he's not working from the public." Hill moved to the sparring mat. "You are fairly high-profile."

Natasha moved to the mat as well. "So nobody's trying to figure out where the leak happened?"

Hill frowned. "I didn't say that." They bowed to each other and settled into guarding blocks, circling. "Is he coming back to work soon?" asked Hill, opening with a light turning kick.

"No idea," said Natasha, easily dodging. " Wouldn't Fury know better than I would?"

Hill's face was blank.

"Is he still in Joneville?"

"No. Still dealing with the fallout from it though." Hill tried another kick.

Natasha blocked and deflected, continuing to circle. "I thought the Verminator was back in custody."

"She is. We still don't know how she got out." Hill spun around, missed a back kick, danced back before Natasha could counter. "It's fine, though. We've handled it."

"Did the WSC think you handled it?"

"They're not a problem," said Hill. "I've handled them."

I've handled them. Not we've handled them. Interesting.
"Fury's back in town, then?" Natasha retreated, drawing Hill in, and feinted to the side, stopping a knife-hand strike a hair's breadth from Hill's neck.

"Not exactly," said Hill, not flinching.

"Where is he?"

"Bogota, helping the WSC answer some questions about how the Clarkson operation went."

Fury, helping the WSC. Fury never helped those assholes if he could help it. Rumors of a disciplinary meeting were probably correct, then.

"When is he coming back?"

"I haven't been informed," said Hill. "Above my clearance level."

You're lying through your teeth, thought Natasha. And you're pissed off. And... something else.

"The Council's pretty involved these days, aren't they?" she asked, doing a spinning back kick that skimmed along Hill's hairline.

"It's useful," said Hill. "We've received a lot more information and personnel. In return, of course, we have to take a little bit more time to keep them informed, but it's beneficial in the long term."

"You find the new personnel helpful?"

"Oh yes." Hill feinted to the side, aimed a knife-hand strike at Natasha's neck and winced as Natasha blocked it. "Don't you?"

Natasha jumped to the side, easily dodging a reverse kick. "You aren't concerned about the WSC's judgment?" What with them having aimed a nuclear weapon at New York? she wanted to ask, but it wasn't necessary.

"That was an anomaly," said Hill.

Yes, with all blame assigned to a SHIELD pilot with a well-timed psychotic break, thought Natasha sourly. The pilot had been handsomely compensated and bundled off to a plush retirement, but the cover-up still disgusted her.

Hill circled. "It would be unfortunate if anybody thought it wasn't."

"Such as?"

"Such as your teammates."

"How's the Delineator?" asked Natasha, reflecting that while she and Clint might have agreed to cover SHIELD's ass in that respect, Hill probably didn't want to hear what either of them thought of having to keep it from their fellow Avengers.

"He's being watched, don't worry. We won't have another escape. Not on my watch."

"Deputy Director," said an agent Natasha didn't recognize, stepping up to the edge of the mat. Natasha swiftly covered her shock. Deputy Director?!

"Yes?" said Hill, holding up a hand and pausing their sparring match.
"The WSC is calling for you."

"Agent Romanov, I'm sorry, I'm going to have to take this," said Hill, heading off the mat. "Thanks for the workout."

"You're welcome," said Natasha, and watched her leave. She picked up her water bottle and glanced over the gym, spotting a junior agent she knew on a treadmill. She headed over and took the machine next to him, exchanging a few pleasantries as they ran next to each other.

"Chang? Since when is Hill referred to as Deputy Director?" she asked a few minutes later.

Chang glanced sideways at her. "Not long, just a few days," he said. "It's not permanent or anything, I don't think. Fury's got some leave time coming. Or... something."

Natasha nodded and asked Chang about his new baby, giving him half her attention and making the appropriate admiring sounds as Chang described spit-up and rolling over and other no doubt vitally important baby-related things.

Fury. Taking a leave of absence. When pigs flew.

Taking a leave of absence, and leaving in charge Maria Hill, who was so by-the-book she actually thought Tom Sorensen was not a complete waste of paper, and who Natasha didn't trust as far as she could throw. Hill, who had been a bureaucratic thorn in Fury's side ever since Natasha had known her but who Fury seemed to trust, as far as a man who lied and manipulated as naturally as he brethed could be said to trust anybody.

Natasha smiled at Chang, got off the treadmill, picked up her towel and water bottle and headed off for the showers, and home.

4.

November 30

"You're not his therapist, Tony," said Pepper patiently, and Tony rolled his eyes. "And you shouldn't have gone to talk to the person who is. Dr. Sanjay is under strict rules of confidentiality."

"The guy wouldn't talk to me anyway, so no harm done, right?" Tony fiddled with the board he was working on, taking a screwdriver from U and not needing to look up at the screen to see the half-amused, half-exasperated expression Pepper was probably wearing right now.

"Has it occurred to you that Steve might not appreciate you doing that? Might find it a little... stalkey?"

"Pepper, he--"

"No, Tony. You're not his dad, either."

"Trust me, I don't wanna be his dad," said Tony, pushing U's offered wrench away perhaps a little harder than he meant to. U gave him a sad little whirr.

Pepper was silent for a moment. "No."

"What?"

"Oh, Tony, no," she said, and Tony looked up at her, confused, before a light dawned.
He put his hands up. "No - no, come on, Pepper, I'm not--"

"I know what you told me," said Pepper, "but just because he swings that way, doesn't mean he'd want to swing your way. He's got enough going on in his life without you adding to the mess. Besides, you have enough on your plate without going after a team-mate. You know better, don't you?"

Tony turned back to U and the circuit board and reflected that it was a good thing he hadn't told Pepper how he felt about Steve, or anything about that church Steve was going to, or about him and Steve making out a couple of times, or... well, anything about whatever weird thing had been between them. Pepper was a wonderful woman, but some things even the most understanding of ex-girlfriends did not need to hear. "Pepper, come on. I know better than to dip into the company pool... more than once. I'm a reformed man, Pep, I'm going back to my old slutty ways--"

"The tabloids haven't said a word about you in months," she said, looking worried, and oh, God, was his ex actually looking upset that he hadn't hopped into bed with a stranger in a while? Was this really his life now, that when he didn't - hang on, when was the last time he'd hooked up with anyone?

Huh. Not since Pepper. Not that he'd noticed much, which would probably shock the hell out of a lot of people who thought they knew him. Pepper wouldn't be too surprised; she knew the playboy thing was part of the Stark legend and a rep, not an avocation. Really, when Tony was too busy, or distracted, sex and crazy partying often just didn't occur to him unless people threw themselves at him.

"Sorry?" He blinked at the screen, where Pepper's voice had just stopped on an upward tone.

"I said, are things really that bad? I thought you'd said Steve was doing better."

"He was. He is. He just has good days and bad days." Today, judging from his near-silence at breakfast, was probably a bad day. "And they've got him on a drug cocktail merry-go-round. It can't be healthy. I think he needs to take a break from it."

"Is that what you tried to talk to his therapist about?"

Tony pointed to a box of tiny bolts and Dum-E sped off to get it for him. "Yeah, I don't know how much he's in charge of, though. I think because of the Serum they've got SHIELD Medical making a lot of the decisions." And he wanted to talk to Steve about it, but he was staying away from Steve on purpose, and he didn't want to do anything that might make Steve not trust the people who were supposed to be treating him, and...

Pepper sighed and checked her watch. "Tony, I have to go. Please take care of yourself. And don't worry about Steve. I know he's having problems right now but he's a strong person. He'll be all right."

Tony smiled at her. "Yeah, you're probably right. Of course you're right, you're always right. Bye, Pepper."

He turned off the screen, going back to his circuit board for a moment before realizing he was about to solder the third line to the y-junction and he was probably going to solder himself to the chair if he continued working while still frustrated by Dr. Sanjay's attitude.

Damn it, he'd brought up his worries to Pepper hoping to get a little perspective, to settle himself down. Instead he was even more worried.
Well, Mohammed had gone to the mountain, but the mountain hadn't said a damn thing, so...

Tony quickly hacked in to SHIELD Medical, absently considering offering to set them up with proper anti-hacking software - and there were Steve's files. Service record, rescue files, initial unfreezing... nothing having to do with Dr. Sanjay - but oh, interesting, transcripts of conversations with SHIELD Medical's R & D people. He scanned one of the more recent ones:

**Gandry:** This one looks promising for pain control, but might induce paranoia.

**Rogers:** I'd rather not, then.

**Gandry:** Why not? I think we can--

**Rogers:** If I think you're out to get me? You don't see a problem with that? I could break you.

**Gandry:** We have security measures. We're SHIELD.

**Rogers:** And what about when I go home?

**Gandry:** Your team-mates are certainly capable of--

**Rogers:** No. I'm not gonna risk my team's safety.

OK, that was good, Steve was standing up for himself. But this Gandry, whoever he was, seemed a little cavalier about possible side effects. Tony scanned down as Gandry explained another experimental drug, comparing it to one Steve had tested recently, which was apparently adequate at keeping away anxiety but resulted in distracting physical over-sensitivity and heightened libido. Tony resolutely turned his mind away from the implications of that, other than noting that Steve didn't bother to correct Gandry when he assumed Steve meant he was aroused by women.

*Not* out to SHIELD Medical, then. Not surprising. He still couldn't quite believe Steve had come out to the team. Tony had almost had tears in his eyes. Steve might truly believe that he accepted who he was and just wanted to avoid same-sex relationships, but nobody denied part of themselves when they didn't have to without at least some self-hatred. And yet he'd revealed something that even people raised today, with relatively enlightened attitudes, often kept secret for a lifetime. And revealed it not just to Tony, but to an entire set of people who'd been strangers to him a few months ago. And to Rhodey, whom he'd just met.

Tony had been so proud of him. He would've kissed him if it wouldn't have been wildly inappropriate.

But then Steve had stopped whatever medication he'd been on at that time, and his mood had gone... not necessarily down, but distant. He'd been spending more and more time out of the Tower and away from the team, making it all the way through *The French Connection* but walking out of *The Sting* last night for no reason Tony could fathom. Even at home, he'd been unwontedly quiet and pensive. And this morning...

Tony scanned through SHIELD Medical records, ignoring Dum-E's soft taps on his leg. There really wasn't much here to work with. Descriptions of physical and emotional side effects of medications, bloodwork, nothing to cause concern other than the sheer number of substances being tested over a short period of time. Which SHIELD Medical had determined to be perfectly safe due to Steve's hyper-metabolism.

Damn it, Pepper was right. Steve would not want him looking at this. He made himself put the work away and vanish the file.

*Stalk much, Tony?* Clint had asked, and OK, maybe he had a point.

The trouble was, there wasn't anything else he could do. Maybe if he and Steve were close friends, he could ask him what was going on, but Tony had made sure not to be alone with Steve since that
second time they'd made out, and Steve seemed quite accepting of that. Besides, Tony just wasn't
good at this stuff.

"Dum-E, stop that, I don't need it," he muttered, as Dum-E tried to hand him a soldering iron, and
Dum-E paused, waiting. Damn, no mental energy for even a mild threat to his bot. "Just... leave it on
the table. I'll get it in a minute."

Dum-E seemed to shrink down slightly. This was stupid. He was sitting here, not getting any work
done, getting his bots worried about him as he worried about Steve. And he was being an idiot. It
had been a while since the last time things had gotten out of hand between them; whatever weirdness
had been there had passed. And... and if there really was something wrong with Steve, it was
probably better to see him than worry about him. Or spy on him.

Really, all he had to do was go make sure Steve was OK. Let him know in a bro-like fashion that,
hey, maybe they could work out together sometime. That wasn't inappropriate, was it? Not stalking,
not coming on to him, just two guys hanging out and sweating together. In a totally non-homoerotic
way.

Tony mentally rolled his eyes at himself and put down his tools.

"JARVIS, where's Steve? He usually works out right about now, right?"

"Captain Rogers is not in the building."

"Where is he?"

"I am not sure."

Tony blinked. All right, he'd programmed JARVIS to be as human as possible, but he was probably
imagining a worried tone in JARVIS's voice. "What?"

"He may be out for his run in Central Park. He has also expressed an interest in rock-climbing."

"Rock-climbing? Like, without stairs?"

"Possibly."

Tony nodded. "JARVIS, I'm gonna suit up, see if I can catch up to him."

"Good luck, sir," said JARVIS, and Tony also had to be imagining the sound of relief in JARVIS's
voice.

Two hours later, he was getting ready to give up. Steve wasn't in Central Park. He wasn't at
SHIELD; in fact, nobody had seen him all day. Tony had had JARVIS hack into Steve's Starkpad
and found his appointments at that church he went to - turned out he wasn't going there very often
either, and had no appointments for another week.

This was ridiculous. Tony was being an idiot. Yeah, Steve had been distant and a little self-
deprecating lately - referring to his current lack of occupation as "a step down from gathering tin cans
with my little red wagon during the War" - but he was fine, and Tony should just let him be.

He hovered instead, getting JARVIS to project Steve's browser history over his visor. Found
something about a park with a climbing trail on Staten Island, a ravine that had some interesting
serpentine rock formations. Tony headed off.
He cruised over the park and felt a pang of relief, followed by a flare of annoyance. At himself or at Steve, he didn't know. Because there was Steve's motorcycle, and there was a lone human heat signature on the trail, and soon JARVIS was confirming that it was indeed Steve, and Steve was obviously fine, and Tony had just wasted a couple of hours chasing down a guy who just wanted to spend some time in the great outdoors. He hovered briefly, looking down at a steep ravine.

Jesus, from here, a drop down would kill anybody. You'd never find the body.

Steve was standing on the edge.

Tony shivered. He hesitation for a half a moment, then headed towards Steve and landed behind him. "Steve?"

Steve stiffened and turned, his expression half-irritated, half-resigned, then turned back to the ravine.

"What are you doing here, Tony?"

Tony flipped up his visor. "Just came to say hi."

"All the way out here?"

"And ask if you maybe wanted to work out together. I know you go every day. I need to get back to doing that too. Been kinda busy lately."

Steve gave him a skeptical glance and it occurred to Tony that he'd come an awfully long way just to casually ask the guy if he wanted to hang out sometime.

Tony glanced over the trail behind them, avoiding the steep drop. Looked nice, for wilderness. Well, Staten Island wilderness. The air was brisk on his face and Steve was wearing only a light sweater and jeans, but he supposed the Serum's effects normally kept him warm, barring interference from R & D's latest concoctions. "Nice place," he commented. "You come here a lot?"

Silence. The wind ruffled Steve's hair as he turned away from Tony.

"Um, OK, I didn't just come out here for fun," Tony admitted. "I'm a little worried."

Steve didn't react.

"Should I be?"

Steve was still gazing down, and Tony slowly moved closer, a brief glimpse of the trees and bushes and rocks below making him a little queasy.

"Could you maybe participate in this conversation? I'm getting a little self-conscious here."

"Why's that?" asked Steve, his tone unreadable. "You don't normally have a problem listening to the sound of your own voice."

Tony swallowed. "Please tell me I'm being an idiot, but you're standing really close to the edge there and I'm a little worried that you're not answering because you're thinking of doing something stupid."

Steve shrugged.

Tony moved closer. "Are you?"

Steve gazed over the drop for a minute. "Depends what you mean by stupid."
Tony's stomach lurched, and a spike of heat, then cold, passed over him.

He took a deep breath. "All right," he said, forcing a calmness he didn't feel into his voice and ignoring the waves of nausea coursing through him. "What brought this on? I thought things were getting better. You're off duty, you're getting medication, seeing a therapist--"

"I'm useless and the meds do nothing but make me sick and the therapy... that's pretty useless too."

There was another awkward silence. Focus, focus, think, think think... "Have you... have you tried praying?" Tony suggested.

Steve snorted. "You don't think I'm too smart, do you? Of course I've tried praying." He shrugged. "Doesn't do any good. I still hate this time. I hate this entire world."

"You... you just have to give it time," said Tony. "It hasn't been that long, you have to--"

"You know what?" Steve turned to him, his eyes hard. "It's been long enough. And it doesn't matter how long I wait. It doesn't matter how many fucking chemicals they pump into my arm, how many times I puke up everything I eat and tell myself it's for a good cause. It doesn't matter how long I sit around feeling useless. It doesn't matter how many times I tell myself that this time isn't ugly and wrong and that I'll get it, eventually." He paused, breathing hard. "It doesn't matter if I mourn Peggy and Bucky properly, and my men, and my whole fucking life - nothing brings any of them back! It doesn't matter how well I learn to accept my 'perfectly healthy' homosexuality - none of it matters! None of it changes the fact that all I really want to do is end all of this - permanently!"

Tony sucked in his breath, looked over the drop and told himself he could launch himself in time if Steve did decide to step off. He could make it. They would make it. Steve would be fine.

"I should've died seventy years ago," Steve said bitterly, turning back to the ravine. "Nothing changes that."

No, he'd be safe. Alive. Not fine. He wasn't fine.

"Did you know one of the only things that hasn't felt wrong in months is when we - is being with you?" said Steve quietly. "Not - I mean, I'm glad nothing like that has happened in a while. It's one more complication I don't need. But it's ironic, isn't it, that something I can't have is one of the only things that feels any damn good any more. Even though I feel like shit afterwards."

Tony took a deep breath, desperately wishing he had any idea at all how the hell to respond to that.

"There was that one medication, made it so I could hardly think of anything but sex... if we'd ended up alone together while I was on that, there's no way I wouldn't have--" Steve broke off. He cleared his throat. "Sorry."

Tony nodded, reflecting that it was probably a damn good thing Steve had stopped that particular set of meds. Tony wasn't made of stone, and the thought of responding and taking advantage of Steve that way without knowing he was being affected by fucking medication, causing him even more confusion and guilt...

He cleared his throat. "Steve. I'm gonna need you to back away from the edge, OK?"

Steve stayed where he was.

"For me, OK? I'm pretty sure you're not really going to do anything drastic right now, but I'm still, uh, freaking out a bit here." He paused to steady himself. "I mean, I know generally, if men really
want to, they go through with it. Statistically. Women take pills and end up in the hospital. Men shoot themselves in the head. It's still a little, um, nerve-wracking over here...” He was babbling. He really had to stop babbling.

The corner of Steve's mouth twitched, but there was nothing remotely humorous in the look he flicked at Tony. He gestured to the ground beside him, and Tony's heart froze as he took in the small backpack and sketchbook and the... they all had permits to carry, of course, what with being Avengers and all, but he hadn't even known Steve owned a gun. He slowly reached out and picked it up. Checked it. SHIELD-issue, Starktech (Jesus Christ), and loaded.

"I want to," said Steve flatly. "I want to, all the time."

Tony's hands were shaking now, his heart racing. No, that couldn't be true, that had to be the depression talking. Steve had good days; this just wasn't one of them. "Why haven't you?" he asked.

"I shouldn't want to. I repeat all the same things to myself, over and over again, how it's the coward's way out and things will get better and there are good moments worth living for and I've adapted a lot already and I can help people and..." his voice continued tonelessly, a litany of reasons that seemed to have nothing whatsoever to do with his emotions.

"And what happens?"

"And I still want to. I came here today because I didn't want JARVIS watching me. And so that if I finally stopped being able to talk myself out of it, you wouldn't find me afterwards."

"You... you came here to die," said Tony slowly.

And then Tony had shown up. Tony, who was totally inadequate to handle anything like this without somebody to walk him through it step by step. Just Tony, no Pepper, no Bruce, no team, nobody else. Just him and Steve on a ledge, with a gun, and Tony working with nothing but whatever trust Steve had in him. Trust which had led Steve to turn to him for help once, and then never again.

"Steve. I'm gonna need you to come back to the Tower, OK?"

Steve closed his eyes. "And do what? Nothing's working."

"No. You're right. And I don't know what to tell you, but if you come back you're gonna have to trust me that we're gonna do things differently."

"Different how?"

OK, strategy. Tony sucked at emotions, but he could do strategy. "You're feeling sick from the meds, and you're still isolated, and you're feeling useless. Right? So, we'll deal with it. I don't... I don't have any solid ideas yet, this isn't really my area, I'm an engineer, you know? But... but I promise you, we'll do something. Get you away from the lab geeks, for one thing, find something for you to do that isn't make-work... I don't know. Something." He swallowed. "Please. Come with me."

Steve gazed at him for a moment, then back down.

"Do I have a choice?"

Tony glanced down too. "Uh, yeah. If you... I think I can catch you. Pretty sure I can, anyway." He swallowed. "But I don't really wanna test that, and I don't really want to carry you kicking and screaming back to the Tower. I'd much rather you just choose to come with me."
Steve closed his eyes, head bowed and fists clenched, and Tony clamped down on an almost overwhelming urge to just grab him away from the edge. "Steve. Please trust me. God, just please... trust me."

Steve let out his breath, defeated and hopeless. "OK."

Tony barely resisted the urge to sink to his knees in relief. "OK." Christ, his voice was shaking. He stood for a moment, getting a grip on himself, pushing away fear and sudden overwhelming exhaustion and a screaming need to call Pepper and get her to take over, ASAP, before he somehow screwed this up again. He carefully reached out to Steve, and squeezed his shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. "OK."

Chapter End Notes

The movies watched/mentioned are

Patton, 1971
The French Connection, 1972
The Godfather, 1973
The Sting, 1974
"So... Phil Coulson? Was he really a recovering alcoholic?" Steve was asking Clint as Tony joined them on the deck. Good. Apparently, Steve was speaking again, though Tony wasn't surprised Clint had brought a guitar regardless. Steve hadn't been much of a conversationalist the last few days, and nobody blamed him but there was only so much silence any of them could take.

Clint strummed softly and gave Steve a small smile. "Yeah, he really was." He pushed a chair out to Tony with his foot.

"For how long?" Steve asked as Tony sat down, noting the deck's subtle heating system had finally come on. Clint and Steve were in light jackets and jeans, not looking terribly bothered by the light breeze despite the threat of snow in the air.

"All his life. And I'm not just giving the AA party line about alcoholism being a lifelong thing even if you don't touch a drop for thirty years."

"How long had he been sober when I met him?" asked Steve, fiddling with the bracelet Tony had put on him to track his location and vital signs. Tony resisted the urge to tell him to leave it alone. It was built for his strength, after all. He couldn't yank it off if he tried; he certainly couldn't damage it by fidgeting with it, no matter how often he did.

"He'd just earned his six-month chip." Clint grimaced. "For the fifth time."

Tony gave a low whistle.

"Yeah," said Clint, giving the guitar a gentle strum and looking out over the slowly darkening city. "He was what you call a high-functioning alcoholic. His prize possession - other than his trading cards - was his three-year pin. Earned it in '98."

"What happened that he didn't earn the fourth year?"

Clint blew out his breath. "Battambang. Bit of a clusterfuck, lost five agents. He didn't go into a tailspin, but it was a year before he managed to go even a week without." He paused. "Not a good time."

Tony watched Steve, wondering distantly at his sudden interest in Phil Coulson's mental health issues, but mostly just happy that he was taking an interest in the world around him at all. Because the last few days had been brutal. Ever since Tony had brought him back to the Tower, he'd been quiet, tired, and passive, not giving any input during the team's discussions about what to do with him - or even bothering to shave or get out of bed the first day. The only emotions Tony could read
from him had been resentment and self-loathing and occasional frustration. He seemed to trust Tony and the team far enough to go along with whatever they said, but Tony didn't know how much was trust, and how much sheer hopeless indifference. And considering how little confidence Tony had in what he and the rest of the team were doing, Steve's lack of enthusiasm didn't help.

"How many people knew about his drinking problem?" Steve asked.

"Um, not as many as you'd think, considering how nosy SHIELD people are. '05 was pretty bad for that though - it was kind of an open secret for a while, at least among the Level Sevens and a few of the Sixes. Not that Phil was ever falling-down drunk at work or anything, but there were definitely way too many days when he wore dark glasses 'cause he was hungover, and more than a few nights and whole weekends he just totally blacked out." Clint ran a few soft scales. "And after bad missions? Once he was done the reports, he'd go out and have to get collected and poured into his bed by his assets. Natasha could tell you some stories - there was that time with the ficus tree and the soundtrack to Rent that was just..." Clint trailed off, smiling sadly. "I mean, it was pretty funny, but... the worst was we couldn't always keep it from the juniors; kinda hard to hide carrying your boss to his room when you're in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere. Most of 'em didn't think there was anything pathological about it. We'd usually pretend to be just as drunk as he was."

Steve shook his head.

Clint shrugged. "He got better. There's probably rookies even today who get told the stories, but after '05 he ever let it get that public again. So what with the high turnover and the fact that he never let it look like more than a bit of slurring when he was supposed to be off-duty - and he could kill you with a shoelace - it died down. Everyone who knew him respected the hell outta him."

Steve hesitated, then asked cautiously. "What made him a 'recovering' alcoholic instead of just... an alcoholic?"

"Mostly political correctness on our part," said Clint, grimacing. "Phil didn't use the term 'recovering' himself. But he was a good guy, Steve. The best. He picked me outta the trash and Natasha outta hell, and he gave us real lives. He did so much with his life, worked so fucking hard. He just..." Clint shook his head sadly. "He didn't have anything other than SHIELD in his life, and SHIELD's not an easy place to work for. You can do a lot of good, but you also see a lot of shitty stuff, the hours are brutal, the organization's kinda messed up..."

Bruce wandered out onto the roof and pulled up a chair, and Steve looked at his watch.

"You traded your shift with Natasha?" he asked quietly, and Bruce paused for a moment before nodding.

"Yeah. My experiment's done. I was gonna be up all night waiting for results, but it blew up on me. She's up next, though." They'd given up being discreet about who was on Steve-accompaniment duty a day into the arrangement; Steve didn't appreciate it. "Do you mind, or would you rather I call her and we stick to the schedule?"

Steve shrugged and fiddled with the bracelet and Tony reflected that, considering the fact that he very clearly resented the 24/7 accompaniment and the restrictions that had been put on him, he was handling the whole situation with a lot more grace than... well, than Tony would have, for one.

"Would you prefer that as an anklet?" Tony suddenly asked.

"What?"
"Your bracelet. You're gonna wear a groove in your wrist."

Steve glanced down at it. "I'd prefer it off."

"Not an option," and "No way," said Bruce and Clint at the same time.

"I know that," Steve said bitterly. "Doesn't stop me from hating it."

Clint picked at his guitar for a few minutes.

"I didn't even know you played," Tony commented.

"Haven't in years," said Clint. "Almost forgot how. I picked it up during this one undercover mission in Tallahassee. Told Cap about it while we were talking music, a few weeks back." He strummed a bit. "It's neat, getting back into it. Even though the tuning pegs are pretty worn on this one."

Not a bad hobby to pick up again, Tony figured. It was easy enough for him and Bruce to deal with Steve's near-silence as they took their turns accompanying him (only Steve used the term "babysitting"); they just worked on their pads. He'd wondered how Thor, Clint and Natasha had been using their time.

"You know, I have a fairly nice one at my place," said Bruce. "One of my patients in India gave it to me; he couldn't play it any more, couldn't pay me, and his kids had no interest in it." He thought for a moment. "Why don't you take it? I'm never gonna play it."

"Sure," said Clint. "Thanks."

Bruce glanced at Tony. "I could get it for you now, if you want." Tony nodded, indicating that he would stay on the deck with Steve, and Clint and Bruce headed inside. "I'll be right back," said Bruce.

"You don't seem to be taking being restricted to the Tower too badly," said Tony a few minutes after they'd gone, hating the tentative tone in his voice.

Steve shrugged. "I'm already confined to this time," he said indifferently. "One place is as bad as any other." He twisted the bracelet again. "Besides, if I wasn't here, I'd probably be locked up at SHIELD Medical."

"Still, if you want to go out anywhere, we can--"

"It's not like I have any pressing appointments," said Steve. "Other than at the church."

"Do they know why you're not coming in?"

"No. I just said I wasn't coming."

Tony nodded. "What do they talk about?" he asked curiously. What the hell, Steve seemed to be in a sharing mood.

"I'm told it's different for every person," said Steve. "For some people apparently there's a lot of prayer."

"Avoiding sin and hellfire?"

"I guess so. I don't really believe in that, so I wouldn't know. For some people, it's how to leave a lifestyle they're not happy with. For some it's how to stay with their wives or husbands."
"For you?"

"I dunno, avoiding temptation," said Steve uncomfortably. "Figuring out what I want in a... girlfriend. Or wife."

"Are you still thinking about that?" Steve gave him a questioning look. "I mean, you're out, now. To a lot of people. Doesn't that make any difference?"

"A lot of the people who go there are out, Tony. They're just not happy being out."

"What about... do you talk about specific personal stuff?"

Steve sighed and met his gaze. "Are you trying to ask if I've talked about you?"

Tony blinked. "I guess so. Yeah."

"Not everything is about you."

"Have you?"

Steve hesitated, turning the bracelet on his wrist. "Yeah. The counsellor asked if... if you were part of what was making things difficult for me. I told her you weren't."

"Really?" Tony's eyebrows went up.

"I told her if you weren't here, I would've - that I went to you, that night, in your lab before I went on leave. That you were the reason I didn't... do something stupid that night."

Tony swallowed hard.

"I also told her that I knew that wasn't fair to you," said Steve wearily. "You can't be responsible for me, no matter what you think."

"Wait, hang on - so, they do know you're depressed?"

"My counsellor knows, yeah. Now. I hadn't told them until I went on leave."

Tony scowled. "And they keep telling you that you need to change yourself? Did you know that's a huge risk factor for suicide? Don't they--"

"I told them to respect that you weren't part of my problem," Steve said evenly. "I'll ask you to respect that they aren't part of it either."

They were silent for a long moment.

"What I said... the other day." Steve cleared his throat. "About being with you. I don't want to give you the wrong impression."

"What impression is that?"

"That I want - that..." Steve gestured helplessly. "I wasn't - it wasn't a come-on."

Tony nearly laughed. Because he remembered Dad saying that Captain America had no idea how to talk to women, but if Steve honestly thought that anything he'd said in the middle of a suicide intervention could possibly be taken as a come-on, he pretty much didn't know how to talk to anybody.
"I didn't take it as one," Tony reassured him, and Steve nodded. "I know I'm... I'm probably not your type. It's just that you don't know anybody else who swings that way."

Steve looked out over the city bleakly.

"I mean, you're the marrying type. That's what you want." Tony paused. "And with a woman, to boot. I'm the hop-into-bed type, and I don't apologize for that. I tried, with Pepper, to be something else. It didn't work real well. I guess I'm not... I'm not good at the relationship thing."

"I probably wouldn't be either."

"I doubt that. Picking up, maybe that's not your strong suit. An actual relationship? You'd probably be the world's greatest husband." He cleared his throat. "Maybe even with a woman."

Steve gave him a half-smile. "Funny, I'm supposed to be the judgmental one."

"What?"

"Your face. It speaks volumes." He paused. "Go ahead, spit it out."

"No, I--"

"You have a problem with marriage?"

Tony thought for a moment. "Not marriage, no. I just think those places - places that try to change people's orientation - they feed self-hatred."

"You've never been there. I don't feel any hatred there."

"Maybe it doesn't seem like it to you. But you wouldn't be going there if you didn't, at least at some point inside you, hate yourself a little bit for being gay." Steve gazed out at the city impassively, and Tony blew out his breath. "Steve. You say you don't believe in the whole hellish damnation thing. You know orientation's innate. You're smart enough to see that it's possible to get married and have kids in this day and age. The only reason you're still hoping to become something you're not is because you do hate yourself. At least that part of yourself."

"I don't."

"Were you ever called a faggot or a fairy as a kid?"

Steve's mouth twitched. "You mean when I was skinny, weak, and in art school? Oh, maybe once or twice."

"I think that affected you a lot more than you'll admit to yourself. I'm guessing being raised by nuns probably didn't help much either."

"I don't think so." He paused. "Who knows, maybe it did. But I think mostly it's that... it's all I have left from my time. If I'm gonna be out and proud... I really can't be who I was."

"So you're gonna be in and ashamed, because that's who you were?"

Steve sighed. "It doesn't sound too smart, when you put it like that."

For a very brief moment, Tony considered being tactful. The moment passed. "Could I put it in any way that would make it sound any smarter?"
"There's more to it than that."

"Like what? You think liking other men makes you less of a man?" He stared at Steve. "That's part of it, isn't it? Wanting other men was just one more thing that you were taught was weak, your whole life. Like asthma, and being short. And you're so used to fighting against weakness that you can't--"

"Tony," Steve said evenly. "I don't feel like talking about this. Drop it."

Tony held his gaze, not sure what to do. On the one hand, Steve had been completely beaten down, indifferent to everything, for days, and they'd all been treating him like he was about to break. Maybe he needed to fight against something; maybe it would do him good for Tony to treat him like he was perfectly capable of defending his opinions. On the other hand... he had almost broken. And he was being forced to accept all sorts of changes that he didn't want - not just in the last few days, but ever since he'd woken up in this century. Maybe when it was possible to back off and let him be, they should do just that. Even if backing off meant not challenging essentially irrational beliefs.

Hey, at least he was talking again. He was talking, and Tony wished he knew if it was something Clint had said or done during his shift, or Steve had just needed a few days to process after Staten Island before being able to interact with people again.

Bruce came back onto the deck, breaking the moment. "Steve, were you still OK with teaching me pen and ink?" he asked. "I can work on my Starkpad otherwise."

"Yeah, sure, I've got supplies in my studio," Steve said, not terribly enthused, and they headed downstairs.

Tony watched them go, then turned as a Quinjet approached. Oh, goody, he thought, glad Steve wasn't around right now.

The jet landed, and Hill and Fury got out. Tony gave them a friendly wave. "My favorite super-spies," he said. "What brings you to my neck of the woods?" and it was pretty funny how two people who looked so different could have the exact same look of annoyance. Tony let himself smirk at that for a moment, then reminded himself to rein it in a little. It was probably going to take some finessing, getting them to not gang up on Steve.

"So, I take it you're here to talk to Steve," he said, indicating a couple of chairs.

"To you, actually," said Hill, sitting down.

Tony blinked. "Sorry?"

"We're here on Avengers business, and you are the de facto leader of the Avengers now," said Hill, looking like she'd swallowed a lemon.

"What happened to Steve being treated like a field commander but there being no official head of the Avengers other than SHIELD? I seem to recall Agent Sorensen seeing it that way."

"That was never official policy," said Fury. "The Avengers were to govern themselves as they saw fit; you all seem to have settled on Rogers as your leader and spokesman, and in his absence, apparently you are the one in... command."

"Well well well. From 'Tony Stark: Not Recommended,' to leader of the Avengers." Tony allowed himself a brief gloating smirk. "So, what are we talking about?"

"Captain Rogers," said Hill. "From your report, his situation hasn't improved."
"Suicide watch isn’t what I’d call an improvement, no."

"We’re going to need him taken into medical custody--"

"He’s not going back to SHIELD Medical," said Tony, bracing himself for a fight.

"He’s a SHIELD employee," said Hill. "We are not complete newcomers to this kind of thing. Our agents and assets are--"

"Maybe you need to stop thinking of him as an agent or an asset."

"How should we think of him?" asked Hill.

"Have you thought that maybe he's just a kid who's been through a lot?"

"Ya think?" muttered Fury.

Hill scowled. "He's--"

"He's a kid, OK? A traumatized kid!" Tony snapped. "That's all! Damn it, you want survivor's guilt? He's got it for everyone he ever met in the first twenty-seven years of his life. He went through one of the worst wars in human history, sacrificed his life - and then woke up in a whole new world and was told to jump right back into war as if nothing happened. And now he's stuck in this world, and he's lost pretty much the only advantage he has right now, his health--"

"Which is why he should not be here," said Hill. "He should be in a secure facility--"

"One run by SHIELD?"

"Not necessarily," said Fury.

Hill turned to him in surprise. "You want Captain America treated in a regular mental hospital?"

"Uh, yeah we skipped from Godfather II straight to Rocky on our movie playlist," said Tony. "We're not about to let you send him into One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest for real."

Fury rolled his eye. "Don't be an idiot, Stark, that was a movie, they're not like that. And nobody's suggesting that anyway. I'm not keen on moving him at all."

"Are you serious?" said Hill, aghast. "Sir, our directive was clear that--"

"What about his shrink?" asked Tony, ignoring her. "Does he think Steve should be hospitalized at SHIELD Medical?"

Fury handed Tony a file, opened to a transcript. He pointed at a spot halfway down the page.

Sanjay: God damn it, I've been telling you people this all along and now it's blown up in your faces. If you decide to keep experimenting on him, or bring him here against his will, I will not only not support it, I will fight it. He trusts his team; he doesn't trust us worth a damn and after the way you've f*cked up I can't say I blame him. Leave him alone.

Gandry: He is a valuable asset--

Sanjay: And a goddamn marvel of modern science, yes, but maybe we need stop treating him like an asset or a symbol or a f*cking science experiment and start treating him like a human being.

"His therapist is on board with the... proposal you sent us," said Fury, and Tony raised an eyebrow because 'This is the way things are going to be now, you incompetent assholes' had not been meant
as a proposal. "I'm inclined to agree."

Hill scowled. "Sir, Captain Rogers needs--"

"Stark's got his AI monitoring him and a member of the team with him at all times, he's going to continue medication at lower dosages, and he's willing to keep seeing Dr. Sanjay at the Tower. I don't see how being at SHIELD Medical would be an improvement."

"These people are not trained professionals."

Fury turned back to Tony, ignoring Hill. "Dr. Sanjay is. Now, about getting him a non-combat-related position at SHIELD once he's no longer on active suicide watch. Dr. Sanjay's on board with that too, and has a few suggestions." He gestured at the file in Tony's hand. "Do you want to go get him, so we can discuss it?"

Tony blinked, slightly stunned. "Sure. JARVIS, can - no," he broke off, "on second thought, you two wait here, I'll go get him." He turned and headed off the deck.

"Sir--" he heard Hill say behind him.

"This is not your call to make, Deputy Director," said Fury.

"It's not entirely your call to make either, sir," said Hill.

"You are not going to go over my head to--"

"I won't have to. When Agent Soren--"

The doors shut behind Tony. "JARVIS, turn on the speakers from the deck and send it to my Starkpad," he said softly, and Fury's voice came flowing out.

"...reason Tom Sorensen isn't here. The Avengers don't trust him. He's a disaster as liaison."

"Maybe if we showed more support to him, they would," said Hill. "It's dangerous to play their game. Particularly with the WSC having some pretty legitimate concerns right now. Sir, you know my loyalty to you. But this is... maybe this is not the right time to let Tony Stark get his way."

"If we push them, they will leave SHIELD and we'll have no control over them whatsoever."

"I think you're misunderstanding the situation."

"Well, you may find yourself making these calls soon enough," said Fury. "I hope you enjoy it."

"Tony?" Bruce was coming out of the elevator, Steve behind him, both carrying sketchbooks, pens and inkpots. "Is that the Director?" Bruce looked to the deck. "What's he doing here?"

"Came to see Steve," said Tony. Steve tensed. "No, it's OK. I was coming to get you. It's gonna be OK. I think. Come on out to the deck, there's something Fury wants you to see."

2.

December 11

"Really? Computers?" had been one of the first things Steve had said when he'd looked over the list that Dr. Sanjay had made.
"The job itself is analyzing SHIELD Intel and helping strategize ops," Hill had pointed out.

"Intel that's kept on the SHIELD servers."

"That's just the medium," said Fury. "It's pretty close to what you were doing with the Commandos. Sanjay pointed out that technology was one thing you appeared to have no trouble adapting to. We've only got three good, reliable analysts right now, but there are other jobs if you're not interested in that one."

"Besides, most of the more technical stuff on computers is done by the computers themselves," Tony had said encouragingly. "You just need to learn the interfaces, then analyze the information you get."

Which was why he was sitting here now, in a small SitRoom at SHIELD, figuring his way through SHIELD's internal files, following an electronic bread-crumtrail as part of his training. Bruce sat by on a nearby terminal, combining his babysitting shift with his own research time. They had come to SHIELD headquarters and monitored the latest Avengers outing: an attack by a rampaging Doombot, over in less than an hour with minimal damage to anything, really, and Steve once again wondered if Victor Von Doom treated these things as training exercises too because that was the only possible reason Steve could see for mounting them. And now Steve was working on his computer training while they waited for the team to join them, Clint and Natasha having already signed off and indicated that they were on their way, while Tony and Thor stayed onsite to speak to the press.

"You were never just a simpleton with a shield," Dr. Sanjay had pointed out when they'd discussed his choice later. "You and Peggy Carter and Colonel Phillips looked over intelligence on Nazi and Hydra locations, planned attacks, did all sorts of things that made up the bulk of your work. Agent Carter didn't participate in most of the raids at all. You don't have to be in battle to be useful."

Feeling useful was important, Sanjay had fully agreed with Tony, so here Steve was, his mind clear of fog, the medication dialed down considerably, outside of the Tower for the first time in days. Still on suicide watch, but feeling clearer. A lot clearer. A lot more normal. He clicked through the folders on his screen, quickly discarding irrelevant files, and planted an unlocking algorithm.

"I don't think you need to throw out the baby with the bath water with the meds," Tony had said. "The constant testing was too much, but some of it helped. I mean, you've got better sleep now, for one thing. Still nightmares, but that's why we've got somebody at your place at night."

That was one thing that was difficult to live with: somebody in his apartment, sleeping in the guest bedroom, there in case he woke up or couldn't sleep, as if he were a child. JARVIS was programmed to wake them automatically, so that Steve wouldn't have to do so himself. Although, embarrassing as it was, his team-mates were all completely matter-of-fact when JARVIS called them. The first time, Clint had just nonchalantly offered a cold cloth and a glass of water and noted that he'd been pathologically scared of going to sleep at all after Loki; Tony had mused on the benefits of asking Bruce to research anti-nightmare medication.

"Why?" Steve had asked, head between his knees, heart still racing, images of Bucky falling down that ravine in Staten Island flashing through his mind's eye. He had to admit, listening to Tony running off at the mouth was a lot more pleasantly distracting after one of these than just staring at his walls and willing his body to stop shaking.

"He's done some neurochemistry, trying to figure out the Other Guy's triggers. Can you imagine, figuring out what causes nightmares? Maybe that would be outside his reach. But hey, if he did figure it out, I'll say this for SHIELD R & D, they did figure out how to give you some stuff at a therapeutic level. That arm implant may not be 100% reliable for you, but the concept is genius."
"Think it can give me booze at a therapeutic level too?" Steve had asked, sitting up and wiping a
hand across his soaked brow and craving the oblivion of alcohol with a deep hopeless longing.
Funny, he’d never been much for drinking before the Serum; it was only now, when he couldn’t get
drunk, that he sometimes felt he’d give his soul to be able to do so.

"That wouldn’t be therapeutic," Tony had said, handing him a glass of water. "And I know, I know,
I'm a fucking hypocrite, what with self-medicating all the time. Still not a habit I'd wish on anyone."

Steve twisted his bracelet around his wrist as he waited for the program he'd unleashed to burrow
through SHIELD files, then made himself stop. Fidgeting: not a habit he wanted to cement, no matter
how much the thing irritated him.

He glanced at Bruce, steadily working away on his own terminal. For the most part, his team-mates
were unobtrusive about their babysitting duties. Thor tended to spend the entire time regaling him
with sagas, but they were interesting in a completely bizarre kind of way. Tony and Bruce worked
on their Starkpads, Clint played music or board games, and Natasha read. It was... comforting, he
supposed, that they would volunteer to do this for him, when he ignored how completely humiliating
it was that they’d felt they had to do it in the first place.

All right, he was in. He leaned forward and checked his training checklist against the files on his
screen.

Natasha entered, freshly showered and tucking a SHIELD-issue t-shirt into a pair of sweat pants.

"How was it?" Bruce asked.

"Fine," she said. "Though I could've done without getting sprayed with Doombot oil when the last
one near me blew up. They didn't really need us there." She took out her book, and sank into the
nearest chair. "Any advice from the control room?"

"No, not really," said Bruce. "Looked good from here."

Steve nodded agreement. It had been a simple operation. He made a note on his list, then studied the
screen more closely.

Bruce looked over. "You found your service records and rescue records?" he asked.

Steve nodded.

"What's that?" Bruce nodded at the screen.

"Records from after my rescue. While I was still asleep."

Natasha glanced over, smirked. "Not on the list of things you were supposed to track down," she
pointed out. "Good for you." She looked closer at the screen. "Where are you?"

Bruce looked over. "You've accessed one of the Omega Level servers," he said, impressed.

"I didn't really mean to," Steve admitted. "Just took a wrong turn, then decided to explore. Doesn't
say much for SHIELD security."

"Don't worry about it, you're using Starktech. Tony likes to tease Fury that SHIELD needs decent
computer security, but really it's just that his software is almost impossible to guard against. If Tony
ever ran SHIELD nobody would ever be able to get in."
Steve had to smother a laugh at the thought of Tony running SHIELD. He turned to the post-rescue internal memos, scanning down one from Fury.

...I am aware that our Wakeup Scenario team has been used successfully on numerous captured enemy operatives. They have gathered invaluable information when their realistic setups have convinced enemy operatives that they are among friends. It is worth noting, however, that they are dealing with enemy operatives, and it is my understanding that Captain Rogers is not currently classified as such.

"Do you know how long they were going to keep it up?" asked Bruce.

"A couple of days at most," said Natasha. "Unfortunately Cap was a little too bright for them. I heard it took you less than five minutes to figure it out?"

"Something like that." Steve paged through documents listing SHIELD's efforts to keep him in a coma, and then a plan on how to allow him to awaken, and a list of the contents of the room in which he was to wake up. A discussion of whether he should be in hospital gown or regular clothing, whether they were going to try to convince him that he'd been very sick and needed to stay in bed, or tell him he was physically fine. Apparently they'd decided to tell him he was physically fine but needed to stay put because he kept passing out. He supposed he owed some thanks to whoever had been responsible for not making it so he ended up running through Times Square in a hospital gown.

"That's funny," said Bruce. "There's a bit of tampering here."

"What?"

"Not sure I can explain it. Suffice it to say, within the SHIELD systems you wouldn't see this, but Tony's got a special algorithm for finding out what belongs where, electronically, and there's a few anomalies here..."

"Where?"

"See this line, where they've got internal listing of the sound file with the baseball game that was going to be playing on the radio? And this one, with the pattern for the uniform they were going to use for the nurse?"

"Yeah."

"It's been changed." Steve looked closer at the screen where Bruce was pointing. "Looks like this was done from the inside."

"That son of a bitch," said Natasha, smiling.

"What?"

"I can't say for sure. But I will tell you that there were only about four people with the clearance to be here, and two were Coulson and Fury. And the other two were fully on board with the plan."

That son of a bitch indeed. His secrets have secrets, Tony had said.

Natasha was scrolling through other items on the Omega server. "Interesting. I always wondered what happened to the records of the Hikaru op. And why Clint could never find details of the Helicarrier's ventilation system." She frowned.
"What?"

"There's someone copying files. Within SHIELD Medical. And Financial, and Penal Containment. And..."

Steve moved aside for her, and she and Bruce took over for a few minutes, muttering incomprehensibly to each other.

"This isn't really my area," said Natasha finally. "I can tell something not quite right is going on, but beyond that I can't... for all I know, it's nothing."

"Would be nice if Tony was here," noted Bruce.

"He's doing press." She scowled. "I'm done. I'll flag Fury."

"He'll know Starktech got into Omega Level."

"You know Tony would tell him anyway, just to watch the vein throb on his temple."

Clint walked in, freshly showered and carrying a jug of coffee and several mugs. "What are you doing?"

"Helping Steve get up to speed on computers," said Bruce.

"Really? Wow. I'm jealous. Nobody ever does that for me."

"You're not thinking of joining the Analysis & Strategy Department."

"Remind me to tell you about Operation Reawaken," said Natasha, as Steve went back to the list he'd been given. She took the coffee and started to pour for everyone.

"I'll just pull up a Starkpad and feel part of, then," said Clint. "I may be borderline illiterate but I've got a shiny screen too." He started to put in earbuds. "Hey, Steve, I'll even give you my tech tip for the day. In fact, the only one I have: don't rely too much on autocorrect."

"Why not?" Steve took a sip of his coffee.

"Take it from a guy whose name sometimes autocorrects as 'Clit.'"

Bruce snorted and Steve's coffee went down the wrong way. When he'd finished coughing, Clint was smirking at him. "Hey, it's OK," he chuckled. "I hated it when I was in high school, but as a grownup I kinda grew to appreciate it. I mean, what's your name autocorrect to? Probably nothing. Mine's naughty. Friendly." He paused. "Clitty."

"Clit, let Steve and Bruce get back to their work," said Natasha firmly, and Steve smothered a smile and went back to work.

This wasn't so bad, he realized as he worked his way through the training list. It really was just different media. He could get used to this. If he didn't ever go back to the field, analysing data and planning out operations without following them up on the field wasn't exactly a waste of his skills.

Never mind that it wasn't all that he'd been enhanced to do.

Maybe Tony was right, though, and he didn't owe it to anyone to keep being a soldier. Especially if he couldn't hack it, if being a soldier was part of what drove him to a cliff on Staten Island, with only Tony standing between him and that final long step down. With a job like this, at least he wouldn't
have to keep constantly putting himself in harm's way, and it wouldn't matter that his body couldn't handle painkillers. He could finally recover from battle fatigue, like the Commandos he'd sent home during the War.

And the job was certainly necessary. He collated what he'd found, figuring out the interface for encrypting files, and started putting together a practice report.

"Wow. Um, guys," Clint's voice was tight, and Steve, Natasha and Bruce turned to him. His lips were pressed together, a line between his eyebrows. "Cap. You're gonna wanna see this." He pushed his Starkpad over to Steve.

_Captain America, Gay?_ was the first headline Steve saw. His mouth dropped open. "Oh my God." He pulled the pad closer, and scanned it rapidly. Scanned the article under it.

"Hey, it's not so bad," said Clint quietly. "I mean, it's all speculative, it doesn't have to mean anything. And even if it does, getting outed isn't as bad as it used to be--"

"I know that," said Steve impatiently. "It's just that I only ever told..." he stopped, his eyes glued to the screen, sick shock flooding through him. "Jesus Christ."

"You told Jesus Christ?" Clint said, and Natasha hit him. "What?" He leaned closer, reading over Steve's shoulder.

...has been attending conversion therapy, hoping to change his orientation. If he is, what does that say about his own acceptance of who he is? It was followed by a link to ex-gay groups, God's Peace among them. These controversial groups have been associated with higher suicide rates among teens, and are no longer accredited therapy. Could this be why he has not been seen in public lately? Or could there be a different reason?"

"He's there for a friend," says a source close to the Avengers.

_It's well-known that Iron Man Tony Stark, whose exploits with women have been legendary, admitted to having same-sex encounters in the past. Could Captain America be trying to "cure" his team-mate? And if so, how does Iron Man feel about that?_ There was a link to a video.

"That has to be from the press conference that just finished," said Clint, checking his watch.

"He just finished fighting, and they decided to ask him about who Steve wants to sleep with?!" said Bruce.

"To be fair, we fight Doombots every other week," Clint pointed out. "Steve being into men would be actual, you know, news. Welcome to the digital age and all." He clicked on the link to the video and there was Tony, still in his suit, surrounded by reporters, forlorn Doombot remains being gathered by SHIELD personnel in the background. Thor loomed over his shoulder, looking grim.

"Was he trying to cure you?" a reporter was saying.

"No, absolutely not. Captain America has no interest in who I sleep with." He grinned at one of the reporters. "Unless they drink the last of the milk in the kitchen."

"You haven't been seen to be involved with anybody in recent months, though," said another. "No Youtube videos."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Please. Every time I have sex it doesn't end up on Youtube. Otherwise I've only had sex - what, a dozen, two dozen times? Give me a little more credit. Now if you don't have
any more questions about today's attack..." he made his way through the crowd, with the reporters shouting questions about Steve at him.

Steve glanced at another article.

_of the ministries contacted, most did not return our calls, and one, Love Wins Out, declined to comment, saying only, "It is our policy to never confirm or deny the membership of any of our clients. We can only say that if Captain Rogers were a client, we would give him the same anonymity that all of our clients receive."

Jesus. Steve scrolled down to the reader comments with sick fascination.

- Guys get the best and the girls get the rest, as usual
- Iron Man's bi, Captain America's gayy, are all the Avengers just born that way
- No that's sick
- Love and support to Captain America!
  - Why is this even news?
  --- Yeah they should shut up nobody cares who's a fag anymore.
- Hey, I call steamy Iron Man/Captain America torrid love goin on in that Tower!
  --- That building's pretty phallic to begin with!
  --- They're doing it, totally.
  --- Wrong is wrong.
- Hope this is true and that he finds peace within himself. He's a role model no matter what.
  --- Do you mean you hope he's gay, or that he is but is trying to 'fix' himself?
  --- Yes.
- Please let this not turn into another discussion of Captain Americas cherry.

Steve couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry at the last one. "Another discussion?" he said weakly.

"Your V-card is a thing, dude," said Clint glumly. "I thought it was funny. Not so fucking hilarious right now, though."

Tony and Thor walked in, Tony out of his suit but both obviously having come straight from the press to SHIELD without stopping to clean up. "I take it you've all seen the news," Tony said grimly. "Well, heads up boys and girl, the fun SHIELD Brass Trio are going to be here soon."

"What, over this?" asked Bruce.

"For the debrief," said Tony, rolling his eyes. "You may have heard we had a battle today. But--"

The door opened, and Steve stood up as Fury, Hill and Sorensen came in.

"Please don't tell me Captain America's having a sexual identity crisis on my watch," Fury began. He took one look at Steve and sat down. "How is this my life," he muttered.

Sorensen gave him a sour look. "Director, we can contain this. I can put together a statement categorically denying that--"

"No way in hell," said Steve before he could think to stop himself. Clint, Natasha and Bruce got to their feet as one, and Tony put a hand on his shoulder.

"Sorry, what?"

"Don't Ask, Don't Tell is over," he said. "I lied to get in to the Army, but that was seventy years ago-"
Sorensen gaped at him. "Are you saying it's true?"

Steve squared his shoulders. He had nothing to be ashamed of. "Yes. And I am not going to lie about it if I don't have to."

"The - the media fallout--" Sorensen began.

"The media fallout from lying about it," Hill broke in, "if they find out he did, would be--" 

"That's not the fucking point!" said Steve, and thought distantly that once upon a time he would have instantly apologized for swearing in front of an officer and a lady. He ruthlessly suppressed the urge to do so now, and glared at Hill and Sorensen. "My private life is private. I wasn't going to say anything to the media, because it should be nobody's business but my own. If you want me to stay silent, that's one thing. But don't ask me to lie, and don't lie for me. I will go to the press myself before I let you do that!"

Chapter End Notes

1. The movies watched/mentioned are
   The Godfather Part II, 1974
   One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, 1975
   Rocky, 1976

2. I should make something very clear. I have never been involved in it, but have done some research into "Ex Gay" ministries and conversion therapy while writing this story. It's been... an education, usually accompanied by a feeling like I have to throw up into my mouth a little bit.

