Trading places
by Vegetableswillhavetheirrevenge

Summary

Tensions are high when Sam, Dean and Castiel are catapulted into the Avengers' universe mere minutes after Sam has expelled Gadreel. But maybe, just maybe, this could be what the Hunters need to address some major issues in their relationship.

And maybe Sam can help out one Tony Stark along the way.

Notes

So I’ve never written for the Avengers before, but here we go. I've always been kind of obsessed with the aftermath of Gadreel in SPN, so here we are: Sam, Dean and Castiel being zapped into the Avengers-verse (a few months prior to AoU to start) pretty much straight after Gadreel’s been kicked out.

Disclaimer: Later chapters, when I get to them, will be critical of actions taken by multiple members of the Avengers (especially if we manage to hit Civil War), and also of things done by Dean. Hopefully, this will lead to character growth on all sides. Also, I am very protective of Sam Winchester and Tony Stark. You have been warned.
Also, starting soon, there will be some pretty blatant parallels to possession being analogous to rape. I'm planning to give warnings in relevant chapters, but please be aware that this will happen. I don't want anyone to be triggered by anything like that in my work.
Chapter 1

The light came just as Dean was moving to open the impala. One moment Sam was on a bridge, Castiel by his side and mind still reeling under the pressure of trying to even begin to process the magnitude of the betrayal he’d just become aware of, and the next…

The next there was a soft, all-encompassing golden light and a still, small voice whispered something in his ear as the bridge fell away, to be replaced by a city street and crowds of gawping people. He had a split second to register that Dean, Castiel and even the damn car were still in the same places as before (comparatively speaking) before said crowd started to react- cars grinding to a halt, some pedestrians pinwheeling back, others shouting and still others whipping out cell phones and starting to record.

And then an honest-to-God metal man dropped with a solid thud from the air (and he wasn’t hallucinating- he knew he wasn’t hallucinating because all the hallucinations he’d had before had either been based on things from The Cage or caused by detox, and even a Djinn wouldn’t create something as nonsensical as this). The metal guy pointed glowing palms in their direction, and a distinctly human-sounding male voice came out of him.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?”

The first question was not one Sam ever liked to answer, and the second… well, he’d have rather liked to know that himself.

“I could ask you the same.”

Ah, so Dean was apparently recovered enough to find his voice. The older man had moved to be closer to the trunk, ready to reach for its contents should things go bad. The pleading gaze he’d put on during his “I’m poison” speech had been wiped away without a trace, replaced with the smug, cocky expression he’d developed specially for his interactions with law enforcement.

Things only got weirder when a man wearing suit a which appeared to be based on a muted version of the American flag and an armoured guy almost as tall as Sam himself carrying- was that Mjölnir?- pushed their way through the crowd.

“Everything all right here, Stark?” The blond flag asked, and Sam had to admit the way he stood- seemingly composed, but poised ready to attack at any moment- was impressive.

“Just peachy, Cap,” the metal man- Stark?- replied breezily. “Honestly, I think these guys have even less of a clue about how they got here than we do. Car seems to suggest they’re at least from Earth, though, so that’s something, at least.”

“Where the hell else would we be from?” Dean demanded.

Armour dude looked around at the gathering crowd. “Mayhap it would benefit us to continue our discourse in a less public location?” He half declared, sounding like some kind of Shakespearean reject. Sam kind of agreed with him, though, and not only because crowds were always terrible things to have around in such circumstances. The situation really wasn’t helping the raw bone-weariness he’d been feeling in the few minutes- God, had it really only been a few minutes?- since he’d expelled that dick angel.

Dean, however, stayed true to form. “Oh, hell no. No way I’m going anywhere with you freaks. And I’m definitely not leaving Baby here.”
The metal man’s face-plate slid back, revealing a middle-aged man with a neatly styled beard and moustache. “Assuming ‘Baby’ is the impala? No worries, Lumberjack Joe, you can just back her into the garage. She’s already in the right place for it. One of us will have to ride with you, though. Make sure you don’t try to make a break for it.”

“What? No way-”

“Dean.” Castiel spoke up, glancing at Sam with a level of worry Sam didn’t even have the energy- or the brainpower, right then- to feel frustrated by. “I agree with the man with the old-fashioned speech pattern. Publicity is not wise. And Sam should not remain standing for so long in his condition. He needs rest if his body is to heal.”

Dean still looked like he was going to argue, even as multiple sets of eyes turned to scrutinise Sam, but Stark got there first.

“Well, that’s settled, then. Cap?”

“I’ll go with Dean and the car. You and Thor take the other two up to the common room. And tell JARVIS to assemble the team.”

“He’s already on it, spangles.” He walked the metal suit over to them and, keeping Castiel in his line of sight, fixed a near-uncomfortably sharp gaze on Sam. “You gonna be able to walk on your own, or are you really that delicate?”

Okay. Now that he could summon up a measure of annoyance for. “I’ll be fine, Tin Can.”

The corners of Stark’s mouth twitched upwards just marginally. “You know, assuming you don’t turn out to be evil aliens or something, I think I could come to like you guys. Now come on- it’s that tower right there.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which someone announces they may have an idea about what's happened, and Tony begins to notice that things aren't going great in Winchester-land.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony Stark was- in certain areas of his life- a paranoid man. After Obie-Stane’s- betrayal, said paranoia had increased proportionately in regards to his tech. Afghanistan had done the same for unknown people and variables. And New York—well, New York had had perhaps the greatest effect of all. But, in his defence, seeing nigh-uncountable hordes of hostile alien creatures spread across the vastness of space, poised on the edge of wiping the human race from existence, could do that to a guy.

Which was precisely why he had designed prototype scanners to detect surges in possible alien activity, and installed them in every SI-owned building in New York. And was also why JARVIS was able to alert him immediately when one such surge erupted directly outside the Avengers Tower.

Three somewhat bewildered (but doing a good job of hiding it) men had, needless to say, not exactly been what he was expecting. Still, there was no harm in being careful.

“So,” he said conversationally while he, Thor, the taller lumberjack and the trench coat waited for Rogers and hillbilly number two to arrive, “are you two actually human, or do you just look it?”

Mountain Man blinked, just enough wariness in his eyes to set alarm bells ringing in Tony’s brain. “What makes you say that?”

“JARVIS?”

“Nothing from facial recognition, sir, but initial scans show the taller two men to be human. Most likely biologically related. The third is something else, although human DNA does appear to be present.”

“Huh. Let Cap and the others know, would ya, J?”

“As you wish, sir.”

Ignoring, for now, the BFG (who was currently glancing almost interestingly between Tony and the walls- no doubt looking for the scanners and speakers), Tony fixed his gaze on the constipated-looking man who was practically hovering at the giant’s side. “So what are you, then?”

“I am an Angel of the Lord.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ.”

A quick glance towards the elevator confirmed the interruption to have come from the third of the
newly-arrived trio just as the self-proclaimed “angel” spoke again.

“No, Dean. I had assumed you were aware that I was referring to God. Although, yes, when the Father and the Son were separated we did also answer to the Son.”

“Christ,” Tony whistled. “You’re almost as literal as Thor.”

Thor actually had the gall to look **pleased**, of all things. “A mighty feat indeed, Angel of the unnamed Lord. Tony has informed me many a time that none can compare to me in this regard.”

“Wait, hold up,” the snarky one demanded, striding further into the room (and causing Mountain Man to tense noticeably in his seat. Interesting). “Rewind. Did you say Thor?! What the hell are you guys doing hanging out with a damn Pagan god?!”

“Okay, A: Thor here’s not a god, he’s an alien prince. B: How do you not seem to have a single clue who the Avengers are? And C: You’re one to talk. Which one of us is best bros with some mess of DNA calling himself an angel of the freaking lord?”

“I am an Angel of the Lord.”

“Oh, come on-”

“Stark, that’s enough.” Rogers shot him one of his patented ‘Stark, behave yourself’ glances and Tony shrugged, willing to let the question of the ‘angel’s’ validity go for now. Then, seeing Bruce, Natasha and Clint exiting the second elevator, the mechanic stepped out of the safety of his suit (he decided to leave it in the corner for now, though. Just in case). Steve acknowledged the newcomers with a nod, then turned back to their three guests.

“All right. I’m Steve Rogers. This is Tony Stark and Thor Odinson. Those folks over there are Natasha Romanov, Clint Barton and Doctor Bruce Banner. Now that everyone’s here who can be, perhaps you wouldn’t mind introducing yourselves?”

“We’re not telling you-”

“My name is Sam Winchester,” Mountain Man cut in, apparently deliberately ignoring the lumberjack’s annoyed objections. “This is my brother, Dean, and this is Castiel. He really is an angel. But, if I’m right about what’s happened, he might not be able to use many of his powers right now.” He glanced over at the third man. “Sorry, Cas. I know you only just got your Grace back.”

“And what do you think has happened?” Natasha asked, as she and Clint moved to casually cut off any possible escape routes (something which most people wouldn’t notice, but which didn’t seem to escape the attention of a single one of their guests). Sam eyed each of them warily for a second, obviously weighing his options, before replying.

“I think we’ve been sent from our dimension to yours.”

The reaction was immediate. Thor and Bruce both looked intrigued, though Bruce, at least, seemed to also feel a healthy chunk of scepticism. Steve unfolded his arms- a sure sign of surprise for the super soldier. Natasha straightened up, furrowing her eyebrows at the same time as Clint snorted out “Pull the other one.” And Tony… Tony didn’t really know what to think. On the one hand, it sounded impossible. On the other, he’d used to think swarms of invading aliens would be impossible. And those readings…

“No. nuh-uh. Not again,” Dean denied (and that ‘again’ was all kinds of interesting), while Castiel
eyed Sam curiously. “No-one even cast that damn spell.”

“Think about it, Dean,” Sam insisted tiredly, still not quite meeting the other man’s eyes. “The date in the elevator said January 2015. That alone puts us a whole year in the future. We’re definitely in New York, but just a quick look outside shows loads of buildings I’ve never seen before, which means the skyline’s off, too. Not to mention the fact that the tech here is lightyears ahead of what anyone has back home. They’re got a flying metal suit! And the security guy managed to run facial recognition and preliminary DNA tests without taking even a single sample.”

“Umm… First, flakes of DNA probably just got left in the elevator or lifted from your car seats. Second, JARVIS isn’t a security guy.” Tony smiled slightly- mostly to himself- over the misunderstanding. “He’s Just A Really, Very Intelligent System.”

Sam’s confusion lasted for far less time than most peoples’ did, before his eyes widened in comprehension and he peered around the room, apparently seeing it in a new light. “He’s an A.I?”

Now that got Dean’s attention. He gawped openly at Tony. “You’ve got an honest-to-God A.I? Dude, that’s freaking awesome!”

Then he seemed to remember himself, instantly curbing his enthusiasm and staring obstinately at his brother. “That doesn’t mean anything. The date could be wrong, we haven’t even been to New York in God knows how long, and crazy rich people sometimes have some crazy shit.”

Sam’s jaw twitched in the first outward sign of annoyance he’d shown since they entered the tower. “Fine. Don’t take my word for it. Castiel?”

“Yes, Sam?”

“Try to heal me. Just a little- don’t push yourself.”

“Why?”

“Because last time we hopped dimensions, the angel who followed us couldn’t use his Grace.”

“I see.”

Castiel stepped closer to where Sam was sitting, closing his eyes as he placed one hand gently upon the taller man’s brow. A few seconds passed in near-silence. Then he straightened up, removing his hand and fixing Dean with a sombre stare. “Nothing. I fear Sam may be right.”

“But…” Dean shifted, his arms dangling hopelessly at his sides. “But last time we had to hi-jack a damn archangel’s spell to get back. How the hell are we supposed to get home this time?”

Castiel’s gaze shifted pensively between the brothers. “I don’t know if we can.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Chapter two! Just to note- chapter lengths in this are likely to vary in length, depending on where I feel the natural ends come. They may even out a bit later on, but I honestly couldn’t say.

Thanks a lot to you lovely people who have already left kudos and/or reviewed! I hope
you enjoyed this, too!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Some medical information comes to light. Sam doesn't react well.

Chapter Notes

You remember I mentioned heavy rape analogies? Well, this chapter has some big ones. Hopefully I've done the situation a small measure of justice, but please don't read it if you think you could be negatively affected.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The confused silence which followed trench coat’s statement was eventually broken by a soft snort from Sam.

“Guess I should be glad you already healed those damn holes in my brain, huh, Cas.”

The three men fell into a possibly overwhelmed silence, apparently having forgotten everyone else’s presence- which, if what they were saying was actually true, Tony guessed was kind of understandable- and the rest of the Avengers seemed to have reached a silent agreement to give them a short time to process (probably, on the resident spies’ parts, to gather information on how they coped), so Tony decided to take the time to look at the more detailed medical scan results JARVIS had started to send to his Stark-phone. And… yeah. Preliminaries for the ‘angel’ were distinctly not human. The one JARVIS had marked as being the most urgent, though, turned out to be Mountain Man’s. And it didn’t exactly take a genius (even if he was one) to see precisely why. Frowning, and more shocked than he dared to let on, he beckoned Bruce over. The scientist’s eyebrows shot up mere moments after looking at the screen.

“This is impossible!”

The declaration was just loud enough to draw the attention of everyone in the room, but Bruce was so caught up in the science that, for once, he barely even seemed to register the extra attention. Instead, he fixed a horrified expression on the sole seated newcomer. “How are you even functional?!”

Sam obviously knew what Bruce was referring to, a flicker of pain crossing his features as he shrank further into himself. This had the (probably unintended) effect of making extra certain that every pair of eyes in the room once again focussed on him.

“What do you mean, Bruce?” Asked Natasha.

Bruce stepped further into the room. “JARVIS?”

“Yes, Doctor Banner.” A hologram sprang into life in the centre of the room. Dean tried (and failed) not to look impressed. “This is a representation of a normal strand of human DNA.” A
second hologram pushed the first one slightly to the side. “This is mister Winchester’s.”

A muffled gasp ran throughout the parts of the room housing the Avengers members. The hologram showed Sam’s nitrogenous bases to be jagged and almost disconnected, some molecules barely even hanging on as the electrons leaped and pulsed erratically. Some areas seemed almost stitched together with the same shimmering substance present in Castiel’s scan. And it was this last factor, apparently, which caught Sam’s eye. He stood up, wide-eyed and looking slightly nauseous, and gestured toward the strange strings.

“Is this what I think it is?”

“It’s Grace.” Castiel nodded. “Your technology truly is advanced to be able to detect it,” he told Tony, before turning back to his companion. “Apparently, Gadreel was trying to create a more stable structure by working not only with his own power, but also by trying to manipulate the amount you still contain after your time in The Cage.”

Sam blanched. “You mean I’ve still got… I’ve still got parts of… of Him in me?”

“Only a trace.” Castiel was obviously trying to be comforting, but it was quite possibly the worst attempt at comfort Tony had ever seen. And he had grown up with Howard Stark for a father.

Suddenly, Sam rounded on his brother, betrayal in every line of his body, and Tony was hit with a sudden, unwelcome bout of nostalgia. He knew that expression. It was a perfect picture of how it had felt to be freshly back from Afghanistan, watching helplessly as his one remaining father figure quite literally ripped out his heart. Whatever was going on here, it was not good.

“Did you know this was what he was planning to do?”

“Sam, there are other people here-”

“I don’t care anymore, Dean. You’re the one who let him in- did you know what he was going to do?”

“How could I? Jesus, I told you- I wasn’t exactly in my right mind, okay? You were dying, and he said he could help. I didn’t need to know more than that.”

“You didn’t-

“What do you mean you didn’t need to know more, Dean?! This is my body we’re talking about, here! I think I had a right to know what was being done to it!”

“Hey, you said yes, all right? You agreed! Gadreel wouldn’t’ve been able to do what he did if you hadn’t!”

“I said yes to trying to live, Dean, not to-” Sam’s voice cut off abruptly, almost chokingly, and it was blindingly obvious to everyone present that he was visibly trying to calm himself. Only for horrified realisation to flash across his features. He took a single step back, hands falling lifelessly to his sides, and when he spoke again it was little more than a slow, hollow echo of his previous fervour. The poor guy sounded broken.

“So that’s what you were telling yourself? All these months, while he was wiping my memory and hi-jacking my body whenever one of you wanted? I thought I was losing my mind- again- and you thought what? That it must be okay because… because I must have wanted it?”

“That’s not what I said.”
“You didn’t have to say it, Dean.” There was a raw, painful silence, before Sam turned slowly to face Tony, blinking back a faint sheen of tears in a futile attempt to appear calm. “Do you have a bathroom I could use?”

“I can take you.” Natasha, easily among the least threatening-looking of the bunch of them, stepped forward and began to lead the still shaky-looking man away down the corridor. No-one tried to stop her.

Almost as soon as they’d disappeared round the corner, Dean all but collapsed into the seat Sam had vacated, then let out a shuddering breath. “Damn it.”

Chapter End Notes

I realise Sam was more open around strangers here than he would usually be in the show. This is specifically because it's been such a short time since he expelled Gadreel- probably less than twenty or thirty minutes, assuming they didn't want to walk too far before healing his brain-holes. A lot has been revealed to him in a very short time, and he's not really in the mind-space to be as rational as he usually tries to be. Once some time has passed, he's probably going to become a little more restrained again.

Thanks again to those who have left kudos and comments, and also to those lovely people who have already subscribed.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Dean works some of his usual magic, with slightly varied results.

Chapter Notes

As is (sadly) often the case with SPN, warnings for some forms of abuse apologism in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean hadn’t felt so penned in in years. Or so directionless. He’d been planning to spend maybe a couple of weeks away, to let Sam come to terms with why what Dean had done had been necessary, but now that plan had been blown to pieces, and he was stuck in a room in a whole other universe, surrounded by stares ranging from analysing to suspicious to downright hostile. And it was no wonder, with Sammy going off on one like that. The kid had made it sound like Dean had teamed up with a damn rapist or something, instead of agreeing to a procedure which (bad though things may have turned out in the end) saved his little brother from the brink of death. Everything was spinning further and further out of his control, and he had absolutely no idea how to turn things back around.

“So,” the broody-looking blond guy in the mostly-black leather jumpsuit, with a quiver of all things hoisted on his back, said from his spot in the corner. “You gonna tell us why your own brother gets physically sick at the sight of you?”

The guy’s tone alone would’ve been enough to get Dean’s hackles up, but the extra bite in his words was enough to kick-start that gnawing ache of fear he always felt whenever he thought that Sammy might try to leave him again. The combined effect had him jumping back to his feet, fists clenched and reply sounding more harsh and defensive than originally intended.

“I don’t have to tell you a damn thing, Katniss. So why don’t you just keep your nose out of things that don’t concern you, huh? This is family stuff. You’ve got no right to judge me when you don’t even have a clue what’s going on here.”

“Then help us understand,” the Captain offered. And he seemed sincere, but still…

“Look, I don’t know how things work in this universe, flag boy, but back home people don’t just go around sharing their life stories with total strangers.” He shot a glare back towards the arrow guy. “Especially when said strangers are acting like entitled dicks.”

“If it helps,” that Tony dude said with an attitude which was too casually flamboyant not to be fake, “the more you tell us, the more variables we have. And the more variables we have, the more likely we are to be able to figure out if there’s a way to send you back.”

Dean breathed out heavily, mind working furiously trying to decide whether telling the whole lot of
them to stick their empty promises of good intentions up their asses was worth it, especially
considering he didn’t know a thing about them, or whether to give in to the fact that explaining
things (provided they bothered to listen to reason) might make the time he was probably going to
be stuck with them more bearable.

In the end, though, it was Cas who pointed out the clincher.

“Dean, perhaps informing these people of the true circumstances of your decision would mean that
one of them could convince Sam to also listen.”

And however much he hated the idea of any third party getting involved in Winchester business,
damn it he hated the idea of Sam abandoning him more. Biting the inside of his cheek, he gave a
sharp nod and plonked himself back down on the seat. He’d shared some things with strangers
before- like Gordon Walker and that priest who’d talked to them about the demon cure. He could
do it again. Just part of another case.

“Look, before I tell you anything, you gotta understand- I practically raised that kid. Sam is all I’ve
ever had. It’s my job to keep him safe, and God knows he’s done more than his fair share of stuff
to screw that up, but I’ve always got him through things in the end before. It’s just not in me to give
up on him, and I ain’t ever gonna apologise for that.” He focussed on the Captain- if the leader
understood, the other were bound to follow- and was pleased to see a glimmer of understanding in
the man’s eyes as the blond nodded for him to continue.

“Anyway, this last time… things were bad. Sam was… he was doing these trials, and they were
killing him. So I got him to stop, but I was too late.” Biting down on the reminder of the fear he’d
felt as Sam collapsed on the ground, agony on his face, Dean kept going. “He ended up in a coma.
The doctors were saying there was nothing they could do, and I couldn’t reach Cas, so I panicked,
okay? There was this other angel- said his name was Ezekiel- who told me he could heal Sam, but
only from the inside.”

The captain looked confused. “The inside?”

“Possession. It’s how angels work, in our universe, anyway- if they’re on earth they need to
possess a human body, otherwise they’re just so much floaty white light.” He paused. “Sam was
seconds from dying, and I had no other choices if I wanted to keep him alive. So I agreed.”

“And what happened then?”

“Nothing. For a while, anyway. Sam was getting better. The angel even helped out a bit on the job.
Saved someone important to the both of us. Then I found out the dick had been lying about who he
was, and the damn douchebag decided to take Sammy on a bit of a joyride instead. So we tracked
him down and kicked him out.”

The sound of shattering glass reverberated around the room, sending everyone present into
instinctive defensive poses. Dean span around, hand twitching automatically towards the knife he
had tucked into his shoe, only to find the archer standing there, eyes narrowed dangerously, with
shards from the cabinet to his left scattered around his feet.

“So you let some random monster possess your brother and take him over, and you still don’t get
why he’s upset?”

“Hey, I didn’t let him-”

“That’s enough, both of you,” the Captain snapped. “Hawkeye- go take a breather. You need to
calm down.”

The jerk looked like he was going to argue for a second, then gave a curt nod and walked back over to the elevators. As the door closed behind him, Dean could see him rubbing a hand half-absentmindedly over his heart. Somehow, the Hunter suspected there was something extra going on there that he wasn’t aware of. Still, no matter what it was, it didn’t give the guy any right to go acting like a whiny little bitch. Waiting a few seconds for the tension in the room to die down a little, Dean turned back to the Captain.

“Look, I may not have handled things great- I’ll be the first to admit that I’m not perfect- but I did what needed to be done. I couldn’t let my brother die. Not when there was even the smallest chance he could be saved.”

Surprisingly, the first of those left to react was Thor. The apparently-an-alien-not-a-god gave a single, firm nod and unfolded his arms. “A worthy goal indeed, if perhaps poorly managed. Though our circumstances differ, I, too, understand well the need to protect a sibling against that which may cause him harm.”

Tony snorted. “Bullshit.”

“Stark-”

“No. Sorry, Cap, but Mountain Man back there seemed way too upset for that-as disturbing as it already sounds to me- to be the whole story. This guy obviously isn’t telling us everything.”

“He’s told us enough to show that things aren’t just black-and-white here, Tony. Sometimes people in bad situations don’t make the best decisions. I’d think you of all people would know that.”


“Yeah, well hate to bust your bubble, dude,” Dean interjected, “but so far? I’m not too keen on you, either.”

The other man shot back some weird kinda smirk-glare hybrid (a glirk?) in return. “That’s fine with me.”

The captain just sighed, then pressed a thumb and forefinger briefly to the ridge of his nose. “All right, that’s enough for now. Mr Winchester-”

“Dean.”

“Dean. Yourself, your friend and your brother are welcome to stay here for now, while we attempt to work out whether there is a way to return you to your world.” He blatantly ignored Tony’s mutter of ‘Great. More work for me.’ “Is that acceptable?”

Dean glanced over at Cas. He didn’t really think they had any other options for now. And these guys seemed to have enough money that a couple of extra mouths wouldn’t be much of a drain. “That’s fine.”

Tony started towards the elevator, too, his suit following behind him, unmanned. “Well, glad that’s settled, then. Oh, and if you’re staying here I’m going to have to insist you don’t leave the tower until I’ve sorted out a cover story for the press about your arrival. J? Send the BFG down to the lab when he’s done, would you? I’ve got some stuff I’d like to check out.” He shot a glance over his shoulder. “Bruce, you coming?”
The nervous-looking guy who’d called up the holograms trotted out after him and, before Dean even had a chance to confirm whether or not the “BFG” was Sam (he really didn’t want those freaks running experiments or something on his brother), the doors closed behind them. And Dean was left behind with just Cas, the captain and Thor.

“Okay, one more question.”

The captain nodded. “Go ahead.”

“Why the hell do you look like the American flag threw up on you?”

Chapter End Notes

Sigh. As much as I would've liked for anyone and everyone to just tear into Dean (metaphorically speaking), it just didn't feel true to their characters. Especially given the way he tends to paint things with himself being as little to blame as possible, and with Steve and Thor's own experiences with Bucky and Loki. Don't worry- he will eventually begin to atone, but... yeah. Not just now. Sigh.

Also, MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM JAPAN! (For those who celebrate it)
I hope everyone has a fantastic holiday!
Chapter Summary

Sam takes a breather. It's not very fun.

Chapter Notes

Hope everyone had a good Christmas/Hanukkah/whatever else you may or may not celebrate!
Warnings, I guess, for internalised victim-blaming of sorts in this chapter. Sam is not in a good place. Sorry. :'(

The bathroom, as it turned out, was huge. Which really shouldn’t have been all that surprising, given the size of the rest of the tower. Still, elegant designs and seamless blends between metal and marble weren’t exactly what Sam cared about right now. The only thing he cared about was that there was a sink, and plenty of cool, refreshing water. Natasha, the woman who’d showed him the way there, gestured him into the room, then took a step back into the hallway.

“I’ll give you some space. JARVIS will know if you try anything funny.”

And with those ominous, yet strangely understanding, words, the door closed behind her, and Sam was left alone.

Letting out a shuddering breath, he leaned over the sink, resting his forehead against the cool glass of the (frankly enormous) mirror.

Months. That was how long it had been going on. Months of lies and deceit. Months of pinwheeling between different emotions, of missing memories and of ‘duct tape and safety pins.’ Months spent living once more with that old, gnawing fear that this was the time he’d really done it - this was the time he’d screwed himself up so badly that he’d never be able to trust himself or to be of any real use to anyone ever again. That he’d lose his brother again because he was just too broken to stop it in time.

Months of Dean looking him straight in the eye and reassuring him that “it’s just from the trials” and “you just need rest” and “you’ll be better in no time.”

How many times had he started to work out that something was wrong, only for Dean to stand by and watch as that… thing wiped the realisation from his brain?

How many times had Dean told him that he trusted him, only to call on the angel instead?

How could his own brother have done this to him?

That was the big question. One of the main ones to have been haunting him almost non-stop for the past half hour since he’d woken up to this nightmare. How could the brother he had once made the
cornerstone of his reality- stone number one- who knew so much of what he had experienced- from Azazel, to Meg, to Lucifer himself- how could that brother look him in the eye for months on end and let him think that this was all his fault. That he was just imagining things. That all of the inconsistencies and blank spots were all in his head. How could his own brother have justified all that?

Well now he knew.

It was because Sam had said yes. Because he had trusted his brother. And, to Dean and Gadreel, that apparently counted as blanket permission.

Kevin’s face flashed across his vision, eyes burning under Sam’s hand with a sickening stench.

Sam’s stomach lurched.

He should have just agreed to go with Death.

The water was cool as it splashed across his face, and even cooler as he poured a little down his burning throat. This time, as he looked into the mirror once more, he couldn’t help but wonder: if he were to die, right here and right now, would Death come for him again? Or would it be another reaper? Or even, in this new universe, nothing at all?

Would Dean even allow him to die? Or would he find yet another way to stop it again?

Would he ever be allowed to die?

His mind flashed back to years earlier, when Dean had refused to become a monster, and Sam had relented. Because, even if immortality could have saved his big brother from hell, it was still Dean’s choice.

Now he couldn’t help but wonder- if their positions had been reversed, would Dean have allowed Sam the same choice? Or would Sam have woken up the next morning with a pill in his stomach and altered blood in his veins?

Exactly how long ago had Dean decided, like so many others had, that he was the only one with the right to say what happened in Sam’s life?

A fake text from a changed number.

A punch to the face for taking the car.

Double secret probation.

Hours of soul-torturing detox.

No.

No.

He was being irrational. There was no way things were that bad. He was angry, and hurt, and making up patterns that didn’t really exist because of it. Dean had said it himself- he had been desperate. Sam had been dying. And that fear (Tuesday Tuesday Tuesday Tuesday) was something Sam himself was painfully familiar with. That fear was enough to make people make bad decisions.

One bad decision. In- as much he hated the phrase now- the heat of the moment.
It didn’t account for the months after that decision. But perhaps, Sam reasoned, hand curling into a shaky fist as he rested it against the wall, perhaps his own behaviour did.

Because things had been bad between them for a long time- getting worse through the years. And so much of that, he knew, was Sam’s own fault. The text, the detox, the probation- all of them had only happened because Sam had left Dean with no other choice. He had screwed up. So many times. He’d nearly ended the world. He’d let his soul get stuck in the Cage. Let Dean get turned into a vampire. He hadn’t realised Dean and Castiel had been in purgatory. And, because he was so much of a screw-up, he had stopped speaking up as much against what he believed to be Dean’s bad decisions, like having Lisa and Ben’s memories erased. He’d even capitulated in the end over Amy, even though Dean’s actions had left a young boy without a mother, and with no safe way to access food. No wonder Dean had started to believe that he needed to make all the decisions, when Sam had believed himself to be unworthy of stopping him.

Perhaps, in the end, this had been the inevitable outcome. Perhaps Sam was just as much to blame here as Dean was. More, even, considering none of this would have happened if he hadn’t been such a screw-up in the first place.

He leant his head once more against the glass.

Regardless of where the blame lay, there was no question now that things had to change. And, if he wanted Dean to understand precisely why what he’d done was so horrifying, that change had to start with Sam. If he wanted Dean to trust that he was a capable Hunter- or even just an adequate one- he had to actually become one.

But, a traitorous little voice in the corner of his brain whispered insistently, what if it wasn’t his fault?

No. It was. It had to be. Because the alternative…

Shaking his head, Sam stepped back, then leaned closer to the sink and splashed another handful of water across his face. He couldn’t do this right now. He couldn’t work out the solution to all of this when everything was this fresh. He knew he was going to have to figure it out eventually- he, Dean and Castiel were going to have to work together if they had a hope of getting home- but right now everything was just… too raw. He felt like someone (fortunately not literally this time) had reached down inside of him and ripped out everything they had found there, leaving a bitter, hollow shell in their wake. All he wanted to do right now was to wrap himself up in a million different blankets and sleep for a week.

Eventually- he had no idea how much time had passed- Sam straightened up, turning off the water and scrubbing his face dry with his sleeve (a force of habit, after so many crappy motel bathrooms). His reflection, he noted absently, looked terrible. But it was still a thousand times better than he was actually feeling, so perhaps life still had some small blessings. Turning around, he walked back across the warm tiles and opened the door. Natasha was still waiting outside.

“Feeling better?”

“…A little.”

The redhead’s eyes narrowed slightly, disbelievingly. She watched him for a second, then sighed. “Oh, you’re going to fit right in.” Moving back, she pointed back the way they had come. “Now come on.”

“Where are we going?” Sam wasn’t particularly keen on facing everyone- especially Dean- again
so soon, especially with the way he’d acted before. But, if he did have to, he’d prefer to have a little warning to prepare himself.

“Don’t worry. We’re not going back.”

“We’re not?”

“No. Everyone’s gone now, anyway. Steve’s showing your brother and the angel to the guest rooms.”

“And where are we going?”

“To the lab.” She glanced over at him, one eyebrow arching up just minutely. “Tony wants to see you.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The start of a (hopefully) beautiful bond.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony sat in the lab, wheeling almost effortlessly around the floor as he and Bruce looked through the files in more detail. He’d long preferred seeing things like this- his holograms could show more information, and were far easier to manipulate than screens would ever be. Even the ones he’d designed. Most people, he knew, didn’t feel the same.

Most people were odd.

Rubbing a hand through his hair, he flicked at the image of Mountain Man’s DNA, enlarging it once more. He still had no idea what kind of thing would be capable of causing this kind of damage to a person’s DNA. The closest comparison he or Bruce had been able to make so far was to radiation damage, but Bruce was adamant that no radiation he knew of would create a molecular breakdown quite like this. The douchebag lumberjack had, he remembered, mentioned something about trials, but even so…

“Amazing, in a way, isn’t it?” Bruce remarked, coming over to hover near his shoulder.

“Thanks, I guess.”

Tony swivelled as Bruce turned, both of them taking in the Mountain Man with a tinge of surprise. This room had clear glass walls, for Pete’s sake- how on earth had neither of them noticed Sam or Natasha approaching? Just further proof of how distracting anomalies could be to a genius, he supposed.

Sam’s mouth twitched in what was probably supposed to be an attempt at a smile, but actually just made him look even more like a kicked puppy. “Umm… I should probably apologise, I guess, for earlier. I shouldn’t have overreacted like that.”

Tony shrugged, deliberately forcing himself to appear even more nonchalant than usual (and highly doubting that the man had been ‘overreacting’ as he claimed). “Hey, no skin off my back if you decide to let off a little steam, Mountain Man. Besides, most of the people around here- myself included- are usually so emotionally repressed. Kind of nice to have someone break that pattern.”

Now there was a hint of a more natural smile. Just a tiny hint. “If you’re looking for emotionally healthy guests, I’m afraid you’ve been saddled with entirely the wrong people.”