Throughout this story, when I talk about conversion therapy, if I write about it from Steve's POV, I write about it in a fairly positive way.

This is the POV of the character. Not mine.

I believe the people who offer - and participate in - conversion therapy are, for the most part, not evil. They genuinely believe that they are doing a good thing to help themselves and others live healthy, happy lives. Some of them (like the folks Steve's chosen) even have some pretty good ideas about how to merely "accentuate the positive" in terms of opposite-sex attraction, and have done some good work helping mixed-orientation couples remain together.

However. I agree fully with Tony here: conversion therapy is wrong and abusive and dangerous. Yes, most people who undergo this kind of therapy are grownups who - one could argue - should have the right to decide what kind of psychological treatment they undergo. But we no longer permit people to offer mild electrical currents to treat gout, sulfur injections to treat schizophrenia, or cocaine to treat alcoholism. I see conversion therapy as no better than any of the above - especially since non-heterosexuality isn't an illness and doesn't require a cure, as opposed to gout, schizophrenia and alcoholism. Just wanted to make that excruciatingly clear :)

3. I know, comic! Steve's dad was an alcoholic. As there's no indication that MCU!Steve's dad is, I'm assuming he wasn't.
4. Anybody out there interested in beta work? My lovely beta, scrtkpr, who has been more like a co-writer than a beta, is being pummelled by RL. Chapters 10-12 are ready to go, the last chapters are being finished up... I wouldn't be asking for a commitment on every chapter, just whatever you were able to do. Anyone?
Thanks so much to Winterstar, CJ Andre and Cluegirl for your wonderful beta! And thanks so much to everyone else who offered; I'll be in touch in the next few chapters :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1.

December 13

Clint stood next between Natasha and Thor, at the side wall of the drab beige hotel conference room SHIELD had turned into a press room. He glanced over the roomful of buzzing reporters as Sorensen, Tony, and Steve took their places at the table set up in front. Ostensibly they were there to talk about the latest attack, but it hadn't escaped anyone's notice that Steve was joining them for the first time in weeks, in the wake of two days of non-stop and increasingly bizarre rumors in the press and social media.

Steve looked a lot better than he had in recent weeks, indistinguishable from the last time he'd done a press conference other than the civilian business suit in place of the spangly uniform. Still wearing Tony's monitoring device, though it was an unobtrusive anklet now instead of a bracelet. Although Steve was looking a lot better, and presumably feeling a lot better too, Tony didn't want to take any chances with his safety, and none of the rest of them did either. Steve hadn't objected.

He looked so calm and professional, too. No sign of the fact that he'd thrown up right before coming over, despite the fact that his medication hadn't caused him stomach troubles in a long, long time.

Steve cleared his throat and leaned towards the mike, and the buzz of conversation from the gathered reporters went down as camera bulbs flashed.

"Hello everyone," said Steve. "This is only going to take a few minutes, and then I'll turn you over to our SHIELD Liaison and Mr. Stark. They have some information about the last attack on the city. I'm just going to speak today to clear up a few rumors that have been reflecting poorly on the Avengers. I'm going to read out a statement, and then I will ask you to respect my privacy and leave it at that, and will not be expanding on what I've said or taking any questions. Mr. Stark will stay, and will be free to say whatever he wants... which he usually does." He gave Tony a small smile and a chuckle ran around the room.

He glanced down briefly at his prompt card, then back up at the reporters. "I've been Captain America for a while now, and I do understand that in that capacity I'm a role model for many Americans, particularly American youth. I take that responsibility seriously. I try to conduct myself with integrity at all times, whether I'm in public or not. However, my private life is my own, and I don't share it with the public willingly.

"That said, because of recent media attention, we all felt it would be good to clear a few things up. First off, there have been questions about why I'm not currently working with the team, and whether I've resigned or been fired or am dying or have joined the... Russians? Al Qaeda? Chitaurians?" There was a chuckle from the press. "The reason isn't nearly as interesting as the rumors; I'm dealing
with," he paused briefly, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression, same as thousands of Americans and soldiers do every day in this country, and I'm on temporary leave of absence. I have no plans to retire - or defect - and will be back with the team soon. The only reason I'm not with them right now is that it's not particularly responsible to be at work if I'm not able to perform at the mental and physical level my team needs from me." He paused briefly, waiting for the flurry of note-taking and cameras to quiet down. Clint kept his face nonchalant-supportive, knowing Natasha was doing the same and Thor was probably glowering mightily at anybody who looked even slightly disapproving.

"The other set of rumors are somewhat more personal." The crowded room abruptly became absolutely silent. "Mr. Stark has been never made a secret of his sexual orientation. I've never discussed mine in public, because frankly it's nobody's business but my own. Unfortunately, recent events have made remaining silent problematic. So I will put rumors to rest now: I am gay." A frisson ran around the room, but Steve continued to speak evenly, forcing the reporters to remain relatively quiet. "As for my relationship with Mr. Stark: it's true that we live in the same building, but so do a dozen other people. Avengers Tower has 93 floors and is the team's official residence. Mr. Stark and I are not roommates. We are not a couple, and we are definitely not secretly married." There were a few chuckles from the reporters. "We are friends and colleagues and I have a lot of respect for him, despite our many differences. I make no judgements on his behaviour, and he makes... many on mine, but respects me as well." He glanced down at the prompt card briefly, then back up at the reporters. "That is all. Thank you for your attention."

He stood up and left, joining Clint, Natasha and Thor, as the room erupted into questions and shouts.

"That's really all he's gonna say, folks," said Tony, leaning towards his own mike. "Which, yeah, I know, unreal."

"Are you really not a couple?" asked a reporter.

"Like he said, no. Captain America doesn't lie."

"Had any sleepovers?" asked another, and the cameras were fully focussed on Steve, who remained impassive.

Tony chuckled. "What are we, twelve? Seriously? He's said all he's gonna say and I've said all I'm gonna say, for once in my life. I told you this would happen," Tony said, glancing over at Steve, who shrugged. "I think that's Stevese for he's not responsible for your imagination." The reporters laughed. Steve gave them all a polite nod and left the room, presumably to join Bruce waiting in the small hallway outside.

"Yeah, I think we all know as long as he's still here you guys are going to keep asking stuff about him and looking to see if you get a reaction," Tony noted.

"You know we're just going to keep asking you, right?" said a young woman in front.

"Yeah, sure," said Tony with a grin. "I've been doing these since I was a kid."

"What do the rest of the Avengers think of this?"

Clint shrugged, hoping if any pictures of him were published anywhere - unlikely, as the media would probably be chock-full of Captain America and Iron Man - his face could only possibly express his heartfelt sense of 'Whatevs, dudes.'

"Why go public on this at all if he's not going to answer any questions?" asked a reporter near the
"Because the titillation of 'Is he, isn't he' was getting a little ridiculous," said Tony. "And because I was likely to open my big mouth anyway and make it look like an accidental outing."

"How does Captain America feel about homosexuality?" asked a tall man near the front. "In his day it was considered a pathology."

"Is it true that he's sought out conversion therapy?"

Tony shook his head. "Not my life, not my job to speak for him."

"What do you think of conversion therapy?"

Tony's eyes narrowed. "I think it's a poisonous load of crap. There's a reason it's not recognized therapy anywhere, and I fully support anybody who wants it prosecuted as a form of psychological abuse."

"What about his attitude towards gay marriage?"

"Second verse, same as the first: I'm not gonna speak for him."

"Has Captain Rogers ever been in an intimate relationship with--"

"Here's a game plan," Tony told the plump woman who'd asked. "You guys don't ask, and I won't tell."

"Will you answer questions about your own relationship with Captain America?" asked an elderly man. "Have you ever been in a sexual relationship with him?"

"Buddy, Cliffs Notes version: I'm bi, he's gay, not involved, never have been, I'm not his type and he's not mine, end of story. Move on. Just because two people on a team could sleep together, that doesn't mean they're going to. If you're gonna be that way about it, you might as well suggest that Black Widow's sleeping with all of us - except Steve, obviously - although yeah never mind, you people already do suggest that almost every single edition of some of your mags. Widow's a popular girl, I guess--"

"Has Captain America brought any men home to the Tower?" came another voice.

"I am not going to answer any questions if they have to do with Captain America's sex life." Tony stopped and gave an exaggerated shudder. "God, I feel like we're traumatizing ten-year-olds all over the country right now, not 'cause he's gay but because I just said 'Captain America's sex life.' Damn, I just said it again."

"Has Captain America dated--"

"Dude, what did I just say?" said Tony, exasperated.

"Who is in command of the Avengers right now?"

Tony smiled in approval at the young woman who had asked that one. "We're notsomuch with the military hierarchy. We're still functioning as a team, we're still out there. We're looking forward to Steve coming back soon, but in the meantime I tend to make most of the field decisions."

"Why go public with his leave of absence now?"
"In part to quash some of the more... creative rumors, and also because mental illness isn't anything to be ashamed of. Sometimes life throws you curve balls that take a bit of time to work through."

"Captain America suffering from PTSD, though?" said a thin man with a sour expression. "And depression?"

"Listen, Captain Rogers worked way past when most people would've quit," said Tony. "In his time you just manned up and kept a stiff upper lip and didn't talk about it until you either got over it or killed yourself or dropped into a bottle or something. He can't drop into a bottle, and he's got too much integrity to let down people who are relying on him to be in top mental condition. So when he felt that he was going to be operating at a level where his actions might compromise the team, he told us, and got help. That's all. Go Google PTSD and clinical depression if you want, and think about why somebody who's in a pretty high-stress occupation might not want to put their team-mates at risk while going through it."

"Do you think he can still be considered a role model, with these revelations coming out about his character--"

"The revelation is that he's a human being and isn't going to hide either his orientation or his current troubles, because he doesn't have to." He gave the reporter a thin smile. "That, plus the fact that he's saved your asses more times than I can count, makes him a pretty damn good role model to me. Don't know about you. And if anybody thinks they shouldn't look up to him any more, because he's chosen to be honest instead of making it look like he's got anything to hide, then maybe they need to re-examine their definition of role model."

Clint smirked and sat back, letting Tony do what he did best, reflecting that his own responses would probably be a little more profane. There was a reason he was almost never allowed to talk to the press.

Finally Tony was standing up and leaving the stage, leaving Sorensen behind to handle questions from the smattering of reporters who looked like they were going to stay. Clint had to admit that in terms of being boring enough to make the last few reporters want to leave, Sorensen did an excellent job.

"No, SHIELD did not know," he heard Sorensen say as he started to follow Natasha, Thor and Tony out. "No, we didn't need to know. There's no 'morality clause' in their contracts, and no need for one... SHIELD does not discriminate against LGBT individuals... no, it's not appropriate to discuss details of anybody's leave; it's a standard SHIELD Administrative Leave..."

They finally made it through the door to the hallway, where Bruce and Steve were waiting, and headed off to the Quinjet.

"Clint, time to pay up," said Bruce with satisfaction. "I told you there wouldn't be a single Doombot question."

"I really thought they'd ask at least one," said Natasha, "just to keep up appearances."

"If I recall correctly," said Thor, "the Hawk's penalty was that he must make our sustenance for tonight's movie. Which seems to punish all of us for his loss."

"And I was looking forward to finishing Annie Hall," said Natasha.

"Hey! No fair! Help me out here," Clint turned to Steve to protest, and saw him pulling Tony aside.

"What the hell was that?" Steve was asking, his voice low and angry.
"What?" Tony blinked at him. "Wait - are you pissed off at me?" Steve glared and Tony frowned at him, baffled. "Why?"

"You didn't need to lie!"

Natasha stopped and turned around.

"What? When did I--"

"'Never been involved,' you said," Steve snapped. "I agreed to this whole thing so that I wouldn't have to lie or hide. I didn't need you to do it for me!"

"I didn't!"

"Tony!"

Now Thor and Bruce had also stopped, and Steve and Tony suddenly noticed they had an audience.

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Clint.

"None of your business," snapped Tony.

"Too late," said Natasha briskly. "Clint told me a while ago that I should leave work at work and not pry into our team-mates' lives; that backfired pretty spectacularly." She stared at them, her eyes hard. "So, what does he mean, lying about 'never been involved'?"

Clint blinked as Steve started to blush. "I'm sorry, what?" No. No way. He gaped at Tony. "You mean... you're... you and Steve?"

"No way," said Bruce.

"Iron Man and Captain America are fucking," said Clint in disbelief.

"No!" Steve blurted, and flushed deeper. "We're not."

"But you were?" said Clint.

"You were doing something," said Natasha.

Steve looked away, his face crimson.

Natasha crossed her arms. "When?"

"A few weeks ago," said Tony, blowing out his breath. "It was just a couple of times."

"And you didn't sleep together?"

"No!" said Steve. "Of course not!"

"We just... made out a couple times," said Tony. "Steve, come on, it was nothing--"

"Then you shouldn't have lied about it," snapped Steve.

"I did not lie," said Tony, his lips going thin. "Look, for myself I don't give a shit what I say to these people, because they twist things into pretzels whether you try to be straight with them or not. But I knew I was speaking for you. I did not say we'd never done anything. I said, and I quote, 'not involved, never have been, I'm not his type and he's not mine, end of story.' I'm not your type,
remember? No old-timey morals, take everything as a joke, 'all about style'? And you're not mine; you're so fucking repressed you've ended up in psych care in my building! You're so far in the closet you're practically in Narnia, for fuck's sake." He stopped, breathing hard, and seemed to reach for patience. "Steve," he said more calmly, "we fooled around a couple of times, because I'm a slut and you were, I don't know, curious or I don't know what, but we've never been 'involved,' and don't you dare call me a liar for saying the truth."

Steve turned on his heel and left.

Tony closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead wearily, then followed Steve down the short hallway and out the door.

"Wow," said Clint, a little stunned. "Captain America and Iron Man. In our house. And we had no clue." He turned to Natasha. "Wanna turn in your SuperSpy badge?"

She nodded. "Bruce? Did you know?"

"I had no idea," said Bruce. "How would I have known?"

"You see Tony all the time, in the lab," said Natasha.

"And you think we talk about who he's sleeping with?"

"I find this strange," said Thor.

"What?" asked Clint. "That we had no idea this was even happening, in our own home? That this is twice now that Steve's totally blindsided us? Steve Rogers, a guy who's so upright he wouldn't even lie to get out of a speeding ticket?"

"I find it strange that you are surprised."

"What?!"

Thor frowned. "Our ways are... Asgard and Midgard are very different. And the ways of your people are confusing, and have changed much since we lived amongst you. But it was clear that there was a bond of deep affection between our Captain and the Man of Iron. And that the Captain was deeply conflicted about it." He paused. "As is the Man of Iron."

"Tony?" said Bruce, baffled.

"Aye."

Clint rubbed his eyes. "OK. So, to recap, the two super-spies and the sciency BFF saw fucking nothing, and the alien dude who's not even here half the time and is not real up on modern relationships finds it odd that we're surprised." He ran a hand through his hair. "This day sucks. I'm going to bed."

The far door opened, and Tony came back in.

"Is he all right?" asked Natasha.

Tony shrugged. "Says he's going to the SHIELD gym before heading back to the Tower."

Clint traded a glance with Natasha. Technically they still had Cap on suicide watch, with one of them accompanying him all the time, but they'd talked about cutting that down in recent days. And it had really seemed like Steve was just pissed off right now, not emotionally unstable. Besides,
JARVIS was still monitoring him through the anklet.

"Might be a good idea to give him some space," Clint ventured, and there were a number of nods from the team. He turned to Tony. "So, you're in the doghouse?"

"He's pissed at me," Tony said, going for a casual tone and failing utterly. "He's actually pissed at me."

"Yeah, well maybe he's not used to casual grab-ass," said Clint. "Didja think of that?"

"What?"

"As one asshole to another, Tony, I dunno how different it is when there's two dudes involved but generally you don't actually tell the other person that whatever you did 'was nothing,' even if it didn't mean squat."

"That's not why--"

"Tony," Bruce said, his voice even. "Did it cross your mind that maybe a deeply closeted man who was raised by nuns during the Depression might not be the best person to have a casual sexual encounter with?"

"OK, why does everybody assume it's me who wanted this to be casual?"

"Because it always is?" said Natasha. "Although this is a new low, even for you."

Tony turned and glared at her. "All right, maybe I fucked up. Scratch that: I know I fucked up; I shouldn't have - but maybe I didn't go for anything more serious because I didn't want to fuck up even more. Did you think maybe we only made out a couple of times because I realized he's got enough going on without me in his life? And maybe if he didn't, I would want--" He snapped his mouth shut and gave them all a scornful glare. "You know what? Never mind. This is none of your business. I'm going out; you go ahead back to the Tower without me." He turned and headed off.

There was a brief silence.

"It is as I said: deeply conflicted," said Thor gravely.

Clint heaved a deep sigh. "This day really sucks," he repeated. "I am going to bed."

2.

**December 17**

...my story's seldom told

*I have squandered my resistance,  
For a pocket full of mumbles, such are promises.*

They **sounded good** together out on the deck, Tony thought as he got himself a drink, Clint's husky baritone on the melody, Steve's light tenor harmonizing. It had come as a bit of a surprise to the team to realize that all of them had decent voices and could carry a tune, prompting Clint to propose recording an Avenger's Musical. "It would be like the Star Wars Christmas Special, it would be awesome, dude," he'd said, eyes sparkling. "Can you imagine if Phil was still around? He'd cream himself to get a copy, even if Fury put him in charge of erasing every last one from the internet!"
Tony swirled the ice cubes around, hesitating before stepping onto the deck. With miserable timing, he’d had to leave on Stark Industries emergency business the day of the press conference and hadn't been near Steve since then. While the upside was that he’d gotten to skip viewing *Kramer v. Kramer*, it did mean he had no idea what to say to him now, and no idea if Steve was still pissed at him over the press conference.

What the hell, he told himself. It was his own deck and he hadn't done anything wrong. It was Steve's job to apologize, mental health issues or no. Being emotionally iffy did not give you a free pass to treat other people like shit; Pepper, Happy and Rhodey had drilled that into Tony's head often - and painfully - enough.

*Asking only workmen's wages,*
*I've come looking for a job, but I get no offers*
*Just a come-on from the whores on Seventh Avenue,*
*I do declare,*
*There were times that I was so lonesome I took some comfort there,*
*Ooh la la la*

"Don't sing that verse in public," said Natasha, smiling a hello at Tony as he joined them. "I don't think the papers could take speculation that Captain America's not only gay, but hires prostitutes."

Clint laughed and Cap blushed. "Song lyrics don't count, Tasha," Clint snickered, still strumming. "Besides, I think Seventh Avenue's mostly girls; dunno where he'd find dudes for hire," he said, and continued to the next verse.

Tony sank into an empty seat, relaxing a bit when Steve gave him a small smile and didn't break off the song or leave. Not that Steve would've done that - flouncing off was not normally his thing - but the smile had been genuine.

He sat, savoring his drink and listening to Clint and Steve and gazing over the city, as their voices swung into the last verse.

*In the clearing stands a boxer,*
*And a fighter by his trade, and he carries the reminders,*
*Of every glove that laid him down or cut him, till he cried out,*
*In his anger and his shame,*
"I am leaving, I am leaving," but the fighter still remains...

Really, not bad. Not Avengers Musical level, but they did sound good. And it was interesting, hearing them singing a Golden Oldie that had been written more than twenty years after Steve's plane had gone down.

He looked over in surprise as they finished and Clint put away his guitar. "You're done?" he asked.

"Sorry, pretty limited repertoire," said Clint. "Besides, I'm getting cold out here. No, I know; high-tech enviro-friendly heating, it's just sitting outside with snow all over the city makes me cold whether I can feel it or not."

"And I need to finish up a report," said Natasha, standing up to follow him and leaving Tony and Steve alone on the deck. Tony narrowed his eyes at them as they disappeared into the elevator.

Steve cleared his throat. "I suspect that was deliberate."

"Our team-mates aren't exactly subtle," Tony agreed. He took a sip of his scotch.
"I'm sorry," said Steve bluntly.

"Oh. OK," said Tony, off-balance. "For?"

"I over-reacted, the other day after the press conference."

Tony nodded. "Right. No problem, don't worry about it. I... I'm sorry I said some of what I said afterwards too," he added, because that had generally worked with Pepper when he didn't really know what he'd done wrong. When In Doubt, Apologize. "And I'm, uh, sorry I had to leave right after, I wasn't trying to be a dick and get away, it was just that the factory in Broxton--"

"No, don't apologize for that," said Steve, waving a hand. "You have responsibilities, we all understand that."

"So... how has it been? The fallout from the press conference."

Steve glanced at him. "Fine. I haven't really kept track of what people are saying. Spent the last few days at the gym or in my studio, to be honest."

"Pepper said most people have been pretty supportive."

"Not everyone."

"No, not everyone. But even conservatives are being pretty positive. I saw something about former Vice President Cheney saying you're a good role model?" He took another sip. "Although other people's opinions don't matter to you, do they? It's more like your own opinion of yourself is what's important to you."

Steve gave him a humourless smile. "Other people's opinions matter more than you'd think. I realized that morning that it was the first time I was going to come out to people where I knew some of them were gonna react badly."

Tony blinked. "Really? You came out to people in your time."

"That was different."

"But you were just a kid. And you came out to a nun, a priest, and another teenage boy. Not exactly the safest people to come out to."

"I knew it was safe."

"How?"

"The thirties wasn't the Dark Ages. Besides, it was a boys' orphanage, Tony. Boys fool around together; it wasn't exactly accepted, but it wasn't unheard of either." He leaned his head back. "There was this one boy, Charlie. He got caught too many times with his hands down someone else's pants. Some of the nuns were all about the fire and brimstone and telling us we were gonna burn in hell forever if we let our 'so-called friends lead us down the path of Godless perversion'--"

"Jesus."

"But not Sister Barbara. Or Father Brauer. They stood up for the kid. I mean, they still said he was gonna go to hell if he didn't stop, but they tried to help him. So that's who I went to."

"And they helped you?"
"Tried to."

"What about your friend Bucky?"

"Bucky had stopped some of the other boys from beating the snot outta Charlie." Steve swallowed hard. "Didn't stop it from being terrifying, telling him. I didn't want him to think... I mean, he was like a brother to me. I knew he wouldn't beat me up, but I didn't want him to get the wrong idea."

"Did he?"

"No," said Steve with a small smile. "Bucky was... Bucky was the best friend anybody could've had. I don't know what I would've done without him." His smile faded and he looked down.

Tony cleared his throat, looking away from the grief on Steve's face. "What happened to the kid? Charlie?"

"He ran away when he was fifteen. I heard he ended up 'with the wrong crowd,' whatever that meant. There were rumors that he'd become... you know, a hooker. Or got himself raped or killed. Never did find out if they were true."

"How old were you?"

"Two years younger than him."

"So your one personal contact with somebody who was gay was a kid who slutted around, ran away from the orphanage, became a hooker, and possibly got killed."

"Don't forget the soldier who almost destroyed our unit because he absolutely had to offer another soldier a blow job. During war time."

Tony nodded. "Right. Have to say, those were great role models, Steve."

Steve shrugged. "Not that unusual, for the time. And they weren't my only role models; there were a few fellas in art school who were pretty obviously... that way. Very, um, feminine."

"No straight-acting guys who just happened to like dick?"

Steve winced at the crudeness. "How would I have known? How would anybody have known? It wasn't like today, Tony." He shook his head. "Today they're out, and almost nobody cares. And even the ones who do act like dames - you know that agent at SHIELD Technical Support, the one with the big glasses?"

"The one who embraces every lisping stereotype in the book? Gutierrez?"

"Yeah. He's - I can't imagine anyone making fun of him the way people did in art school."

"Not to his face, anyway," said Tony. "Clint said something about him coming to Tech Support after spending five years on the Termination Squad. He could probably kill you with one of his darling little rainbow cufflinks."

"It's still hard to believe it."

Tony hesitated a moment. "So I take it you're not going back to that conversion place."

Steve sighed and gazed out over the city. "No, probably not." He looked at Tony. "Why do you assume that, though?"
"Aside from you being pretty much irreversibly out now? Um... because they're the ones who probably outed you?"

"I'm not so sure."

Tony frowned. "Really? How many people there knew who you were?"

"Two, as far as I know. There may have been other people in their office who had access to my file, but the place itself is pretty small."

"Who else would've outed you, Steve? Everybody else who knew was a friend."

"Why would the church out me?"

"Good publicity. Celebrity client and all."

"If so, it backfired. If anything, those places are getting even more heat, ever since the stories came out... at the same time I did. What you said about them didn't help either."

"Hey, any publicity is good publicity," Tony pointed out.

"If they were going to use me for publicity, they would've done it after I was... I dunno, married, or something," said Steve. "Or at least going out with a woman. Why do it now? And the stories didn't use the name of the place I was actually going to. It was just part of a list."

"Maybe they didn't want to be too obvious." Tony paused. "Come on, Steve, who else would've done it? Nobody at SHIELD knew but your therapist. There was just the team, and Rhody and Pepper. Not one of us would've--"

"Somebody else could've seen me entering the church." Steve paused. "And there have been odd leaks going on to the press."

"Yeah, but..."

"You know what Natasha found the day I was hacking into SHIELD. There was somebody copying files in there."

"Yeah and I wish I'd known about it," said Tony. "I would've tracked them down."

"We still don't know it was anything out of the ordinary," Steve pointed out. "Natasha said it could've been nothing."

"Natasha said it was SHIELD Medical and Financial files, at least, maybe others. And you have spent a lot of time at SHIELD Medical..." Tony frowned as he reluctantly dismissed the rather baffling topic. "Anyway. It's probably for the best that you're not going back to the church, whatever the reason." He swirled the ice cubes around the bottom of his glass. "Let's go in, I'm getting a refill," he said, standing up. "I mean, there's not much point in you still trying to go straight, is there? Now that the world knows you're not?"

"That wasn't the reason I was doing it," Steve pointed out as they came back inside. "It wasn't so that nobody would ever find out. Though that would've been nice."

"Then why--"

"I might want to get married and have a family some day." Tony gave him an exasperated look and Steve held up a hand. "Yeah, I know. I have heard of gay marriage."
"You changed your mind on serving openly in the military--"

"The military isn't sacred."

"Tell that to Rhodey," said Tony, heading for the bar. "Anyway, I'm not gonna argue with you on this one. I don't even really believe in relationships, let alone marriage. I've never seen a functioning one. And I don't particularly want kids, so I'm not the best spokesperson for that either."

"I don't know if I want kids either; I just don't want to close off that possibility forever. And I wouldn't deprive a kid of two parents."

"You wouldn't have to," said Tony, taking out a whiskey bottle.

"Two parents of the opposite sex," said Steve, dropping onto a bar stool. "Kids need both role models."

"Hey, you were raised by a single mother, and then by nuns," Tony pointed out. "You turned out OK."

Steve stared at him. "My childhood was terrible, Tony. I would never do that to a kid."

"Think it might have more to do with your mother dying and you being poor, than not having a father." Tony grimaced. "In any case, trust me, two parents of the opposite sex do not a stable home environment make. And trust me, we're gonna want to change the topic on this one. Hey, do you want a drink?"

Steve nodded. Tony reached for the cabinet.

"Whiskey OK?" Tony asked, and poured after Steve nodded again. "On the rocks? How are you feeling, by the way?"

"Sure. Um. Fine?"

"I mean, stability-wise." Tony got ice for both of them.

Steve's lips pressed together briefly. "Fine, Dr. Stark."

"How's the lower dosage working?"

Steve touched his arm absently. "Fine."

"Bruce said you had a bit of a panic attack the other day," said Tony, handing over Steve's glass.

Steve sipped his drink thoughtfully. "It's actually helpful that I spent all those years being told asthma was just mind over matter. It's kind of encouraging, now; Bruce tells me to breathe more slowly, and my breathing actually settles down. Never worked when Bucky tried it."

"Yeah. Panic attacks suck," said Tony, and took a sip. "I had a couple after Afghanistan; always felt like I was dying. Mind you, I never was able to tell how much of what was going on was panic attacks, and how much of that was my body breaking down from the arc reactor poisoning me. And I didn't have too many of them; Pepper insisted I get lots of therapy and cutting-edge meds." He swirled his drink around, remembering Pepper's efficiency, the way she'd forced him to take care of himself emotionally. The way she'd actually made a difference, so that he was able to walk away from what was a completely horrific experience not that much more screwed up than he'd walked into it.
So completely different from how he'd handled Steve. Not just failing him when Steve had first come to him, but unable to do much to help even now. Other than sitting and taking up space while Steve brooded after nearly killing himself, or holding him silently while he cried on the kitchen floor. Barely able to do anything more useful than point out that maybe non-stop chemical experimentation wasn't a good idea, or that watching *The Deer Hunter* and *Ordinary People* was probably also not the best thing for Steve right now.

Tony watched the play of light off the ice cubes in his glass. "I... I'm sorry I'm not good at this."

Steve blinked at him. "What?"

*I'm sorry I don't know what to do or say. I'm sorry all I can do is babble to you about Bruce finding a cure for nightmares when you're shaking after dreaming about your best friend dying. I'm sorry I can't even say any of this out loud.* He drained his glass. "But hey, you're... you are looking better. More... I don't know, centred?"

"I guess so."

"You could go out, you know. You're not on constant watch any more. You've got the anklet - I mean, at some point, you'll be able to take it off, but--"

"I think that'll be a while coming," Steve said lightly, resting his elbows on the bar. "I don't really mind being here. I don't really have anywhere to go by myself. I mean, I was going out to see the city, before, but... other than Central Park, which was just a dump when I was a kid, the rest of it really isn't that attractive."

"Still, isn't there anything you want to do?"

Steve gave him a grim smile. "Well, I was supposed to go on a date with one of the women going to the church. In a couple of days, as a matter of fact. Other than that, no."

Tony's eyebrows went up. "The church runs a dating service?"

"You would call it that," said Steve, grimacing.

"You'd be OK dating a woman you know isn't really into you?"

"It's a little more honest, I'd think, than dating a woman who thinks I'd be thrilled to get her into bed."

Tony shook his head in disbelief. Sounded about as much fun as root canal.

"But you're right, there's not much point to going," said Steve. "I don't want to give up, but... I haven't been much good at doing any of what they've told me to do." He paused. "For one thing, I'm really not supposed to be alone with you."

"Me, specifically?"

"I never named you to the counsellor. I just told her that there was somebody, and that we'd - and that I was still tempted."

Tempted. Tony's heart skipped a beat, and he took a drink to cover his reaction. Of course, any good intentions Tony had had at keeping his distance had gone all to hell after Staten Island, eclipsed by bigger concerns, like Steve's life and safety. Not that it really made any difference in terms of Steve 'avoiding temptation'; whether you called it suicide watch or babysitting, their time alone together
had not been sexy. It had mostly consisted of Steve being silent and in pain, and Tony feeling useless or chattering inanely at him.

"So your counsellor thinks just because you're... curious--"

Steve put his glass down impatiently. "Look, it's not that you're the only gay or bi man I know," he said, his voice tense, his eyes on the bar top. "Stop saying that. It's not that you're... convenient. You're pretty damn inconvenient, Tony."

"You have no idea how many times I've been told that," Tony quipped.

Steve didn't smile. "I know what you said, that it didn't mean anything for you, and that's fine, but... I wasn't just curious." He pressed his lips together, a blush heating his face.

Tony cleared his throat, his stomach doing a small flip.

You don't actually tell the other person that whatever you did 'was nothing,' even if it didn't mean squat, Clint had said, and damn it, even Tony knew that much. And - oh, shit, he was probably going to fuck things up again, but somehow he couldn't leave the guy hanging, his emotions so raw and open, with Tony just sitting quietly on his own. He opened his mouth without letting himself overthink it.

"Look, what I said, that day, was - you... you are my type. Very much my type." Steve's head snapped up and Tony drew a nervous hand through his hair. "I mean, I'm not just a friendly guy who does that kind of thing with anybody with a pulse." God, he should probably shut up and he was probably fucking this up, badly. What else was new. "But, but you said pretty clearly that you didn't want anything like that to happen with a guy."

Steve was gazing at him thoughtfully. "Sometimes I honestly don't know why not. You're right; nobody cares."

You care, thought Tony as Steve lifted his glass and drained it, then set it down.

"I am so damn tired of fighting," Steve said softly, staring down into his glass. "I don't even know why I should any more."

"I've never understood, to be honest."

"Was it really that simple for you, accepting that about yourself?"

Tony gestured helplessly. "I don't really remember. I mean, it was so long ago - and seriously, one more thing for my dad to disapprove of and the tabloids to talk about? Didn't really register much for me, I don't think."

Steve slid off the bar stool and moved around the bar, facing Tony. "I envy that about you so much," he said, his voice quiet. "You make no apologies for how you feel. You don't think any less of yourself for it."

"Why should I?" asked Tony. "What's wrong with wanting what everyone wants, just because it comes in a different package?"

Steve shook his head, his eyes uncertain, tension in every line of his body. "Maybe nothing. I don't know any more." He drew a shaking breath, and his eyes dropped down to Tony's lips.

OK, this was getting out of hand, Tony realized. There was hope in Steve's eyes, and fledging acceptance of himself, and God Tony wanted this a lot more than he'd thought he did and all the comforting statements he'd made to himself about 'just an anomaly' and 'platonic friends is fine' were
such complete lies he was kind of impressed that he'd managed to convince himself even for a moment--

But Steve wasn't really stable, yet, and giving up on that church was a far, far cry from embracing his sexuality, and Tony was so, so bad at this...

"Steve," he said, and swallowed. "I - we... I don't want..." And oh God, he went stupid when Steve's deep blue eyes met his and his brow furrowed slightly.

"You don't--"

"I mean, yes I do want - 'don't want' is so far from true it's not even funny. I want you so much you have no idea." He cleared his throat and held on to his resolve with both hands. "But I don't do long-term, and you do."

Steve gave a short laugh. "I never have," he pointed out. "And if I can't be with a woman, maybe I don't."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Oh really? Captain America's gonna get into the casual scene? Seriously?"

"Maybe Captain America's tired of being alone," said Steve.

"I thought you believed in waiting until marriage."

"Doesn't look likely that I'll ever get married. What am I supposed to do?"

"Uh... 'don't knock masturbation, 'cause it's sex with someone you love'?" Tony joked weakly.

Steve snickered and drew closer. Tony gazed at him, frozen with indecision, but didn't move back as Steve slowly lifted a hand to his cheek. He took a deep breath as Steve brought their faces together, hesitating an inch away from Tony's mouth.

**Reasons This Is a Good Idea**, Tony's brain supplied as his breath mingled with Steve's. One: Steve wasn't on medication. Or rather, he was, but it was good, and it stabilized him. Two: he wasn't on suicide watch any more. Three: he probably wasn't going to go back to that awful church. Four: Steve had been so alone, for so damn long, and wanted Tony, and Tony wanted him, and...

**Reasons This Is a Very Very Bad Idea...**

Oh, there were too many to count, but Tony wasn't made of stone, and the reasons were so hard to remember as Steve bridged the final gap between them, and Tony groaned as their mouths met and Steve's lips parted instantly under his, their tongues sliding together with an almost electric tingle, tasting of fine whiskey and excitement, the tension in Steve becoming something else, something joyful and vibrant. Steve gasped and buried his hands in Tony's hair, gently biting Tony's lower lip between his own before sliding his tongue back into Tony's mouth. And Tony wanted so much more, wanted to slide his hands down to Steve's ass and pull them closer together and see if Steve was already hard or not, and then Steve's hands were running down Tony's back and to his waist and--

Tony grabbed on to what little common sense he had left. This might be OK, but there was no way he should let it go too far. Never mind that they were technically in a public area; Steve really wasn't compos mentis enough to provide real consent to much more than this.

"Steve, Steve," Tony gasped, pulling away slightly. Steve stilled immediately and Tony took a quick breath, then moved his mouth to Steve's ear. "Slow down," he whispered. "We don't need to do
everything all at once. Come on." He gently tugged Steve to the couch, sinking down and pulling Steve next to him, turning and capturing Steve's mouth again. "Is this good?" he murmured between kisses, feeling like a bit of an idiot but what the hell. "We don't go any farther than this? Above the waist only?"

"Yeah, yeah it's good," Steve gasped. "Jesus. It's good," he said, taking Tony's mouth in another hungry kiss, then moving to his ear and nipping Tony's earlobe between his teeth, sending a shiver through Tony.

Let's see if I can get the hang of this, thought Tony as Steve's lips ghosted from his ear down his neck, leaving sparks of sensation behind. It had been a distressingly long time since he'd hooked up with anyone, and he was used to most of his hook-ups being driven straight towards bed, but he had had some experience - about a million years ago - with just fooling around, and there was a certain charm to it. Sensuality to be enjoyed when this wasn't just a headlong rush towards orgasm. It had been a while, but he had a pretty good memory.

He relaxed into it, savoring Steve's mouth, finding sensitive spots on his neck, encouraging him to explore, both of them losing themselves in each other for what felt like forever. Steve melting into him, small gasps and soft moans, the scent of the hollow at the base of Steve's throat, his pulse thrumming rapidly under Tony's lips. Quiet laughter, Steve's eyes sparkling, and if felt powerful, it felt incredible, it felt like this couldn't be anything but right...

Hours later, it seemed, they came up for air.

"I..." Steve broke off a kiss. "This is - we should probably stop pretty soon," he whispered. His face was flushed and his eyes bright, and despite his words he looked more... peaceful than Tony had seen him in a long, long time. Tony felt a bizarre flush of pride.

"Blueballs?" Tony asked, regretting it the moment he said it, but Steve just rolled his eyes.

"Nah, just getting a little hotter than I can really..."

"Yeah, I know. Me too." They shared another slow kiss, their lips swollen sensitive, and pulled away reluctantly.

Steve kept a hand on Tony's, lacing their fingers together, and looked down. He carded his other hand through his own hair, straightening it a bit, and cleared his throat. "Look, I know." He looked up at Tony, a small smile on his lips. "I know you're not into long-term," he said. "I don't. Uh. Really don't expect this to change anything.

Tony nodded, feeling his pulse slowing down, and squeezed their fingers together. "So... you're OK with, you know, friends with benefits?" he said. Steve nodded. "Wow, No Strings Attached With Captain America." He shook his head. "Try putting that on a trading card."

Steve gave him a wry smile. "Talk about traumatizing legions of ten-year-olds."

"I won't tell," Tony promised.

"Who knows, most of them probably wouldn't even care." Steve shook his head, sitting back on the couch. "Ten-year-olds aren't how they used to be."

"A lot of things aren't how they used to be."

Steve sighed. "No." He was silent for a while. "Guess I'm... really not going back to the church, then," he said, and Tony would've felt another rush of pride if not for the subdued tone of Steve's
voice.

"That's... that's good, isn't it?"

"I guess so," Steve said quietly.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Other than I'm gonna be missing the second date I've ever had?" Steve looked down at their clasped fingers. "Giving up without even trying?"

Giving up?

Tony frowned. "Steve, I don't get it." He hesitated, trying to feel his way through this cautiously. "You say you don't believe the whole damnation and hellfire thing. So what does it matter whether you try to go straight or not?"

"It's not about avoiding punishment from God," said Steve slowly. "It's never been about that. God forgives us anything; I believe that."

"So what's the problem?"

"Just because God can forgive us doesn't mean we shouldn't do our best to do what's right anyway. Doesn't mean we should just give up." Steve pressed his lips together. "It's not just a religious thing either. I mean - during the War, I never thought the men who didn't go into the army should be punished; I just wanted to do the right thing."

Tony nodded. "And you kept trying to do the right thing, even when the army rejected you four times."

Steve nodded, still looking down, one thumb gently rubbing the top of Tony's hand.

Tony gazed at Steve's profile for a long moment; the smooth brow, the eyes that no longer looked as haunted as they had a few weeks ago, but always had that hint of sadness, the lips that had just been so pliant under his own. He covered their clasped hands with his free one, then drew it up Steve's shoulder, giving him a gentle squeeze. "Steve."

Steve sighed and looked back up at him. "Yeah."

"Are... do you really feel like you're giving up on the church?"

Steve blinked. "I am."

"Even though you've been with women before, and it didn't, you know, fix you?"

"I didn't know what I was doing back then, Tony. The church doesn't just throw men and women at each other and assume that's all it takes to straighten them out." He bit his lip. "Besides, it might have worked with Peggy; I never got the chance to try."

Tony felt his heart aching a little. Damn it. Walking away from that stupid place should be a triumph, should feel like freedom and self-acceptance, a rejection of irrationality - like doing the right thing after all. Not this sense of defeat, of 'giving up' without even trying.

And if he walked away now...

He took a deep breath. "Then... then maybe you should go," he said, feeling a little unreal.
Steve's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"Steve. I really - shit, I really can't believe I'm saying this and I should probably get Bruce to examine me for alien mind control. But maybe you should. Go back, I mean. At least for that one date."

"After... this?" Steve gestured between them.

"Hey, no strings attached means no strings for either of us. And you're looking for long-term. You're also looking for female. And you... you were enjoying yourself a few minutes ago, but I think you think you're giving up on something pretty important to you."

Steve frowned. "You're actually pushing me to--"

"Not pushing you." He squeezed Steve's hand, then let go and leaned back on the couch, running a frustrated hand through his own hair. "Jesus, you know exactly what I think of those places, please don't get me started on how fucking poisonous and--" he cut himself off. "But you look like you're already regretting this, and... fuck it, go. Get it out of your system. Or... I dunno, find out that it works for you after all," he said, and was a little startled at the bitter taste that thought left in his mouth. "Just, if it doesn't go well, come back." He corrected himself. "Not to - this, not to me, not necessarily, just... talk to somebody. Maybe an ex... ex-gay client, or something--"

"Why, because what I need is yet another counsellor?" said Steve dryly.

Tony gave a small laugh. "No, just... I don't know, it's your life, you decide. I don't want you to. If it was up to me I'd shut all those places down permanently. But I also don't want you to feel like you gave up on anything."

Steve gazed at him seriously. "I'll think about it."

Tony nodded, but couldn't help wondering if he was totally fucking up - again.

Steve stood up. "I really should go to bed," he said. He leaned close, hesitated, then pressed a brief kiss to Tony's mouth. "Good night, Tony," he murmured, and started to draw away.

Tony quickly put a hand up and tugged Steve back, kissing him again more slowly. He finally broke off.

"Good night," he said, his lips still tingling, and watched Steve walk away.

Chapter End Notes

1. The movies mentioned/watched are:
   Annie Hall, 1977
   The Deer Hunter, 1978
   Kramer v. Kramer, 1979
   Ordinary People, 1980

2. Ordinary People, by the way, is about a family in which the older son, Buck, dies in an accident while boating with his younger brother. The younger son deals with PTSD and survivor's guilt, tries to commit suicide, and is hospitalized for four months. No, I'm not kidding. I saw it as a child but didn't remember much about it, and when I was
looking for movie quotes (there's at least one movie quote or semi-quote in every chapter, fyi) I looked up the plot, and... um. Wow. Yeah, no. Never mind! Sail right over that one on the playlist, people

3. The Avengers Musical could *totally* happen. All the Avengers actors are musically talented. Don't believe me? Follow this link. Just don't blame me if you're permanently scarred by Loki rapping, Fury in a pink wig, or Captain America in drag singing "I Will Survive."

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0cG0fBFpLg

4. The song Clint and Steve sing is *The Boxer* by Simon & Garfunkel.
Terms of Endearment

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much, Cluegirl, forgetmenotjimmy, and BeatriceEagle! Your beta was awesome both times I went through it. Any remaining errors are due entirely to me and my possible rage issues with my computer corrupting the file when I had three comments left to work on, and making me go through the whole thing again.

Apologies to all for the lateness of this chapter, too - it's been written for a while, but RL hit me really, really hard (in a nice way - I got a new job!) so everything slowed down. The rest should come a little faster :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1.

December 20

It had gone well, Steve thought as he finally headed home with the bike thrumming under him. Jillian seemed like a nice girl. A bit like a dark-skinned version of Beth, actually: young, pretty, interesting, beautiful smile. They'd gotten the awkwardness of introductions out of the way first: yes, she knew who he was, had seen him in the news; yes, she was a little surprised that he was still going through with their date. No, she wasn't overly surprised; she'd been out to her entire family for a long time and had even lived with a woman for four years before that had ended. She'd realized she couldn't live that life any more, and wanted a better path.

They had a lot in common. She worked as a counselor, had a lot to say about poverty and injustice, went to church regularly. Wasn't much into popular culture.

She was also bright and articulate, and had a good sense of humor. She did yoga in her spare time.

They'd even shared a few kisses outside her apartment at the end of the date. It had been nice; she tasted like strawberry lip gloss and pumpkin pie, and her curly hair had felt soft and silky through his fingers. It wasn't particularly exciting and it wasn't thrilling, but it was definitely pleasant. He could work with that.

And being with her - being with a woman - felt right in a way that he couldn't imagine with a man. He could picture holding her hand in public, talking about her to his team-mates. Even the social niceties had gone all right. He'd pulled her chair out for her - women today were dicey about that, some liked it and some didn't, but it was still a reflex action for him - and remembered to not stand up when she left to go to the washroom and when she came back, but she didn't seem put off by anything he said or did. Maybe spending time with Natasha had helped him learn how to talk to women in this century. He wondered if maybe things might have gone better in his own if he'd just been less nervous around them.

He'd had a good time with Jillian.

He could probably work with this. If not with her, then with someone else. It was a matter of reminding himself that relationships were not just about sex; they were about companionship,
commitment, partnership. He could make something like this work.

Did he want to, though?

He parked his bike and got into the elevator. Odd that he didn't feel like he was walking back into confinement, even though this was one of the first times he'd been out of the Tower by himself since Staten Island. He resisted the urge to touch the security device Tony had made for him. He'd been feeling better lately, and some days he almost couldn't remember what had made him so desperate that he'd honestly felt he had no choice but to end his own life. But then some days - or rather, some late nights - he was reminded all too well. Not enough to do anything about it, but enough that the light touch of the anklet felt like security, like safety.

Like Tony looking after him when he couldn't look after himself.

All right, this was probably a bad idea, Steve thought as he realized which elevator button he'd just pushed. What he actually needed was to go back to his own apartment, think about the date he'd just pushed. What he actually needed was to go back to his own apartment, think about the date he'd just been on. Think about what he wanted to do next. Think about the positives, like the church said. Think about how well the sexes complemented each other, completed each other. Think about how, if he ever wanted to have children, those children would need a mother.

Instead, here he was, at Tony's lab.

No, this was stupid, he should go back upstairs. He turned to go.

The lab door slid open, a blast of heavy metal pouring out. Guns'N'Roses, if Clint's Modern Pop lessons were correct. "Hey, Cap," said Tony. "You OK?"

"What?"

"JARVIS said you were on your way down." He gestured in to the lab. "Did you want to come in?"

"I'm fine," Steve said.

Tony blinked. "Oh. OK, uh, that's fine, I mean you don't have to have a reason to come down here, you're welcome any time you want," he said, and headed back inside. "JARVIS, volume down," he said, and Axl's screeches welcoming him to the jungle became softer. "So, what's up?" Tony took in Steve's windblown hair and motorcycle jacket. "Hey, were you out?"

Steve nodded. "Just came back in."

"Good for you, Spangles. Where'd you go?"

Steve hesitated a moment. "I decided to go through with it," he said. "The date."

Tony stilled, and his shoulders drew together slightly. "OK. Right. Well. Good for you." He looked at the wrench in his hand, put it down, and moved to the small bar he kept in his lab.

"You said I should--"

"No, no of course I did," said Tony, grabbing what looked like a random bottle and pouring himself a glass. "And really. Good for you. I mean, you know what I think about it. But if you think that - you know what, I'll shut up now."

Steve smiled. "That's probably for the best."

"It's rare enough that you should really enjoy the experience." He added ice cubes.
"Trust me, I do."

"Hey, did you want any..." he glanced at the bottle, "scotch?" Steve shook his head and Tony tossed back a gulp. "So where'd you go?"

"Italian restaurant. She picked it."

"You didn't take her to a dance bar?"

"Not a girl I met through a church, no. Besides; dance bar, for lunch?"

"Lunch?" Tony blinked. "What time is it?"

"Close to dinner time. We ended up walking through the Park for a couple of hours, then I rode around the city." He glanced around the lab. "Anyway, just wanted to say hi. I should head back to my place."

"Oh hey, hang on a sec," said Tony. "I uh... I wanted to talk to you about tonight. I was going to anyway, but I guess what with you going back to the church and them saying you're not supposed to be alone with me--" He cleared his throat, and Steve got the feeling that Tony was bracing himself. "Look, I still think it's not a bad idea for you to have someone in your guest room at night, but it's my turn tonight and I - I understand if you'd rather have someone else. Or even if you want to stop it altogether. It's up to you," he said, and Steve wondered if he'd rehearsed this a few times. "I was talking to the others and in the last two weeks you've only had three nightmares, and you're doing pretty well otherwise. We're all fine with it, either way - you know it's no skin off my nose, I designed your guest room, so it's no trouble - just wanted to let you know, you have that option."

Steve blinked. "Oh. I... hadn't really thought about it."

Tony's eyebrows went up. "Really? Thought you resented it."

Steve rubbed the spot between his eyes. "Yeah, but I try not to think about it, you know that." He thought for a moment. "I'm OK. With stopping, I mean." Tony nodded and took a sip of his scotch, and Steve narrowed his eyes. "And it's not because of this date. Or the church." Tony's eyebrows went up. "It's not you; I just don't like having babysitters. I appreciate it, but I don't like having to rely on all of you."

"None of us minds. You know that." Tony shrugged. "Most of us have been there. We've had other people take care of us; we don't mind paying it forward."

Steve gazed at him. "You've never... I know you went through some rough times after Afghanistan. You keep saying you're over it."

"I am, mostly."

Steve hesitated. "How bad was it?"

The corner of Tony's mouth twitched, but his eyes were bleak. "I was tortured and then held in a cave for three months, Steve. It was pretty bad. Pepper was the only reason I didn't end up where you did. She made sure I got off as lightly as possible. There were some rough spots, and there's still scars, but I was never suicidal."

"Never?"

"Never have been, not because of Afghanistan or anything else. Though I've been pretty low. Like, a
lot of my wild party days? They were fun, but they were also acting out pretty badly. You know, 'Daddy never loved me, the only way I can get friends is to flash around money or flash around my barely-pubescent dick' - and let me tell you there was some heavy therapy over that a few years after the fact, because I was slutting around MIT at age fourteen which I thought was pretty hot at the time but now makes me feel icky in all sorts of ways and I've seriously thought of tracking down some of the fucking pedophiles I slept with--"

Steve felt his eyes widen. "Are you serious?"

Tony gave a short laugh and leaned against the small bar. "Yeah, no, some serious issues there. Better left to the tabloids than polite conversation."

Steve winced. Seriously as Tony treated Steve's troubles, he tossed off his own past so casually, so flippantly, like it was some sort of joke. "How can you laugh about it?"

"Oh it's about as funny as pancreatic cancer," said Tony. "But how else should I talk about it? I mean, on the one hand, I was a very willing participant, I almost always initiated everything, and I had a great time." His mouth twitched and he drew an idle finger around the rim of his glass. "I was also a minor, and usually drunk or stoned out of my head. So, you know; you be the judge."

"I know what I'd say if it was my child," said Steve.

"So do I," said Tony grimly.

Steve hesitated. "Didn't Howard do anything?"

Tony gave a short laugh and pushed off the bar. "Howard did not give a shit about the girls. The only time he got involved was when he found out I'd slept with... what the hell was his name - Ken? I think? Lucky for Ken, Ken was another wunderkind, and only sixteen at the time. So no luck for poor Howard, who had threatened to have him charged with statutory rape - this was when he was still trying to tell himself at least I wasn't a fairy on top of everything else. He never found out about Alan, or those two butch hockey players from Harvard, or the red-headed TA, or... anyway, let's leave it at: I'm not exactly a stranger to self-destructive, maladaptive reactions to psychological stress." He paused. "And we're not even touching on the self-medicating with alcohol thing, which, I know the Serum taking that venue of stress-relief out for you can be a real pain in the ass, but on the other hand take it from someone who doesn't like to think about Phil Coulson's life too closely, it's also a blessing." He swirled his ice cubes and Steve raised an eyebrow. Tony looked down at his drink with a grimace. "Yeah, the irony isn't lost on me right now. I like having a drink in my hand. Helps with stressful situations."

This was stressful?

"I'm sorry," Steve said.

"For what? It was a long time ago." He tossed back a swallow.

"I'm sorry your father was such a prick," said Steve. Tony choked on his drink.

"You know, I don't think I'm ever gonna get over your potty-mouth," he said, coughing.

"I swear when it's appropriate. Howard was a good friend. Always seemed like a decent man. Seems he reached his level of incompetence as a father."

"Well, he thought the world of you. Thought a lot more highly of you than me." He drained his glass and set it on the counter.
"Then for a genius, he was a real idiot," said Steve, and Tony's eyebrows drew together. He put a hand on Tony's arm. "He didn't know how lucky he was. He should've been a better father. And he should've stepped in and done something when you were at MIT."

"I don't think there's much he could've done by that point."

"Maybe if he'd been a better father before, you wouldn't have been acting the way you were."

"Maybe. Some kids are just trouble, though."

"He still should've cared."

Tony shrugged. "It was a long time ago. And they weren't really pedophiles - most of them were only a few years older than me. Seriously, Steve, don't look like that. It was a really long time ago." Steve shook his head and Tony covered Steve's hand with his own. "God, I've made Captain America look like a puppy needs rescuing. Did not mean to do that. The puppy's all grown up and doing fine now."

Steve stared at him, unable to process or figure out how to respond. Tony always seemed to revel in his playboy reputation, as much as Howard had. It was hard to imagine him feeling disturbed by any part of his sexual history, let alone imagine him as a troubled, vulnerable young boy, taken advantage of by his fellow students - and unable to even see it until years later.

"Look, I should finish this thing up before movie time," said Tony, gesturing to his work table. "Do you want to maybe wait for me? Get yourself a little more squared away with that part of my sordid past, which does not bother me at all any more but seems to have thrown you for a bit of a loop?"

"Sure." Steve settled down on the nearest bench and watched Tony go back to work, remembering how he'd wanted to sketch him in his natural environment a few weeks ago.

He had such economy of movement, such amazing concentration as he fiddled with mechanical objects Steve could not have even named, let alone used. His brow furrowed and he murmured instructions and idle threats to his bots, who scrambled about handing him things, looking like they were having the time of their lives. He was so... incredible...

And that didn't even take into account Tony's generosity, his desire to make the world a better place, the way he cared about the people around him, however flippantly he might insist that he didn't. The way he willingly lay down on the wire, over and over, protesting the whole time that he was doing no such thing.

And Howard Stark had thought more highly of Captain America, a soldier he'd known for a few short years, than he had of his own brilliant son. At least in part because of Tony's sexual preferences, which were actually far more in line with Howard's than Steve's were.