“Ah well, it’s probably for the best. JARVIS and the bots probably wouldn’t have a clue how to react if someone ‘normal’ were to move in.”

“Jarvis would be fine. You’re the one who’d malfunction,” Natasha quipped, moving back out of the room. “Now, I’ve got some things which need seeing to. You boys have fun, now.” She paused, shooting a part-teasing, part-warning glare in Tony’s direction. “Try not to break him.”
As the spy prowled away to parts unknown, Tony merely rolled his eyes in response. “Ignore her,” he informed Sam. “She’s not exactly the greatest at inspiring peoples’ confidence in me.”

“No offence, but you don’t exactly seem the type to need help inspiring confidence.”

Huh. A compliment. So he’d apparently managed to make a decent first impression on the beanstalk. Imagine that. “Perhaps. But not everyone always appreciates my particular brand of charm. Even some of the Avengers started off with the ‘Iron Man yes, Tony Stark no’ mindset.”

“For good reason.” Bruce interjected teasingly. He smiled at Sam. “Tony was a bit of a party animal until a few years ago. People are bound to be a bit dubious when a world-famous playboy decides to become a superhero.”

“Superheroes?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “What? You don’t have them in your world?”

“Only in comic books.” Sam explained. “Although we do have people who deal with certain threats. It’s mostly done in secret, though.” He blinked, looking between the mechanic and the scientist curiously (though still, Tony noted, with a hefty dose of empty weariness behind it all). “So you’re really superheroes, then? And you call yourselves the Avengers?”

“You catch on quick.”

A shadow passed over the taller man’s face. “Not always.” He stood for a few seconds, looking awkward in the sudden silence. “What did you want to see me for, anyway?”

“Ah, that, my young padawan, is for research purposes.”

“So you still have Star Wars over here. Good to know. What kind of research?”

Bruce stepped forward, putting on his ‘Gentle Guy Doctor BannerTM’ voice. “If it’s all right with you, we’d like to take some more detailed medical scans. There’s no way of telling how long you might need to remain here and, well… I’m a doctor. I’d rather not leave you in your current condition if I can help it.”

Sam blinked again, apparently struggling to come to terms with what he was hearing. Tony couldn’t help but wonder whether the guy was always so easy to read, or whether it was only because of the obvious exhaustion. “You think you can heal me?”

“Without running some more tests, there’s no way to know for certain. But you said technology is more advanced here- it stands to reason our medicine is more advanced, too. And, if you’re okay with it, we can probably collaborate with some of the world’s leading geneticists. They’d probably jump at the chance to take on a case like yours.”

“And you want my permission?”

(Of course.)

“JARVIS only does the basic facial and DNA checks for security,” Tony explained, standing up so he felt less out of place. “Anything other than that, and we only do it on your say-so. Standard ethical procedure.”

Sam’s mouth twisted in a wry grimace. “Right.” And… oh. Yeah. Given what his crap-bag of a brother apparently put him through, Tony guessed he could understand the guy’s bitterness.
towards the topic. Waking up in a cave with a magnet in your chest is bad enough. Tony could only imagine what waking up to find you’d had a whole other being in your body would be like.

“Look,” he offered, trying not to make too big a deal out of it. “It’d just be a couple of scans, and you don’t have to do them if you don’t want to. Nothing goes into your body. Nothing comes out. If you do do the scans, and if we do manage to rustle up a cure, we still won’t give it to you unless you’re certain you want it. This whole thing? Entirely in your hands, Mountain Man.”

A tense smile. “Is the nickname because of my height, or because of your guess at where we live?”

“Bit of both.” Tony grinned. “So what do you say?”

Sam thought for a while, eyes flicking back and forth between Tony and Bruce, around the lab and, intermittently, up in the direction Natasha must have told him the guest rooms were located. Eventually, though, a determined glint appeared in his eye. “O-”

The word was aborted almost before the first syllable made it out of Sam’s mouth, panic appearing in the taller man’s eyes as his breathing, just for a few seconds, grew stilted. In what Tony deemed quite a remarkable feat, though (considering his personal experiences with panic attacks), Sam got control of himself almost ridiculously quickly, face settling into a calm mask which could easily rival one of Tony’s- or even Natasha’s- own.

“Sorry,” Sam said, without explanation. “Right.” He paused for a few moments, and when he spoke again his words sounded far more carefully planned than they had up to this point. “I… I agree with allowing you to run the tests.”

Okay. Strange. But Tony didn’t need to question it for now. He clapped his hands together, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet. “All right, then. Fantastic. Brucie-bear, shall we get this show on the road?”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks again to those who have been leaving kudos, subscribing etc. I hope you enjoyed this latest update. ^_^
And please feel free to leave a review- reactions and feedback are fuels like no other.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Sam settles in. Mostly successfully for now. (JARVIS helps)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was, if Sam’s mental time-keeping skills were still up to par, approximately one hour and thirteen minutes later that Tony and Bruce declared that they had enough data now to build up a fairly solid profile. And perhaps it was fairly reckless of Sam to have agreed to the tests in the first place but, after everything he had learned today, the idea of people- even two complete strangers- actually giving him a legitimate choice in the proceedings (and making sure, at every step along the way, to let him know exactly what each test was for)… Well, Sam had appreciated the gesture enough that he’d have had a hard time refusing to cooperate, even if he had wanted to.

And he’d also learnt quite a bit about his hosts in the meantime. Bruce was left to do most of the actual medical work (Tony insisting that he was “just a mechanic” and therefore not qualified), but Tony was more than willing to chat away as the other man worked. And, as both men seemed to have reached an agreement not, for the time being anyway, to question Sam about how exactly he’d ended up in the state he had, the conversation quite naturally fell into a pattern of Sam asking questions about this new universe, and Tony answering (with Bruce or JARVIS chipping in occasionally if Tony didn’t know the answer).

The questions had started off quite general- like, for example, the fact that, in this universe, the Zodiac killer had two fewer victims than in his world, while Bundy had confessed to four more. Or how the Avengers Tower’s technology was not actually representative of the world as a whole, but was instead only there because Tony was a certified mechanical genius. Or how, fascinatingly enough, there were entire countries here which either didn’t exist back home, or else had different names and populations.

Soon enough, however, Sam had been unable to keep himself from turning to some more focussed questions, mostly about the Avengers themselves. Tony had made clear that any information he gave about them would be solely what could also be found on the internet for now, but still it was all kinds of staggering. Steve Rogers (aka Captain America), for instance, was a serum-enhanced super soldier from World War Two who had been frozen alive for seventy years, and was apparently a national icon. Thor really was an alien prince over here, hailing from somewhere called “Asgard.” Natasha (the Black Widow) and Clint (Hawkeye) were both spies and former assassins (which certainly explained a few things about his earlier guide), who had spent many years under an organisation called “SHIELD” before said organisation collapsed. Tony, unsurprisingly, was the owner of a multi-billion dollar business and the leading name in electronics, clean energy and any number of other mechanics-related areas. And mild-mannered Bruce could apparently turn into a nigh-indestructible rage-monster if his heart-rate sped up too much (that particular nugget was rather alarming, but both men had assured him that the doctor kept a tight lid on the situation unless the Hulk was needed). There were a couple of other relevant people, but they weren’t there right now, and Tony assured him that introductions could be made when they were.
When Sam wondered aloud at how such a mish-mash of people and abilities could possibly have been brought together, Tony had launched into a quite lively description- aided by video footage from JARVIS- about an alien invasion in New York, led by Thor’s half-brother. When Sam asked how on earth they had managed to fend them off with only six people- however gifted- Tony’s expression had turned dark- haunted, even- for just a second, before the billionaire slipped a slightly smug mask into place (earning an eye-roll from Bruce when he saw it).

“No biggie- I just flew a nuke through a wormhole into space and blew up the mothership.”

Considering the man’s deference to his own trauma, Sam had quickly decided not to pry further into that.

All in all, by the time Tony escorted him up to a guest room, the atmosphere between the three men (and JARVIS) was more relaxed than Sam had experienced with… well, anyone, really (outside of maybe Jody) for years.

“There’ll be a guard posted at the end of your floor,” Tony explained on the way up. “Sorry, Mountain Man, but it’s unavoidable. JARVIS can do the surveillance stuff, of course, but it makes certain people feel better if there’s actually security around when un-vetted people are in the tower.” He had a fond (if slightly put-upon) smile on his face towards the end of that last sentence.

“It’s no problem,” Sam assured him, holding back an exhausted yawn as the elevator door opened and they stepped out into a stylish lounge area. They walked across it (Tony pointing out a kitchen on the way past) and down another corridor, lined with spaced-out doors on either side. Sam eyed them with a vague, tingling sense of trepidation. “Which rooms are Dean and Cas staying in?”

“Your companions have been placed on the floor below yours,” JARVIS informed him, sounding strangely pleased with himself, for some reason, behind the otherwise bland politeness the AI seemed to prefer.

“Really? Why?” Wouldn’t that just create more work for security?

“For maintenance reasons.” The AI explained, then promptly refused to elaborate when Sam asked him what he meant. Sam just shrugged it off- at least he wouldn’t have to worry about either one of them bursting into his room in an attempt to get him to talk (and, most likely, to forgive Dean). Having some time and space to himself to process actually sounded pretty perfect right now, if he was honest with himself.

Tony led him over to the second door on the left, mid-way down the corridor. “There’s an en-suite bathroom in the room, of course. And I’ll have someone sent to get you some new clothes tomorrow, so let JARVIS know tonight if you’ve got any preferences.”

“Oh, you don’t have to-”

“Beg to differ there, Mountain Man. You guys can’t leave the tower until things with the press are sorted, and you can’t exactly go wandering around in the same clothes non-stop until then.”

Sam shifted uncomfortably. It still didn’t feel right. “Is there at least some way we could pay you back?”

“Why?” Tony blinked, looking genuinely confused. “I’m a billionaire. This isn’t exactly going to make a big dent in the coffers, and it’s way less than I pay to keep the other Avengers here.” He grinned. “Look, if it really bothers you that much, just think of it as my thanks for providing me with an interesting distraction from all the HYDRA raids Steve has us running.”
“HYDRA?”

“I’ll tell you some other time. Unless you find out for yourself first. Now, try to get some sleep, Mountain Man. You look worse than I do after a 50-hour binge session in my workshop.”

“You have 50-hour binge sessions?” Yeesh- this dude must run on more caffeine than teenage Sam when his dad hit a wall on a case.

Tony just shrugged, tucking his hands into his jean pockets. “Sleep is boring. Robots aren’t. See you, Sam.” And, with that, he turned and walked back towards the lounge, humming a few riffs of AC/DC and leaving Sam hovering in the doorway. ‘Boring,’ the Hunter was quickly beginning to suspect, was most likely Tony-speak for ‘something I don’t want to deal with right now.’

Sam figured he could relate.

The light came on as Sam entered his assigned room, and he directed a quick smile towards a random corner of the ceiling. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Sam.” (The name put another quick smile on Sam’s face, however alien the motion felt right now- it had taken a bit of persuasion to get the AI to stop referring to him as ‘Mr. Winchester’ all the time.)

After making quick use of the facilities in the bathroom (not the shower- he just didn’t have the energy right now, and he could always have one in the morning), he moved back into the bedroom, eyeing the bed somewhat warily as he wondered what to wear. Stripping down to his underwear was probably the most logical solution, of course, but just the thought of being that exposed right now, even with no-one else around…

In the end, he settled for simply shrugging out of his outer jacket and stripping off his boots and socks, leaving him to settle himself under the softest bedspread he had ever come across in his life while still in his jeans, T-shirt and shirt. The lights dimmed slowly as he shifted more solidly onto his front, tucking his hands under the pillow to automatically reach for a knife that wasn’t there, and then the room was dark and quiet.

Too quiet.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes, Sam?”

“Would you mind playing a little music or something?”

“Certainly, Sam. What would you prefer?”

“…Maybe some soft rock or something, if that’s okay. Anything is fine.” A few moments later, the gentle twang of ‘Rocky Mountain High’ began to echo softly from the hidden speakers, filling in the crushing emptiness around him. “Thanks.” And, by the time the song finished, Sam was finally able to close his eyes and give in to what would hopefully be the sweet release of a night of oblivion.

The music was still playing when he startled awake two hours later, grasping wildly in an attempt to catch Kevin before he dropped onto the floor-

Where was he?
The room around him wasn’t his. Wasn’t in the bunker. Wasn’t even a motel room. Where the hell was—

“You are in the Avengers Tower, Sam.” A soft, calming voice spoke from the walls. “You arrived here a little over four hours ago. It is 1:14 a.m. on January 15th, 2015. 2014 in your dimension. The weather today is predicted to be approximately 35 degrees Fahrenheit, with a humidity of—”

The voice continued, listing meaningless facts, until Sam finally came to enough to remember precisely how he’d reached the room. To remember that Gadreel was gone. Crowley was gone, too. Lucifer and Meg had left his body years ago. He had come here himself, on his own two feet. He was fine.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes, Sam?”

“Thanks. I’m… I’m good. You can stop now.”

“As you wish. Should I turn off the lights, also?”

Sam hadn’t even realised the lights had come back on. “No. No, That’s okay. I don’t…” He didn’t think he’d be able to go back to sleep anyway. But he didn’t want to just sit there, alone with his thoughts, either. “Is there something I could do which wouldn’t disturb anyone else? Some books, maybe? Or a computer I could use?”

“Sir has ordered that Starkpads be kept in the bedside tables of all guest rooms, Sam. Guests are permitted to use them at their leisure.”

“Thank you. And… sorry for disturbing you, I guess.”

“I am constantly online, Sam. I cannot be disturbed.”

“Still. Thank you anyway.” Leaning over to open the drawer, he found the pad inside. It was a little lighter than the ones back home, with a sleek black design and ‘Stark’ printed in a subtle dark grey across the back. The user interface was different to those he’d seen before, too, but it was fantastically simple to figure out, and he was online in no time. Google, he was happy to discover, was pretty much exactly the same in this universe, as was Wikipedia and, when no other ideas come to mind, he chose a random year- 1993- and just started reading, skipping to whichever article he wanted, whenever he wanted.

The mindless research proved an excellent distraction (80 percent of the time, anyway), and he didn’t even realise when, a little over three and a half hours later, he drifted back to sleep.

JARVIS dimmed the lights once more.

Chapter End Notes

Just a note- if, at any point, you think I need to add a warning for a chapter, please let me know.

Also, many thanks once again to all those who have been leaving Kudos etc. (And especially to Lucifers711 for commenting once again- you gave me just the boost I
needed ^_^)
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Dean and Castiel have a slightly more active start to their first night in the tower. JARVIS gets a little petty.

Chapter Notes

Don't think there are any warnings necessary for this chapter (if you don't count mentions of one of Dean's fetishes), but please let me know if you believe otherwise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel was worried about Sam. If prior conversations with Dean over the years had taught him anything, it was that Sam was capable, yes, but that he also required a strong leader to utilize those capabilities properly. That in times of stress, and without his brother’s guidance, Sam often faltered- many times to the detriment of either the familial unit or else to his own health.

Castiel believed that this most certainly counted as a time of stress.

And, given Castiel’s inability in this new universe to heal the Hunter of his current molecular state, his worry that Sam would do something drastic in response to Gadreel’s actions during the possession had increased twofold.

He kept this conclusion to himself, however, as Steve Rogers and the non-human known as Thor led them to the provided accommodations, instead merely asking, “Where is Sam? It is essential that I monitor his condition.”

Captain Rogers informed them that Sam was likely to be brought to his own room soon enough, as their Mr. Stark wished to speak to him first, and continued to show them their sleeping quarters (Castiel didn’t feel it necessary to inform them that a bed would not be required for him- most humans tended to view that fact as alarming). When they returned to the floor’s common area, they were met by the sight of two women dressed in light, flexible body armour, with SI printed on their shoulders. Their nametags read ‘Saitou’ (a woman with the sort of colouring, form and symmetry of face which Dean often enjoyed in his magazine collection) and ‘Phillips’ (who was meticulously well-groomed, much paler, and had a large purple birthmark spread across the entire left side of her face). Both of them greeted the group’s foremost member with sharp, professional nods.

“Captain.” They redirected their heads slightly. “Thor.”

“These two ladies will be the guards for this floor tonight,” Captain Rogers explained. “If you have any more questions, I’m sure either they or JARVIS would be happy to answer.”

After checking once more that they understood the terms of their stay, both guides left them to their own devices, with the Captain mentioning something about wanting to contact a falcon as the elevator pulled away. The people of this world, Castiel decided, were just as confusing as those in
the one they had left behind.

Almost as soon as the men were gone Dean, as expected, immediately shot the Asian guard a charming grin.

“So, you here to protect us? Or to make sure we don’t get up to any trouble?” When Ms. Saitou looked unimpressed, his smile merely grew more flirtatious. “Cos let me tell you right now, honey, I’d happily make trouble for you anytime.”

Ms. Saitou merely sighed and rolled her eyes. “You can cut it with the Casanova routine, buddy. It’s never gonna work on me.”

“And why’s that?” A single finger tapping against a black, grey, white and purple badge she had pinned to her lapel was the woman’s only answer, and Dean looked between it and her, confusion pulling at his brow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Another sigh. “It means it’s never gonna happen, so you may as well both go and get some sleep.”

Apparently giving up his advances as a lost cause (at least for now), Dean nodded. “Fair enough. Your choice, sweetheart. But there’s no way I’m sleeping until my brother gets here. I gotta talk to him.”

“Then I’m sure you can find some way to amuse yourselves in your rooms,” Ms. Phillips stated drily. “Or you can watch TV in here. As long as you behave yourselves and don’t try to leave this floor, we’ll get along just swell.”

Dean shot her a half-sarcastic smile. “Swell.” Then he strode into the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge with a muttered “small mercies” and made his way over to the large couches which lined the central area. “C’mon Cas, we might as well see if this dimension has anything decent to watch.”

Castiel perched himself upon one of the couches and, as Dean began scrolling through channels, allowed himself to dedicate a portion of his brainpower to thinking of possible causes and solutions for their relocation. He had sensed no ill intent in the light which had transported them to this new world, but nor had he been able to ascertain the true extent of the power held by the one responsible. Or, indeed, if it had only been one who was responsible. For all he knew, it could even have been Metatron, determined to send his enemies away from him. And this lack of knowledge as to the method of (and circumstances surrounding) their transferral was worrying- as Tony Stark had pointed out, variables were important. Crucial, even, if they ever had a hope of returning. And yet he had no knowledge of any of them. And no way of healing Sam, either.

He was still pondering the issue over two hours later, when the closing notes of ‘Return of the King’ began to filter from the sound system. Dean stretched languidly on the second of the other couches.

“Man, the special effects are way better over here. Lucky bastards. I wish-” He jolted upright, looking around. “Hey, shouldn’t Sam be here by now? Did he sneak past while we were watching the movie or something?”

He appeared as though he was truly expecting an answer, so Castiel shrugged. “If he has returned, it was without my noticing.”

“So that’s a no, then. So where the hell is he?!” The last question was directed over his shoulder, and Ms. Phillips glanced over at them, giving an unimpressed shrug of her own.
“No idea, buster. If you’re that wound up about it, though, you should just check with JARVIS.”

“Who?”

“The AI. He always knows where everyone in the tower is. If you’re authorised, he’ll answer.”

“Right.” Dean stared vaguely around the room, while Castiel focussed his own attention on the camera he could detect within a framed photograph of a scarlet sports car. “Hey, uh, JARVIS?”

The Hunter asked awkwardly.

“Yes, Mister Winchester?”

“Where’s my brother?”

“Sam is currently sleeping in his assigned quarters, Mister Winchester.”

“The hell he is. Sam hasn’t been here once.”

“That would be because Sam’s quarters are located on a separate floor, Mister Winchester.”

“What? Why? There’s plenty of space here.”

The pause before the voice answered was three milliseconds longer than the previous three times. “I felt it prudent.”

“What the hell is that supposed to-” Dean cut himself off, clenching his jaw. “Ah, screw this. I’m just gonna go find him myself.” He stormed towards the elevator. “’Scuse me, ladies.”

In a split second, the two guards both had one hand on the tasers at their belts (only enough charge to momentarily stun an average human- Castiel had nothing to fear either for himself or for Dean), and the other held, palm out, towards Dean. Ready to use force, but ostentatiously placating.

“Mr. Winchester,” Ms. Saitou bit out warningly, “I suggest you go back to your room now.”

“No way.” Dean slipped on a more pleading expression. “Look, I just wanna talk to my brother. Make sure he’s all right. Surely you can understand that.”

Her expression didn’t change. “I can. But I also know it’s not our job to care about your motivations. We’re here to keep you on this floor until eight a.m. Whether or not your brother is with you is none of our concern.”

The pleading expression was gone in the blink of an eye. “Look, lady-”

Ms. Saitou’s hand tightened around her taser, while her teammate shifted to have Castiel more firmly in her sights. Dean raised his hands, making as though to back off. “Whoa, okay there…”

Then, as soon as Ms. Saitou’s hand started to loosen, he leapt forward, thrusting one palm into her arm and grabbing at the weapon, throwing it as far behind him as he could manage. “There. Now, are you gonna-”

Apparently, the woman couldn’t have cared less that her weapon was gone. Instead, she threw herself into a hand-to-hand battle with relish, aiming for crucial nerve clusters as often as possible. Aiming to disable Dean, clearly, rather than to harm him.

When it became clear that she was making little headway, and that Castiel was not planning to come to Dean’s aid, Ms. Phillips drew her own weapon.
“Rena, back!”

Ms. Saitou- Rena, apparently- jumped backwards, the electrodes hit their mark, and Dean dropped to his knees with a grunt.

“Son of a-”

Wasting no time, Rena circled him, forcing him to the floor and pressing a knee sharply into the small of his back. “Hands out either side of you. Now.”

“Alright, alright already.”

Dean was just moving to comply (albeit reluctantly) when the elevator doors opened and Tony Stark stepped out, cloaked once more in his armour but with his face unshielded. His hair looked vaguely dishevelled, and he had a small amount of oil smeared carelessly across one cheek.

“Whatever this is, it better be good.” He looked at Dean. “What did you do?”

Dean began struggling again, only to stop when Rena dug in with her knee. “I could say the same! Your crazy-ass guards and son-of-a-bitch computer won’t let me see my brother!”

Tony blinked down at him owlishly. “Do you have any idea what time it is? Your brother’s probably sound asleep.”

“Exactly! And I wanna know where.”

“Apparently Mr. Winchester is under the impression that his brother should be staying on this floor, Sir,” Ms. Phillips informed him.

“Right.” Tony sighed. “You can let him up now, Rena.” As the guard slipped off, allowing Dean to climb to his feet, the older man looked on with a calculating stare. “Alright. Sam is on another floor for now because JARVIS and I both thought you two could do with a little space. If you want to ask him if he feels like moving closer, you’ll have to wait ‘til a more reasonable hour. Until then, sleeping arrangements are 100% non-negotiable. Got it, Gollum?”

Dean drew back, eyes narrowing. “How the hell do you know what we’ve been watching?”

Tony pointed an armoured hand towards the TV. “The credits are still rolling, dumbo. Now, do I have your word you’ll stay put like a good boy?”

“You gonna be staying all night to keep us here?”

“Don’t need to.” Tony shrugged carelessly. “All I’ve gotta do is give the word, and JARVIS’ll lock you in- elevator doors won’t even open. This whole tower is my brainchild, buddy. Did Steve not tell you that?”

He didn’t. But Castiel had suspected as much. Dean, however, apparently had not. His jaw worked furiously for a few seconds, before his shoulders slumped slightly in defeat.

“You’re a dick. Anybody ever told you that?”

“Many times. Now, if you fellows will excuse me, I have work to do.” Before he left, though, he stopped to check with the guards one more time. “You two gonna be alright here, Anna? Or should I have someone else sent up to help?”

“We’ll be fine, Sir,” Ms. Phillips replied, slotting a new cartridge into her taser and gathering up
the spent one. “Won’t we, Rena?”

“Absolutely.” Rena moved easily over to the other side of the room, collecting her own weapon. “No problem.”

“Glad to hear it. See you round, girls.”

And, with that said, Tony stepped back into the elevator and disappeared. Ms. Phillips- Anna- fixed the two of them with an amused smirk. “Now, are you two actually gonna go to bed now? Or will I get to use Angela again?”

Dean beat a tactical retreat, muttering about trigger-happy bitches and their lunatic bosses, and Castiel (after a cordial goodnight to each of the guards) followed him. Best to continue with the illusion that he slept for now, and he knew from past experience that he had no issues with sitting in a room for one night. After all, what were a few hours to a being who had been alive for hundreds of thousands of years? As they both stopped by their respective doors, though, Dean shot him a sour glare.

“What the hell, Cas? You couldn’t’ve leant a hand?”

Castiel merely raised a single eyebrow. “Their reasoning was solid, their intentions were non-lethal, and you weren’t fighting at full strength. I saw no reason to intervene.”

Dean just cursed. “Should’ve known you’d be frickin’ useless. Damn angels.” He ducked into his room, slamming the door behind himself, and Castiel could hear him fumbling for a light switch for several seconds, before giving up and throwing himself onto the bed.

Castiel looked up towards the nearest camera. “Is Sam safe in his current location?”

“He is as safe as he can be.”

“Okay.” He would still need to talk to Sam about moving to where he and Dean could keep an eye on him, but at least the younger Winchester was in no immediate danger.

Dean’s light, Castiel noted absently to himself as he walked into his own room and his came on automatically, must have been broken.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked this chapter. (Next time we'll get back to Sam)
Feel free to let me know if you have any thoughts. ^_^
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The morning after, Sam gets a gift.

Chapter Notes

I... was not expecting for the end of this chapter to turn out quite the way it does. Sam was just... being so Sam, I guess. And I was powerless against his innate Sam-ness. Sigh. This guy will be the death of me, I swear.

Warnings for post-possession issues with bodily autonomy. Although that probably goes without saying, considering the current time period of this fic...

The second time Sam blinked into awareness was much more peaceful (even if the Starkpad had probably left a large red mark where he’d ended up with it plastered to his face). That peace lasted a full five seconds before everything came rushing back. Dean. Gadreel. Kevin’s blood joining the countless others which stained his hands and soaked his body. Clamping down as best he could on the sudden rush of nausea, Sam tapped the Starkpad’s screen. 8:07. Dean was probably up already.

“Good morning, Sam,” came the voice from the walls.

“Morning, JARVIS.” He placed the Starkpad on a pillow, and swung his legs around until he was sitting on the edge of the bed. “Is everything okay?”

“Sir has asked that, upon waking, you be reminded to submit any requests in regards to clothing choices.”

Right. He’d almost forgotten about that. “Umm... Nothing too expensive. Just a couple of pairs of jeans, if that’s all right, and some plaid shirts and plain T-shirts. Oh, and some sweats to sleep in, maybe, with a long-sleeved T-shirt?” It still felt kind of like he was taking advantage, asking for all this when he had no way to pay Tony back yet, but he figured he didn’t really have many other options. “Do you need to know what sizes?”

“That will not be necessary, Sam. Have a good day.”


A quick, hot shower later (in which he scrubbed himself down hard enough that he’d probably have bled if he stayed in there much longer), and Sam decided he might as well get back to distracting himself with research. When he reached to put on his clothes from the day before, though, he froze. These were what he had been wearing when Gadreel had taken over fully. They were what he -no, Gadreel- had been wearing to kill Thaddeus and Abner... And Kevin. If he looked carefully, he could still see a few drops of Abner’s (Alexander Sarver’s) blood staining the sleeves of his jacket.
And some of his own on the collars of both the jacket and the shirt.

He didn’t have a choice though (when did he ever, a bitter voice in his mind pointed out). He had no other clothes- even his duffel was back in the bunker- so he had to wear at least the jeans and the T-shirt. But then, if nothing was covering his arms he would just end up feeling completely unshielded. In the end he ended up in the shirt again (it was only his blood, right? He’d walked around in his own blood plenty of times- this really shouldn’t bother him), and had to simply try to ignore the itching feeling of lingering wrongness as the well-worn clothing nestled itself snugly against his skin.

He spent an hour at the desk, half-absorbed in reading more and more about this world, before his eyes began drooping again.

When exactly was the last time he’d eaten or drank anything?

Shaking his head in a futile attempt to stave off some of the weariness, Sam stood and made his way out to the kitchen, carrying the Starkpad with him. There was a guy in body armour sitting in a fold-out chair near the elevator, who stood up almost as soon as Sam entered the common area. Sam waved two fingers at him a little awkwardly.

“I’m guessing you’re the guy Tony said was coming to guard me?”

The man nodded, friendly but professional. “Devon Turner.”

“Sam Winchester.” He paused, not quite knowing how to react to having a guard who didn’t think he was a serial killer. “Do you… Do you want a cup of coffee or something?”

Devon raised a single eyebrow. “I’m fine.”

Right. Guard. The guy probably wasn’t even allowed to accept drinks from him, in case they were poisoned or something. “Right. I’m just gonna…” Pointing a thumb towards the kitchen, Sam headed over. Fortunately the cabinets had glass fronts, so he didn’t have to rummage around in search of a cup. The coffee machine itself was obviously high quality and well… if Heaven had been a place which didn’t only hold bad memories for him, he imagined this was what it would have tasted like.

He stared balefully at the fridge while he took his first sips. Logic dictated that he should at least try to eat some breakfast while he was here, especially if he ever wanted to get his strength back. But he was supposed to be dead anyway, so what was the-

Okay no. That was definitely a train of thought he should try not to go down again. You’d think he’d have learnt by now that that path never led anywhere good. That path led to manipulative demons and icy, burning cages. It led to him abandoning the first shot at a real home he’d had in years. To endless, over-whelming guilt and to broken pleas for understanding in ruined churches while he burned slowly from the inside out. That was not a path he ever wanted to travel again.

Upon opening the fridge, however, the sheer amount of food in there was nearly overwhelming. But that was fine. He was fine. He just had to start small. Making his choice, he closed the fridge and instead picked up an apple from the bowl on the counter. The healthy option- that was a good enough start, right?

Practically downing his coffee, he re-filled the cup and made his way over to the lounge area, making sure to sit where Devon would always remain in his line of sight. Before unlocking the Starkpad, though, he looked over at the man once more. “Do you want the TV on or anything?”
Devon just looked at him, expressionless if you didn’t count the slight glimmer of amusement in his eyes, and settled back down into his chair. “I’m fine.”

And then it was back to research. This world, he had quickly found, was utterly fascinating, with a strangely beautiful dichotomy between what had changed and what had stayed the same. So much of the music and entertainment, for example, was practically identical (lucky for Dean and his pop culture references), and yet so much was so different. And not only with the technological side of things, either. Instead of gods, angels and other supernatural beings, there were apparently aliens, superheroes and “enhanced” humans (which, as far as he could tell, just meant humans who were further evolved in some way). That left him with thousands of years of lore he was practically itching to go through and compare to what he could remember. How had the werewolf lore developed, for example, if there were never any werewolves to base it on? Was the Abrahamic God also just another highly-developed alien? And, if so, how much impact had these aliens had on the development of the human race? Were there any differences to be found in Heaven, Hell, or any of the other afterlives? Would soul-magic still work over here?

Other than that, some of the most obvious differences (setting aside the lack of supernatural intervention) had begun to crop up around the time of the second world war, when America had been introduced to its first superhero (and, boy, were Captain Rogers’ “before” photos a bit of a shocker), along with the HYDRA group Tony had mentioned the night before. From what Sam could tell, the group had served as a driving force for the Nazis, in a similar way to what the Thule had done back home— they were simply a lot more open about their manipulations. There had been a rush to recreate Dr. Erskine’s formula after the war, with varying levels of success (he’d found a video of the Hulk by accident, though his thoughts were mixed as to whether Bruce’s alter-ego was really as volatile as he claimed, considering how easy-going Tony, in particular, had been about the entire topic).

And then, by the looks of it, Tony had come along years later and just… completely revolutionised anything and everything he turned his hand to, inspiring people in pretty much every scientific field to do the same. Sam was deliberately aiming not to pry too far into the lives of any of their hosts, but articles about, or else referencing, Tony’s inventions seemed to pop up in practically every search based within the last thirty or so years.

Somehow (and Sam still had no idea how), he, Dean and Castiel had ended up being housed by a man who would probably have a good shot at ruling the world if he ever chose to attempt it.

…Dean would probably say he was a screwed-up freak for not being more concerned about that revelation.

It was almost twelve o’clock when, after a heads-up from JARVIS, the elevator opened and Clint Barton strode out. Sam looked up just as the Avenger made his way past Kendrick (who had taken over from Devon at ten thirty, and was actually okay with coffee), and almost startled as Clint thrust a bag practically into his face.

"Here," the blond said in lieu of a greeting. "Cap wants everyone together to talk about your situation, but Stark insisted you get these first. He says the rest’ll be here later."

“What is it?”

“Clothes. He said you should change first.”

“Oh.” Sam kept his face carefully free of all but a hint of gratitude as he accepted the bag.

“Thanks.”
Clint waved a hand in the direction of the bedrooms, then took the seat with the best vantage point of the room (minus the one Sam was in, of course). “Go on, then. I’ll wait.”

So Sam made his way back to his assigned bedroom, shucking out of his old clothes almost as soon as the door was shut and stuffing them into the laundry hamper in the bathroom (he’d rather have burned them, but he had a feeling even Tony wouldn’t entirely appreciate him starting a fire on his second day here). Just having those damned clothes against his skin for the past few hours had made him feel almost as filthy as if he’d been trudging through city sewers for a full week.

Stepping almost compulsively into the shower once more, he gave his body a quick once-over under the spray. It would never be enough to completely wash away the knowledge that Gadreel’s and… and His Grace still lingered in his cells, but at the very least it went some way towards ridding his skin of the stain.