What an idiot.

Steve wondered what Howard would've said, had he lived long enough to find out the friend he'd spent years searching for was even more bent than his own despised son. Would it have changed his mind? Or would he simply have rejected Steve, like he'd rejected Tony?

Would Howard's opinion have mattered to Steve? Or would he have been able to dismiss it, like he'd dismissed that weird church that had tweeted that "America, the Fag Nation, now has an appropriate icon to represent it," and implied that Hurricane Sandy had somehow been his fault?

They were so similar, Howard and Tony. So brilliant and mouthy, full of life and brashness and wit.
And it was a good thing Steve had never had any kind of attraction to Howard, because that would've made how he felt for Tony now incredibly awkward. It was a little odd, too, because Howard had been very much Steve's type. Once past adolescence, it had never been the handsome, beefy, muscle-bound athletes that turned Steve's head, that made him wake up hard and panting at night. It was men like the dark-haired Stark Lab tech, or the handsome chopper pilot who often flew the Commandos out for missions, or the lieutenant who was Colonel Phillips' aide. Men with sharp minds and skillful hands, men with a kind of aggressive competency about them, who had bright eyes and confident smiles and made Steve ache to pull them closer...

"Are you OK?" Tony's voice startled him, and he answered without thinking.

"Yeah. Thinking your dad was a jerk. And not sure if I can go out with Jillian again."

Oh. He hadn't really meant to say that last part out loud.

Silence. "Um. OK. Why not?" Tony was staring at Steve, ignoring the wrench Dum-E was holding out to him.

Steve shrugged. "Not sure it felt... right."

Dum-E poked Tony, who gently elbowed him away without breaking eye contact.

"You'll notice I'm not saying anything," said Tony finally. "I'm shutting up and respecting the hell out of your choices so hard I'm practically imploding here."

Steve got up and approached Tony's table, stepping around Dum-E. This was the kind of man he'd always been drawn to, in a way he'd never been drawn to any woman - not Jillian, not Beth, not even Peggy. And he'd never been attracted to any of those other men - not the lab tech, not the pilot, not any of them - as strongly as he was to Tony.

It wasn't just physical attraction, either. It was caring, it was friendship, it was a desire to go back in time and protect Tony from the students who'd only seen him as a good time and not a troubled child - a desire to go back in time and shake Howard senseless for not giving a shit about his amazing son, who had deserved so much more...

"Seriously not saying anything," Tony repeated faintly. He cleared his throat. "Didn't feel right?"

Steve swallowed hard and shook his head, his heart beating a little faster.

"What does feel right?" Tony asked quietly, looking up at Steve. "Or is that a stupid question?"

Steve chuckled, and leaned closer, a shiver passing through him as Tony's eyes darkened with desire. OK, so they weren't a couple, and Steve was looking for long-term commitment, and Tony wasn't. What the hell.

He reached for Tony as Tony stood up, and their lips met. Dum-E made a whirring sound and nudged Steve, and Tony reached out blindly and shoved the bot away, breaking their kiss only long enough to firmly say, "Dum-E. Go to your corner, and if you spray us with fire retardant I will turn you into an iPad."

Steve laughed, taking Tony's lips with his again, slow fire sweeping under his skin. He pushed all thoughts away, and concentrated on Tony's mouth, the hard line of his arms, the strength in his hands. Tony's scent subtly mingled with motor oil, Tony's taste subtly mingled with scotch.

This felt so damn right. Jillian was companionship and making do. Tony was joy and sex, friendship
and desire. What he wanted and needed, so much it made him dizzy, and the hell with the rest of the world thinking otherwise.

"We're gonna have to go upstairs soon," Tony gasped, breaking off a kiss. "You know that, right? Thor's all excited about starting Chariots of Fire tonight, even though I told him it has nothing to do with chariots - or fire--"

"Nobody's gonna come get us till at least seven," Steve whispered into Tony's mouth.

"JARVIS, let me know if anybody's coming to this floor."

"Certainly, sir."

Maybe this was sinful and counterproductive, and maybe Steve wasn't thinking right, and maybe he was thinking more clearly than he had since he'd woken up. He pulled Tony closer, and let go of his doubts.

For this moment in time, at least.

2.

December 27

And where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within, said the earnest athlete on the screen to his spellbound audience.

Natasha smiled at the wondering expressions on the crowd, and popped a salsa-laden chip into her mouth. Not that different from the crowds that gathered around some of the Avengers after a few of their battles...

"Did you know that the actor who played Eric Liddle was gay?" said Clint, and Bruce nodded.

"Really?" asked Tony.

"Yeah. And there's a scene later on, where he's with his American rival - less than ten years after Chariots of Fire, all three actors on the screen had died of AIDS. Well - OK, Brad Davis didn't die of AIDS, strictly speaking; he OD'd. But it was because he was dying of AIDS."

"I thought it was treatable," said Steve.

"Wasn't back then," said Tony. "It's part of why I toned down the drugs-and-party scene. AIDS didn't give a crap how rich or famous you were. Was Brad Davis gay too?"

"Well his widow said he got infected from sharing needles, but apparently he was bi as well, so who knows," said Clint.

"Clint, since when did you become the repository of lore for all things gay?" asked Natasha.

"Since our own token LGBT team-mates can't be bothered to know any of this on their own," Clint shot back. Steve snorted into his beer. "Somebody's gotta."

"Uh... thanks?" said Steve.

"No problem," said Clint generously. "My pleasure. Any time you need to know anything, just ask me."
"God, Hawkeye as Professor of Queer Studies," said Tony. "Steve, please, stick to Google."

"I'm keeping off the internet right now, thanks," said Steve, and Natasha winced.

Although almost all of the reaction to Steve coming out had been positive, there had been a few virulently negative clips, posts, and other bits of media that had been hard to avoid seeing. While "All these beautiful women in the world and this guy wants to mess with other guys?" from a random athlete had been relatively harmless, there had been a sportscaster who'd claimed that the man who represented America should not be "living in unrepentant sin and walking in open rebellion to God." And a preacher who had immediately proclaimed that Steve had "tainted the shield that meant so much to our country", and could no longer call himself a Christian. And a bunch of rather unhinged e-mails to SHIELD about Steve - Steve! - contributing to the moral decay of the nation.

Tony shot Steve a sympathetic look. "Good. Some of what's out there is like looking at maggots: all it can do is make you sick. They're just pissed that a gay guy is a better man than any of them'll ever be."

Natasha met Clint's eyes in amusement and turned back to the screen, realizing she'd lost track of the plot at some point. It wasn't the movie's fault, though watching people train for what was in fact just a sports event wasn't her first choice of entertainment. And it wasn't because the movie had been interrupted by several days, as Thor took Jane to Asgard for a few weeks, Bruce reconnected with an old college friend, and Clint and Natasha got called for a mission in Reno. It was just that everything felt a little unreal right now, a little hard to grasp.

After all these months of intrigue and wondering, of suspicious changes going on at SHIELD, of feeling currents under the surface... it was over. Because waiting for them upon their return to the Tower had been holiday cards from SHIELD; the same generic thing as every year... signed by Director Maria Hill.

That was that, then. Fury was out, nobody could find the man, Hill was in command... it was over. Natasha and Clint had headed for SHIELD right away, debriefing as quickly as possible and then spending the rest of the day trying to figure out what the hell had happened. All anyone could tell them was that there had been a sudden flurry of meetings starting two days before Christmas, that raised voices had been heard between Fury and Hill, and that suddenly Fury was gone.

The man was SHIELD, to Natasha. Had been for so long it was impossible to think of the place without him. Especially with Maria Hill, Bureaucrat Extraordinaire, in charge.

And there were so many loose ends. Natasha didn't even know if Fury had done anything about the possible computer surveillance, and wasn't sure she wanted to bring it up with Hill - no, that wasn't true. She did, and she would; just because Fury wasn't there didn't mean she should let the organization that had given her a home go down to possible cyber-sabotage. But knowing Hill, she would most probably focus on the fact that they'd found that surveillance because Steve was accessing the Omega Level servers when he wasn't supposed to, and...

Happy Holidays, Director Hill, my ass. Must've been a hell of a Christmas present for Hill. One she didn't deserve, and most probably could not handle.

Damn it all. Damn Hill, damn Fury for disappearing without a trace, damn SHIELD for suddenly turning upside down, damn herself and Clint for being legendary spies and assassins who couldn't even figure out what was happening on their own turf, much less agree on where the hell to go from here...

Somehow it had still managed to be a decent Christmas for Natasha, much to her shock considering
everything. Reno had been chips and beer in a cheap motel on the Eve and Day, but Tony had put on a surprisingly homey dinner on the 26th, and none of them seemed particularly hung up on dates anyway. And none of them had done elaborate gifts or decorating, but it was still nice to have friends to celebrate with, a day late or not. Friends who weren't off celebrating with their real family; except for Thor, not one of them had living parents. Tony, who'd lost his parents at age twenty, was the one who'd had them longest, and from what Natasha remembered of his file that hadn't necessarily been a good thing.

It probably wasn't a coincidence that all of these orphans had ended up together.

"Hey what year was this set, anyway?" asked Clint. "Steve, weren't you alive when this was going on?"

"1924. I would've been six."

"So, no memories of it?"

Steve laughed. "No. I remember the Games in '36, in Berlin, and Hitler refusing to shake Jesse Owens' hand on the newsreels. That was amazing." He smiled nostalgically.

"Ever go to any Olympics?" asked Tony.

"When I was an orphan and then a starving art student? Or when they were cancelled during the War? Uh, no."

Tony frowned. "I'll take you to the next ones," he said. "We'll all go," he added. "It'll be a team thing."

Clint met Natasha's gaze and rolled his eyes.

"That's very generous of you, Tony," said Bruce, covering a smile. "You do know the next Winter Games are in Russia and the Summer ones in Rio, right?"

Tony dismissed that with a wave of his hand, and they turned their attention back to the screen.

"Wait - why was Harold Abraham's funeral at a church?" asked Steve suddenly.

"What?"

"The whole movie begins with Abraham's funeral. It was at a church. Not a synagogue."

"Was it?" asked Clint.

"Yeah, it was," said Bruce. "He converted."

Steve's eyebrows shot up. "You're kidding. After all that fuss about him being Jewish, he converted?"

Yes, and after all that fuss about you and Tony not being a couple, here you are, eye-fucking each other every chance you get, Natasha wanted to say, but really, it wasn't comparable or appropriate. The two were sitting apart, but fooling exactly no one. It was kind of cute, in a pathetic way.

And it wasn't really that big a surprise, either. Once Natasha had decided conclusively to not respect her team-mates' privacy or allow Thor, of all people, to out-spy her, the signs of attraction and confusion between Steve and Tony had come in loud and clear. Starting with Tony's tirade on the day of the press conference.
"So, what do you think?" Clint had asked the day after Tony had come back from Broxton. "Friends with benefits?"

"They've probably convinced themselves it's something like that," said Natasha.

"Self-deception is cute, isn't it? And speaking of, you think Steve still has his V-card?"

"Clint, we're not going there," Natasha had groaned.

"Hey, I agreed I was wrong to tell you not to spy at home."

"This isn't spying, it's prying."

Clint shrugged. "Same difference. Work out your fine ethical lines on your own time. Do you think you get separate V-cards for men and women?"

"I... what?"

"Or hey, what about separate ones for pitching and catching?" Clint had gone on, ignoring her pained look. "And if you've pitched with a girl, could you still consider yourself a virgin with men if you're not planning on catching?"

"Does anybody mind pausing to restock?" asked Bruce, startling her back to the present. She glanced at the screen, where the athletes had just arrived at the Olympic games.

"No, might as well," said Clint. They headed into the kitchen en masse, bringing in empty bowls and glasses and refilling them.

"Oh - we're out of chips," said Bruce.

"I think there's some in the pantry," said Steve, heading off.

"We're low on dips too," said Tony, and followed him. Bruce caught Natasha's glance, biting back a smile.

Natasha drained her drink, waited a few beats before heading down the hall to the pantry, and smirked as she caught a faint vibration from the wine cellar door.

The wine cellar. No reason for either of them to go there; the team didn't do wine with movies. Natasha wondered if Tony had bothered to think of an excuse to use in case anyone followed them to the pantry and didn't find them there. Probably not; they weren't exactly being secretive, just discreet. Or rather, what passed for discreet for them. She silently pushed open the door a crack.

And there they were. Hadn't even bothered to tell JARVIS to warn them if anyone was coming, apparently. Natasha paused for a moment, admiring the two men fully absorbed in each other in the small room. They both qualified as eye-candy on their own; together, they were very hot. Steve had his head thrown back against the wall, eyes closed, as Tony nibbled on his throat and whispered some comment that made Steve laugh breathlessly, and now Steve was putting a hand to the back of Tony's neck and pulling him in for a kiss, and now it was actually not so much hot as it was... surprisingly sweet.

...and staying here probably went over one of those fine ethical lines she kept meaning to figure out one of these days.

"Enjoying the view, Nat?" Clint murmured into her ear, and Natasha smiled.
"Probably for longer than I should have," she murmured back, then cleared her throat loudly and pushed the door fully open, smirking as Tony and Steve jumped apart. "Did you find the chips you were looking for?"

Steve's face flushed alarmingly, which was no surprise at all. Tony's cheeks going a little rosy definitely was.

"Ah, yeah, Pringles Cabernet Sauvignon 2012, a very good year," said Tony, striving for a casual air. "And you? Got lost on the way to the can?"

"So what happened to 'not a couple'?" Clint asked innocently. Steve gave a soft groan and covered his eyes. "Dude. Relax. We don't give a shit," said Clint, and Steve looked at him, embarrassment warring with relief. "Seriously. Just thought we'd let you know you didn't have to sneak around - and we'd really prefer if you don't try, since you're both crap at it."

Steve blushed again. "Uh. OK. Thanks." He cleared his throat. "We - we really weren't, before, you know," he blurted after a moment. "When I said that--"

"Oh don't worry, we believe you," said Natasha. "Based on the last few days, if you had been, we would have figured it out, no matter how many times Clint said we shouldn't bring work home." She gave the bottles a cursory glance. "You have some decent Rieslings. Maybe bring one back with you to apologize for nauseating the team with your... subtlety."

"Does everybody know?" Steve looked appalled. "Other than Thor?"

Clint snorted. "Dude, Thor knew before any of us. No, don't even try to figure that one out."

"Just bring out the nice wine, stop trying to be subtle, and come back to finish the movie," said Natasha.

She smiled at them and headed back, and they settled in to watch as the fierce rivalry between idealistic, earnest blond Liddle and driven, almost amoral dark-haired Abraham evolved into mutual respect. And the movie ended with them somehow not falling into bed together.

Which was kind of a pity.

3.

December 30

Hill and Sorensen had both looked like they wanted to object when Steve had shown up with Bruce at the Command vehicle when the team was called out. Steve had ignored them and reached for a communicator.

"I'm not sure - you aren't part of operations," said Sorensen. "I realize the former Director indulged your wish to stay involved, but--"

"Captain, we're on frequency 616," Hill had said brusquely. "Have a seat." Sorensen pressed his lips together and turned back to his screens, turning his back on Bruce and Steve.

On the screens, two building-sized, blue, vaguely bear-shaped behemoths raged, flinging cars and snow-covered trees at the team. Tony was zipping along between them and blasting away, Thor dodging projectiles and calling down lightning strikes, Natasha staying out of the way and sniping whenever possible, Hawkeye perched on top of a building and sending explosive arrows at them.
"Iron Man, this isn't having much effect," said Sorensen.

"Thanks, Agent Obvious. Get off the comms."

"That would go against protocol. And I am warning you now: if you try to block me again, SHIELD will withdraw from the area," said Sorensen.

Steve started. "What the--"

"We will not," said Hill calmly. "We will, however, ignore your team and send our own people in to deal with this threat."

"Regular SHIELD agents? Facing those things?" Clint exclaimed.

"Your choice, Iron Man," said Hill.

"We're gonna have to have words later, Maria," said Tony.

"Iron Man! Behind you!" Clint's voice came over the comm, and there was an explosion.

"Thanks, Hawkeye. Widow, any luck finding an Achilles heel down there?"

"Not so far."

"Hawkeye?"

"Barely making a dent here, even with explosive tips," said Clint. "I think I'm just annoying them."

"Well, keep annoying them," said Tony. "The more you annoy them, the less they smash stuff."

"The big guy is really vicious," said Clint. "The little brother's more like he's playing."

"Sister," Tony grunted, blasting the big one.

"Sister?"

"Breasts."

"Thought those were pecs."

"Trust the Man of Iron to know the difference," said Thor.

"Breasts," Tony repeated. "Though I much prefer them perkier, less blue, and smaller than me."

"They are a bit hulky, aren't they?" said Natasha.

"Speaking of the Hulk, you think we could set these kids up?" said Tony.

Bruce grimaced. "You think the Other Guy might be useful?"

"The Man of Iron and I are wearing them down, but there is a great deal of destruction in the meantime," said Thor. "Perhaps your monster could engage one of them."

"Is the area cleared of civilians?" Steve asked.

Hill nodded. Bruce sighed, his expression resigned, and put down his comm.
"Iron Man, watch out for this weird... stuff they're spitting out every so often," said Clint. "Looks like acid or something."

Steve squinted at one of the screens. One of the walls behind seemed kind of... partially melted. "Can we get stronger resolution on that screen?" he asked one of the techs, who began fiddling with her instruments.

"OK, I'm gonna engage Big Blue," said Tony. "Bruce, you come in and deal with Little Blue. Thor's gonna keep calling down thunder strikes on them both at random, seems to piss them off. Hawkeye and Widow, keep harassing them whenever you get a shot."

"No problem, Iron Man," said Clint. "Are you-- SHIT!"

There were sudden exclamations on the comms from Natasha and Thor, but nothing from Tony. Steve sprang to his feet as they all crowded Sorensen's screens, one of which held an image of Big Blue crouching over something. No Tony in sight.

"Iron Man is down, repeat, Iron Man is down," Clint was saying urgently, and Bruce headed out the door at a run. "Got swatted in the head and spat on, I think whatever that thing was just burned its way right through the arm of his suit - Widow, back off, they'll spit at you too--"

"Iron Man!" Natasha yelled. "Iron Man, respond please - he's not answering, can't tell if he's just down or unconscious or--"

Steve headed out the door, dodging past Bruce as Bruce grew before his eyes.

"Captain Rogers!" Sorensen yelled. Steve ignored him as he raced past the emptied buildings towards the conflict, to the sound of Big Blue roaring and crashing, and oh Christ, why the hell wasn't Tony answering, was he--

Steve rounded the corner.

Oh thank God.

But damn it, this still wasn't good. Tony was kneeling, one arm smoking, looking up at Big Blue and blasting it, but his blasts were erratic and Steve could tell he was going to go down soon, and the huge thing was going to spit at him again - or just try to crush him under one massive foot - the moment he let up on the blasts that were keeping it away--

The ground shook and Steve turned around. "Hulk!" he shouted, pointing when the Hulk looked over. "Smash!!"

Hulk lumbered past him, rushing towards Big Blue and crashing against it with a shuddering impact. Steve ducked under them, racing towards Tony, grabbed him around the chest, and pulled him behind a building. He put Tony down and focused on his arm, hoping the Hulk could keep Big Blue busy.

"Shit, shit, shit, that hurts," said Tony, flipping open his visor. "Holy shit. Oh fuck, fuck, fucking fuck--"

"I know. I know. Breathe," said Steve, taking in bright red, heavily blistered skin, the nauseating smell of burnt flesh and... some sort of citrusy scent? "Looks like a second degree burn--"

"It's fine," Tony grunted. "The suit took the brunt of it, I think. Holy shit that hurts."
"There's some on the helmet," said Steve, quickly removing it and pushing it away from them. "Must be what knocked out your communicator."

Tony gulped, eyes screwing shut. "Fuck." He tensed, sweat beading on his forehead. "Funny, I've been shot before, but this feels a lot worse..."

"Burns usually do." Steve examined the arm. "Without knowing what this is, you have two choices: if we leave the armor on, more of it might seep through, but if we pull it off we'll be exposing your skin to more oxygen, which could make the burning worse. Which do you want?"

Tony gaped at him. "You've got one hell of a bedside manner."

"Not a doctor. Make up your mind."

"Yank it off."

Steve grabbed the smoking edge of the armor and pulled, wincing as some of the goo smeared his hand. Tony was right, it hurt like a sonofabitch - and all he had was a line of it across his palm. Tony's entire upper arm was red and bubbling. Steve tensed, waiting for the exposure to make it all worse.

"OK, no, looks good," he said after a moment. "Now we just wait for the medics to get here." He looked at Tony, his surge of adrenaline subsiding now that Tony seemed out of immediate danger. Tony's eyes were closed again and he was panting shallowly. "Tony?"

"I gotta tell ya, this superhero thing is not as much fun as it says in the brochures. What the hell was in that?"

"I'm sure Bruce will be analysing it as soon as he wakes up," said Steve, pushing Tony's sweat-stained hair off his forehead. "Bad?"

"Jesus, I swear if you had the shield I'd be asking you to use it to chop my arm off right now." He groaned. "Fucking monster-spit. Jesus." He opened pain-hazed eyes and stared at Steve. "How the hell do you do this?"

"Have you noticed I'm not doing it?" Steve asked, and moved so that Tony was cradled in his arms, ignoring the searing pain in his own hand.

"Shit, this hurts."

"You'll be OK. Just think of something else until the medics get here." He paused, listening to the street and his almost-forgotten communicator for a moment and taking a few moments to confirm their position and a description of Tony's burns to SHIELD. "I can only hear one of those things," he told Tony once he was done, "probably Little Blue; Thor and the Hulk are about to bring him down..." and Tony really wasn't in any condition to listen to tactical information, but Steve kept talking anyway. The point was to distract Tony from the burning in his arm, keep his mind off the possibility that he could be suffering serious damage to muscles and nerves, keep him--

"Y'all all right back there?" asked a medic Steve vaguely remembered from a few months ago. Steve sat back and gently let go of Tony and she bustled past him and immediately sprayed something foamy on Tony's shoulder.

"JESUS!!" Tony yelled, his entire body spasmimg. Steve grabbed at his flailing hand.

"Believe it or not we've come across this nasty thing before, Iron Man," said the medic, her soft
Southern drawl a contrast to her brisk, rather ruthless movements. "I know the foam hurts like hell, but it's counteracting the chemicals and saving your muscles from bein' damaged permanently. Here, Captain, can you sit on him or something?" she said to Steve, taking out another bottle from her kit and shaking it. "I don't know a lotta folks who can sit still for this till the painkillers kick in and I'd rather not get this stuff on parts of him that aren't affected." Steve nodded and leaned over Tony, forcibly holding him down as Tony jerked up and cursed them both and the woman spread more foam on his arm. Steve grabbed some padding from the woman's kit and passed it to Tony, who bit down on it, barely muffling his scream as the foam interacted with the venom.

"Oh good, thank you Captain Rogers, that's done it a lot faster than I thought - here," she said, and jabbed Tony's neck with something. Tony yelped. "Don't worry," she said, smiling. "That's the good stuff, you'll feel it kick in in a moment. Sorry, I hadda counteract the venom first. You OK?"

Tony glared at her, but Steve could see the relief unknotting his muscles. He sat up and off of Tony, feeling somewhat shaky himself.

"Jesus, you SHIELD women, do they teach you neck-jabbing as a sport?" Tony muttered, eyes starting to go cloudy.

"Yup, with annual competitions," said the medic. "Points for accuracy, stealth, and painfulness of the jab." She glanced behind her and raised her voice. "Over here!" A SHIELD team swarmed over them and she started giving instructions as they loaded him onto a stretcher. "He's gonna be out in a couple minutes," she said. "Gonna need that arm looked at; pretty sure nothing's broken but I didn't wanna poke around too much while the foam was still doing its thing. All right, let's go, yeah the armor's heavy, we'll be in the 'jet soon enough, we can take it off him then..."

Steve followed them as they carried Tony into the Quinjet and headed back to SHIELD, relieved that nobody seemed to have a problem with him being there while they cared for Tony. Not that he would've left anyway.

Tony was OK. It had looked pretty scary there for a few minutes, but they'd all been hurt in missions before, and this wasn't even so bad. Granted, it was unusual for Tony to get banged up, but it had happened before, would happen again, and Steve was going to have to get used to it.

In fact, he was used to it. He'd sat next to a team-mate's bedside three times after bad injuries: twice for Clint, who had an unfortunate habit of jumping off buildings, and once for Natasha. And he'd even seen Tony hurt far worse - technically, seen him dead - in their first battle together, after he'd fallen through a hole in the sky.

Bad as that had felt, this felt far worse.

He sat next to Tony's bed, watching him sleep, the next hour passing by in a blur. Doctors coming to check on Tony ("He's fine, no permanent damage, just needs to sleep it off"). Machines whirring reassuringly. Natasha and Thor stopping by to let him know the blue things had been contained ("A glorious battle indeed!") no serious casualties, and yes, Tony's suit was being taken to the Tower. Clint dropping in to check on him ("Jesus Steve, your hand - hey can you people put some foamy stuff on Captain Rogers too? God damn Medical...")

"Please tell me nobody kissed me," was the first thing Tony croaked when he woke up, and Steve huffed a startled laugh. Tony's eyes focussed on him. He gave Steve a dopey smile. "Ooh, scratch that: please tell me somebody kissed me."

Steve darted a quick glance around the room - empty, not that Tony would've cared if it hadn't been. And really, a comment like wasn't out of character for Tony, unless possibly he woke up with Fury
"How'd it go?" Tony slurred.

"Fine. The fight was over about ten minutes after you went down--"

"To monster-goober, I know," said Tony. "The Hulk helped? He didn't get spit-dissolved?"

"He got hit, but it just seemed to make him itch. Bruce is sleeping it off right now. A couple of buildings are going to have to be condemned, but you were the worst human casualty. The blue things are in containment."

"What the hell were they?"

"That, we're still not sure about. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, and noticing you look exceptionally gorgeous right now." He blinked. "Possibly less social filtering than normal."

"Didn't know that was possible. I meant how's your right arm."

Tony glanced down. "Wow. I don't feel a thing." He poked at the mass of bandages with his uninjured arm. "Nothing. Like it doesn't belong to me." He clenched his right fist. "Doesn't seem to be affecting me much below the elbow. Weird. There's little lines of numbness, but I can feel from here..." he trailed off, poking at his arm, exploring what he could and couldn't feel. "Hey, can I go home?" he asked, just as one of the SHIELD doctors walked in.

"To be honest, there's no reason you shouldn't," said the doctor. "You're fine; no broken bones, no concussion, venom neutralised--"

"How do you know that?"

"Our medic was able to recognize the substance because it's been used by several people in the last year. It eats through metals and then goes to work on the nervous system, damaging nerves and muscles," said the doctor, checking Tony as he talked. "It's pretty nasty. We think the creatures you fought today were engineered by somebody who bought the venom from whoever created it - though whether they were designed to create it in their mouths or just had sacs surgically installed in their mouths, we don't know... all right, you're fine, you're welcome to leave whenever."

Tony immediately stood up, and Steve caught him as he swayed.

"How about you put on clothes first, OK?" he said, chuckling as he brought Tony his clothing and helped Tony put on his shirt.

By the time they were on the Quinjet, Tony was somewhat more coherent. "Damn. That was intense," he said as they finally lifted off. He cleared his throat. "Sorry, I'm not the stoic kind."

"What?"

"This happens to you all the time, and you just grit your teeth and--"

"For one thing, I've had a lot of practice," said Steve, glancing at the SHIELD pilot, who seemed to be ignoring them. "For another, you weren't with me when they had to remove those hooked darts out of my spinal cord after Albuquerque. I asked them to use reinforced straps; didn't want a repeat of the time I kicked poor Falsworth in the teeth--"
"You what?"

"He and Morita had to hold me down once while the medics were digging shrapnel out of my femur. I... didn't take it real well. Bit right through the piece of leather they gave me."

"Oh my God."

"Yeah. Bucky felt awful; he was there at the beginning, but had to leave to puke. He always felt responsible for Falsworth getting his tooth chipped. We all got used to it eventually - I got better at holding still and the men got better at handling me when I couldn't - but we never let Bucky take a turn again." He paused. Tony was looking a little green. "We should probably talk about something else."

Tony nodded queasily. "What's on tonight movie-wise? We finished Gandhi, right?"

"Finished it last night. I think tonight's Terms of Endearment."

"Ouch."

"Why?"

"Remember Clint said Kramer v. Kramer redefined the term 'tear-jerker'? It's got nothing on Terms of Endearment."

"Wow."

"Though personally I always thought Kramer v. Kramer didn't so much redefine tear-jerker as put anyone off the idea of marriage."

"It does that too," Steve agreed.

"I don't think I'm up for a movie tonight," said Tony as they landed. He looked and sounded perfectly coherent now, but tired. Steve helped him out of the jet and accompanied him up to his place.

"You don't have to--" Tony began as they reached his floor.

"Somebody should be with you in case you need anything," said Steve. They entered Tony's apartment, and headed for his washroom.

And Steve didn't mean to, he honestly didn't, he meant to just help Tony check that his dressing was on properly, reassure himself that Tony was all right and that he had the painkillers Medical had given him at easy reach... but then somehow as he was helping Tony to his bedroom, suddenly they were very close and then reaching for each other and things were getting hotter, faster than he was used to, and then they weren't just kissing any more as their hands started to wander and he pulled Tony close, feeling his erection through his pants, and then somehow he was undoing one of Tony's shirt buttons--

Tony grasped his hand. "Oh please tell me you're not just doing that for medical reasons."

Steve shook his head and nuzzled Tony's neck, unbuttoning further. Tony's hands went to Steve's own shirt, and Steve walked them back to the bed. He ran a hand down Tony's back, pulling them flush together and groaning at the friction and pressure.

"You want - oh," Tony moaned. "What do you - how far--"
Steve pulled Tony's shirt from his pants. "I don't want to - I mean, I don't want to go all the way, but... I mean, I--"

"You don't want penetrative sex, but frottage or possibly mutual masturbation or intercrural might be OK." Pause. His eyes crinkled at the corners. "Do I need to get JARVIS to translate?"

"If I run into any terms I don't know, I'll ask him," Steve said breathlessly, and kissed him again. God, that felt good. He ran his hands through Tony's hair and marvelled at its softness, moaned as Tony gently bit at his lip, and started pulling Tony to the bed.

"Holy shit," gasped Tony, "what brought this on? Not that I'm complaining, at all--"

"I thought - for a moment there, during the fight, I thought - you didn't answer, and--" Steve stopped. "Put a few things in perspective." He took Tony's lips again, caressed his face, moaned as Tony cupped the back of his neck and pulled him closer. Steve started to push Tony back down onto the bed, pausing as he remembered Tony's injuries.

"I am absolutely in my right mind, I'm not zoned out at all," said Tony, mistaking his hesitancy. "Just numb from shoulder to elbow. Trust me." He sank down, pulling Steve down with him until they were facing each other on the bed. "Yeah. God, yeah," he gasped, tossing his head back as Steve worked his way down his throat. "Yeah, God, you're, oh my God, Steve--"

"Tony," Steve moaned, hands wandering over Tony's back. He pulled them together.

"Jesus," Tony gasped, and thrust against Steve reflexively. Steve deepened their kiss till they were both breathless, and he went to move on top of Tony, then paused. He was a lot bigger than Tony, and Tony's shoulder--

"Oh, hey, you're not gonna freak out on me are you--" Tony began. Steve hitched a hip under Tony and Tony gave a slight squeak, suddenly finding himself lying on top of Steve.

"Not changing my mind," Steve laughed, parting his thighs to let Tony lie between them. "Just considering logistics." He pushed up, smiling as Tony groaned and thrust against him, then dropped his head down to bury his face in Steve's hair. "Here," Steve whispered, slipping a hand under Tony's shirt, delighting in the shiver that flew over Tony's body, Tony's fingers setting him on fire as they finished unbuttoning each other.

"OK, no, elbow feeling wobbly," said Tony, and flipped them back over. He grinned up at Steve. "You're gonna have to do all the work here, big boy."

"No problem," said Steve, and carefully drew both of their shirts off, tossing them to the side. They pressed together, bare skin against bare skin, no feeling like it in the world, and he traced Tony's muscles in wonder, smiling at Tony's whimper of delight. "I always wondered about that," he said as his fingers ghosted over the arc reactor. "It's warm."

Tony huffed a small laugh. "Yeah. Be kinda off-putting if it was a cold weight in the middle of my chest," he said. He closed his eyes and pushed up against Steve, and they panted together. Steve moved over Tony, rocking against him, hands running over his chest, his neck, groaning as Tony's hands ran over his back and they both lost themselves in each other.

"Tony, hang on, I'm not - I'm gonna--" Steve warned him suddenly and stilled. "I'm, uh, gonna come in my pants if we don't stop pretty soon--"

"I don't care," said Tony, his pupils blown. "Do you care?"
"Guess not," Steve said, and stopped talking in favour of kissing and moving together, and it was all heat and sensations and Steve had never, ever felt this, joy coursing under his fingertips, heat sparking wherever Tony touched him, his entire body tightening in anticipation as the tension grew and Tony's movements started stuttering and losing rhythm and Tony bit back a curse. And then suddenly everything was rushing through him as his body lit on fire and he welcomed the flames and heard Tony cry out and everything was a white-hot rush of pleasure and

He was gasping over Tony, tremors moving through him.

Jesus. That... had that really happened?

He heaved in a breath, felt his hips moving almost involuntarily, pushing against Tony slowly, an echo of what he'd just felt sparking through him in a wave. Tony was warm and pliant under him, panting softly, his lips still ghosting over Steve's cheek, his ear, and Steve drew a shaking hand up to Tony's hair.

"Christ," he whispered. "That was..." he gathered Tony in, brought their mouths together in a kiss, broke for air again.

"Steve?" Tony whispered back, and Steve felt a small pang at the slight uncertainty in his voice.

He drew a deep breath, wondering at the joy still zipping through him. "That was... amazing," he said quietly, wishing he had words for what he was feeling. He kissed Tony again; felt him slowly relax.

"You're OK with this?" Tony asked quietly, and Steve nodded, moving off of him and but still holding him close.

"More than OK." More OK than he'd felt in a long, long time. "Um... sticky, though," he said after a minute, glancing down.

Tony laughed. "Yeah, damn, I haven't done that since... wow," he trailed off, looking a little embarrassed. He lay back in the bed, spent and sleepy.

"Hang on," said Steve, reluctantly pushed himself up out of bed and went to the washroom to clean himself off and get a wet cloth. He returned to the bedroom and handed the cloth to Tony, who'd removed his pants and was down to underwear. "I'd like to stay in your guest room tonight. Just in case you need anything during the night."

"Steve, it's OK, you don't have to--" Tony began, cleaning himself off.

"Just returning a favor." Steve gently brushed Tony's hair off his forehead. "Close your eyes," he murmured, noting that Tony's eyelids were drooping and he seemed halfway to unconsciousness already. "I'll stay here till you're asleep."

And Tony smiled at him drowsily, before turning on his side and almost immediately dropping off, a peaceful, contented look on his face.

Chapter End Notes

1. The movies seen/mentioned are

Chariots of Fire, 1981
2. Some of the homophobic reactions? Were actually directed at Jason Collins, the first major league athlete to ever come out. The Westboro Baptist Church blamed a tornado on him, the Dolphins' Mike Wallace wondered why he wanted to "mess with other guys", and Chris Broussard from ESPN said he was openly living in unrepentant sin and open rebellion to God, and could not be characterized as a Christian.

Meh. Haters gotta hate.

3. On a totally unrelated note, I appear to be committing a Steve/Bucky. MCU, set during Captain America (movie), totally unrelated to this fic.

I'm also possibly committing a genfic, god help me. IanRogersFic, 616 and compliant up to the latest Captain America released.

I should have my head examined.

Assuming I am able to get either one beta-ready while still finishing up Not About Superheroes, would anyone be interested in betaing either of those?
Thanks so much, ClawR, holliswrites, and forest_rose, for your awesome and very thorough betadom!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1.

January 1

"I don't like it, Tasha," said Clint in a low voice, munching on the last of the chips and trying to ignore his residual queasiness. Funny, he hadn't drunk all that much last night. Fancy champagne hit him different from his regular poison, apparently.

"I don't either," said Natasha, who looked a lot fresher than Clint felt despite having consumed her weight in vodka less than twenty-four hours ago. "Although, on the surface, you have to admit not that much has changed."

Clint shot her a dark look. "Yet. Say that again after tomorrow's meeting."

"Why, what do you think Hill's going to do?" Natasha poured Clint an orange juice in an oversized green drinking glass and handed it over.

Clint slurped it down gratefully. "Order us back to the barracks, for one thing."

"The barracks were always optional," Natasha pointed out. "Why would they suddenly become mandatory?"

"Because she's Hill and she has a bug up her ass?"

Natasha poured more chips into the red, white and blue bowl Clint had just emptied. "That was Sorensen's bug."

"Because she wants to do things differently from Fury?"

Natasha gestured to Clint to put salsa into a smaller red and gold bowl. "That's a possibility. She hasn't yet, though."

"I bet she's gonna tell us we're gonna be called in for a lot more SHIELD missions." Clint finished pouring in the salsa, scraping the last of it out of the jar.

"And if we are, what's wrong with that?"

"That we won't be here for Avengers stuff."

Natasha sliced up a lime and started to squeeze juice onto the salsa. "We resented it when we had nothing else to do."
"Yeah, but it's a balancing act, and I don't think she'll care. And it won't just be skill-specific stuff, either. We're gonna be called in for more regular shit that any junior could do. I bet the team will be, too. Bank robberies and drug lords and kittens in trees."


Clint nabbed a couple of chips from under Natasha's fingers, her automatic slap stinging the back of his hand. "You know Tony's talked about breaking with SHIELD, don't you?" he said, popping the chips into his mouth. "Especially with Sorensen still being around? And Hill liking him a lot more than Fury ever did?"

Natasha gave Clint a level stare as she arranged the chips, salsa and green drinking glasses onto a thunderbolt-and-hammer-patterned tray, and Clint vaguely wondered if allowing Marketing to dump all their overstock at the Tower was really such a good idea after all. "Tell me how Tony's shoulder would be doing right now if it wasn't for SHIELD Medical's anti-venom foam."

"I'm not saying there's no benefit," Clint protested. "You know how I feel about SHIELD." Natasha nodded. "But you also know it's fucked up in a lot of ways. Especially now."

Natasha nodded again.

Clint stepped closer to the tray and lowered his voice. "Tasha... what if the rest of the team knew the truth about the nuclear strike?"

"That wasn't really SHIELD," Natasha shot back, and nobody but Clint and possibly Phil could've caught any hint of hesitation in her voice. "That was the WSC."

"Technically, it was SHIELD. It was a SHIELD pilot using SHIELD equipment, following the commands of the WSC after they'd fired Fury. Which they can do at the drop of a hat, and they've just done it again." Clint glared at her. "The only reason it didn't work was that Fury went against them, but he's gone now. And Hill went along with the cover-up."

"So did Fury," Natasha pointed out. She paused. "So did we."

Clint didn't drop his gaze. "That strike nearly killed our team-mate."

"Clint, it nearly killed all of us. We were all in Manhattan."

"And maybe we owe it to them to let them know it wasn't just sent out by some rogue pilot."

Natasha sighed, then opened her mouth to respond.

"Friends!" Thor boomed cheerfully, entering the kitchen. "Everyone is back; we are awaiting your return to continue the musical!"

Natasha gave Clint a significant 'We're not done here' look, shoved the tray at him, then turned to Thor. "Thor, it's not a musical."

"It is a movie about music," said Thor, confused, as they headed back to the movie room. "And there are frequent breaks in the narrative for music."

"Yes, but Mozart never suddenly bursts into song that's related to the plot."

"The songs are often related," Thor protested.

"The words aren't even in English," said Clint.
"This is confusing," said Thor. "Nonetheless, it is a glorious movie. Though the female singing is remarkably high and often akin to shrieking in pain."

Clint sat back down and looked over at Tony, whose shoulder was still sore, but who was looking remarkably chipper, especially for a post-party day. Probably because Steve was sitting next to him, and God the two of them were ridiculous. No nauseating displays of affection, no tonsil hockey or even hand-holding in public, but the way they were constantly on each other's radar was pretty funny to watch. Especially since they both knew that everyone knew about them now, and often blushed - or, at least Steve did - when caught staring.

It had been particularly amusing to watch them yesterday at the Maria Stark Foundation New Year's Eve party, Tony schmoozing as only he could - though, oddly, not getting drunk - and automatically flirting with every woman around, and Steve determinedly not looking in Tony's direction as he politely entertained the long line of people falling over themselves to tell him how much they admired him. And, for about half of them, how much they supported him for coming out.

He'd done the Captain America thing flawlessly, as only a veteran of endless USO tours could, accepting compliments and support with a serious, humble air that charmed everyone. Clint doubted anybody but the team could tell that he was terrifically uncomfortable - at the fawning, at being out in public, at Tony's parade of precariously covered women. The only time his calm demeanor had faltered had been when he'd realized that one particularly admiring, handsome young naval officer was in fact making a pass at him. Clint had nearly pissed himself laughing when the penny had dropped and Steve had turned brick red.

Even funnier had been Tony's barely-disguised irritation. Clint had noticed a quick succession of different drinks in his hand the whole time the poor guy was trying to pick up Steve - and really, if Clint had had that much over an entire evening, he would've been passed out cold. Tony had to have a liver made of titanium. Happily, Natasha had taken pity on Steve and, after digging a stiletto heel into Clint's toes for his lack of sympathy, had sailed in to rescue Steve from the increasingly frustrated young officer, much to Steve - and Tony's - very obvious relief.

Clint had briefly wondered what would've happened if she hadn't. If Tony would've come across Steve and the young officer getting it on, and done a replay of what Phil had referred to as the Peggy Carter Shooting Incident.

Clint had had no idea superheroes could be so lame. He tried to imagine Phil witnessing Tony Stark, suave, cocky thorn in his side, and Captain America, his childhood idol, turn into awkward eighth-graders near each other. He wasn't sure if Phil would've been mortified on their behalf, or found it all hysterical.

"I feel quite badly for this Salieri character," said Thor quietly. "It can twist a good man, to live in the shadow of another in such a manner."

"Actually, I heard there's no real proof that Salieri felt that way about Mozart," said Bruce.

"No?"

"No. Except for a few rumors, there's a lot of evidence that Mozart and Salieri were friends, and that Mozart respected Salieri as a musician."

"They besmirched the name of a real person for the sake of entertainment?" Thor asked, faintly scandalized.

"Oh, don't even get me started on that," said Bruce. "The movie industry does that all the time."
"Mel Gibson's especially good at it," said Clint. "Cracked.com calls it 'Gibson Takes Another Dump on History.' And from what I've heard of some of this year's movies..."

"There are some very good candidates for Mel Gibson Awards this year," Bruce agreed. "We'll see once the nominees are announced."

Thor frowned. "Jane's assistant, Darcy, told me I would enjoy this movie. I wonder if she knew it was filled with untruths."

"How is Darcy doing, anyway?" asked Clint.

"She is doing well. Although Jane does not approve of the young man she is currently bedding. She has termed him 'creepy.'"

Clint laughed. "I don't think Jane needs to worry about her. If she can defend herself against you, big guy, she can defend herself against any nerd out there."

"Defend herself against Thor?" Steve asked, puzzled.

"When I first met my Jane, there were a few... misunderstandings. I did not fare well."

"Darcy tazed him," said Clint.

"Aye, she did," said Thor fondly.

"There's not a lot of guys who'd smile at a memory like that," Bruce chuckled.

Steve gave a short laugh.

"What?" asked Natasha.

Steve hesitated, glancing at Tony, then shrugged. "Peggy shot me once."

"Seriously?" asked Bruce.

"So that was true," said Tony, chuckling. "Dad told me the story, but I always wondered. Did she really catch you kissing another girl?"

"Actually, it was the other girl kissing me," Steve pointed out. "And I was holding the shield when she shot me."

"Dad said it was one of the funniest things he'd ever seen." He gazed at Steve, whose smile had turned thoughtful. "What is it?" he asked, his voice low. Steve shook his head. "Steve."

Steve shrugged. "Got a late Christmas card from Peggy's niece in the mail this morning," he said, his voice carefully neutral. "Had a picture of her whole family." He turned back to the screen. Tony's eyebrows went up and he opened his mouth, then closed it.

Bruce leaned over slightly and gave Tony a small shove. Tony blinked at him. Bruce made a subtle movement towards Steve, and Tony reddened. He reached out hesitantly and touched Steve's hand. Steve gave him a small smile, covered Tony's hand with his own briefly, and they both turned back to the screen.

Had Clint thought they were awkward eighth-graders? Make that fifth-graders. Clint rolled his eyes and turned back to the movie.
Steve didn't exactly have the flair of an interior decorator, thought Tony, but he had an artist's eye. His place was lightly furnished, mostly in pale woods, with plenty of bookshelves, a few comfortable couches, a large-screen TV, an old-fashioned radio. Tony had been here a few times, and was always struck by how simultaneously old-fashioned and modern it looked. Kind of like Steve himself.

"Steve?" he called out.

"Studio," Steve's voice came back, and Tony made his way through the apartment, surprised that Steve had allowed JARVIS to just let him in instead of greeting him at the door, as he usually did when people came to visit him. Now he glanced around the studio curiously. Funny, he thought of Steve as primarily a pencil and occasional pen-and-ink sketchbook guy, but there were also plenty of charcoals, oils, and even a few watercolors. A few items were in frames - landscapes, a sketch of grease-stained, strong-looking hands - the rest haphazardly strewn around the room in various states of completion, on easels and table surfaces. In sharp contrast, the paints, brushes, inks and pencils themselves were neatly stored.

Steve was at a chair by the window, a sketchbook on his lap, a stone bridge arching over a river taking shape on the cream-colored page in stark black lines.

"You OK? Didn't see you at the gym today."

"Went for a run instead," said Steve.

"Hey, are you coming to the common floor? Clint and Natasha are away, and Bruce said he wasn't sure about movie night. We're supposed to be starting Out of Africa."

"Not really in the mood for a movie tonight," said Steve, dipping his pen in the inkwell and scratching out a few more lines. Tony approached and glanced over his shoulder. A series of perspective drawings of a train graced the page, all unfinished.

"You OK?" Tony repeated.

"Yeah, just tired. Didn't sleep well last night."

Tony looked him over. His eyes were slightly reddened, his face unshaven. He wondered if Steve had slept at all.

"New Year's Blues?"

"What?"

"A lot of people feel a bit let down after the holidays are over," he said. "Especially if they're welcomed back to work the way we were a couple of days ago."

Steve shrugged. "You can't say it was a surprise. Hill's always made it clear she's more of a stickler--"

"Happy New Year, let me bitch at you over paperwork and comms protocol for an hour? You're OK with that?"
"I expected worse. And it was forty-five minutes."

Tony frowned. Count on Steve to minimize anything negative. "You have to admit, after Fury, Hill is... OK, was it just me, or did she remind you of the line, 'I speak for all the mediocrities in the world' to a disturbing degree?"

Steve frowned at him reprovingly. "She's not that bad. And I thought you didn't like Fury anyway."

"No, but I respected him." Steve snorted cynically. "Steve. She put a stop to your training program."

"She said it was temporary."

"You believe that?"

Steve shrugged again. Tony looked around, glancing at the pen-and-ink sketches strewn on the drawing table. Movie scenes Tony vaguely recognized, still life drawings from inside Steve's apartment, his old radio - nothing from the modern outside world.

"I've been rethinking Analysis and Strategy anyway," Steve said.


Steve shrugged, the light scratches of his pen sounding loud in the quiet studio. "I do, just... I've been rethinking some stuff."

Tony carefully picked up one of the pen-and-ink pages. A young woman's face, familiar somehow; dark eyes shining, hair falling in waves.

Steve glanced over and saw what Tony was looking at. "She's ninety-three now," he said softly. "Her birthday's April 9th." Tony examined the picture more closely, noting delicate lines drawn on the corners of the eyes, faint tracery over her forehead. An attempt at softening the jawline.

"Peggy?"

Steve nodded. "Bucky's birthday's September 7th. He would've been ninety-four." He put down his pen and paper and put his elbows on the windowsill, leaning his forehead against the window.

Tony waited for a long moment. "Steve?"

Steve stared sightlessly at the snow-covered city below. "Nothing's wrong. Nothing new, anyway."

"Then why do you look like 'didn't sleep well' is Stevese for 'didn't sleep at all'?"

Steve chewed on his lip. "Am I ever gonna stop missing them?" he finally asked, his voice low. "Am I ever gonna stop wishing I was back home, where things make sense?"

"I don't know," said Tony helplessly, briefly wishing he could check out of this and call someone who knew what they were doing. But the first time Steve had come to him in serious trouble, he'd panicked and handed him off to other people - for Steve's own good, he'd thought - and it had been a disaster. That wasn't going to happen again. Whether whatever was going on right now was big or small, Tony wasn't going to flake out again. He came closer and put a hand on Steve's shoulder, startled as Steve relaxed against him.

Steve closed his eyes. "It hurts, damn it. Hurts all the time. Some days I can almost forget, and then something happens and it hits me, again..." He breathed deeply. "They're never coming back. Nobody I knew is ever going to come back, none of them. I'm never gonna go home. God, I wish I
could get drunk."

"I'm sorry," said Tony.

"It's been over a year," Steve pointed out bleakly. "Shouldn't I be over this?"

"'Over' losing everyone you ever knew? I'm not sure it works that way."

Steve opened his eyes and stared out the window. "I miss Bucky."

"I know, babe."

"Miss all of them. Feels like a hole in my chest sometimes."

"I know." Tony stepped closer, bending slightly to wrap his arms around Steve and resting his chin on Steve's shoulder. He gazed out the window. "I wish... I wish I could help."

Steve shook his head. "Unless there's something you can do to make me stop thinking about them, I don't think you can. There's nothing that can just turn off my brain." He paused. "This is where other people turn to booze or drugs, I think."

Tony gave him a sideways glance. "Turning off higher brain function? I have some pretty inappropriate ideas."

"Like what?"

Tony lifted an eyebrow. Steve's mouth quirked slightly. "I don't think it works that way."

"No way to know if you don't give it a try," said Tony. Steve huffed a small laugh. "And I... probably sound like I'm not taking this seriously enough. I do, don't I. You can shut me up any time."

"What, so I can keep brooding? No thanks."

Tony let go of him and moved beside him, bending down to press their lips together gently. Steve returned the kiss with a small sigh, and Tony put a hand to his cheek, stroking the lightly stubbled surface, feeling Steve start to relax.

He tugged Steve's chair away from the window a bit and waited as Steve covered his inkwell and pushed the small art table out of the way. Tony joined him on the chair, straddling him, gently nibbling at his lips, drawing on everything he'd ever learned about how to please a partner, all the things he'd tried on Steve and catalogued as successful. All the touches to Steve's body that made him tremble and gasp: soft bites on the side of his neck, a tongue in the hollow of his throat, a flick of a thumb against his nipples. And now Steve wasn't just passively going along with it any more - he was starting to breathe faster, his eyes growing dark with desire instead of sorrow, and Tony's own pulse was quickening. Steve hesitated, and Tony's heart skipped a beat as Steve's hand slipped down and cupped him through his pants. He groaned and pushed into Steve's warm palm, itching to have him slip a hand inside his clothes, because God, frotting against him the day he'd been injured had been amazing, but they'd shared nothing but occasional kisses since then and he wanted, needed, Steve's hand on his bare skin - and then Steve squeezed tentatively and Tony groaned.

"There, see?" he whispered into Steve's neck, moving his own hands down to Steve's waist. "Told you I could help you out."

Steve went still, then let out his breath and dropped his hand.
Tony nearly whimpered at the loss. "What? Why--"

"I... I'm sorry," Steve said quietly, kissing him gently before shifting back a bit.

"What? Why?" asked Tony, totally lost.

"This... isn't right. I shouldn't--"

"Wait, hang on, hang on." Tony made himself logic it out, never mind that his pants were about to catch on fire and Steve's chest was still heaving and his lips were parted and this wasn't what Tony wanted to be doing at all. "You... you're feeling bad about this? What we're doing?"

"You don't have to--"

Tony shook his head, mouth rattling ahead of himself. "Right, so you think that because I've just pointed out that this is going to help you feel better, it must be bad somehow. God, spare me Catholic guilt."

"Not Catholic."

Tony waved that off. "First off, sex is supposed to stop your brain, genius. Second, listen, compared to drugs and alcohol, which you can't have, the idea of you using sex - more to the point, sex with me - to deal with your demons is the most awesome thing in the world, and I can't tell you what kind of powerful sex god I feel like, knowing that me and my dick help you actually enjoy the twenty-first century. I haven't felt this proud since I finally got Dum-E to make a perfect sloe gin fizz and that sounds less impressive than I mean it to so I'll go for my second-proudest moment, the first time I got JARVIS to recite a dirty limerick, I can tell this is not reaching you so let's just say I'm thrilled, OK? I'm thrilled. I want this. You were really getting into this, a few minutes ago, before I ran off at the mouth, and I'd really like us to get back to that."

Dude, your cock heals Captain America's psychological wounds, he could just hear Clint saying in his mind, and it was a measure of how bizarre his life was that apparently now he had an internal Clint Barton narrator. Particularly at a moment like this.

"Steve. Just go with it," he said. Steve shifted closer hesitantly, and Tony took his hand and brought it to the front of his pants again. "Now. Where were we?" Steve paused and Tony gulped as he tentatively moved his hand and all of Tony's blood went rushing downward. "Oh good," he said faintly, closing his eyes. "I was really enjoying this part. I promise, no more talking. I'll put my mouth to much better use."

Steve gave a short laugh and pulled him closer, pressing a kiss to the side of Tony's neck before tugging his shirt out of his pants and Tony sure as hell didn't need any convincing as he drew the shirt up and over his head, and then tugged off Steve's, and damn, if he hadn't gone stupid and talked, they might have reached the pants-off stage by now, but it was probably going to take Steve a while to--

"Oh wow," he said, feeling a little light-headed as Steve tugged on Tony's belt. "I am so very much in favor of that," he murmured. Steve snickered. He started to work on Steve's belt and fly, reaching inside as soon as they were loose.

"Oh, fuck," Steve gasped, throwing his head back as Tony wrapped a hand around him. "Jesus, oh, fuck." He bucked into Tony's hand, once, twice, then grasped Tony's hand and held him still.

"Tony?"

"Yeah?" His voice was hoarse.
"I - I want..." Steve suddenly shifted forward, standing and lifting Tony with him, and Tony grabbed his shoulders to steady himself and then put his feet on the floor. Steve gave him a hard kiss and pulled his pants up slightly, then started to move them to the bedroom.