The new clothes, as it turned out, were exactly his style (if a noticeably higher quality than what he was used to), and he tugged them on with a sort of relief he didn’t think he’d ever be able to explain to anyone. Everything he owned at the bunker was linked to Gadreel somehow. But these clothes? They were completely free of him. There was even a new pair of boots and a jacket (and underwear, of course), even though he didn’t think he’d mentioned either item to JARVIS.

Speaking of whom-

“Thanks for ordering the new clothes, JARVIS.”

“You are welcome Sam. I hope these are more to your liking.”

Sam blinked, suddenly overcome with a rush of gratitude. It figured, didn’t it? A computer programme (however sentient) in another universe was showing more care for his well-being than even his own brother. And if that didn’t indicate exactly how much had gone wrong between him and Dean, he wasn’t sure anything could.

“They’re great, JARVIS. I appreciate it.” Rubbing his fingers along the bloodless sleeve, he felt it. Underneath the hollow pit in his stomach. Underneath the anger and the guilt, the pain and the despair. Underneath it all. It was back again, no matter how unprepared he was. That single spark of hope which always insisted on dogging his every footstep, springing back into being in the form of a tiny bud. He recalled the words he’d heard as they moved to this new world.

“Be free. And find peace.”

He had a whole lot of issues to deal with himself first, so it was probably going to take a while for him to be ready to let that hope develop. But maybe, just maybe- if he could get Dean to understand- maybe this was their chance to fix things. Before they went back to vampires and demons, to psychotic angels and ghosts and a bunker forever stained with betrayal.

Maybe this was their shot at a new start.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Steve calls a meeting. As expected, things don't exactly go 100% smoothly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everyone else had already been gathered for a good ten minutes before Clint finally arrived with Sam Winchester. Steve ran a confused eye over the taller man as he walked into the room- Tony had been frustratingly adamant that a set of new clothes be delivered to the man before their meeting began, but Steve saw no real change in style from what he had been wearing the day before. He had a feeling it was just Tony being petulant- neither of the other new arrivals’ wardrobes had been treated with the same urgency, after all, so it was probably just a power play. Retaliation against Steve for over-riding his outburst the previous day, as well as against how Dean Winchester’s demands to see his brother had reportedly pulled the temperamental billionaire away from his workshop for a few minutes around midnight.

The wardrobe situation was obviously noticed by the Winchester brothers, too, though neither one made a comment. And, fortunately, Sam’s posture (while wary) suggested that an emotional outburst like the one the night before was unlikely. That would hopefully make this run much more smoothly.

Steve sent Sam a nod, making sure to project a welcoming atmosphere. “Thank you for joining us, Sam.” He gestured over to a spot on the couch next to Dean. “Please take a seat.”

“Ah ah- me first.” Tony declared, practically throwing himself down exactly where Steve had just indicated. He shrugged at Steve with an over-the-top sigh and sprawled out, demonstrating his typical smug flare for the dramatics. “Sorry Cap- I think I might be getting a little old. You know how it goes.” Before Steve could say anything, though, Tony was joined on the couch by none other than a surprisingly stubborn-looking Bruce. He had no idea what the two of them were trying to pull (especially when he couldn’t call them out for fear of the newcomers identifying weak spots in the team dynamics when Stark refused to get back up), but Stark was obviously proving to be a bad influence on the usually mild-mannered scientist. At some point, he was going to have to find a way to rectify that. Bruce already had enough on his plate without being tarnished with Tony’s particular brand of reputation.

Sam, surprisingly enough, didn’t seem all that taken aback by the display. Surprised, yes, if the sudden blink and marginally raised eyebrows were anything to go by, but the only other reaction Steve could make out as the man perched himself on the armrest beside Bruce was a strangely thankful hint of relief. His brother, meanwhile, looked mildly suspicious about the whole display.

Odd.

The third man- Castiel- had been staring at the taller Winchester with an almost startling intensity since he arrived. “How are you feeling today, Sam?”

Sam shot him a tired smile in return (though it quickly grew strained as his eyes flitted past his
brother). “I’m fine, Cas.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“Alright, enough with the damn chick flick stuff already.” Dean scowled, waving an agitated hand as he cut the moment short. He looked over at Steve. “Guessing you guys want more info or somethin’, right?”

Steve nodded, unsurprised at the correct deduction. It was the most obvious conclusion for anyone in such a situation to have drawn, after all. “As much as possible, if you can. We need to know if anything dangerous might be planning on travelling here from your world.”

“Doubt it,” Dean snorted. “All the major players are way too busy having their own pissing contests right now. They wouldn’t bother coming here if there’s a risk they’d lose their powers.”

“Then why- and how- would any one of them send you here?”

“No idea. Get us out of the way, maybe.” A proud smirk stretched its way across the older Winchester’s face. “We’re pretty good at sticking a spanner in the works when we wanna be.”

Over on the other side of the room, Natasha propped a hip against the bar. “If they wanted you out of the way, wouldn’t it be easier just to kill you?”

Dean shrugged. “Killing us never worked before. Maybe this guy finally wised up to that- decided to try a new tactic.”

Steve frowned. Surely he was misunderstanding something here. “Are you trying to claim that you’ve died before?”

“All three of us have.” Dean looked around the room. “Oh, come on. This universe can’t be that different to ours, and you guys are definitely not normal. At least one of you must’ve at least heard of a resurrection spell before, right?”

“It’s more different than you think here, Dean.” Sam interjected quietly, looking down at his own hands.

“Oh really? And how would you know?”

“Because I’ve been researching all morning.” Ignoring Dean’s eyeroll and muttered ‘of course you have, geekboy,’ Sam looked around at the gathered Avengers. “This world has technology and aliens,” he explained. “Our world has supernatural creatures. Vampires, shapeshifters, witches, ghosts. Pretty much any supernatural thing you’ve heard of. They all exist there, but only a few people know about them. Dean and I, and some others, are what we call Hunters. Our dad trained us. And we met Castiel about five years ago. And… yeah. We’ve all died at least once.” His mouth twisted bitterly. “Never really seems to stick.”

“Your story sounds like one fraught with peril!” Thor declared. “Perhaps during your stay, you could regale us with tales of your hunts!”

Steve held up one hand, pausing the Asgardian in his sudden enthusiasm. “Maybe when we have a better idea of what we’re potentially dealing with here, Thor.”

“Very well, Captain,” Thor acquiesced. “Then I shall await that time eagerly.”

Clint stepped forward. “Umm, no offense but… why you?”
“Why us what?” Dean arched an eyebrow.

“What makes you guys so important? I mean, you said there were other Hunters over there, right? What makes you so different from them?”

This time it was Castiel who answered, still looking as earnestly direct as he had since the trio had first arrived. Steve was beginning to wonder if the expression was a permanent fixture on the angel’s face.

“Sam and Dean’s lives were fated to be entwined with those of Heaven and Hell ever since destiny appointed them their roles in the apocalypse. When the apocalypse was averted, they continued to be linked to more high-profile events than the average Hunter. It was a natural progression, aided by their ongoing communication with me.”

Steve had to fight to keep a reasonably stoic exterior. “By ‘apocalypse,’ are you referring to the one predicted in Revelations?”

“Yes.”

“And you claim it was averted? How?” The entire concept seemed utterly ridiculous. God’s word was absolute- there was no way two ordinary men could have had a hand in preventing His plans from coming to fruition.

“The apocalypse would have involved a battle between Michael and Lucifer, in which the majority of the Earth’s population would likely have been extinguished. This was prevented when Sam-”

“Cas, don’t.” Sam’s words were quiet, but they were enough to cause the angel to pause in his retelling for long enough for everyone to see the pain which briefly enveloped the younger Winchester’s features. “I don’t want to-” He paused, looking around but not quite meeting anyone’s gaze, then shifted where he sat, right thumb brushing momentarily against his left palm in the process. “We managed to stop them, and Michael and Lucifer are both locked up now. There’s no way they could be involved in this. That’s all you need to know.”

“Sam, there’s no need not to share this information. You should be-”

“Cas, please.”

There was beat of heavy silence before Castiel answered. “Very well.” And Steve would have objected- he had been aiming for complete transparency after all, given that they had no idea what information the newcomers had could prove relevant- but Castiel, unfortunately, moved directly on. Steve made a mental note to himself to get the full story later- maybe either Castiel or Dean would prove more open without Sam there to stop them. Perhaps he had made a mistake in allowing the three of them to be together during the information-gathering process- he would have to consult Natasha and Clint afterwards to get their opinions on the matter.

“The main issues currently,” Castiel continued, turning back to address Steve directly, “are the respective battles over the leadership of both Heaven and Hell. I don’t believe either are relevant in this situation, though.”

“Mind sharing why with the class there, Cas?” Dean pointed out once enough time had passed that it became obvious Castiel was not initially planning on expanding on his observation.

“Crowley and Abaddon were likely still in the middle of their confrontation in the warehouse- neither of them would have been able to track us, and I doubt they would do this even if they did have the skill. Any angel- even Metatron- would have required a number of ingredients, as well as
physical proximity, in order to perform such a complex spell. On top of which, angels are still incapable of tracking any one of us. Or did you forget the warding on your ribs?”

“The what on their ribs?” Clint half-exclaimed. Castiel turned to him, seemingly exasperated at the archer’s confusion.

“I carved warding into Sam and Dean’s ribs during the apocalypse, so that other angels would be unable to find them and force them into their roles.” He looked over at Dean, oblivious to the expressions of shock and disbelief all around him. “Besides which, I didn’t detect any sense of hostility in the force which sent us here. Looking back, it actually seemed more protective than anything else.”

“Right. Some unknown, weirdly powerful being put us in a whole other universe instead of letting us work out how to boot the angels back into heaven to protect us. Like our luck is ever that good. You sure the trip over here didn’t screw with your brain as well as your mojo, Cas?”

“Our luck has been that good before,” Sam almost whispered, dawning realisation seeping into his tone. He sat for a moment, tapping his fingers against his knee in a manner which was eerily reminiscent of how Tony drummed table-tops sometimes when he zoned out of a conversation. Like he was just itching for a computer he could use to confirm his theory.

“Since when?” Dean snapped, apparently as irked as Steve himself got whenever he felt out of the loop (something which, luckily, happened less around most members of the Avengers the more pop-culture he read up on. Tony and his techno-babble was an entirely different matter).

“Don’t you remember?” Sam looked up, automatically meeting his brother’s eyes- accidentally, if the minute flinch and immediate re-directing of his gaze was any indication. “We’ve been moved in a light like that once before. Right after I- right after the Cage first opened.”

Castiel’s jaw clenched- the largest outward sign of emotion he had shown yet. “Sam, this was not God.”

“Why not, Cas? He brought you back after I- I mean, after Lucifer-” The words caught in a sudden hitched breath, and Sam closed his eyes momentarily. When he opened them, they shot straight back to the angel. “Think back- was the power this time anything like what you felt then?”

Castiel faltered, multiple expressions suddenly warring in his eyes- hope, despair, denial. Sam took the lack of response as a sign to continue.

“And that voice did say to find peace, after all, so-”

“Hold up.” Dean narrowed his eyes suspiciously at his brother. “What voice?”

“When we got sent here. The voice said-”

“I didn’t hear any voice.”

“What?” Sam blinked, a hint of fear sneaking into his eyes as finally- finally- he turned them deliberately towards Dean.

“No voice. Cas, you?”

Castiel tilted his head, peering slightly pensively between the two brothers. “None. What did it say, Sam?”
“I… It said ‘Be free. And find peace.’ What-”

“Dammit, Sammy, and you didn’t think to mention this earlier? What the Hell, man?”

Tony coughed as Sam quailed. “It’s pretty obvious that he thought you two heard it too, Gollum. What would’ve been the point?”

“The point, Robo-cop, is that, historically speaking, Sam keeping secrets hasn’t really ever worked out for the best. Right, Sammy?”

Something seemed to snap in the younger Winchester at Dean’s words. He froze, fists clenching, before fixing his brother with an icy glare. “Right, Dean,” he bit out. “Because you have any right to talk about keeping secrets right now.”

Dean reared back, shock and hurt quickly morphing into his own brand of scathing anger, then jabbed a finger in Sam’s direction.

“Hey, I saved your life, you ungrateful-”

“O--okay, is anyone else hungry?” Tony suddenly jumped to his feet, bringing the argument to a shuddering halt. Clapping his hands together (in a motion which Steve would probably say looked nervous on pretty much anyone else), he grabbed Bruce and Sam by one arm each and started to lead the two of them towards the doorway. “I’m hungry. I say we order lunch. Italian, maybe, if there’re no objections. There’s this great little Italian place four blocks over. They don’t typically deliver, but I’m sure I could convince them to make an exception. So, yeah. Who wants Italian?”

“Tony, we’re not finished here!” Steve protested, knowing even as he did so that it was probably futile. When Tony began rambling, there was precious little anyone could do to stop whatever he was up to. This was not how he had wanted this meeting to go.

“No biggie, Cap. We can just finish after lunch. Besides, if we don’t order now then who knows when the food’ll get here, and I’d rather have something in my stomach when I face the sharks this afternoon.” And, with that said, he disappeared out of the room, pushing the other two men before him.

“He’s got a point, you know.” Natasha walked over to Steve, looking deliberately calm. “Tony in front of the press with an empty stomach? It’s got disaster written all over it.”

“Sustenance does sound most welcome,” declared Thor. “Perhaps a hearty meal is what is required here. And it has been too long since the food you call pizza has passed my lips.” He paused, brow furrowing briefly. “Pizza is a staple of your ‘Italian’ food group, is it not?”

“Well, it’s a part of it,” Natasha smiled. “What do you say, Steve?”

Steve sighed internally, then shot his teammates a fond smile. “Alright then, a break for lunch sounds good.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was *hard*, people. I have discovered while making it that Steve is (at least for now) a pain in the butt to write. In AoU and CW, especially, I see him as kind of judgmental, especially where Tony is concerned, but I don't think anyone on the
Avengers (even Steve himself) sees that. Or, at least, the majority of them share his opinions to some extent. So I hope that came across okay here.

Thanks once again to those who have left kudos etc. And, as always, feel free to drop a review if there's anything you'd like to comment on- they're like what I imagine morning tea/coffee feels like to those people who like tea/coffee. A lovely little pick-me-up.
In retrospect, Sam probably should have expected this. He’d managed to force down a few mouthfuls of salad, unwilling to seem ungrateful for the food, but the sight of the others eating some expensive-looking braciole had made his stomach lurch uncomfortably, and he’d had to excuse himself to the bathroom before he found himself making yet another scene. Apparently, today was one of his bad days where meat was concerned.

He should’ve known Dean would take the opportunity to corner him.

Breathing steadily, Sam straightened up from his position by the mirror, still keeping his head tucked down and his eyes firmly closed. He couldn’t turn around. Every time he saw Dean right now, it was all he could do to keep a lid on the mix of anger, nausea and betrayal which coiled in his gut. Some had already slipped out after the older Hunter’s earlier comment about secrets, and he wasn’t exactly eager to repeat it if at all possible, in case he ended up saying something he’d regret (or which Dean would hold against him in the future).

“No right now, Dean. Please.”

“We need to talk, Sammy.”

“Dean-”

“No. I get you’re pissed alright? I shouldn’t’ve let the Gadreel stuff get that bad, and you can throw as much of a bitch fit as you want when we get home. But right now I need my geek brother’s brain, man. You gotta put this behind you and \textit{work} with me on this one.”

Sam couldn’t have stopped the disbelieving huff of laughter which escaped him even if he wanted to. Was he actually hearing things right here?! “You want me to put this behind me.” He raised his head and stared at Dean’s reflection, an unwanted burst of anger shooting through his veins as he took in the stubborn Big-Brother-knows-best/You’re-just-being-unreasonable posture combo. Another exhalation escaped and he bit his lip to reign it in as best he could, fearful that if he let it out he’d end up in hysteries that would never end. “So let me get this straight- less than twenty-four hours ago, I woke up with \textit{needles} in my \textit{brain}, having just kicked out a psycho angel who used \textit{my body} to kill an \textit{eighteen year old kid} I’d \textit{promised} to keep safe. I find out that you’ve been \textit{collaborating} with him whenever he took me over or wiped my memories- that you were actually willing to let me think I was just… \textit{born} defective or something. I find out that the \textit{one} person I always thought I could count on- who I finally thought was starting to trust me, too- tricked me and \textit{lied} to me for \textit{months}, and you want me to just get over it? Just like that?”
Dean sighed, like he was indulging a goddamned child or something. “Look, Sam, I trust you, alright-”

“No you don’t, Dean.” God, why couldn’t Dean even try to see-

Suddenly, the anger was just… gone. He just felt tired again. Arms falling to his sides, he finally turned around, fixing Dean in the eye. “If you trusted me, you would have at least tried to ask me outright.”

“You would never have-”

“For you, Dean?” He breathed out as calmly as he could. If Dean had just asked… If he had shown Sam even that level of respect… Would he have said yes? Would he have been able to put himself through that again? “Well, I guess we’ll never know, will we?”

Then, unable to stand there any more, he made a bee-line for the door, leaving Dean standing aimlessly in the centre of the room.

In the hallway he paused, taking a series of steadying breaths and trying not to care when, a minute later, the unmistakable sound of shattering glass echoed out of the bathroom. Guilt stirred within his gut, telling him to just go back- to stop hurting his brother like this. That Dean was right- they probably would need to work together if they wanted to get back to their own universe.

But then Kevin’s face loomed in front of his vision once more, and he squared his shoulders, forced on as blank a mask as he could manage right now, and walked away.

He was almost back to the kitchen/dining room where the Avengers had set up for lunch when Castiel rounded the corner, an earnestly determined expression blossoming into place as soon as he laid eyes on Sam. As ever, the newly re-minted angel got right down to business.

“Sam, I think you should move to the same floor as Dean and I. In your condition, it’s not a good idea for you to be left by yourself.”

“Cas, I… not yet, okay? I just need my own space right now.”

“I really don’t think that’s wise. You and Dean-”

Sam breathed in, reminding himself that Castiel was only really trying to help. That, as an angel, it would probably be difficult for him to grasp exactly why Sam was reacting the way he was. That Cas had his own reasons for wanting to get back and deal with the Metatron issue. “Cas, I’ll be fine. JARVIS can monitor my condition, and Tony and Bruce are already analysing the energy from our move and looking into whether there’s anything they can do to get us home.” Or to heal me, he almost added. Instead, he just sighed. “Let’s just try not to inconvenience the Avengers any more than we need to, yeah?”

Castiel didn’t look convinced, but he also didn’t look like he was going to argue. It was good enough for now.

“Look, Cas, I should really get back.” He paused, mind going back to the crashing glass. “Besides, I think Dean could do with a friend right now. You should go talk to him.”

Giving Castiel a quick pat on the shoulder on his way, he moved past the angel and on down the hall, stopping when he reached the doorway to where the Avengers were still eating. It was weird, seeing a group of people laughing and eating casually together and knowing that, for now at least, he was free to join them (to a certain extent, anyway- he definitely felt kind of like a science project
to most of the team). He hadn’t really had a shot at the whole group dynamic thing since… well, since Stanford.

The idea was just a little overwhelming.

As he watched, Thor all but slammed a palm against Steve’s back, causing the Captain to almost drop the forkful of orecchiette he’d been manoeuvring towards his mouth. Clint almost choked at the sight, sending a glare Natasha’s way when she asked flatly whether he’d be requiring a bib for the remainder of the meal. Tony and Bruce were over in the corner, laughing as the doctor conducted what appeared to be a rather dramatic re-enactment of some kind of science-related explosion or something. The braciole, thankfully, appeared to have been completely devoured during his absence. It wasn’t until half a minute later, after Natasha had called Bruce over to try some ragu—leaving Tony alone—that the mechanic glanced around and caught sight of Sam in the doorway. Smiling, Sam made his way over and perched on a bar stool.

“Welcome back, Mountain Man. What happened— you need a trip to the little girl’s room or something?”

“You got me, Tin Can. That time of the month— you know how these things go.” He tried to keep it light, but Tony must have picked up on something wrong, because (while his expression otherwise remained unchanged) a slight hint of suspicion entered his gaze.

“See, Sam. Knew it. No fooling a Stark—we’re geniuses in the ways of the woman.” Tony looked over at the team. “Where’re the ugly step-sisters, then? Still powdering their noses?”

“…Something like that.” Damn it, that was not supposed to have come out sounding that feeble. “Listen, about Dean…”

Suddenly, a shape seemed to practically materialise next to him. “You feeling better?”

Blinking at the new arrival, Sam tilted his head slightly. Then promptly forced it back upright, holding back a shudder. Way too angelic a motion there. “Um… in comparison to…?”

One corner of Clint’s mouth twisted up slightly. “Your brother’s a dick. Don’t listen to his bullshit until you want to.”

The archer disappeared as promptly as he had arrived, popping back up next to Natasha, and Sam turned back to Tony, thoroughly confused.

To be fair, the mechanic didn’t appear to be faring much better.

“Is he always that…?”

“Brash? Abrupt?” Tony shrugged. “Kinda, but it usually takes a while for him to get that protective over anyone. Guess your brother must’ve struck a nerve.” Not giving anything else away (however much Sam both wanted and didn’t want to know precisely how Dean had apparently managed to piss of a Superhero while he wasn’t looking), Tony took a sip of his coffee. “Anyway, speaking of Dean, you were saying?”

“What? Oh, right.” Man, he really didn’t want to have to defend Dean right now. But he knew how bad his little breakdown last night must have seemed, and he also knew that this whole thing would probably go a lot more smoothly if his brother and the Avengers could get along (they probably would in time, anyway—practically everyone they’d ever met ended up preferring Dean in the long run). “Listen… I know I probably haven’t given you the best first impression of Dean, but… but he’s actually a pretty decent guy. He screwed up this time, yeah, but—” but it’s not like Sam himself
hadn’t screwed up far worse in the past “-but this whole thing is just… something we have to sort out ourselves. I don’t want that to make things difficult for you guys.”

Tony, beneath the arrogant playboy façade he seemed to almost permanently hide behind, eyed him contemplatively. “You don’t have to do that, you know.”

“Do what?”

“I can’t speak for the others of course, but I grew up in front of the cameras, Mountain Man. I’m a pretty firm believer in judging people by what I see, not by what I hear. Doesn’t always work out, believe you me, but on the whole I get by. When your brother’s willing to show me himself that he’s not a giant hairy dick on legs, then I’ll believe it. Until then?” He shrugged again. “Well, I’ve worked with plenty of people I don’t like before. Can’t imagine this’ll be all that different.”

Sam let the comments sit for a while. It was a relief, really. Like Tony (and Clint, apparently) were giving him permission to be as pissed as he wanted. To stay away from Dean if that was what he needed. To, for the first time in what felt like forever, actually take the time to deal with all the never-ending crap in his life. He didn’t smile, but he did feel just the tiniest sliver of tension leave his body, even as Dean and Castiel walked back in through the doorway, obviously not having had time for more than a few words back in the bathroom (not that he’d really been expecting much of a heart-to-heart to take place). He let out a slow exhale.

“So, is it really true that there’s an entire country run by a super-villain?”

Chapter End Notes

So my work starts back up today, which means there’s a possibility updates will become a little more spaced out. I’ll try to keep it from happening, but things can get a bit hectic. Just a heads up.

Anyway, thanks once more to followers/kudos-leavers/reviewers. As always, please feel free to drop a line and let me know what you think. ^_^
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Tony has a couple of chats. Sam does a little unexpected reading.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The press conference was, in Tony’s not-always-so-humble opinion, a roaring success. And he’d even had the foresight to make sure that a Stark lab in Pennsylvania had the data to corroborate his story, just on the off chance a reporter got extra nosy. Pepper would be proud.

Much better than the press conference itself, however, were the hours he got to spend in his workshop after it. Steve had said that the impact of the shield re-attaching to the “magnetic” strips on his armour was stronger than optimal, so first he ran through a few algorithms to fix that, and set JARVIS to crafting the updated technology. Then he checked on the progress of the scan analysis from Sam, Dean and Castiel’s arrival. So far the math was… well, even JARVIS was having notable difficulty, seeing as half the digits were coming out in some strange lettering no amount of internet searches could place. Chances were he’d have to ask one of the newcomers if they knew what it was- Castiel was the most obvious choice, considering the age he’d claimed to be when Thor asked over lunch, but there would likely be no harm in asking Sam either. Dean was a last resort as far as he was concerned. Either way, he made sure to put a small sample of the lettering on his Starkpad.

Next came some check-ups and work on Butterfingers’ chassis (the poor guy had been 9.73% more clumsy than usual since the panini incident three days before), and then it was on to the SI folder. By the time JARVIS informed him that Rogers was outside the door asking for him, he’d already listed 52 possible improvements to the coding for the R&D department’s new translation app, discovered (and solved) some minor issues he had with the planned security system for the next-generation Starkphone, played a (reasonably) quick game of catch with the bots to check on Butterfingers’ new reflexes and begun development on a new series of silent (and not so silent) personal alarms he was hoping to get Pepper to get the board’s approval for further down the line.

Upon hearing that the Cap had come to play, however, he paused, checked the external cam to see how urgent Rogers’ body language was, then saved his progress and spent a leisurely two and a half minutes making up a new cup of coffee before making his exit from the workshop.

“What’s up, Rogers?”

“You couldn’t have come out a little quicker than that?”

“Was in the middle of some complex designs, Cap. Can’t just stop that stuff at the drop of a hat- gotta make memos first, otherwise the whole thing could go boom when I build it.”

“You never build anything that goes boom without you meaning it to, Stark.”

“True. Well, mostly true. But you can never be too careful with these things. Plus people always say it’s best to make a gentleman caller wait a little.” He took a careful sip of coffee, silently
revelling in Rogers’ eye roll. Always a plus, that was. “So? What did you want?”

“Hill says her team’s tracked down another possible location for the sceptre. Near Lukovo, Serbia. I want the team together for a briefing tonight. We head out in two days.”

“What about-”

“That’s why it’s two days. Falcon gets back tomorrow- with his work with veterans, he’s probably the best equipped of all of us to bring the Winchesters and Castiel into the right mindset to be able to work together.”

Right. Because ‘mindset’ was really the issue here. Honestly, sometimes Tony had to wonder just how much Rogers really understood about mental health and broken trust. Probably because Steve had never had anyone he trusted that personally completely betray him. Not willingly, at least. Had to wonder what it said about Tony himself that he was so painfully familiar with the concept. Also…

“That can’t be all, right?” He asked, using a scepticism level of 2.34 (2.37 max). Rogers never came down personally to deliver information he could relay through JARVIS far more easily.

The blond folded his arms. “I spoke to Dean Winchester.”

Well this was bound to be just fantastic. Not. “Really? What about?”

“Natasha, Clint and I all felt that a more informal approach would be more effective, so I went to speak to Dean and Castiel while you were gone. Both of them insisted that it would be best for Sam to be moved to the same floor as them.”

“Not happening, Cap. The guy needs some space right now.” He purposefully didn’t mention another long-haired vagabond who probably just needed space (before a shit-ton of time with a psychiatrist)- Steve got weird whenever Tony got involved in a Bucky-related discussion, for some reason.

“Both Dean and Castiel say that Sam is a risk to himself when left alone. Going by his behaviour since yesterday, I’m inclined to agree.”

Tony couldn’t help it. He actually started staring. Maybe even gaping. Never before, he was fairly certain, had the words ‘gobsmacked’ and ‘disbelieving’ applied so perfectly to his life.

“Okay, first, he’s not alone- JARVIS is monitoring all three of them, and there are guards on both floors in case any of them prove a risk to anyone. Second, okay then, if we for some reason ever have Loki staying with us, I’ll be sure to room him right next door to Clint, shall I? I bet Barton will be thrilled.”

And there was the eye-roll again, only this time with an extra dose of indignant incredulity and just a tinge of righteous anger. “Come on, Stark, now you’re just being ridiculous. You know what Loki did to Barton.”

“Exactly.”

“You can’t be saying this is anything like-”

“No, it’s worse!” Honestly, how dense could a guy get?! “Loki sucked big time- understatement of the year right there- but at least he was an enemy. Sam and Dean are brothers. Sam trusted him, and Dean still had something take over Sam’s brain. Can you even begin to understand how
shattering that could be to someone?!” His jaw clenched automatically, and Tony had to make a deliberate effort to calm himself before anything too personal (standing on the steps in front of dozens of cameras, unable to react to the news that his father figure had been working against him. Sitting, frozen, on a couch while cold hands ripped out his heart and left him to die. Trying- and failing- to stop himself deliberating for hours where in the lifetime they had spent together everything had started being a lie) slipped out. “Wilson. Romanov. Barton. Banner. All of them would probably back me on this one. But even if they don’t, unless Sam tells me himself that he’s comfortable living on the same floor as his brother? It’s not gonna happen.”

Steve stared right back at him, gaze searching for something Tony was fairly certain, whatever it was, he wanted to keep hidden. Finally, though, the super soldier let out a defeated huff. “I still think you’re being a bit over the top-”

“When am I not?”

“But fine. I can see your point. I’ll still be asking Falcon to give me his analysis of the situation, though.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything else, Cap. That all?”

“That’s all. Briefing starts at nine-thirty.” Steve paused, his expression softening slightly. “Try and remember to eat something first. You didn’t have much at lunch.”

“Right. ‘Cos you tracking my eating habits isn’t at all creepily stalker-ish. You know, despite what people may say, I am actually a fully grown adult who is perfectly capable of feeding himself,” Tony called light-heartedly after him as Steve headed up the stairs. Still, even though it came on the heels of implying that Tony alone couldn’t be trusted to provide a solid analysis of the Winchesters’ situation, Tony couldn’t deny that Steve’s parting comment left him feeling just a tiny bit happy. He wasn’t always quite sure whether the team (outside of Bruce, of course) just put up with him ‘cos they needed his tech, or whether they actually cared about him as a friend. It was comments like that which had his heart almost allowing itself to believe the latter was true.

Heading back into the workshop, Tony added a quick reminder into the personal alarm file to have someone check on whether women, in particular, would prefer discreet or customisable designs (or even a range), then said goodbye to the bots, grabbed his Starkpad and headed out again.

“Hey, J, where’s Bruce?” He wanted to check in with the other scientist about some ideas on how to improve the bio-mechanical aspects of the Ultron project.

“Doctor Banner is currently in the laboratory, Sir. Shall I inform him that you are on your way?”

“Go for it. Oh, and remind me to call Pepper later- she’ll want to know the real deal with our new houseguests.”

“Of course, Sir. Will that be before or after the briefing session?”

“Ah, best make it after. Give her time to quiz me. Plus it means I can run right over if she wants a Booty Call.”

“As desirable as you are, Sir-” (Ooh, Tony knew he shouldn’t have taught the AI sarcasm) “I find it doubtful. The probability of Miss Potts requesting a ‘booty call’ is… shall we say, ‘negligible,’ Sir.”

Tony laid a hand across his chest. “You wound me, JARVIS. I was aiming for ‘unlikely,’ at the very least.”
“Whatever you choose to believe, Sir.”

Coming up on the lab, Tony saw a second figure inside, hunkered on a stool in the corner and watching Bruce work. He shot over a grin as he entered the room. “Hey, Mountain Man! Perfect timing, I’ve got something I wanted to- wait, what are you doing here?” They wouldn’t need blood for the tests for a couple of days at least- most likely more- and he’d already made sure Sam’s floor was loaded up with all the food and tech he’d need. Had he missed something?

Sam smiled, a little embarrassed. “Sorry- JARVIS told me you were on your way here, and I just… wanted to thank you, I guess. For doing the press conference. You were really good.”

Tony blinked. “What?” No-one ever… “You watched that?”

“Well, yeah. I needed to know what story to stick to if anyone asks, right?” He paused contemplatively. “Could probably learn a few things from you. Be useful for future jobs. Always good to be able to lie smoothly if you’re impersonating a fed, right?”

Tony’s immediate raised eyebrow was matched perfectly by Bruce’s, the scientist pausing in his work as he turned to silently observe the conversation. Tony huffed out a laugh. “You impersonate feds? With that hair?”

Sam just shrugged. “I told you- most people don’t know about the supernatural. We have to find some way for people to give information to random strangers. FBI usually works, but we’ve had to pass as doctors, security guys, press- even mental patients.” His mouth shifted momentarily into a perfect arch. “That was… not a fun case.”

“Okay. Thor was officially right. When you’re up to it, you are most definitely gonna have to tell us about some of these cases. ‘Cos no offense, but so far? Everything I’ve heard sounds like something straight out of a bad science-fiction novel.”

Sam smiled, letting out a soft snort. “You have no idea how right you are.”

“I bet. Oh, by the way, while you’re here…” Tony quickly unlocked his Starkpad and, after opening up the right document, placed it on the counter beside Sam. “Would you take a look at this and see if you recognise anything?” Walking a couple of steps past the taller man so that he was closer to Bruce, he started to explain. “Found something weird mixed in with the math from the analysis from last night. I think it’s a language, or a numerical system, or maybe a code? But JARVIS can’t find anything similar on the net, so I have no idea how to solve it. Kind of refreshing, actually, not knowing something for once.

“…Well, okay, it’s more frustrating than refreshing, ‘cos I am just itching to solve it, but- what?”

“Tony-” Bruce suddenly leapt forward, demonstrating perfectly the speed which had served him so well back in his fleeing-from-the-army days, and grabbed the pad from Sam’s hands. There was no need to ask why- the Hunter had practically frozen in place, wide-eyed and skin almost dangerously pale as he stared at the item Bruce was quickly shoving back in Tony’s direction. Tony hurried to turn off the screen, clamping down on the unease he always felt when being handed anything, and placed it face-down on the farthest counter he could reach, talking all the while.

“Sam? Sam? Hey, Mountain Man- you okay there? What is it?”