Oh, fucking awesome. Tony stumbled in his haste, thanking his own foresight for putting the studio right next to the bedroom, and then they were tumbling onto the bed and Steve was starting to draw his pants down, and Tony didn't remember the last time he'd moved so fast, getting rid of all of their remaining clothing in record time, and then they were both gloriously naked and in bed together. And somehow Tony hadn't imagined this before, just how much incredible, smooth, muscled skin there would be at his fingertips, how Steve's chest would heave and his neck arch back as Tony mouthed along it. How Steve would rock into his grip, eyes squeezing shut, and then take a deep breath and shyly grasp Tony's length.

"Just do whatever you do to yourself," Tony murmured reassuringly. Steve's hand was warm and large, his grip quickly growing firmer and more confident, and Tony could feel himself coming undone, both of them giving each other everything they had, hands stroking, mouths melting together, Steve's panting breaths coming faster and faster as he tangled his legs with Tony's and held him close, small cries dropping from their lips--

This wasn't just about sex for Steve, Tony knew. This was about oblivion, this was about satiating hunger and turning off the voices that cried grief, and loss, and homesickness and loneliness, drowning them in sensation and desire and heat. He pressed against Steve and gave back as good as he got, determined to not allow a single moment of doubt or shame, determined to overwhelm Steve with everything he had.

"Oh God, God, Tony--" Steve whispered, and suddenly tensed, burying his head in Tony's shoulder, shudders passing through him. Tony felt wet warmth cover his hand and stomach, and his own climax rushed through him in a wave, spilling over Steve's fingers as shivers of intense pleasure broke over him.

He slowly wiped his hand on the bed and drew Steve close. They lay together quietly, coming down from the high, until Steve stirred himself slightly as if to move off the bed. Tony stilled him with a touch, grabbed a corner of the sheet, and wiped them both off, tugging him back down.

"Do you want me to go?" he asked.

Steve thought for a moment. "No."

"Good."

"I... thanks," Steve said quietly.

"For what? Staying? Or... this?"

Steve gave him a small smile. "What are friends for, right?"

Tony smiled back. "Any time," he said. Steve snorted. "OK, not any time. Might get awkward if you're feeling down during a movie, or a meeting with Hill." Tony paused, then pushed ahead. "Steve, was this really just a bad day?"

Steve gave him a wry smile.

"Bruce mentioned you had a bit of a panic attack the other day," Tony said cautiously. "Said it was over pretty quick, but..."
Steve rolled onto his back and sighed. "I'm... feeling better. Mostly. It's just been a rough few days. Haven't been sleeping too well." He drew up one leg, clasping his hands around his knee. "Dr. Sanjay said I should try again, with SHIELD Medical - not constant testing like before, but maybe go back on some of the things they tried that helped."

Tony turned onto his side. "And you said?"

"They almost all had pretty bad side effects."

"Yeah, but I don't think you stayed on anything long enough to figure out how to deal with them. It was almost like they were just throwing anything at you to see what stuck."

Steve ran a hand down to his anklet, fiddling with it absently. "There's one that really helped with the panic attacks. I've thought of trying it again."

Tony idly ran a hand down Steve's chest. "Why don't you?"

"Um. It." Steve cleared his throat. "It made things a little rough." He cleared his throat again. "Sexually."

"What?"

"I told you there was one medication that made me want to have sex all the time."

"This is bad?" He circled Steve's nipple.

Steve squirmed. "My libido's already high enough, thanks."

"And I appreciate that intensely, you really need to know that," said Tony earnestly. Steve snickered. "Although... just how high - I mean, you said your metabolism burns four times a normal person's, but--"

Steve chuckled. "It's not really that my sex drive's four times yours - or anybody else's. It's more like I've got the drive of a... teenager. Kinda. Except I'm not actually fifteen. The mind is a little more advanced."

Tony was silent for a moment. "Add to that the fact that you are in your twenties and pretty new to sex in general," he said with a grimace, "and I'm feeling a little skeevy right now." He picked his hand off of Steve's chest with exaggerated care. "I've entered dirty old man territory. Which makes you my boy toy. Ew."

There was another silence. "Would it help at all if I pointed out that I'm actually ninety-four years old?" Steve said, clearly trying to suppress laughter.

"Yeah, no, that just reminds me that you were also a friend of my dad's. I hear Reed Richard's doing some work on memory alteration these days. Think I'm gonna go look him up, so I never have to remember any of this conversation ever again."

Steve laughed and tugged on his hand and Tony leaned over him to kiss him, gratefully considering the subject dropped. They shared a few slow kisses before Tony drew back. "Seriously, Steve, if Dr. Sanjay says you should try those meds again, I say go for it. And I just realized that sounds pretty self-serving considering I might benefit from the side effects."

Steve shook his head, amused.
"Hey, you know I'm up for it, any time you want."

Steve sighed.

Tony gazed at him, running his hand lightly down Steve's bent leg. "You still think there's something wrong with this, don't you?"

Steve looked away. "I can't explain it to you, Tony."

"Try."

"Just because you want something, doesn't mean you should have it." He paused. "You want alcohol a lot. And you know that's not always a good thing."

"Alcohol can be destructive."

"So can sex," Steve pointed out.

"Not between two consenting adults," Tony shot back.

"The Bible says otherwise. A lot of people say otherwise."

"A lot of people say birth control is harmful, and blacks and whites shouldn't get married. They're wrong too."

"It's not just the guy thing," said Steve patiently. "Being intimate is supposed to be something you do with the person you're going to spend the rest of your life with."

"I'm guessing friends-with-benefits isn't in the Bible?"

"Not really, no."

"So if it's not a man and a woman in their marital bed, it's wrong, is that what you're saying?"

Steve gazed at him fondly, a small smile on his face. "Tony, don't worry about it. I'm not asking you to believe what I believe. It's not your problem."

Tony glanced around the neat, sparsely-furnished, bedroom, frustrated. He stopped on a pen-and-ink drawing - it didn't look like it was Steve's work, but he'd had it framed. A cracked brick wall, with a broken-down grocery cart, somehow made beautiful in clean, spare lines of black and white.

"You're an artist, right?" he said, turning back to Steve, not knowing where this was going to go but going with it anyway. "You can find beauty in the most amazing places. Let me tell you what I see right now." He studied Steve for a moment. "Your eyes are all dark, unfocussed, like you're somewhere else right now. You don't even know how out of it you look, just totally peaceful. Not sad, or tense, or scared, just peaceful. Your eyebrows are relaxed, your hair's sticking to your forehead, your cheeks are flushed, your mouth," Tony paused, feeling his throat dry a bit from the sight of Steve's reddened lips, the bow falling gently open, the way Steve's eyes focussed on Tony's own lips, not hungry and wanting any more, but serene and still a bit dazed. "You were kissing me with that mouth just minutes ago. I can still feel you, I can still taste you." He ran his eyes down the curve of Steve's throat. "I can see marks that I made on your neck with my mouth. Your chest is still flushed from coming," he murmured. "You're just all sex and exhaustion, I can still see where the sweat made tracks on you." He gazed downwards, to where Steve's cock lay spent, nestled in sand-colored pubic hair. "Close your eyes," Tony whispered, and Steve obediently closed them. Tony drew closer and nuzzled the side of Steve's neck. "You smell like... like you and me, and sweat, and
"I can still feel your heart beating a little fast, and I know how you're feeling, it's just like after you've exercised and your body's feeling tired but good, except instead of feeling like you worked past the pain, you've also got endorphins zipping around from coming. There's nothing like it in the world. And even better when it's shared." He carded a hand through Steve's hair, and Steve tilted his head back slightly. "You made me come too. You made me feel so fucking good..." He paused.

"Steve. I don't pretend to understand anything about your God. But back when I used to believe, I always thought God was supposed to be pretty cool. Why would he make all of this, and make it feel so amazing, make you look like this, for Christ's sake, like you could get some real sleep without worrying - without missing anyone or anything... why would he invent something like this if it wasn't good? Why would he make it so two people can make each other feel so incredible, without hurting anybody else, and then tell them they're not allowed?"

Steve gazed at him, eyes still calm, still peaceful. "I don't know."

"Think about it?"

Steve nodded.

"Go to sleep, Steve," said Tony, and Steve nodded again and closed his eyes. Tony settled down next to him and ran his fingers down Steve's leg, to the knee and past, leaving a trail of goosebumps.

He stopped at the anklet. "I've been wondering..." he said, idly running his fingers under the silvery metal, making Steve twitch. "Does Dr. Sanjay think you still need this?"

Steve hummed thoughtfully. "Dunno." He thought for a moment. "I'm OK with it." He took Tony's hand in his and put his leg down, turning onto his side and facing Tony. "I'll let you know when I don't need it any more."

Tony nodded, lacing their fingers together, and closed his eyes.

3.

January 7

Serious eyes and a distracted air. Morning therapy hadn't gone well today, guessed Clint.

"You all right?" he asked Steve casually, seating himself at the common room table and surprised at how good it felt to be back, even after only a couple of days away. He tried to recall ever feeling this kind of... homecoming feeling upon returning to the barracks. He couldn't.

Steve nodded, drying some dishes and putting them away.

"How's the training program? Still on hold?"

"Yeah."

Damn it. Hill was a bitch. Steve didn't do well with idleness, with feeling useless. He'd taken to cooking in the common kitchen a lot, simple old-timey meat and potatoes with occasional experiments in Middle Eastern cuisine, of all things. Which Clint certainly appreciated, but knew wasn't nearly enough for Steve.

"What's for lunch?"

"Hey, don't knock the classics," said Clint. "Love that shit."

Steve nodded, getting out a bow-and-arrow-themed bowl and spooning Clint's lunch into it.

"Damn, that's good after days of field rations," said Clint, aware that he was probably gobbling but unable to make himself care.

"Did you just get in?"

"Yeah, about an hour ago. Nat's in Medical - nothing serious - so we're debriefing later today. Should be back by movie time."

Steve nodded, spooned some macaroni and cheese into a bowl and covered it, presumably for Natasha.

Clint slowed down a little, his hunger pangs feeling more manageable, savoring the comforting cheesy pasta. "What's on tonight, anyway?"

"Just finished Out of Africa, on to Platoon."

Clint nodded, figuring they'd probably already had the discussion of whether watching Platoon would be triggering for anybody or not.

"How was the mission?"

Clint shrugged. "Ninety-eight percent mind-numbing boredom, two percent deadly panic. Same old. Sniping a couple AIM-wannabes." Steve nodded and put away some glasses and a mug with lurid black and pink spiders all over it. Clint made a mental note to get rid of that one before Nat saw it. Damned Marketing. "You all right?" Clint asked again.

Steve ducked his head and put away the last of the cutlery.

"Therapy?" guessed Clint.

Steve sighed and leaned his elbows on the table, gazing out the window.

"Wanna talk about it?"

Steve's mouth quirked slightly. "You mean, do I want to talk about much I hate being forced to talk about things I don't wanna talk about?"

Clint winced. "I take it that's a no?"

"That's a no," said Steve.

"Sorry, dude," said Clint, filling his mouth to avoid talking.

Steve gazed out the window, absently pushing his hair out of his eyes.

"Damn, I need a haircut," he muttered.

"And a shave," said Clint, reflecting that it was odd how for the first few months they'd lived together, he'd never seen Steve anything but militarily tidy and well-groomed, unless they were immediately post-battle.
"Forgot to get new safety razor blades the other day." Steve gave him a humorless smile. "I have my old straight razor, but I think JARVIS still gets nervous whenever I pick up anything sharp."

Clint rolled his eyes. "You've never heard of electric--"

"No way in hell."

"Shit, Cap, watch your language," said Clint.

"Screw you," said Steve with a small smile, and Clint laughed.

He scraped up the last spoonful of mac and cheese and resisted the urge to lick the bowl clean. "That's not bad," he said, handing Steve his bowl.

"Yeah, I can always get a job as a short order cook if this Avengers gig doesn't work out," Steve sighed, taking the bowl to the sink and rinsing it.

Clint chuckled. So, a rough morning, but not a devastating one.

"Clint?" said Steve, back to him, standing at the sink.

"Yeah?" Clint waited a beat. "What?"

"About the Avengers gig."

Clint tensed. Oh shit. Just how bad had therapy gone this morning?

Steve turned around, drying his hands on his jeans and then rubbing one across his face. He cleared his throat.

"Yeah?"

Steve took a deep breath. "I... something came up yesterday, and I, uh, wanted to talk to the team about it."

"Yesterday? This isn't about this morning?"

"This morning was more useless 'I never had a proper childhood,' with a side order of 'twenty-first century sexuality is hard to get used to,'" Steve dismissed it.

"Yeah? What came up yesterday?"

Steve cleared his throat again.

"It's not about quitting the team again, is it?" Clint asked, his stomach sinking. "Because we've gone over this shit and--"

"No, it's not that." Clint waited as Steve visibly gathered his courage. He swallowed, then blurted out, "We talked about it might be good for me to, uh, be there next time we get called out."

Clint's eyebrows shot up. "Are you serious? Like, come out and - I thought you didn't want to - seriously?" He felt a grin stretching across his face.

Steve hesitated. "You'd be all right with that?"

"Are you kidding?" Steve's worried eyes brought Clint up short. "You - of course we'd be OK. If
you think you're ready, Christ, I don't know how many times we've said we want you back when
you're feeling up to it, but--"

"You wouldn't be worried about my whole... death wish... thing?" Clint frowned. Steve shrugged
uncomfortably. "I mean--"

"OK, hang on, who said you should come back?"

"The shrink. I - I'm feeling better, sometimes, and it's getting kind of stifling in here. I wouldn't be in
command, and I'd have to bow out if I wasn't feeling stable because it wouldn't be fair for you guys
to be worried about me on top of whatever's going on, but... yeah. He said it might be OK." Steve
looked down. "I'm feeling pretty useless over here, lunch duties aside. And with training
suspended..."

Clint nodded. "Hey, I'm all for it. If you think you're up to it, I'll fight next to you any time."

Steve gazed at him. "Even though I was suicidal for months and didn't tell anybody--"

"You never put any of us in danger, I don't care what Fury said," Clint interrupted him. "And you
told us eventually. If you say you can go out, I trust you."

Steve looked down. "OK. Thanks."

"Seriously, dude, any time," said Clint. He glanced at the kitchen clock. "I gotta get back and see
how Nat's doing. Mind if I tell her?"

Steve shrugged. "If it comes up, sure."

Clint gave him a reassuring smile and headed out. 'If it comes up,' Steve said, like coming back to the
team after all he'd been through wasn't a huge deal. Like that wouldn't be the first thing he'd talk to
Nat about.

Like it wouldn't mean the two of them had to really get off their asses and decide what to do about
SHIELD.

Chapter End Notes

The movies watched/mentioned are
Amadeus, 1984
Out of Africa, 1985
Platoon, 1986
"Because Steve's coming back to work, that's why," said Clint, packing his arrows. "And that means back to SHIELD."

"We knew he would eventually," Natasha pointed out patiently, checking her Widow's Bites. Hm. One of them definitely needed replacing. "I don't really see why anything has changed. We agreed that keeping quiet was for the best, we agreed that--"

"We agreed before, when Fury was in charge. He's not in charge any more. And SHIELD's already put Steve through the ringer."

Natasha pursed her lips and gave her gun a cursory check, loading the ammo.

"SHIELD's different now, Tasha. You know it's different. What we're doing is different. What Steve's gonna be doing is different. And he deserves to know--"

"If anything, it's safer," said Natasha. "For Steve, at least. A lot more milk runs."

Clint added a package of extra strings to his bow case. "And what about when he needs to use SHIELD Medical?"

"Seriously, Clint," Natasha challenged him. "What vested interest would Medical have in messing with Steve?"

"Not necessarily messing with him. But using him to do research, whether it's good for him or not."

"Why?" asked Natasha, checking the batteries on her comm.

"He's an asset. Just a tool for SHIELD to take advantage of."

"We all are."

"Not to Fury, we weren't," said Clint, carefully replacing the garroting wire in his shoulder pocket. Natasha rolled her eyes. "Please."

Clint snickered. "Well, OK, we were. But we weren't just assets. It was different with Fury, you know it was." He stared at her, obviously frustrated. "Nat, he coulda had you killed when I brought you in. He listened to me and Phil instead when we told him to give you a chance. He could've left me with Loki after Manhattan, or had me killed too. I'm sure the Council wanted him to. Fury fought
for both of us, against the Council. The Council doesn't give a shit about people - even a city's worth of people. And Hill's just - they say jump and she just says how high."

Natasha had to admit there was some truth to that. She looked over her emergency ration packs. Probably wouldn't need to replace those yet...

"We agreed to not say anything about the Council's nuke because of Fury, Tasha," Clint pointed out, adding a couple of darts to one boot and a vial of poison to the other. "At least I did. With him gone - and with all the weird shit that's gone on there in the last few months..."

"Clint, we don't even know for sure that SHIELD Medical was doing anything wrong to Steve."
Natasha blew out her breath, frustrated. Her own agency, and she hadn't been able to crack it. "We don't know anybody was doing anything wrong."

"Don't give me that. Steve's own therapist thought there was something weird going on."

"The only things we know for sure have been going wrong at SHIELD actually look more like Fury's fault than anyone else's. The Mean Teen getting away from Joneville under his watch; what Chang said the other day about funds going missing a few months ago--"

Clint stared at her. "Nat."

Natasha sat down and fiddled with her boot-knife for a moment before separating it in two and sliding the pieces into the soles of her boots.

"You may be right. I'm just trying to get you to convince me."

Clint took a deep breath. "So, we tell them?"

"I didn't say that." She paused. "For one thing, you know it's treason. We took an oath to uphold national security. You don't break that on a whim. Bad things happen to people who do."

"It's not a whim. Everything's changed, and you know it." He put a hand on her shoulder and looked at her earnestly. "You know it. Besides, we wouldn't be telling some random guys off the street. We'd be telling our team-mates. The Avengers." He sighed. "And we better hurry, because if SHIELD has its way we might not be part of that any more."

"Hill said she was happy we'd integrated," Natasha pointed out.

"So how come the two of us being called out again and again?" Clint challenged. "Doing stupid missions, without the team?"

"Why do you care? We didn't like it when we were sitting around idle."

"For one thing, we totally missed The Last Emperor," said Clint, packing away a small bottle of gun oil. "For another thing, it's not just us being off the team. I get the feeling the new world order doesn't just want us off the team; they want to shut the team down, period."

"You're being paranoid," said Natasha firmly, and had to smile at Clint's don't-bullshit-a-bullshitter eyeroll in response. "If they wanted to shut down the team, they'd be happy about Steve wanting to do Research and Analysis and join another department. Instead Hill shut that down."

"I can't make heads or tails of that part, to be honest," Clint admitted. "Maybe she wants him to feel useless? I don't know."
Natasha took a deep breath. "All right. If they try to pull us away from the team, we tell them. They should know."

Clint nodded, but his eyes remained hard. "That's not enough. We're stalling. Why not tonight? Before we go on assignment again?"

"It's a two-day surveillance. What's the rush?"

"Tonight," said Clint stubbornly.

"You're like a little kid. No. We're going on assignment in three hours, and this will probably take some time for them to process." She gave her equipment one finally cursory glance. Everything accounted except her cyanide pill. She added it to her wrist pocket.

"You're delaying."

"I'm not. Clint. They're not going to take this well. Would you?"

Clint's mouth opened, then closed. "Good point. All right. As soon as we come back."

Natasha hesitated, then nodded.

Clint nodded grimly, then checked his watch. "I guess it's for the best. We'd have to miss the movie otherwise. Think it's Rain Man tonight." Clint grinned. "And then we'll drive off to the mission. 'Course I'm an excellent driver."

Natasha blinked. "You're going to drive us? I thought we were being picked up."

"Never mind, you'll understand after the movie. Come on, let's go."

They took their packs and took the elevator to the common floor, getting off and heading towards the movie room and stopping abruptly as they spotted Tony and Steve coming out of the kitchen, locked in a fierce embrace.

"Come on, Tony, come back to my room," Steve was saying urgently, mouth busy on Tony's lips and hands grasping him, pulling him down the hallway, then stopping to push him against the wall and rocking against him.

"Steve, fuck, not here," Tony murmured, pushing Steve's hands away and stopping his protest with a heated kiss.

"Can't - can't wait," Steve panted, pinning Tony's hands to the wall and biting his neck. Tony threw his head back against the wall, opening his eyes and spotting Clint and Natasha, who were both stopped in the hall, mouths slightly open.

"Steve, fuck, no come on," he said, tugging ineffectually at his hands. Steve bit the juncture of neck and shoulder, and Tony moaned and pressed closer, thrusting them together. "Steve," he groaned. "Normally love wall sex, dude, but you're gonna regret this tomorrow. Let me go. Let's take this to my room."

Steve raised his head, alerted by a noise, taking notice of Clint and Natasha for the first time. He closed his eyes, biting his lip, then swore softly and pried himself reluctantly from Tony, not meeting Clint and Natasha's eyes as he and Tony pushed past them and hurried to the stairs. The door swung shut behind them and Natasha could hear a thud against it, hear Tony's gasp of surprise being muffled, see the door shaking slightly.
Natasha took a deep breath.
"Um, holy shit," Clint said quietly.
"Yeah."

"Think the side-effects of this latest one might be overstimulated libido and lowered inhibitions?"

"He might wear out even Stark," said Natasha. The door rattled lightly and a faint groan came from behind it, from which of them she couldn't tell. She glanced at Clint and they shared an unspoken thought that it wasn't likely Steve and Tony were going to make it all the way to Tony's room, let alone Steve's. They were probably fucking against the stairway door right now.

Funny; she'd seen Tony on the prowl a few times when SHIELD had started following him, seen him aroused and hedonistic and letting go of even the minimum of social conventions in pursuit of a quick scratch to an itch... but never Steve. Ever-proper, gentlemanly Steve, who looked like he still wanted to stand up when Natasha or Pepper or Hill entered the room, who didn't think it appropriate to even kiss in public or use foul language in mixed company. Seeing him like this, eyes dazed, pupils wide, cheeks flushed, raw, overwhelming need taking over him, and rutting up against Tony as though nothing else mattered, as though he had to come now or die, barely even noticing two friends and colleagues seeing him nearly undone...

"I... don't think they're going to make it back for the movie," said Natasha slowly.

Clint nodded, still somewhat stunned. "All right. Yeah. We'll, um, let's just head back to your floor and, uh, play cards or something till the transport gets here."

"Good plan."

2.

January 13

"Why do you want to go back, Captain?" Sanjay had asked. "I'll clear you, but I need you to understand why you want me to."

"I told you, I need to work," said Steve. "I'm going stir-crazy doing nothing in the Tower."

"What about Research and Analysis training?"

"That's been paused. Indefinitely."

"I can assure you, Director Hill wants that to continue. There may be some adjustments going on right now, but you could wait another week or two and see what happens. Why go back to the team instead? Why be an Avenger?"

"I feel like I have to."

"As an obligation?"

"No. More like... to prove to myself that I can."

Sanjay regarded him seriously. "What will you do if you're hurt? What will you do if you need medical attention?"

"I'll deal with it. I just... I need a purpose."
"A purpose?"

"Something to do. Something useful."

"There's a lot of useful things you could do that don't necessitate putting yourself in harm's way on a regular basis."

"Like what?"

"For one thing, you're a role model to many people--"

"Without doing anything. Besides, read the papers sometime. Or reader comments on Yahoo."

Sanjay wrinkled his nose. "Those rot your brain."

"Mostly, yeah. But they do give some insight into man-on-the-street opinions. One of them called me a fag who was benched because I couldn't handle living in the real world. Whose role model do you think I am?"

"People dealing with mental health issues. Soldiers. Kids questioning their sexuality."

Steve rolled his eyes.

Sanjay's eyebrows went up. "You don't think that's important? Think of yourself, as a teenager. Wouldn't it have made a difference to you if you had known someone who you admired, who was the way you were?"

Steve sighed. "You know, I ended up Googling some stuff at one point. Something Clint said about how the two 'token LGBT Avengers' didn't know anything about gay history. There were some names I was surprised to see."

"Such as?"

"Walt Whitman, Hans Christian Anderson... a couple of places mentioned Eleanor Roosevelt."

"None of them were out then, were they? Would it have made a difference to you if they had been?"

Steve frowned. "I suppose so."

"You inspire a lot of people," said Sanjay, leaning forward. "You've heard the recent stories about young people accepting themselves because of you. Being able to come out to their families, just because of what you said during that press conference. Imagine how much more you could do--"

"What, if I became professionally gay? My private life is private--"

"I don't mean go on a talk show circuit. I mean just live your life. More openly than you have been."

"How?"

"For one thing, you're in a relationship--"

"No, I'm not."

"-that you don't acknowledge in public. You could--"

"It's private." He paused. "And it's not even a relationship. He's not into long-term anything. I knew
that before anything started."

"Would you be with him, if he were?"

Steve sighed.

"You have a real mental block about this, don't you?" said Sanjay, sitting back.

Steve crossed his arms. "We agreed, a long time ago, that this was a no-go zone," he reminded Sanjay.

Sanjay nodded. "How are you doing otherwise? In terms of publicity? Have there been other incidents like the one last week in front of your building?"

Steve chuckled. "There was a loon who walked up to me and Bruce at Trader Joe's and called me a practicing sodomite." Sanjay's eyebrows went up. "No, it was funny - I didn't even get a chance to react. Bruce just said, 'Actually I think he's a Methodist,' and walked us right past." Sanjay laughed, and Steve smiled at the memory. "I think I'll have to remember that line if anybody calls me that again."

Sanjay grinned and made a note. He glanced at his clock and flipped a page. "All right. I'll approve you going back on duty. Light duties only, no command role yet."

"Really?"

"Your new medication is helping you, you no longer experience panic attacks, your sleep is much improved. We're going to work on pain relief next, but I'm encouraged by what's happened so far." He paused and looked up. "How are the side effects of the new formula? Are things back to normal?"

Steve looked away. "Yeah, I guess so."

"I did warn you that it might--"

"It's better. We're fine - I'm fine."

"Fair enough. Although I did think that switching so quickly after just one week--"

"I couldn't live with that," said Steve. "That was... not a situation I was willing to tolerate."

Sanjay nodded. "Well, let's talk again in a week, and we'll see how you're doing. In the meantime, I'll start the paperwork to get you reinstated. I'll send you copies of what you need to sign."

Steve nodded and stood up. "Thank you."

Sanjay smiled at him. "My pleasure, Captain."

Steve headed back to the Tower, stopping by the cafe to get a coffee to go and giving Beth a small smile, grateful that the place seemed busy this afternoon and she couldn't stop to chat. She'd been nothing but polite and friendly, even mentioned his coming out ("Good for you," she'd said) and politely refrained from mentioning his absence from the team. She was nothing but pleasant and open. He was the one who felt a little ill-at-ease around her.

In fact, everything surrounding coming out had gone a lot easier than he'd expected. Conservative preachers aside, except for some ugly words online and a few instances of people recognizing him on the street and being assholes (three of which he wouldn't even have noticed if not for his
enhanced hearing, plus the one that Bruce had so memorably handled), everyone had been either supportive or kept their opinions to themselves.

He parked his bike and entered the Tower, finger hovering briefly over the elevator buttons. He should go down to the gym. Maybe go to his studio. Think over what it meant to be approved to go back on duty. Maybe look at the paperwork Sanjay said he'd send over.

He punched the button for Tony's workshop instead.

A wave of Aerosmith washed over him as the door opened. He winced slightly and waited for his ears to adjust before looking around. Tony was in a far corner, a tiny screwdriver in hand, random pieces of metal spread out on the table before him. He was doing something that apparently occasionally involved welding, judging from the safety glasses on his head. He looked up at Steve briefly, adjusted the screwdriver, and said something Steve couldn't quite hear.

_The way I see it, you've got to say--_ and Steve Tyler's voice suddenly dropped to a low murmur.

"Hey Spangles, what's up?" Tony called out. Steve waved him back to work, making his way across the shop. Tony picked up a small torch and a bright burst of blue flame zapped the pieces of metal in his hand. He turned the piece around in his hand, surveying it critically, then glanced up at Steve as Steve reached him.

"You OK?"

"You know these don't do you much good if they're not in front of your eyes, right?" Steve said, smiling at Tony and pushing the glasses down.

Tony rolled his eyes. "I forget. What's up?"

"I've been cleared," Steve said. Oh. He hadn't exactly come here planning on saying anything yet.

Tony's eyebrows went up. "That calls for a celebration." He paused. "Doesn't it?"

Steve nodded and Tony leaned forward to give him a kiss, then went to get a couple of glasses for them from the small workshop bar.

Steve looked around. This wasn't what... damn it, how did this keep happening? He could understand it when he'd been depressed, he could understand when he'd been able to think of nothing but sex, but now? Why did he always end up at Tony's place? Why was Tony always on his mind?

At least Tony was now merely on his mind instead of constantly on his libido. The first days after going back on the anti-anxiety medication had been hellish, and Steve had been skittish about being near Tony at all for a few days after the incident with Clint and Natasha. Things were... better in that department now. A little too much better, actually.

Tony came forward with two glasses of wine and they clinked them together.

"To your triumphant return," said Tony.

"Well, it's a return. Don't call it triumphant yet."

Tony smirked. "Listen, Capsicle, you'll be great." And he leaned closer and kissed Steve, hitching his breath a bit as Steve parted his lips and their kiss deepened.
It shouldn't be this way, thought Steve vaguely. This wasn't supposed to be as attractive. Even without the pull of over-stimulated libido, here he was with Tony again and within minutes he... he had completely lost track of the plot. Who knew what the hell this was about. He was lost in Tony's mouth, their lips caressing each other, Tony's hands carding through his hair. Tony's warmth, his hands, his breath, his scent, and God it was so perfect, the muscles on his chest and back flexing against Steve's, so good, so right...

So different from those times they'd been making out when he first went on the new medication and it got out of hand, turned Steve into raw need and itch and ache needing relief. The mere memory of that had made him burn with shame later. Especially remembering Clint and Natasha, hardened assassins who had seen everything, mouths gaping as he practically tried to fuck Tony against the wall in plain sight because he had to, because he couldn't stop himself, because even the five minute walk to his room was beyond his reach as he tried desperately to slake his need.

...although come to think of it, he'd almost take the itch and the ache over the complete absence of anything sexual right now. It wasn't that he wasn't having a good time, because he really was; everything Tony was doing was perfect, it was usually all he needed to get him going, he'd jerked off to the thought of this kind of thing endless times, wishing it didn't affect him so viscerally... and now that he had his wish and it wasn't what he wanted after all.

Tony broke off their kiss to move his lips over Steve's face, over to his ear, nibbling his earlobe, and Steve sighed. God, that felt so good...

And Tony was definitely feeling the way someone was supposed to feel right about now. A low moan escaped him as Steve ran a hand up his back and cupped the back of his head, and Tony pressed himself against Steve.

Fuck.

Tony backed off immediately, but it was too late, Steve had felt how hard he was, he could feel the frustrated desire trembling in Tony's fingers, the fluttering pulse in his throat. And it wasn't fair, wasn't at all fair that Tony was alone in how he felt, that Tony wanted to go further and for once Steve's hesitation had nothing to do with his scruples or hang-ups; it was a simple chemical imbalance, a tweak to his medication keeping his mood stable but his sex drive almost completely dead.

He stepped back and Tony put a hand on his cheek.

"Hey."

He looked up at Tony. Tony bowed his head, their foreheads touching. "I don't mind," he said quietly. "If this is what it takes--"

"I do mind," Steve snapped tiredly.

"I would've thought you'd be happy. No... sinful urges and all."

"Would've been happy to get here on my own. Not like this."

"I don't mind," Tony repeated.

Steve sighed. "You have a lot more patience than most people give you credit for."

"Hey, in the grand scheme of things, you're not to hard to be patient for," said Tony. He cleared his throat and rubbed a hand through his hair, giving Steve a small smile. "So you swing from fuck-or-
die to budding asexual in a week, and half the time you look like you want to go to Confession for not staying pure before marriage. The other people I put up with on a regular basis are my nagging ex-girlfriend, a flyboy who stole a multimillion dollar machine from me, and a guy who might turn green and destroy my kitchen if he burns his toast. Looking at it that way, Steve, you are not the most trying thing going on in my life."

Steve laughed despite himself.

"Besides, in terms of people I sleep with, it's nice seeing the other side. I'm normally the one trying other people's patience. I once suggested celebrating a six month anniversary by having a threesome. To this day I don't know if she broke up with me because of the suggestion or because the girl I wanted to bring to our bed was Miss February and my girlfriend was Miss April and they'd had a rivalry I didn't know about." Steve groaned. "Hey, how was I supposed to know? I'd put a lot of thought into selecting February. We'd started dating in February. I thought it was romantic."

"You have no shame at all, do you?" said Steve, with a wry smile.

"Shame? No. Regrets, yes."

"You? Regrets?"

Tony's eyes darkened. "Are you kidding me?" he said, his tone still slight, but with a small edge. "I have regrets - lots of 'em. I've done a lot of stupid stuff, made a lot of mistakes - and I don't mean any of what's on Youtube except for the one with the mohair pants - but I've hurt people, most of whom deserved a lot better from me." He paused, swallowed. "I don't sit around and ask myself if what I do in my bedroom meshes with some obscure set of rules that maybe I'm not quite following right. When I do something wrong, it has nothing to do with having a good time with a willing partner."

Steve winced. OK, he probably deserved that one. "Like what?"

"I've sucked up a lot of things in my life," said Tony, his voice hushed, none of his normal flippancy evident. "Part of why I'm not the marrying kind: because I know I'm no fucking good at any of... this," he said, gesturing between them. "I can fix anything mechanical. Invent the most amazing things. I can see things so clearly when we're talking about things. People? Not exactly my forte."

"You do fine," said Steve uncertainly.

Tony turned away, fiddling with his screwdriver. "Well, put me in front of someone I care about when they need me and I don't have a clue what to do."

"You do," said Steve.

Tony didn't look at him. "Steve. You came to me that first night, and I'd had no idea you were in trouble. And then I panicked and practically handed you right over to SHIELD Medical with a bow, for fuck's sake. That shows people-smarts to you?"

Steve gaped at him, stunned. "That's... not how I remember it."

"You weren't thinking clearly. I'm not surprised."

"No, look, that day, that you came after me, on Staten Island." Steve had to stop, remembering the hopelessness, the despair, the sheer sense of futility he'd felt. How he'd stood on that ledge for over an hour, the wind on his face, his will to live weakening. How by the time Tony had shown up, he was too drained to feel much beyond vague annoyance and disbelief. "That's not what happened, that day. I would've - you came after me. If you hadn't..."
They were silent for a moment. "How... I never asked, but how close were you?" Tony finally asked cautiously.

Steve shivered. "I don't know. But you - you were there, and you made a difference. I might have stepped back on my own, but I might not have. I didn't feel like I had anything left to live for, no matter how hard I tried to convince myself that I did. You probably saved my life."

And he was continuing to save Steve's life. For a man famous for being a selfish, oblivious brat, for a man Steve had accused of being concerned only with himself... Tony had shown himself to be a better friend, shown more caring for him - for a lot of people - than just about anybody Steve had ever met.

"You are good at this. I mean - I know, this," he echoed Tony's vague gesture between them, "isn't anything - it's friends-with-benefits. But. Your... your friendship is a benefit. Whether we - whether we keep doing anything or not. It's... you've helped. You really don't see that?"

Damn, but he was inarticulate. He'd always thought it was because he wasn't good with women. Maybe he just wasn't good with anybody he felt this... strongly about.

"Well," said Tony, and cleared his throat, still concentrating on his machine. "You're very generous." He put down his tools and smiled brightly at Steve, but the expression didn't make it all the way to his eyes. "So, after I finish this, since celebration sex is off the table for the foreseeable future, can I interest you in a celebration dinner?"

"Sure."

"Want to invite the team, or should this be a party of two?"

Steve hesitated briefly. It had been a few weeks since the last spate of rumors about them, and they weren't really a couple but paradoxically being unable to have sex was making Steve feel more like being with Tony in other ways - ways that he normally shied away from.

"For two. It can even be at one of those Japanese places you like so much."

"We'll miss Driving Miss Daisy."

"Whatever," he said, and smirked at Tony's smile.

"Whatever? Did Captain Tightpants seriously just say 'Whatever'?"

"I think so."

Tony laughed as he dialled up the restaurant. "God, I feel like calling up the tabloids. Not only out on a date with a guy, but playing hooky from team-building activities and about to eat raw fish. It's positively indecent. I've really corrupted you. I'm so proud."

3.

January 15

All right, they were going to do this. They were really going to do this.

She shouldn't be so nervous, thought Natasha as Jessica Tandy snipped at Morgan Freeman on the screen. She'd done far more dangerous things. She'd been a spy since childhood, fought bad guys and aliens and gods, put her life at risk over and over again... but this felt somehow different.
They were all leaving tomorrow morning on a reconnaissance mission. Nice and easy, a perfect outing for Steve's return to the team. Some weird stuff was going on in Taft, a small city in California, where SHIELD had been stationed for a few days, watching odd colors undulating in the sky. Thor had been called and said that it might be some kind of god gate but not one with which he was familiar, and it didn't look dangerous at all. But then a small building had fallen down for no reason anyone could tell, the undulations had become more frequent, some kind of giant dead lavender lizard had appeared on top of the local liquor store, and SHIELD had decided to send in the team. Tony and Bruce were going to watch and work with the scientists (Thor's Lady Jane was going to be there too, to his very vocal delight), and the rest of them were going to be on standby. Sounded like a standard SHIELD mission: a lot of waiting, a lot of preparing, small possibility of extreme action.

Steve was ready to go. He looked good. Centered; steady. She hated to do anything to disturb that, but there really wasn't a choice.

She gazed at Tony and Steve as they watched the movie. Tony sat on the floor, leaning on the couch, Steve sitting behind him and absentely running a hand through his hair. Steve leaned forward and whispered something into Tony's ear that made him chuckle, then pressed a kiss to the side of Tony's neck. Tony smiled and tilted his head to the side, eyes sliding shut.

"Come up," Steve murmured softly into his ear. Tony nodded and moved up on the couch, then lay down with his head on Steve's lap, eyes still on the screen, Steve's fingers idly running through his hair again.

They looked peaceful, but also somehow... subdued. More couple-like than they'd been since they'd started whatever-this-was between them, but with a sense of something missing as well. Which made sense, considering what she'd overheard Tony talking to Bruce about the other day.

"Yeah, no, he says it's not a long-term solution," Tony had been saying as Natasha approached them around the corner. "He's giving it another couple weeks and then he's gonna try other stuff."

"Is it just the sexual side effects he's concerned about?"

"Yeah. Kills everything."

"I can imagine that would make things awkward."

"I told him I didn't care."

"And he believed you?"

There had been a pause. "I meant it."

Must be love, Natasha had thought before she deliberately made a noise and both men dropped the subject. Part of her knew very well just how uncomfortable Steve would've felt at her overhearing that, but she refused to feel guilty about it. Bruce had taken over as the team's backup medical resource after Steve's initial disasters with SHIELD Medical and Tony of course knew everything that went on with Steve, but if Tony and Bruce wanted to keep anything secret from the rest of them, they should have known better than to discuss it in the kitchen.

The movie ended and the news came on automatically. Natasha made a noise in her throat, which Clint ignored in favor of staring at the screen, and she mentally rolled her eyes at him. If they were going to do this, they should do it. Turn off the damn TV and get on with it. That, or they should all
go to bed to get some rest before tomorrow. Had there been an Avengers Den Mother present, she
would've been turning off the TV and dragging them off for their own good.

"We should all go to bed," said Bruce. "We'll need rest before tomorrow."

"Yes Mom," said Clint, and Natasha snickered. "Hey, Celeb City Buzz is on."

Steve blew out his breath. "Celebrity culture and reality shows. That and climate change make me
almost wish I'd stayed on ice."

"They're like flies," said Tony. "You just have to learn to ignore them."

Clint smirked. "Yeah, Cap. You're just pissed 'cause there was another frenzy of 'Iron Man and
Captain America are secretly married' stories this week."

Steve rolled his eyes. The screen changed to a flurry of pictures and a rough series of short shots
outside the Maria Stark Foundation party last week. It settled on a shot of Steve walking to the limo,
looking rather dapper in a dark suit, and being followed by two reporters.

"Captain America! Is it true that you're dating Zachary Quinto?" asked the male reporter.

Steve blinked but kept walking. "Who?"

"Why are they showing this now?" Tony grumbled. "That party was last week." Clint waved a hand
at him, grinning.

"Are you dating anyone?" asked the female reporter.

"Sorry ma'am, I've already said that I won't discuss my private life," said Steve, continuing to move
towards the limo.

"Did you come to the ball with anyone?"

"Yes, of course," said Steve, deadpan. "My team."

The reporters were not dissuaded, and kept shouting questions. "Is there anyone special in your life?"

"Is it true that you were attending conversion therapy?"

"Iron Man has gone on record saying those places should be shut down. Do you agree with him or
not?"

Steve shook his head and moved on and into the limo.

The screen dissolved to two anchors, who were chuckling and shrugging. "That was Captain
America last week, notoriously private as ever," said one, a heavily made-up woman. "No word as
to what he thinks about the latest round of rumors this week. The one thing we do know is that the
stories about Captain America and Iron Man being an item are probably not true - sorry, guys! -
despite them being spotted at a restaurant together this week: Tony Stark has never been shy about
the details of his personal life, so if there was anything going on there, trust me, we'd hear about it."

The other anchor, a man with spiked hair, laughed. "What do you think about his refusal to address
conversion therapy?"

"I think that--" the screen abruptly went dark as Natasha turned off the channel.
"Hey, better than that other shit they printed in some Christian news site - did you see that one, Nat?" said Clint. "Saying Captain America approves of that crap?"

Steve turned to look at him, his eyes narrowing.

"So fucking stupid," Clint went on. "Like anyone in their right mind would endorse those damn witch doctors."

"What do you know about them?" asked Steve.

"Uh, electro-shock therapy? Pray the Gay Away? Might as well wave a dead chicken around. Though waving a dead chicken wouldn't be abusive. Except to the chicken."

"Not all of them are like that," said Steve, his voice odd. Natasha felt a sudden unease.

No. No, he couldn't have...

"Yeah, well, these Christian 'news' assholes said you approve of them, just because you never denied those rumors that you actually went to one of them, and there's no proof that you've ever dated a guy. If you ask me, you oughta sue the bastards." Clint smirked. "Or let yourself get photographed playing tonsil hockey with Iron Man. Preferably in costume."

"Why would I sue?" asked Steve quietly.

"Um, libel?" said Clint. "Defamation of character?"

"Not if it's true."

There was a deep silence.

Clint blinked. "OK, um... that's messed up."

"Clint," said Natasha.

Clint sat up. "No, that's messed up. Dude, are you serious? You actually went? When did you stop?"

"The last time I went was December 20."

Clint frowned and flicked his gaze between Steve and Tony. "That was after you two started."

Tony sat up. "How do you know when we started?"

"We're not blind. Though apparently we are. Again." Clint glanced at Natasha. "Did you know?"

Natasha shook her head. "No, but it doesn't surprise me that much."

"Doesn't surprise me either," said Bruce.

"I... do not understand," Thor confessed.

"That's really messed up," Clint said, ignoring Thor. "That you'd go at all, never mind after you two were already--"

"Clint," Natasha repeated firmly.

"No, come on, Nat, it is." He glared at Steve. "You know, we were all protective of you - we all tore Tony a new one because we thought he'd messed around with you, but all the time you were--"
"Clint," Tony snapped. "Maybe you don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Maybe that's a good thing," Clint shot back. He glanced around at the rest of them. "You don't think it's fucked up?"

Bruce rubbed his forehead. "Clint, think about it for a minute. Steve, when did you know you were gay?"


"And you fought against it all your life, I bet."

"Yeah, of course."

"And you were twenty-six when your plane went down." Bruce turned back to Clint. "Fourteen years of fighting, versus one of being told he didn't have to. What did you expect? Would anyone be able to just accept something like that without a struggle?"

Clint scowled. "You know, that's fine, that's - Steve can make his own decisions about trying to be something he's not. But here's the thing: I thought they were just being discreet and not wanting the paparazzi to bother them while they sorted themselves out. But it's more than that, isn't it?" He glared at Steve. "You're still hiding. Acting like the two of you are some kinda dirty secret." And now Tony was determinedly looking away, and Steve's jaw was set. "That's not being discreet, that's--"

"Clint," Natasha said, her voice steely. "Do you really want to antagonize everybody? Right now, tonight?"

Clint hesitated, mouth still open, then sat back and took a deep breath.

Bruce frowned at her. "What do you mean? You mean the day before a mission?"

Natasha blew out her breath. "No." She exchanged a glance with Clint. "Not just the mission."

"What is it?" asked Bruce.

"Fuck. Me and my big mouth." Clint rubbed his forehead, then gave Natasha a wry smile. "This is why you're the social graces part of this partnership." He sat back, looking tired. "Look, whatever; Cap, Tony, none of my business. Whatever floats your boat, man - if Tony's OK with that conversion shit, and with you treating him like - let's just all forget I said anything."

Steve gave him a level gaze. "You still look like you want to say something."

"Yeah, well I was kinda hoping to segue very smoothly from some random item on the news to what we had to talk to you guys about. This is gonna go about as smooth as chunky peanut butter. After it's been thrown up."

Natasha moved her chair around and faced her team-mates. "There's something we haven't told you about that we probably should have a long time ago. Something about SHIELD." She lifted her chin. "And before you make any judgements, let me remind you that we took oaths. By telling you this, we're violating about fifty different rules and regulations, not to mention laws."

"You're Level 7 Operatives," said Steve. "We know there's a lot you can't tell us."

"Well, this was kinda big," said Clint. "And probably a lot more messed up than any church crap
"you were involved in." He took a quick breath. "You know that pilot that went rogue during the battle of Manhattan, and went to nuke downtown? The one Fury said suffered a psychotic break and got sent off to a soft padded room somewhere?"

"Yeah? Is he... is the pilot back?"

"No, he's still safely retired. But Nick Fury is a lying liar who lies lying lies." Clint paused. "And so are we."

"What are you talking about?"

"Brucey, you're gonna wanna take a few deep breaths," said Clint. "You were told the guy just flipped. The truth is, the WSC ordered him to go."

"What?!" Bruce gaped at them.

"Deep breaths, dude. It happened a long time ago, and it all worked out, right?"

Bruce visibly calmed himself. "You're saying the Council ordered a nuclear strike on New York."

Natasha nodded. "Fury fought them. They ignored him."

Steve was staring at them. "The Council sent nukes. Against eight million people."

"The Tesseract was open, Steve. Aliens were coming down, and we didn't know what was going to happen. We didn't know how many of them were going to come through that thing. All we knew was that it was open, and spewing bad guys--"

"And Manhattan island was an acceptable loss of life," Bruce said flatly.

Thor was looking grave. "If I understand you correctly, you are saying that the people to whom you owe allegiance ordered the attack that would have destroyed this city."

Natasha nodded.

"And they asked you to speak falsehoods about it? And you agreed to do so?"

Tony spoke up. "When did you two know?"

"We found out the week after the battle, after Clint had been cleared, post-Loki," said Natasha. "Sworn to non-disclosure before we were told anything."

They were all still staring at Clint and Natasha, and Natasha had never felt so naked. These were people who trusted them, their team-mates.

"Why break that secrecy now?" Steve asked quietly.

"We took oaths to SHIELD," said Clint. "And Phil, and Fury. They're both gone. We never took any oath to the WSC."

"And that's who's in charge now," said Natasha. "And you need to know that."

"Plus Steve's back at work, and hasn't been treated exactly well by SHIELD so far."

Tony was scowling at them, arms crossed. "Damn it, you should've told us. I can't believe you two have been sitting on this--"
"Level 7, man," said Clint. "Some of the freaky shit we've had to sit on - just this year alone - you do not want to know."

"You know, I felt sick when I found out the country I fought for had dropped nuclear bombs on Japan," said Steve, his features grim. "And that was in war time. Even the idea of nuclear bomb, that kind of mindless--"

"My father worked on that bomb," Tony pointed out evenly.

Steve took Tony's hand in his. "And I felt sick knowing a man I worked with and trusted helped to invent it," he said quietly, looking down at their clasped hands. "I know there were good reasons for it, but the only thing that made it bearable was that it was only used twice. And now I find out I work for people who would have tried to use it again."

"Fury tried to stop it from being used again, Steve," Clint pointed out.

"Fury's gone."

"Which is why we're telling you," said Natasha.

"Besides, Fury didn't tell anybody what the Council had been willing to do--" Bruce began.

"The Council was willing to use it, but they were also trying to save people," Natasha protested. "Trying to save the planet, not just one city."

"It's really that simple to you?" Bruce said, his hands clenched.

"It's war," said Natasha.

"And you two just went along with it."

"Yes."

"You are... you are my shield brother and sister," said Thor slowly. "I have fought by your side. I have trusted you."

Natasha's heart sank. "I won't apologize for keeping this secret," she said, keeping her voice even. "I will," said Clint ruefully. "It was a shitty thing to do. We shoulda said something a long time ago."

"The fact is that we didn't," said Natasha. "And I won't apologize for keeping my word."

Thor gazed at her thoughtfully.

"A whole city," said Bruce. "All of us could be dead."

"Let me remind you that the reason we're all alive is because of that bomb," said Natasha. "Tony flew that bomb into the opening and killed off whatever controlled those things we were fighting."

"Dr. Selvig knew how to close the Tesseract--"

"In the meantime we were fighting an enemy that massively outnumbered us," Natasha reminded him. "People were being hurt. A lot of people, not just us."

"The ends justify the means?" said Bruce.
"Sometimes." Natasha took a deep breath. "Not this time. Obviously. Or we wouldn't be telling you. But it's not as black-and-white as you're making it sound."

"You still should've told us," said Tony.

"Tony," said Steve quietly. "They had other obligations. And we were barely a team yet when they found out what happened."

"It's been a few months since then. If they'd told me before, Jesus, I would've--"

"What?" said Natasha.

"I would've gone after the whole Omega-level server thing a hell of a lot more, for one thing!"

"Would you have done anything differently?" Natasha asked Steve.

Steve stared at her. "Maybe. Probably. I don't know."

Thor looked grave. "I do not know if I would have been so eager to remain allied to an organization led by persons with such eagerness to give up when difficulties arise. Or such callous disregard for life."

"Would you have stayed?" Clint asked Bruce.

Bruce shook his head.

Natasha took a deep breath and glanced around her team-mates. Thor still looked appalled, Tony angry, Steve weary, and Bruce more visibly upset than she had seen him in a long time without being green. But after the initial shock, most of their upset didn't seem directed at her and Clint. That was good, at least. They could work with that.

Bruce stood up.

"Gonna hit the giant bag of weed?" Tony asked sympathetically, and Bruce gave him a sharp glance before walking off. Tony took a deep breath. "I think we're gonna be talking for a while tonight." He paused. "And to think, tomorrow was supposed to be a cake-walk."

"Tomorrow will be a cake-walk," said Clint gloomily. "It's tonight that's gonna be a bitch."

4.

January 20

Thank God the Taft mission had been a cake-walk, thought Tony as he gazed out over the railing. 98% preparation, 2% perspiration, and they'd had almost no trouble taking down the weird little wanna-be villain posse they'd found. Noobs messing with a stolen teleportation device they couldn't control. At one point after their capture Steve had gently bopped one with his shield, more to move him out of the way than anything else, and the guy had actually pissed himself.

Forty-four minutes from initial shot to final takedown, most of that spent with Tony taunting the leader. It was almost a record, broken only by that genetic designer who'd surrendered within five minutes back in February. The good people of Taft had barely had time to notice anything was happening before it was all over and the Avengers were leaving.

It had been the perfect mission for Cap to come back. Only Tony had known how nervous he was,
only Tony had known that he'd had trouble sleeping the night before, and not just because of the revelations about SHIELD and the WSC. He'd been calm and professional during the extremely short battle, gone through debrief with no hint of any inner trepidation, and accepted the admiration of a gaggle of Taft's youngest citizens with ease. The papers had mentioned his return to the field, but the battle had been minor enough that there hadn't even been any media frenzy.

And then they'd come back home. To redoubled combing through SHIELD databases, looking for they had no idea what, all of them debating or contemplating the finer points of ethics. Tony discreetly figuring out how to legally and financially dislodge the Avengers from SHIELD. All of them on edge, wondering what they were going to do next. Where each of them was going to fall. It was pretty clear that Tony, Thor, Bruce and Steve wanted to leave SHIELD, but they weren't sure when or whether Clint and Natasha could join them, or what the consequences would be to them, as Level 7 agents who had betrayed their oaths... or whether they could remain team-mates even if they did leave, what with there being some distrust and resentment towards them, at least from Bruce - and all right, a bit from Tony himself - and...

"Tony?" Steve poked his head out onto the deck and Tony braced himself.

"Hey Spangles." He smiled back at him, gestured for Steve to join him at the railing. Steve did, gazing out over the city.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yeah." Tony glanced back at the table where his gin waited for him patiently and took a deep breath. No. Not another one. He needed to be at least a little coherent for this. Briefly he wondered if for once it might not have been a better idea to stop when he first started to feel like his judgment might impaired, rather than relying on the fact that he'd been successfully managing classes, exams, conferences and board meetings while totally blitzed most of his life. Because yes, he'd had a lot of successes in that field. But somehow he always forgot the crashing failures.

"What is it?"

Right. Tony turned, gave Steve a small smile. "Yeah." Rip off a bandage. Get it over with, in the current spirit of making major decisions and getting off the pot and all that. "This is... I'm gonna try to get through this without it being awkward. So, um, it's probably going to be awkward as hell."

"What is it? Have you found something in the SHIELD database?"

Tony shook his head. "No, this is personal. Here, I'll just say it. This - you know our little friendly arrangement?"

Steve's eyebrows drew together.

"Yeah." Tony glanced back at the table where his gin waited for him patiently and took a deep breath. No. Not another one. He needed to be at least a little coherent for this. Briefly he wondered if for once it might not have been a better idea to stop when he first started to feel like his judgment might impaired, rather than relying on the fact that he'd been successfully managing classes, exams, conferences and board meetings while totally blitzed most of his life. Because yes, he'd had a lot of successes in that field. But somehow he always forgot the crashing failures.

"What is it?"

Tony shook his head. "No, this is personal. Here, I'll just say it. This - you know our little friendly arrangement?"

Steve's eyebrows drew together.

"Yeah, I can't do that any more."

Steve blinked.

"This is the part where other people always say 'It's not you, it's me,' but I don't have a lot of experience with this side of it so bear with me. It's, uh, really not you. Maybe a little you. But mostly me. All right, all me - wait, hang on, do you know what I'm talking about?" he said, taking in Steve's blank expression.

Steve nodded slowly.

"OK, I - you just looked a little out of it there, I'm - this is like talking into a void. So, yeah, like I
said."

Steve nodded. "Why..." he trailed off. "No. I'm not - sorry. You don't owe me any explanations. I'm... I'm sorry. If I did something--"

"No. No, that's not..." Tony pressed his lips together. "Steve. I told you I could do this. I usually can, all right? Friends-with-benefits has really never been a problem before."