There was a moment of tense silence (Bruce hovered at Sam’s elbow, obviously wanting to check on his stats but unwilling to touch him without permission unless necessary) before Sam seemed to
snap out of it, giving his head a brief shake and forcing himself to look at each of them in turn.

“Sorry. Um…” He slipped his hands into his trouser pockets, hiding the faint tremor. “Sorry. Bad memory. This whole Gadreel thing just… dislodged a few things, I guess. I’m not usually this pathetic, I promise.” Taking one hand back out, he gave a wry twist of the mouth and gestured for the pad. “I can translate it for you. It might take a while, though, depending on how much there is.”

“It’s fine,” Bruce blurted out, shooting Tony a meaningful stare from behind Sam’s back. “It’s probably not even that important. We should at least try working with just the numbers first. And JARVIS or one of us could probably crack the… whatever-it-is by ourselves if we had some time, anyway. Solving puzzles is kind of what we do.”

“Right.” And Sam was either completely oblivious to what the scientist was doing, or else he knew exactly what he was doing and was just grateful enough not to want to comment on it. Tony’s money would be on the latter. “Alright, then.” Looking back at Tony, he offered up a carefully blank smile. “Well, I just came to say thanks, and I’m kind of tired. Let me know if you change your mind.” Then, with a small wave to both of them, he headed away, probably back to his room. Tony waited until a good minute after he was certain Sam was out of earshot before daring to comment.

“You know, I’m beginning to feel like that guy has even more cans of worms in his past than I do.”

Bruce nodded an agreement. “Let’s hope the same’s not true for the other two.”

“Yeah.” Glancing across at his friend, Tony knew neither of them would really be in the mood to get anything productive done for Ultron tonight. “Alright. Plan B it is. Looks like I’ve got an angel to consult.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, all- thanks once again for the kudos etc. Hope you enjoyed this chapter, and, as always, feel free to drop some comments- reviews are huge morale boosters.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Dean cooks, thinks about some things, listens to some other things, and somehow comes to entirely the wrong conclusion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dean liked having music on while he cooked. Back in the bunker (on the rare occasion when he decided to actually use the giant kitchen there, anyway), he’d pop some of the tapes from the impala into a near mint-condition cassette player he’d picked up in a vamp nest, and blast out some of his favourites as he worked. Here, though, he was having to make do with youtube’s classic rock playlists on some iPad-esque thing he’d dug up while scrounging through the drawers in his room (he was definitely going to ask to go down and check on Baby at some point, collecting the tapes at the same time). The sound quality may have been clearer, true, but it just wasn’t the same, and the whole thing left him feeling off-balance.

Of course, that could also do with the fact that he still had no idea where in this god-damned tower Sam was being kept.

Hopefully that would change soon, though. The captain- Steve, as he had informed them they could call him- had assured them that he was going to speak to Stark about maybe having Sam moved. He seemed sincere enough, so Dean was at least willing to take a shot at it working. If Sam was just with him, after all, he was almost certain his brother would come around sooner rather than later. That was how things had always been, ever since they were kids. Dean would do something (like that time with Sam’s prom date). Sam would get mad and hide in his room for a few days. Then he’d come out, realise that Dean was only doing what he thought was best for Sam (the kid really should’ve seen the girl was a total skank, and therefore nowhere near good enough for him), and things would go back to normal. And, yes, Dean knew that this time he’d made the wrong choice in trusting “Ezekiel,” but he’d done all he could to check the angel was a good guy, hadn’t he? The rest of the crap which went down had been completely unplanned and out of his control. So he’d assumed that, much like with the Kitsune chick, Sam would see that and come around eventually.

But, with Sam now so out of his reach, the fallout just felt more… permanent, somehow. Like a wall he wasn’t entirely certain he’d be able to vault. And it was killing him.

It was at times like this that he found himself, in a twisted way, kind of missing purgatory. The place had been bloody, yes, but everything had just been so clear there. Just fight and kill, fight and kill, surviving minute by minute as his little team moved slowly towards their goal. And feeling certain all the time that his little brother Sammy was back home, searching for him.

He flipped the burger patties, and placed a generous amount of bacon into a second frying pan.

Why had things had to go so wrong?

“So you cook, huh?”
Dean glanced over his shoulder at Stark, inwardly scolding himself for zoning out enough that he hadn’t even heard the other man approach. “Mostly just burgers. None of that rabbit food crap.” He paused, fingers tightening slightly around the handle of the spatula, eyes fixed firmly on the stove. “Steve talk to you yet?”

“Like I said yesterday, Gollum, Sam stays where he is until he says otherwise. Doesn’t matter how many Avengers you ask, that’s not gonna change.”

The words sent a razor-sharp cut through his hopes, and Dean had to fight not to rage against the sudden rush of angry despair which flooded through him. Was this going to be the time Sam finally left him behind for good?

No.

No, he wasn’t going to let that happen. Sam had always come back to him before- hell, even when Dean hadn’t wanted him to he’d still returned. One dick angel wasn’t going to break a life-long bond, right? Not on Dean’s watch. Not when all of Heaven and Hell hadn’t been able to fully do so before. He’d give it a few days- that was why he had originally been going to take off for a bit, after all. Let the dust settle before going back and talking to Sam again directly. Sometimes the best plan of attack was just staying put. He could do that. To get Sam back by his side where he belonged, he could do that.

“So what are you doing here, then?” He asked, keeping his voice deliberately even. “’Cos it sure as hell ain’t to watch me cook burgers.”

“I came to talk to your angel buddy, actually. Then I realised someone was butchering AC/DC’s sound by limiting them to such tiny speakers. Grudging props for the music choice, but please tell me you at least know that the only ways to listen to rock are either properly or else not at all.”

Dean shot an annoyed glare behind him, then turned back and flipped the bacon. “Well if I had a better sound system.”

There was a beat of silence, then: “Did Rogers not tell you people anything? JARVIS, show Gollum how rock is supposed to be played.”

“As you wish, Sir.”

Suddenly, the music filled the entire room, thrumming through the air and into his bones with an energy he’d never experienced before outside of concerts. All from speakers he couldn’t even see.

When he looked over at Stark, all thoughts outside of ‘whoa’ temporarily forgotten, the older man merely shot him a smug smirk, eyes no warmer than they’d been at any other time. “Go big or go home. Or did you forget about JARVIS?” More like he hadn’t realised JARVIS had access to this kind of tech, actually. And also hadn’t wanted to talk to him (it?) because the AI had pissed him off so much the night before. Stark smiled like he knew exactly what Dean was thinking. “I’m assuming Clarence is in his room.”

It wasn’t really a question, but Dean answered anyway. Make nice. Don’t make waves. All part of the new ‘lay low’ plan. “Still wondering how he’ll ever use that many clothes, no doubt.” Like he had been ever since some staff members (at least, Dean assumed they were staff members) brought up enough to fill both their wardrobes two hours before. Dean assumed the delay was because Stark was so pig-headedly stuck on Sammy being his favourite.

“J, ask him to meet me out here, would you?”
Stark headed over to the couches and Dean turned his attention to slicing cheese to the perfect thickness, flipping the patties once more before placing a slice on top of each one. By the time Cas arrived a minute or two later, Dean was just finishing up on the final touches to two of his signature burgers. Grabbing a beer, he carried everything over to the counter and plonked himself down on a stool—just in time to see Stark place another one of those Pad things down on a coffee table in front of Cas. Probably, he decided, best that he listen in.

“JARVIS. Uh… Cut the music?”

The chorus of Back in Black disappeared, to be replaced by Cas’ usual near-mono-tone.

“-is it you want me to do?”

“Just take a look at these symbols and see if you know what they mean. Sam says he can translate them if we need him to, but apparently they bring up some bad memories.”

Dean frowned, leaning forward slightly and trying to ignore the bitter thrum in his brain at Stark’s apparently blossoming friendship with his little brother. Since when did Sam make up lame excuses like that to get out of research? The kid usually loved translating all those headache-inducing old languages.

Cas’ face, as he looked over whatever was on the Pad’s screen, took on that constipated expression he got whenever he came across something unexpected or confusing. “No, I can’t read this. And I don’t know why Sam claims he can. As far as I know, God and the Archangels were the only ones ever to use High Enochian.”

High Enochian? Why on earth was Sam saying he could?—

“Oh, shit.”

It felt like all the blood drained from his body as the realisation hit, replaced by a searing chill which ripped its way through his bones. His eyes latched onto Cas as the angel’s, Stark’s and even the current two guards’ attention shifted at the declaration. He barely even registered how hollow his voice sounded when he spoke again.

“Do you think he- in the Cage?”

He could see the exact moment Cas understood what he meant and came to the same conclusion. “It would make sense,” the angel confirmed slowly. “Michael and Lucifer could have used High Enochian as an extra form of punishment, or even just so they wouldn’t be lowering their speech to a level Sam could comprehend. It’s possible Sam was down there long enough that he learned to understand them.”

No, but… “But he shouldn’t still be able to understand it. You took away his Hell memories.”

“The memories will always be there, Dean. Even Death himself couldn’t remove them. All I did was remove the more severe effects Sam experienced after the wall was broken.” Cas shifted slightly in his seat, probably from the guilt. Good.

“But-“ But he never said anything. Two years later, and Sam hadn’t made a single mention of remembering anything Cage related. Dean had actually seen him as lucky, considering how much he himself would like to forget his own time Downstairs, and now… How was he supposed to respond to finding out something like this? Why would Sam have even kept this from him? Or had the memories been there, but simply unacknowledged or numb, like a bad dream you don’t think about while you’re awake? “But why would he bring it up now? He never said anything about it
“He said everything with Gadreel ‘dislodged’ some things,” Stark informed them bluntly, eyes even harder than before as he fixed them on Dean.

“Shit.” If Dean ever managed to find that damn angel, he was going to rip him apart limb from limb. What was this- some sick form of revenge for Sam managing to kick him out? Had he deliberately knocked the Hell stuff loose on his way out?

Deliberate or not, it didn’t matter. “When I find him, that dick is as good as dead.”

Stark stared at him, somehow managing to look incredulous, disgusted and stubbornly emotionless at the same time, although Dean had no idea what he’d apparently done to deserve such a look. “You can’t seriously be this dense.” He shifted his gaze to Castiel. “You can’t read it. That’s all I needed to know.” Then, grabbing the Pad as he stood, he made his way over to the elevator, back almost ramrod straight. As the doors began to close, he shot Dean one last look and added, deliberately flippantly, “you owe me a mirror, by the way.”

Chapter End Notes

*blinks at screen*

Umm... Honestly, I don't really know how to express how much thanks I have for the sudden influx of reviews, kudos and bookmarks. You have all boosted my enthusiasm for this story about a million times over, and I really hope you enjoyed this chapter, too. ^_^

Thank you so much for reading!!!
“Babysitting.” Glancing behind him, Falcon studied the scene behind the currently one-way glass walls of the conference room. Two short-haired white guys sat together at one end of the table. One of them was looking at nothing in particular, while the other had his eyes fixed firmly on the ill-looking man with longer hair who sat at the other end, on edge but lost in thought. Natasha was seated at the centre of the table, hands folded delicately on top of it, assuming a quietly unaffected air. According to the press, all three men had been transported to just outside the Avengers tower in a freak accident, possibly caused by unidentified factors involving scientific rays and amplified projections of a passing enhanced’s powers - some short-range teleporter who was rumoured to have been vacationing nearby.

He was beginning to suspect the press hadn’t been told the entire truth. Or, at least, that they’d been deliberately led astray by the hints Tony had dropped them.

Turning back to Steve, he continued flatly. “You brought me back for babysitting.” Not that he was arguing against being brought back, exactly - their leads in Ethiopia had gone cold days before he’d even arrived, as far as he could tell - but this seemed a bit out of line with Steve’s usual MO as far as ending Bucky searches went.

The captain in question shrugged apologetically. “It’s actually more for your counselling skills. They’re from another universe.”

“…Okay. That was unexpected.” Man, just when he’d thought things couldn’t get any crazier.

“Exactly. Tony and Bruce are working on a way to figure out how they got here - and how to send them back. It might be easier if we knew more about them and what they know, but… well, they’ve got issues, and it’s making it hard to get much real information from them. I was hoping you’d be able to get more out of them.”

Falcon looked around at the suddenly tense postures of most of the other Avengers. “What kind of issues are we talking here?”

Five minutes, several aborted interruptions from Tony and one declaration that seeing such a rift between brothers saddened Thor greatly later, Steve had him pretty much caught up. Falcon let out a low whistle.
“Did I ever tell you guys how glad I am that vampires aren’t real here? ‘Cos yeah. I am very glad vampires aren’t real here.”

Steve laughed and relaxed a little. “So what do you think? Any way to get them to cooperate?”

“With each other? I’m not really sure, not without talking to all of them. But I think you were right about keeping them separate for now- sounds like they’re more likely to tell us more when there’s no chance of one of them saying something which triggers an argument.” A faint glimmer of what he was probably just mis-reading as disappointment flittered across Steve’s face. “I’ll see what I can find out, though. We looking for anything in particular?”

“Tony?”

“Right-o, Cap.” The billionaire unfurled from his position in the corner, as dramatic as ever with the attention back on him. “JARVIS has finished the scan of the arrival site, but we ran into a bit of a snag, given that half of the code looks like complete gibberish. Spoke to the good angel Constantine last night- he says it’s High Enochian.”

“What’s that?”

“Language used by Heaven’s most high, apparently. That’s God and the Archangels, if the lay folk need clarification. He can’t read a word of it, but fret not mis amigos- we’re working on alternative methods of code-breaking. There’s no language out there JARVIS won’t be able to crack once we’re through.”

“And there’s also a chance the numbers alone will still be able to tell us something,” Bruce added.

“So it was almost certainly either God or an Archangel who sent them here.” Steve frowned. “That means there’s a chance this has something to do with what they’re not telling us about their apocalypse. We can use that as a starting point- find out what happened there and maybe we can work out if it’s linked to what’s happening now.”

Falcon nodded, accepting the instructions, but it seemed Tony had other plans.

“You can’t ask them about that,” the older man insisted strangely stiffly.

“Why not?” Steve asked. “It makes sense. There’s a good chance the two are connected.”

“It’s the best lead we’ve got,” Clint acknowledged. “If they’ve dealt with Archangels before, then-”

“This has nothing to do with that,” Tony snapped. “People have the right to keep some things to themselves.”

“Since when do you care about peoples’ privacy?” The archer questioned, seeming faintly amused at the idea. “You used to hack SHIELD whenever you felt like it.”

“I hacked SHIELD,” Tony bit out, “because they were a spy organisation who lied to me and expected me to fall in line. And I never looked into any of the personnel stuff. Only the things we needed to know for missions. And we don’t need to know this.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he already knows what happened.” Steve realised aloud, unfolding his arms and keeping his eyes fixed on Tony’s face. “Am I right? What did Sam tell you?”
“Nothing.”

“Dean or Castiel, then.”

“None of them told me anything,” Tony insisted, taking a step back and jamming his hands into his pockets. It was what he did whenever he was trying not to look too defensive.

“What did you work out, then?” Falcon asked, trying to project an open-minded atmosphere as he moved to stand beside Steve.

Tony, apparently realising that the others weren’t going to give up unless he gave them something, at least, eyed them all for a few seconds. “I put together enough, okay? None of it is relevant to them coming here and none of us need to know it unless Sam wants us to. It’s bad enough that I heard enough to figure it out- and that’s even assuming that I’m right. And, believe me, I’m actually hoping I’m wrong on this one.”

Thor and Bruce seemed to accept the words without issue, but both Clint and Steve continued to look marginally dubious. Looking between the two of them, the corner of Tony’s mouth twitched down almost unnoticeably, and he let out an annoyed huff of breath. “Look, I know I don’t exactly have the best track record on the whole sensitivity front, but trust me- this is one bear you really don’t want to poke. Besides, call me crazy, but I don’t think Mountain Man just finding out he’s been possessed makes this the best time to go overriding his privacy if you want him to trust us.”

And that, honestly, (if you discounted the attitude the words had been delivered with) sounded perfectly fair. When people came to the VA, he didn’t force them to talk about anything they didn’t freely volunteer about the war. And, from what little Steve had said their guests had implied about Hunting, it seemed like they had been fighting some form of war for years, at least. Plus, disrespecting the younger Winchester’s autonomy directly after such a trauma may, as Tony (surprisingly) rightly pointed out, negatively impact the working relationship they would need to develop with him.

“Alright,” he said. “I won’t talk with any of them about this apocalypse stuff-” (and man was that a weird sentence to be saying- aliens were one thing, but the literal biblical end of the world was so far beyond what he’d signed on for that, quite frankly, he was glad he wouldn’t have to delve into it)- “unless they bring it up themselves, or unless you or Bruce tells me that it’s necessary for your calculations.” He looked to Steve to confirm. “That seems like it might be our best option here.”

After taking a few moments to consider everything, Steve nodded acceptingly. “Alright. I’ll trust your judgement on this one.”

“Fantastic,” Tony declared, turning his back and moving over to the conference room door. “Now that that’s settled, can we actually get this show on the road? Some of us do actually have other things which need doing.” He was through the door before anyone even had time to either agree or object. “Greetings, peasants. No need to rise.”

Surprisingly enough, the long-haired man- Sam- actually seemed to relax slightly when Tony sat next to him. It was such a rare reaction to the billionaire’s presence that Falcon actually found it a little jarring- the half-resentful look Dean shot the man was far more in line with what he’d been expecting from someone only recently acquainted with Stark, going by past experiences.

“This is Sam Wilson,” Steve started.

“Who can also be referred to as Falcon, or just plain Wilson. If we want to cut down on the confusion while Mountain Man here’s around,” Tony interjected teasingly, bringing a rueful smile
to Falcon’s lips. He’d known he was going to be the one to get last-named as soon as he’d heard that Sam and Dean were brothers. There was just no competing against a shared surname. He didn’t really mind, though. Most of the Avengers referred to each other by their last names half the time, anyway.

“He just returned from a mission this morning,” Steve continued, barely missing a step. “The rest of us have some urgent duties to attend to, so we’ll be leaving for a day or two starting tomorrow. Falcon will be around in case you think of any information we could use to help you get home.”

“Nice to meet you all.” Falcon nodded at each of them in turn. Castiel returned his with an equally militaristic motion, Dean jerked his head up in acknowledgement, and Sam offered him a friendly smile.

The rest of the meeting was brief, but he did manage to get a base set of information on how the three men currently interacted. The decision to keep Sam on a separate floor was, he was now one hundred percent certain, definitely the right one. The man had hardly ever been able to bring himself to look at his brother in the short time they were together, and whenever he did catch sight of him by accident, he ended up looking (even though it was just for a split second) like he was reliving being shot or something. Dean, on the other hand, could barely keep his eyes off his younger sibling, constantly sending half-worried, half-pleading gazes in Sam’s direction when he thought no-one was looking. Maybe he was hoping for a chance to apologise? He didn’t actually try to talk to Sam directly, though (even though he clearly wanted to), which was a little at odds with reports on his behaviour so far. Which must mean he was consciously holding himself back- a good sign. When he knew people were looking, however, the older Winchester kept up a brash exterior which was all too common around here. Castiel, meanwhile, seemed more confused than anything else about the tension between the brothers, which was interesting in and of itself. Weren’t angels supposed to ‘know the minds of men’ or something? Or was that just God? And how messed up was it that that was actually something he was actually considering from a practical, non-theoretical point of view?

When their guests were gone (Sam having been led out of the room and towards one elevator by Tony, Dean and Castiel to the other by Natasha), Thor looked over at him, his sorrow obvious.

“What think you, Falcon? The rift between these brothers is severe indeed, but do you believe it possible that we could offer them healing?”

“Honestly?” Falcon answered. “I don’t think there’s any way of telling for sure.” It all depended on whether whatever relationship they’d had before was one both brothers decided was worth the struggle it would take to overcome something of this magnitude. Them working together for so long suggested that most of their friends and acquaintances- Castiel being a prime example- were probably mutual, too, which added another layer of complexity to the whole thing. Which, in a way, meant that it was probably a good thing for them that they had been moved away from most of those friends for now. It was always harder to properly deal with problems in relationships of any kind if everyone around you just wanted you to stop fighting and return to the norm. “There’s a chance, though,” he continued. “Assuming no-one pushes it too hard.”

Thor acknowledged the (admittedly vague) conclusion with a grim, understanding nod. “Then I shall endeavour to avoid talk of reconciliation should any one of them choose to accept my offer of comradeship, and shall instead discuss only tales they share freely.”

“Good plan. Very princely of you,” Tony responded, popping his head back through the door. “Now, Natasha’s vanished and I’m off. If you need me for anything in the next few hours… well, try not to need me for anything.” With one final lewd smile and a call of “Brucie-Bear, you
“Where are they going in such a hurry?” Steve asked, confusion, amusement and a hint of exasperation vying for position in his voice.

“Sir and Doctor Banner are attending the opening of a new exhibit in the New York Hall of Science,” JARVIS’ smooth tones informed them.

“Probably just wants to play with the kids toys,” Clint laughed. “I’m meeting Natasha in the training room, by the way. Feel free to join us if any of you thinks you could take it.”

“I shall take you up on that challenge,” Thor beamed.

“Come on then, big guy.” Clint moved out of the room, the Asgardian easily keeping stride. “You can try to teach me how to tackle a Bilgesnipe again.”

“It’s all in your stance, my friend-”

Their voices faded away, but Falcon remained at the table, Steve shifting to sit closer and taking a pencil and notepad from his trouser pocket.

Luckily for him, the debrief didn’t last long, either. With all that he had learnt in the last hour, Falcon was just itching for a brisk jog. Followed by a long, tension-relieving shower, of course.

Chapter End Notes

Ja-jaaa.
To be honest, I'm not 100% sure about how this chapter ends, but I figure I can always alter it at a later date if the inspiration arises. Hopefully you like it regardless.
Also, huge thanks again to all reviewers and kudos-leavers etc. You guys are awesome!
Natasha watched the two men steadily as they drew closer to their guest floor. If angels had physical tells which were at all similar to a human’s, then Castiel was probably relatively calm, though she thought she could also detect hints of worry (for his comrade) and of exasperation (most likely for their general situation). Dean was a far easier read—eyebrows drawn slightly together, fingers tapping sporadically against his leg, breathing deliberately measured.

“You seem restless,” she pointed out, using a gentle cadence most people she had met found reassuring. The Hunter eyed her for a moment (no doubt suspicious over the source of her apparent friendliness) before relenting.

“You would be too if you’d been stuck in the same rooms for two days.”

“True.” It was an unfortunate side effect of a life as active as hers could be (though not, she highly suspected, the entire issue here). Rest and relaxation sounded good on paper, but it was never long before she felt that familiar itch to get moving. The same was true for the majority of the other avengers, as well.

“Plus, no offence lady, but a lot of your team are complete dicks.”

“Also true.” She smiled at the look Dean sent her. “No use denying it. As long as the missions get done I find it doesn’t really matter that much.” Providing nobody crossed a line, of course.

Dean gave a non-committal hum as the doors opened and they all stepped out.

“You know you’re not limited to this floor, right?” Natasha asked as the two men moved further into the room. “You have to be here at night, of course, but as long as you stay within designated sections of the tower you’re free to move around during the day.”

“Right. So I can go and watch TV on another floor. My life is complete.”

Natasha arched a single eyebrow. “You are seriously underestimating the toys a billionaire will forget he ever bought in the first place.” She paused, an idea coming to mind that Clint was seriously going to hate her for. But observation provided information, and if there was one thing Natasha hated it was a lack of information. Especially on people she would be sharing a building with for the foreseeable future.

“I’ll be going to the training room next. You can come if you’d both like to learn where everything is.” Of course, if they came along there was a good chance she would also get an example of what kind of opponents they could prove to be in a fight. Handy knowledge to have, and not exactly something she could just dig up in a database considering where they were from.
Dean considered it for a few moments. “Tell ya what, you let me go down and check on my Baby afterwards, and you can take me wherever you want, darlin’.”

“Deal. And never call me darling again, and I’ll promise if you ever do get to go back it won’t be with a missing digit, too. Not of my doing, anyway.”

A huff of laughter. “You got it. Sweetheart.”


“I’m a Hunter, sweetheart. You don’t Hunt in sweats.”

So Dean preferred a non-comfort based workout. Fair enough- practise as you mean to go on. She could respect that. She turned her attention to the angel. “What about you, hotshot?”

Castiel tilted his head, looking confused. “Why would I need to change my clothes?”

“Some people don’t like getting sweat all over their everyday stuff.”

“I don’t sweat.”

Interesting. “Alright, then. Are both of you coming?”

Five minutes later, Dean was admiring the equipment in the training room (or, more likely, wondering what half of it was), while Castiel stood by one of the rings, looking completely out of place in his trench coat and tie. Natasha stayed near the door, stretching as imperceptibly as her years as an assassin could allow.

She was almost done when Clint walked in with Thor, the grin on the archer’s face morphing instantly into a bitter snarl as he caught sight of Dean.

“What’s he doing here?”

Dean turned with a deliberately cocky smirk. “I was invited, Katniss. You got a problem with that?”

There was a beat of silence as the two eyed each other, each sizing the other up, before Clint put on a mock-polite grin. “Not at all, Rambo. In fact, I’d be more than willing to be your sparring partner. If you think you’re brave enough to risk it, that is.”

“Oh, I could take you in my sleep, Katniss. Bring it on.”

As Clint moved past her, Natasha tilted her head to get his attention. “Bruises only.” Then, when a little light crept back in to replace the dangerous gleam in his eyes, she allowed herself a small smile. He was going to be okay. A few rounds to get his anger out of the way, and then he’d be able to work with Dean if necessary. Maybe not more than civilly for now, but that was all they really needed. Clint was strong- he wouldn’t let a walking reminder of Loki control his actions for long.

In the meantime, Thor had managed to move past her, making his way over to Castiel.

“Angel of the Unknown Lord, what about you? Will you honour me with a match?”

“Why?”
“Why, to bond through the mutual honing of our skills, of course. Do your species not train for pleasure?”

“We train for war. Usually only with members of our own garrisons.”

“Then, if you would accept my offer, this could prove a most worthy experience for the both of us. What say you?”

It wasn’t long before the two matches began, and Natasha made sure to keep an eye on both as she worked with one of the many punching bags which lined one side of the room. The newcomers were good, she had to admit, though both of their styles were a little rough. Castiel appeared easily strong enough to keep up with Thor, and had a flexibility and ease of movement when he fought which the Asgardian, with his usual direct style being challenged so, appeared to be invigorated by. Dean’s attacks had little in the way of finesse (though certain movements suggested that he was capable of employing it), but his footwork implied that he had received training in various forms of fighting, including some martial arts influence which was mixed in with the military-meets-bar-brawl thing he had going on. He wasn’t as strictly trained as Clint, of course, but he was managing to hold his own reasonably well- even managing to land a few good hits in between the ones he was taking. He could probably take on most ‘former’ SHIELD agents with little difficulty. (Clint himself appeared torn between the thrill of finding a relatively good opponent and the anger that this opponent came in the form of someone he had no real desire to stop disliking).

If both men’s styles were anything to go by, most of the creatures they had fought against were probably fast, strong and vicious.

She almost wanted to fight them both herself.

When the two humans finished, both moved to separate benches (Natasha pointing out to Dean where the water bottles were kept) and sat down to watch until Thor and Castiel called an end to their own match. Thor almost immediately joined Dean, looking thrilled to finally have a chance to approach the shorter man about his adventures, leaving Natasha surprised when Castiel made his own way over to her. So far, the angel had rarely left Dean’s side, after all. True to his word, too, there was not a drop of his own sweat on him. He wasn’t even breathing hard.

“Did you want something?” She asked, swinging down from the hoops she had shifted to when Clint finished.

“Why has Sam been placed in separate living quarters?”

Okay, now that was a non-sequitur and a half. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I don’t understand. The Winchesters have always worked best as a unit, and being separated from Sam is obviously causing Dean distress. If he’s distressed, he can’t focus on the issue of us trying to get home.”

“And you don’t think being in close proximity to Dean right now would cause Sam any distress?”

“None that he wouldn’t recover from quickly. Especially once he sees that he and Dean have the same goal.”

Natasha eyed the angel, feeling a strange sense of shock in her stomach at the ease of his dismissal. She had expected an argument as to how being in Dean’s presence would help the younger Winchester to adjust and forgive more easily. That would have been the more likely course for this conversation to follow. Not that she let any of her sudden discomfort show on her face, of course.
“And what would that be?”

“To find Gadreel and enact their revenge for what he did. I doubt they will be willing to focus on the broader issues until that is resolved.”

Taking a moment to curse the fact that she was the one being forced to play guidance councillor in this situation (wasn’t that precisely why Steve had brought Falcon back, after all?), Natasha thought through her answer. “Have you considered the possibility that Gadreel isn’t actually Sam’s main priority right now?”

“No. Jimmy Novak passed on to Heaven when I was killed by Lucifer.”

“Of course he is. Gadreel killed a friend of the Winchesters. He betrayed Dean’s trust in their agreement. Finding him will obviously be a high priority.”

“But Gadreel wouldn’t have been able to do that if Dean hadn’t let him into Sam in the first place, right? Don’t you think it’s possible that that breach of trust is enough on its own to cause such a rift?”

“I don’t see why. Dean was only trying to save Sam’s life. He had no way of knowing that Gadreel was lying about his identity or his motivations. If Sam moves to a closer proximity, he will understand that soon enough. He knows that Dean only ever acts in Sam’s best interests.”

Something in the way Castiel spoke sent a shiver of something cold up Natasha’s spine. It reminded her too much of her old instructors—always informing her that she had no choice but to listen and obey. To become a blank slate for a handler to control. The perfect puppet warrior. The comparison was an odd one, and most likely (she hoped) wrong. But now it was there in her mind regardless, even though the red room was something she usually kept as far from her thoughts as possible.

“So you don’t think Sam should be upset about the possession?”

“Angelic possessions are a natural part of creation, designed by God himself. They’re different from possessions by demons. Sam knows that. He just needs to remember it, especially now. If he’s with Dean, he’ll realise that his own problems are of minimal importance compared to what needs to be done.”

“You don’t have a human in your vessel right now, right?” According to Tony, he’d had JARVIS ask Castiel about that during the first night.

“No. Jimmy Novak passed on to Heaven when I was killed by Lucifer.”

“When Jimmy was still alive, was he happy to have you in his body?”

“He knew that it was necessary.” So not exactly a yes, then. “I don’t see-”

“Have you ever had someone control your actions?”

A pained shadow suddenly crossed Castiel’s features. Natasha knew the answer before the angel even opened his mouth.

“Yes.”

“Was that person close to you?”

“No.”
“What if they had been?”

“...I don’t understand.”

“If that person- the one who controlled you- if they had been close to you. If they’d been your friend. If you’d been together your entire lives. If you trusted them to always trust you in return, and then you discovered that they had been controlling you. Even if that control hadn’t led to anyone being hurt, do you think you could forgive them easily? Do you think you could work with them just a few days later? Especially on a mission which you have no way of knowing whether there’s even a chance you’ll be able to attempt? Would you be able to so easily forgive someone who betrayed you like that, no matter how well meaning they were?”

Castiel didn’t reply, but something shifted in his gaze. Something much closer to home than she had imagined such a theoretical could hit. Could Castiel have experienced a betrayal in the past? If she was reading his posture correctly, she thought it could be a possibility. A betrayal which possibly wasn’t as much of a betrayal as he’d originally thought, if the signs of guilt which came along with the realisation were anything to go by. One which had ended badly. Giving the angel one last steady look before she moved past him to join Clint for a break and then a spar, Natasha made sure to smile in as understanding a manner as possible.

“Just something to think about.”

Chapter End Notes

Phew. This was originally going to be a Castiel chapter, with him asking JARVIS if he could talk to Falcon, but it just... wasn't working at all. And then Natasha kindly popped up and informed me that she'd be able to provide her own take on things, and I ended up spending yesterday (Saturday) writing this. I haven't checked through it as many times as I usually like to, but I still think I'm happy with the result, and I really hope you are, too.

Also, random question: How do you guys feel about the Bruce/Natasha thing in AoU? It seemed kind of out of the blue and weird to me, so I've been feeling a little torn as to whether to still include it here, or whether to change it so they're just friends (and maybe get rid of the lullaby thing? I dunno). I'd really appreciate your thoughts on this.

Finally, huge thanks again for the response to this! I can't believe I'm still getting reports of kudos coming in, and the comments are lovely motivation boosters. You guys are awesome!
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Work-out attempts and dinner time for Sam.

Chapter Notes

Hey all. Sorry for the delay with this chapter. I’ve been marking like crazy this week, and that had to take precedence over fanfic, I’m afraid. Thank you all so much for the continued reviews and kudos etc. in the meantime, and I hope you enjoy this latest chapter, too.

Muscles burning, Sam collapsed to the floor, rolling over to stare hopelessly at the ceiling as he did so. His arms ached like nobody’s business, and he could feel a similar pain in his legs and chest.

Pathetic.

He’d resigned himself, all those months ago, to the consequences his body was going through because of the trials. There had been a purpose to it- an end goal which made the constant nausea and weakness manageable. And a final end, he had realised with dawning certainty, in sight. After waking up after the church, he’d felt like he was slowly getting better- rebuilding some muscle mass, being able to go running again or to exercise in his room. He’d thought he was happy again. All, apparently, due solely to Gadreel’s influence (exactly how much of his peace had been artificially generated?). Because now? With the bastard angel kicked out and no longer bolstering his endurance? He couldn’t even manage five minutes of mild (for him) work-out without ending up feeling like a dog’s chew toy.

The whole thing was like a never-ending series of kicks to the teeth.

He had to get used to this again. There was little to no guarantee that Tony and Bruce’s search for a cure would work, however much he appreciated the gesture. And the chances of them finding a way to return to their own universe (where Castiel could help him) were similarly slim. He couldn’t afford to let himself get bitter over his condition. Not when he had brought it on himself. He was the one who agreed to stop the trials after all. He’d known at the time precisely how bad a shape he was in.

Just… having that joy over his gradual recovery snatched away like that… Finding out that the only reason he’d even felt better in the first place was because of a murderous parasite which could control him at will…

Sometimes he just had to wonder what the point was. Why did people (and other beings) keep bringing him back, when all it did was to cause him and everyone around him to suffer?

Sighing heavily for what felt like the millionth time over the past couple of days, he stood up,
grabbed the Starkpad from the desk and flopped down onto the bed. Instead of turning the Pad on, though, he stared instead at the faint lines and patterns in the paint of the ceiling. There were so many questions and uncertainties he still had, and he still had no idea what he wanted to do with them. Heck, he didn’t even know what he wanted full stop.

Time drifted and, by the time he finally looked at the Pad again, almost two hours had passed since his ill-advised attempt at keeping himself in some semblance of shape. He spent the next few absorbing himself in various websites and message boards, looking into whether the witches (or, more specifically, their spells and ingredients) of this world shared the power of their alternate counterparts (a lot of it seemed similar, but the power aspect would require actual testing to be certain), and only stopped when JARVIS’ gentle tones drifted from the walls.

“Sam, Sir is calling. Would you like me to pick up?”

Blinking, Sam looked around. There was no sign of a phone anywhere. “Su—” His chest tightened, one fist clenching slightly against the covers. Damn it. He focussed. “You can pick up.”

A hologram flickered into being at his words- a single square with Tony’s sunglass-clad features just off centre. The mechanic beamed at him.

“Mountain Man! Fantastic! Hey, Brucie-Bear, he answered!”

Bruce’s face appeared on one side of the screen, fond exasperation in every crease of his apologetic smile. “Hi, Sam. Sorry about this. Tony’s idea.”

“What’s Tony’s idea? And where are you guys?” All he could see in the background were plain walls, but he was fairly certain the faint babble of excited voices in the background put them outside of the tower.

“We’re just leaving NYSCI,” Tony explained.

“Finally.” Bruce added dryly.

“Hey, don’t give me that, Brucie-Bear. You were having just as much fun as I was.” The billionaire grinned widely, turning back to Sam. “We came to help open a new exhibit. Got kind of carried away showing everything off to some of the guests. Anyway, you hungry?”

Sam paused, thinking back to the last time he’d eaten- the few forkfuls of salad he’d had after meeting Falcon. “Probably. Why?”

“We were thinking of heading out to eat,” Bruce explained. “How would you feel about joining us?”

“I thought I wasn’t allowed out of the tower yet?”

Tony shrugged. “The press stuff’s been covered, and you’re okay security-wise as long as someone’s with you while you’re out. Heck- Steve, Falcon and Thor have already agreed to take Constantine and the Lumberjack out for burgers and post-workout bonding. Don’t see why you’d have to be the only one going stir-crazy.”

The mention of Dean had his stomach twisting painfully but, at the same time, he felt a small burst of determination. Tony was right. Why shouldn’t he try to have a little bit of fun? “I’m in.”

“Fantastic. We’ll pick you up on the way, then. In front of the tower. Twenty minutes. Don’t be late, or I’ll get JARVIS to play Bieber songs every time you’re in the shower.”
“Now that’s just cruel, Tin Can.”

“Hey, whatever works.” With one final shrug from Tony (and a quick wave from Bruce), the holographic screen blinked out of existence. Sam sat for a few moments, eyes fixed on where it had been, before typing up his goodbyes and signing out of the message boards. He didn’t think, going by what Tony and Bruce had been wearing, that he needed to change his clothes (especially as his earlier “exercise” hadn’t even lasted long enough for him to even work up a sweat), but he did pop into the bathroom quickly to rinse his face and comb his fingers quickly through his hair.

He ended up in the lobby a good five minutes earlier than asked, taking a seat in clear view of the security desk to watch through the doors until Tony and Bruce pulled up in a pristine-condition ’49 Mercury Coupe–the kind of car both Dean and his Dad would have killed to take for a spin. As he squeezed into the back, Tony shot him a grin over the top of his sunglasses.

“Hey there, Mountain Man. You made it. Shame.”

“Well, as much as I love Bieber…”

Tony let out an undignified snort, then drove until they reached a small-ish restaurant half-hidden down a side-street a few blocks over. The mechanic patted the car lovingly as they all climbed out (setting a small mechanical device under the front seat which he claimed was to “burgler-proof” the vehicle before locking it up) and, straightening up into his “smug billionaire” persona, led the way inside.

“Oh garçon, table for three.”

A young man looked up from his spot near the register, eyes widening as he took in the sight before him.

“Mr. Stark! I- Uh- Hi- I mean… uh… it’s nice to see you again!”

“Hey, Jason. Back room available?”

“I- Of course. Right this way, Mr. Stark.”

Jason led them through to a cosily-decorated private room, easily compensating for a slight limp on the way, and handed each of them a menu. “I’ll be back in a few minutes to take your orders, Mr Stark.” Bruce eyed Tony amusedly after he’d gone.

“One of your foundations’ beneficiaries?”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about, Brucie-Bear. Now order up- times-a-wasting.”

The menu, as it turned out, had quite a surprising variety of foods. Sam ended up ordering a simple three-cheese carbonara, just to stay on the safe side. With his self-control as low as it had been with the braciole the day before, he didn’t want to risk any meat dishes just yet (he did, however, make a mental note to come back one day if he could–some of the fusion food sounded surprisingly delicious). To his surprise, both Tony and Bruce followed suit with the vegetarian angle. He wasn’t sure whether it was a deliberate move or just a happy accident, but he was grateful nonetheless. He really didn’t fancy having to explain why the smell of cooked pork could occasionally have him running for the nearest bathroom.

As they waited for the food to arrive, Sam decided to go for the obvious topic of conversation (to him, at least. It had kind of been a while since he’d had to worry about restaurant etiquette with new kind-of-friends). Luckily, Tony took to it with the same kind of easy flamboyance he
displayed in so many areas of his life, dragging Bruce along with him in the process.

“So how was the exhibit?”

“Awesome. Bruce here is fairly certain I may have inspired a fifteen year old to become a criminal.”

“You were giving her hacking tips!”

“So she could get past the internet blocks and monitoring her parents set up! The kid just wanted to read fanfiction and check twitter, for crying out loud- it’s not like she’s trying to crack the pentagon. Which, by the way,” he informed Sam, “is actually not as hard as they’d like you to believe.”

“For you, maybe,” Sam snorted. “Never had the free time to really get to that level myself.”

Bruce gaped a little while Tony raised a delighted eyebrow. “Oh, so you’re a hacker now as well as a professional conman?”

Sam shrugged a little self-deprecatingly. “Police reports, mainly. For the job. Our friend Charlie, though, she’s incredible. Could probably do that kind of thing in her sleep. The furthest I ever got was doing a bit of white hat stuff back when I was in college.”

“Which college?”

“Stanford. Back when I thought I still had a shot at doing something else. Never got to finish, though.”

“How come?”

Sam looked away as he answered, cursing his idiocy at bringing it up and hoping he wasn’t completely ruining the mood for the evening with how subdued he knew his answer was. “Hunting caught up. Turns out demons don’t really care what your own plans are for your life.” He breathed out, eyes turning downwards. “Couldn’t really face going back after that. Revenge was as good an excuse as any to run away.”

Bruce gazed at him sadly. “You lost someone?”

“My girlfriend. Jessica.” He didn’t go into more detail. Didn’t want to explain the sickening feeling of nightmares coming to life- of blood dripping down from the bleeding stomach of the girl you’d sworn to marry as the world fell into flames around you. Or of the horror when, years later, you discovered that your entire relationship together had been contrived solely for that moment. Still, he was prepared for them to push for more information. Everyone always wanted more.

He needn’t have worried. Bruce just raised his glass of water in a sombre moment of solidarity. “To Jessica.”

“To Jessica,” Tony repeated. Sam blinked back the sudden prickle of unwelcome tears.

“Jessica.”

He’d never been more grateful for waiters than when theirs came back just a short minute later, and talk turned to considerably more cheerful things.
As always, comments are much appreciated. (I know the ending for this one was a little abrupt, but it felt like the only place I could really stop for now). Hope you liked it!

(Also, I've decided to be patient for now on the Bruce/Natasha thing, and just see where they go. If anyone feels strongly either way, though, you can feel free to let me know your reasoning at any time)
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Sam goes through a bit of an emotional roller-coaster.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, when Sam woke up, he was surprised to find that he actually felt… okay. Not great. Not even good. Still weary as all hell, but otherwise… yeah. Okay.

He had a feeling it had something to do with the dinner last night, and the freeing realisation that he could actually relax and let down his guard a tiny bit. There were no supernatural creatures here. No pictures of him on a most-wanted list which could lead to police or FBI bursting in. No Hunters out for revenge (or to hunt him). All that, and the added sense that the two superheroes sitting with him were, for some incomprehensible reason, more than willing to defend him even if that wasn’t the case.

The sensation was a weird one to try and adjust to. Although the reduced number of nightmares which followed the meal had definitely been most welcome.

Stretching slightly, he turned to take in the bedside table, where a brand new Starkphone sat waiting for him. (Assuring himself that, even with the majority of their hosts leaving today, he still had this one link to them. Just in case.) Tony had practically thrust the thing upon him during dessert, informing him in no uncertain terms that Sam was free to ignore contact from any other Avenger who had been programmed in, but that missing an ‘I-want-to-pick-your-brain-while-I’m-on-a-boring-ass-flight’ call from him would result in immediate pouting. Apparently, the older man had a thing about people missing his phone calls (Sam had decided against questioning why when he noticed the far-away expression hidden in the shadows behind Tony’s gaze).

Smiling at the memory, Sam twisted to semi-suspiciously eye the box he’d set on the desk- one of the three packages which had been being held at the front desk when they got back (the other two, he suspected, being for Dean and Castiel).

“JARVIS? Can I open it yet?”

“According to Sir’s instructions, you are permitted to open it in two hours and twenty-three minutes.”

“So only when he’s far enough away that I can’t try to give back anything he’s put inside, you mean.”

The AI sounded a little like an over-indulgent uncle trying to hide how amused he was by his nephew’s antics. “I suspect that to be a good portion of his reasoning, yes.”

Two and a half hours later, Sam could see why.

“JARVIS, these must have cost…” Hundreds. Each. Maybe far, far more.
Moving slowly, almost reverently (and trying to ignore the strange pressure building in his chest), Sam removed each of the books one by one, carefully lining them up between the novelty Hulk and Iron Man bookends which had also been provided. Eight tomes in total (two in their original Latin, one in Hebrew, the rest in English), with topics including ancient religions, mythological lore, the formation and development of native cultures across various continents, and more. Not a single one of them would have looked out of place on the shelves of the Bunker. And the extra true crime book was a nice addition, too, detailing a plethora of information about serial killers in the US which he was all too eager to compare to what he remembered.

The item tucked down the side of the box was a little more confusing. “What’s this for?”

“The latest model of Starkpad, Sam. As those found in the rooms are intended for use by guests only within the tower itself, Sir has seen fit to provide newer models for the personal use of both yourself and your companions.”

“Oh.”

Deciding not to comment more than that right now, Sam turned his attention to the final item in the box- the contents of an Avengers-themed folder. It took him all of five seconds to realise exactly what it was he was looking at, and another thirty at least to reassure himself that all of it was almost certainly 100% legitimate. How on Earth had Tony- even with all the resources no doubt at his disposal- managed to put all this together so fast?!

Grabbing the phone out of his pocket, Sam quickly flicked open his contacts, bringing up the billionaire’s number. Tony picked up just seconds after he hit dial.

“Wow. You seriously waited until I told you to.”

Sam paused, suddenly all too aware that he hadn’t planned for a single word of this conversation. “Was I not supposed to?” (To be honest, he really hadn’t had enough practice to be completely certain what to do about the whole ‘gift-receiving etiquette’ thing.)

“Take it easy, Mountain Man,” Tony laughed. “You didn’t break some freakish cross-dimensional taboo or anything. So?”

“So what?”

“So are you going to tell me off? Try to convince me that I shouldn’t have spent so much money on you?”

“Would it have any effect whatsoever on future purchases?” Sam asked dryly.

“None.”

“Then I think I’ll pass.”

“You’re taking out half the fun of being an eccentric billionaire, Mountain Man!”

“You’ll live. Seriously, though-” he glanced down at the papers in front of him. Passport. Driver’s License. Birth certificate. Bank account details- complete with credit and debit cards. And that was only the beginning- there was a whole identity sitting in front of him, fully formed. And all of it under his real name. “–How?”

He could easily picture the shrug Tony no doubt gave. “Pulled a few strings. Called in some favours with a couple of government flunkies who owed me. Nothing major.”
“Tony, this is-”

“Not finished yet, I know. You’ll need to let JARVIS know all the school stuff, and he’ll put that together, too.”

“…I was going to say pretty incredible, actually.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end. “You and Rhodey are gonna get on like a house on fire, I know it.”

“Rhodey… James Rhodes, right? The Iron Patriot?” The name was a bit much in Sam’s opinion, but he guessed that was the whole point. Good press for the American military and all that.

“That’s the one. Don’t you go trying to steal my little Honey Bear away from me, though, you got it? And it’s War Machine, not Iron Patriot. I don’t care what the President says.”

“War Machine? Seriously?” Yup. That sounded much more in line with Tony’s usual style.

“You bet I’m serious. War Machine is an amazing name.” Another pause. “Hang on, Bruce wants in. I’m switching to video.”

Sam pulled the phone away from his ear just in time to see Bruce sidle into view behind Tony, the scientist’s little finger wave providing a strange counter-balance to the mechanic’s devil-may-care grin.

“Hi, Sam,” Bruce smiled. “How do you like the books?”

The small smile which had been tugging at the corners of Sam’s lips split instantly into a full-on grin, surprising both other men almost as much as it did him, if their sudden near-identical blinks were any indication. “They’re amazing! I have no idea how to even start paying you guys back for them.”

“Huh. Gotta be honest here, I was not expecting dimples,” Tony remarked, before suddenly narrowing his eyes. “And no paying back. I thought we already covered this.”

“I said I wasn’t going to try to convince you not to spend money on us,” Sam shrugged. “I never said I wasn’t going to get my own back. It just… probably won’t be with money, I guess. I have a strong sense I’d never be able to win on that front.”

“Oh, it’s on, Mountain Man. Just you wait- I haven’t even started.”

“…Please don’t tell me you’re serious.”

“As serious as a catholic schoolgirl bringing her date home to meet the parents.”

“Bruce?”

Bruce just raised his palms in the air. “Hey, don’t look at me. You’re the one who kicked off his competitive streak. Just count yourself lucky- the first time I met the guy, he practically offered me a lab worth millions.”

Sam laughed, the motion feeling less alien than it had in years, then looked down at everything again. A bad idea, as it turned out, because all it gave him was a sudden, overwhelming sensation of undeserved gratitude he really wasn’t keen on being caught on camera. Who did this kind of thing? Least of all for some screwed up near-invalid who had practically forced himself into their
lives.

“Why would you even bother with all this?”

Tony frowned, then swiftly hid it behind a nonchalant gesture. “Eh, I felt like it. Besides, I’ve done a whole lot more in the past for people I liked a lot less. Plus it’s better to get all the boring stuff out of the way now than to have one of you get in trouble at some point and not be able to get out because all the records say you don’t even exist, am I right?”

“No no, I get the identity stuff. It’s just… The books, and the tech, and the room and the clothes and the meal and just… everything, really. You’ve done so much- for me and for Dean and Cas, and we don’t deserve it. Me least of all.”

“Sam—”

“No, I really don’t.” He cut Bruce off, forcing himself to appear calm when in reality he was anything but (Christ, where had this sudden rush of emotion come from? Was it really just him, or had something else- No, No, he was safe here. Nothing was in his head except him, which meant that there was no-one else to blame. That he was the one screwing everything up right now, just like always). “Don’t get me wrong, I am beyond thankful for all of this, but if you knew even half of the crap I’ve pulled in my life—” God, even Dean had ended up giving up on him at multiple points in the past, and yet here he was accepting all this amazing stuff from these amazing guys and they didn’t even know. They didn’t have a single clue just how unworthy- just how filthy- he was, because he hadn’t told them. Because he still didn’t want to tell them.

“Sam, that doesn’t—”

“Stark, Banner, we need you back in here.”

Tony shot an annoyed glare into the near-distance in the direction Sam assumed Steve’s voice had come from. “We’re on the phone!”

“We’ve just gotten some new info about the base,” Steve called back. “We need everyone in here for analysis.”

Bruce sighed, looking uncharacteristically annoyed. “I’ll go tell them that you’ll be right there,” he told Tony. “Speak soon, Sam.”

Tony continued to look torn even after Bruce had gone. “You should go,” Sam told him, oddly glad for this reason to escape the awkwardness he’d brought into what had been a perfectly good talk. Not to mention the fact that his stupid issues weren’t worth creating any discord in the older man’s team. He shouldn’t have even said any of it in the first place. All he’d done was to split the other men’s focus just as they were preparing for a (no doubt ridiculously important) mission.

“Yeah…” Tony dithered for a moment longer before making up his mind. “Look, about that so-called ‘crap you say you’ve pulled- I don’t care what it is, and neither does Bruce. And I doubt most of the others do, either. Hell, I’ve done plenty of not-so-stellar things myself and, knowing what I do about you so far, I’d say chances are you’ve more than made up for it anyway.”

“I—”

“And if you want proof—” Tony insisted- “then just think about it. You said that God was probably the one who sent you to us in the first place, right? And that he told you to find peace? Well, I’m not exactly one to talk, but I say if even God is telling you to move on, that’s a pretty good sign you need to start forgiving yourself.” He smiled, still looking pained. “Look, I know I’ve got to go,
but just think about it. I’ll call you after we finish at the base.”

“You don’t have to.” He didn’t want Tony babying him (on top of everything else) just because he apparently wasn’t capable right now of participating in even a single conversation without having a freaking meltdown of some sort.

“Not because of this.” Oh, thank God. Provided that was actually true. “I gave you the phone because I was already going to call anyway- got a couple of things to run by you that I can work on on the flight back.” The mechanic gave him one last (only slightly strained) grin. “And you better pick up. This is important business.” Then, before Sam could offer even a single rejoinder, the line went dead and Tony’s face disappeared from his screen.

Sam set the phone down on the desk.

Was Tony right? Was this God’s way of saying that he should try to forgive himself? He’d tried that before, and had just ended up making everything worse. But who knew. Maybe he really could-

The books caught his eye again, sending another burst of something through his chest, and Sam shook his head. He needed a neutral space. Somewhere where he could clear his head- where he wasn’t surrounded by all these incredible gifts he didn’t deserve.

He just needed to get permission first.

“JARVIS, is there a park anywhere nearby? And can I go for a walk in it?”

Chapter End Notes

Guys, thank you all so much (as always) for the continued comments and kudos etc. A large part of me still can't believe that new ones keep coming in. Lol. I don't know what I did to deserve such lovely people following this story, but I'll be eternally grateful that I did it. Anyway, I hope you all liked this chapter. The second half kind of came out of nowhere, to be honest- I was planning for something else to take place later, but then this felt like it needed to happen first. Also, apologies for my attempt at a Tony Stark simile (Snarky one-liners aren't exactly my forte). I hope it fits all right, but if you have any better suggestions I'd be perfectly happy to hear them. ^_^
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Sam comes to a decision, and has an unexpected encounter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Okay, so when Sam had asked to go to a park, Central hadn’t exactly been what he’d had in mind. Nevertheless, Falcon had insisted that a visit there was a necessity when staying in the city. He had also told Sam that, if he really wanted a place he could lose himself in, the Ramble was a brilliant choice.

After hours spent wandering in the shade of the trees- many of which, at this time of year, looked almost as devoid of life as he had felt so often over the past few days- Sam had to admit Falcon had a point. With the other man walking a few paces behind him, giving him all the space he really could considering his guard/babysitting duties, Sam pushed himself to walk long past the point where his pathetic excuses for limbs began to protest the strain. And, without the temptation of research as a distraction, he finally allowed himself the time to think.

He finally allowed himself the chance to grieve.

He mourned the travesty his brotherhood with Dean had become. He mourned the losses of Tommy, of Jenny and of Sarah. He mourned the multitude of deaths and possessions which had come as a result of them re-introducing Metatron to the Heavenly Host. He mourned his own mental and physical losses. And then, as they left the Ramble and spent a silent half hour sitting by the edge of the lake, Sam allowed himself to really remember Kevin. He remembered the long-haired, terrified student zig-zagging across the gardens of a mental hospital. He remembered the traumatised teen working himself half to death, popping pills and hiding himself away in the vague hopes that the nightmarish life the Winchesters had dragged him into would eventually leave him alone. He remembered the young man, grieving the loss of his mother and everything else he had ever known, who had thrown himself right back into translating yet another tablet. For them.

He remembered the casual greeting and questions tossed his way right before his hands had burned that bright young life right out, the sensation of Grace streaming out of his palm and melting the brain of a young man who had once dreamed of becoming the first Asian-American President of the United States.

There would never be a funeral outside of the Hunter’s Pyre Dean had hopefully built. No-one from Kevin’s old life would ever know just how amazing a person he had become. None of them would ever get closure over his (or his mother’s) disappearance. Sam owed it to those people- he owed it to Kevin- to remember him. He owed it to Kevin to honour all of the sacrifices the teenager should never have had to make.

Kevin stayed on his mind even as Falcon drove them back to the tower, remaining equally as respectful for Sam’s current desire for silence as he had (intuitively, it seemed) during their time in the park. And, with those thoughts gradually mixing with all the others from the day, the Hunter began to see a possible course of action he could take. One which would not only begin to pay back
the Avengers- Tony, especially- for all they had done, but which may also help him to start finding a small measure of redemption for his role in all those destroyed lives. Unfortunately, he was fairly certain it was a course which, while necessary, no-one would be 100% happy with him undertaking. Least of all himself.

But then, when had he ever been able to achieve even the slightest form of redemption without suffering for it first?

After stopping in at a local store, they pulled into the Avenger’s Tower’s garage. Sam sat for a moment, pulling himself out of his own head before he slid out from the passenger seat, shut his door and gently tapped his knuckles twice against the roof.

“Thanks. For taking me out there.”

“Hey, no problem, man.” Falcon smiled back at him. “You sounded like you needed it. And hey, if you liked it there, you can always join me when I go jogging. After Bruce gets you all fixed up, that is.”

Sam made sure to keep any hint of bitter regret out of his voice. “If they can fix me up, you mean.”

Falcon just smiled reassuringly and stepped away from the car. “Bruce is a genius with radiation and stuff, and between him and Tony they’ve got connections to some of the leading medical specialists around the world. If they’re this determined to make something happen, you can bet they’ll succeed. It’s just a matter of when.”

Restraining his reaction to what essentially amounted to a non-committed hum, Sam followed Falcon’s lead and began making his way towards the door back into the tower proper, running a hand over the impala’s hood as he went. If at all possible, he wasn’t going to let Falcon’s trust in Tony and Bruce’s set-up boost his hopes for a cure. The other man was only trying to help, he knew. To cheer him up. But letting himself cling to too much hope now would only result in greater pain further down the line if things didn’t work out. Far better to remain realistically focussed on the probabilities the two scientists had fed him that first night.

He’d have to keep reminding himself of those probabilities, he decided as he stepped through the door. Keeping a lid on hope was a lot easier said than done.

“Cas?”

The Angel stood in the middle of the hallway, hovering awkwardly with his hands firmly at his sides. For a moment, Sam froze, unsure whether he would need to re-iterate once again that he just wasn’t ready to forgive Dean yet.

“Sam. JARVIS told me that you were arriving.”

Wait. But that… JARVIS would never have led Castiel to him if the AI had even an inkling of a suspicion that Castiel would try to pressure him into anything. So why exactly-?

Falcon looked between the two of them, then coughed slightly, closed the door to the garage and made his way over to the stairs. “I’ll go on ahead, then. If either of you need anything, feel free to let me know, alright?”

As soon as he was gone, Sam tried for a smile. He wasn’t entirely certain how successful it was.

“How you doing, Cas?”
“I’ve been… adjusting.”

“And Dean?”

“Also adjusting, in his own way. He’s researching into whether this world has any lore on how to summon specific Angels which would work in our universe.”

Okay that… was not exactly what Sam had been expecting. Not this soon, anyway.

“He has also been watching various movies and animations.”

Ah. “So… what did you want to talk about?”

Castiel shifted a little, looking suddenly unsure of himself. “I wanted to apologise. It was wrong of me to try and force an immediate reconciliation between you and Dean.”

For a moment, it was almost like Sam’s heart stopped. This was beyond quite literally anything he’d expected to occur in this scenario. “Did Dean say something to you?” That would make sense, right? Dean getting annoyed, maybe believing that the Angel’s attempted intervention was one of the reasons Sam hadn’t come back to him yet? A new burst of guilt flitted through his stomach at the idea- he hadn’t thought about how his choice to remain separated could potentially make things harder for Castiel.

“No.” Castiel tilted his head slightly, brow furrowing. “I had a conversation with Natasha Romanov which made me look at the situation in a new light. I am not a stranger to betrayal, Sam. And I know what it feels like to discover that someone has been controlling your actions to suit their own purpose. I should have realised the similarities sooner.”

“No, Cas, Naomi wasn’t your fault—”

“And neither was Gadreel yours. Regardless, I have had my mind played with before, and I would rather die than to be put in a position where I could be forced to kill good people again. The same is true for you, and Dean should have known that before he ever agreed to trick you into the possession. He… made a mistake. Even to save your life, he should not have done what he did.”

Sam couldn’t answer. He didn’t know whether it was shock or whether he had just fallen asleep in the car and started dreaming this whole thing, but he had absolutely no idea how to respond to any of this. He couldn’t remember the last time any of their mutual friends had ever decided to listen to and understand his reasons for wanting to follow his own path, for even a little while. Ellen had told Dean where he was as soon as Dean had asked back when Sam found Ava. Bobby had tried to get him to go straight back into that panic room for the detox. And Castiel had sided with Dean on pretty much everything before (if you didn’t count surrendering to Michael, but those were kind of extenuating circumstances- which wouldn’t have even happened in the first place if it hadn’t been for him being so untrustworthy in regards to Lucifer). Having someone who knew the whole story- past and present- actually declare that he had a right to be upset was so unexpected it was bizarre.

Castiel sighed, looking like he was trying not to look disappointed. “That was all I wanted to say.” He turned and moved closer to the elevator, and Sam reacted before he even fully realised what was happening.

“Cas, wait.” The Angel turned back at his words, and Sam offered him a hesitant smile. “Did Tony get you a phone? You can have my number if you want. Message me if you want to talk or something?”

The expression Castiel sent him in return was both proud and relieved in equal measure. Reaching
into his coat pocket, he pulled out a silvery phone. Sam took it from him, smiling inwardly at the
delicate angel-wing design on the case, then added in his own number to Castiel’s contacts, and
Castiel’s to his.

“There,” he said, holding it out. Then, as the phone passed hands once more, “thanks, Cas. I really
appreciate it.”

As he went back to his room after parting ways, Sam felt stronger than he had since before he’d
woken up in that chair (he refused to think of the needles. He refused to think of Lucifer’s icy
fingers imbedding similar items into every available piece of skin). He could do this. He would do
this.

Emptying the small plastic bag from the shop onto the desk, Sam set the candle upright, seated
himself and stared into the flame as the lighter brought it to life.

“He was only eighteen, you know,” he announced in a near-whisper. “Kevin. Our friend. The one I
killed.”

“The one Gadreel killed, Sam,” JARVIS reminded him, equally sombre.

“That doesn’t make me feel any less responsible.”

There was a slight, almost hesitant pause before the AI spoke again. “During Loki’s invasion of
New York, some SHIELD agents were compromised. He used an alien sceptre to alter their
allegiances. With their loyalty his, they turned on SHIELD. Then, upon later regaining their minds,
they discovered that they had killed several of their colleagues. And yet they were never
disciplined for their actions during that time. Do you feel they should have been?”

Sam closed his eyes for a moment, touched despite himself by the AI’s concern. “No. But my
guess is they still feel guilty for that, even now.”

“Perhaps. That does not make them responsible, though.”

“I know.” But they had never had the opportunity to say no. “JARVIS, if I decided to take on a
project, would I need to get permission from one of the Avengers first?”

“That would depend fully on the nature of your project, Sam.”

“Nothing that would impact anyone else. I would just be reading.”

“Sam-” JARVIS’ voice sounded oddly resigned beneath the otherwise gentle tones. “You do not
need to do this.”

“No-one else for the job, though, right?” He breathed out. “So, can I do it?”

Another pause. “There is no protocol which would prevent me from allowing you access to the
files.”

“Alright then.” Looking over at the candle once more, he passed a thumb over his palm- one final
reassurance. “JARVIS, please transfer the High Enochian files to my StarkPad.”

Chapter End Notes
So it ended up taking three chapters instead of one for Sam to reach this point, but I
don't really have any regrets about that. Lol.
Hope you enjoyed it, feel free to comment and thanks, as always, for all of the
comments and kudos etc. You guys blow me away every time. ^_^
“Damn it.” This wasn’t working. Hours of searching for something even remotely helpful, and he’d found a grand total of Jack Shit.

All but growling in his frustration, Dean threw his Starkpad down onto the bed, then promptly rolled himself off it. Cas had been hiding away in his room ever since they got back last night- maybe he had thought of something.

Leaving to go and push open Cas’ door, though, revealed that the angel wasn’t even in his room any more. And he wasn’t in the common room either. Typical. Always underfoot and making random demands at the worst of times, never there when you actually needed his help. It kind of reminded Dean of how Sam could be sometimes- especially when they were younger. There was a reason he’d always been so pleased whenever a Plucky Pennywhistle’s was in the area.

“Hey, JARVIS, where’s Cas?”

“Castiel is on his way down to the lower floors, Mister Winchester.”

What the hell was he doing that for? It wasn’t like there was anything down there he needed. “Can you tell him I need to talk to him?”

There was a minute of near-total silence as he grabbed a beer from the (newly restocked by the staff) selection in the fridge and took a couple of swigs, leaning back against the counter. Free alcohol, he decided, was definitely something he could get used to.

“Castiel has asked that I inform you that he will return after finishing his business.”

“And how long is that gonna be?”

“That is impossible to predict. I do not, however, suspect that it will take long.”

Dean glared up at the ceiling for a moment. He was definitely not imagining the sardonic undercurrents to JARVIS’ polite-on-the-surface tone. Honestly, parallel universe aside, he’d originally been kind of psyched at the idea of living in a tower run by an actual, fully sentient AI, but the more time he spent here the more he was beginning to suspect this was like those cases of pets starting to act like their owners- it was obvious Tony didn’t like him, and JARVIS had apparently dived straight down the same path. Which only made him wonder precisely how insistent the damn robot had actually been in his talk with Cas. After all, it wasn’t like Dean was making pointless requests. This research was important, damn it. When he saw Sam next, he wanted to have at least an idea of how they’d be able to track Gadreel down and gank his ass. Learning precisely what happened to someone who deliberately re-unleashed Hell on Dean...
Winchester’s little brother was the least that son of a bitch deserved.

Plus, maybe seeing that Gadreel was definitely gonna get what was coming to him would get Sam to point his anger at the psychopath who actually deserved it, and Dean would get his brother back by his side where he belonged sooner than he might do otherwise.

God, this sucked. He hated feeling so utterly unequipped to combat what had happened. Hated feeling so out of his depth- so lacking in control, both in getting home and in whatever was happening with Sam. He was itching to get out there- to drive around until he eventually stumbled upon a Hunt to clear his mind and give himself at least the illusion that this damn separation was something he had a say in. Only every time the thought crossed his mind, he remembered that this world didn’t even have anything for him to hunt. Which, when he was feeling more and more like he just wanted to chop some bastard monster’s head off, wasn’t exactly what he’d call ideal. And being relegated to research which had pretty much zero chances of turning up absolutely anything useful really wasn’t helping.

Most of all, though, he hated the creeping, itching sensation of wrongness he got whenever Sam was out of his reach. He’d looked after the kid for so long that to have some rich douche nozzle just waltz in acting like he knew so much better was like a kick in the nuts. Having Sam actually go along with it was more like full-on castration with a rusty spoon.

Man, he really needed to stop thinking about this. Any more brooding and he’d be practically on par with the vampire dude in those books- the ones that one angsty teenage chick had been obsessed with back when he got Turned.

Scraping a hand down his face, Dean let out a stress-filled sigh, grabbed a second bottle of beer (because why the hell not?), then meandered over to plonk himself down in front of an episode of some random medical drama (nowhere near on par with Dr. Sexy, but fine for a bit of mind-numbing background noise). He was still there when, almost an entire episode later, the faint tread of footsteps sounded from the direction of the elevator.

“Where the hell have you been, then?” He questioned, only half-jokingly. It wasn’t until seconds of silence had passed, though, that he finally turned in his seat, taking in the slightly shift expression.

“What happened?” Cas only ever looked this awkward when he knew he’d done something he knew (or at least highly suspected) Dean wouldn’t be happy about. The thought had Dean tensing almost subconsciously where he sat, mentally preparing himself for yet another disaster.

“Nothing.” Cas straightened up slightly, jutting his chin out almost defiantly. “I just went to apologise to Sam.”

What?

“…What?” A lump so apprehensive it was practically painful formed in his throat. What was even going on here? “Tell me you mean Wilson.”

All he got in return were the Furrowed Brows of Permanent Confusion. “Why would I need to apologise to Falcon?”

“Why would you need to apologise to Sam?” (The unspoken ‘and why would you go behind my back to do it?’ hung in the air.)