"Why is it a problem now?"

Tony looked away. "It just is."

"I'm not trying to argue out of this, you know," said Steve hesitantly. "I'm just curious. What changed?"

_I've changed. I want more. I actually give a shit that you're almost never there in the morning. That we just... come and go._

Tony's shoulders hunched. Oh, Christ, that part was the last thing he wanted to get into with Steve.

"Look, I've never had a problem before with being discreet," he said deflecting. Hell, it wasn't like this part didn't bother the crap out of him too, and had even before Clint had made his opinions known. "And believe me, if I never sleep with another star-fucker again it'll be too soon," he said, and had to smile as Steve's eyebrow went up and his lips silently repeated 'star-fucker'. "But this... I just... can't be your bit on the side. I can't be something you're ashamed of."

"I'm not ashamed of you," Steve said, his eyes widening. "Tony--"

"No, but you're ashamed of yourself after we're together." Steve's eyes dropped and he swallowed hard. "You are. Fuck-buddies doesn't work for you."

"You're not a fuck-buddy."

"Right, because we don't fuck. We just screw around. We haven't even really had sex. You can still feel virtuous about that, at least." Shit, that had come out a little more bitter than it sounded in his head. Damn it, he was supposed to be going for sensible, tactful, and mature, wasn't he? "You could even still go back to that church place, whatever it's called, and be able to say--"

"God's Peace. And I don't feel virtuous. I feel like I'm taking advantage of you." Steve paused, his eyes dark and guilty. "And apparently so do you. Which makes me not much better than the people who took advantage of you when you were at MIT, does it?"

_The only way I can get friends is if I flash around my money or my dick_, he vaguely remembered telling Steve, and holy shit was he not going to go there.

"That's not the same thing. Christ. Not the same thing at all. You're _not_ taking advantage. But I'm Tony Fucking Stark, and I don't do this hiding from the world bullshit."

"I don't - I just think some things are private."

"There's private, and then there's dirty secret, Steve."

"You're not a dirty secret. You're..." Steve paused and took a deep breath. "Look, we're - we _were_ doing this by your rules. So we're not a couple. But you're the best friend I have. I'm not ashamed of you. I - how I feel about you, it's not." He swallowed and looked down, his composure faltering. He
took a deep breath. "It's - it's not your fault that I fell in love with you, it's not your fault I couldn't deal with this being just a friendly thing," he said, his voice husky. "It's not your fault I don't feel right sleeping with a guy and not having it mean anything, let alone being - telling the world about it. But... it's not. You're not a dirty secret. I didn't mean to make you feel that way."

"You're... in love with me," said Tony flatly, his mind reeling.

Steve sighed. "Tony, for Christ's sake. If you hadn't figured that out by now..."

"I hadn't," said Tony, feeling numb. In love with him. Perfect. He'd not only not managed to make Steve feel better, he'd managed to make him feel guilty over casual sex, and then somehow totally missed the part where Steve was falling in love with him - with Tony Fucking Stark, genius when it came to machines, and pathetic sub-moron when it came to people.

_Dude, your healing!cock is notsomuch_, he could hear his internal Clint Barton narrator mocking him.

"If you were a dame I'd be the happiest guy in the world." Steve gave a weary laugh, leaning his elbows on the railing. "Well, maybe not, because I woulda proposed to you months ago and you're not the marrying kind, but--"

Tony stopped him with a kiss, and Steve startled for a moment, then leaned into it. It was over fairly quickly, and Tony pulled back, cupping the back of Steve's head and touching their foreheads together. "If I was a woman and you had, I would've said yes," he said, and bit his lip. Oh, shit. "Damn it. That wasn't - fuck, forget I said that, I'm not into marriage and you think it's some Straights-Only club anyway - shit, I'm sorry, God, that's a lot more than I meant to say. Fucking declarations of love during a break-up. I really shouldn't drink before a heart-to-heart, it never goes well, how do I never manage to remember that."

They both drew away at the same time.

"Look, forget it, I didn't say anything," said Tony, and clenched his hands to keep them from shaking. "I'll forget what you said too. Let's just leave it as we're not gonna screw around any more. Unless you decide you actually wanna be out and proud and quit the self-hating thing."

_And let's never tell anybody I ever said any of this because all of my hook-ups except Pepper would wet themselves laughing at me."

Steve nodded quietly, his features pale. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry it didn't work out. For you."

Tony shook his head. "Don't be. I had fun. It's funny, being with you, other than your fucking hangups? Seriously better than... hey, better than any drug, and trust me, I know what I'm talking about. That's part of the problem. With you I feel higher than anything - booze, E, whatever - and we've never even fucked properly." He paused and laughed bitterly. "And you think it's a mistake. Hard to deal with that. I feel higher than a fucking kite, and you feel lower than a child molester."

Steve frowned. "I don't feel--"

"Fine, will you let me exaggerate a little?"

"But I don't--"

"We're in love, Steve. It should be the happiest moment in your life, when you realize the person you're crazy about is just as crazy about you."

"I'll take your word for it," said Steve, looking miserable. "Haven't exactly done this too many
"Me neither," said Tony. Steve gave him a skeptical glance. "Hey, it's true. Do you have any idea how many people I've fucked?" Steve shook his head. "I don't either. You know how many times I've been in love? Three times."

"Tony... I'm sorry. I never meant to..."

Ah, shit. Tony really was too drunk for this. Right now all he wanted was to take Steve in his arms and tell him never mind, of course they could keep messing around. Kiss that sad, guilty look off his face. See whether the libido-killing medication was still affecting him, and reassure him that it was OK if it was, and--

No. He blinked and gathered his thoughts. There were good reasons for staying the course. To wit:

One: Steve might think he was in love with Tony, but he was just a kid. A kid with almost no experience. What did he know?

Two: Steve deserved better than a fuck-up who couldn't even figure out the simplest interpersonal things.

Three: Tony might be a fuck-up when it came to people, but he didn't deserve to be kept in the closet like a fucking umbrella. And he could damn well make and keep friends based on more than just flashing around his money and his dick.

Right.

"Go on in, Steve," Tony said, with small flash of pride for how he managed to make his voice sound almost steady. "It's almost time for Dances With Wolves and we've got a full day of figuring out SHIELD's shenanigans tomorrow." He paused. "We can still be professional about this, right?"

Steve nodded, and Tony could almost see the 'soldiers do what they have to' stoic mask settling onto his features. "Yeah, of course."

"Happily, having to try to figure out how to deal with someone I'm no longer sleeping with is one area where I've had lots of experience," said Tony, his mouth twisting bitterly. "Hey, you and Pepper have something in common now."

Steve gave him a small smile. "I've always liked her."

Tony gave him a small smile back. "Yeah. And hey, you know, it's better this way. I inevitably fuck up eventually anyway. Better get out while the getting's good."

Steve shook his head, and the mask slipped for a moment as he held Tony's gaze. "You don't give yourself enough credit," he said quietly, and went inside.

Tony put his face in his hands, fighting back the urge to throw something or to cry. He took a deep breath, then he turned back to his patiently waiting gin and tossed it back before heading back inside.

Chapter End Notes

1. The movies watched/mentioned are
The Last Emperor, 1987
Rain Man, 1988
   Driving Miss Daisy, 1989
   Dances With Wolves, 1990

2. I made up Celeb City Buzz. I was going to do my regular research-for-realism thing where I go look at something I'm going to reference so I can provide accurate descriptions - maybe catchphrases, descriptions of some of the regulars involved - and then realized that would require, you know, watching a gossip show. I then discovered a hard limit in my dedication to my Art ;
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much, forest_rose and ClawR! Your beta help is much appreciated :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1.

January 22

"Captain Rogers, why did you come here?" asked the grey-haired woman he'd spent so much time talking to in the last few months.

He gazed at her, then glanced around her comfortable, slightly messy office with its children's drawings on the walls and sets of inspirational coffee mugs on the bookshelves. "To be honest, I'm not sure. I think I came to say goodbye officially." He paused. "I'm told it's called a sense of closure."

"I don't mean today," said the counsellor, and Steve reflected that in all the months he'd spent talking to her, he'd never seen her anything other than chipper and optimistic. Now she looked remote, subdued. Tired. "I mean in the first place. Why did you come to us?" Steve blinked. "You've never believed in the everlasting flames of hell, have you?"

Steve shook his head.

"Then there really isn't any purpose to your being here," she said quietly. "Maybe there never really was."

"Isn't this where you're supposed to convince me to come back?"

"I have been doing this for twenty-two years," said the counsellor slowly. "I'm proud of a lot of the work I've done. I've helped people who honestly feel that they will burn in everlasting hell if they give in to their addictions - their impulses. I've helped people whose families would disown them. People who would lose their spouses and children, their entire lives. I'm proud of that work." She sighed. "I've also been called every name in the book, and had clients tell me I ruined their lives by not forcing them to accept who they were." She suddenly looked very old. "I believe in my work, Captain Rogers. But if you don't..."

"I don't."

"You don't seem to me to be a young man who needs what we have to offer. You seem to be conflicted, yes. But not committed. Not to this."

Steve sat back.

She gave him a small smile. "I'm not - it's not that I want to give up on you. I want all my clients to find God, to find happiness. And we're here if you feel you need to come back. I pray that you do. But if you don't... I'll pray for you anyway."
Steve nodded, and stood up. "I don't think I'll be back," he said, and had to wince at the bluntness of his own words. "It's not that I think you should be banned, not like... some people do. But I don't agree with what you do. Not any more." He paused. "Thank you for trying to help me. For doing what you thought was right. But there's nothing wrong with me. Nothing I need to change."

"I've had a lot of my clients tell me that, years later," she answered. "I've learned to be grateful when they don't blame me for wasting years of their lives."

Steve nodded and moved to the door.

"Captain Rogers," she called out. He turned back. She looked uncomfortable for the first time, choosing her words carefully. "If you don't choose to come back... you don't have to wallow in the kinds of behaviour that... others do." His eyebrows went up and she hurried on. "I don't think that's who you are, regardless of your orientation. I do have gay friends, and not all of them - I don't agree with their choices, but I do believe that some have made better decisions than others in terms of the lifestyle they choose to pursue." She paused and said carefully. "If you do pursue a relationship... just be careful. There are many people in the lifestyle you're choosing who... who should not be emulated. You should... take care. Of who you surround yourself with."

Steve thought for a moment. Are you telling me that if I have to be gay, at least don't be gay with Tony Stark? Briefly he thought of saying that out loud, but there was no point.

"Thank you," he said instead. He paused at the door. "Goodbye."

"Good luck, Captain Rogers. I'll pray for you."

Steve walked away from the church, feeling strangely relieved and let down at the same time.

He checked his watch. Three hours till their meeting with SHIELD.

He looked around and headed down the quiet street, no particular destination in mind. He'd needed to get out of the Tower this morning, had wanted to settle some things that he really should've settled a long time ago, in the spirit of ending things that needed to be ended. But that had gone a lot faster than he'd expected, and now he had all this time and nothing to do but brood and worry and think...

And he believed what he'd just told the counsellor, he realized, stopping short in the middle of the street as it hit him with unexpected force. He'd wrestled with this for so long, about what was right and what God wanted and what he believed, and had slowly started to intellectually agree that maybe Tony and Clint and all the others were right, but still felt in his heart that there if there was a way to be normal, then maybe... but now, with a clear head, and a year of living in this world...

There was nothing wrong with him. There was nothing he needed to change about that part of himself.

What he and Tony had done together might be something he'd been told was evil and weak for most of his life, and might still be thought of as disgusting and wrong and sick by a lot of the world, but the peace and joy he'd found in Tony's bed was nothing to be ashamed of. Not in that way, anyway. The only thing wrong with it was that it was supposed to be about more than just a roll in the hay; it was a part of yourself that you shared with someone you loved and were committed to for life, and not just with a pal with some time on his hands and an unhealthy tendency to give too much of himself for his friends.

He sighed, his sense of stunned relief giving way to a wave of regret. "Friends" wasn't all he and Tony had been, no matter what Tony said. And if Steve hadn't been a horse's ass and brought his
insecurity and hang-ups into the bedroom, maybe eventually Tony would've realized that. Maybe he wouldn't have made Tony feel like there was something wrong with them and they had to end things.

Maybe he wouldn't have taken the closest friend he had in this time and used him, taken what he needed and repaid him by treating him like shit. Like he could just be picked up whenever Steve couldn't take the pain and loneliness and frustrated desire any more, and tossed aside when he felt better.

God, he'd been so selfish and blind. Tony hadn't deserved that. No wonder he'd backed off. Amazing that he hadn't done so a lot sooner.

Steve took a seat at the cafe, feeling drained and noting with relief that Beth didn't seem to be working today. He passed the time alternating going over the last bits of paperwork for the Taft mission and occasionally drawing, trying to psych himself up for the meeting at SHIELD.

It would be fine. The hard part had been deciding what to do and planning the meeting. A harder part would be the coming weeks and months. This meeting? Peanuts.

His cell phone pinged - damn, he really had to ask Clint how to manage this thing because Tony had programmed his phone to the tune of the Star Spangled Banner and he was getting pretty sick of it - and he checked the number.

"Ready Cap?" said Tony's voice. Steve's heart gave a small thud.

"As we'll ever be," he answered. "Everything still as planned?"

"Yup. Assassin Twins are meeting us there. Hill's gonna be there too."

"We still let Sorensen go first?"

"No reason not to. I bow to your wisdom about discretion and not wearing the suit to the meeting. Humdrum administrivia all the way." There was a pause. "Almost all the way."

"It wasn't just my wisdom," Steve reminded him.

"Hey, I'm letting you feel like you won an argument. Don't question it. It's called being gracious."

Steve smiled and stood to go, reflecting that it was a good thing Tony had a lot of experience with this not-together-any-more thing. He hadn't allowed any awkwardness between them. As far as the team was concerned, there was no change; they'd barely acted like a couple before, and the fact that they hadn't sat together as *Dances With Wolves* gave way to *The Silence of the Lambs* was not remarked upon.

At least Steve didn't have to deal with losing Tony's friendship. No fights, no anger... just regret and guilt. Just desire that he couldn't act on any more, a yearning to touch and hold and go back in time and not screw this up and take for granted the best thing going on in his life right now.

Steve hurried into SHIELD HQ half an hour later, gathering with his team-mates in a board room and sat through an admin meeting, all of them responding and nodding in all the right places as Sorensen droned about procedure and documents to be filled about Taft and a request for specifications for Clint's new arrows, and Tony's by-now-standard refusal to provide said specs.

"I don't think you appreciate that you no longer have Director Fury's backing on this," said Sorensen impatiently. "We have a new Director, and I doubt she's going to continue to indulge your lack of
cooperation." He turned to Hill expectantly.

Hill's eyebrows went up. "Agent Sorensen, we haven't discussed this. Perhaps after the meeting would be a better time to talk over what it is that you think I should do about Iron Man's preference for not sharing Stark Industry trade secrets."

Sorensen's mouth thinned briefly. "Very well, Director. I'll send you a memo. I do think that as SHIELD personnel, Iron Man has a duty to--"

"Um, excuse me, Iron Man is a consultant, not personnel," Tony interrupted, his eyes narrowed in annoyance.

"You're part of SHIELD. You have certain responsibilities. It's time you started to act like it," said Sorensen.

Tony glanced around the room. The tension had suddenly spiked, as they all leaned forward in their seats.

"Guys?"

Steve glanced around the room. Technically they had agreed to wait until all of SHIELD's agenda items were done before springing this on them, but there was no real reason for that other than politeness. He gave a small nod, and saw no demurral from any of his team-mates.

"Iron Man?" Sorensen prompted. "You have something to say?"

"Funny you should ask," said Tony, sitting back. "We were going to wait till after you were done bitching about inappropriate use of copier fluid and triplicate request forms for paperclips, but now's as good a time as any. Yeah, so, we quit."

Sorensen blinked.

Hill leaned forward, her eyes narrowing. "Come again?"

"We. Us. All of us, as a team. We are withdrawing from SHIELD auspices."

"Are you serious?" Hill looked around at the team.

"We are leaving," Thor answered. "We are remaining Avengers, but shall no longer be part of SHIELD."

"All of you?" said Sorensen, looking around the table.

"All of us," said Steve. Bruce nodded. Natasha reached into her pocket and took out her SHIELD ID, placing it on the table before her, and Hill's eyes widened as Clint did the same.

"Are you seriously--" she began.

"They can't--" Sorensen interrupted her.

"Agent Sorensen, please," said Hill brusquely. "Why?"

"We have our reasons," said Bruce.

"Listen," said Hill, her voice rising, "You don't have to do this--"
"Director, you can't allow them to just walk away," said Sorensen.

Hill turned to him impatiently. "Agent Sorensen, Mr. Stark and Mr. Banner are consultants only, and Thor isn't exactly regular staff. There is nothing I can do to stop them. Now be quiet." She turned to Steve, Clint and Natasha. "The three of you are SHIELD. You can't just--"

Steve leaned towards her. "It's a job," he said. "It's just a job. And we quit."

"Maybe to you it is," said Hill, and turned to Clint and Natasha. "But you two--"

"It's just a job," Clint repeated. "I've had lotsa jobs."

"You'll have to be cleared to exit," said Sorensen.

"We know that."

"There are fairly rigorous exit interviews," said Hill. "For all of you. It's not a step to take lightly."

"We know that too," said Steve.

Hill gave him a hard look. "I told you that you were welcome to join Research and--"

"And then you put a stop to that."

"This is highly irregular!" Sorensen said.

"Yes, it is," said Hill. "What brought this on?"

"It's not working out," said Tony. "There's been problems with the team and SHIELD from the beginning. We're just pulling the plug. I had Legal go over it and we're totally clear."

"You've learned a great many things through SHIELD that--"

"We've explained confidentiality clauses to them," said Natasha. "And we're familiar with them ourselves."

"They have to return all SHIELD technology," said Sorensen.

"Oh no, please not that," Tony sneered. "Legolas and the Widow haven't used SHIELD tech in months, you moron. I've been supplying all their weaponry. Half of SHIELD's weaponry, as a matter of fact."

"What about Captain Rogers?" said Sorensen.

"His shield was designed and built by Howard Stark," said Tony with a smirk. "We can fight over it in court, but I don't think you'll like the media fallout if you try to take it away from him."

"That's not the only SHIELD tech he has."

"The uniform? Please. Did you never notice that he never came to you for repairs on that thing? That's because I repaired and rebuilt it about a dozen times. Though I suppose you can still claim it's yours." He rolled his eyes. "What would you do if he'd shown up here wearing it? You'd want him to strip off for you in here and walk home bare-assed? I'd have a new uniform delivered to the front door in a limo."

"That's not it." Sorensen nodded towards Steve's arm.
Steve blinked. "You mean the implant?"

"It's proprietary SHIELD technology, invented and built by our scientists and currently administering medication formulated by SHIELD Medical."

Bruce made a noise in his throat and Clint blew out his breath in disgust.

Steve nodded. "That's a good point. How do we get it out?"

Tony's smirk dropped. "Steve, are you kidding?"

"It'll be OK," said Steve calmly. "He's right; if it's not mine, it needs to come out. We knew there would be sacrifices."

"Had you already thought about this?"

"No, but it's not a big deal," Steve kept his expression calm and refused to give Sorensen any satisfaction. Bruce could reformulate a lot of what SHIELD Medical had worked on; he'd been backing up SHIELD Medical for him for months. Tony had already figured out the cost of their medical care, and that included therapy. Granted, none of them had factored in the idea of trying to get medication to work on his enhanced system, but Bruce could figure it out.

He'd be OK. He ruthlessly tamped down fear at the thought of dropping back down into depression, having to try to cope again with anxiety attacks.

There was no cause for alarm. The medication had been meant to stabilize him when he was deeply depressed, give him time to feel better while he and Dr. Sanjay worked out his issues. Well, he'd had months of that. He was feeling better and it wasn't all due to the little implant in his arm.

Funny, though; for all that he'd hated the thought of being dependent on it at first, he certainly didn't feel too good about giving it up now.

"How should we do this?" Steve asked, his voice determinedly casual. "Should I go down to Medical right now?"

Sorensen blinked.

"Or are you gonna do it right now with a knife?" asked Tony angrily, making no attempt at nonchalance. "You might as well, he'll heal right away anyway and without the implant there's no pain medication that'll work on him--"

"We would be within our rights to do exactly that," Sorensen began.

"And of course we wouldn't," Hill broke in hastily. "Captain Rogers, we can make an appointment to deal with that later this week, if you really are serious about leaving."

"We're serious," said Bruce flatly. "Really, really serious."

Hill gave him a level gaze, then moved to the rest of the group. "All right, then," she said calmly. "As of 14:15, the Avengers are no longer associated with SHIELD." She sat back and stared at them, her eyes stony and unamused. "You are making a huge mistake. Without SHIELD resources--"

"We'll do fine," said Tony.

She pursed her lips. "For what it's worth... good luck."
And that was the second time today Steve had been wished luck by someone he was rejecting. He tried not to feel like there was something passive-aggressive about it.

He stood, and followed his team-mates out the door.

2.

January 29

The Tower deck was a bit like a reverse snowglobe, thought Natasha as she walked out into the cool evening. Snow was coming down all around but somehow kept off the actual deck itself, an oddly beautiful effect. It was empty; nobody around yet, since the movie wasn't on for another hour. Natasha took a deep breath and gazed out over the railing, clearing her mind and settling her body, reaching for peace after a full day of hard work on the move from SHIELD.

It was so peaceful out here. So different from the frenzied flurry of meetings and exit interviews and strategy sessions that had filled this week.

She finally sat down on a deck chair, satisfied that her thoughts were more orderly, and pulled a Starkpad towards her, frowning as her newfound peace faltered at the sight of yet another flagged story about Tony and Steve.

Iron Man's Broken Heart?

Ugh.

God, weren't they tired of that yet? She flicked the story away, then clicked on “Related stories” against her better judgment, groaning inwardly as yet another column about Steve's mental health appeared. Those were even more disturbing, as the media indulged in their time-honored practice of tearing down the very people they built up. Speculations as to whether Steve was fit to serve again, and whether he had merely suffered from depression or been actively suicidal, whether he'd recovered and how...

And there it was, a photograph of Steve in Taft, cowl off and frowning at one of the idiots they'd apprehended. Somehow the angle and lighting made it look like Steve was nervous, almost intimidated by the guy. Which was funny because moments after the picture the moron had tried to bolt and gotten about three feet before super-soldier reflexes and a steely grip on his collar snapped him back.

"Don't do that again," Steve had said mildly, holding the guy a foot off the ground and politely ignoring his girly squeak.

Unstable and emotionally compromised, the article speculated. Not ready to take up the shield again.

That wasn't how Natasha remembered Taft at all. She remembered seeing Steve coming out of the Quinjet, suited up, calm and confident, and it was like the man they'd come to know over the last few months, who had doubts and fears and mood swings and who had sometimes seemed like all he wanted was to be allowed to die in peace - that man had disappeared, and Steve Rogers was back among the living. Captain America was back where he belonged.

It wasn't anywhere near that simple, Natasha had reminded herself sternly. He was only there for muscle, only tentatively cleared to be part of their dysfunctional little team again. And she knew that given a major setback he could be right back where he had been, on that ledge on Staten Island or on the floor of their kitchen, huddled and sobbing while Tony was forced into the uncomfortable role of
grownup and held him close and whispered comforting words and rocked him back and forth into stability.

But that day, he'd been Captain America again. The man who had led the Howling Commandos and made Phil Coulson swoon like a giddy fanboy and brought the Avengers together like nobody else could. Natasha had felt her heart soar despite herself.

*Fit To Lead Again?* wondered another headline, and Natasha wanted to kick whoever had written it until she scanned through it and found a relatively balanced piece. Yes, a mention of him being gone for a while, yes, some doubts as to the wisdom of allowing such a young man with such a past to take on such a stressful job again; but also an exhaustive list of his many triumphs, both during the War and during his time with the Avengers.

*God's Peace: Religious Therapy, Or Psychological Abuse?* asked another headline. She scanned. Allegations that Steve had been a regular at the church. Firm refusal to comment from church officials. Silence from Steve, the Avengers, and SHIELD.

And just how the hell had the media caught wind of the particular place Steve had attended?

Clint walked out onto the deck, drying his hair, and flopped down into the chair next to Natasha. She put her pad onto her lap and leaned over to rub his shoulder; he often got aches in it from target practice, and their sparring match yesterday hadn't helped. Thank God Tony's private Avengers gig included medical.

It was so odd to no longer be part of SHIELD, she thought as Clint closed his eyes and leaned forward, elbows on his knees and head bowed as she massaged his shoulders. So odd to no longer be part of that world. To be living, essentially, on Tony Stark's dime. Odd and disturbing. After so long with SHIELD being their only stability, their only salvation...

SHIELD people came in all types, but there were more than a few like the two of them: throwaways who had SHIELD or nothing. Assassins, hackers, social misfits; no family, no home. They tended to either be fanatically loyal to the only place that had ever let them belong, or pragmatic and ready to fly the coop at any moment.

Clint and Natasha had always prided themselves on being somewhere in the middle, in part because of each other and because of Phil, but if she'd had to choose Natasha would've said she was more of the former. Until a few months ago, she would never have considered leaving SHIELD.

"How are you doing?" she asked Clint, giving his shoulder a final pat. Clint sighed and rubbed his neck.

"Fine," he said, and rotated the shoulder tentatively. He winced.

"When's the movie?"

"In a few minutes. Bruce is finishing some hummus dip."

"How's the shoulder?"

"Fine." Clint glanced at the Starkpad on her lap. "How's the news?"

"Fine."

Clint snorted. "Yeah. Like my shoulder." He scanned the pad. *Iron Man Dumped?* and *Captain America, Ex-Gay?* headlines screamed from the surface.
"Notice there's nothing about us leaving SHIELD." He ran a finger over the pad, scrolling through the stories she'd just been reading.

"Good thing."

"Seems like that's about the only thing that's not covered, though," he remarked, stopping on a picture of Steve smiling at a star-struck gap-toothed child from Taft, with a headline underneath reading Suicide Watch For Cap? and a sensationalist expose with subheadings titled, Religious mania, Secret relationships, and Love triangle? above a picture of Tony, Steve, and Pepper.

"It's like they're throwing anything and seeing what sticks," said Natasha. "Typical."

"I wanna know how they got so much right, though," said Clint. "Some of the details--"

"SHIELD Medical knew about his suicide watch," Natasha pointed out.

"They didn't know about God's Peace," said Clint, pointing at the name on the screen. "Steve never told anyone at SHIELD the name of the church he went to - hell, none of us but Tony even knew he went. And nobody but us knew they were fucking. Or that they'd broken up. Who the hell told? It was either the church or the shrink. Again. And Steve swears up and down that he doesn't believe they told."

"I don't think he's so sure about the church any more," said Natasha. "But I don't think it's them either."

"So, what, you're saying it's SHIELD?"

"I don't know. If it is them, though, you can bet they're laying the groundwork so that if it comes out that we've left, we look like a bunch of lunatics."

"Especially if we say anything about why," Clint agreed glumly.

Natasha sighed. That was one of their biggest bugaboos. What to say, when to say it. Bruce and, to a smaller degree, Steve, wanted to go public with it, but the rest of them were urging caution, for various reasons - not the least of which was the fact that it would expose Clint and Natasha's failure to maintain non-disclosure. It... wasn't helping team dynamics.

"What's the movie tonight?" asked Natasha. "I take it there was a discussion on that last night after I went to bed."

"Forrest Gump," said Clint.

"So we are skipping Schindler's List then? Too triggering?"

"Nah, we decided to go ahead and see it after all. But then Bruce said everyone was too exhausted this week and half of us would just fall asleep. We're gonna watch it when we're not so out of it. Besides, after Lambs and Unforgiven we kinda need a little levity."

Natasha nodded. "Good. It deserves full attention."

"You've seen it?"

"Many times."

"Isn't it a bit of a bummer?"
"The hero is a morally bankrupt man with a lot of red in his ledger," said Natasha. "I found it... uplifting."

"We are skipping The English Patient, though."

"Too triggery?"

"Also boring, according to Bruce, who tried to see it with a girlfriend in the theatre and when it came out on video and fell asleep five time times."

Natasha laughed. "Bruce said that? I would've pegged him for a romantic."

"I got the feeling he just wanted to give Tony and Steve an excuse to skip it."

"Guys," said Bruce, poking his head out onto the deck. "Movie time." He stepped back inside and Natasha and Clint got up to follow him.

He looked tired, Natasha noted. But at least he was talking to her and Clint. Their relationship had taken a bit of a beating, but they were OK. Sort of.

They went inside and helped Bruce bring trays of the hummus and something Steve had made - some kind of Middle Eastern samosa-like baked things - to the movie room. They all settled down to watch, as the screen lit up with a feather swirling up into the sky.

Natasha looked around at her subdued team-mates, all showing the strain of the last week of living in a kind of no-man's-land, having quit SHIELD but still being up in the air about exactly what that meant.

They couldn't even go public with that, for one thing. Not without knowing more about how they were going to manage themselves, not without knowing more about exactly what had happened at SHIELD and whether it might still be a threat to them. Tony had been working night and day on it, looking through servers, trying to track down Fury, frustrated that they weren't getting anywhere.

They wouldn't be in this position if they'd waited a little longer before quitting, she thought for about the millionth time. Then again, considering how some of her team-mates had felt about SHIELD, she was lucky they'd agreed to delay even the minimal time they had. And it wasn't like they could do anything about it now, not without a time machine.

And they couldn't do anything about the fresh batch of publicity regarding Steve and Tony, either. It was disturbing that all of it was going on right now, but for all they knew, it might just be one of those media things where there was a slow news week and they latched on to something inane.

Natasha shifted over slightly as Clint leaned up against her and smiled as Forrest Gump held out a box to the woman on the bus bench next to him.

"Mah mama always said," Forrest began, and Clint, Natasha, Bruce, and Tony finished with him, "Life was like a box a chock'lits," laughing as Forrest continued his speech.

"That's where that came from!" Steve exclaimed.

"What?" asked Tony.

"This guy at Research and Analysis," said Steve. "When I was doing training. He'd say that every so often, 'Research an' Analysis is like a box a chock'lits, ya never know what you gonna git,' and I could never understand why he put on an accent."
Tony smiled at him and they both turned back to the screen, seemingly engrossed in the movie, and if Natasha hadn't known they were no longer together she'd have sworn the casual way they were behaving towards each other was perfectly normal. They were being so mature and reasonable, so careful to show no hint of anything having gone wrong.

And it was wrong. Very wrong. Steve was quiet and pensive, and couldn't seem to look at Tony without guilt in his eyes. Tony was very determinedly not acting in any way that was any different from before, right down to working to all hours and kidding around with Steve, but it felt forced. They were trying, but it wasn’t the same. They were too careful with each other. No more touching each other, no more smiles that actually reached their eyes.

It was depressing, is what it was. For a woman who so determinedly didn't believe in love, it was disheartening to see it go bad.

Natasha turned away from them and back to the screen. She was turning into a sap. And at a remarkably bad time, too. She believed in individual strength, in independence. Being alone, self-sufficient. The way she had been before SHIELD. She'd let herself get too soft, these last few years. She shouldn't continue down that route. She shouldn't let herself romanticize love and friendship any more than she'd let herself romanticize SHIELD. All of it was unreliable; all of it could turn on you.

Even though everything felt different right now. She was alone again, she'd lost the protection of SHIELD, but she still had Clint. She still had the team, shaky as it was.

She even still had friends. She'd gotten several emails from people at SHIELD, people she hadn't realized considered her anything but a colleague. She'd always thought she was a maverick, part of the organization but outside of it; apparently she'd been wrong.

Can't believe you're gone, Agent Romanova, said one email from an agent she'd worked with a few times and worked out with whenever they were both in the gym.

Ours is not to question why you quit, said another from Chang. But there's a lot of us who are wondering. You will be missed.

And a very strange anonymous one, that she and Clint had puzzled over extensively and then brought to the attention of the rest of the team. One more thing for Tony to work with, one more reason to think they were right to have left.

Keep looking, it said. You weren't wrong. You were given a great deal of latitude for a reason. We weren't wrong either.

She turned back to the movie, clearing her mind so she could pursue it more tomorrow.

3.

February 8

"You know, these guys should be the Verminators," said Tony's voice over the comm.

Steve whacked back a grimy-looking young man and couldn't help agreeing with the description. He'd been expecting mad scientists. Instead, they were facing... actually, they looked a bit like the warriors from Braveheart. All they needed was blue paint. And apparently they didn't have a high opinion of personal hygiene.

Steve swiped sweat from his face, then ducked and hit another assailant. The smell was probably
partly due to the unpleasant Miami heat - a change from New York, which was chilling the Avengers to the bone these days. And it wasn't just the grimy people, it was the warehouse and the whole neighborhood, wafting a bizarre scent of tar and vomit that Steve didn't think he could have possible imagined and didn't think he'd be able to forget any time soon. If this is what these guys had to live with on a daily basis, it was really no wonder they didn't bother to bathe.

Steve ducked and punched and drew a quick breath as the last two guys attacking him finally went down. He checked - OK, three breathing and bleeding - took the tracking devices Tony had provided him with and clipped them onto the unconscious men. He grimaced and whacked the spines of the non-breathing ones, wincing at the weird popping sound as they went limp but relieved that at least he wasn't killing anyone. And SHIELD would pick up the tagged men eventually.

They were battling some idiots who apparently wanted to try a combination of pilfered high-tech and possible biological warfare kluged together from alien technology. Not viruses, but many species of weird crawling insects, ranging from gnat-sized to about the size of a Chihuahua. SHIELD had been keeping an eye on these guys for a while, according to Tony's intel. Had noticed weird science lab materials entering a nondescript warehouse and too much movement of people in and out. Had decided to move in on them at dawn this morning when they started getting reports of weird-looking, weird-acting, impossible-to-kill bugs coming from the warehouse - and had discovered themselves outnumbered, outgunned and outnumbered, if that was a word. The first unit had been easily repelled, the warehouse nearly impossible to breach, and the agents who'd gotten inside reported being beaten back by surprisingly grimy scientists, some of them eerily silent, and swarms of vicious bugs.

The second storming attempt a few hours later had gone no better. More agents, more tech - more mad scientists and bugs. SHIELD had settled in around the warehouse to try to figure out how to get them out, reluctant to damage the building and risk releasing the bugs - and then a group of agents going for a coffee a block away had spotted a group of bad guys trying to sneak off, no idea how they'd gotten out of the warehouse. It was only by luck that they'd run into them. SHIELD had gone into massive containment mode.

That was when the Avengers had decided to step in. The Verminators were trying to get out. They were going to get away, with their weird tech and bugs, and SHIELD wasn't getting the job done. Maybe a flying suit, JARVIS's observational and analytical abilities, and Bruce and Tony's genius, could get the job done. And if they also had Thor and Clint watching from up high for more of these folks popping up out of nowhere and Steve and Natasha to help beat back whoever did, well maybe that could help too.

Seemed to be going well so far. Tony had gotten a lot of info and shared it with SHIELD, they'd managed to contain several small groups that had gotten out, and seemed to be making a difference. They'd even discovered that the eerily silent grimy human fighters weren't human at all; they were "some kind of knockoff Life Model Decoy," according to Tony. Which certainly made fighting them a little easier, since he didn't have to worry about causing unnecessary harm the way he did with the humans.

Most of the human-like assailants seemed eager to fight but not up Natasha's or Clint's level, let alone Steve's. Clint was beginning to sound out of breath; three batches of assailants had appeared on his perch, trying to bring him down. So far he'd brought all of them down instead, but he was getting tired and wasn't happy about the bug-protecting coverings over his eyes, face and arms. They were all hot and tired, beating back people and securing them while Tony, Thor and Clint tried to figure out where the hell all they were coming from so they could cut them off at the source, how to get into the warehouse without blowing up the surrounding city blocks or possibly setting off something volatile inside...
It was too damn hot here. And extremely frustrating, beating back one batch of unwashed people and annoying bugs only to have another one spring up a few minutes later, from out of nowhere it seemed. The warehouse wasn't that large... how many of them could there be?

On the other hand, it was nice to be doing something active. They'd been busy setting up their own observation equipment since they couldn't use SHIELD's, getting up to speed on various intel, going over old missions, trying to see how they would have run them with no SHIELD logistical or infrastructure behind them. It had been an interesting mental exercise. They'd missed an incursion of some kind in Milwaukee, they thought - one of the things SHIELD did rather well was keep things out of the media, so it was hard to tell exactly what they'd missed - and it was sobering how much they relied on SHIELD in previous missions. They'd tentatively decided that this event on the outskirts of Miami was a good test, and besides, they were needed.

"SHIELD still has the north quarter?" Natasha asked. It was a little eerie that they were cooperating the way they were; not working together, but the Avengers had informed SHIELD that they were taking the area past NW 60th and a voice - sounded like Taggart, an agent Steve had worked with before - had curtly said, "Acknowledge," and let them handle things themselves.

Steve ran behind the warehouse, alert for any new breakouts Tony, Thor, and Clint might not be able to see up high. He heard Tony curse.

"Another breakout, west side - damn it, that's seventeen, eighteen - Thor, can you get them? SHIELD's getting pummelled--"

"This is taking too long," said Clint. "SHIELD evacuated twelve square blocks, right?"

"Yeah," said Tony.

Bruce's voice came over their comm. "Should I call in the Other Guy?"

"No, it's fine, we can handle it," said Tony.

"Iron Man, are you sure?" said Steve. "The Other Guy knows enough about LMDs and people to not go after the people. Didn't you say LMDs smell funny to him, Bruce?"

"They irritate him," said Bruce.

There was a brief pause.

"You think?" asked Tony.

"I think it's worth a try," said Steve.

"Big Green, what do you say?"

Bruce chuckled. "I think it'll be fine."

"Remember SHIELD also suspects these bugs might not just have venom. Me and Steve and Thor and the Hulk are probably fine, but I'm not feeling great about Hawkeye and the Widow."

"We can take care of ourselves, Iron Man," Clint said. "Bugs haven't bitten through yet."

"I know you can take care of yourselves hand-to-hand; I'm worried about viruses. And there's SHIELD agents and local law enforcement to think about too. Besides we're gonna have to turn this over to the good people of Miami sometime soon; I don't much feel like letting these idiots put bio
junk into the city."

"OK. Bruce?"

Steve nodded and flung his shield at a human fighter as Bruce went past him, growing into a force to be reckoned with and going around the corner.

"Smash!"

He followed at a distance, keeping to his area in case there was another breakout but getting close enough to see Hulk grab one LMD and roll it like a pinball towards a group of others, bowling them over. It was going to be OK; this looked like it was maybe a final push out, and it looked like the Hulk might be helpful enough that maybe SHIELD could finally just concentrate on the humans and maybe finish securing them. Steve glanced down the street, debating calling Natasha to get her feel on whether this was a final push and they should lend a hand, or whether it was a distraction and they should keep their posts--

Suddenly there were shouts as a large group came out of the door closest to Steve and headed straight towards him, desperation clear in their faces. He braced himself and waded in, glad he'd kept his post and wishing it was a little easier to tell who was who, holding his own and beating down opponents and they were turning the tide, this was the final push, he'd downed most of them, just two left--

Steve suddenly stumbled as something ripped through his glove and embedded itself into the back of his hand, pain blossoming from the impact as it expanded and the bones cracked. He bit his lip back on a shout, as another projectile lodged itself into his ribcage.

"Jesus Christ! Steve!" Tony's voice came over the comm.

"It's OK," Steve gritted out, flinging his shield in front of him and crouching down behind it to avoid any more missiles. "I can still move. See if Hawkeye can take down whoever just got me."

"Done, Cap," Clint's voice came over the comm. "He's - uh, she was on the roof across the park. Iron Man, I've got her netted. Looks like she also got some of the SHIELD agents on the other side of her building though--"

Steve bit down on the inside of his mouth, chanced to look down. His shield hand was still intact, his other hand a sodden mess and his uniform was soaked, an ugly gash in his side where whatever it was had gone in.

Tony landed next to him, grabbing his arm to prepare to lift him away.

"No," he said. "Don't lift me, I don't want to puncture a lung. It's gonna hurt like a sonofabitch but I'll be fine, remember? Super-soldier?" He paused, took a breath that lanced through him like fire. "Go see to those SHIELD agents that got hit."

Tony took off without a word and Steve looked around. The people he'd been fighting looked like they were disappearing, a dozen or so of them down in one way or another, many of them looking like maybe he or Natasha had knocked them out and Clint had netted them. He could hear Hulk still rampaging, but it was all beginning to feel faint and faraway.

"Cap, I'm gonna need you to head for the SHIELD comm portable unit, OK?" said Tony's voice over the comm. "I'm picking up SHIELD agents to bring in and so's Thor. We've got three down, looks nasty. Can you get there on your own?"
Steve nodded. "Yeah. I can get there."

"Captain, lean on me," said Natasha from his side, and he blinked. She looked dusty and sweaty and had taken off her face mask and glasses. There was a streak of something across her cheek, but she didn't seem to have any of her own blood on her.

"What--"

"They're retreating," she said, a small arm slipping around his uninjured side and her frame providing surprising steadiness. "Iron Man brought some injured SHIELD agents to their control building and he and Thor are collecting the guys we took down. SHIELD's determined that those darts have bio contaminants; we're not sure exactly what that means but they've asked us to join them in the building."

"How many got away?" he asked, focusing on each step. Jesus. His ribs felt like there was a bomb lodged in there.

"We don't know. A few. There were over a hundred when we started, plus LMDs."

"What happened to the LMDs?"

"Hulk smashed the hell out of every LMD they had," said Clint, joining them and taking Natasha's place. Steve felt himself relax as he took more of Steve's weight, now that he didn't have to lean down so much for his larger frame. "He sat on a bunch of them, it was actually pretty funny. Unfortunately I guess someone didn't like that, so they burst out the big guns and now we've got SHIELD agents itching at themselves and we're calling for a quarantine. We're joining them in this little shelter."

Steve's vision was starting to swim. The comm portable building seemed to be shimmering.

"It's just SHIELD's got a hazmat tent over it," said Clint. "It's a portable unit they use. We all need to go in, Steve, and they're gonna irradiate this whole area and get rid of the little watchamacallits."

Steve nodded, trying to listen as they stumbled into the comm center, crowded with at least a dozen agents as well as themselves.

"...didn't ask the Avengers to interfere," said Sorensen's voice over an open comm. "This is SHIELD--"

"We took out all the LMDs," snapped Clint, helping Steve sit down on the nearest chair as a dusty, tired agent hastily vacated it. "We picked up three of your injured people. We netted a bunch of your prisoners. You're very welcome, you ignorant--"

"And we're grateful for your help," said Taggart. "Come in," he gestured to Natasha. "Make some room," he called out, and there was a general shuffling of bodies around the crowded space. "And get some bandages!"

"They aren't part of SHIELD," said an agent.

"You can't leave them outside," said another.

"Sorensen's gonna shit."

"Sorensen's not their liaison any more."
"Sorensen's got a point, though," said one of the agents. "He tried to work with them; they're loose cannons."

"You know we've got superhero-hearing, right?" said Clint, annoyed, taking off his and Steve's face masks and glasses. "As in, we can hear you when everyone's in real close quarters and you're making no effort to keep your voice down?"

"Steve," said Tony, still suited up and taking up a great deal of space as he entered the portable. He knelt next to Steve's chair and raised his faceplate. "Jesus, Steve. What the hell. You're--" he trailed off, staring at the sodden shredded mess of Steve's left side.

"It's all right," Steve said, nausea rising.

"It's not all right. You've got - holy shit. That thing looks like it exploded on impact."

"It did, and his isn't the only one," said a medic, shouldering past and peering at Steve's side. "You didn't get a chance to take a good look at those folks you brought in. Not actually as destructive as they look, but they've got some sort of bio-contaminant. And the lady your archer took down was firing canisters of the stuff down at random after shooting the ones in darts."

"He's--"

"Good news is, he'll live," she said, hastily pressing some dressings to Steve's injuries and standing to go. " Didn't pierce a lung or hit major arteries. I'll be back when I'm done with--"

"They're right," said Steve, holding Tony back as he moved to grab the medic. "I'll be fine."

Tony took off his helmet and dropped it next to Steve's chair. He peered at Steve's side. "Listen, you know Stark Industries just hired a medical research team of our own, they're on standby--"

"Until we know how contagious these things are we're not letting anybody in or out of this unit," said Taggart.

Tony opened his mouth, then shut it.

"The hell," said Clint, watching as blood seeped around the dressing and ran down Steve's side. "We don't even know that--"

"We don't," said Tony, his voice hoarse. "But they're right. We stay here."

"Until we know how contagious these things are we're not letting anybody in or out of this unit," said Taggart.

Tony opened his mouth, then shut it.

"All right. As far as I can tell it's not too bad," she muttered. "Just some kind of bugs wriggling around in there. Just seems to be causing irritation in the people who were doused with it over the skin and some pain in the people who got it in darts. I mean, who knows, it may end up being a major disaster where we're all infected with the zombie plague, but right now it looks like the major problem with the darts is how they spread and crack shit up on impact."

"Your bedside manner--" Tony began.
"Is nothing compared to the bill you're probably gonna get for this once the new world order sees I treated your man," noted the medic as she examined Steve more closely.

"And you'll get my bill for bringing in three of your people," Tony shot back.

"Touché," she said, grinning as she leaned over Steve's side. "Right. This is where I normally put in some painkillers, but... hang on, we should still have on hand the formula for what SHIELD Medical had worked out for your implant, shouldn't we? We can probably synthesize it? Stan, look it up," she said over her shoulder, and another medic got onto a pad and started typing. She kept working as she talked. "You're. Shit. It's dug in. It's gone right in between your ribs."

Steve flinched and tried not to scream as she poked and prodded. "Yeah, it's wedged in real good. I'm gonna need to cut some, then spread your ribs apart a bit and dig it out. It's left a hell of a mess on the way in, too... shit, your tissues are trying to close around it, that's not helping. Jesus."

"All right," he bit out. "Take it out."

"Any pain relief administered is a SHIELD proprietary formula," said Sorensen's voice over the main portable comm, and the medic blinked. "He shouldn't even still have the implant."

"You're a piece of shit, Sorensen," said Tony after moment. "You're a piece of shit and if I could I'd wipe you off my shoe."

The medic's mouth dropped open. "What the--"

"What the fuck is the matter with you--"

"We don't have time for this," said Steve. "And Tony, it doesn't really work anyway, it doesn't knock me out; all it does is take the edge off a bit and messes with my senses and then I throw up. It's like being drunk." He took a quick breath, wishing breathing didn't hurt so much.

"It's better than nothing--"

"It's not gonna kill me to not have it. And I'd really rather get these things out than keep arguing."

"You're a piece of shit, Sorensen," said Tony after moment. "You're a piece of shit and if I could I'd wipe you off my shoe."

The medic was looking almost as angry as Tony. "Fine. We'll do without." She started to sterilize her surgical equipment. "Never wanted to do this again after Albuquerque," she muttered. "Yeah, I was on that team. Had nightmares about that for days. And we don't even have reinforced straps here."

"If the Hulk was here, he could probably sit on you," said the other medic, helping Steve off the sodden chair and onto the floor, away from the puddle of blood, and starting to cut away the side of his suit.

"He's still out there, though, looking sad," said one of the other agents, looking out the window. "One of you is gonna have to go collect him when he turns back."

"Sir," JARVIS's tinny voice came on the overhead, startling the SHIELD agents. "Captain Rogers' vital signs have spiked sharply in the last--"

"Yeah, thanks, JARVIS, we're on it," said Tony.

"You were not responding to--"
"Helmet's on the floor. Nothing you can do anyway."

"Does he monitor all of you?" asked the medic, and Tony shook his head grimly.

"Use your metal suit and grasp his shoulders, brother," said Thor to Tony. "I will hold down his lower body." He sent a venomous glare towards the comm console. "Sorensen is a petty man with no honor. There is no reason to force a man to suffer when it can be prevented."

"No argument from me," muttered the medic, and sloshed disinfectant on her hands. "You ready? This is gonna hurt like hell," she said, and Steve nodded. She handed Steve a piece of padding and he bit down on it. "We'll do your side first, then your hand, it's not bleeding so much."

Thor nodded grimly, holding down Steve's torso, hips and legs, and Tony tightened his grip on Steve's shoulders and upper body as Clint and Natasha held down one arm each. Steve had a sudden vivid image of the Commandos, gathering around him and cursing as doctors worked on him and he bit down on a piece of leather and prayed for an end.

"OK. Here goes."

Steve tensed as the disinfectant splashed onto his side and it lit on fire.

Jesus.

This was sickeningly familiar. Pain so bad all he could do was hang on and wait for it to end, he could feel the medic digging around, slicing his uniform off some more, Thor and Tony holding him steady as his body tried to get away from the pain, back trying to arch away, every muscle cording futilely to escape the scalpel and probing fingers and he could feel his ribs cracking as the medic grunted and pulled some more and her eyes were intent as she pried the thing out of his ribcage and he clenched his eyes shut, trying desperately to send his mind elsewhere, somewhere where this wasn't happening. Somewhere where he was safe and there wasn't any pain, Tony's bed and the two of them holding each other close, a smoky bar in France with Peggy's eyes sparkling at him, Coney Island and Bucky's grin so bright, the sheen of his motorcycle, the peace of the French countryside, the feel of pastels on his fingers - but every image and thought was punctured by the pain as the medic dug and clipped and tugged and then started stitching, stabbing repeatedly at abused nerves that screamed in protest--

And then they weren't holding him down so hard any more and his chest was heaving and the pad he'd bitten through was falling out of his mouth and his face was soaked in sweat and tears. Tony and Thor both looked like they were going to be sick, pale and grim and covered in Steve's blood, and he couldn't see Natasha or Clint but he could vaguely hear Clint swearing softly.

"You ready for the hand?" said the medic.

Tony glared at her incredulously. "Can't you give him a minute?" he said harshly, his own breathing heavy. Steve wearily raised his uninjured hand, too dizzy to speak, and Tony grasped it. "Just a minute, you just finished--"

"Sorry Iron Man," said the medic grimly, "but the sooner it's out of his hand the sooner he can start healing. His body's trying to knit the tissues around it right now; gonna make it harder to get the thing out the longer we wait. And I wanna stitch the hand, too, he's lost enough blood already."

Steve groaned and closed his eyes, biting back the urge to sob like a child at the thought of the medic digging around some more.

"Come, Man of Iron," said Thor, his voice subdued. "Our brother can be allowed more movement
this time but he still needs our help.” He handed Steve a clean pad and Steve bit down again, taking a deep breath through his nose and steadying himself.

The medic moved to his hand, Thor was still sitting on him, keeping his side still so he wouldn't rip out stitches but letting his legs move, heels digging into the floor as he tried to block the pain from his hand, the medic digging and cutting and aligning the bones in his hand and he desperately thought of something, anything else - Tony's eyes as they talked, his mouth when they kissed, but the medic was still tearing at him and he couldn't hold still, Tony was stroking the side of his face and murmuring to him when he couldn't stop the cries from getting past the pad he'd nearly bitten through...

They were done. They were finally done, and he was covered in sweat and exhausted but all the pieces of the darts were out and he could relax, he might even be able to sleep if he could just ride out the waves and waves of agony lancing through his ribs and hand.

He would heal. An hour, maybe two, and the pain would start to subside. In two or three days there would be nothing left. The pain would be gone.

"Is he all right?"

"Blood loss," said the medic. "Jesus, the amount he lost, anybody else would be dead; he just gets woozy. He'll be fine in a couple of hours."

Somebody was screaming, he vaguely registered, somewhere in the portable. And then suddenly quiet. But somebody else was cursing steadily, and crying.

"They're infected," he heard vaguely through the miasma of pain.

"Thank God he can't get infected."

"Not with anything normal, no."

There was a long pause, his team gathered around him as the world slowly gained solidity again. Dizzy perceptions of something worrying all the people around him, far-off sounds of pain.

"We can't take any chances," the medic was saying when Steve was next able to pay attention. "You saw what happened to the other wounds. Those things were burrowing." Somebody was poking his rib, lifting the padding, exposing his wound to the air. "Ah, hell. It's not an infection, it's... they're like tiny insects, or something."

"Shit."

"Listen, the stuff we used on the agents, it looks like it worked."

"It's not 'proprietary'?"

"Probably is, but thank God I have it here and don't have to clear it with Sorensen. He'd probably tell us to wait and see if the Serum can get rid of them." Pause. Poke. Steve groaned. "I don't know if it's that the darts that got him weren't as soaked in whatever it was, or that maybe the Serum does have something against the bugs, but he's not affected as badly as the others. I still don't wanna wait here and see what happens, I'd rather just kill these things off." The medic cleared her throat. "But you heard Shiang screaming. We put the others under before even starting the treatment. It's a poison, we've used it before on other infestations, but it takes a while. About twenty-four hours for most people; maybe four to six for him. Goes through their wounds and destroys the fucking little bugs that are burrowing under their skin, then spreads all over the damn place, through the bloodstream."
She cleared her throat again. "It's gonna hurt like hell, like second-degree burns. And I've got the treatment for the bugs here, but I don't have Captain Rogers's synthesized pain medication."

There was a long silence.

"You're going to need to clear that one with Sorensen, aren't you?" asked Natasha.

"No choice. The only way to get it is to synthesize it, and for that I need the formula from the SHIELD servers."

"He'll give it to us if we're back with SHIELD, won't he?" said Clint.

"Probably."

"No," said Steve wearily. He blinked, forcing his thoughts to clear. "We quit."

"Shut up, Steve," said Tony. "You're in no shape to be making any decisions right now." He got up and headed for the comm unit.

"My medical care you're talking about," Steve called out, but Tony didn't answer. Far off he could hear him starting to talk quickly into a mic. "Tony!"

Natasha patted Steve's arm and got up. "Relax. We'll work something out. I'll help sweet-talk Sorensen; Tony pisses him off just by breathing." She headed over to Tony.

"Just clear the bugs," Steve told the medic.

"Give them a few minutes. They may be able to work out a deal. There's no reason to do it painfully if we don't have to."

"Relax, Cap," said Clint, patting his shoulder. "Nat can charm anybody."

Steve breathed deeply, trying not to think of the bugs or whatever they were burrowing in his flesh while they talked rapidly, Natasha's voice gaining volume.

"People?" the medic called out a few minutes later after examining Steve again. "Time-sensitive thing going on here, I really don't want to pit these things against the Serum. The Serum's not doing well so far."

Tony and Natasha came back, a black cloud of anger simmering around them both.

"He wants two years," said Tony.

"The fuck?" said Clint.

"Two years," said Natasha. "We all come back to SHIELD for two years, or Steve gets no 'proprietary' pain medication."

"He's throwing in enhanced confidentiality agreement shit too," said Tony.

"Tell him to go fuck himself," said Steve, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. It wouldn't be so bad. He was used to this. He could do it. He felt a sob starting in his chest, ruthlessly clamped down against it.