“Because it was the right thing to do. I failed to analyse the situation, and ended up treating Sam poorly because of it.”
The lump turned sour. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Cas hesitated again, just for a moment. “I tried to persuade Sam to move to this floor immediately, when I should have respected his right to space.”

“So what, you… you agree with that prick Tony now? You think I should just stay away from Sam?” A trickle of betrayal slid down to settle in his stomach as he rose to his feet, turning to face the angel fully, then abruptly shifted into fear. With practically the whole world feeling like it was against him right now, he couldn’t have Castiel turning on him, too. “C’mon, man,” he pleaded. “You can’t be serious, right? I need you with me on this one. You already admitted that I just got played by Gadreel- you can’t blame me for that.”

“Dean,” Castiel sighed, looking pained. “I know you care about Sam. And I know you were only trying to save his life, but Sam… I’ve always just thought of him as your brother. And I wasn’t wrong, but that’s not all he is. What he suffered after his last possession was enough to drive even me insane for a while. Surely you knew he would never react well to finding it had happened again against his will.”

“Hey, you’re the one who told me that Ezekial could be trusted! He was supposed to just heal Sam and then leave. Sam would have gotten better and he’d never have even had to know about the possession.”

“What, forgive me? I don’t need forgiveness when I didn’t do anything wrong, okay?! What I need is for people to wake up and realise that I was just doing everything I could to keep my little brother alive!” He steadied his breathing, letting a sneer spread across his features. “Go on, then. What did he even say? He tell you to piss off?”

“No. He… he thanked me.”

Wow. Way to kick a guy in the balls when he was already down. So that was how Sam was playing this- wait until they broke down and fell in line with his interpretation of things and then ‘forgive’ them? Go along with some angel first (the very angel who was responsible for his last trip down Hell-Memory Lane, at that) instead of the flesh-and-blood brother who had raised him? Who had sold his soul for him? Died for him and saved him so many times it was, quite frankly, almost unbelievable even to Dean?

Screw that.

“Yeah no. No, you know what? Fine. You wanna ignore everything we’ve been through together? You wanna go behind my back and act like this whole thing is my fault instead of Gadreel’s, fine. It’s not like I’ve ever done anything to prove to you that you can trust my judgement, right?

“Oh, wait. Except that’s pretty much all I’ve ever done. Who told you opening purgatory was a bad idea, huh? Who tried to tell you to listen to Naomi about Metatron? Who did you ignore about the angel tablet? Or about Uriel? Who’s been right pretty much Every. Single. Time you or Sam wanted to do something stupid? Except I guess you’ve just forgotten about all that, huh?”

“Dean-”

“No, screw you, Cas.” He laughed, beyond caring just how bitter it came out sounding. He should have known this was going to happen. Should have known no-one would ever care for him enough to actually stick around when things got tough. Hell, Sam abandoned him pretty much every
chance he got, why should Dean have expected Cas to be any different? When had the angel ever shown that he would be willing to put Dean ahead of anything? The dude’s allegiances had always been all over the place. Turning on his heel, beers long forgotten, he strode back to his room, slamming his door behind him and more glad than he’d’ve thought possible that things had eased up enough that daytime guards were no longer deemed necessary. He didn’t need the entire god-damned staff of this freaky-ass tower gossiping about how he’d been thrown aside like that (and that was even assuming the damn AI wouldn’t spill the beans the first time it got a chance).

Screw them all. Screw Sam and his ‘I’m the only victim here’ mentality (acting as though Dean wasn’t half-torturing himself with guilt over his part in Kevin’s death). Screw Cas and his willingness to see him as the bad guy. Screw Tony and JARVIS’ quick, judgemental dickishness and Clint’s holier-than-thou attitude. Screw Natasha’s seeming total ambivalence, even. Hell, while he was at it, screw Steve, Thor and Falcon, too. Sure, they may not have been treating Dean like dirt like Tony or Bruce had, but they still hadn’t put any real effort into fixing things, and he had a sneaking suspicion they were all secretly leaning towards taking Sam’s side in this whole mess, too. Besides, he’d probably be back in his own universe soon enough anyway- why should he bother to care what they thought of him? He’d go back and gank Gadreel’s sorry ass into oblivion, no matter what anyone else said. And then, if Sam and Cas ever got their heads out of their asses for long enough to realise just how selfish they were both being here, maybe- and he did mean maybe- he would decide to take them back.

Chapter End Notes

Umm... This kind of went a bit differently than what I initially pictured? I think I may have lost a bit of control over Dean in this chapter... Here's hoping I manage to get a little of it back sooner rather than later. *fingers crossed*

Hopefully this isn't too jarring a shift in tone after last chapter. Also, I haven't checked it through as many times as I would usually like to, so sorry if there are any mistakes or if anything feels weird because of that.

Lastly, as always, thanks a bunch to kudos/comment leavers etc. You guys are amazing.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

The mission turns out to be a little bit dull. Tony unveils his idea to Sam and Bruce.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were missions where having the Hulk around was a huge help. And then there were others where letting him out would only ever be a hindrance. Unfortunately, it was impossible to ever predict with total certainty which one an outing would be until they were actually on location. HYDRA, especially, were pretty notorious for their hidden ambushes. In a turn of events Bruce would usually have been thrilled by, Lukovo turned out to be one of the latter.

Usually, however, he didn’t have a one-of-a-kind biological mystery (who wasn’t him, which was a nice change) waiting for him to help solve back home.

Internalising a sigh, Bruce tapped the fingers of one hand against the opposite arm as he paced around the interior of the quinjet, arms folded tightly against his chest. It wasn’t like he was against this mission- he knew perfectly well that locating and retrieving the sceptre was crucial- but he couldn’t help thinking that this could have been delayed for at least a few days. They could have taken the time to learn more about Castiel and the Winchesters, to set up their identities freely and to make headway on Sam’s case- and on the unravelling of the code- without any of the rush Tony, especially, had ended up needing to revert to.

And instead they had flown over to Serbia, and were currently in the process of raiding a base with a grand total of around twenty low-level Hydra goons. Yeah. The sceptre was really going to be in a place like this.

He almost didn’t catch the next sigh in time. “Hey, guys, how are things going out there? Any secret ambushes I need to worry about?”

“Just finishing up here, big guy,” came Tony’s reply. “I’m uploading the data from their computers to JARVIS’ satellites as we speak.”

There was a minuscule grunt from Natasha, followed by a momentary satisfied pause. “Just finished up in the West quadrant. Captain, where do you want me next?”

“Stay and secure the operatives, Widow. I’m on my way over to your location now.”

“Roger that.”

“Only three foes were located in the North,” Thor informed them, “but they have been similarly vanquished and bound.”

“Good work, Thor. Hawkeye?”

“Just three left in the South, Cap. Oh, make that two.” The near-silent rush of two more arrows filtered through the system. “Zero. Could do with some help with the clean-up, though.”
“We’ve got a team on their way to you now, Hawkeye,” Hill informed them from the cockpit, no doubt having just sent the location to a couple of her ex-SHIELD members. The back-up crew would round up all of the Hydra operatives and take them to be handed over to the Serbian government, as per the agreement she and Tony had set up with them on the way over.

“You’ll deal with them appropriately, I trust?”

Hill gave a firm nod she probably wasn’t even aware Bruce had seen. “All arrangements have been made, Captain.”

“Excellent. Hill, Bruce, we’ll be back with you in twenty. Everyone else, prepare for a final sweep of the building. I want to be absolutely certain there’s nothing here about the sceptre.”

Thus assured of the team’s safety, and certain that he definitely wasn’t needed, Bruce moved to sit in his usual chair (turning off his mic as he went, but leaving the earpiece on just in case) and tugged out his laptop. Tony may have preferred his holographic keyboards, but Bruce (though perfectly at ease with the displays in the lab) had actually found he rather liked sticking to physical ones most of the time. Something about the soft clacking beneath his fingers was strangely soothing.

Typing in his password, Bruce clicked open his files on Sam’s scans and scrolled through them again, wondering if there was anything he had missed. He and Tony had tossed around the idea of Extremis, but neither of them really thought it was capable of healing this particular brand of damage alone. He knew Helen Cho was running some simulations to see if her Cradle would be of any use, and Gorokhov was doing the same with his experimental compound for radiation treatment (both were long shots, but still worth looking into, right?). N’Diaye, Jackson and Carrillo had all given the case up as either impossible or untreatable with any known procedure in their fields, but Mora, Oliha, Taupo and Sanders had promised to get back to them if they came up with anything worth trying.

Something had to have a shot, right? His own cells may be beyond stabilisation, but there had to be something he could do for Sam’s. After all, if them ‘finding peace’ really had been Parallel-God’s reason for sending the three men here, it was a really dumb thing to do if it meant Sam had to spend the foreseeable future as a walking time-bomb of impossible DNA.

Which, he was choosing to believe, meant that the answers were there somewhere. Hidden on his screen. He just couldn’t quite put his finger on what they were yet.

True to Steve’s word, the Avengers arrived back just shy of twenty minutes later, the biggest injury between them a small cut on Clint’s left thigh (where, the archer claimed, a goon had ‘got lucky’ with a stray knife throw). Tony quickly moved to ‘his’ area to put his suit away and phone the Serbian authorities to inform that the mission was over, and the others began to take their seats, settling into their own activities as they waited for the eventual confirmation that the prisoner transfer was complete. When the engineer returned, he gave them all a quick update on what he’d found on the computers (mostly just stuff they already knew, but with a couple of possible clues for locations of one or two larger bases), and then promptly disappeared again to contact Pepper about some concerns the SI board had and to follow up on a few things with the company’s R&D division. Bruce, not for the first time, thanked his lucky stars that he hadn’t been born into that kind of responsibility.

Even if he was certain child-him would have much preferred all the money and tech to the abusive ass of a father he had been stuck with instead.

In the end, it wasn’t until a couple of hours later that the two scientists (finally in the air and
having just finished debriefing) were able to regroup and move to the back of the plane, Tony checking with JARVIS that Sam was awake and bringing up the Hunter's number almost before they’d even finished sitting down.

The line connected after four rings and Sam answered, propping his phone up on what was (if Bruce considered the layout of his own room when he had first arrived) probably his desk.

The younger man shot them a smile. “Hey.”

"Hey, Mountain Man,” Tony smirked, then quickly frowned. “Hey, do I need to get JARVIS to order in some turbo-vitamins or something? You look like death warmed up there, buddy.”

It was exaggerated but true (if somewhat inelegantly put). Sam did look a couple of shades paler and more wrung out than he had when they had last talked, although Bruce supposed that could be partly down to the fact that he had the desk lamp on this time.

“I’m okay,” Sam quickly reassured them. “Just tired, I guess.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Have you been running marathons or something while we’re not there?”

Sam smiled again, looking marginally more relaxed this time. “Wouldn’t dream of it. No, I’ve, uh, just been reading on and off. Translating old languages for too long can take it out of you I guess, and I get tired pretty quickly right now. I’ve got the True Crime book to distract me, though, which helps.”

Bruce suspected Sam knew they wouldn’t completely buy that that was all, but swiftly decided not to mention anything about it. If the other man wanted to keep his secrets, that was for him to decide (especially as it was more than likely that this was because of another trip down memory lane- trauma style). So, instead, he just huffed out a laugh and adopted a put-upon demeanour.

“…How do I end up friends with the kinds of people who find serial killers relaxing?” If Sam ever decided he wanted to share, they would be there. And until then? Well… they would still be there, he supposed.

With Tony declaring that serial killer facts were a lot less creepy than what Clint and Natasha had turned into their hobbies, the conversation quickly fell into casual pleasantries and updates- during which time Sam inquired as to how the mission had gone, and Tony (nearly) cracked everyone up completely when he announced that Bruce had essentially turned into a Hot Girlfriend™ from an old movie, waiting in the ‘car’ unless called.

Bruce merely replied that being the Hot Girlfriend was much better than being the Quirky Sidekick everyone forced themselves to put up with for the sake of the heroes, side-stepped Tony’s mock-indignant insistence that he was anything but a sidekick and informed Sam about the time Tony had, mid battle, been knocked rather spectacularly into the paint section of a hardware store. The news had been rife the following day with images of a technicolour suit of armour fighting in the streets of downtown Brooklyn, with some late-night shows referring to it as ‘Iron Man’s Elmer Incident.’ (Sam promised to read some of the ‘Adventures of Elmer Man’ fanfiction recommendations Tony said he would have JARVIS send his way.)

In the end, it took around ten minutes for Sam to finally get around to asking what they had originally wanted to talk to him about.

The shift in Tony’s posture was immediate, but the tenseness of it was subtle enough that it
probably (or hopefully, anyway) wasn’t visible on Sam’s end. He took a breath in and, when he released it, all signs of joviality had faded from his features.

“I have an idea for a possible cure, and I want to run it by you both to see what you think. Problem is, Mountain Man, I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

Curiosity piqued, Bruce stared over at his friend. He himself was still no closer to working anything out. “What are you thinking?”

The mechanic rubbed one hand across the nape of his neck. “I was thinking Extremis.”

“I thought we already ruled out-”

“We said is wasn’t viable by itself. That doesn’t mean we can’t use it.”

“What’s Extremis?” Sam questioned, leaning forward slightly.

“It’s genetics-altering nano-tech,” Tony explained, looking grim. “The creator’s original idea was to boost a person’s regenerative abilities, but it was unstable enough that those who used it either died straight out or ended up doing freaky crap like breathing fire and briefly self-detonating.”

“…Okay. Not feeling all that confident about Extremis right now.”

“I managed to stabilise it enough that small doses can be used to aid in things like tissue repair— that’s how my artificial sternum ended up actually working as well as it does.”

“You have an artificial sternum?”

“Oh. Long story. Another time.” Tony grinned stiffly and ran a hand over his chest. “Anyway, I was thinking we could maybe combine a few different components here. We could get you into Helen Cho’s Cradle— that’s this new thing she’s been working on to reproduce tissue— and dose you with an altered version of Extremis which— and this is the part you’re probably not going to be all that keen on— replicates and improves on the effects of the Grace in your system. It’s purely theoretical right now, and I guess we’d need to run blood tests and all sorts to figure things out, but I think it’s got a chance of working.”

A heavy silence fell over the three of them. Sam sat, frozen in place, staring out through the screen. Tony shifted in his seat, looking like he’d rather have had to face twelve hours alone in a room with Justin Hammer and ex-Senator Stern than to deliver this news. And Bruce’s mind was whirring, shooting through all the possibilities.

It could work. Or, at least, he thought it could. The Grace, as far as he could tell, wasn’t something they would be able to extract from Sam’s DNA (it was far too metaphysical for any scientific instruments currently known to withdraw), but if they really could engineer a miracle and get Extremis, aided by a recalibration of the Cradle, to essentially force it to reproduce and expand on what Gadreel had started in Sam’s cells… There was a minuscule chance that it could actually work.

…He was just the tiniest bit jealous of just how good Tony was at thinking outside the box.

But the probabilities seemed like they were probably one of the last things on Sam’s mind. The younger man eventually sat back up, ran his hands through his hair and let out a shaky breath.

“So you’re saying the only way I’ll be able to get back to full strength… is to basically make Their Grace a permanent part of my DNA?” At Tony’s reluctant affirmatory nod and mutter of
‘probably,’ he closed his eyes and huffed out a bitter laugh. “Of course it is.”

Oh. Oh man. Bruce could have kicked himself. He’d been so busy focusing on the science of it all, that it hadn’t even occurred to him to think about the personal side of things. He’d always said he was no psychologist, but that was an oversight and a half.

This time it was Tony who leaned forward. “Look, Sam, I know it sucks-”

Another laugh. “No kidding.”

“But we won’t do it unless you agree. We can keep looking for other options.”

“But you don’t think there are any, right?”

After a momentary pause, Tony shook his head. “As far as science goes, no. I don’t think so.”

“It’s a huge long-shot,” Bruce put in, looking between them. “But I think Tony’s right. Normal medicine just… isn’t ready to deal with this kind of damage. Using the Grace is our best bet.”

Another silence fell.

Sam’s eyes remained closed.

Almost a full minute passed before he opened them again, still not quite meeting their eyes. “Can I have some time to think it over?”

“Take all the time you want,” Bruce assured.

“If it helps,” Tony added, his eyes suddenly burning with a fierce determination. “Think of it like this. When people hurt you, you can accept it and move on. Or you can take what they left you and twist it around to spit in their faces. You can take a thing which could have destroyed you and you can use it to make yourself stronger.” As Sam finally looked back at him, Tony shot him a vicious grin. “I find there’s no revenge quite like shoving the fact that they could never break you in their faces.”

The two men stared at each other, the unspoken understanding between them practically electric, and Bruce felt an odd sensation of awe welling up his chest. Almost three years as an Avenger, and he’d never seen Tony take to another human being so quickly before. Never seen him so easily connect with someone before.

Then again, he’d never seen another human being take to Tony so quickly before, either. Never even seen one try.

Sam glanced down at his desk for a few seconds, looking at something off screen, then nodded slowly as he looked back up.

Bruce blinked. “You’ll do it?”

“I don’t know. Not yet. But I’ll give you some blood for the tests when you get back so you can look into it.” Sam sent back a half-resigned, half-determined smile of his own. “Do whatever needs to be done, right?”

And there was a sentiment Bruce understood one hundred percent. He smiled at the same time as Tony.

“Right.”
So this week has been utterly insane, but I finally managed to get this chapter finished! I really hope you enjoyed this little glimpse into Bruce's head- I kind of enjoyed writing him, so fingers crossed you liked it.

For the timeline here, my internet searches put a commercial flight of the same distance as taking almost eight hours, so I'm guessing the Avengers' Quinjet would make that in around seven? If anyone knows better, please feel free to let me know!

As ever, huge thanks to reviewers/kudos-leavers etc. Every single one of the reviews to the last chapter put a huge smile on my face. Virtual magical-flavour-changing-cookies for all of you!

(Ps. Is it bad that I find the idea of an Elmer-style Iron Man as funny as I do?)
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Sam is not exactly having fun. JARVIS is awesome. Castiel loves using emojis.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter contains references to torture and (relatively) vague allusions to past rape. Please do not read it if you think that could prove in any way triggering for you.

(Also, this is Sam's salad: http://healthier.qld.gov.au/recipes/three-bean-salad-with-spinach/)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At this point in his life, losing a pint of blood was pretty much old hat for Sam. It had been nice (if slightly odd) to lose it to a needle inserted by someone he actually trusted this time, though, rather than to a knife, a gun, a vampire, a ghoul or any host of other less-than-pleasant methods. Still, his familiarity with the sensation didn’t mean that he didn’t notice the slight drop in his body temperature, or that he wasn’t keen to reverse said drop as soon as physically possible.

Which was precisely why, upon returning to ‘his’ floor, he made himself a three-bean salad with spinach, red onion and cherry tomatoes for his lunch (meat or fish would probably have been a good idea, too, but he definitely wasn’t at that point yet- especially considering his current choice of pastime) and made himself eat the entire thing. Then, after carrying a bottle of water and a glass of orange juice through to rest on one of the bedside tables, he settled himself down- as his damaged body seemed to require at least once a day- for a nap.

When his phone’s alarm woke him an hour later, he was pleased to find that the cocoon provided by his duvet had warmed him to a slightly more acceptable level. Not only that, but he was also (thankfully) free of the disoriented, almost disgustedly groggy feeling which sometimes struck after a nap. Sitting up, he unwrapped the bandage Bruce had given him from his arm, then took a swig of water to wash the taste of sleep from his mouth.

Okay. So now all he had to do was to get back to work on his translations. He looked over at the small stack of papers sitting on his desk, telling himself once again that this was necessary. That giving up now would just be further proof that he was every bit as weak and useless as he was trying to show he wasn’t. Not to mention the fact that, without this, there was pretty much no chance they’d ever be able to go home (he carefully ignored the quiet voice in the corner of his mind asking him if he really wanted to go back- that line of thinking was just plain selfish).

Sighing, he glanced down at his phone, blinking as he saw the notification that he had two messages. The first was from Tony- a couple of links which, when clicked upon, took him to the promised ‘Elmer Man’ fanfiction. He’d check those out and reply accordingly later. The other was from Castiel.
‘Hello, Sam. How are you today?’ Complete with a smiling monkey emoji.

Well, that was a question and a half. An honest answer would probably require an entire essay. Maybe even a full on dissertation. Hesitating only briefly, he typed back, ‘I’m doing okay, Cas. What’s up?’ then, making up his mind, pushed himself out of bed (grabbing the orange juice and taking a sip once he was up) and made his way over to the desk.

Another hour later, he was wishing he’d never left the relative warmth of the duvet behind.

“JARVIS, could you turn up the heat some more?”

“Of course, Sam.”

Ice-cold flames continued to lick their way, invisible, up and down his back, creeping through his bones and sending goosebumps dancing along the flesh of his arms.

Shivering, he stood up and collected a spare blanket from the top shelf of the closet, wrapping it firmly around his shoulders before going to sit back down and getting back to work. He was fine. It was just text on a screen. It wasn’t being carved methodically into his skin, or fashioned out of woven clumps of hair or bone. It wasn’t being seared into his eyelids or whispered in silky, taunting tones as pain lanced through every orifice, Lucifer draped languidly across his back as Michael looked on, disgust and recriminations spilling from lips which looked like those of every person he had ever loved.

It was just words. Words and numbers. They couldn’t hurt him. And if he thought he saw an echo of them stirring in his veins, or felt a finger trail them up his spine, that was just because he was letting the memories win. All it meant was that he needed to snap himself out of it.

“Sam, if I may, I have a suggestion.”

Beyond thankful for the excuse to look away from the letters he was scrawling across his latest page, Sam glanced vaguely towards one corner of the ceiling.

“What is it, JARVIS?”

“In my experience, people often find it easier to accomplish difficult tasks when they are able to talk about unrelated- or even related- topics at the same time. If you wish to do so- perhaps with further details of your life, for example- I would be willing to listen and participate.”

That was- Sam wasn’t really great at talking about himself. Especially not for himself. If it was because he needed to say something to help someone during a Hunt, then yeah, he could let little bits and pieces out when necessary. But, to be honest, he was far more comfortable listening to other people talk about themselves. Whenever things were the other way around, it just made it that much easier to see the judgement and disdain in the other person’s eyes when they learned just how disgusting he really was.

But, then again, JARVIS didn’t have eyes. And if he stuck to more innocuous stories, maybe he would be able to avoid hearing that disgust start bleeding into the AI’s voice, too.

Still, he couldn’t quite hold back a self-deprecating smile when not one such story came immediately to mind. “I don’t think I’d know where to start.”

There was a moment of silence. “I have yet to compile school records for either yourself or your brother. Perhaps you could share approximate dates for when you attended each of your schools.”
Yeah. Yeah, he could do that. He couldn’t really remember much about his earliest schools (except for those brought to the forefront of his mind when he was doing the trials), but from third or fourth grade on he had a pretty good idea of where they’d been and when. And he didn’t really need to recall every one of them anyway- just enough to give JARVIS an approximate picture (even though everything, in accordance with the claimed birthdate on his new ID, would probably have to be shifted to one year later than it had been in reality).

Scrolling down to the next section he needed to work through, Sam nodded once. It wouldn’t hurt to try, right?

“I remember this one school back when I was eight. Somewhere in Glenrock, Wyoming, I think. We moved there in January so Dad could look into these weird deaths a couple of towns over. Dean showed me the police files- this string of guys had gone missing, and when their bodies turned up they all had these weird orange and grey scales smeared all over their chests. This girl, Emery something-or-other, caught me looking up pictures of any scaled things I could find in the school library, and she became convinced I thought there was a mermaid living in the local pool. So-”

Okay. Okay, this really was easier. He could almost feel the shadows which had been pressing in on him loosen their hold a little. He still felt cold- bone-achingly cold- but the fingers prodding at him (both inside and out) slowly withdrew slightly, no longer the focus of his subconscious. He could actually breathe again, without ancient alphabets twisting into his oesophagus or plaiting patterns into the lining of his lungs. It still wasn’t perfect. Far from it.

But he could work like this.

So he did. Slower than before, true, but he figured slow progress was better than no progress, and he was fairly certain most of the others would feel the same. Or at least give him a little leeway.

Oddly enough, the couple of texts he got from Castiel while he worked helped a little, too. Although he got the vague impression that, just maybe, the angel was feeling kind of lonely. The first, which he originally didn’t notice had arrived pretty quickly, read ‘Nothing much is happening, and my room is quiet. My lore-related internet searches have provided nothing I believe could be useful.’ After Sam replied that maybe taking a break and checking out youtube or something could ease some stress, there was no reply until about forty-five minutes later.

‘Why do so many people share videos of their cats?’ (with every single cat emoji)

And then, an hour and a half after that: ‘Do people truly believe that lizard people secretly control the world’s governments?’

And another eight minutes after that: ‘What are Beliebers and why are they screaming?’

Sam replied to each one as best he could but, even as he did, he couldn’t help but wonder why Castiel was asking him these things. It would have been much easier to ask Dean this stuff, right? Faster, too. Was this just a genuine attempt to improve their friendship? Or had something happened between Castiel and Dean which meant the angel didn’t feel he could ask the other man? Sam knew better than anyone, after all, just how volatile his brother’s moods could become when he was under stress and missing his usual forms of release (namely, hunting and girls). Or was it neither of those things? Or both?

Part of him wanted to ask, despite how rude or unappreciative such a question might appear. Another part thought maybe he should ask, just in case the possible rift had something to do with him. But a louder, much more sizable (and much more bitter) part of his mind just… didn’t want to
know. Didn’t want to return to dealing with other peoples’ issues right when he had only just found a place where he could begin dealing with his own. Especially when doing these translations brought so many of those issues so far into the foreground.

Deciding to let things be for now and see how they developed, Sam tucked his phone away and glanced briefly at the currently unlit candle still resting on his desk. Answering Castiel’s message had provided him with a natural break in his work. Could he justify making that break longer, when he’d only woken back up less than four hours beforehand? Would Kevin ever have let himself give up after only that long?

Well, he already knew the answer to that. If things were really bad, the teen would have just popped a couple of advil if necessary and kept at it. If things weren’t so urgent, however, he’d proven himself more willing to kick back a bit.

The problem was, this situation was near one end of the spectrum for Sam, and probably way over at the other end for the others.

After a few more moments of consideration, he decided taking the middle ground was probably the best option here. He’d work for another hour or so, and then he’d put it away for the rest of the day and do something which would hopefully fully get rid of the ghostly sensation of the memory of thousands of meat-hooks worming their way slowly into his skin.

Fifty minutes later- when, even despite another temperature boost and the continued conversation with JARVIS, echoes of blinding Grace still started creeping into the corners of his vision - Sam finally decided enough was enough. Practically throwing his pen down and jamming his papers into the desk drawer, he half-ran from the room, glass in hand and blanket still firmly wrapped around his shoulders.

He ended up curled up at the end of one of the couches, TV blaring out a documentary about tardigrades, trying to absorb himself in the (admittedly appropriately hilarious) Elmer Man fiction. Until, that is, a little more than twenty minutes later, when his phone started buzzing in his hand.

“Hey.”

“Hey, Mountain Man- got a couple of friends here who’d like to meet you. You mind if I bring them up?”

“Friends? Should I be worried here?”

“Don’t worry, they won’t bite. Hell, only one of them even can bite.”

Okay what? “Huh?”

There was a laugh on the other end. “You’ll see.”

“Umm, bring them up, then. I guess.”

“Awesome. See you in two.”

The call went dead, and Sam was left staring at his phone, memories of the Cage finally pushed (almost entirely) aside in favour of sheer confusion. What the hell kind of friends did Tony have?! And why on earth would they want to meet him?

Chapter End Notes
So there was our first real glimpse into what these translations can do to Sam. I seriously don't know how he manages to cope with this stuff. I know I definitely couldn't. Still, I hope you enjoyed (if that's even close to an appropriate word here) this foray into his mind.

Just as a heads up: Both grades of students I teach had tests yesterday, and I will be going kind of mental trying to get all of their papers marked within a week. So, unfortunately, there's a pretty strong possibility that the next chapter will take a little longer than usual to get written.

And, finally, thank you so incredibly much to everyone's continued support for this story!


Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Sam has some guests. He also brings Tony into the loop.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first guest stepped out almost as soon as the elevator doors opened- a black man maybe a centimetre or so shorter than Tony, with close-cropped hair and an unmistakably military posture. Sam knew who he was even before the man expertly hid the small glimmer of surprised confusion which flashed across his face.

“James Rhodes,” the man introduced himself, stepping forward with his arm already outstretched.

“Sam Winchester.” Sam shook the offered hand, trying not to appear too nervous. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Colonel.”

There was barely even time for the Colonel to begin eyeing him speculatively before Tony also stepped out, the billionaire’s lack of restraint explaining precisely why his friend had seemed confused in the first place.

“Whoa, Mountain Man, what’s with the sauna theme? I could practically fry an egg mid-air in here.”

Sam blinked, not really sure-

Oh. Oh damn. How hot had he ended up asking JARVIS to make it in the end? He glanced down. Was he still- Yup. He was still wearing the blanket. Probably looked like a complete idiot. He took it off somewhat tentatively, folding it over his arm instead and tamping down the nerves he felt over what he was about to do. “It’s nothing. I was just feeling a bit cold, but it’s fine now. JARVIS, you can turn the heat back down a bit if you like. Thanks.” Hopefully he was far enough removed from the High Enochian now that a more typical environment wouldn’t bring anything back up.

And, even if it did, he had plenty of practice hiding that sort of thing. Right?

Still, when he looked up again to find Tony with a carefully blank face and the Colonel with marginally narrowed eyes, looking between him and Tony as if something had just fallen into place, he had a sinking suspicion he was already too late to hide it.

Damn.

Suddenly, a series of beeps (which sounded oddly indignant) sounded from the elevator, drawing everyone’s attention (thankfully) away from him.

“Calm down, fellas, we didn’t forget about you.” Tony rolled his eyes as the Colonel smiled and stepped aside, making room for the other occupants of the elevator.

Which turned out to be three huge robotic arm-type things on wheels- each one large enough that,
“Sam, meet Dum-E, Butterfingers and U,” Tony introduced, pointing out each one in turn (a slightly confusing task given the fact that all three of said robots had immediately begun circling Sam, inspecting him through lenses which had been built into their arms). “Usually they live in my workshop, but apparently they wanted to meet you. And, considering there are only three people authorised to be in my workshop, we figured it was easiest to just bring them here.”

“So they’re AIs, too?” They definitely seemed to be. He looked over at the mechanic for confirmation, noticing too late that one of the robots- Butterfingers, he thought- was poking at the blanket he still had over his arm. In a move which looked absurdly like something from the type of kid’s cartoon Dean tried to pretend he didn’t still like, the blanket dropped from his arm, falling so that it covered almost the entirety of Butterfingers’ arm. The robot wheeled back with a startled beep, jerking to and fro and almost sending Tony into fits of laughter (the colonel tried to hide his own amused smile behind his hand).

Sam blinked, unsure whether to be confused or similarly entertained. But then, if the robots were as sentient as they appeared, he figured being suddenly blinded wasn’t exactly the most fun of experiences. “Whoa, whoa, hold on a second.” Crouching down, he placed a hand on Butterfingers’ arm to steady it, then swiftly untangled the blanket. “There. Is that better?”

There was an odd moment where all three robots kind of just… froze for a second. Then Butterfingers let out a soft trill, with Dum-E and U both replying in turn, and all three began circling him again, slowly shepherding him over to the couches. Tony and the Colonel both followed (the shorter man now biting his bottom lip slightly to keep himself from laughing).

“Guess that answers your question,” Tony declared as they moved. “Yes, they’re AIs. My first ones, actually. They’re not as advanced as JARVIS, of course- don’t give me that, Dum-E, you know it’s true- so they can’t talk back, but they can understand you just fine. Whether they listen or not is pretty much arbitrary, though,” he finished with a smirk.

“They’ll also make you smoothies if they like you- especially U,” the Colonel added. “It’s kind of hit and miss whether they’ll be edible, though.”

“Or whether any of it stays inside the blender,” Tony laughed. At U’s indignant chirrup, though, he simply shrugged. “Hey, if you don’t want us teasing you about it, don’t soak my kitchen in green goop anymore.”

U hung its… what? Head? Hand? (he was going to have to check what to call their body parts), then promptly perked up in time to help the others push Sam down into his usual seat (most likely guessing the right one based on where he’d set down his glass. Unless JARVIS was communicating with them somehow?).

“Okay, so just to make sure I don’t screw anything up, how do I refer to them? He? She? It?”

“JARVIS?”

“They are currently all male, Sir.”

At Sam’s confused expression, the mechanic shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter to me what gender they are, so we let the bots decide for themselves. Sometimes they change their minds.”

“Well, they’re-” he caught himself, directing his attention back to the ‘bots’ “-you’re all amazing.” Seriously. The things he’d seen in this tower were like something out of a sci-fi movie. Dean must
be absolutely loving it.

...And he really needed to stop thinking about Dean so much. It just made things hurt that much worse.

Looking back at his human guests, Sam smiled. “Sorry, I wasn’t really thinking- do either of you want something to drink?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony grinned. “The bots’ll sort us out. Go on, then, you wastes of space- you can explore. Just bring us all back something good to drink when you’re done, yeah?”

Bobbing their head/hands, the bots rolled away, investigating various items around the room and leaving Sam thoroughly awe-struck. “When exactly did you make them?”

“Made Dum-E while I was still at MIT. He didn’t used to have wheels, though, which was kinda dumb of me.”

“Our entire dorm room was a mess for months,” The Colonel put in. “And then Tones spent the entire week before he finished living on handfuls of nuts, coffee- which,” he aimed at Tony, “I had to make, by the way- and about two hours of sleep each day.”

Sam laughed. “Sounds like me during Hunts. Triple red-eyes were my lifeblood from when I was twelve until I left for college.” He smiled at Tony’s declaration that triple anything when it came to coffee was one of the best inventions ever to come from mankind, then looked over at the Colonel. “So you’ve known Tony since college, then?”

“Unfortunately. Can you imagine? I work my ass off to get there, walk into my dorm on the first day and find this fifteen year old kid sprawled out on the couch fast asleep, butt naked, covered in oil and with the oven in pieces all over the floor.”

“Hey, I had a blanket on!”

“Only because I put it on you before you woke up!” The older man rolled his eyes, smile firmly in place as he turned back to Sam. “So we put the oven back together, and I’ve been stuck with him ever since.”

“Aw, honey bear, you cared that much even back then? I’m touched.” Tony beamed at Sam. “You’ll have to read Rhodey’s final college dissertation at some point. He worked on it for months, then had to re-write the entire thing in two days because we got drunk and thought making confetti and fireworks was a good idea.”

“Your idea. I wanted no part of it.”

“That’s because you wanted to fill a swimming pool with koi, honey bunch. Wasn’t possible.” He smirked. “That time, anyway. Besides, you still got the top grade in your class, so no harm, no foul, right?”

Sam stared. “You filled a swimming pool with koi?”

“You bet we did. Howard had a cow trying to settle that one. The media loved it, though- and they didn’t even realise Rhodey was involved. Pinned the whole thing on me.” While the Colonel sighed long-sufferingly, and Sam kept staring, incredulous, Tony just looked proud. “What? You don’t have any wild, drunken exploits to talk about from Stanford?”

“Drunken escapades were never really my thing. Besides, I was a bit busy trying to make sure I
didn’t lose my scholarship. The campus security wouldn’t really have looked kindly on a drunken idiot dumping a load of fish in the library.”

“Shame. You probably never even knew what you were missing. Poor guy.”

“More like lucky guy, you mean,” the Colonel interjected drily.

“I think I agree with the Colonel on that one.”

There was a sudden moment of silence, and Sam felt the familiar swell of anxiety in his stomach. God, what had he done now?

Then Tony let out a powerful snort, and the Colonel leaned forward where he sat. “As much as I appreciate the respect, you don’t have to call me that, you know. Rhodey is fine.”

Oh, okay. No taboos or social norms violated. Good. “Rhodey, then. Got it.”

“Or you could always just call him Sugarplum,” Tony declared. “Works just as well.”

“Think I’ll pass on that one, thanks.”

The C- Rhodey nodded sagely. “Wise man.”

“Sir,” JARVIS spoke up, “I believe the bots are ready.”

Looking up, Sam was amused to find that all three of the bots had gathered in the kitchen. One of them (he wasn’t entirely sure which, with the names hidden as they were behind the counter) had somehow managed to drag the fruit bowl over to the edge of the counter, and was now holding one of the bananas, twisting it in a random pattern.

“Alright, then,” Tony called over in their direction. “Who wants to make drinks?”

Three robotic arms semi-shot up into the air (which, incidentally, sent the banana flying off into the sink), and Tony raised an eyebrow. “Okay, Butterfingers, you’re definitely out for the hard stuff. Alright then, guys- Dum-E, you can make some smoothies. U, you’re on coffee duty- no spilt coffee grounds this time, though, or you’re the next one to get the dunce cap. Butterfingers, why don’t you bring over some juice and snacks and stuff.” Turning back, he studied Sam contemplatively. “So, Mountain Man, no pressure, but why is it that every time I see you you just look more and more like a sickly elf?”

Sam froze. The words sounded blunt, true, but a single second looking into Tony’s eyes showed the concern the mechanic was trying not to flaunt. And Sam just somehow knew. He didn’t need to explain the details, but even if he revealed what he was doing- and even if Tony figured out just how badly doing the translations affected him- the older man wouldn’t try to stop him. He would understand, as he had with everything so far, that this was something Sam needed to do. Something he needed to work through.

Making up his mind, he stood up. “Wait here a minute. I’ll be right back.”

Back in his room, he took a few moments standing by the desk, steeling himself before he opened the drawer. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d willingly shown so much of himself to someone he’d known for such a short period of time. Or, indeed, if he ever had. Even knowing that Tony wouldn’t pry (and trusting that Rhodey, being someone Tony cared about as much as he did, would follow suit) didn’t make this any easier. Taking a slow breath, he took out the papers and carried them through to the main room, placing them on the table in front of Tony just as
Butterfingers did the same with a collection of nuts and berries. He sat down before explaining, interlocking his fingers as tightly as possible to prevent himself from fidgeting.

“I’ve started working on translating the High Enochian from the code.”

Tony’s head snapped up immediately, just too slow at hiding the horrified surprise which flashed across his face. Ignoring the way Rhody was looking between the two of them, obviously all too aware that he was missing out on something big, Sam stared right back at Tony, realisation heavy in his stomach. For the mechanic’s reaction to be that big, it could only mean… he knew. He knew why doing these translations would affect Sam so badly.

But why?

_How?_

Had Dean or Castiel told him? Or had he figured it out? Each one of those options was equally likely. And _when_ had he found out? Why hadn’t he _said_-

Wait. He hadn’t said anything. He had found out, and he hadn’t tried to force Sam to talk about it. Hadn’t begun treating him like he was going to break at any moment.

He had just… accepted it. And Sam found he was… oddly okay with that.

Still… “Does anyone else know?”

Tony shifted, then shook his head. “Just me and JARVIS. I worked it out from some stuff your brother said a few days ago. Figured if you wanted anyone to know you’d tell them yourself.”

Flicking his eyes away from Sam’s, he picked up the top paper, looking over it. “You sure you’re okay doing this?”

No. Not really. But he knew he needed to be. “I’ve got a- a system, kind of, set up with JARVIS. Still working out the kinks, but it’s nothing I can’t handle. A lot of it’s just numbers and random pieces of spellwork, anyway.”

Tony just nodded and placed the page back down, setting the small stack aside for later. “Alright then.”

Sam blinked. “That’s it?”

“Hey, if you say you can handle it then you can handle it. I’m not gonna stop you.”

The conversation fell into a quiet lull- not really awkward, as Sam had been half expecting, but more one of acceptance. He felt… freed, in a way. Like there was one less thing he had to worry about now. Like, if Tony could learn about just how filthy Sam was and could still sit there and treat him like he was someone worth spending time with, maybe there really was some part of him which was still salvageable.

A faint ‘thunk’ shook him out of his thoughts, and Sam looked down to find Dum-E retreating from a tall glass of a strange green mixture with a slight layer of foam on top.

“Thank you.” Picking up the glass, he peered at the mixture slightly apprehensively.

“It’s a stamina smoothie,” Rhody explained (showing, like Tony, no real shift in his behaviour). “Don’t worry- it’s probably not as toxic as it looks.”
“Okay, then.” Sending a reassuring smile in Dum-E’s direction, Sam took a deep swig…

…And found it actually tasted pretty good. As did the second swig. He felt his smile widen further as Dum-E trilled in satisfaction.

Tony and Rhodey started on their own drinks, too, the mechanic smirking as he settled back in his seat. “So. Rhodey has a couple of days off. I haven’t been properly drunk in years. Sam has never experienced any proper drunken escapades. Who else here thinks now might be a good time to rectify that?”

Rhodey let his head fall into his hands. “I get two days off a month. Why did I choose to use this one to come see you?”

Another teasing smirk. “Guess that’s just how much you love me, Bubble-butt.”

Rhodey simply sighed into his hands. “Oh, Christ.”

Chapter End Notes

So this actually took even longer than I thought- both due to grading, and because I found it kind of hard to write Rhodey (this was originally going to be from his POV. Plus, he kind of surprised me by popping up this early, anyway- my original plan had a timeskip, then Pepper, and then another timeskip before Rhodey came over. Lol.) Hopefully the wait wasn't too long, and you guys still enjoyed this chapter!

(The two days vacation comes from my research on the US Air Force. If anyone knows any better, please let me know and I'd be more than happy to change that.)

(Also, I know most fics out there have all the Avengers having entrance codes to Tony's workshop, but I always just figured, what with the military defense contracts and the SI patents etc, mixed with Tony's own issues, only Tony, Rhodey and Pepper would be allowed in. Even Obadiah- back when Tony still trusted him- didn't appear to have a code for the workshop in Malibu. So that's what I'm going off of here.)

Anyway, hope you enjoyed this! (And many thanks, as always, to those lovely people who have been commenting/leaving kudos etc.)
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Rhodey gets to know a little more about the Winchesters. Not all of it makes him happy.

Chapter Notes

Fortunately, talking Tony out of a full-on bender was considerably less difficult than it had been in the past. Maybe it had to do with the fact that he’d been a lot more sensible where alcohol was concerned since recovering from his secret heavy metal poisoning (and yes, Rhodey still ended up a little bitter, nauseous, guilty and/or angry whenever he thought of that. What of it?) and realising that ‘Tony Stark, Iron Man’ needed a cleaner, more mature and dependable image than ‘Tony Stark, playboy extraordinaire.’

Or maybe it was because of how Sam explained, far too lightly not to be put on, that he didn’t really want to risk drinking enough to possibly end up with blank spots in his memory. (Beneath the calm façade, Rhodey could see Tony kicking himself for not thinking of that. And, considering the bare bones of the other man’s situation he’d been made aware of, he could kind of understand why.)

Well, whatever the reason, Rhodey was glad things turned out the way they did. Wild, drunken exploits were all well and good during college. For an Air Force Colonel- let alone the ‘Iron Patriot’- he had a feeling such things wouldn’t exactly be well received. No, quiet drinks in an upscale bar were far more acceptable. And also made his own goal for the evening (figuring out whether Sam properly appreciated and was invested in Tony’s budding friendship with him) much easier to attain.

And there was another advantage, too- a bittersweet one he hadn’t expected to stumble upon so soon. The unravelling of the mystery of why, after less than a week, Tony already appeared closer to Sam than he did to most of the Avengers, even though he had been living in the same building as them for months, and working with them for years before that. Rhodey had to admit he had originally found it odd- startling, even- that Tony was so inexplicably confident that he could trust the guy, even if they had both experienced such extreme betrayal by a loved one. But, as the time ticked on, he realised that the similarities ran deeper than that. Both men were ridiculously, endlessly eager to learn (even more so than Rhodey himself). Both found it almost second nature to hide their true feelings and vulnerabilities behind masks of ‘fine.’ And both, while admittedly willing to freely acknowledge their expertise in certain areas, were also unbelievably self-deprecating in pretty much everything else (even if Tony would never admit to that particular aspect of his personality).

Which also meant, of course, that (while both tried to hide it) neither of them believed themselves to truly be worthy of pretty much any form of love.

Rhodey half-smiled, half-sighed into his glass, holding back a snort of exasperated semi-amusement. It hadn’t exactly been long since JARVIS had interrupted their talk in the workshop to not-so-subtly imply that Sam would probably appreciate some company, but he was quickly
realising that it was entirely possible that he’d soon end up with another adopted brother- of sorts- for the duration of the foreseeable future. Damn him and his soft spot for emotionally damaged geniuses.

It was about two hours in that Tony stretched, peering over at an obviously flagging Sam. “Alright, we should probably head back before your guard gets there and starts freaking out about where you are. We can pick up some real food on the way.”

Sam paused for a moment, then relaxed into a small, knowing smile. “You’re the boss.”

“Ugh.” Tony shuddered over-exaggeratedly. “Nope. That’d be Pepper. I’m nothing more than a lackey- albeit an outrageously gorgeous lackey with billions of dollars and a swarm of incredibly awesome flying metal suits of armour.”

“Okay. Guess I’ll just have to stick with Tin Can, then. Or Elmer.”

“You read the fanfiction!” Tony grinned.

Sam nodded, mouth twisting wryly. “Yup. So much less creepy than the stuff about me and Dean back home.”

Rhodey blinked. “I thought you said you were Hunters? Why in God’s name would there be fanfiction about you?”

“Ah, that’s… ummm…” The taller man dragged a nervous hand through his hair. “Long story short, a prophet of God wrote a bad book series about our lives around the apocalypse, which was supposed to come to be known as the ‘Winchester Gospels.’ Luckily only one of the fans ever worked out we’re real. The only one who did was…” He trailed off briefly, rubbing his palms against his jeans and looking vaguely uncomfortable. “Well, she was kind of… intense.”

“What did she do?” Rhodey blurted out, picturing Sam being confronted with the kind of screaming fans who so often surrounded Tony. Somehow, he didn’t think the Hunter would face such a situation with quite the same amount of relish. Upon catching sight of the awkward attempt at a smile his words had drawn out, though, he quickly backtracked. “Sorry- you don’t have to answer that.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Um, let’s just say I have a very good reason to hate love potions.”

Crap. “Wait, she didn’t-” Man, everything he heard about this guy’s life just made him feel more and more horrified. And he really needed to learn how not to let alcohol loosen his mouth.

“No. No, thank god. The potions wore off and she ended up killing a demon and signing the annulment papers.”

Tony huffed out a forced laugh. “Wow. You really don’t do things by halves, do you?”

“You can say that again.” Not quite meeting either of their eyes, Sam downed what was left of his drink and stood up. “Anyway, you said you wanted to get going?”

Tony stood up, too. “Be right back.” As he made his way over to take care of their tab, Sam raised an eyebrow at Rhodey.

“Is he ever going to let me pay for anything?”

Rhodey laughed in return. “It’s unlikely. Not unless you put your foot down or it makes you
honestly uncomfortable— that’s just the way Tony is.” Internally, though, he was nodding approvingly. That was another checkpoint ticked- Sam definitely wasn’t just going along with this for the perks of being a (stupidly generous) billionaire’s friend. He’d suspected as much within the first few minutes of meeting the guy, but still it was nice to have a verbal confirmation.

“Yeah. I figured as much. It makes him happy, though, right?”

Okay. Rhodey decided then and there that Sam Winchester got his official stamp of approval. Precious few people ever bothered to think even that far into why Tony did these things.

“Yeah. Yeah it does.”

Twenty minutes later found them in Tony’s latest car, bags of Indian food tucked between Rhodey and Sam in the back seat as Tony chatted animatedly with the straight-faced driver, when suddenly JARVIS’ voice echoed out of the sound system.

“Sir, I’m afraid we have a situation with Dean Winchester.”


“He is in the garage, and is currently refusing to return to his assigned floor.”

Tony stared at the speakers. “What? Why? And what’s he doing down there in the first place?”

“Mister Winchester moved to the garage an hour ago to check on his car, Sir. He is now demanding to speak to Sam, and is saying that he will not return until he has done so. Should I send security to accompany him?”

“You know I’d love that, J, but it’s not really my call.” Turning slightly in his seat, Tony sent a carefully unjudging expression Sam’s way. “What do you want to do, Mountain Man?”

A nigh-deafening silence filled the car, Sam yet again looking anywhere else but at the other occupants as the thumb of one of his hands rubbed tentatively against the palm of the other. After a long, tense minute, he nodded out into the night. “Tell him I’ll see him when I get back.”

“You sure?”

Rhodey was pretty sure he wasn’t imagining the bitter, nervous edge to Sam’s huff of breath.

“I was going to have to talk to him at some point,” the Hunter told the window. “Might as well do it now- he’s only going to get more and more difficult if I don’t.”

And that was just… all kinds of wrong. Rhodey shared a look with Tony, ignoring the similarly concerned frown the driver was sending Sam’s way through the mirror, and quickly shook his head. Making assumptions here would likely only make things worse. Even if he knew absolutely none of the tower’s employees would really mind a little bit of extra trouble. Tony narrowed his eyes, looking anything but happy about it, but turned back to face forwards regardless.

“Alright. You heard the man, J. We should be back in about five minutes. Tell the hillbilly he’ll just have to hold on ‘til then.”

“Understood, Sir.”

The rest of the drive back was tense, to say the least, and Rhodey spent the entirety of it alternating between trying not to let third-person accounts impact his image of a man he hadn’t even met yet
and wondering just how easily he could kick this ‘Dean’ guy’s ass if things ever came to that. When they pulled into the Avengers’ garage, however, the image he was met with wasn’t really like any of the ones he’d gathered so far. The man sitting on the hood of the black chevy impala was the very picture of misery— all the way down to the empty beer bottle dangling loosely from his fingers.

All of that changed, though, when he looked up to see Sam exiting the car and stepping forward, leaving the rest of them behind. Instead, he hopped off the hood, jaw clenching and twisting into a barely-concealed sneer.

“So I guess I’m the only one actually interested in trying to get home, then.”

Sam’s fingers twitched against his legs. “Don’t do this, Dean.”

“I’m sorry, don’t do what, exactly? I’ve been working my ass off trying to figure out how to get back and how to track down Gadreel—” He either didn’t notice or else chose to ignore completely the sudden tensing of his brother’s shoulders, and instead barrelled straight on— “and you’ve been doing what exactly? The only reason I agreed to this whole stupid ‘separate floors’ thing in the first place was to give you time to wake up, get your head out of your ass, and actually start focussing on what’s important. Like, I dunno, getting back to our own universe?!”

“I’m working on it, Dean!”

“Really? ‘Cos so far, all I’ve seen is you moping around, buddying up with Cas, completely ignoring or bitching about me, and going out drinking or whatever with that Dick over there and his buddies!”

“Dean, you have no idea—”

“Oh, I think I’ve got a pretty good picture, thanks.” Shaking his head, Dean scoffed derisively. “I guess I’ve known better than to trust that you’d actually take things seriously when I wasn’t around to remind you what was actually important.”

Rhodey thrust an arm out to (reluctantly) stop Tony from surging forward, flicking his head instead towards where Sam had suddenly straightened up to his full height. He couldn’t see the other man’s face, true, but he had a strong feeling that Sam didn’t need them to interfere regardless.

“Oh, yeah,” the younger Winchester bit out, “I forgot that I’m supposed to be the untrustworthy one here.” His right fist clenched slightly, and he quickly continued speaking before Dean did. “I don’t need you breathing down my neck just to remind me to do research I’m already doing, Dean.”

“Oh go on, then, College Boy, what have you been researching exactly?”

This time Rhodey was too slow to stop Tony’s movement— not that he was really all that sure he wanted to. The mechanic lurched forward almost robotically, moving to stand defensively beside the taller man and rest a hand on his shoulder.

“Sam, you don’t have to—”

“It’s fine, Tony. Thanks.” Breathing out just as Rhodey, too, drew level, Sam fixed his brother firmly in the eye. “I’ve been translating the High Enochian.”

In a bizarre parallel to Tony’s own reaction to that news, Dean also blanched pretty much instantly. He didn’t quite take the same route after that, however.
“What the hell were you thinking?!”

“Dean-”

“No, you can’t seriously think this is a good idea! Especially after Gadreel already kicked up all those other Hell memories!”

Sam practically froze in place, voice turning near-silent and utterly void of emotion. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m not stupid, Sam. What, you didn’t think you’d be able to hide this from me this time, too, did you? I know all about how Gadreel forced you to remember all that stuff.”

“You honestly think-” Sam breathed out again. “No. You know what, I thought I could do this. I thought maybe you’d have actually thought about precisely why I was so upset with you. But it looks like I was wrong. Again.” Glancing between Rhodey and Tony, he attempted a small smile. “I’ll see you guys upstairs.” When Dean made to follow, Rhodey grabbed hold of his arm.

“I’d let him go if I were you.”

Dean shook him off a moment later. “Who the hell are you?”

“Colonel James Rhodes, U.S. Air Force. And I’m telling you, you should just let him go. And, if you really want to ever make up with him, you should probably try actually thinking about what he said, instead of just accusing him of all this random stuff.”

“Look, you don’t get it. The last time he let this Hell stuff have free reign in his head, he went completely off the reservation. He would’ve died if I hadn’t managed to find Cas in time to fix him.”

Okay, what on Earth was with this guy’s habit of just blurting out that kind of private information for the entire room to hear? “And he knows that. He’s not exactly stupid, you know- if things get too much, he’ll let someone know.”

“No. He won’t. That’s the problem- that kid doesn’t know what’s good for him. He never knows when to stop.”

Tony just glared at him. “He’s thirty, not a kid. And trust me- he knows exactly what he’s doing. Besides, even if he did get too badly affected, JARVIS would never let things get that bad. And neither would we.”

Dean flinched like he’d just been kicked in the stomach. “So now you’re trying to pretend like you know more about what’s best for my brother than I do.”

“Well, considering the crap you put him through, I’d say you probably don’t know him even half as well as you think. Either that or you’re really just self-centred enough that you know and you don’t even care. I kind of suspect the latter, considering just how determined you seem not to just lay off the guy but, either way, I think we’re done here. Now, I’d suggest you get back to your floor sometime in the next five minutes, before I have to ban you from leaving the damn place.”

Without another word, Tony turned on his heel and followed Sam out of the room, leaving Rhodey to collect the food he’d almost forgotten about from the rather-overwhelmed-looking driver and promptly bring up the rear.
Ah, writing Rhodey in this chapter was so much easier than my first draft of last chapter. It's amazing the difference choosing the right POV for the right chapter makes.

Sorry for the slight delay with this update- we had the last week of school this week, and I had to prioritise things for my final lessons. Still, I hope this chapter was at least somewhat close to worth the wait.

Thank you so much for the continued kudos/comments! You guys really know how to make me smile!
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Tony, Rhodey and Sam try to return to the fun times.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony wasn’t quite sure what to expect upon returning to Sam’s floor. The ride up there was completely silent, barring the faint sounds of the bags Rhodey was carrying rustling gently whenever the other man shifted even slightly, and it somehow felt much longer than usual. He wasn’t sure whether the slow drag of time was just his mind playing tricks on him or else JARVIS deliberately making it so that Sam would have more time to compose himself in relative privacy, but either way it still left him with plenty of time to seethe.

He was beginning to really, really dislike Dean Winchester. It was like the man was taking every single opportunity made available to him to try and make up for what he had done, and was instead using them to try to berate, belittle and break Sam down enough so that… what? Sam would end up being the one to say that he was the one in the wrong, even though it was obvious to anyone with half a brain that the opposite was true?

Damned if Tony was ever going to let that happen.

And the evening had been going so well, too. The bots had taken to Sam even quicker than he’d thought they would (and vice-versa)- as had Rhodey, which hadn’t really been a shock, but was relieving nonetheless. They’d had some nice drinks and good conversation, and he knew full well just how amazing the food was going to be (he wasn’t exactly a stranger to this particular restaurant’s Aloo Gobi). Sam had slowly lost the tormented aura forced upon him by his translation work, and had actually regained a little colour in his cheeks. And then, in less than ten minutes, Dean had managed to single-handedly rip all of the evening’s light-hearted atmosphere away and grind it down into something more closely resembling the mess of goo left over after a particularly vicious child was done working out their sadistic side on a slug.

When the doors finally slid open, Tony stepped out first, Rhodey just behind. It took less than a second to find Sam, seated as he was in his usual spot, and only two seconds more to see that things were just as bad as he’d been hoping they wouldn’t be. The TV was on, the Hunter’s eyes fixed firmly on it, but it didn’t exactly take a genius to see that the younger man wasn’t taking in a single thing happening on the screen. His fists clenched nearly uncontrollably at the hollow, disconnected blankness of Sam’s gaze, a surge of protectiveness welling up in his chest so strong he could count on his fingers the number of people who had ever- for better or worse- been able to draw out something similar within him.

“Tones-” Rhodey’s soft voice sounded from beside him- “leave him for now. Let’s just get the food set up, yeah?”

After a few moments of hesitation, Tony nodded. “Yeah. Okay.”

Giving a nod to Devon in greeting (who, in a sure sign that he, too, had picked up on something
being wrong, actually had a barely-noticeable frown tugging at his brow for maybe the first time ever), Tony followed Rhodey over to the kitchenette. The bots joined them just as he put the last of the bowls Rhodey passed him onto the small pile on the counter, all three moving as quietly as was possible for them. Then U’s claw twisted anxiously, the sentiment echoed in Dum-E and Butterfingers’ soft whines, and Tony was hit with a sudden urge to punch Dean in the face if he ever got a chance to do so without anyone asking too many questions- now the damned asshole even had these guys worried about Sam’s state of mind.

“Hey, now, none of that,” he instructed in a rough approximation of his usual blasé manner of speaking. “You guys go over there acting like that, and it’s only going to make Sam feel guilty for making you feel sad. Is that what you want?” At the emphatic shaking of their arms, he nodded. “Alright then. Now Dum-E- you take the bowls over. Butterfingers, you grab one bag from Rhodey. U, you get the other bag. We’ll get the spoons and some more drinks and follow you over.”

The bots promptly (or as promptly as they ever did anything, anyway) moved into action and, other than one iffy moment where Dum-E set the bowls so close to the edge of the table that U would have knocked them off again were it not for Rhodey’s quick reflexes, the five of them together had everything nicely spread out in a manner of minutes.

It wasn’t until Tony all but thrust one of the bowls right into Sam’s line of vision that the younger man actually noticed that they were even in the room, if the small jerking motion he made was anything to go by. Tony didn’t say anything about it as Sam apologised and took the bowl, though. Instead, he jerked his head in the direction of the TV, where a large, beaming nurse was checking in with a heavily pregnant woman and her partner, and started spooning generous helpings of food into his own bowl.

“There any particular reason we’re watching a documentary about Maternity Wards, Mountain Man?”

Sam stared at him somewhat blankly before turning to actually take in what was on the screen. “Oh. Sorry.” He slid the remote across the table, smiling. “You can choose something else if this makes you uncomfortable, Tin Man.”

Okay, this guy was way too good at that. If Tony hadn’t been present downstairs, or hadn’t known as much as he did about Sam’s history, there was a good chance he may have fallen hook, line and sinker for the other man’s act. Still, there was no harm in playing along if that was what Sam really wanted. Smirking back, he raised his eyebrows. “What? So you’re not looking for birthing advice?”

Another deceptively easy joking smile. Damn it- before Dean, they’d actually started to move past having so many of those. Not that he should really be one to judge. “Maybe when I know you a little better, yeah?”

Well, might as well go the whole hog. “Got it. Wait ‘til you’ve actually got a bun in the oven. In that case, I shall await your proposal and the following outcome of our wedding night with baited breath.”

“Roger that.” Then, all of a sudden, something in the younger man’s mask cracked slightly, and a small glimpse of that disbeliefing, thankful expression he let out every now and then slipped through, so similar to how Tony himself felt sometimes when people were genuinely nice to him that it almost physically hurt to look at. Quickly swallowing it down, Sam turned away and looked across at the food (or maybe just in that general direction- his eyes had taken on that unfocussed look again).
And Tony, in a perfect example of precisely why he had so few friends, was left with absolutely no idea how to react. Why did he always have to be so god-damned constipated when it came to the important emotional moments in life?

Luckily, though, Rhodey came to the rescue after just a few short seconds. The older man leaned forward slightly, hand raised with only a minimal amount of awkwardness, and levelled a solid stare towards Tony, calming his panic in a way only Rhodey and Pepper ever seemed capable of. “Hey, if you two are getting married, I better be Maid of Honour.”

“Well, you would look absolutely stunning in the dress, honey bear,” Tony acknowledged, keeping half an eye on Sam even as he stuffed a spoonful of Aloo Gobi into his mouth, savouring the delicious blend of spices and the gentle mix of textures as he chewed and swallowed, wondering whether or not it would be worth it at this point to just throw all caution to the wind and actually take a trip to the floor below. “You’ve got yourself a deal. I guess that would make me the bride, then?”

“Wouldn’t that mean you’re the one who needs the birthing advice, then— not Sam?”

“Hmm.” Sitting back, he nodded contemplatively. “Also a valid point. Unless we’re both the bride? That would be even better, right? Hey— would our kids still be considered twins if each of us gave birth to one?”

The following debate (which started by detailing the logistics of raising the imaginary children, then went on to who Sam’s Maid of Honour could be and whether things would be easier if they just had all of the theoretical wedding guests attend in formal dresses, and eventually degraded into wondering which styles the possible male guests would wear if such a wedding was ever held) was passably fun at first, but there was still an element of ease they’d had earlier on which was noticeably missing. Everything just felt… off, somehow. Like, even though everyone was participating, none of their hearts were really in it. A glitch in the code he didn’t know how to fix. And while he supposed that was technically true, the stark (no pun intended) difference from such a short time before was physically jarring.

But, hey, at least there was food and maternity documentaries to distract them a bit, right?

Yeah right.

He really wanted to punch Dean Winchester.

In fact, he was about two minutes away from storming off to do just that when, to the surprise of every single person present, Dum-E came to the rescue.

One second they were all pretending to stare at the screen. The next, the blanket from earlier was dumped unceremoniously into Sam’s lap, with the robot in question doing his level best to stretch it out and over both his legs and his shoulders. When he couldn’t succeed, he gave up entirely, and instead began prodding gently against Sam’s arm, whirring and keening softly all the time. Fortunately, it wasn’t long before JARVIS took pity on the completely and utterly bewildered Hunter.

“I believe that Dum-E does not like seeing you sad, Sam. He feels that, if the blanket offered you some form of comfort earlier, perhaps it could do the same now.” A moment of silence passed before he continued, sounding hesitant in a way he rarely let anyone but Tony hear. “I believe everyone present shares similar sentiments.”

For several seconds, Tony honestly had no idea what was going to happen. He wasn’t sure he’d
ever seen anyone experience such a vast array of emotions in such a short time as Sam did right then- which was remarkable enough in itself but, when coupled with the fact that all of those emotions were in his eyes alone, face not moving a single muscle, was probably a feat worthy of some sort of obscure (and really messed up) record book. At the end of it, he didn’t cry. But Tony had a feeling it was a damn close call. Instead, he let out what was possibly the saddest, most grateful smile Tony had ever seen and patted Dum-E’s claw.

“Thanks, buddy. It helps. A lot.” As Dum-E rolled away, humming gently as he disappeared down the corridor, Sam turned that same smile to Tony and Rhodey. “I’m sorry. I know I’ve kind of ruined this whole evening.”

Rhodey leaned forward, his patented ‘comfort frown’ firmly in place. “Sam, you didn’t-”

“No, I did. Really. I had a chance to make things better for everyone- and not just for today- and I blew it by losing my temper the way I did.”

Tony had to fight not to raise his eyebrows (that was what Sam called losing his temper? Seriously?!), limiting himself instead to just a shake of the head. “Sam, with all the self-righteous garbage he was spouting, you can’t honestly expect us not to understand why you reacted like you did. Hell, I probably would’ve done a lot worse if it had been me.”

And there was that self-deprecating smile again (Tony was really beginning to see why Rhodey and Pepper claimed to hate it so much when he pulled that same expression). “I know you think that what I’ve done in the past could never bother you, and I know a lot of what Dean says and does probably seems unreasonable and kind of out of left field because of that. But you’ve got to remember- Dean lived through all of it. He’s lived through an entire lifetime of me letting him down pretty much every single chance I got- in ways you probably can’t even imagine. Hell, if any other Hunter had a brother like me, they probably would have killed me years ago.”

“Sam, even if that’s true- which, by the way, I’m still kind of iffy about- it doesn’t mean he gets to hurt you like he did and then treat you like crap just because you can’t forgive him straight away,” Rhodey insisted.

Sam just shook his head. “The truth is, I knew when I said it that that wasn’t the way to deal with the situation. I should have been trying to calm Dean down, not rile him up. I had a chance to make things easier for every single person involved, and I blew it- again- by not being able to control myself.”

“So what I’m hearing is-” Tony stated as flatly as he could- “that he’s a complete douchebag who brings up past mistakes you’ve more than atoned for whenever it suits him, then loses his temper when you don’t bow to his every whim, and ends up making you feel like crap because of it.” He moved to the edge of his seat, mind whirring furiously in his anger. “See, here’s the thing, Sam- I don’t buy it. This whole narrative reeks of something that’s been drilled into your head because no-one ever tried telling you that you didn’t deserve it. And I have absolutely no doubt that, even if you told me your entire life story, I would still end up with exactly the same opinion.”

“Just because you feel guilty, Sam,” Rhodey added, placing a calming hand on Tony’s shoulder, “that doesn’t mean you actually deserve to feel guilty. And however Dean chooses to handle the fact that you’re standing up for yourself this time? That’s not on you. He’s, what, thirty-something?”

“Thirty-four. Thirty-five next week.”

“Exactly. He’s a grown-ass man. He’s responsible for his own actions. And he should know by
now that you don’t make up for your actions by grinding the person you hurt down even more, or by getting angry because they don’t let that happen. Look, however you choose to handle this, we’ll follow your lead. You want to make up with your brother, that’s fine. Just make sure you do it on your terms, or all you’ll end up doing is letting him think that what he did really wasn’t all that bad. And if he never realises that it was, who’s to say he won’t do it again at some point?”

Tony couldn’t say a word. Could only watch as fear eclipsed Sam’s face, eyes slowly moving from Rhodey’s serious expression down to his own hands and ending on the palm of his left hand. Tony had no real clue why that hand was so important, but he’d seen Sam ground himself enough times by now with it that he knew there had to be some sort of significance to it. Almost a full minute passed before the younger man looked up again, more firm this time.

“You’re right.” His eyes flicked between the two of them, coupled with a deep, determined, and only slightly shaky breath. “Both of you. It’s a pattern, and it’s only going to get worse if I don’t get him to see that. Sorry you guys had to play councillor.”

Rhodey forced out a laugh. “Hey, I’ve spent half my life being friends with Tony Stark. Counselling is kind of a big part of the package.”

Tony shoved the other man’s arm, grateful for the segue. “Hey, come on. I’m not that bad!”

“Whatever you wanna tell yourself, buddy.”

“Alright, fine. So I’m messed up.” He shot a conspiratorial grin in Sam’s direction, pleased to see the other man return with a tentative one of his own. “Personally, I think everyone in the world is their own personal brand of screwed up. It’s the smart ones who actually realise that, though.”