"Tell him yourself, you stupid son of a bitch," said Tony harshly. "I'm not watching you be tortured in front of me twice in one day. Not if I can help it."
"Me neither," said Clint.

Steve gritted his teeth. "I can take--"

"Yeah, fuck that noise," Clint cut him off, his voice rising. "Just watching that shit's enough to give anyone PTSD. So don't be a fucking hero about it, and take the meds--"

"We quit for a reason--"

"God damn it, this is why you aren't in command," Tony shouted. "Because you make stupid-ass decisions that always end up with you getting hurt!"

"Tony," Steve bit out. "Drop it."

"No! No, fuck you. You're not going through that again!"

"Two years," Sorensen's implacable voice came over the overhead comm, and part of Steve had to hand it to the guy; there was something impressive about holding that steady when so many people were radiating hatred at you, even long-distance.

"One year is sufficient," said Hill's voice, breaking in.

There was a pause. "Director Hill, I can--"

"One year Steve, come on," said Natasha, her green eyes steady on his and a smear of his blood across her forehead where she'd pushed her hair back.

"Brother, do not force us to be complicit in your suffering," said Thor. "We are all in agreement."

Steve swallowed.

"Do we have your agreement, Captain Rogers?" said Hill. "You and your team will return to SHIELD for a minimum of one year. Agent Sorensen will not be your handler."

"What?!" the comm fairly squawked with the force of Sorensen's dismay. "I'm the one who's getting them back on board--"

"And your record will note that," said Hill's cool voice. "Agent Sorensen, you are not being demoted. You will be given a leadership role at the Rosendale unit; they can use somebody with your determination and ruthlessness. But this team is no longer your concern."

"Please, Steve," said Tony quietly.

Steve gazed at Tony, his dark eyes pleading and full of pain and fear, as they had been on that ledge in Staten Island. No. No, this wasn't fair. He wasn't - he didn't want to - they'd quit, they'd all decided to leave, and now Steve was going to be the reason they were all going to go back under the control of a place that didn't give a shit about them, that didn't give a shit about eight million people, that--

Tony gently grasped his hand and brought it to his lips, holding his gaze.

"Captain Rogers?" Hill's voice broke the silence in the portable.

Steve let out his breath and nodded in defeat, looking away from his team-mates as they breathed out audible sighs of relief. The medic quickly turned to her assistant, who did something incomprehensible that Steve couldn't follow with the computer console and with some sort of
"I know it's not perfect," the medic murmured. "I'd much rather knock you out for this, if I could. But it's all we've got."

Steve nodded again, feeling the coolness of some kind of sedative working its way through him.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

All right. He held Tony's red-smeared hand tighter. Natasha, Clint and Thor gathered around them, huddling close, their breathing anchoring him.

"Go for it," said Tony, his voice hoarse.

The medic lifted the padding from Steve's side wound and poured some sort of green gel over his ribs, and Steve jerked as he felt the burning, but somehow removed.

"Jesus Christ," he mumbled, his eyes closing of their own accord. "That hurts."

"I know, Steve," said Tony. "I'm sorry."

"Not that much, though," he said, and felt a sort of crawling painful itch begin, radiating out from the wound. It was like his flesh was peeling away, but unlike the sharpness of the scalpel digging into him, the agony of flesh and bone ripping apart and nerves screaming in the air, this was a softer, more generalized ache. Still awful, though.

"Fuck. Hurts," he mumbled, and Tony ran fingers through Steve's soaked hair.

"I know. Relax. Just don't think about it, OK?" He stroked Steve's cheek and Steve saw the medic gazing speculatively at Tony, but like it was all far away.

She leaned forward, peered at his ribs. There were people out there beyond their small group, people discussing something.

"Shortest retirement in the history of SHIELD," said one.

"Son of a bitch Sorensen."

"He's not even one of us. WSC all the way."

"He's just doing his job."

"Asshole."

"Hill should've shut him down."

"Useless bitch."

Another splash of the gel, this time over his injured hand. More fire. He could pick out the voices individually, but he couldn't figure out who was saying what, and they were starting to not make sense. A wave of nausea passed over him. Hard to tell whether it was from the pain meds or the weird disinfectant working away at killing the bugs in his wounds.
"You all right?" he asked Tony to distract himself.

"Why?"

"You look sad. 'M sorry. You really didn't need to do this."

"Yeah, I really did," said Tony, and when had he removed the suit? He was sitting on the floor next to Steve now, holding Steve's uninjured hand, and at some point somebody had also put a blanket over Steve and a pillow under his head.

"You gave 'em a year, just for a couple minutes of--"

"No, Steve, it's gonna take more than a couple of minutes. It needs to work through your system." Tony stroked fingers through Steve's hair and squeezed his hand. "It's gonna be hours of this stuff reacting with those bugs and the shit they left behind--"

"Few hours, then," said Steve, shrugging, but shrugging hurt so he stopped. "Been hurt a lot worse, 'member? Spent most of my life in hospitals."

"You're not making this any better," said Tony, his voice rough. "Be quiet. Try to sleep."

"Didn' have to. Serum probly woulda killed the damn things anyway."

"Yeah, maybe," said Clint. "We didn't want to take the chance."

Steve opened his eyes, squinted at Clint and Thor. "You're kind of blurry," he said through the burning in his hand and side. He looked at his hand. "So'm I. An'... rainbow-y. Or maybe tha's just blood."

Clint snickered. "Cap, you're high."

Steve blinked. "Am I?"

"As a kite," said Natasha.

"Huh. Wouldn't know." He swallowed, a wave of nausea flooding over him. "Missed the sixties, y'know."

Clint laughed.

"Feels like bein' drunk. Too bad 's also makin' me feel sick." He thought a moment. "Not that much fun, bein' high."

"No, not like this," said Tony. He stroked a hand across Steve's brow, wiped his forehead. "Think you can sleep while this thing does its job?"

"C'n you stay?" Steve asked, and Tony nodded. "Good," Steve sighed. "'ve missed you. A lot."

Thor made a noise in his throat and Steve glanced at him, biting his lip as he realized what he'd said. Damn it. And what a ridiculous thing to say - it wasn't as though Tony had gone anywhere, after all. The empty feeling Steve got when he found his thoughts reaching for Tony - it wasn't, no, damn it, he'd told himself he wasn't going to say anything to Tony, Tony had ended things and he had every right to, damn medication loosening his stupid mouth...

Tony adjusted the blanket, then leaned down and rested his forehead against Steve's for a moment.
"You're gonna be OK," he murmured. "Close your eyes. I'll be right here."

Steve closed his eyes gratefully and let the dizzying darkness take him away.

Chapter End Notes

1. The movies watched/mentioned are:

   The Silence of the Lambs, 1991
   Unforgiven, 1992
   Schindler's List, 1993
   Forrest Gump, 1994
   Braveheart, 1995
   The English Patient, 1996

2. Guilty confession: Bruce, falling asleep watching The English Patient? That was me & my husband. We'd heard it was the most romantic thing ever, but we just. couldn't. finish.

   No judgment on the movie, though - we also kept falling asleep during Pirates of the Caribbean 1 and it wasn't until we watched it again with our kids years later that we realized it was an awesome movie.
Thanks so much, Cluegirl and Winterstar, for your beta help! And yes, Cluegirl, Clint does think of Alison with a first name and everyone else with a last name - well-spotted! My headcanon is he's known her a while and probably wants to sleep with her, whether he knows it or not ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1.

February 13

Clint shuffled out of the way to make room for Alison Roma, the senior medic. She sank down to the floor between him and Thor with a weary sigh, pushing her dark hair back from her face.

"Shiang's gonna be OK, isn't he?" Clint asked her in a low voice, glancing over at the middle of the narrow rectangular metal portable, where the four hurt agents were resting on cots.

"Yeah, he'll be fine," said Alison, finding a comfortable spot against the wall. "He's just fucked up his shoulder big time; the dart that hit him burst right in the joint. He might have lessened mobility. You know what that's like." Clint nodded. "Though he'll probably be less of a baby about doing his physio than you ever have been."

Thor's eyebrows went up. "Your shoulder has been hurt?"

"What part of him hasn't been hurt," said Alison, and Natasha and a few of the other agents around them snickered. "Hawkeye's a little accident-prone."

"Not accident-prone," said Clint, offended.

"Reckless, then," said Joe Taggart, the SHIELD lead agent.

"Brave," said Clint. "And dashing."

"And an idiot," said Alison.

Steve chuckled and rubbed a hand through his stubble. Stopped himself before rubbing became scratching.

"How'd you keep him in line?" asked Taggart. "Barton, that is."

"Me?" said Steve. "Who says I did?"

Alison, Taggart, and a few agents near them laughed.

"So Shiang's gonna be OK?" asked Lucas Soto, a local agent Clint hadn't met before quarantine.

"The bugs aren't giving him so much grief any more," said Stan Mackay, the other medic. "Thank
God. Three treatments to kill the damn things." He shuddered. "Rogers, let me look at your hand again, would you please?" he asked. "It's so damn frustrating, working with wounds you can't heal. Five god damn days stuck in here and none of them getting much better. And you're the only one who didn't have to go through the disinfectant more than twice."

Clint shuddered, wishing the medics would stop talking about it. Steve and the wounded agents had needed dousing with that freaking gel on them over and over, and it hadn't stopped creeping Clint out. "Hey, Al Mahdi's doing better," he pointed out as Steve held out his hand and Mackay examined it. He glanced over at Rashid Al Mahdi, who was laying out yet another set of cards for solitaire.

"Yeah well Al Mahdi wasn't hit by a dart, he cracked his ribs," said Mackay, running fingers lightly over the thin red lines that were all the evidence of where he and Alison had stitched Steve up. With no anesthetic. While Clint and his team-mates held him down. Clint swallowed.

"You're doing everything you can," said Steve.

"Too bad there's not enough Serum around," said Mackay.

Taggart grimaced. "No thanks. To be honest, after - I dunno, man, I heard you had to go it without painkillers, but that was something else, seeing it."

"I've got painkillers now," said Steve shortly, and an awkward silence fell over their end of the portable.

"And speaking of your Serum-ness," said Alison with forced cheer, "I'm up for the next nap shift. Before I lie down I'd like to check your ribs." She shuffled closer to Steve.

Steve sighed and pulled off the grey SHIELD t-shirt they'd given him after declaring his sliced and blood-soaked uniform a dead loss. The shirt and shorts were dotted with old bloodstains too, but five days into quarantine it wasn't like any of them were fussy about fresh laundry.

"Looking good." She examined the edges of the ugly wound, still pink and slightly inflamed. "You normally wouldn't even have any scarring by this point, would you?"

"Nope. It's just the bugs," said Steve, pulling his shirt down again.

The bugs. Clint scratched his neck, caught himself and winced. They were all infested with the things, and hot, and tired, and thirsty. They had sixteen agents in here and the five Avengers, they were rationing the water and food that came with the portable since SHIELD didn't want anything in or out of the quarantine seal unless it was a dire emergency, the single toilet was tiny, and there wasn't even enough room for everyone to lie down and sleep at the same time so they were taking turns. Five days in they were all going stir-crazy.

Some more so than others.

"Getting out of here is seriously becoming wet-dream territory," muttered Soto. "I think we're gonna have people shooting each other before long." He glanced over at Tony worriedly and scratched at his own scraggly new beard. Alison reached out to stop him. He'd scratched his chin raw. "Right. Thanks."

Tony was leaning with his head back against the wall, features grey and grim, and Steve and Clint exchanged a worried glance.

It was funny, Steve looked just fine - stubble, stained t-shirt and shorts and bare feet aside. He'd
looked like shit for the first day or so. Sick, muttering, out of his head, in pain. Tony had been by his side the whole time, as if they hadn't broken up, holding him close when he whimpered in his sleep, murmuring to him when he cried out in pain as the medics examined him and re-applied the gel. But as Steve had gotten better, Tony had slowly gotten worse. Of course, they were all worse - tired, hot, thirsty, bored, itchy from the bugs, irritated at the confinement and at the worry over the three injured agents who didn't have Steve's Serum to help them miraculously heal. But for some of them - like Tony, and Tania Marita, an agent Clint had worked with a few years ago - the situation seemed to be getting desperate.

"Think they'll get an antidote any time soon?" Taggart murmured quietly.

"Our friend Bruce will find a solution," said Thor.

"Wish I was where he is," said Mackay. Taggart glanced at him sideways. "Not that I'm saying he shouldn't have come in to quarantine. But I sure wish I was wherever he is."

"I'm still not sure how our people on the outside didn't catch him when he turned back," said Taggart.

"How smart is he?" asked Sally Ibis, an agent Clint had worked with - and, he'd suddenly remembered yesterday, slept with - a few years ago. "The Hulk, I mean? Did he take Banner far away deliberately? You said he's usually pretty groggy when he turns back."

"The Giant hid our friend away," said Thor. "It has been known to happen."

"How?" asked another agent. "That thing's kinda huge."

"And dumb as a post," said Taggart. "How could he hide?"

"He's smarter than he looks," snapped Tony. "And it wouldn't have been that hard for him to not be found. Your people were a fucking mess."

"Well whoever was in charge of that cleanup is gonna get transferred to Nome," said Taggart, ignoring Tony's caustic tone, as they were all ignoring how quickly he was reaching a ragged edge. Steve cleared his throat. "Tony. Hey. Next sleeping shift is in an hour or so. You wanna take a cot?"

"No," said Tony, rubbing red-rimmed eyes, clearly exhausted.

"You missed your last shift," said Steve. Tony shrugged. "I'll be there too," Steve said, his voice low.

"Didn't do much good last time," said Tony. He scratched at his own beard. "Don't wanna wake up everybody again."

"Look, nobody minds that," said Clint, preferring not to think of how Steve had had to wake up Tony over and over again as Tony's nightmares interrupted his sleep. "Hell, nobody could sleep through Triviani screaming either."

"Triviani was getting doused with disinfectant," Tony pointed out.

"You can't just stay awake until we get out of here," said Natasha. "It may be days."

"I've done it before in the lab." Tony drew in a shaking breath. "Although, fuck, not even internet access here, fucking unacceptable. And I can't spend the whole time in my helmet talking to
JARVIS." He grimaced. "Even though at least when I'm in there I'm getting filtered helmet-air. Not this."

Clint leaned his head back on the wall, trying to breathe through his mouth. The smell really was pretty intense. Feet and underarms and twenty-one people who hadn't taken a bath in five days. Blood and disinfectants and medicine. Recycled air. Clint didn't even want to imagine what he smelled like; the only comfort was that he was no worse than anyone else.

The comm unit came on and Hill's voice floated out. "Iron Man, I need to speak to you."

Tony's lips pressed together and Clint felt a surge of anger. Funny, several days into this and the burn of resentment still hadn't gone down for any of them.

"Sure, boss, go ahead," said Tony.

"You have to talk to Dr. Banner," said Hill bluntly. "He has not responded to my request to come back to SHIELD."

"Yeah, I don't think so," said Tony. "He was lucky enough to be a big green raging monster at the time that you used extortion to extract a promise under duress. He's not part of your little chain gang."

"Get him on board."

"I'm not a fan of indentured servitude."

"Yeah? What the fuck would you know about that, trust fund brat?" asked Ned Hollis, one of the agents who had been hurt, and although Clint could see some of the others wincing at his painkiller-induced tactlessness, at least a couple were nodding. "Not so used to having to do anything you don't wanna do, are ya?"

Tony stared at him. "Except for a three-month period in a cave, yeah, I've probably been kinda spoiled," he said acidly, and Clint winced. He hadn't thought of that. He'd known, obviously, that Tony was probably devolving because of their confinement, but he hadn't thought that part of that might include Tony likening this to the last time he'd been essentially forced labor. Tony turned back to the comm. "Was that all you wanted to talk to me about? Because I have to say--"

"No, that wasn't all," Hill said crisply. "And we are going to talk about this again later. What I wanted to tell you is that your colleague has been working with us despite not agreeing to rejoin SHIELD - apparently he hacked into our servers, we'd like to know how he was able to do that, Stark - and he's getting close to a formula to permanently get rid of the bugs."

"That's good to know," said Taggart.

"And Stark, you have to--"

"I don't have to do a fucking thing except work for you as Iron Man," snapped Tony, "and that does not include recruitment as far as I know. You can't make me do anything else."

Clint swallowed and thought briefly of what it would be like to be back in his own worst nightmare. Feeling again the mindlessness, the lack of control, the unnatural peace Loki had given him - with muted horror in the background as a part of him watched himself moving and talking and killing, and tried to stop it, helpless and struggling uselessly--

Hill was saying something to Taggart now, and Clint shoved his dark thoughts away. "You OK,
"Yeah," said Tony, his voice tight. He scratched his side, his own SHIELD-issue t-shirt stained with sweat from countless nightmares.

"Look," Clint said, finally acknowledging the big white PTSD elephant in the room with them. "We all understand, OK?"

"Understand what?"

"Why you're starting to freak the fuck out."

Tony glared at him. "Don't play armchair therapist. I pay professionals for that."

"It's not playing therapist to point out that there are some differences between this and Afghanistan," said Natasha, her voice low. "Nobody's going to force you to build anything for SHIELD. We haven't even decided what our new relationship with them is going to be. You also have a hell of a legal department at SI, and--"

"It's not just that."

"This isn't a cave," said Ibis gently, leaning in. "I know it's hot and smells crappy, but it's totally different, physically. Maybe it might help to concentrate on that."

"Not different enough," said Tony.

"You're confined and it's too hot and there's not enough food," said Steve. "What else?"

Tony passed a hand over his forehead. "You don't want to hear--"

"We wouldn't ask if we didn't want to hear," said Steve. "We're not therapists, but we might be able to help."

Tony blew out his breath. "There were... bugs. In, in the cave. Lice. Got into everything. I know these aren't lice, not here, but." He scratched behind one ear, stopped himself and crossed his arms. "Fuck, what I wouldn't give for a whiskey right now," he said, his voice slightly unsteady.

"Mm. Me too," said Clint. "Or bourbon. We're in the South, right? Bourbon."

"Mint julep would go over well too," said Taggart.

"Or a beer," said Mackay. "A nice cold beer."

"You never realize how often you drink until you can't," commented Ibis.

Tony shrugged. "It's funny, every so often I think it might be a good idea to try going without for a little while," he said, his voice low. "Never lasts."

"How long have you gone without before?" asked Natasha.

Tony took a deep breath. "Uh, the longest? Three months."

Clint grimaced. Oh goody. Nothing like sobriety being paired with a traumatic experience for a borderline alcoholic.

Tony shivered. "OK, folks, this is all very touchy-feely and thanks for, you know, the group share,
but I think if we talk about this shit any more I'm gonna have a panic attack."

"We could synthesize you a sedative," said Alison. "Already did for Marita." She glanced over at the sleeping Marita, who also looked like hell warmed over when she was awake and who had spent some time as a hostage at an AIM base in Indonesia if Clint recalled correctly.

Tony frowned and started to shake his head, then stopped and took a deep breath. "No. No, not yet. Ask me at the beginning of the next sleep shift."

"You sure?"

Tony nodded.

Clint glanced at the far, dim end of the portable, where six agents slept on the floor rolled up in blankets. Another hour till the next sleep shift. "What do you think?" he asked Taggart. "Movie time?" They'd commandeered the communications console and been able to get SHIELD to send over Titanic, Shakespeare in Love, and American Beauty, but it wasn't easy, with everyone crowded around the small screen.

"Hill said she wanted the channel clear for now. I'll ask again in an hour."

"Avengers singalong time again?" asked Ibis.

Tony shook his head. They'd sung a few songs together the first day that Steve had been able to sit up again, and it had cheered him up and made one of the more tech-minded agents take a video that he'd threatened to upload as soon as they got internet access again. They'd repeated the performance a few times, after much teasing and growing boredom, joined by many of the SHIELD agents.

Tony looked like he was in no shape for that any more, though. Thor shifted closer to him in silent solidarity, and Natasha shook her head as well. Clint shrugged. Whatever; they didn't know more than a handful of songs anyway.

"Quartet?" Taggart asked, and Steve glanced at Tony. Tony gave a curt nod. Steve and Clint, joined by Taggart and Mackay, all moved their way to the end of the portable, farthest away from the sleeping agents.

Funny, the things you learned about people when you were confined together for days on end. One of the local agents had teased Taggart about his college barbershop days after the Avengers had sung the first time, and Steve had commented that he'd sung baritone in a quartet way (way) back in the day. Then Mackay had said his dad used to belong to one too and Clint, bored out of his skull, had suggested putting something together. Taggart, Mackay and Steve had been able to find some tunes they all knew - a lot of barbershop music was from even before Steve's time anyway, and all of them knew the standard repertoire - and Clint had been able to pick up the lead part by ear, and they were off.

The four of them were weaving harmonies together now and it was a different kind of cooperation, and the agents near them, bored and desperate from lack of sleep, heat, bugs and jitters, were certainly appreciating the show. He never would've pegged no-nonsense Taggart as a singer, but there he was, his bass voice rumbling out beautifully as Clint sang lead and Mackay put in the tenor line above them all.

They were getting tired, though. Down by the Old Mill Stream, Wild Irish Rose, Sweet Adeline and For The Longest Time (not in the traditional repertoire, but they'd been able to figure out the parts anyway) and Clint was ready to pack it in. Maybe this had to be done somewhere where you weren't
just about going insane from confinement and heat and miserable crawling genetically engineered bugs.

"OK, I'm done," said Mackay, his voice hoarse, as they finished the last note.

"Ah, come on, one more?" said Ibis, and Clint shook his head.

"He's fallen asleep," Steve murmured quietly, nodding towards Tony.

"Good; worth it, then," said Mackay. "Barbershop as lullabies for stressed-out billionaires, what my dad would've thought of that I don't know."

Steve smiled and quietly moved back towards Tony, who was still leaning against the wall, eyes closed. He picked up a blanket and placed it around Tony, carefully putting a pillow on one shoulder where Tony's head could lean against it if it bobbed a bit. And he'd be OK if he listed towards the other side; he was leaning against Thor, whose head was also resting against the back of the wall and who had also dozed off. Odd that of all the Avengers, Thor seemed to be dealing with the quarantine best. Clint had expected his booming voice to be a constant disturbance, but no; Thor just seemed to be sleeping a lot.

Steve gazed at Tony worriedly, fussing with his blanket a bit.

"Just friends my ass," muttered Hollis. Another one whose temper was beginning to get the better of him, what with wooziness and pain medication on top of the same crap that was getting to the rest of them.

"Hollis, you want any more sedatives?" asked Alison.

"'m fine."

"You could probably do with some more sleep."

"Don't wanna sleep," he said, shifting on his cot, his voice rising in irritation. "I'm fine. Fine, fuckin' fine. I'll just lie here smelling everyone's feet and thinking about getting that fucking bug dosage again and watch as the Golden Boy over there walks around like he doesn't have a care in the world."

Clint glanced at Steve, who looked wary but resigned. Of course; he'd probably dealt with plenty of wounded soldiers who only saw the impressive recovery time and not the price it came with. And Hollis had been unconscious while Steve was being ripped apart and stitched back together.

"He's quarantined, same as you," Taggart pointed out mildly. "None of us are happy about this."

"Yeah? Pretty boy here doesn't seem to mind. 'Course he's got his boyfriend here." He crossed his arms. "Fucking faggots," he muttered.

Steve pressed his lips together and Clint took a deep breath. Oh, great. Technically he knew not everybody at SHIELD would be filled to the brim with rainbows of welcome, but they'd worked with Hollis before and the man had never treated any of the Avengers with anything other than respect.

"What did he just say?" asked Ibis.

"Shut up, Hollis," muttered Alison.
Tony stirred restlessly and Steve glanced at him.

"Relax, your lover-boy's fine," sneered Hollis. Steve gave him a level gaze but held his tongue. "Or do you wanna go cuddle up to him again? Maybe whisper sweet nothings in his ear?"

"Hollis, what's your problem?" asked Clint, temper fraying.

"Clint, don't," said Steve quietly.

"Hey, he's not your butt buddy, you don't tell him what to say," Hollis snapped. He glanced at Clint. "Unless you are. You a faggot too now, Barton? You guys real close these days? All sucking each other's dicks at Avengers tower?"

"Hollis!" said Taggart.

"He's sick," said Steve clearly. "Leave him alone."

"I'm not the one who's sick, you stupid fuck," Hollis snapped back. "And shut up. Don't want any fucking faggots defending me or staring at my ass."

"I can't stare at it, Hollis," said Steve evenly. "You're lying on it. And I'm not gonna take anything you say seriously when you're not yourself."

Clint gave Hollis a pitying look. "Dude, you're gonna feel like an asshole when the drugs wear off," he said, and turned his back on him.

"One thing Hollis is saying is true, though," said Taggart, his voice low. "I'd say the secret's out."

"What secret?" asked Clint.

"You and Iron Man," Mackay said bluntly to Steve. "This ain't 'just friends' no matter what you told the media. And why would you lie about it, anyway?"

Steve hesitated a moment, then sighed. "It wasn't a lie when Tony denied it," he said quietly. "And we never said we weren't together when we were; we just didn't confirm anything."

"So you're... you know, dating?" asked Ibis.

"Not any more," said Steve.

" Came to your senses?"

Steve shook his head.

Mackay whistled. "Tony 'love 'em and leave 'em' Stark strikes again, eh? Got some balls to do that to Captain America."

"Wasn't his fault," said Steve, his voice hard. "It was mine."

Tony moved in his sleep, his breath hitching, and Natasha moved closer to him protectively.

"Fucking faggots," muttered Hollis.

"Hollis, everyone gets that you're not in control of your mouth right now," said Alison, "but if you don't shut up I'm gonna sedate you before you completely tank your career."
"A man can't have a fucking opinion any more, we all have to be so politically correct. I think last time I asked, freedom of speech it applied to conservatives too, right?"

"Yeah. And morons. You're entitled to your opinion, but you're outing yourself as a bigot and an idiot."

"Not to me," said Steve quietly. "He's got a right to feel how he feels."

"That's because you come from a time where shit like that was acceptable," snapped Clint. "It's not any more."

"Just be quiet, Hollis," said Taggart. "Nobody here agrees with you."

"I happen to know Soto does," said Hollis. "Just too much of a fucking coward to say so. We talked about it after Captain Queer came out. He was just as grossed out as I was."

Soto flushed brightly and opened, then closed his mouth.

"You don't have to defend your point of view," said Steve.

Tony startled awake. "Shit!" he gasped, hands flailing out, and Steve was by his side in a moment.

"You're OK. You're OK. We're just in the portable."

"Jesus Christ. I have to get out of here," he muttered, his hands shaking. "Fuck, I have to get out of here."

"Man of Iron, our friend Bruce will find a solution," said Thor, somehow awake and coherent within moments.

"You're OK," Steve said gently, kneeling in front of Tony and holding his hands steady as Tony tried to bring his gasping breaths under control. "We'll get out. Soon."

"Shut the fuck up, fucking pansies--"

"Hollis!"

Tony blinked at Hollis, still confused and out of it. Thor stood up. "Friend, you are wounded and not in your right mind," he said to Hollis, and gestured the other Avengers towards the lighted end of the portable. Steve helped Tony stand and make his way the short distance and they all settled down on the floor again.

"So. You dumped Captain America, did you?" asked Mackay, clearly trying to distract Tony. Tony blinked, startled, and looked at Steve, who shrugged.

"I'm telling you, SHIELD agents are horrible gossips," said Clint. "Why don't you go back to gossiping about Corrigan and his crazy ex?"

"No thanks, man," said Mackay, wrinkling his nose and glancing towards the dim part of the portable where Dan Corrigan, a Florida agent, lay sleeping. "Nothing to tell anyway. She hasn't tried to break through the perimeter again."

"I think Corrigan's gonna try to talk to her after we're allowed out," said Ibis. "Or at least bail her out."

"Ugh. Why?"
"How should I know, dude. Besides, Corrigan's story's as old as SHIELD: we attract shady weirdos, who usually end up dating other shady weirdos." Ibis glanced at Tony and Steve. "Dishing about you two would be an interesting change."

"There's nothing to dish about," said Clint sharply. "They dated, it didn't work out. You're not gonna get a story like... well, like Corrigan's." Clint tilted his head at Natasha and she nodded, shuffling over with him so that the Avengers were in a small circle, slightly apart from the SHIELD agents. "No, Steve didn't badmouth you," Clint told Tony once they'd rearranged themselves, his voice low. "On the contrary."

"My track record seems to indicate it was probably all my fault," said Tony grimly. "Ask Pepper how great I am at this kind of thing."

Steve frowned at him.

"Maybe you weren't the problem, dude," said Clint. "Maybe you're a better person than you think you are."

"I keep telling you," said Steve. "You don't give yourself enough credit."

"Couldn't it be that you and Pepper just weren't right for each other?" asked Natasha.

"I've got a bit of an undeniable history, remember?"

"Did you cheat on her?" asked Natasha. Tony shook his head. "Did you treat her badly?" Tony shook his head again.

"Why was it automatically your fault, then?" Clint asked, irritated by Tony's subdued air. Damn it, yes, he was sleep-deprived and PTSDing like crazy right now, but there was something seriously wrong with the world when Tony Stark looked quiet and guilty and nothing like the cocky asshole he was supposed to be. "Dude. You're not just a spoiled little trust-fund playboy any more. You're a superhero. You're dealing with a lot of shit." He glanced at Steve. "You brought someone else out of some pretty heavy shit. That changes you."

Tony stared at him uncertainly.

"Dude. Seriously. Steve says you weren't the problem between the two of you. Maybe you weren't the problem with Pepper either."

"People," said Taggart, leaning into their little circle. "Don't worry, I'm not trying to eavesdrop on Avengers secrets." He deposited a stack of packaged sandwiches and freeze-dried fruit into their circle. "Just doing a food drop."

Oh good, though Clint, trying hard not to pounce. One of the crappy things about this entire experience was the hunger. Hunger all the time, and the rations weren't doing shit. Nobody was starving, not like when he was a kid, but the ever-present slight discomfort was getting on his nerves. The fact that no meal ever resulted in a nice, full feeling... also not fun.

He glanced at Steve, who'd also been hungry as a kid. This had to be a lot worse for him; he'd agreed after some wrangling to accept three times the rations as everyone else, but according to the medics, he was really supposed to be getting at least four, both because of his metabolism and because he'd spent the first couple of days healing from severe injuries.

Both Clint and Steve were chewing slowly, making it last as long as possible. Clint wondered if Steve also had to battle the instinct to just gulp it all down as quickly as possible, the lurking fear that
it would be taken away.

"Yeah, faggots get all the best," Hollis's voice floated up from the middle of the portable. "Even get more food than the rest of us."

"That's because he needs it, you moron," snapped Alison, and the comm crackled.

Hill's voice came on. "We've figured it out," she said, and there was a loud cheer. The agents in the sleeping area of the portable stirred, sitting up and complaining. "To be more specific, Dr. Banner figured it out," she went on. "I'm sending Agent Taggart instructions on the procedure to get you all out of there. It shouldn't take more than a few hours at the most. It's almost over, people."

Clint drew a deep breath of relief as the portable erupted into activity, the newly wakened agents being made aware of the news and Taggart eagerly reading the instructions appearing on the screen in front of him. Thank Christ. No more bad food, no more crowded boredom, no more tension ratcheting slowly tighter and tighter.

"Right," Taggart said after a minute or so, and the rest of them quieted down instantly. "Here's the deal. They're spraying the outside again as a precaution. Banner's got a disinfectant that will finally kill the bugs off so they don't keep coming back. The spores or whatever makes them grow cling to hair, is the problem, and that's how they've been growing back again. So they're dropping in razors so that we can shave... everything, before going into a disinfectant vat. They're setting up the vat right now."

Mackay grimaced. "Ew. Everything?"

"The less hair you have, the shorter time you'll spend in the disinfectant. There's room in decontamination for six, max. We'll have the six women first, then two groups of six men, then one last group of three. Sound good?"

"I'm not stripping down and getting in a fucking vat with two queers," said Hollis.

"Fine, we'll go in the last group," snapped Steve. "You don't have to worry we're trying to stare at your skinny ass."

Clint covered a snicker. For some reason, as many times as he'd seen Steve's Captain America politeness falter under stress, slightly-snarky Steve was still funny.

"How long will decontamination take?" asked Ibis.

"About an hour for each group," Tony sat up, his eyes widening. Taggart waved him back down.

"And Hollis, forget it, nobody has to accommodate your hang-ups. If it bothers you that much, you stay a few extra hours."

"I don't care," said Steve. "We're all getting out soon enough anyway."

"Uh, not soon enough," Tony objected.

"Besides, I'm hurt," said Hollis.

Alison spoke up. "No real medical reason for you to get out first," she commented. "Al Mahdi, Shiang and Triviani are hurt too. An hour more or less isn't going to make much difference."

Taggart reconsidered. "I'm all right with sending all the wounded out first, actually, if nobody minds mixed-sex groups in decontamination."
Triviani shook her head and Al Mahdi said, "Don't make no diff to me, I just wanna get the hell outta here." He glanced apologetically at the female agents. "I mean, if you wanna get out first, that's fine, but my ribs hurt like hell and I'd really like them taped up at the hospital."

"Asshole," Alison bristled. "They can't do any better job taping them than I did."

Al Mahdi smiled at her sweetly. "Maybe not, but they'll get me on the good drugs."

"I don't think anybody cares," said Natasha, quickly glancing over the other female agents, who shrugged. "We're all adults." She glanced at Hollis. "Mostly."

"Wounded first, then?" Taggart looked around and got general nods from everybody.

"Hollis, you do realize that still puts you in with Captain Rogers, right?" said Alison with a sneer.

"No, that's fine," said Steve quickly, before Hollis could say anything. "I'll go in the last batch. Tony, you go in the second."

"All right, the first batch is the four wounded plus a medic and... Marita," said Taggart, glancing at the SHIELD agent whose PTSD had been getting to her even more than Tony. "Second batch, all the Avengers - that means you too, Captain Rogers, you were hurt and I'm in charge here - plus one more space..."

"I'll go," said Soto. Clint exchanged a glance with Natasha, wondering if he was eager to get out or eager to distance himself from what Hollis had said about him and show he didn't care about stripping down in front of the only two men who were openly out.

"Third batch," Taggart began, and started listing remaining agents, but Clint didn't care any more because the most beautiful thing he'd seen in a long time was happening: the so-far-unused hole used to pass objects into the portable was finally opening.

Of course, rather than steak dinners or more water the package coming through contained twenty-one electric razors, a few mirrors, hand towels, bottles of some kind of foam, and a huge plastic drop cloth, but by this point Clint didn't care much. He impatiently helped to put up a blanket to block off one part of the portable so that the six women could shave with some privacy - why, who knew, as they were all going to be baring it all in the decontamination chamber anyway in front of at least some males. He supposed it was a little more sensitive to not have them strip in front of all fifteen men.

"All right," said Taggart. "Get as much off as you can with the razors. Just let it all fall onto the plastic sheet; it's gonna get rolled up and incinerated. Then use the depilatory foam; rub it in, then wipe off with the towels. Drop it all on the sheet."

"Everything must go?" asked Clint.

"The more you keep, the longer you'll have to stay in the chamber. I'm told the parts with hair are gonna itch and burn something fierce."

Clint grimaced. "Thanks but no thanks," he said, and started the razor. He ran it over one arm experimentally, shivering a little at the vibrations as his arm hair started to come down onto the floor.

"I've done some bizarre things for SHIELD," said Mackay, propping a foot up on a chair and starting to shave a path through thick reddish-brown leg hair. "But this has got to be one of the weirdest."
"Yeah?" said Clint. "Not me."

"What's the weirdest you've done?" asked Steve, grimacing as he started the razor down his arm.

"You really don't want me to answer that," said Clint.

"You really don't," said Taggart, his short black curls falling to the plastic and leaving smooth brown scalp behind. He glanced around and snickered. "Hey, apparently Avengers don't need testosterone."

Steve blinked. "What?"

"You're all, like, body-bald," said Mackay. The other agents laughed. Clint glanced at Thor, Tony and Steve and yeah, they were pretty hair-free as a group. And getting more so by the moment.

"Except for Bruce," said Tony, still looking shaky but a hell of a lot more cheerful now that the prospect of freedom was just an hour or so away. "He's a monkey compared to the rest of us."

"So's Tasha," said Clint, and glanced at the hanging blanket. "I'm gonna die as soon as we leave this place, aren't I?"

"Don't think you'll need to wait that long," Natasha called out from behind the blanket.

"Is it true someone wanted to do a photoshoot with you guys?" asked Mackay. "The Avengers swimsuit calendar?"

"Aye," said Thor, his brow furrowed. "That was a strange proposal."

"The mugs and action figures are bad enough," said Clint.

"You never know. Would've made you even more popular with the ladies," said Taggart.

"Not a priority," said Steve.

"Men, then."

"Still not a priority."

Mackay laughed. "You're for real, aren't you?"

"You have no idea," said Clint, taking a turn at one of the mirrors to get to his face and head. Ugh. The stubble being gone felt nice, but watching his hair coming off in swaths and falling below in light brown masses...

"Move over, Clint," said Steve, taking his place in front of the mirror and running the electric razor over his face.

"Thought you didn't like electric?"

"To get out of here? I'd use a butter-knife if I had to." He hesitated over his head, then sighed and started in, swaths of blond hair falling onto the drop cloth.

Thor stepped away from another mirror, running a hand over his face. "I've not felt my face without a beard for... generations. This is most interesting."

"Wait till you get to the depilatory," said Al Mahdi, struggling to shave around the wrapping on his ribs.
"No sympathy from back here!" yelled one of the female agents from behind the blanket.

Clint pulled the waistband of his boxers out and stared down at his crotch. Steve glanced over at him and sighed. Clint brandished the razor and revved it.

"Jesus, Barton," Mackay grimaced.

"All right," said Clint, looking down, "so long, pubes. Nice knowing you. Haven't seen my own bare balls since--"

"Too much information, Barton!" yelled a female agent.

"You know, some people are into this," Tony commented.

"Into what?" asked Steve, his face scrunched in distaste as he started his own razor.

"It's a thing. Trimming."

Steve gaped at him. "What? There?"

"Everywhere, Spangles," said Tony. "Men and women. Trimming it, thinning it, waxing it--"

"Waxing?!!" Steve nearly dropped his razor.


"Oh my God." Steve grimaced, looking down at himself. "That's... with wax? There?"

"Hawkeye, quit traumatizing Captain America!" yelled out one of the women.

"Boy, you didn't corrupt him much, did you?" Mackay smirked at Tony, and started carefully unwrapping Al Mahdi's ribs.

"Yeah, you know, I can't see it," said Al Mahdi and Clint reflected that it was weird, the Florida agents had been rather standoffish and a little awed by the non-SHIELD Avengers - especially Captain America - at first, but they were pretty comfortable now. He supposed watching the man in the spangly uniform covered in blood and writhing in pain, followed by five days of sitting around being hungry and bored together, had taken some of the awe out. Not to mention shaving pubes next him.

"Can't see what?" asked Steve.

"You two," said Al-Mahdi. "As in, together."

Steve ducked his head and tapped the side of the razor to get the hair out of it.

"Why not?" asked Mackay.

"He's just all, you know, moral and shit," said Al Mahdi gesturing at Steve. "Sorry, man, but you are. You're like... the poster boy for good and righteous." Steve's eyes flicked towards Hollis and Al Mahdi rolled his own. "For most people, you are. Like, I could see you dating some highly decorated officer, or some guy who teaches Sunday school and runs a kitten sanitarium or something, you know? But... Tony Stark?"

"Yeah, well, opposites attract," said Mackay.
"And SHIELD agents are horrible, horrible gossips," Clint commented, as Steve reddened further. As did Tony, interestingly enough. "I'm really hoping none of these conversations make it to the news."

"Who would care?" asked Mackay. "By this point the media's said you're a couple so many times nobody would believe this time it was for real."

"When you're done, toss the used razors in here," said Taggart, indicating a garbage bag. "Don't bother cleaning them; it's all gonna get incinerated. And Gleason and Dallard, you're in the last group anyway; you may as well help get the wounded ready so they can get into the vat as quickly as possible." He wiped a foam-filled hand towel over his arm, waited a moment and scrubbed it away. "You know," he mused, smoothing a hand down his arm, "I can sort of get the attraction."

"Really?" Clint grimaced.

"Yeah. Not enough to do this as a hobby, but it probably does feel pretty interesting." He paused. "Hope my wife thinks so too instead of just being weirded out."

"Perhaps I shall go and visit my Jane," said Thor, rubbing thoughtfully at his bare face and then running a hand up to his shorn head.

Clint guffawed as he tossed the razor in the garbage and started in on the depilatory foam. He glanced at his team. Tony and Thor looked almost unrecognizable, Steve looked surprisingly good with a buzz cut.

Taggart rubbed the top of his head. "Think if I put on an eyepatch anyone will mistake me for Fury?" he asked.

"Yeah wouldn't that endear you to the WSC," muttered Mackay. They all turned as there was a clanging on the side of the portable, and a cheer went up as Clint heard something clamp on to the side.

"Never thought I'd be grateful for a giant vat of disinfectant," called out one of the women, and Clint grinned tiredly. One thing you could say about SHIELD; it might be messed up and bizarre, but it was never dull.

It was a fucking endless and pointless hassle, is what this was. Tony felt his bile rising at the thought. Finally blessedly free of that portable, finally clean again - a little too clean, as his face felt cold and his head felt funny with the ultra-short hair that he hadn't had since that time he and Rhodey had gotten spectacularly drunk after Rhodey enlisted and he'd agreed to a military buzz in solidarity with his friend - and instead of being on the way back home, here they were.

They'd been graciously allowed a four-hour nap at a Miami hotel and then Hill had insisted on a press conference, of all fucking things - another brilliant idea from the Council that she was only too happy to go along with, apparently. The one upside had been that she'd promised they only had be available for questions for the first twenty minutes, after which SHIELD personnel would take over, and then they would be off the hook for several days. Apparently she didn't trust them to not say anything stupid to the press. A little brighter than she seemed, maybe.

Tony checked his watch. Five minutes more and then he could lean back and not say another fucking thing for days. He glanced at Jasper Sitwell, an agent he vaguely remembered hanging around Phil Coulson, who had apparently come in to run the conference.
"And the bugs are definitely gone now?" asked a reporter.

"Dr. Banner found a way to get rid of them permanently," said Natasha. "It was all contained."

"The Avengers didn't show up until partway through," asked another. "Why weren't they the first team sent in?"

"Too far away," said Sitwell smoothly, and Tony glared at him and wished he wasn't too tired to just elbow him aside and explain the real reason, damn their stupid fucking confidentiality agreement.

"How are the new hairstyles?" asked one at the back.

"Smooth in all the wrong places," said Clint, and the reporters snickered.

"Unless you're into that," said Tony.

"Hey, no judgement here," said Clint.

"You look like raw recruits," said one reporter.

"And Widow's rocking the pixie look, isn't she?" quipped Tony, his gut churning but smile firmly in place. This, at least, felt familiar - from Congressional hearings, from board meetings while Obie was alive, from fucking Howard's passive-aggressive little tirades about Tony's inadequacies until the day he died: helpless rage and resentment channelled to flippancy. He'd worked so damn hard to avoid this kind of thing since his parents died, and yet for some reason he kept ending up in these situations.

Keep it together, keep it together... he was free, he was clean again, there were no more bugs, natural or otherwise, anywhere on his body, and he was going to go from here to his hotel room where he was going to consume the entire minibar and hopefully wake up three days from now with a terrific hangover and no memory of the entire experience. And then breathe down Legal's neck until they found a way to get them all the hell away from SHIELD.

And if he had to make nice with fucking Maria Hill until then to avoid making the mess even bigger... well, he was a big boy. He could do this.

"What was it like being in there for five days?" asked one reporter. "That portable looked pretty small to hold twenty people."


"Do the citizens of that area of Miami have to worry about the quarantine?"

"Nope," said Clint. "It's perfectly safe to go back. You won't end up in a little tiny portable getting to know your neighbors a little too well."

"Iron Man, what was it like, being confined like that?" asked one reporter. "Did it remind you of your ordeal in Afghanistan a few years ago?"

Tony swiftly tamped down on the surge of panic. "Are you kidding?" He laughed. "No running water in Afghanistan. No singalongs, either," he said, and from the chuckle that ran around the room he could tell the video of the Avengers singing Stand By Me -- or was it Rolling in the Deep? -- had probably been released.

"There were rumors that a fan tried to break into the portable," asked another reporter. "Is that true?"
Tony blinked, a surge of relief flashing through him at the realization that apparently that was it for the cave questions. "Sorry, a what?"

"An Avengers fan tried to break in," said a tall woman.

"Somebody penetrated the perimeter," called out a grey-haired man near the back. "There was a rumor that it was a woman who claimed Captain Rogers had been dating her."

Steve's eyebrows climbed up and Tony rolled his eyes.

"Again?" he said, chuckling. "Again with the who's dating Captain America rumors?"

"Was it?"

"No, absolutely not," said Steve, leaning forward into the mic.

"Not an ex-girlfriend?"

"No."

"Do you have an ex-girlfriend?"

"No, I do not."

"Would you tell the press if you were--"

"You people are going to have to stop asking those questions," said Tony. "He's said before he won't discuss his personal life. Apparently the Captain doesn't kiss and tell."

"Yes, whoever does end up dating Captain Rogers will be a very lucky... person," said one of the reporters near the front.

Steve gave her a level stare, and Tony could hear in the murmur from the reporters the word 'conversion' and damn it, they were like dogs with a bone, they just wouldn't leave Steve in peace about this. Oh well, at least nobody was asking about the two of them; apparently none of the SHIELD agents in the portable had talked. Yet.

Steve leaned to the microphone. "Uh, man," he said. "Not 'person.'"

"A lucky man?" said one of the reporters in the front row. "So you aren't going to conversion therapy?"

"No," said Steve.

"And you are planning on dating men?"

"If I find the right guy," said Steve, looking away from Tony, and Tony had to laugh because he had no idea. None at all. Forget Miami narrowly escaping bizarre bug infestation: that was going to be the soundbite that came out of this. Captain America looking for 'the right guy.'

"And that's it for the Avengers," said Sitwell, leaning into the mic, and Steve shot him a fervently grateful look. "I think everyone's appreciative of them coming in so soon after their ordeal, but we've got a bit more ground to cover and--"

"We have a few more questions--"
"You're welcome to ask them of the rest of the agents here," said Sitwell, and Tony sat back and pushed his mic out of the way. He smiled as his fellow Avengers copied his movements almost perfectly. "We have Agent Jemma Simmons to speak about the precautions we'd like Miami citizens to take re-entering the zone where the bio-contaminants were being produced--"

Tony zoned out as a nervous young agent with a British accent leaned forward and started to answer questions. He rubbed his eyes.

"Look at that poor kid," he chuckled, nodding towards Simmons. "All full of adorable biotechbabble; nobody gives a shit."

"Why not?"

"Steve. You just finally ended the conversion rumors and put yourself in the Eligible Gay Bachelor dating pool. You're gonna be paired up with every gay celebrity on the planet until they get bored or find another hot story." He shook his head. "Agent Biohazard over there doesn't hold a candle to that."

Steve ducked his head and Tony chuckled, and then looked down at his Starkpad. God, it was going to take him days just to catch up on missed messages, let alone - he looked up as Steve tapped his shoulder.

"Listen," Steve murmured, leaning closer. "If I tried to kiss you right now, would you let me?" He paused. "Or would you slap me for getting fresh?"

Tony gaped at him, then felt a smile breaking over his face and leaned closer. "I would kiss you right now in front of God and everybody if you'd let me."

"I'm serious," said Steve, a small smile tugging at his mouth. "I would kiss you right now in front of God and everybody if you'd let me."

"I'm not gonna let you," said Tony, and he probably looked like an idiot by this point, because he couldn't seem to stop grinning at Steve, but what the hell, Steve was smiling back. "We are gonna talk as soon as the press conference is done, though," he said, and Steve nodded.

He turned back to Biohazard Girl, glancing at his Starkpad and damn it, ten more minutes to go until they were free, and then he and Steve could--

Could what, exactly? Steve was now gazing with apparent rapt concentration at the biogeek and Tony could not have understood what she was saying if she'd come with subtitles and a PowerPoint presentation. He could feel Steve's body heat next to him. Through the wall of exhaustion and discomfort, there was something in him that felt like bursting open. Had Steve seriously meant what he'd said, had he--

OK, wait. Calm down. He could be totally misreading things here. Had Steve been suggesting a 'let's kiss and make up and make out' kind of kiss, or a 'damn it, the media's gonna hound me, can you help me throw them off' kind of kiss - except that didn't make sense, if they got together and the media saw it there would be more publicity, not less, and--

They'd felt very close during the time in the portable, but they'd both been messed up as well, and they still weren't entirely stable. A shower, freedom, and four hours of sleep did not wipe out the entire experience. And if there was a shrink around he'd probably say something about Tony still feeling jittery over being confined and pressed into service, and Steve possibly still dealing with the whole surgery-without-anesthetics again - hell, Tony was still a bit traumatized over that - and they
were both still upset over SHIELD having their balls in a vise. And things hadn't worked between them; it wasn't just that Steve had been effectively still in the closet, it was that Tony wasn't any damn good at anything serious no matter how much he might want it, and--

And finally the endless press conference was over and the reporters were leaving and the infernal microphones were off.

"Finally, fuck." Clint stretched and yawned. "Me and Nat are gonna go back to our floor. Did you know they've actually got Gladiator on the hotel's pay-per-view? We're gonna order it, and then order one of everything on the room service menu, on SHIELD's tab." He grinned. "Anyone else in?"

"I'm in," said Bruce. "I don't know why, but the idea of sticking it to an organization that doesn't even have me trapped in any way is strangely satisfying."

Tony grinned. Bruce had been as serene as always during the press conference, but it was clear that he was beyond pissed at his team-mates' predicament.

"This would be Midgardian food that is not dried in ice?" asked Thor, and Natasha nodded. "Good. That was becoming tiresome."

"You go on ahead," said Steve, and looked at Tony, his gaze a mixture of hesitant and challenging. "Tony?"

"Why? Where are you going?" asked Clint.

Natasha glanced between them, then a small smile quirked her mouth. "I... think maybe that's none of our business."

"What?" Clint blinked.

"The Captain and the Man of Iron shall remain behind," said Thor firmly. "They may rejoin us later." He flicked his eyes between them. "Probably not. Let us go back to our floor."

Bruce glanced at them, did a small double take. "Right. We'll, uh, see you later."

They stared at each other awkwardly as the other Avengers hurried out and they were left alone with the hotel employees clearing the chairs and equipment from the press conference.

"Are you hungry?" asked Steve, and Tony blinked.

"You mean - for room service?"

"No. For dinner." Steve took a breath. "For you. And me. Together. Possibly at a restaurant." He paused. "Like a date."

A date.

Damn, Tony was probably a little too sleep-deprived for this. The sensible thing would be to say no, to go on back to their floor of the hotel, join the others for room service, possibly watch the movie, not do anything or talk about anything until they were both in a more reasonable, objective frame of mind.

"Yeah. That'll be good," he found himself saying instead. Screw reasonable objectivity, apparently.

"There's a restaurant at this hotel," said Steve. "Italian, I think." And suddenly the idea of non-freeze-
dried spaghetti and meatballs sounded like the most mouth-watering thing Tony had ever imagined.

They made their way to the hotel restaurant and were seated quickly and without fuss, and Tony reflected that it was interesting to be almost unrecognizable. He ran a hand over his smooth chin, glancing at Steve and his unfamiliar buzz cut.

He glanced at the wine list as the waiter fussed around them with place settings and he tried to bring his scattered thoughts and feelings under control. He'd wanted alcohol, with the desperation of the deprived, the whole time they'd been in that portable, but he really had to be sober for this. Whatever it was. Everything shifting under him, again. He put the wine list aside.

"I wasn't ashamed of you, you know," Steve said quietly as soon as the waiter had left. "I was never ashamed of you."

OK. That was direct. And they had yet to order dinner. He supposed this was better than sitting there in nervous anticipation making small talk, but still.

He took a sip of water. "What is this about?" he asked when he could speak without getting tongue-tied.

"It's about making some things clear," said Steve. "You said you ended our arrangement because I was still pretty much in the closet. I'm not any more."

Tony swallowed hard. Oh, shit. Suddenly about a million Reasons This Is a Very Bad Idea crowded into his head. He opened his mouth.

"I don't think that's all it was about, though," said Steve, and Tony's words froze. Steve reached out and carefully took Tony's hand. "I'm not going to hide."

"OK." Tony swallowed again.

"But you're not going to hide either."

Tony blinked. "What?"

"You're not going to hide behind 'I don't do long-term.'"

"I don't."

"You did. With Pepper."

"Look how that turned out."

"That's no excuse to never try again," said Steve. "Besides, you've got 100% better success rate than I do, right?"

Tony shook his head. "I... I'm really not good at this."

"And I've really never done this at all. I'm not asking for guarantees and I'm not asking for forever, but I'm not going to do friends with benefits."

"What's changed?"

"I got my head out of my ass," said Steve with a grimace. He squeezed Tony's fingers and said gently, "And maybe it's time you did too."
Tony frowned.
"You won't stay a dirty secret; I won't be a fuck-buddy."

Tony drained his glass. Steve's eyes followed the line of his throat, his fingers tightening on Tony's slightly. "So you want to be... what, dating, then?" Steve nodded, and Tony sighed. "You have no idea what you'd be getting into."

"Probably not. Neither do you."

"What if I say no?"

"We'll finish dinner, and maybe I can talk you into a round of goodbye no-strings-attached... whatever," Steve said, and Tony could feel his effort at keeping his tone light. "And that'll be that."

"What are you gonna do?"

"I'm not going to a pick-up joint or getting an eHarmony account, if that's what you're asking," said Steve, chuckling. "I know even less about dating men than I do about women. But."

"But you've had offers. And you might take them up."

"Just go back to doing what I did before. Wait for the right partner."

Tony tilted his head to the side. "Why did you accept it, before?" he asked curiously. "No strings attached, that is."

"Because I didn't think it could be about a relationship, Tony. I thought it was just sex. But it can't be, not for me." He looked down. "Look, I'm sorry, I can't offer you very much. I don't know how I feel about a lot of stuff. I'm not... experienced. And I'm not a fan of premarital anything, and I'm not the most stable--""

"I'm not exactly poster boy for stability either, am I?"

"But I can at least offer honesty." He gazed at Tony. "And I meant what I said. You're not bad at this. Not with me, anyway."

"I have a lousy track record."

"Well, I don't have any track record," said Steve.

Damn it. Almost all the reasons Tony had had to stay away were still there. And he sucked at this kind of thing...

But damned if Spangles didn't make him want to prove himself wrong.

"So... you want us to be... boyfriends?"

Steve chuckled. "What would you prefer? Partners? Lovers?"

"Um." Tony wrinkled his nose. "Partner sounds like a business relationship, lover sounds like a bad Harlequin, boyfriend sounds like we're in high school."

"I've been called worse," said Steve.

"So have I." He sat back, toyed with his menu. He was tired, his eyes still felt gritty, his back was
sore, all of him was way too smooth, there was still this shit with SHIELD...

And there was no reason for this feeling in his chest, happiness and hope bubbling up through the confusion and fear, lightness that he wanted to ascribe to the giddy feeling he sometimes got when he was particularly sleep-deprived after days in the lab, but that felt somehow completely different...

"So? Are we?" asked Steve.

"Are we what?"

Steve gazed at him patiently.

"Dating? Going to try for this?" Tony blinked. "What the hell. Why not?"

And Steve's grin was so bright Tony drew in his breath. Steve clasped his hand more firmly, then gently pulled him closer and kissed him.

As kisses went, it wasn't one of their best. They were both tired, Tony's lips were chapped, his face felt bare and cold, everything was slightly off and it crossed Tony's mind that, holy shit, anybody could see this - granted, they weren't right in the middle of the restaurant and it wasn't all that busy, but...

But it felt natural. Easy. Amazing, as they finally drew back, smiled at each other, ordered their food and ate. Relaxed, happy to be free of the portable and clean and bug-free and free in general, and the tiredness, the overhanging shit with SHIELD, all of it just seemed so much less pervasive. He could even be grateful that Hill had made them sit through those forty minutes of press stupidity rather than leaving it hanging over their heads. Now they were free to just sit and eat and enjoy the moment, as they made small talk about the agents they'd met in the portable, and Sitwell, and going back to New York - and then dinner was over and Tony had no idea where it had gone.

They made their way back to their floor, and Tony paused as they exited the elevator.

"So... we're dating, now. How traditional." He paused. "Just how traditional is this going to be, though?" He smirked. "Was that offer of no-strings-attached 'whatever' only contingent on me turning you down? Can I interest you in strings-attached whatever, or are we starting from zero?" He fluttered his eyelashes at Steve. "Are you going to see me to my door and kiss my hand, then go back to your place?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "People didn't even do that in my time," he said, and gave Tony a gentle push towards his room. "We had sex in the forties too, Tony. Even I had sex in the forties."

They stopped at Tony's door and Tony took out his key card. "And?"

"Can I come in?"

Tony opened his door. "I thought you'd never ask."

Steve came forward and embraced him, parting his lips, and it felt so familiar, so easy. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed this. And then they were hurrying through the small sitting room and practically stumbling into the bedroom and Steve was pushing Tony down onto the bed, eagerly unbuttoning his shirt and running his lips down Tony's throat, and it felt amazing, it felt awesome, it felt...

A little off, actually. His face bare, everything so over-sensitive - and Steve's hair so short, nothing for Tony to run his fingers through. He stifled a laugh as Steve nibbled on his neck.
"What?" Steve asked, lifting his head.

"Nothing - tickles, a bit," said Tony.

Steve chuckled. "Feels a bit funny from this end too," he said, and they kissed again. Steve drew back. "Not used to feeling all of... this," he said, running fingers over Tony's lips and cheek. He kissed him again. "I don't understand women who complain about kissing guys with beards. I like it."

"Ever thought of growing one yourself?"

Steve shook his head. "You saw what I was growing in when we were in quarantine," he said. "Patchy and too dark."

Tony laughed and pressed up against him, grinning as he felt distinct hardness against his thigh. "I take it the libido-lowering meds are no longer an issue?" he said, groaning as Steve pushed down against him.

"I'm still not at base-normal for me," said Steve. "Frankly, that's a good thing."

Tony shook his head in mock dismay, unbuttoning Steve's shirt and pushing it down his arms. "So many men would give so, so much to have what you had."

Steve smiled, pulling his shirt off. "I'll settle for being normal. In this at least. I can think about you without immediately wanting your hand down my pants."

Tony snaked a hand down and deftly unbuttoned Steve's fly. "Do you object to my hand down your pants?"

"Never," gasped Steve as Tony's hand slipped in. "But I'm glad I can look at you without getting hard."

Tony grasped him. "I dunno, feeling pretty hard right now."

"I'm not just looking at you," Steve pointed out. "We're in your bedroom and there's nobody else around. It's a little more private than a conference room." He thrust into Tony's hand and they pushed against each other, moaning, and Steve's hands came down to Tony's pants and undid them as well, pushing them down his hips a bit.

He pushed Steve onto his back ran his lips down Steve's throat, down to his chest, a little put off by the unnatural extra-smoothness - and damn it, this was supposed to be sexy. And it was, mostly. But... he'd thought about Steve in his bed so many times in the last few weeks. Thought about his eager hands and darkened eyes, how he'd felt when Tony pressed his thighs together and Steve pushed between them, caressing him and tensing and catching his breath before shuddering his release. Thought of his dark thoughts held at bay for a little while as they touched and melted together, his impulses overriding everything. And now they were back to what Tony'd fantasized about so many times--

He winced slightly at the over-sensitization as Steve pulled his underwear down.

"What is it?" asked Steve.

"Nothing, nothing," said Tony, and Steve kissed the side of his neck, wriggling out of his own pants. Tony squirmed.
"It feels... weird," he blurted.

Steve froze, then laughed, Tony joining in. "Weird," he said. "Thanks?"

"You're too smooth."

"So are you." Steve tilted his head to the side. "Thought it was supposed to be..."

"A kink? Yeah, supposed to be. Maybe it's an acquired taste." He shook his head in apology, smiling and coming back to Steve's mouth, trying to push the oddness away and just enjoy the moment.

There was something different about this, Tony realized as Steve deepened their kiss. Beyond the obvious. He threw back his head and shivered as Steve pushed him onto his back and worked his lips down Tony's neck. Eager and ardent a lover as Steve was, there had always been an undercurrent of guilt about him, a slight reluctance to indulge too much. A hint of desperation, like he was only with Tony because he couldn't stand not being with him, because loneliness and unwanted desire won against his better impulses and pushed him into Tony's bed. That was gone now, and he explored Tony with hands and lips, holding him close, knees on either side of his thighs, leaning down to fit their mouths together.

And stopped, pulling away, laughing.

"What?"

"I'm sorry, it's just - you're..." Steve's stopped, trying to contain himself, but laughter seemed to bubble up despite his efforts. "You're - slippery."

Tony burst out laughing, and then Steve joined in and they lay helplessly giggling together. "I think the word is supposed to be 'silky' Steve," he said when he could breathe again. "Seriously, people do this on purpose. It's supposed to be very erotic."

"You've got no... traction," Steve said, and had to stop as Tony cracked up again.

It wasn't that funny, really. In fact it was kind of pathetic - they'd both been pining ridiculously, he could admit that now, admit what he'd seen in Steve's eyes, what he'd felt within himself. They should be coming together in a glorious overwhelming surge of passion that blotted out all other considerations. Instead they were finally naked in bed together again - and laughing their fool heads off. Steve was laughing harder than he'd ever seen him, shoulders shaking helplessly, breath gasping as they lay together.

Finally Tony stopped, wiping his eyes. Now that he thought about it, this was actually probably far better for them than sex right now.

"I... am not sure this is gonna work," he said.

Steve put his head down on the bed and snickered, then ran a rueful hand over his too-short hair. "I don't think so either," he said, his mirth subsiding slowly. He rolled over on to his side and gazed at Tony, eyes still bright with amusement. "You have no idea how much I've wanted this. But it's probably for the best."

"Too soon?" Tony asked. "Seriously? Why? Because this is our first date?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "No, not that. I mean too soon after getting out." He clasped Tony's hand. "I probably should've waited until you'd gotten some real sleep. You were... I know being in that
Tony snorted and moved onto his back. "Steve, if you're gonna play the 'poor Tony's Afghanistan flashbacks' guilt card, I'll have to raise you 'poor Steve's surgery-without-anesthetics,' OK? We're probably both massively f*cked up right now."

"Right," Steve said. "So we shouldn't rush into anything."

"Fine. Let's call it that. Let's pretend we stopped because we were both being responsible and careful of each other's mental health issues. It's easier to swallow than, 'We tried but just couldn't get past the lack of traction.'"

Steve snorted. "I guess so."

Tony sighed and turned over, gazing at Steve, who grasped his hand and brought it to his lips.

"Speaking of mental health issues, I'm sorry," he said quietly. "For before." Tony raised his eyebrows. "You didn't deserve any of what I put you through."

"You didn't--"

"You brought me through a lot of shit, and put up with a lot from me. I know you don't think you did anything right," he said, speaking over Tony as Tony opened his mouth to object. "You can believe what you want. But you're wrong. You saved my life. Over and over. You gave me something to live for."

Tony frowned. That sounded a little too - but now Steve was giving him a small smile. "Not just..." he waved between them, "this. I mean, I missed you - you have no idea how much I missed you - but this wasn't what made the difference." He paused, evidently choosing his words carefully. "You've made me feel like I belong here, whether you're in my bed or not." He ran a hand down Tony's arm. "I'm still homesick," he said, his voice low. "I'm still... grieving, I guess. Probably will be for a long time. But it's not like it was before, when I felt like I'd give anything to go back. Like I'd rather die than stay here." Steve smiled and drew his knee up, running a hand down to his anklet. "I don't need this any more."

Tony ran a finger under it, making Steve shiver a bit and twitch his leg. "I'll give you the code to unlock it."

Steve nodded. "I'd still like to keep it, though. You should think about making one for everyone on the team; it's pretty useful, having JARVIS able to locate you and monitor your vital signs."

Tony hesitated a moment. "What if... what if you could go back?" Steve looked at him curiously. "Back to your time, without screwing up any timelines or bringing about a paradox to end the universe or anything. Would you?"

Steve nodded and took Tony's hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing his fingers. "Yeah, I would," he said quietly. "It's where I belong. But I'd miss this time, too. I'd miss you." He sighed and rested his cheek against the back of Tony's hand. "And I dunno, I've thought, a couple of times... without Bucky, without Peggy... who knows, maybe even if I had the chance to go back I'd choose to stay here."

"Peggy would still be there," Tony pointed out.

Steve shook his head. "Not for me. I couldn't marry her. I love her - I'll always love her. But I couldn't spend the rest of my life with any woman. It wouldn't be fair to her." He paused and
blinked, as if something had just occurred to him. "Or to me."

Tony gazed at him thoughtfully.

"I'm better, Tony. You did that, whether you believe it or not."

"You did it yourself," Tony protested.

"But you helped. The whole team helped." He leaned forward and kissed Tony again. "It's late. We're both exhausted." He drew back. "How are you feeling?"

Tony thought for a moment. Considering that he was weirdly slippery, coming down off an experience that was way too reminiscent of the worst time in his life, hadn't managed to have sex with his... boyfriend, and was still aching for sleep... he bit back an impulse to crow, "Like the King of the world!" and just smiled at Steve.

"Pretty good."

"We should sleep."

"Yeah. Hey." Tony blinked. "Tomorrow's Valentine's Day." Steve's eyebrows went up. Tony chuckled. "You know, the sad thing is, every other time I've been with someone for Valentine's Day I've gone the kinky route. Lingerie, sex toys, leather." He grimaced. "We're both going to be prickly as hell tomorrow though. I may be forced to go the romantic route by default."

Steve snickered, then yawned. "Maybe we'll just sleep through it."

Tony smiled and closed his eyes, feeling Steve's hand gently run across his too-short hair, then felt Steve settle himself on the pillow and drop into a deep sleep almost instantly.

He turned over, watching Steve's peaceful features, mind still a little too wired to come down.

This was probably insane. But damned if insanity didn't feel like the best thing in the world right now. He touched a finger to Steve's smooth cheek, watched his eyes flutter slightly, smiled as Steve moved towards him, reaching for him without waking.

It was insane. He had a lousy record, a lot of it painfully recorded in the media. But Steve believed in him. That said something, to have someone like Steve Rogers think highly of him. Too bad Tony didn't particularly share the sentiment - sure, yeah, genius billionaire and all that, he knew he was pretty hot shit, but not about the important stuff. Not when it came to deserving someone like Steve.

Well, maybe Steve could believe in Tony enough for both of them. Tony smiled, drew closer to Steve, and prepared to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

1. The movies watched/mentioned are

Titanic, 1997
Shakespeare in Love, 1998
American Beauty, 1999
Gladiator, 2000
2. The Avengers men - except for Bruce - really are very lightly furred. Chris Evans has a bit of, um, traction going on in the chest area, but gets shaved down to play Cap. I know this because I went and looked, in the name of story realism and accuracy. It was a sacrifice I was willing to make for my readers.

You're very, very welcome :D

3. I was really hoping to have this done by chapter 16, but it looks like I'll need to make it 17, with the last one being more like an epilogue...
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much, ClawR, for your beta work! Truly appreciated :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1.

February 16

"Why did you quit?" Sitwell asked, scanning over the notes he'd made so far on his legal pad.

"We had our reasons," said Natasha.

"I figured that," said Sitwell patiently. "But if I'm going to be your handler, I'm going to have to know a little more about--"

"How are you our handler, anyway?" Clint interrupted, a scowl on his face. "Who'd you piss off to get this detail?"

Natasha gazed at Sitwell, content to let Clint's belligerence run free. After the way SHIELD had treated them, she didn't particularly feel like doing what Clint referred to as her "let's make Clint behave like a real grownup" thing.

The fact that Jasper Sitwell was a good guy and probably didn't deserve the attitude didn't seem to matter to Clint much. Which Natasha probably should've cared about, but found she didn't particularly.

"I asked for the position," said Sitwell, scribbling down something incomprehensible.

"And Hill just said yes? Just like that?"

"Why not? I worked with Phil. He was supposed to be your handler."

"I just figured she'd sic another WSC type like Sorensen on us," said Clint.

"Sorensen's been reassigned," said Sitwell. "I'm familiar with the Avengers Initiative, I've worked well with both of you in the past--"

"Doesn't seem like the WSC's style," said Clint. "Putting in someone we can work with."

Sitwell gave them a bland look. "Well, we'll see how long this lasts," he said. "Now, as part of your re-integration--"

"We weren't gone long enough to have to re-integrate," said Natasha flatly.

"--you are expected to go through Retraining Program B-3," Sitwell finished. "I will be evaluating your weapons tests. Mr. Stark, Captain Rogers and Thor are expected to--"

"You're out of your mind if you think Tony's going to--"
"--also comply," finished Sitwell, taking a thin binder out of his briefcase. "I will leave you the following documentation to explain to them. They have no reason to trust me and I have no reason to waste my time trying to make them."

"What makes you think we want to do your job for you?" asked Natasha.

"We're only doing this for a year, and under duress," said Clint.

"And I'm sure Mr. Stark is already trying to find a way to weasel out. In the meantime, there's no harm in going through the motions, is there?" asked Sitwell, opening the binder and flipping through the tabbed pages. "Here are your access codes for the systems - you aren't Level 7 any more, of course, but you do need Level 1 access - and here are codes for the training, weapons and tactical rooms. Please fill out the following--"

"You know where you can stuff these--" Clint began.

"Hawkeye," Sitwell said firmly, setting down the binder with a slight thump. "I am not going to waste my time making excuses for SHIELD. Or the WSC, for that matter. I don't much care why you quit. I don't much care why you came back, or how you feel about it. I do care about making this as painless as possible for everyone involved. So please, out of respect for the man who trained us both, don't make my job deliberately harder."

Natasha put a hand on Clint's arm and shook her head slightly. Clint sat back, satisfied they'd made their feelings clear.

"What has Dr. Banner said about returning to SHIELD?" asked Sitwell.

"That he'd rather have gangrene of the dick," said Clint.

"Is that a direct quote?" Sitwell chuckled, shaking his head. He ticked off an item on his legal pad and scanned over his notes. "Are Stark and Rogers romantically involved?" he asked, without looking up.

"Search me, I dunno," said Clint. "Why do you care?"

Sitwell gave him another bland look. "I'm your handler. I need to know about the team. I'm not asking to gossip, or go to the media. I'm asking because it's part of my job."

"And you can figure it out yourself. That's part of your job too." Clint gave him a grim smile. "Besides, it might not be your job for long. I'm sure the WSC has some other stooge ready to replace Sorensen."

"Please make sure you get your team-mates to sign in and complete their intake paperwork," said Sitwell calmly. "Forms are available online as well, addresses in your binder."

"No promises."

"Wouldn't expect any. Well, that's all for today," said Sitwell, dismissing them with a wave.

Ridiculous of Sitwell to ask about Steve and Tony, really, thought Natasha as they walked away. It wasn't like it was a huge secret any more. The latest picture circling in the media had been telling enough, even though she knew for a fact that it had been taken before Steve and Tony were actually back together.

The photograph, taken during the post-quarantine press conference, was actually kind of... gorgeous.
They were in their own world, obviously, Steve's hand on Tony's back, Tony's eyes wide and joyful, both of them leaning slightly towards one another. It was intimate, despite the decorous space between them. Natasha had tried hard to figure out how anybody could explain it away as platonic, and had come up blank.

"So. Back to the Tower?" asked Clint as they left SHIELD. "I think we're on to A Beautiful Mind."

"You know, you didn't have to be such a prick to him. It's Jasper. He's just doing his job."

"He didn't need to ask about anybody's private--"

"I'm sure Jasper wants to think about Tony and Steve fucking about as much as we do," said Natasha. "He's asking because he has to. It's what Phil would've done." She paused. "Phil liked him. He would've been happy Jasper was assigned to us."

"Well he won't be for long," said Clint gloomily.

"Clint, make up your mind. You either hate him on principle or you hate the fact that he might be replaced by a WSC stooge."

"Can't I choose both?" Clint asked, a smile tugging the side of his mouth.

"No," said Natasha flatly. "It's time to be a grownup and play nice with the other kids."

Clint shrugged, then idly flipped through the papers Sitwell had given them. He stopped, frowning. "I will say one thing," he said slowly. "I'm not sure when Jasper got this sloppy." He tilted the binder in Natasha's direction.

Natasha glanced at it, then blinked. "The code?"

"It's not Level 1, that's for sure," said Clint.

Natasha frowned thoughtfully. "Clint. I don't think he's sloppy. That's... not Jasper."

Clint's eyebrows raised. "You think..."

"I think we're not the only ones who didn't like WSC's strong-arm tactics. Jasper may have just given us clearance into areas we shouldn't be getting into." She smiled at Clint. "I say we take advantage of it."

They entered the Tower and went up to the common floor.

"How'd it go at SHIELD?" asked Bruce as they entered the kitchen. Bruce and Steve were putting together the makings for a taco dinner; Tony appeared to be loitering for the purpose of eating the shredded cheese whenever Steve wasn't looking.

"Come back to its loving arms, Bruce," said Clint. "And you'll find out. Really. Please. You know you want to. There, Tasha, can you tell Sitwell I did my part trying to talk him back in?"

Steve frowned at him. "They're still trying to get Bruce back?" He put down the cheese grater and pressed his lips together. "Damn it. I'm sorry."

Tony shook his head. "Steve. Don't."

Steve glared at him. "Tony, it's my fault. If I hadn't accepted--"
"Shut up," said Clint. "If anything, we pressured you, when you weren't in any position to say no. Drop the guilt trip already, or I end you."

Steve sighed and Tony put a hand on his, squeezing it. "I told you so," he said gently, leaned forward and gave him a quick kiss. "The only one who blames you for this is you. Here." He handed Steve the bowl of grated cheese. "Take this away from me before I eat all of it, and let's go see the movie."

They settled themselves in front of the screen, Steve still looking upset but the rest of them determined to let it go. Bruce started to fiddle with the remote, queuing up the movie.

"Hey. Tony. What do you make of this?" Clint tossed the page with the codes Sitwell had given them at Tony, then sat down next to Natasha and started putting together nachos for himself. Tony glanced over the codes, frowning slightly. "Yeah, those are our new security codes. It's supposed to be Level 1--"

"To anyone who doesn't know how SHIELD codes work, it should look like it, yeah," said Tony. Steve peered over his shoulder.

"Helpful?" asked Natasha, helping herself to the nachos as well.

"You have no idea," said Tony. "Very. Not that I can't find plenty of things on my own."

"Any news on that, by the way?" asked Natasha.

Tony took a breath, glanced sideways at Steve. "I've been meaning to tell you." He cleared his throat and put a hand on Steve's. "Uh. I was able to get into SHIELD Medical records."

"I thought you'd figured out how to break in ages ago," said Clint, his mouth full.

"No, a little deeper. I, um..." he glanced at Bruce, who had found where they'd left off the movie the night before.

"We weren't sure how to tell you," Bruce gave Steve an apologetic glance and put down the remote. "There's a lot of proof in there that SHIELD Medical was experimenting on you for their own purposes, to find out more about the Serum. I mean, it would be hard to prove it in a court of law, because they really were testing stuff that was for your benefit--"

"And it worked," Steve pointed out.

"Yeah, it did." Bruce cleared his throat. "But some of the practices were not exactly ethical. And all of your records were being transferred straight to the WSC. By one researcher in particular."

"Gandry," Steve guessed. Bruce nodded. "You're not telling me anything new. We all suspected this. Right?" Steve looked around at them and Natasha could see her own sheepish embarrassment mirrored on her team-mates' faces. "I'm not an idiot; I suspected it too. Once I got out of there a lot of what had happened didn't make much sense, therapeutically speaking. It felt more like what SRS did with me during the War." He shook his head. "This isn't new information, Bruce."

"All right, maybe not. But it's... it doesn't look good. Especially considering the state you were in when you went to them, and the fact that they took advantage of that." He paused. "Gandry was also trying very hard to get Thor and me in, to do research on us too."

Thor looked darkly amused as he filled his own plate.
"Is that all you found?" asked Natasha.

"We've gotten into some financial areas," said Tony. "You know how it looked like Fury was in charge of things, and some finances went missing? We're getting pretty close to tracing where they went. And it's pointing back to the WSC. Again."

"As in, taking funds?" asked Clint.

"More like putting them where they wouldn't be found and would make Nick Fury look as bad as possible. There were also three new hires in that department. One has ties to the WSC. The other two, haven't found any yet."

"Sounds good," said Natasha.

"It's mostly confirmation of stuff we were pretty sure about already," said Tony. "Stuff to make Nick Fury look bad; stuff to push through the Council's agenda. No smoking guns yet."

"You've watched too many spy movies," said Clint. "There's usually no smoking gun; it's mostly a lot of small details that put together build up a damning picture."

Natasha smiled. Phil used to say that. Funny hearing it out of Clint's mouth.

"How's it going with SI Legal?"

Tony grimaced. "Not so good. Pepper's still working on it. Obviously we can make a good point that we were under duress, but it'll still get messy if we try to get out right now. SHIELD has plenty of dirt on us too. I don't want our leaving to reflect badly on us..."

"Look at you, all responsible with your image," Clint snickered.

"It's not just my image," said Tony seriously. "I don't want us to take a hit, and you know SHIELD will hit us. They'll play dirty."

"What's dirtier than having sent nukes at New York?" asked Bruce. "Because that's what we've got on them."

"We don't have the proof of that yet," said Tony grimly. "Other than through our resident spies, who could be charged with treason for telling us. The pass codes we just got might help with that."

"Once we get it, and proof of other stuff?"

"Then we go in. And not just to quit. We're gonna blow this open. Expose the WSC. SHIELD, whoever gets hit with whatever shit flies." Tony paused. "I don't know if we should use the pass codes, though..." He thought for a moment. "I'll have Pepper ask SI Legal whether it'll be treason for us to get info from passcodes we get as employees of SHIELD. I'm not keen on becoming another Bradley Manning, thanks."

"Chelsea," Steve corrected him.

"Whatever." Tony put the paper Clint had given him in his pocket. "I'll look this stuff over. For now, let's watch the movie."

"Right, yeah, the movie about the crazy socially awkward genius dude," said Clint, mouth full of nachos. "Feeling some kinship here, Tony?"

"Tony's more engineering than mathematics," Steve said seriously, and the others snickered.
Tony rolled his eyes. "Thanks, dear, love you too," he said, settling back against Steve on the couch. "This is your idea of support?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Steve said, and Tony chuckled as Bruce started the movie.

2.

February 20

"I still don't understand how somebody who grew up in the Depression could even look at that stuff," said Tony as they finally approached the Tower. "Let alone eat it without exploding. Don't you have taste buds?"

Steve laughed, enjoying the soft wind on his face and the bustle of people on the street, but glad to be close to home. "I ate rations during the War. Do you know what those were made of?"

"Probably not capsaicin so strong it could peel the paint off my armor," said Tony. "I'm not letting you near any sensitive part of me with that mouth."

"What? Why?"

"I learned the hard way, once, that really spicy salsa right before oral sex is a very bad idea," said Tony darkly, and Steve's eyebrows shot up.

"Are you serious?"

"A very bad idea. Your tongue gets acclimated to it; lady parts don't."

Steve felt a blush spreading right to his hairline. Tony snickered.

"Hey, have you ever?"

"Have I ever what?"

"Gone down on anyone," said Tony, as if it were the most normal thing in the world to say, right out in a public street, as part of a regular conversation.

"Tony!" Steve muttered. Damn it, this century. Not that people in his time didn't talk about sex, but for God's sake, they didn't just segue into it from a perfectly innocent discussion of eating Ghost Pepper quesadillas.

"Steve!" Tony shot back, smirking at him. "Come on. Or do you make it policy to never go down and tell?"

Steve blushed even harder. It was odd how it felt so natural, being with Tony, and in the Tower it was almost as if he'd forgotten that he'd ever felt completely out of time and place... and then Tony would say or do something that would make him feel so damn self-conscious. Remind him that this whole world, this whole time, wasn't his own. None of the attitudes and social norms he'd been raised to believe in were the same. Here he was, mortified at the thought of anyone overhearing their conversation and judging them... but the vast majority of his fellow New Yorkers wouldn't care enough to say anything, no matter what they felt. And a huge proportion of them actually wouldn't think there was anything wrong.

No, damn it. There was nothing wrong with this conversation. Tony was being an ass and trying to embarrass him, as per usual, but that was just how he showed affection. "Possibly emotionally
"maladaptive," he'd said once, and Steve chuckled at the memory because yes, he really was.

"What?" Tony said, smiling back. "Gonna tell me what that smile's all about?" He pitched his voice lower again and raised an eyebrow. "Fond memories of blow jobs gone by?"

"Iron Man!" As if on cue, a reporter jogged up to Tony and Steve. "Is it true that--" and Steve glanced around at the gaggle of reporters, maybe eight or ten of them, drawing closer to the Tower.

"There was a report of an anomaly in Central Park today; were the Avengers called in to that?" asked one reporter.

"Uh, I hope not," said Tony. "In that we were just at dinner, so we missed the whole show if there was one."

"I can answer that one," said Clint, coming out of the Tower. "No, the Avengers were not called out." The reporters made a small communal sound of disappointment. "Apparently there was a sighting of a man who burst into flame and then walked away, but not before setting a few bushes on fire. Wasn't our call, we had nothing to do with it, the guy was apparently not even super-powered, just some idiot who decided to try stunt-flames in public. Could've burned down a lot of property." Clint rolled his eyes. "And here I'm gonna take on the uncomfortable position of PSA Safety Dude: Kids, seriously, don't do this at home."

The reporters looked disappointed, and Steve couldn't help feeling bad for them. He'd heard of the problems besieging professional journalists these days, what with everyone having access to free news. These poor fellas were just trying to make a living and had probably raced to the Tower to get a scoop and now had nothing to show for their troubles.

"So, you weren't at a battle?" asked one. He glanced between Tony and Steve. "You were at dinner? Together?"

Steve's sympathy dipped markedly. He glanced at Tony.

"Yeah, together," said Tony. "Elena's Garden. Spicy. Excellent chimichangas."

"And was there anybody else there?" asked the reporter.

Tony smiled at him coolly. "During dinner rush? I dunno what the capacity of the place is, but--"

"Can you address the new rumours about--"

"Sure," said Steve impulsively. "They're true." Tony grinned at him and Clint burst out laughing, as the reporters briefly fell silent and then all started to talk over each other.

"Do you mean to say that the photograph taken of you the other day--"

"Is accurate," said Steve, nodding. "We're together."

"I think you just made a couple of them cream their pants," said Tony, leaning into Steve's ear.

"You're dating, then?" said one of the reporters, learning forward avidly. "Officially? What about the other day, at the press conference, when you said you were looking for--"

"Guess I found the right guy," said Steve shortly, but couldn't stop smiling at the way Tony's eyes sparkled.

"Did you know?" a reporter asked Clint.
Clint nodded, grinning. "It's pretty new, but yeah, we all know."

"And how do the other Avengers feel about--"

"We think it's about god-damned time," Clint said with feeling.

"Captain Rogers." A short, round reporter with intense blue eyes shoved forward into Steve's personal space. "What do you think some of the more conservative Americans will say about this? Do you think that--"

"I don't think it's a conservative issue so much any more," said Steve. "Not from what I've seen. Almost everybody's been pretty supportive so far. I don't imagine that many people will care."

"But the fact that you're dating Tony Stark, that's--" Steve gave a small smile. "Wasn't there a meme going around a little while ago that said, 'Live your life in such a way that the Westboro Baptist Church will want to picket your funeral'?” There was a laugh from the crowd. "Not that that's what I was planning on doing, but what the heck, so long as I'm here..."

"My boyfriend uses the word 'heck' in casual conversation," Tony chuckled. "It's adorable."

"My team-mate uses the word 'boyfriend'," said Clint, rolling his eyes. "I can't decide whether it's adorable or nauseating."

"Do you think any groups will picket you--"

Steve shrugged. "Nobody I would be concerned about, I don't think. Westboro pickets the funerals of American soldiers, they'd probably picket me anyway. If they ever do, wherever I am, I'll be very proud."

"And on that note, we've got to go in," said Tony, and they went into the Tower, leaving the reporters outside. He turned to Steve, still chuckling. "Seriously? We came out to the people who camped out near the Tower after a flaming guy went through Central Park?"

"You would've preferred a press conference?"

"I would've preferred messing with their minds a little longer," Clint snickered.

"This way they get a scoop."

"This way they're going to camp out next to the Tower more often," Clint pointed out as they entered the elevator.

Steve frowned. "Damn. I hadn't thought of that."

"Ah, there's usually one or two of them out there anyway," said Tony. "It'll die down."

Clint took out his phone. "Well, time to be a gracious loser," he said wryly. "One lobster dinner for Natasha, coming up."

"Why?" asked Steve.

"We had a bet – oh hi Nat," said Clint, and the elevator slowed as it got to his floor. "Yeah, so pick the date for the Pearl Oyster Bar, oh Wise Woman," he spoke into the phone, rolling his eyes as Natasha evidently whooped. "Yeah, Steve, a few minutes ago, to some reporters outside the Tower."
Tony burst out laughing. "You bet I'd be the one to out us?"

"Bruce bet it would be you," said Clint. "I thought it would be photographs of you two making out." He turned back to Natasha on the phone as the elevator stopped on his floor. "OK, fess up Tash, was that just a lucky guess?" He exited, still talking.

"Seriously, though, I'm fine with this," said Tony as the elevator doors closed. "You know that, right? The papers will have a ball, but that was gonna happen anyway."

"Yeah, I know," said Steve. "I figured, why delay the inevitable? Besides, a week or so from now it'll be over, and they'll have something better to write about," said Steve. He ran a finger over Tony's stubbled cheek. "We'll be fine," he said, and they got off on Tony's floor.

"We will, won't we?" said Tony. He drew Steve closer and they kissed, and Steve suppressed a giggle. A week after what Clint had only recently stopped calling their close shave, they'd gotten used to the ultra-short hair, but it still felt odd to feel so much of Tony's face, and he missed the texture of his beard.

At least their bodies were past the prickly stage of hair growth, he thought as their kiss deepened. Or maybe they were just used to it. Steve gently steered Tony to the bedroom, still kissing, and Tony chuckled as they backed up to the bed. "So... are we skipping team-building?"

"What is it today, Chicago?" Tony nodded, and Steve rolled his eyes. "I was a kid during Prohibition, Tony. I'm not in the mood to see it satirized tonight." He pushed Tony down onto the bed, lying down next to him and pulling him close.

"You wanna skip it?" asked Tony between increasingly heated kisses, and rolled onto his back, pulling Steve on top of him and parting his thighs.

"No, just don't wanna see it tonight, that's all," said Steve, enjoying the feel of Tony under him, both of them rapidly hardening.

"What do you want to do instead?"

Steve gave a pointed glance at their position on the bed, and Tony smirked and leaned up to kiss him, lips moving quickly down to his throat. Steve closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of Tony's mouth on his skin, a shiver running through him.

"So you never did answer," Tony murmured. "Did you ever go down on anyone?"

Steve's pulse jumped. "Uh. No."

"Anyone go down on you?"


"Like it?"

Steve's mind swam. "What kind of question is that?" he asked. He brought Tony's hand to the front of his pants. "What do you think?"

"Want a repeat performance?" Tony asked, moving his hand, his voice low and filthy. "I didn't eat anything dangerously hot..." Steve bit his lip as a whimper escaped him, and Tony chuckled, nibbling his neck. "I'm guessing this doesn't go over any lines about premarital sex, then?"
Steve sighed and pulled away slightly, leaning on his elbow. "Tony." Tony paused in mid-nibble. "You know when you said I could still feel all right because we'd never had real sex?"

Tony frowned. "What?"

"When you ended things."

"I said that?"

"You said we never even fucked properly, so I could still feel virtuous. You were drunk, I'm not surprised you don't remember."

Tony looked away from him and Steve put a finger under his chin brought his gaze back. "I told you I didn't feel virtuous. Look, what we were doing - *everything* we've done together - it's all considered wrong, by some lights." He paused. "By *my* lights - before, I mean. I wasn't telling myself it wasn't 'real' sex, so it didn't count."

"Steve..."

"It all felt pretty real to me," Steve finished gently. "For good and bad."

Tony swallowed hard and nodded, holding his gaze.

Steve kissed Tony, slipping a hand down. "This feels real too," he said, groaning as Tony's fingers went to work on his fly and his hand slipped in.

"So what do you want to do?"

Steve kissed him. "Whatever comes up," he murmured, and started pulling clothing off.

"Oh, that's terrible," Tony groaned, falling onto his back as Steve pushed him down and pressed them together. Steve laughed, revelling in the feel of him, the feel of so much skin under his fingers, Tony's chest hair growing in, no longer stubble but still a little sharp, Tony's tongue in his mouth, Tony hot and hard in his hand.

"Jesus," he moaned. "You feel so, so good..."

"Whatever you wanna do," Tony gasped. "You know I'm up for it." Steve nodded, kissing Tony as the last of their clothing disappeared. Tony pressed his legs together and pulled Steve on top of him again. "You wanna..."

Briefly Steve considered taking his pleasure as he had so many times before, thrusting between Tony's thighs, then shook his head. "No, I want - I want you inside. Inside me," he clarified.

Tony stopped, panting, gazing up at Steve. "Steve, are you sure--"

"I told you, it's all real to me," Steve said, kissing him. "So why not?"

"Because there's a reason we haven't," Tony said when they came up for air. "And I don't want you to--"

"The reason was that I needed to go slow, and it didn't feel right yet," said Steve between kisses. "Trust me, it feels right, now. I want it. I want you." He took Tony's hand in his. "Trust me."

Tony swallowed. "I... uh, I guess I always thought you'd want to top."
"Maybe some other day," said Steve, not wanting to think too hard about why this felt so right, but his brain helpfully supplying reasons anyway - wanting to show Tony that he trusted him fully; part of him still feeling like you weren't really a fairy if you didn't lie down for a fella and the rest of him wanting that part of him to shut the fuck up forever; part of him still not believing in sex before marriage but the rest of him pointing out that what he had with Tony was as close as he was likely to come, and if Tony had been a dame he would've proposed months ago so really, why get hung up on technicalities...

"I want to," he said, and took Tony's hand. He kissed his fingers, moved his mouth to Tony's and kissed him breathless before moving down his neck. "I want to. Please."

Tony panted below him, eyes dark and wide. "Yeah. Yeah, OK," he said, his voice rough. "God, Steve, I'm gonna make this so good for you." He pushed up, locking his lips to Steve's again, and moved them to their sides. He slipped a hand down and started working Steve's length, making Steve moan.

"Yeah, that's it," Tony murmured, then reached over to the side of the bed and pulled out the lube. He nodded to Steve to hold out his hand and poured lube on it, then into his own hand, and then took Steve's erection, motioning to Steve to do the same. Steve shivered, shudders going through him as Tony's hand sped up and their lips came together again, and then Tony's hand was moving around Steve's hip and reaching down and it felt like it should feel different, intrusive or at least strange as Tony went lower and started gently stroking him, but it didn't feel strange at all. Tony's finger slipped in and Steve almost didn't notice, in the overload of lube and lips and Tony growing harder and hotter in his hand.

"You OK?" Tony murmured, and Steve nodded, overwhelmed at the sensations, at the feeling of giving himself to Tony and trusting Tony this much - not that what they'd done together before now hadn't taken trust, but... he gasped as Tony added another finger.

Tony chuckled and kissed him again. "I wanna go down on you so much," he whispered. "Wanna find out what kind of noises you make when my tongue is wrapped around your dick," and Steve closed his eyes, fighting to keep from going off right now before they even went further, but somehow Tony seemed to be keeping him on an edge. "I'm not gonna let you come yet," Tony murmured. "Trust me. This won't be over before we start." He kissed Steve again and kept going, and Steve supposed he should feel a burn or something but he didn't, just felt good and drawn tight as a bowstring...

He kept forgetting to move his hand on Tony, though, amazed that Tony was somehow able to keep coordinating kissing him and stretching him and pushing into Steve's hand, while he himself was rapidly losing all coherent thought and--

"Don't worry about me," said Tony, chuckling and nibbling on his earlobe. "Just relax."

Steve nodded in relief, concentrating on the feeling of Tony's lips and fingers and letting Tony lead as Tony kissed him breathless and damn it, he wanted, he needed Tony to - God, he didn't even know what he wanted any more--

Tony gently broke off their kiss, removing his fingers and Steve couldn't have said how many there were, only that he'd always assumed he'd be feeling tense at this moment as Tony gently pushed him onto his back, but it was hard to feel anything but breathless anticipation as Tony took a slow deep breath and put more lube on himself, and then slowly pressed into Steve.

Oh, God. Steve held on to Tony's shoulders, their eyes locked as their bodies came together.
"You OK?" Tony asked when he was fully sheathed inside him, and Steve could feel him, all of him, filling Steve and holding himself still, waiting for Steve's signal to continue.

Steve nodded, not trusting his voice, feeling like he was going to break apart. He looked up at Tony, braced above him, a bead of sweat starting to trickle down his forehead, and he reached up, tracing it with a finger before gently brushing over Tony's lips. He nodded again, shifting his hips slightly and groaning at the pressure as Tony slid deeper inside.

Tony gave him a small smile and pushed again, and Steve swallowed. Tony rocked slowly, giving Steve time to adjust, and Steve figured it couldn't be as intense for Tony as it was for him, but Tony looked completely focused on him, as if he hadn't done this a million times, as if this was the only thing that mattered to him - and then Tony brought a hand down and stroked Steve and Steve felt his eyes roll to the back of his head.

"Oh my God," he whispered, his head pressing back into the pillow, on sensory overload.

"It's OK. You can let go. I'm pretty close," murmured Tony. He moved inside Steve. "Some day, I'll make you come without even touching your dick. It's pretty intense."

Steve nodded wordlessly, senses sparking as Tony stroked and rocked into him and everything narrowed down to where they were touching, and he looked down to see Tony's hand wrapped around him and Tony disappearing into him and he suddenly gripped the sheets, back arching and crying out as his climax took him totally unprepared in a searing wave of sensation.

"Oh fuck," Tony groaned, moving with Steve through his release and growing less steady until, just as Steve was starting to come down, Tony tensed. "Jesus, oh, fuck, God, Steve," Tony groaned, hand dropping to the bed and body tensing, and Steve could feel him pulsing inside. Tony's eyes were clenched tight as he rode out his orgasm, shoulders shaking with the effort until he finally heaved a deep breath, lowering himself onto his elbows.

Steve smiled up at him, dazed and still panting. "You OK?"

"Am I OK?" Tony huffed a laugh. "I'm fan-fucking-tastic. Literally." He dropped a kiss on Steve's forehead. "You?"

Steve nodded, his limbs feeling heavy, lazy satisfaction stealing over him. "Yeah. Great."

It was so inadequate. He didn't feel great. He felt amazing. He felt like he could shout his happiness to the world, like he wanted to take on whoever decided Captain America shouldn't be queer - or at least shouldn't be queer with Tony Stark - and laugh at how wrong they were. Like he'd like to track down anyone who had ever told him that without marriage vows, sex was tawdry and cheap, and let them know in no uncertain terms that they didn't know what the hell they were talking about.

"I'm great." He glanced down at his stomach, spattered with his release, and grimaced. "Aside from needing a cleanup."

Tony snorted. "Give me a moment." He leaned down, gave him a kiss, and carefully withdrew, rolling over to find a box of kleenex next to the table.

"Always prepared."

"Always wanted to be a Boy Scout. Well... except for their whole attitude of not allowing people like us in."

Steve laughed. "You would've spent camping trips figuring out ways of making robots light the
campfire and put up the tents."

Tony smiled. "True. But it would've been a good formative experience."

Steve laughed and shook his head, lying back.

"So." Tony leaned down, kissing him slowly, then pulled back. "Did you want to go down to see the movie?" he asked, nuzzling his neck.

"Not really, no."

"What do you say we order in?"

"Really?"

"Yeah, be decadent." He gave Steve a smile. "And you may not have your normal refractory period, but I think we can figure out other ways to occupy our time."

Steve grinned up at him. "You think so?"

"Oh, there is so much I want to do with you..." Tony murmured, and ran his eyes down Steve's body and it was so bizarre, he'd just had Tony inside him, could still feel Tony's hands and body all over him... but the touch of his eyes was making him feel like his skin was coming alive and aching for more.

"OK," he said, pulling Tony down for a kiss. "I'm in."

3.

February 22

"I see you took my advice, again," was how Pepper started the video call, and Tony tensed but put on a big smile.

"Pepper, it's not my fault I went to a different hairdresser. I know you picked out Falvia specifically for me, but she wasn't in the quarantine hut, so--"

"Nice try, Tony," said Pepper, her eyes crinkling at the corners, and Tony relaxed minutely. "You know, you're supposed to be lying low while we extricate you from this SHIELD mess. Calling Steve your boyfriend on camera isn't what I'd call lying low."

"...spur of the moment?" Tony tried. Pepper shook her head. "For once it wasn't even my fault, Pep," he protested, grateful that she was focussing on the 'going public' rather than the 'dipping in the company pool' aspect of this. "It was Steve, I swear to God. I wasn't going to say anything."

Pepper shook her head. "And you're going to tell me you didn't encourage him."

"I... not right then and there, no."

"Which means?"

Tony sighed. "I... may have broken up with him before because he wouldn't go public? Sort of?" Pepper's eyes widened. "What do you mean, before? I thought this just started a few days ago!"

"Um." Shit. Right. "We were... kind of sleeping together. Sort of. For a while."
"Since when?" Pepper asked, and now there was real hurt in her eyes and voice.

"Um. Mid-December?"

Pepper closed her eyes and counted to ten. "December... oh, Tony. You were sleeping with him while he was emotionally compromised and unstable, after I had told you not to, knowing that this could seriously compromise the Avengers. Am I understanding this?"

Tony winced. "I'm not sure it's fair to put it that way."

"Tell me how else to put it."

Tony opened his mouth, then closed it. "I can't."

"Tony." Pepper rubbed the spot between her eyes that always looked like it hurt after a few minutes in his presence. "Tony." She sighed. "Tony."

"Right here."

"Tony." She sighed. "I'm going to scream if we keep talking about this." She shook herself. "I meant to call you to let you know Legal's got some preliminary documents they want you to look over about getting out of SHIELD."

Tony straightened up. "What do they want me to do?"

"Discuss options with you, to minimize the likelihood of SI getting hit with backlash if you--"

"How many options are there?"

"There's three that--"

"Pick one. I trust you."

"Your entire team needs to know about this--"

"Natasha's good at that kind of thing. She's laid up with an injury right now anyway, after the last fight. Steve would probably be interested too."

Pepper rubbed that spot again, and Tony kicked himself. Too soon to mention Steve. "All right. I'll send them both copies. They can probably explain to you much better than I can what you need to do when you present your resignations."

Tony hesitated. "About those resignations."

Pepper nodded. "You're not resigning, are you?"

"We've got some... leads."

Leads. What they had was a lot of nothing, files that showed WSC members infiltrating SHIELD, promotions that went back to WSC, a lot of communications between Hill and the WSC, a lot of files being shared around. No smoking gun. This wouldn't be solved with a smoking gun, Tony knew that, but the ten-year-old Sherlock Holmes enthusiast in him was still hoping for one.

Pepper sighed. "Well, as long as you're getting something out of it. I heard your last mission went well?"
"Well enough," said Tony. "Thor did most of the heavy lifting, and Clint got the horses with tranq darts."

"Horses."

"It's kind of hard to describe. They were inter-dimensional horses."

"Of course they were," said Pepper.

"We would've been fine if SHIELD had let me run Steve's plan. He thought we should go through the tunnel, but they wanted us at the docks instead."

"Why didn't you do it anyway?"

"We're trying to play nice. Steve's idea."

Pepper smiled, looked down at her tablet. "Well, that's all I wanted to talk to you about."

Tony blinked. "Really?"

Pepper nodded, then tilted her head to the side. "Tony. Should I give him the shovel talk?"

Tony blinked again. "Most people are giving me the shovel talk." He winced as he thought of all the news items that he'd come across - and thank God it was Sitwell and not Sorensen in charge of them these days, as he'd limited himself to three articles, but the volume of people weighing in on the wisdom of Captain America dating Iron Man was impressive and their thoughts were generally not... charitable.

"I can definitely understand that," said Pepper.

"Thanks," said Tony. He hesitated. "I can't say I blame them. Pepper, I'm not good at... people things."

"That's an understatement."

"...thanks?"

"Tony. You're selfish, self-centered, socially clueless most of the time--"

"Pepper, I can't tell you how much I appreciate--"

"And Steve is a bright boy. He's lived with you for seven months. I'm sure he's figured all of that out by now."

Tony blinked.

"And somehow he still wants to be with you. There must be a reason."

Tony stared at her for a moment. "I don't know what it is," he finally blurted.

"I do," said Pepper. She leaned forward. "You're generous. You're one of the kindest people I know, when you notice the people around you. You can be selfless to a fault."

Tony blinked at her, not knowing how to take that. "I don't feel so selfless. He's... he's so young." Who's robbing which cradle? one article had asked, and the answer had been predictable.
"He's not a child."

"He's also not so far away from being completely fucked up."

"All right, I'll agree if you started with him when he was sick, that wasn't the wisest thing in the world," said Pepper. "But he's fine now. And he still wants you."

He really did, that was the bizarre thing. Tony looked down, thinking of Steve, in his bed and in his life, because he wanted to be there for the long haul, and hadn't accepted Tony's bullshit about friends with benefits. His unabashed delight at learning what Tony was teaching him. His strength, gentleness...

"You've really fallen for him, haven't you?"

"What?" Damn it, he'd kind of zoned for a moment, and almost forgotten Pepper was still there.

"You've never fallen for anyone like this."

"I fell for you."

She smiled gently. "Not like this."

"Maybe you didn't think so, but I did. And look how that worked out, Pep." Tony looked away, aware that he wasn't keeping his tone as light as he meant to.

"Oh, Tony," she said sadly. She looked away, blinking rapidly. "That wasn't... that wasn't really you. It was the whole superhero thing. You know how much that freaked me out." She cleared her throat. "The two of you are better suited for each other. From what I can see, anyway."

Tony thought of the way Steve reached for him, in bed and out. The way they seemed to fit together. The way he'd found all of those sketches of himself in Steve's studio - his own eyes, his hands, his lips, the arc reactor, in ink, charcoal, pencil, and oils. The throb his heart had given when he'd glanced around the room, the warm feeling when he'd spotted Steve's blush. He ducked his head, not wanting to give too much away to Pepper's sharp eyes.

"And you're head over heels," Pepper said gently. Tony sighed. God, she was spooky sometimes. "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. And possibly Clint and Natasha. They're super-spies. They can probably blackmail themselves."

"They don't have that great a track record with this, actually," said Tony.

"All right. I have a meeting," Pepper said, glancing at her watch. She gave Tony a small smile. "Take care of yourself, Tony. And tell Steve he'd better take care of you too, or he'll have me to answer to."

"Hey, no, I don't wanna terrify the poor guy."

"Goodbye, Tony."

"Bye, Pepper," he said, and cut the connection.

It was funny, they'd been through so much together, he and Pepper. And part of him still thought of her as his, in a way, he suddenly realized - through their break-up, through everything that had happened with Steve, Pepper was still his; his better half, his go-to person, his Girl Friday, the one he reached for the moment anything went wrong.
She shouldn't be, though. A good friend, yes. CEO and colleague, certainly... but he needed to go on with his life and let Pepper go on with hers. Maybe if she wasn't always dealing with his problems, she could find someone who could be to her what Steve was to him.

"Bye, Pepper," he repeated softly.

4.

February 28

"Natasha... I think I've found something," said Steve.

"What is it?" asked Natasha, looking up from her Starkpad and leaning over to peer at his laptop screen.

"An encrypted file," he said, showing it to Natasha. "Tony's been showing me how to get around file deletions and find hidden files on the SHIELD server, and I think I found something. I think this folder was Sorensen's."

Natasha's eyebrows went up.

"What's it in?" he asked her.

"I can't tell. But I can tell you this should've been erased when Sorensen was transferred." She frowned briefly. "Maybe we should ask Bruce and Tony to look at it..."

"They both sounded like they were getting antsy to check on things in their labs," Steve reminded her.

"Yeah, and it may be nothing," she agreed. "Well, I'm almost done here; why don't you run a decryption algorithm and I'll be here to help if you have any problems." She glanced at the clock. "And they'll be back in a hour for the end of the marathon anyway."

Steve shook his head as he wrote an algorithm to break through. Marathon; in his day, it was a race. Today it was anything done to excess, the latest being the way they'd set themselves to watching all three Lord of the Rings movies from beginning to end so that they could watch Return of the King. After two days of elves and orcs and gore, he was both eager to see how it ended and quite ready to go back to simply watching part of a movie during dinner.

There. If he'd done it properly, it was going to take a little while to unencrypt the files, but it should be worth it. He glanced over at Natasha's Starkpad, where a small screen was showing Clint and Natasha talking to a reporter after their latest mission.

"Why are you watching that?"

"Clint and I always watch each other's public appearances," said Natasha absently. "Give each other tips."

"How do you feel about two members of your team dating?" the reporter was saying.

"Yeah, whatever," said Clint. "I don't see much of a difference, to be honest. They're not - well, Cap's not - real PDA-prone, so it's not like they're making out in the kitchen or anything. And they were bickering like an old married couple from the moment they met, so that's nothing new."

"The flowers after a fight are a nice touch though," said Natasha. "And the chocolate."
"Those were for you," said Clint.

"What?"

"You'd wrenched your ankle after that last battle. Steve thought they'd cheer you up."

"Oh. I thought it was because they fought over Tony diving into the monster. Again."

"Nah, Tony apologized for that with a new engine for Steve's motorcycle."

Well done, thought Steve. They'd deflected the questions, provided a small human-interest anecdote, made the team sound like a charming family, and reasserted both Steve and Tony's masculinity. No flowers here, folks; these are Real Men. They apologize to each other with motorcycle engines.

Steve shook his head, cynically amused, then glanced at the pad Natasha was holding as she made a notation. Smile noguvbr => 3 x pwd it said, and he supposed Clint could probably understand it.

The clip of Clint and Natasha wrapped up and Steve's decryption algorithm finished at the same time, and Natasha moved closer to Steve on the couch as he started to click through the folder.

"What the hell..." Natasha muttered.

"That's the Verminator... this is about her escape."

"Why did Sorensen have this file?" asked Natasha.

"All of these have to do with Director Fury." Steve scanned through the files. "Was he... keeping track of how Fury messed up?"

"There's... that's a financial file. That's not Sorensen's area," said Natasha. "That's... that's Allen. A new accountant."

"This is from the R & D Department."

Natasha leaned forward. "Steve. That's SHIELD Medical Psych." Steve clicked on it and started to read through.

"Shit," he said, then automatically added, "excuse me. That's... that's my file."

"Well, he was our liaison, he was supposed to have reports on us, that's par for the course, but some of the rest of this stuff..." Natasha scanned one file. "And they aren't full files. Maybe this wasn't Sorensen's. It doesn't have everything Sorensen should have - for one thing, Sorensen would've had more details. I think this was somebody else's. Somebody with access to Sorensen's files."

Steve clicked on another file, scanning it. "Damn... look at this, bring the Avengers within SHIELD with the aim to absorb them into the regular working order - which is not what Fury intended for us at all, is it?"

"That's probably from Maria Hill. That bitch."

"Or Sorensen."

"They sure as hell didn't do such a great job keeping us after they got rid of Fury, did they?" asked Natasha with satisfaction. "WSC should've thought about it before giving her that promotion."

Steve shook his head. "She didn't fight terribly hard to keep us, either."
"What are these?" Natasha frowned over the contents of another folder. "Surveillance. Son of a bitch. This is surveillance for the Joneville secure facility, the Carson labs, the Helicarrier..."

Steve clicked one open and frowned at the grainy video. "What's that?"

"That's a warehouse one of our contractors uses. Looks like the Council weren't just trying to bring us under heel; there's about a half dozen other semi-independent groups that they probably didn't like." She smiled, amused. "Look, the video's taken from far away. The building probably had scrambling tech on it. Starktech, if I'm not mistaken." She clicked through several files, nodding as they seemed to start making sense to her.

"What do they have?" asked Steve.

"Most of what they've got here is nothing," said Natasha. "Which isn't surprising; most surveillance is useless. Look at this - this place was surveilled from a few weeks after the Chitauri to January, and it looks like they distilled the usable material to five minutes."

"It's not just video," said Steve. "This is a text file, right?"

Natasha nodded. "Probably what sound they got had to be re-calibrated so many times you wouldn't get anything usable from it. No human voices. They got the computers to take educated guesses."

"I see." Steve shook his head at the array of files open on the screen. "So the point of all of this was to bring Director Fury down. This is what we're looking at. Bastards."

"Yeah. Well, they did it."

"The files go on after Fury's ouster, too," Steve noticed. He thought for a moment. "I wonder if these are Hill's."

"She's not that devious." Natasha frowned. "I don't think she is, anyway. They were probably meant to help whoever it was keep control of SHIELD, no matter who was put in charge. Not that Hill would make that hard."

"She did get rid of Sorensen..." Steve pointed out.

"That may have been a political ploy to get on our good side, considering what he was doing to you at the time," said Natasha. "Not that she did much better. And look what's happened to SHIELD since Fury left. The Council's taken over, nobody likes them or trusts them, Hill's... well, she's no Nick Fury. And if anything big happens, they're going to need Fury. Or somebody who'll be able to stand up to the Council. Think outside the box, and get things done."

Steve nodded. "You know... with this, we could maybe get Fury back."

"Why should we care?" Natasha said softly. "We're not really SHIELD any more, except in name."

"You were SHIELD. They did good work."

Natasha started closing the files. "We'll get copies of all of this. Show it to Tony and the others, and maybe SI Legal. Decide what to do then. There's no need to go off half-cocked, when we're not even sure whose these are and what they were supposed to do."

"What are these?" asked Steve, spotting a large number of files with similar names.

"They all seem related," said Natasha, and opened one ending in 091412.
September 14.
3:07: Tony. What are you doing up?
3:07: Relaxing. Looking out at the stars. Having trouble sleeping. You?
3:07: A bit. I was thinking of drawing. Do you mind?

Steve drew in his breath as he scanned down briefly, then closed the file. He glanced over the other files. Video format, ending in 091512. He clicked on it, saw Natasha move out to the deck, stand there for a while, looking out over the city. Bruce poked his head out the door and she turned, then moved back inside.

There was a file for almost every single day. He aligned them, video to transcript, noting that many of the videos had no corresponding transcript.

"The bastards," said Natasha, her lips thinning. "They were spying on us. I should've known, but I thought Tony's security... damn it. They probably used the same program to figure out sound."

Steve's eyes moved down and he spotted another video file with a tiny transcript. October 24.

3:15: JARVIS. JARVIS, could you please tell me if anybody heads towards this floor?
3:15: Certainly, sir.
[no sound]
3:43: JARVIS. Where is Tony?
3:43: He's in the workroom, sir.

He clicked on the video and there he was, grainy and silent, bowing his head at the railing and Steve could suddenly vividly remember the hopelessness, the despair, the longing to pull himself over and land below.

God, he'd been so close that night. So fucking close to ending everything, so crazy with grief and loneliness. Stretched so taut, longing so desperately to go back to his time, back to his world, so out of place and so incredibly, heart-breakingly alone. Separated from everyone he'd ever known or loved by death and seventy years under ice. Separated from his team by a few floors of concrete and a complete inability to reach out to them in any way. Separated from Tony by his own fear and self-hatred.

He wondered what the observers would have done if they'd captured his suicide onscreen.

Steve swallowed and cleared his throat, and Natasha put a hand on his and squeezed. He squeezed back, unable to turn from the image of himself weeping silently on the deck, as Natasha sat next to him, staring unflinchingly at the screen in silent witness, until he reached out and stopped the recording.

She took a deep breath, then clicked on another pair of files for December 3.

Clint. Clint talking, telling him about Phil Coulson, and now Phil's pathetic personal life was right there, exposed - though according to Clint it had been an open secret at SHIELD, so who knew whether whoever had recorded this had already known. If they even knew or cared who Phil Coulson had been.

And then there were Hill and Fury, talking to Tony, deciding Steve's future... and then Tony was leaving the deck and Hill was talking to Fury...

7:35: It's dangerous to play their game. Particularly with the WSC having some pretty legitimate concerns right now. Sir, you know my loyalty to you. But this is - maybe this is not the right time to
let Tony Stark get his way.
7:35: If we push them, they will leave SHIELD and we’ll have no control over them whatsoever.
7:35: I think you're misunderstanding the situation.
7:36: Well, you may find yourself making these calls soon enough. I hope you enjoy it.

Another file. December 23. Bruce and Clint talking on the deck. Transcript said nothing important, something about Bruce going to visit his college friend.

January 20th. Natasha clicked on the video and there they were, he and Tony on the deck, feet apart and worlds away from each other. There was the transcript. Natasha clicked and he watched the words fill the screen next to the silent video, eyes scanning down, almost mesmerized.

8:12: You could even still go back to that church place, whatever it's called, and be able to say--
8:12: God's Peace. And I don't feel virtuous. I feel like I'm taking advantage of you. And apparently so do you. Which makes me not much better than the people who took advantage of you when you were at MIT, does it?

Oh, Jesus.

8:13: There's private, and then there's dirty secret, Steve.
8:13: You're not a dirty secret. You're... look, we're - we were doing this by your rules. So we're not a couple. But you're the best friend I have. I'm not ashamed of you. I - how I feel about you, it's not. It's - it's not your fault that I fell in love with you

Steve's skin crawled. The most honest, naked he could remember ever feeling, the heartache he'd felt, the despair and longing, were all right there before him, in his dispassionately recorded words and his grainy black-and-white image. The half-drunk confession Tony had made, spread out for strangers to read. He could remember, so well, how much he'd needed Tony, how much he'd loved him and wanted him, could see even in the blurry images how torn Tony had felt... and it was there, as just another piece for shadows to use in a game of power and politics.

Natasha clicked stop. "It's not a smoking gun," she said grimly. "Nothing is. The fact that SHIELD was spying on our deck - and we'll probably be able to link this to all those odd leaks going on to the papers at the time - it's nothing startling or particularly surprising."

Steve nodded, feeling numb.

"But you know something? It's the last straw for me. I don't care what SI Legal thinks. It's time to confront the assholes, and get out. The hell with the consequences."

Steve looked at her. "That doesn't sound like you."

"I'm pissed off," Natasha said, her voice perfectly calm. "You don't want to get somebody like me pissed off."

Steve nodded.

"All right, then. Let's go." Natasha clicked a few more times, quickly typed in response to prompts, and patted her StarkPad. "I've got copies here," She smiled. "No, it doesn't sound like us. You did the spy work and figured out the electronic surveillance, and I'm advocating just going after the bastards. Looks like we're learning from each other." She stood up. "All right. Let's go get the others, and let's go confront SHIELD. Take down Maria Hill and the WSC. Paint the town, and all that jazz."

Steve smiled, and they got up to go.
Chapter End Notes

1. The movies watched/mentioned are:

   A Beautiful Mind, 2001
   Chicago, 2002
   The Lord of the Rings: Return Of The King, 2003

2. So... as I feared, it's gonna be one more, folks, I'm sorry! It's already mostly written, but this chapter was getting long like whoa and I couldn't cram it all in.
Chapter Notes

Thanks so much, Cluegirl, ClawR, and forest_rose for your beta help!

This is actually the final chapter plus epilogue being posted as one chapter for now. It's finally done!

Correction: The epilogue has been moved to its own chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1.

March 3

It felt funny, Clint thought as they walked in, to think of SHIELD as the enemy. Such a love-hate relationship he'd always had with the place; even when everything was going well, SHIELD was messed up. It tended to take people in, use them up, and then spit them out in pieces.

It had been his home, though, for so long. Dysfunctional, predatory, but home. Overall just a bunch of screwed-up people trying to do the right thing, however they defined it.

Not any more.

He passed through the door with his team, keeping his face carefully blank, as he had on countless ops in enemy territory. Funny to be using the very skills that SHIELD taught him to take them down.

Not that he actually wanted to take them down. He loved this place, in his own way; that was part of the problem. Most of the people in it weren't bad, and the job they did was necessary. Too bad it had been infected with this rot, starting at the top and seeping all the way through it.

If there had been any other way... but there wasn't. WSC had taken over, Fury was gone, Hill was a Council puppet, SHIELD Medical had been turned into a mad scientist's lair, they spied on their own people, used their personal lives to trash them in the media, put civilians in danger for political purposes, and Clint had had enough.

They were led to an empty conference room and waited impatiently for Hill. He tensed as she entered the room. Damned traitor; Fury had been good to her, had trusted her... and she'd turned around and made his agency the lapdog of a bunch of thugs.

"You wanted to see me?" She frowned at them as they stood around the table. "Sit down, please."

"We'll stand," said Tony. "This shouldn't take long. It's not really a meeting; more of an announcement."

"An announcement?"

"SI Legal said we had to."
Hill gave him a small smile. "You've found a way out of your contract," she guessed.

"Sure did," said Tony. "It's a nasty side effect of using coercion as a form of contract negotiation. You open yourself up to dissatisfied employees."

"I doubt there's anything we could do to make you a satisfied employee, Stark," said Hill.

"I have been told I don't play well with others," Tony agreed.

"Are you disputing that?"

Tony's 'bitch, please,' face was heartfelt. "Anyway. Yes, we found a way out of the contract. Though I'm sure you know we had a way out of our contract the moment we made it."

"Is that so?" asked Hill.

"You put our team-mate's pain on the line," said Natasha evenly. "Made us choose between seeing him tortured in front of us again and giving you a year of forced labor. There's nothing legal or ethical about that."

"So why has it taken you this long to get out of it?" asked Hill.

"Because we knew you'd go after us," said Clint. "Smear our names, try to bring us down."

"This isn't the Mafia," said Hill scornfully. "I have no interest in bringing anyone down."

"Maybe," said Bruce. "Your bosses don't feel the same way."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You do not rule SHIELD," said Thor. "Your superiors do. And they have no honor."

"They make decisions to protect all of us," said Hill.

"Does that include protecting the island of Manhattan?" asked Thor.

Hill's eyebrows went up. "What?"

"We know about the nukes you sent out," said Tony.

Hill didn't look at Clint or Natasha. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she said.

Tony blew out his breath. "Look. We know about the nukes. We know that the cover story of 'pilot went rogue, he's all better and in a padded room' was bullshit. We didn't want to go after you until we had a lot more dirt on you, because we want to shut you down. It's not just about quitting any more."

Hill stared at him. "Your father helped build SHIELD," she said finally.

"My father was a son of a bitch," said Tony without missing a beat. "But I think even he would agree that it's outlived its usefulness."

Hill frowned at him. "Why are you here?"

"SI Legal told us that in order to do this right, we had to come to you and resign before going to the press," said Tony. "And we are going to the press, Maria. We have a whole lot of dirt, and there's
nothing you can do about it but brace for the fallout. You can do the denial dance all you want, but it's all there."

Hill stared at him, then glanced at the rest of the team. "You're all in agreement?"

"We are," said Thor, and the rest of them nodded.

"Get out," she said, her voice tense.

"Sure thing, Maria," said Tony, getting to his feet.

"Oh, can you put down our quitting time again for the record?" asked Clint. "I really liked how you did that last time."

Hill stared at them as they left the room. As Clint watched the door close behind her, she leaned over and pushed a button, speaking into an intercom.

"So," said Tony as they left SHIELD. "What to do with the rest of our day?"

"Back to the Tower?" asked Bruce, looking at the SHIELD building a little nervously.

"Sure, why not," said Tony. "We've got an hour or so to kill before JARVIS sends the info to the press, may as well go back and start watching Crash."

"I missed the end of Million Dollar Baby?" asked Clint, feeling it all had been a little... anti-climactic.

"Yes you did," said Natasha. "Be grateful, it took a nose dive into angst about five minutes after you left."

"Wait, no, seriously?" asked Clint. "We're really going to just gonna go watch a movie?"

"No, of course not," said Steve. "We're going back to the Tower and going over the last of the details before the media release. This is an operation, just as much as if we were fighting."

"We know that," said Natasha. "You have no idea how much damage you can do just sending files to the media."

"Dubai," said Clint, nodding, as they headed for Tony's SUV.

"Glycerin," said Natasha, and Clint had to chuckle at Tony's expression. He had that, 'I'd love to ask you to clarify what you're talking about, but I have a feeling I'll regret it because I always do' look. The look that usually preceded him breaking down and asking for clarification - which made Natasha either ignore him or give him one those smiles she had that made recipients regret all their life choices, and caused Clint to make up the wildest stories he could think of, just to see if Tony believed them.

Tony opened his mouth to ask, and stopped short as they all spotted the man leaning against the vehicle, arms folded.

"Hello, people," said Fury. "Sounds like we have some catching up to do. Mind if I take the wheel?"

The team exchanged glances. What the...

"It's not far," said Fury, glancing at Steve. "Small place in Brooklyn."

They got in, Fury at the wheel, and Clint felt surreal. Fury looked exactly the same as before. No
change whatsoever - but then, what had Clint expected? He'd only been gone a few months. He
didn't speak to them as he drove the SUV along back streets to Brooklyn, finally ending up at a small
brick building.

"This is where I went to school," said Steve suddenly.

Fury nodded. "Phil Coulson found out it was going to be demolished a few years ago along with the
rest of the street, to make place for a department store," he said, parking in the small parking lot.
They all got out. "Helped the neighborhood association stop the project. It's a safehouse now." He
 glanced around as they headed for the back doors. "The neighborhood's changed a little; not sure
your school had a coffee shop and two tattoo parlors within walking distance."

Steve shook his head, bemused. Fury opened the door and led them in, leading them toward an open
area that looked like it might have once been a small classroom. They warily settled down at a long
 table piled high with papers and boxes of labelled disk drives.

"So, you're going to the press," said Fury.

Clint's eyebrows went up. "Word travels fast."

"I wouldn't advise it," said Fury.

"Really? Protecting SHIELD? Thought they turfed you."

"They did. But we need SHIELD. It's the only organization that can protect us all from some pretty
vicious stuff."

"And who protects us from SHIELD?" asked Bruce.

"Look, it's good that you got the information you got. We can use that, and we will. But we can do
more good--"

"Who's 'we'? And how are you going to do good? By sweeping this under the rug?" said Bruce.
"Again?"

"If you go to the press, you're going to destroy something that took decades to build. And you'll
leave us all without any defence against--"

"What do you propose to do instead?" asked Steve.

"Take it back," Fury grinned. "You people haven't been the only ones searching for answers. But I
can't let you take SHIELD down for some idealistic--"

"You want to play corporate takeover power games?" asked Tony.

"I still have plenty of friends in there," said Fury. "And if this was a spy thriller instead of real life,
this would be the perfect time for one of them to make a dramatic entrance. In any case, trust me
when I say I've got dirt on some of those fuckers that'll make them step down."

"Which fuckers would that be, sir?" asked Steve dryly. "The ones who tossed a bomb at New York
City? The ones who let dangerous people out of confinement just so you'd look bad? The ones who-
"

"They're all the same people, Cap," said Fury. "The WSC is a group of twelve talking heads. Not all
of them are evil. Depending on what you've got, what you've found might help me take down the
three that took matters into their own hands. It'll put control back where it belongs."

"Where would that be, sir?" asked Steve. "With you?"

"For now, yes," said Fury. "The WSC wants to call the shots; control everything from the top down. They don't see that with the problems we're facing, we need the ability to think outside the box." Fury looked around at all of them. "We need discipline and order, I agree with them on that. And we've got that at SHIELD. But we also need a team - a lot of teams, actually - who are out there dealing with things on their own, coming up with ideas that you can't get from a bunch of trained paramilitary types. This is why I wanted the Avengers to be separate. You can do what we can't."

"You can do a lot," said Hill, walking in.

"Uh, OK wait what?!" said Clint, as his team-mates burst out in a chorus of exclamations and curses, Thor and Tony springing to their feet.

"You said you don't do dramatic entrances," said Bruce evenly, and Clint felt a pang of alarm at the tightly controlled tone of his voice. Not a good plan, springing something like this on the good doctor.

"You have to admit there were at least three other places in this conversation that would've been a lot more dramatic than discussing administrative hierarchy," said Hill. "Sit down, everyone."

"OK, OK, back up, I'm sorry: what the hell is going on?" asked Tony. Clint surreptitiously moved closer to Bruce.

"We realized shortly after the Battle of New York that the Council was going to try to take over SHIELD," said Hill. "They were scared and they wanted someone to blame the mess on. Director Fury was the easiest target, since he'd defied them."

Clint stared at her, with her perfect hair and snotty voice, and tried to make sense of her presence in this safehouse.

"They tried to get Hill to turn on me immediately after the attack," said Fury. "She put them off at first, but we both saw the writing on the wall. We knew they'd be up to some dirty stuff. So we put our own plan in place."

"Are you telling us you've been on Fury's side this whole time?" asked Natasha, her eyes narrowed. Hill nodded.

"Bullshit," said Clint.

Hill shrugged, her cold blue eyes amused as she gave Fury a wry smile. "I told you they wouldn't buy it, sir."

"We don't," said Bruce, his voice strained. "And I'd very much like to know what the hell you're doing here."

"She's here to help me convince you people to cool down and not go after SHIELD like a horde of avenging berserkers," said Fury.

"Yeah, good luck with that," said Tony, and the hostility and suspicion in the room were so thick Clint could shoot an arrow through them.
Fury chuckled. "I don't blame you for your paranoia. Here," he said, and passed Bruce a Starkpad. "Show of faith. Here's everything we've got on SHIELD." He pointed to one folder. "And a folder with files that show how long Hill's been working for me." He gave them a grim smile. "You were working your way through Oscar movies last time I was around; have you reached *The Departed* yet?"

They shook their heads and Fury shrugged. "Too bad. Read the file."

"Am I supposed to be Matt Damon or Leonardo DiCaprio?" Hill asked Fury in a low voice, and Fury chuckled. Hill didn't seem all that impressed, crossing her arms and tapping her foot impatiently as the team gathered around the Starkpad and Bruce started scrolling through the files in the folder labelled 1310.

Clint blinked as the words scrolled by, transcripts that looked like meetings between Hill and the WSC, terse reports that seemed to be from Hill to Fury, more transcripts - whoa, a bunch of conversations between Hill and Fury, what the hell--

**Fury:** How'd that go?

  **Hill:** Sold you down the river, sir. Should have your job within a month.

  **Fury:** Good work. You should maybe ask for a chair.

"Suppose we believe you," said Natasha. "Why should we work with you?"

"We're on the same side," said Fury.

"I'm not on a side that wants to sweep everything under the table again," said Bruce, looking up from one transcript. "I don't want to keep SHIELD the way it was when they ordered you to strike New York and you," he nodded at Hill, "agreed to hide it from the world just to protect his job."

"I didn't do it to protect his job," Hill began.

"Really? Because that's what it looks like from this bit," said Tony, pointing at a couple of lines of transcript. Clint scanned it.

  **Hill:** ...Where you morons tried to nuke New York? Well that's on the record. As in, we recorded it. We do that. We're SHIELD. So if you're thinking of coming after Nick Fury? Ever? Think really, really hard.

"All right, so you don't trust any of us," said Fury. "I can't say I blame you. But look at the rest of what's on the pad. I've just given you enough information to bring down SHIELD, even without whatever you gathered on your own." Hill made a noise in her throat, her eyes widening, and Fury waved her silent. "It's your choice what to do with it."

Clint sat back. Damn it. This was one of the oldest tricks in Fury's book: letting you decide for yourself, knowing you'd most probably end up doing exactly what he wanted you to, without Fury expending the effort of convincing you.

"What else is on here?" asked Steve, gesturing at the pad.

"You'll find a lot of financial misconduct, promotions of unqualified personnel to sensitive positions, some of which put the public in danger; getting rid of two of our top scientists because they weren't sufficiently loyal to the WSC; trying to get the private records of SHIELD Psychiatric Services--" Clint glanced at Steve as Steve blanched, and Fury gave Steve a grim smile. "You might be happy to hear that Dr. Sanjay was particularly adamant about not cooperating with that; in fact, he destroyed
many of his physical records to make sure they wouldn't fall into WSC hands."

"Why didn't you come to us?" Natasha suddenly asked Hill. "Let us know you were working with Fury?"

"I tried to reach out to you. You were too paranoid for your own good."

"What? When?"

"Several months ago. We were sparring. I tried to let you know that you could tell me what was going on with your team."

Natasha scowled at her. "You did a piss-poor job."

Hill shrugged. "To be honest, I wasn't trying that hard. We also didn't know where the Council had ears in the building."

"Turns out they had ears everywhere," said Fury. "And bugs everywhere. Look in the file; we found a number of unauthorized surveillance sites."

"We know," said Steve. "We found a few too."

"Really? Which ones?"

There was a quick exchange of glances in the team, then Bruce spoke up. "One was a warehouse. Another was on the Tower."

Hill nodded grimly. "Let me guess: the deck?"

Clint swore. "You knew?"

"We didn't know. We thought it might be one possible site."

"In fact, we used it against them," said Fury. "It was one of about two dozen places where we had conversations in which Hill expressed her loyalty to the WSC, just in case they were listening."

"I'd gone to bat for him right after the Battle of New York," Hill explained. "Had to convince them that I'd changed my mind, that I mostly still supported Director Fury but now thought they'd been justified in calling for the nuclear strike. We had to have bits and pieces of that conversation where we knew we'd be overheard, and then again in all these different places where we might be overheard." She frowned slightly. "It was incredibly boring."

"If you suspected we were being bugged," said Bruce evenly, "why didn't you warn us?"

"We didn't know," Hill shot back. "We were under no obligation to warn you about anything." She gave them all an impatient glance. "What did you want us to say? By the way, we think the Council may have you under surveillance - but don't tell them we told you so or they might overhear you talking about it?"

Clint blew out his breath. Typical SHIELD. "Fair enough."

"No, not fair enough," said Steve. "We said and did a lot of pretty private stuff there. It was part of our home." Clint swallowed. His skin crawled a bit as he remembered saying some confidential stuff about Phil on the deck, but having read the transcripts he knew it was nothing compared to how exposed Steve had to feel about it. His own private talks with Tony, coming out to him, their break-up - his breakdown before he'd gone on leave--
"I'm not going to apologize for that," said Fury. "I'd do it again. We were working on a strictly need-to-know basis, and we weren't sure there was anything you needed to know." He looked around at them. "All right, people, I've told you what I want to do. Not take down the WSC entirely; just the rotten apples. But I need your cooperation, or at least your patience."

"You want us to trust that you know who the rotten apples are," asked Bruce. "This is a 'who watches the watchers' kind of thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, pretty much," said Fury. "And my answer is: we do."

"Our answer is: that's not good enough," said Steve.

"Then that's your insurance, right there," said Hill, nodding at the Starkpad. "That's everything we know about them. If you give us what you have and you don't like what we do with it, at a later point you can--"

"Why should we give you our information?"

"You can tell us. You don't have to show us," said Fury. "I'm assuming you've already sent files to the media, or have them on some sort of timer release so that if you don't call them off, they'll get sent?"

"Something like that, yeah," said Tony, and Clint wondered just what the Daily Planet would think of the files they were going to get later today. The reporter Tony was sending them to seemed like a good kid, but...

"What do you have on them?" asked Fury.

Tony stared at him for a moment. "Among other things," he finally said, "we've got records from SHIELD Medical showing that some WSC-appointed personnel were abusing their position and conducting unethical medical research."

Fury nodded.


Hill's eyebrows went up. "We didn't have anything on Medical, though we suspected. We may have some of the same financial and holding files. We didn't have the Avengers Tower surveillance."

"Your files will make a difference," said Fury. "If we work together."

"Suppose we do help you," said Natasha. "What's in it for us?" Bruce and Thor both made disapproving sounds, and Natasha gave them a quelling glance. "I'm not saying we will. I'm getting information."

"They knew about the nuclear strike," Bruce began. "They're just as culpable--"

"We tried to stop it and only covered it in order to keep the Director at the head of SHIELD, so that he would be there if they ever tried anything like that again," said Hill impatiently. "And now we're asking for your help, so that we can get rid of the very people who called for it."

"If we do help you, we want something in return," said Natasha.

"Like what?"
"The team will not be subject to SHIELD regulations or to SHIELD's power structure," said Natasha.

"Not a problem," said Fury.

"No specs shared," said Tony. "No reverse engineering of anything of ours that you happen to get your eager little hands on, either."

"That, we'll have to talk about," said Hill.

"We're talking about it right now," said Tony. Fury scowled at him, then nodded.

"No more trying to get any of us in to SHIELD Medical," said Bruce, and Clint could almost sense the hostility and suspicion in him, but at least he was trying. "We would use outside medical resources."

"Basically, the Avengers will be independent consultants," said Tony.

"As a team, yes. We'd like all of you to remain part of SHIELD as individuals," said Hill. Bruce, Thor and Steve shook their heads.

"Yeah, I don't think so," said Tony.

"What about you two?" Fury nodded at Clint and Natasha.

"Hell no, said Clint, and, "We'll have to think about it," said Natasha at the same time. They looked at each other.

"There are benefits to SHIELD, Clint," said Natasha.

"I don't ever wanna be put in the position we were put in before, keeping secrets from the team," said Clint.

"If you do decide to stay, it will be understood that anything you learn from SHIELD will be shared with your team," said Fury.

"Are you sure about that, sir?" asked Hill.

"Yes, I am. The trust in the team is more important than their loyalty to SHIELD."

"This is a lot to think about," said Steve.

"Well you better think about it quick," said Hill. "SHIELD knows you've got something on us. They know I've left the building, and they may be tracking me right now. We don't have time for a long, drawn-out heart-to-heart."

There was a pause.

"This is not a battle," said Fury quietly. "Battles are what you people are for. This is a dirty information war that's going to be played through meetings and intimidation and all sorts of nasty shit you people are not prepared for."

"I am," said Natasha.

Fury smiled at her. "So you are." He gazed at Hill in thought for a moment, then seemed to come to a conclusion. "Why don't we do an exchange," he said. "Romanov, come with me, Hill, you stay
here with them. Having you with me when I confront the Council might throw in some extra antagonism we don't need," he spoke over Hill's protest. "It'll also be yet another show of good faith. Take them through the Starkpad, give them the highlights."

"And Clint can also let the team in on some other Level Seven info we've had to sit on," said Natasha.

Fury raised his eyebrows.

"There are some things they really should know, sir," she said.

Hill, unexpectedly, spoke up. "I agree."

"All right," he said, and nodded at Hill. "I trust you to make it all... palatable. Romanov and I have two hours. At the end of two hours, if we haven't contacted you back and told you I'm back in charge and at least two of the names on the WSC removed from power and on their way to detention, you can go to the media."

Clint gave Hill a wary frown. He didn't like her. He'd never liked her, this rigid, by-the-book, dour woman Fury seemed to trust so much. But maybe... what she had done had taken a hell of a lot of guts.

He glanced down at the transcript again.

_Hill_: The Avengers were the mistake that saved the world. That's my official statement.

Maybe they could work together.

"Let's go through this stuff first," he said, as Natasha and Fury left the building. "I'm really hoping to find Sorensen was secretly subscribed to a Furries site or something. The Level Seven shit... can wait."

2.

**March 22**

"Captain Rogers, can I ask you a few questions about Reed Richards?" asked a reporter, jogging up to Steve and Clint as they approached the Tower. Steve glanced at her tag - Amy Davis, _Daily Planet_ - recognizing one of Fury's approved reporters, and looked at Clint, who shrugged.

"You can ask; I can't guarantee an answer," said Steve. "Reed Richards, the leader of the Fantastic Four? Not sure what I can tell you about him; I've never met him." At least it wasn't yet another round of questions about SHIELD. Steve really wasn't sure he could deal with yet another reporter trying to figure out that particular corporate spy takeover. Not that there had been much to tell, outwardly speaking, but it was clear that the press suspected far more had happened under the surface than a mere change of Directorship.

"I'm surprised you don't know him," said Davis. "Seeing as he spends a lot of time with your - what term do you prefer? Partner? Boyfriend?"

"I don't think either of us has been a 'boy' in a few decades, but I assume you mean Mr. Stark?"

"I do. Do you prefer another term?"

"Doesn't matter, whatever term you want to use; I've heard worse," said Steve.
"Keep telling you not to read Yahoo reader comments," said Clint.

"What is he doing with Reed?" asked Davis. "He's been seen going into the Baxter Building several times in the last few days, and--"

"I have no idea; you can ask him, though," said Steve, though apparently Fury was making overtures to the Fantastic Four, so maybe Tony was--

"Stark's not usually very straightforward with the press."

"I wonder why," Steve muttered. "Clint, do you know?"

"I've seen them talking in the SHIELD building, but it's like when he and Bruce get going, can't understand sh- um, can't understand a word. They don't even talk English."

"I think I have to agree," Steve laughed.

"Are the Fantastic Four going to brought into SHIELD as well?"

"You'd have to ask one of them," said Clint.

"What can you tell us about the reorganization that's going on at SHIELD?" asked Davis, and Steve suppressed a sigh. Here they went.

"Not a thing," Clint told her with a straight face. "We're not part of it, we just work with them."

"There's a new Director, again, after only a few months. Does that mean that--"

"Look, we just go where they tell us," said Clint. "Unless we have a better idea. How they run themselves is none of our business."

The reporter frowned. "Well, what about reorganization within your own structure?" she asked Clint, glancing at Steve. "Do you think two people dating has affected the balance of the team?"

"Nah."

"Really? What if they break up?"

"Hey, whatevs, they're big boys, I'm sure they could handle it," said Clint.

"What about being over-protective of each other in the field?"

"Yeah, that doesn't happen," said Clint. "For either of 'em. Look over our mission reports."

"And what about your PTSD?" Davis turned to Steve. "Are you still--"

Steve kept his expression neutral. "I've made progress. And I'm not going to share that, it's personal."

"You're still not in command, though."

"The Avengers aren't a real strict command-type organization," said Clint.

"Yes, but the fact that Tony Stark is in command - doesn't that mean that he's abusing his position of power?"

Steve blinked at her. "Beg your pardon?"
"You could charge him with harassment, you know."

"Uhm. I'm... not going to do that."

"Listen, if it's harassment, it's harassment that he enjoys very, very much - ow!" Clint rubbed his foot where Steve had stepped on it.

"I hear you've been seen going to a local church," said Davis. "Though not God's Peace. What are your views on--"

"I'm sorry, we're back home," said Steve in relief, because there was no way he was going to talk about his views on church. One discussion with a Christian who'd wanted him to speak at a pro-gay marriage rally had been enough. In a way it was nice that there was so much love and acceptance and fuzzy feeling in parts of the Christian community, but it was hard enough trying to figure out how he felt about the religion of his childhood and how it had changed without trying to tell everyone else about it. Let alone trying to tell anyone else how they should feel.

"This will just take a few minutes," said Davis, putting on a winning smile. "I think a lot of people want to know how you feel about--"

"No, we have a very important meeting to attend to," Clint cut off the reporter, and Steve blinked.

"We do?"

"You know, our team-building exercise? About defusing bombs?"

"Yes! We do," said Steve, giving Davis a polite smile, and they ducked into the Tower.

"We are watching The Hurt Locker, right?" asked Clint.

"Yeah," said Steve, amused. They got into the elevator. "What would you have said if we were still watching Slumdog Millionaire?" he asked. "International relations?"

"Probably. Dunno what I would've said for No Country For Old Men," said Clint.

He and Clint rode up to the deck, getting off at the common floor and finding the movie room empty save for Thor, who looked like he'd taken apart the remote and was trying to put it back together with only minimal success. "What's going on?"

"We are starting the movie late tonight, as Bruce's latest results are coming in all haywire," said Thor. "I do not understand what that means, but he was very excited. He will be with us soon, he says."

They went into the kitchen. "So, you didn't wanna talk to the reporter about the Christians, huh?" asked Clint, helping himself to some raw veggies.

"Not a chance," said Steve, grabbing some carrots and starting to chop them into sticks.

"I'm surprised you're going back to church, to be honest. I thought they didn't approve of, what is it they call 'em, certain life choices..."

"I'm not going back to the same church. And I'm not going to any one place very often; don't particularly want to bring that kind of publicity to anyone."

"I can understand that. Why go back at all, though?" Clint picked up some of the carrot sticks and started munching on them.
Steve gently pushed his hand away. "Not sure I can even explain it to a friend," he said. "Definitely don't want to talk about it to the media. I'd rather figure all of this out in private."

"I think you gave up your right to privacy when you put on that spangly outfit," said Clint. "But I know what you mean. I mean, it was one thing being The Amazing Hawkeye in the circus; nobody outside the circus really cares, and you're wearing a mask anyway. This... it's like they wanna eat you or something. And not in a good way." He shuddered. "Still, I thought it was the whole Christian thing that was keeping you, you know..." Clint made a gesture that Steve didn't particularly want to interpret but was probably fairly rude. "What with them being a buncha brain-washing homophobes and all."

"Who's a bunch of brain-washing homophobes?" asked Tony, coming in with Natasha.

"Christians," said Clint, and Tony winced and glanced at Steve.

"Not all of them," said Tony, giving Steve a small squeeze before moving on. Natasha gave Clint a slight shove and a glare.

"Present company excepted, obviously," said Clint, unfazed.

Steve shook his head, unwilling to talk about this, even with his team. Because it hadn't really been religion that had caused his difficulties, though it was easy to blame. If he'd been in a better space, he would've been able to listen to pro-gay Christians, accept what they were saying, or at least be a little more curious about them rather than dismissing them out of hand. He'd been able to reconcile being gay with being a good person - if slightly flawed - way back in the thirties and forties; he'd been able to see that men like him could serve their country perfectly well, when the army actively discouraged them. He would've been able to be one of the millions of gay Christians who were perfectly capable of reconciling their sexuality with their faith.

He'd just been so desperate to hold on to any part of his past that he could -- even the terrible parts that were better left firmly in the past.

"I really thought you'd changed your mind about all that stuff," said Clint.

"Not all of it," said Steve.

"Yeah, well, a lotta those folks are still pretty disapproving," said Clint. "Or they say they're 'accepting' but it doesn't go as far as letting gays be actually equal. It's funny the stuff that just won't die." He crunched on a carrot stick, and Steve blinked, not sure how he'd managed to get it. "Hell, there's still folks that think Obama's parents shouldn't have gotten married."

Steve nodded. "In most states when I was growing up, what they did would've been illegal."

"Yeah, it's funny, just because something's illegal and called immoral doesn't make it wrong. Just because people call it 'redefining the institution of marriage' doesn't mean that--"

"You're being very subtle, Clint," said Natasha, rolling her eyes. "By the way, Bruce will be up in a few minutes. He'll have to take a break about an hour in, but he says we should get started."

"OK, forget the gay stuff, then," said Clint, filching a few sprigs of broccoli. "What about premarital stuff? That's changed since your time, right?"

"To be honest, that wasn't a big deal in my time," said Steve. "It was pretty normal for men to sleep with whoever they wanted. It was different for girls, but most men didn't really care, whether they were church-going Christians or not."
"Did you?"

Steve sighed. "Yeah," he admitted. "Didn't make enough of a difference, though."

"Do you still care?"

He gave Clint a sharp glance. "Yeah."

"Isn't that hypocritical?" Clint glanced at Tony, who was nominally helping Natasha get drinks but seemed to have stopped once his own drink was in his hand. "I know you two ain't playing' pattycake when you have sleepovers."

"I look after my own conscience," said Steve, not looking at Tony.

"Even though he's not into long-term? You're OK just being with him till he gets this out of his system?"

Steve shoved a tray at Clint and pushed him to the movie room. "I think this is where Tony normally tells you you need to get laid," he said firmly. "So you can stop asking people about their sex lives."

Tony started. "Right!" he said hastily. "Sorry, I'm falling down on the job. Robin Hood, go get laid."

Clint gave Steve a shrewd look. "Or are you just with him till you get this out of your system?"

"Clint!" said Steve sternly, and Natasha whacked him as they all settled in to watch.

This was nothing to get out of his system, thought Steve with a smile, stroking Tony's hair as Tony lay watching the movie with his head in Steve's lap. Whether it had to do with Tony or not, he felt content, as he never thought he'd feel in this time, and he was going to cherish this time enjoy it as long as possible.

It almost felt like his time with the Commandos, where despite the War going on around him, he'd had a purpose, good friends, strength and health and a place to belong for the first time in his life. Except there wasn't the horror of a world in constant danger right now, or the physical discomfort of field conditions.

This, right now, was worth holding on to, worth saving up for those days - and nights - that still came, when he felt displaced and alone. His team surrounding him, a pretty good movie to watch - and he wasn't really bothered by military combat stuff on screen any more, though really the setting here was so different to what he had experienced, both physically and technologically, that it really couldn't remind him of anything. Other than one of the characters looking weirdly familiar.

And it was interesting, getting to learn about fairly recent history in a somewhat more entertaining way than reading about it. Tony seemed OK with the whole desert war thing, too. It was Iraq and not Afghanistan, but still. He ran fingers through Tony's hair, finally longer again, noting his relaxed body language, eyes alert and interested, his even breaths...

Tony had had a good idea with the Oscar movie project. They were almost done, now. He wondered what they would do when it was over.

Bruce crunched on the last of the carrots and sat up. "OK, we're out of food and I need to check on my results." He checked his watch. "Uh... I may be gone for a while - do you guys mind--"

"I shall attempt to hail Jane over your Skype instrument," said Thor.
"Everyone back in... thirty?" said Natasha, and the others nodded. "Clint, we still have that report to finish up for Hill."

"We'll make more snacks," said Steve, and he and Tony went to the kitchen as the rest of the team scattered. Steve headed for the fridge, taking out a bunch of carrots, celery and a head of broccoli, and passed them to Tony to chop while he gathered the ingredients for dips, noting Tony was a bit oddly subdued. Maybe the movie was affecting him. He'd said he was OK, but...

But he'd tell Steve if it bothered him, Steve decided. He started measuring out the mayo.

"So what would you say if the media asked you about gay marriage now?" asked Tony out of the blue, carefully chopping celery into bite-sized sticks, having been almost banned from the kitchen last time when he'd minced it instead.

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Are you channelling Clint now?"

"Natasha interrupted before you could answer him."

Steve shrugged and measured chives into the mayo and sour cream. "I still don't think it's a cause worth dying for."

"But do you think it's a good cause?"

"I understand why a lot of people say it's desecration. Marriage is important to people, Tony."

"I know that." Tony moved on to the broccoli. "What do you think, though?"

Steve smiled at him. "All right, yes. I think gays should have the right to marry. Happy now? Don't ask me my opinions on nudity during Pride Parades, though, because I really don't think we're ever going to agree--"

"Good," said Tony. He paused. "And what if I asked you?"

"Asked me what?"

Tony cleared his throat. "About marriage."

"You just did," said Steve, and got out a tray to put the veggies on.

"No, I mean in a more... you know, 'the personal is political' kind of way."

"What?"

"God, I had no idea you'd be so slow," said Tony, a little exasperated. "I mean, pretty blue eyes and all, but not much behind them sometimes." He put down his knife, took one of Steve's hands and got down on one knee, looking up at Steve with a small smile. "Uh, what if I asked like this?"

Steve stared at him, baffled, a handful of celery poised over the tray.

"Steve? Seriously, this is kinda killing my knee here. I'm asking."

"What?"

Tony's eyebrows rose. "Jesus, Steve, what do people normally ask when they're down on one knee?"
Steve gaped at him, bafflement giving way to disbelief as he put the celery down. "Are you... are you joking?"

Tony sighed. "No. But I am getting a little self-conscious."

Steve suddenly realized his own knees were feeling a little weak. "Are you - no, I'm not gonna ask if you're serious again." He drew a hand through his hair, meeting Tony's dark eyes and registering amusement warring with nervousness and - oh, God, Tony looked like that when he was one step away from getting obnoxiously cocky and mouthy to hide how vulnerable he felt and - "Uh. Yes?"

Tony blinked. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, I'll marry you?" Wow, he'd sounded stronger and surer of himself when he weighed ninety pounds soaking wet. He gulped, his heart speeding up, and now Tony's eyes were crinkling at the corners and the bastard looked like he was about to start laughing at him. "Yes," he said firmly, and yanked Tony to his feet, deciding only to mention the squeak he made if Tony made fun of his acceptance. He caught Tony's waist and pulled him close, stopping whatever smart-ass comment Tony was about to make with a firm kiss that quickly turned passionate.

Tony pulled back, breathless, after a moment. "Just to get this straight," he said, and oh, God, he looked happier than Steve had ever seen him, and a little dazed, "I totally threw out all the half-baked and over-the-top romantic ideas I couldn't decide on and just popped the question like an idiot in the kitchen during movie intermission and it worked and you said yes?" He paused. "I'm not high right now?"

Steve laughed and pulled him close for another kiss, a sense of disbelief flooding him. "You're not high. Unless I am too." He kissed Tony again, pulled away slightly. "You - are you serious?"

Tony nodded, and Steve realized his heart was beating faster than he could remember outside of battle and Tony was actually trembling. "I - I've been thinking about it a lot," said Tony. "Couldn't figure out how to bring it up. I mean, I could, but every idea I could come up with also sounded like I should be committed somewhere or be forced to write Hallmark cards as punishment and I was getting desperate enough to try asking Pepper. Or Rhodey. Or JARVIS."

Steve pulled him close again and their lips met, moving together, warm and familiar, Tony's breath warm on his mouth, his beard tickling Steve slightly.

Tony huffed a laugh against his mouth. "Can't believe I was so nervous," he admitted.

"Were you?"

"I was worried you'd ask me about it before I was ready. And I wouldn't have a chance to chicken out if I needed to."

"You? Chicken out?"

"Hey, everyone's a coward about something," Tony quipped.

Steve laughed. "No, I had no idea. Why tonight?"

Tony paused. "You... do you think I'm just in this for kicks?"

Steve frowned. "What?"

"When Clint said--"
"Are - I didn't think that - you didn't have to propose just because--"

Tony shook his head, smiling. "I proposed because I love you. Clint just made it happen tonight."

"You're sure about this?"

Tony kissed him again. "I'm sure. I've never been so sure about anything." He grinned. "It's supposed to be for better or for worse, right? And we've had the worse already."

Steve nodded, then tilted his head. "You know, it could be worse."

"If it is, I want it to be worse with you."

"I... don't know how to take that," said Steve laughing. "But... me too." He shook his head. "Uh. Don't take this the wrong way, but I really wasn't expecting this."

"From me?"

"From me," said Steve. "When I decided not to try to date a woman again I thought I'd decided I'd never get married." He blinked. "I'm gonna be married," he said slowly.

Tony chuckled. "You're not already picturing our wedding, are you? Because I'll be honest, the farthest I got was the proposal, and even that was a struggle." He raked a glance over Steve, mouth quirking up at the corner. "I may have thought about post-proposal sex, which didn't include moving a tray of half-chopped vegetables off the counter." He paused, kissing Steve again, then pulled back. "I'm thinking about it now, though. And you know if you leave it to me it'll be outrageously ostentatious and in Las Vegas, so if you want it intimate and in military uniform, you should probably start pushing for that now."

Steve laughed, covering his eyes with his hand. "Not Las Vegas. Oh, God. I can just picture - you'd want us in our Avengers uniforms, I wouldn't put it past you to put a veil over your helmet..."

Tony cracked up, and they held on to each other, as they laughed, and Steve felt a little giddy. "Tony... why?"

"I wanna make an honest man out of you," said Tony lightly, then sobered. "I wanna say, before your God and everybody, that we're together for the long haul. It's not - it's never been that important to me, but it is to you. And... it's more important to me than I thought it was."

Steve nodded.

"I want this, Steve," said Tony quietly. "My childhood - it wasn't like yours, but I didn't grow up seeing what a good marriage was like. I never really thought it was for me. But... you seem to think I can do the boyfriend thing. I'm starting to think maybe I can do the husband thing too." He took a deep breath. "And. Uh, if you wanted kids..." He took another deep breath. "If you wanted them, you make me feel like maybe I wouldn't be, you know, the world's worst father." He gave Steve a brave smile that looked like he was about to swallow a bottle of cod liver oil.

"I'm pretty sure I don't want kids," said Steve, suppressing a snicker.

"Oh thank Christ!" Tony blurted, sagging in relief. "I mean--"

Steve started laughing again, and Tony joined in, holding each other close, the snack tray forgotten behind them.
"Hey, we're starting the movie again," said Bruce, popping his head into the kitchen. They glanced at each other guiltily and pulled apart, and Steve hastily finished plating the veggies.

They entered the movie room, where Bruce was trying to explain the results of his latest experiment to Thor, and Steve felt flushed. They were engaged. They were gonna be married, they were going to be together for the rest of their lives. It felt surreal.

Clint and Natasha walked back in, deep in conversation.

"...don't care what she says," Clint was saying while Natasha listened with patient amusement. "I'm not doing the re-test, Fury's little undercover heroine can just pucker up and kiss my - what happened to you?" Clint stopped short, Natasha almost crashing into him.

"What?" said Tony. Natasha's eyes narrowed and she looked from Steve to Tony and back.

"You two. What happened while we were out?" asked Natasha.

He glanced at Tony, who opened, then shut his mouth.

"Uh," said Steve intelligently.

"This is what comes of inviting spies to live under your roof, nothing's sacred," Tony muttered.

"Spill," said Natasha, and now Bruce and Thor were staring at them too.

"To be fair, their record hasn't been that great with us," Steve pointed out.

"Had to make up for it sometime," Tony agreed.

"Are you going to tell us or are we going to find out the hard way?" asked Natasha.

Steve smiled at Tony and shrugged. Tony grinned back at him.

"I may have just asked Spangles here to join me in holy matrimony," said Tony, and the room erupted.

"Holy fuck are you serious?!" shouted Clint, as Natasha uttered a few rather unladylike words with a wider smile on her face than Steve had ever seen and Bruce and Thor hastily got up.

"And he said yes?" asked Bruce, laughing, coming toward them.

"I think so, yeah," said Steve, and Bruce grabbed his hand, shaking it, then pulled him in for a hug.

"You are to be wed?" asked Thor, his eyes bright, pulled Tony close and gave him a clap on the back that nearly threw him to the ground. "Congratulations!"

The next few minutes were filled with hugs and backslaps and congratulations, and for a moment Steve felt disoriented. There was no judgment here. None. Every one of them was just thrilled for both of them, wishing them well, as if they were any other couple who had decided to pledge their lives to one another.

"... and Cap's gotta be be amazing in the sack, to get Playboy Stark to commit - OW!" said Clint, as Natasha slapped him upside the head.

Steve laughed, and the team finally settled down to re-start the movie, their spirits high. He sat down next to Tony, gently tugging on him to tuck his head onto Steve's shoulder. He pressed a kiss to
Tony's forehead, smiling, feeling indescribable.

He was engaged. And to someone he not only loved, but also desired, and not just in an aesthetic sense the way he had Peggy. It almost didn't feel real.

Maybe this century had something to recommend it after all.

Chapter End Notes

1. The movies watched/mentioned are

Million Dollar Baby, 2004
Crash, 2005
The Departed, 2006
No Country for Old Men, 2007
Slumdog Millionaire, 2008
The Hurt Locker, 2009

2. Yes, the "Level Seven shit" that the Avengers should be let in on is the whole "Coulson Lives" thingy, which wasn't a thing at all when I started writing this. Clint and Natasha are Level Seven; at some point in time, I'm sure they would've been told. And probably kept it from the other Avengers out of duty and respect for Phil's wishes… and felt like crap about it.

The transcripts of Hill and the WSC are from the Deleted Scenes on the Avengers DVD. They really do try to get her to turn on Fury, and she politely tells them where to go and threatens to expose that they tried to send nukes to New York. She also does joke to Fury that she "sold him down the river," which I know is more than a little racially charged. I'd really like to know who thought it was a good line to use in that particular place. I get that it might take place between those two characters, who have a history together and might have discussed racial issues, but as a throwaway Ha ha ha isn't she clever line... um :/


4. Yes, according to Marvel canon, when AU!Tony married AU!Steve, she wore a veil over the helmet, OMFG.
There is no new content here. I've just moved the Epilogue to its own chapter.

However! There is a new one-shot sequel-type thing, called What Happens In Amsterdam (Some Private Little Memories). I've also turned NASH, What Happens In Amsterdam, the NASH Oscar sketches, and a soundtrack & movie trailer listing-thing into a series. So, you know, please don't shoot me for "posting" a new chapter that actually wasn't new at all ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Epilogue: The King's Speech

April 12

"It shouldn't be that bad," said Natasha as the Quinjet sped over a New Jersey forest dripping with melting late-spring snow. "It's just a short hop away, and with no civilians around, we can let the Other Guy out to play. We'll be done in no time."

Bruce looked resigned but reasonably optimistic.

"Seriously, who decided that it was a good idea to play out The Wizard of Oz in Jersey?" asked Tony, looking over the information SHIELD had sent them. The creativity of some of it was admirable. It was just too bad about the batshit insanity.

"We'll probably be back in time for tonight's movie," said Natasha.

"Yeah, I can't believe we're actually finishing the Oscar project," said Clint.

"What is the final movie?" asked Thor.

"Argo," said Clint, frowning. "Unfortunately, it's from the 'Mel Gibson takes a dump on historical accuracy' school of filmmaking."

"Also takes a dump on international relations," said Bruce. "Apparently it's a good movie, but don't mention it to Canadians, Brits or New Zealanders. They weren't amused."

"I heard he thanked them at the Oscars, though," said Clint. "So everything's fine, right?"

"Yeah, because what everyone will remember will be the fact that he thanked them. Not that the entire movie ignored everything they did."

"All historical movies have to take some liberties," said Natasha dismissively.

"That is merely weak storytelling," said Thor. "My father could speak of the dullest training session and turn it into an adventure with no untruths." He suddenly looked rather sad. "My brother, on the other hand... well, they did not call him God of Lies for nothing."
"I'm tired of the history movies, anyway," said Tony. "I mean, the Oscar project was supposed to make Cap acclimate to the twentieth century, wasn't it? And the last two were King's Speech, World War II again, and The Artist from the silent movie era."

"Well, maybe it was comfortingly familiar," said Clint. "Right Cap?"

"I didn't actually see too many silent movies," said Steve. "They were expensive. Though I do remember that speech."

"Really?" asked Natasha.

"Yeah. We listened to it on the radio, me and Bucky. I had no idea he'd had any kind of a stuttering problem. I just thought he was being serious."

"So, you been all nostalgic for home the last few days, then?" asked Clint, and Tony abruptly wanted to kick himself - damn it, there he'd gone and done it again, been completely oblivious to something that had probably been fairly important to Steve...

But Steve was shaking his head. "No, not really," he said. "They're just movies. Besides, this is home, now," he said, and smiled at Tony.

Tony felt warmth spread all over him as he smiled back. God damn. He probably looked like a lovestruck idiot, but who cared. He leaned over and snatched a quick kiss as the Quinjet landed.

They all scrambled out, and Fury strode over.

"Have to tell you, you're not one minute too early," he said. "This is a pain in the ass. I'm almost ready to go back on the run and tell the WSC they can have their damn agency back."

"That bad?" asked Steve.

"Mostly just embarrassing to be beaten back by children's book characters. We can probably get in, but it'll take us a lot longer than it'll take you."

Tony nodded, glancing over the wooded estate with its slightly medieval-castle-like mansion. "All right, so, we need somebody up on that roof--"

"Actually, Stark," said Fury. "What do you think about what we talked about yesterday?"

Tony blinked. "What, right now?"

"No time like the present."

Tony turned and looked at Steve. Steve frowning and looking out at the trees, apparently trying to spot the wolves with collars skulking about, and - and Fury was right. He felt his instinctive worry turn to certainty and an odd sort of pride. "Yeah, why not?"

"Captain?" said Fury.

"Yes?"

"Want to take over leadership of the Avengers again?"

Steve blinked. "What? Right now?" He immediately turned to Tony, blue eyes wide, and Tony couldn't help laughing at his rather stunned look.
"Why not right now, babe?" he asked, reaching out to take Steve's hand. "Half of what I decide is your suggestions anyway."

"Stark's not a natural team leader, Captain," said Fury. "He'd much rather be off blasting things on his own than trying to deploy team-members."

"But--"

"C'mon, Cap, time's a wasting," said Clint. "If you're looking for votes, you got mine, 'cause I gotta tell you, Tony may be a genius but he's kind of a douchebag as a tactician. Forgets all about me half the time."

"Thanks, Katniss," said Tony. "See if I give you a lift anywhere again."

"Truth hurts," said Clint with an unapologetic grin. "As one non-team-playing dickhead to another."

Steve gulped and looked over the estate. "You do know you're talking about my fiance, right?" he muttered, his eyes narrowing at one of the towers of the castle.

"Fiance?" Fury exclaimed, and Tony grinned at him and waggled his eyebrows. Fury rolled his eye. "How the fuck is this my life," he muttered.

"Babe, you got this," said Tony, and Steve bit his lip. He turned to Tony and for a brief moment Tony could see all his insecurity, all his uncertainty - everything Steve had trusted him to see during the past several months.

"You think so?" he asked, his voice low. "I haven't been--"

Tony shook his head to stop him, thinking of everything Steve had been through, all of his strength and determination and stubborn perseverance. "You're the bravest man I know." He brought Steve's hand to his lips and kissed his fingers quickly. "You got this," he repeated. Steve held his gaze.

"Captain?" Fury asked.

Steve closed his eyes briefly, then nodded and gently pulled his hand out of Tony's, turning to the team. "Yeah. All right. Widow, you and I are going to go around the south to breach tower security where the report said there might be an entrance. Hawkeye, up on that roof, if you can shoot the collars off the wolves I think SHIELD will be able to get into the grounds without them attacking. Iron Man, I think that turret's got some strategic importance, see if you can blast it after you take Hawkeye to the roof. Thor can handle the flying monkeys."

"I shall return with the heads of these foul creatures, Captain," Thor boomed, and took off.

"I'll just piss off and let you do your job, then," said Fury with a grin, and strode off to his people.

Tony gave Steve a kiss and flipped down his mask, grabbing Clint none too gently and hauling him up, grinning at his indignant squawk. He glanced down, seeing Bruce narrow his eyes and let go of his normal calm, and grow.

Tony plopped Clint down on the roof and flew back for Natasha, and Steve tapped on Hulk's leg.

"Hulk?"

Hull looked down at Steve, and Steve pointed to the castle walls.

"Smash!"
Chapter End Notes

1. The movies watched/mentioned are
   The King's Speech, 2010
   The Artist, 2011
   Argo, 2013

2. If Argo was your favourite movie ever, that's fine, but please don't tell me. I'm a history buff, a Canadian, and someone who hates it when America looks awful to the rest of the world. The movie makes me want to cry.

3. OK, well, that's that for the story!
   Can't quite believe I'm done. Thanks so much to my many, many betas: scrtkpr, schemingreader, tree00faery, NotAllGirlsAreGlass, TheKinkyPet, CariZee, vasiliki, Winterstar, CJ Andre, Cluegirl, forgetmenotjimmy, ClawR (BeatriceEagle), holliswrites and forest_rose.

   Thanks most especially to scrtkpr, for being my sounding board for the beginning of this story, especially for internalized homophobia stuff. You would not believe how much of her feedback made it into this story, or changed how I wrote about stuff. Thanks so much to all of you for following this story for... oh boy, 11 months, especially after I got my new job and posting slowed to a crawl.

   I have no plans for a sequel at this point, though I do have a short standalone that might fit into the same universe, after Steve and Tony have been married for a little while. I wrote a short standalone that fits into this same universe, after Steve and Tony have been married for a little while. Mostly I'm eagerly looking forward to Captain America 2, even though Iron Man 3 and Thor 2 both totally AU'd this in terms of the Avengers pretty much saying sayonara at the end of that movie and never seeing each other again, except for Tony & Bruce, and Captain America 2 looking to do the same thing except for Steve & Natasha. Thanks so much, everyone! Hope you liked the ending!

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