Sam raised a challenging eyebrow. “Even Mother Teresa?”

“Especially Mother Teresa. Woman was probably making up for a previous incarnation as that grasshopper from Bug’s Life or something.”

“What on Earth is Bug’s Life?”

“It’s an animated movie,” Rhodey explained, before fixing Tony with a quizzical expression. “When did you watch Bug’s Life? No, scratch that- why did you watch Bug’s Life?”

Tony let their agony go on for a grand total of twelve seconds before laughing. “I lost a bet with Pepper. It wasn’t actually as bad as it could have been, though- Dot is one hell of a tough little ant.”

It was then that the bots chose to return- each of them now loaded down with two or three blankets apiece, which they placed with varying degrees of success either on or next to each of the three humans. Tony blinked, then laughed.

“Okay. Blankets for all it is, then. And JARVIS, play Bug’s Life for us, would you? It’s time to educate these peons in the absurdity that is family entertainment.”

Chapter End Notes

You would not *believe* just how many times I bounced back and forth about whether to use Tony's or Sam's POV for this chapter. Lol. I think I made the right
decision in the end, though, and I hope you agree.

Many thanks, of course, to everyone still reading this, and especially to you awesome people still leaving comments and kudos. All of you are amazing. ^_^
JARVIS plays therapist, and Sam has his eyes (ever so slightly) opened, and his world turned on its head (again).

The next few days, when all was said and done, passed relatively quietly, and Sam quickly settled into a routine which—while not exactly what most people would call pleasant—worked reasonably well towards keeping his mood steady. The times at which he did everything were adjustable, of course, but they were his times. And only he could choose whether they changed. Whether it was his twice-daily naps, his feeble attempts at exercise, his research, his leisure time, his three hours (maximum) of translation work each afternoon, or the walk outside (accompanied by a plain-clothed guard, of course) to clear his head after completing it, everything had its place. Everything fit. And, much like it had during his time at Stanford, or while he was hallucinating Lucifer, even having just that much control over his life helped. Just a little.

Perhaps the biggest help, though, came in the form of his conversations with JARVIS, during those hours spent translating. Talking came more naturally, somehow, without a human face judging him, and Sam found himself opening up in a way he couldn’t bring himself to with other people—going over parts of his life he’d never usually be comfortable discussing in an effort to pin-point more precisely where the real issues he and Dean would have to work on lay. JARVIS had a way of looking at things—vast and inhuman, but compassionate and empathetic at the same time—which never failed to pick up on some sort of detail Sam himself would usually never think twice about. Things he had become so used to that he’d never even thought to question them.

Like the fact that saying their mother wouldn’t like them hunting—or that she was never coming back—did not mean that he deserved violence or recriminations. Or that confronting Dean about their dad, taking the car (even if— or even especially because—Dean had been worried about his mental state at the time) and being possessed by a damn demon weren’t things that merited being punched in the face. That maybe he wasn’t in the wrong for sometimes thinking it was unfair or hypocritical that when Sam trusted a supernatural creature, Dean railed against him practically every time, only to expect Sam to fall in line unquestioningly when he declared one worthy of their trust.

And that maybe they had allowed themselves to become far too comfortable with stabbing demons to kill them, instead of attempting exorcisms where at all possible and only using Ruby’s knife as a last resort. That maybe the things they had been dealing with had been too big for too long, and they’d lost track of all the little things which were supposed to matter so much.

Perhaps that insight—that willingness of the AI’s to remain open enough to criticise Sam’s own actions, too—was why, today, he had decided to reveal to JARVIS a big part of why Dean was not entirely wrong in finding him untrustworthy.

“I am afraid I cannot agree with the arguments you have presented,” JARVIS stated, interrupting Sam’s train of thought. The Hunter looked up from his Starkpad, pulling the blanket slightly tighter.
around his shoulders.

“What do you mean?”

“In what you have just told me, as well as various conversations both you and your brother have held since you arrived at this tower, it appears that all parties involved- and many who weren’t- place full accountability for starting the apocalypse upon your shoulders. I fail to see why this is the case.”

“…What?” Sam cleared his throat, forcing himself to repeat the question in a less strangled manner. “What?” Had the AI perhaps had a momentary malfunction and missed several key points of his explanation? “I drank Demon Blood. I chose a demon over my brother. I killed Lilith and opened the Cage. How on earth is that not my fault?”

“You ingested a substance you had no way of knowing could lead to addiction and used it to aid the victims of possession- and not, I may add, without first experiencing extreme and well-tailored manipulation while grieving. You made a logical choice to work with a demon who by your own account had, at that point, never shown any signs of being anything but helpful, and with whom every member of your group had also worked. You offered your brother the chance to work together with you, as she was the only one who had a method to locate Lilith, and he refused and then responded by threatening you. Your reaction may have been more extreme than it would normally be, but on the heels of an experience as traumatic as the one you described as occurring in the panic room, and under an undeniable threat to your safety, it is understandable. And you had been led to believe by everyone involved that killing Lilith would end the breaking of the seals- and therefore bring a halt to the apocalypse. Not knowing she was the last seal is not something which can on any level be said to be your fault. While I understand your guilt, in this case I do not, therefore, understand why anyone with a full understanding of the situation would come to the conclusion that you alone are to blame.”

“But I don’t-” he didn’t understand what was going on here. “You’re supposed to-” JARVIS was supposed to hate him for this, or at least feel some vague sense of disgust or disappointment. That was all everyone else- himself included- ever felt when faced with this topic. That was what he had braced himself for. “JARVIS, people died because of me. Thousands of people. All of them dead because I opened that Cage.”

“I am not questioning the effects, Sam. Merely the proportion of blame laid upon you compared to that on others. Heaven and Hell conspired to break sixty-four of the seals. The first was broken without your knowledge and while your brother was dead. You broke one seal out of sixty-six under false pretences. So why does it fall to you to accept one hundred percent of the guilt?”

“Because I broke the last one. Even if every other seal possible had already been broken, nothing would have come of it if I hadn’t been too stupid to see through Ruby’s play, or too arrogant not to see when Lilith was obviously taunting me into killing her!”

“Again, as far as you knew, everyone believed that her death would stop everything. Do you truly believe that you would still have killed her if you had known otherwise?” When Sam didn’t respond- for some reason unwilling to admit that no, he definitely didn’t believe that- JARVIS continued regardless, voice painfully un-accusing. “What if it had been a different Hunter who killed her, simply because she was a demon? Or if things had gone differently, and your brother had accompanied you and Ruby? What if he were the one who killed Lilith, not knowing that it would release Lucifer? The results would have been the same- all of those people would still have died. Would you have held him entirely responsible, as he does you?”

“Of course not!” At least, he didn’t think he would. Not when Dean had no way of knowing- right?
“Then why is it different for you?”

“Because Dean is-!” Clean. Not a monster. Not tainted. Not destined to be the damn vessel of the Devil himself. Dealing with his own issues at the time- ones it wasn’t Sam’s place to reveal. “He’s smart enough that he would have noticed something was off about how Ruby was acting.”

The excuse sounded weak even to his ears.

This wasn’t right. The apocalypse was the one thing everyone had always agreed on- Angels, Demons and Hunters alike. All of them knew that it was Sam who had kickstarted the whole thing. He had accepted that. He had thrown himself into Hell to atone for that. He had suffered- was still suffering- because of that. And while he hoped that he would still have been strong enough to do the same even if he hadn’t been to blame- just because it was the right thing to do, and because he was the only one who could- to hear it even being suggested that he had been wrong about this all this time…

No. No, this was too big. It was too much. And besides, how much of a selfish ass would he have to be to put that kind of weight on someone else now? He had carried this around for so long. It was a part of him- an ugly, painful, gaping part, but a part nonetheless. One he had grown crushingly used to. And he wasn’t really sure he knew how to live without that any more.

“There was a room in this tower filled with radioactive explosives, and everyone but Doctor Banner was aware of that. But, instead of telling him what the room contained, they instead led him to believe that it contained a possible cure which would keep him from becoming the Hulk. Would you hold him to be at fault if he opened the door to that room and inadvertently set off the explosives within?”

“…No. But he’d still…”

There it was again. Bruce would still feel guilty- it was a natural reaction when people got hurt because of something you’d done. But, if there was one thing that Sam was trying to teach himself to apply to his own experiences- something he’d had to repeat to himself several times over the past few days- it was that guilt didn’t necessarily equate to true responsibility. It wasn’t something he should be counting in this equation.

…but then, he’d already allowed himself to let go of his guilt over this once before, after returning from the Cage. It had still come rushing back at the first sign that Dean still hadn’t fully forgiven him, and then quadrupled when he’d been confronted by someone directly impacted by Lucifer’s release. That guilt would never truly go away again, no matter what he tried to tell himself about liability or accountability. However, while he didn’t doubt in the slightest that he was right to feel at least somewhat responsible, he couldn’t deny that what JARVIS was saying made logical sense.

God, he didn’t know how to respond to this. Had absolutely no idea how much he should allow JARVIS’ observations to impact his life. They were talking about the single greatest mistake he’d ever made in his life- possibly the greatest mistake a single human had made since biblical times. How could he even think about trying to put even a tiny bit of that on someone else- especially after all this time? And if JARVIS was right, then what did that make him? The world’s most gullible punching bag? A pathetic scapegoat begging for every single scrap of redemption?

The sigils on his screen swam before his eyes. It was no good- he wasn’t going to be able to get any more translations done today. Closing the window, he pushed the couple of sheets he had worked on so far into their drawer and leaned back in his chair, dragging a single hand down his face.
This wasn’t about putting blame on other people. Not really. There was no need for him to rage at the world and demand that everyone involved suffer their own fair portion of the pain he had been through ever since Lilith’s blood first formed that shaky circle on a cold stone floor. The question really was: to what extent should he continue to blame *himself*?

“JARVIS, I think I need some time to think.”

Chapter End Notes

Phew. I’ve gotta be honest with you, when I started writing this I wasn't expecting for it to take over an entire chapter, but here we are (and with plenty of things I decided not to say because they simply wouldn't have fit tone-wise). I hope you guys enjoyed it!

(Also, in case it wasn't clear, Sam didn't tell JARVIS that Dean broke the first seal, or even that he was in Hell when he died- I feel like Sam has had enough experience (especially in this fic) with other people blurting out private things about him that he wouldn't be willing to do the same in return. To him, Dean's secrets are Dean's secrets even if he *is* angry at him, and Sam isn't going to reveal anything Dean would be uncomfortable with having other people know.)

Huge thanks as always to everyone still reading, commenting and leaving kudos- I really do appreciate it so much! You guys are amazing!
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Sam figures out where his motivations should lie. Bruce has some news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sam, with so much on his mind weighing him down, almost forewent his usual walk. After some deliberation, though, he decided that fresh air and hints of nature would help his thought process far more than shutting himself away ever would. So, when four o’clock arrived, he shrugged on an extra layer to combat the seasonal chill and made his way down to the lobby to meet his escort for the day.

The ensuing walk (and coincidental discovery of a quaint little organic smoothie bar not too far from the tower) did wonders, as ever, for his frazzled nerves, but unfortunately did precious little to help him actually reach a resolution regarding JARVIS’ observations. Which was fine, to an extent. To be expected, even. But, on the other hand, he really would have liked not to have to think about these things any more. Re-evaluating such a loaded situation now- after all this time, and with so many other things forcing their way out of the woodwork- was just plain unsettling. As twisted as it probably sounded, he just… wasn’t used to people not blaming him for things. And trying to adjust his own way of thinking to fit the idea that his new acquaintances may actually have a point was far more exhausting than it really had any right to be. And it wasn’t made any easier by the fact that a not-insignificant part of his mind- a part he’d given into more and more easily over the past few years- was telling him that things would be a lot easier if he just put all these thoughts of re-assessment and adjustment behind him and fell back on the status quo. He’d spent his entire childhood fighting a losing battle for change against the way their dad ran things, and it had very nearly drained him of everything he had.

Was he absolutely certain he wanted to continue on to repeat that same path with Dean?

The truth was, he missed his brother. He missed laughing together over ridiculous movies and sitting on the impala’s hood, creating similarly ridiculous stories in the patterns of the stars. He missed them teasing each other and poking at each others’ sore limbs after uncomfortable nights curled up on car seats. He missed dumb quizzes about music trivia and stupid competitions over who could throw the most peanuts into an empty tin can.

He missed the comfort and safety he used to sense when he was in his Big Brother’s presence, before everything was overshadowed by his own shame. He missed a time when a certain shift in Dean’s posture, or a certain clenching of his jaw, hadn’t sent faint shivers of tense, anticipatory fear shooting up his spine.

He missed a time when Dean’s disappointment in him had been a distant ghost in his nightmares, instead of something he lived with every day.

He missed knowing with absolute certainty that his brother would never go so far as to violate his body and mind.
So, yes, he missed his brother. And he hoped, eventually, that they would be able to move past this - he couldn't really help that. But eventually was a long way away when the trust he’d thought they’d had between them had been shattered as brutally as it had. And maybe he was going about all this the wrong way by focussing so much of his efforts thinking about how to bridge that gap. Maybe real change would never come if reconciliation with Dean was his only motivation. Maybe, before he could take a step towards building a real foundation - or even seeing for himself whether Dean would even be willing to work with him on it - he had to focus on himself first. Maybe before working out what \textit{they} needed, he had to work out what \textit{he} needed.

And really, after everything, there was only one answer to that. He needed boundaries. He needed to feel like the inside of his body was safe again. He needed… he needed to figure out, after everything, exactly who Sam Winchester was now. Outside of Dean and Hunting. Outside of blood and guts and death and the endless, repressing weight of what felt like their entire universe’s expectations for him. Was he even the same person he had once thought he could be?

Maybe, in the end, it didn’t matter how long he spent trying to work out where things with other people had gone wrong. The rest of the answers were never going to come unless he solved \textit{himself} first.

And besides, this time? Maybe the one who \textit{should} be trying to think of a way to fix their bond? \textit{Wasn’t him}.

That was what he told himself as, in his up-to-then nigh relentless melancholy, he fell - for the first time in what felt like uncountable years - back on a technique Jessica had liked to prod him into if she ever saw him “overworking” himself (and one she used at least one a week for herself).

It was amazing, really, how something as simple as soaking in a bath could ease away what was weighing you down.

And when he went to bed that night, warm and comfortable and \textit{safe}, it was with one more burden lifted from his shoulders.

And when he got up the next morning, having only woken a mere two times during the night, and the date brought Dean straight back into his mind, his brother’s name was no longer accompanied by the crushing question of ‘\textit{what am I going to do to make this right?’}

The text from Bruce came a couple of hours later.

‘\textit{Got some news. Can you come to the lab when you’ve got time?’}

After sending back confirmation, Sam finished the chapter he was reading (from one of the books from Tony and Bruce, this time on the various mythologies found across the different regions and religions in Africa), then finished his latest coffee before making his way down the now-familiar route to meet Bruce. The scientist waved him in when he arrived, indicating for Sam to take his usual seat as he finished fiddling with some ridiculously complex molecular compounds he had spread across the displays hovering around him. In all the time it would have taken Sam to recite a single exorcism, however, Bruce was done, dragging the re-arranged compounds into a folder and tugging off his glasses to scrub them clean as he turned and cast a doctor’s eye over the Hunter’s general demeanour.

“How are you feeling today?”

Sam sent him a smile and a small shrug in return. “Surprisingly? Not too bad.”
Bruce slipped his glasses into the pocket of his lab coat, then brought his hands back up to fold
them in front of him. “Do you think you’re ready to feel even better?”

No, that was impossible. Right? They couldn’t have already found a cure. “It’s only been a few
days.”

“Oh, it’s not ready yet. But I spoke with Helen Cho earlier. She thinks she might have figured out a
way to incorporate the modified extremis into her Cradle. She says the tests they’ve run with your
blood show promise, but she’d like to do the next stage on fresh tissue before we even think about
applying it to you directly. And considering they can’t exactly test it on animals, or even on anyone
else, she would need to take the tissue from you directly.

 “…Which is basically a very round-about way of me asking if you’d like to go to Seoul for a few
days.”

“Wh- Seoul? When?”

“If you’re still certain you want to go ahead with the cure, tomorrow. Now’s a good time, because
we’re unlikely to have another mission just yet. And Tony’s got to go to Melbourne in a couple of
days anyway-”

“Right. For that guest lecture thing he’s doing, right?”

“Yeah. So he says, if you agree, he’ll take us over on his jet then pick us up when he’s finished
with Australia.” The older man coughed slightly awkwardly. “I, uh, don’t really like travelling
commercial if I can help it.”

“Right.” Okay. Wow. If Sam was entirely honest, a large part of him hadn’t really expected Tony’s
idea for a cure to be truly viable at all, let alone so soon. But if the tests were already looking good,
then the finished product probably wouldn’t be far behind. Which meant that he was running out
of chances to back out. He really would have to make a final decision soon. Would he turn down
the treatment, and hope for an eventual way to rid his system of Grace, or would he be able to
accept the idea of tying two of his life’s greatest abusers into his DNA for the rest of time?

He took a deep breath. “Right.”

Bruce nodded understandingly. “If you’re not sure, we can put it off. Maybe go in a few weeks?”

“No. No, I can go. It’s just… a lot to take in, you know?”

“Yeah.” The older man tapped the tips of his fingers together- a habit of his whenever he was
feeling even slightly apprehensive. “Are you sure? I know it’s a lot to ask of you.”

“Y- I’m sure.” Sam smiled only marginally shakily. “I chose this. And it’s only for tests anyway.”
He paused. “Speaking of which- assuming these tests are successful, what then?”

“Well, it’s up to you, really. Even with the tissue, it will still take a little time for Helen to run the
final checks, and for us to eliminate as many dangers as possible. Then, if you decide you still want
to go ahead, we were thinking it would be best to do it as a series of treatments instead of one big
dose- just in case there are any unforeseen side-effects. And Helen says she’d be fine doing that in
either Seoul or New York. We can decide that closer to the actual time, though.”

“Right.”

“You’re saying that a lot today,” Bruce pointed out somewhat dryly. Sam laughed.
“I guess I am. So what time will we need to leave tomorrow?”

“About eleven. Maybe take off at around one. We can eat and sleep on the plane, but Seoul’s over half a day ahead of us, so if we want to arrive in the afternoon it would have to be then or earlier.”

“Eleven it is then.” Offering a smile, Sam breathed out a little nervously. “You know, if you don’t count a quick trip to Scotland to find the King of Hell’s bones, I’ve never actually been out of the country before.”

“… Considering the fact that you seem to have spent most of your life as a fugitive? I’m not really all that surprised.”

“Fair enough.”

The two of them slipped into an easier conversation, as Bruce double checked that Sam was up to date on certain inoculations and described a few of the different countries he had visited- many of them as a fugitive himself. It stopped abruptly, however, when one of the machines in the corner let out a series of whining beeps. As Bruce excused himself and moved over to check on the test he’d been running, Sam made his own way back out to the elevators, taking out his phone and opening a text to Castiel he’d started that morning as he walked. He only hesitated for a minute before adding to the message, sending it before he had a chance to change his mind.

‘Hey, Cas. I’m going to be out of the tower for a few days starting tomorrow. Got something to see to. Can you ask Dean if it’d be okay for me to pop by?’ He may not have been ready to forgive Dean just yet but, for today at least, he could at least offer that much, right? Just for a minute or two. He was angry. That didn’t mean he didn’t care any more.

Still, he couldn’t deny he felt oddly relieved when, a few minutes later, Castiel replied with ‘Dean seems un-eager (gloomy emoticon). Perhaps another time?’

Sam stepped into the elevator, asking JARVIS to take him back to his own floor.

‘It’s fine. I understand. Just tell him Happy Birthday.’

Chapter End Notes

I have to be honest- I'm not 100% sure I'm entirely happy with this chapter. I can't tell if the ideas came across clearly enough, or whether the flow feels a little awkward in places. And, even though some of this stuff was necessary in moving on to the next part of the story, I also feel like it come across as a little filler-y? That might just be me being hyper-critical, though. Sigh.

Anyway, please feel free to let me know what you think. And thank you so much, as always, to everyone who responds to this story- whether it be through kudos, comments or subscriptions. The comments I got on the last chapter, especially, had me grinning like an absolute loon. Lol.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Dean takes some teeny-tiny baby steps forward... and several giant leaps in just about every other direction.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The air in the training room was refreshingly cool. Dean leaned back where he sat, head thumping gently against the wall as he tilted it to stare blankly at the ceiling. That coolness was about the only thing the room had going for it right now- he’d agreed to come down with Cas just for the sake of breaking the monotony of being on their floor, but to be frank he just wasn’t in the mood to join the others in actually doing any exercise. He wanted some real stress relief, and punching an unresponsive bag of sand or getting his ass handed to him by Steve or that Natasha chick in a sparring session just wasn’t going to cut it.

He was spared the decision of whether or not to either hit his head again or else go and get a beer just for the sake of it by Cas- who had apparently finished his latest bout with Thor while Dean wasn’t paying attention- wandering over, fiddling apprehensively with his phone.

“Dean, can I talk with you outside?”

Dean eyed the phone for a moment before replying. The angel had been almost frustratingly open about the fact that the only one he regularly contacted on it was Sam, which could potentially mean that Sam had talked him into trying to manipulate Dean into standing down. And asking to talk away from the others did suggest that this would likely be about something Dean wouldn’t be all that happy about. On the other hand, though, Cas had been acting like more and more like an increasingly wet blanket over the past week- maybe he’d finally woken up to Sam’s play and was coming over to apologise for betraying the Hunter’s trust again.

Whichever one it was, Dean had to acknowledge that maybe it would be best to have this conversation away from prying ears. He still didn’t fully trust the Avengers. Not when it came to the possibility of some of his vulnerabilities being revealed, at least- Steve and Thor (and maybe Falcon) would likely try to pry in their desire to “help,” and Natasha was definitely the type to store that kind of thing away in case she ever needed to use it against him (as was that dick Clint, but luckily he wasn’t around right now).

“Sure.”

Standing up, he led the way out into the corridor and down into a smaller room a couple of doors down which he’d spotted on a previous visit. The inside was surprisingly small and bare considering the tower’s usual décor, with only lamp fixtures- not posters or paintings- on the walls, bare (if noticeably high-quality) wooden floors and only a few chairs dotted around the solitary glass-topped table. Probably a conference room or something. Deciding against taking a seat, he simply walked around the table and planted himself on the other side of it, trying his best not to look too confrontational. This was all about balance- especially when he didn’t know for certain yet what kind of a direction the conversation could end up taking.
“Go on, then. What does Sam want?”

At least Cas had the grace— or maybe just the good sense— not to act either innocent or as though he was surprised that Dean had worked even that much out.

“He says that he has something to attend to away from the tower for a few days,” -wait, what? *What the hell would he need to do that for? How would a road trip or whatever help them to get home? What happened to translating the High Enochian?*- “and wants to know if he can come by before he leaves.”

Dean stilled. “He wants to know *what*?”

“…Whether you would be okay with him coming to talk to you, I suppose.”

Oh, this was just- “Is he shitting with me?” He had tried how many times, exactly, to reach out and talk to Sam in those first few days? To get him to see sense? And Sam had rejected him every single time, and stormed off to no doubt bitch about him to Tony for half of those. And now he was just going to turn around and do what exactly? Play nice just for Dean’s birthday, and then turn around and go right back to ignoring him the next day?

“No.”

Cas looked hesitant. “Dean-”

“No. No, I’m not just gonna sit there and let him try to string me along with some one-day truce just so he doesn’t have to feel guilty for acting like a dick on my birthday. I’m not some damned charity case!”

“Dean, it’s possible that he wants to reach out for some kind of reconciliation.”

“Oh, don’t give me that crap, Cas. If he wanted to make up, he wouldn’t have bothered giving himself an out by planning to run off the next day. Especially if he’s still trying to convince everyone that I’m the one who needs to back down here, ’cos I think we all know *that’s* not gonna happen any time soon.” Chest clenching painfully, he glared across the table. “Get out.”

“Dean-”

“Cas, I swear to God, man, if you don’t want me to break my freaking hand against your face, you will get out of this room right. Now.”

After just a few more beats of hesitation, Cas relented with a begrudging nod and turned, leaving Dean alone. The Hunter waited for a full minute- making absolutely certain the angel was really gone- before lashing out at the nearest chair with a vicious kick.

“Dammit!”

Sinking down onto the offending item, all fight gone as swiftly as it had arrived, Dean breathed heavily through his nose, bringing one hand up to grasp at his forehead. Instead of his more typical massage, though, this time he simply tightened his grip, fingers digging in so hard it bordered on painful. He was just over-reacting to this, right? Surely Sam hadn’t really sunk low enough as to do this to him deliberately? To dangle the possibility of reunion only to snatch it away by disappearing the next day and going back to ignoring him? The kid had always been scarily dark when he was really angry, true- it was something all the Winchesters had in common, to a certain extent- but he’d never purposefully go messing with his brother’s hopes like that. Not when he already knew just how many times Dean had been abandoned or betrayed in the past- many of
those times by Sam himself. It was just too cruel.

Not unless the trials- or even Gadreel- had messed with his brain somehow.

Huh.

The thought hadn’t really occurred to him before but, now that it was in his head, it was hard to just ignore. It would definitely explain why Sam had been acting so irrationally for the past week and a half. It might even explain why God- if it had, indeed, been God- had sent them to this universe. Maybe what had been done to Sam was severe enough that he once again posed a risk to their world, and it was only by sending them here (where these weird, over-powered freaks and their cyber-tower could keep an eye on him) that Gadreel’s influence over his mind would be weakened. Maybe that was why Sam had been the only one to hear the “find peace” message.

After all, this wouldn’t be the first time some heavenly douchebag had tried to manoeuvre Sam into the ending the world by driving a wedge between him and Dean. And influencing Sam into staging a reconciliation attempt and then snatching it away would definitely do that…

…Christ, he was seriously beginning to sound like some messed up conspiracy theorist.

It was a stupid idea. Misplaced anger aside, up ‘til now none of Sam’s actions had shown him to be any different than his usual whiny self. And even this could just be Dean mis-reading things. Sam could be so short-sighted when it came to thinking about other peoples’ feelings sometimes, after all- it was entirely possible (if still kind of dickish) that he thought pretending the Gadreel thing hadn’t happened for one day was actually a nice thing. Or, heck, maybe the timing for the whole ‘Sam leaving’ thing really was a coincidence. Maybe he had found some really important lead on getting them back home- a time-sensitive one- and this was him actually trying to admit that he was wrong, and to start making amends before he left. A metaphorical white flag, as it were. Given the fact that he’d had over a week now to think things over, that was the far more likely option, right?

…But could he really risk being wrong about this?

Dragging his hand back away from his face, Dean stared down at the table. What was he supposed to do here? On the one hand, getting Sam back was- and always would be- his main priority. Them against the world was how it was supposed to be. On the other hand, however, if this did just turn out to be an offer for a single day of brotherhood, he knew himself well enough to admit that he would take it anything but well once tomorrow hit.

He almost wished Gadreel (as Ezekiel, of course) were still around- at least the angel had been able to give him a pretty clear picture of what had been going on in Sam’s head.

Really, though, he just needed more time to think this over and find a way to confirm-

Wait.

Sam was leaving for a few days. What if Dean just waited until he returned? If Sam still wanted to talk then, then things were golden. If, however, the younger Winchester showed that this whole thing really was just because it was Dean’s birthday, then at least Dean would know where they both stood, and would be better able to predict how long it would be before Sam woke up and realised that they needed each other. He’d know for sure whether something had screwed around with his brother’s brain.

And there it was. Simple. Sweet. Failsafe.
And more than enough heavy thinking for what was supposed to be his day.

Mind thus made up, Dean made his way back to the training room, planning on staying an extra ten minutes or so before heading back to his floor. He’d need to make at least a short reappearance there, after all, if he didn’t want people thinking he was running away with his tail between his legs.

He was barely through the door, however, before Cas all but materialised in front of him yet again.

“Whoa- Jesus, Cas, what is it this time?”

“Another message from Sam, after I told him it was not a good idea.” Great. Maybe it was about time he swiped Cas’ phone at some point. Made sure the angel wasn’t painting him to be some giant douchewad or something. “He says he understands, and wants me to tell you Happy Birthday.”

Dean could practically see Steve’s ears prick up at the words. The captain grabbed his super-enhanced sandbag between his forearms, stilling it, and quickly jogged over to where they were standing.

“It’s your birthday?”

See-nosy super-heroes were precisely the reason he hadn’t wanted to talk in here in the first place. Ugh. Nothing to be done about it now, though, so he just nodded back at the other man. “Yeah. Thirty-five.”

“A joyous age for one of your race!” Thor half-bellowed, striding over and clapping Dean on the back with all the force of a freaking semi. “And a cause worthy of celebration! Perhaps a night of revelry is in order?”

Huh. “What did you have in mind?”

Steve stood up straighter, shooting him an All-American smile at the same time. “We could go out to a local bar this evening if you like?”

“It might do you good to get out of the tower for a bit,” Falcon agreed, coming over from the treadmills with Natasha in tow. “And there are a lot of nice spots in this area.”

Looking around at the gathered group, Dean allowed a smile to stretch across his face. “You know what, I think you’re right.” This could be exactly what he needed. “But there’s one thing you’ve gotta know about Winchesters before we go.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

“We don’t party anywhere nice.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I know I mentioned this to some of you in replies to comments last chapter, but HUGE thanks to everyone’s positive comments in response to it. Even though I
absolutely love my job most of the time, I think I was experiencing some end-of-
holiday blues as the new school year started, and that may have bled over into how I felt about the chapter. The past week and a half has been ridiculously hectic, but all of your reassurances and lovely comments were exactly what I needed, and I will love you all forever for that. ^_^ Thanks, as well, to those awesome people still leaving kudos- I have no idea where you're coming from, but I love you guys, too!

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! (Even if Dean is still being rather stubbornly... Dean-ish. He will come around, I promise. But there are a lot of things which need to be gone through, so it's not exactly going to be a straight line of progress.) Big thanks for everyone planning to stick through this! ^_^
“Ahh, man, I needed this.” Revelling in the faint squeak of the fake leather seats as he stretched, gulping down a mouthful of ice-cold beer in the process, Dean surveyed the room with no small amount of satisfaction. It wasn’t quite the crappy dive bar he’d been hoping for, but it was damned near close enough. Especially considering Natasha’s firm declaration earlier on that the Avengers wouldn’t be celebrating anywhere which could negatively impact their image if any photos or footage of them made their way to the media. There was cheap beer. Greasy food. Music being blared out just a little too loudly for easy conversation. There were even a couple of pool tables and dart boards, which definitely helped a lot towards lifting his spirits.

And not a bad selection of girls, either. Bonus.

Looking away from a particularly well-proportioned redhead to meet Steve’s questioning gaze, he clarified. “No offense, man, but everything in the tower’s just a bit… too perfect, you know? It’s weird.” And that was putting it mildly. Being in the tower made him feel like he was on Big Brother or something. Things got restocked before they even started running low. Temperatures adjusted if he ever showed even a single hint that he was either too hot or too cold. The food in the fridge was constantly being altered to be more to his liking without him saying a single word about it. And the fact that all of this was being done by an A.I he was absolutely certain hated his damn guts…

Yeah. ‘Weird’ didn’t even begin to cover it.

Still, he was a little surprised when Steve huffed a soft laugh through his nose, nodding in agreement.

“I’m exactly the same,” the human-sized dorito confessed. “I’m not sure Tony quite understands how jarring that kind of shift in surroundings can be. He grew up with more money than anyone would know what to do with, after all. Absolutely no idea what life can be like for the little guy.”

Okay. Dean may have snorted a little at that himself. “You calling yourself the little guy here?”

“Trust me,” Steve assured him, grinning over at Falcon and Natasha, “I have more than enough experience as the little guy.”

Natasha cocked her head slightly when Dean raised a disbelieving eyebrow (but come on- how else was he supposed to react to a claim like that? The dude was a rock). “You really haven’t read up on us at all have you,” she observed.

“Don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but I’ve been kind of busy focussing on other things. Like looking into how to track down dick angels and gank their asses in the most painful way possible.”
And watching movies which wouldn’t be out for another year back home. Always good to be ahead of the curve on that front—especially with the awesome graphics over here. And, believe it or not, there really wasn’t all that much info out there on rogue angels when you were in a universe where angels apparently didn’t exist. There was only so much he could really do before they got back to the Bunker, so he figured he may as well try to make the best of the shitty situation he was in and have at least a little fun while Sam was off fraternising with… well, if not the enemy, then at least the antagonist. But when they were back? Well, Gadreel and Metatron wouldn’t know what hit ‘em.

The inscrutable expression Natasha sent his way was overshadowed in moments by Thor leaning back on his own seat, brandishing his drink vaguely between Dean and Steve. “Ah, then you are unaware of the Captain’s glorious transformation!” The alien declared (and wow—the dude actually had an inside voice. Dean had been beginning to wonder). “I myself was most impressed when I heard of the Good Doctor Erskine’s efforts and conclusions as to his formula’s effectiveness. Captain, you must tell your tale!”

Falcon failed to hide a half-snort at the words, and Steve smiled vaguely uncomfortably.

“I’m not sure people should put so much stock into those conclusions,” the blond denied (in a tone which said he was either being knowingly humble or else was really good at faking it). “Despite what the war propaganda claimed, I’m not perfect—” (Okay. Humble brag. Dean was thinking humble brag for sure)—“I’m just a little guy from Brooklyn, who was in the right place at the right time.” The words smacked of being something he’d either said a thousand times before or else repeated to himself just as often. (Either way, though, it was kind of curiosity-inducing.)

“I’d just google it if I were you,” Falcon informed Dean, glass clinking against the Hunter’s as he leaned across the table so as to be better heard above the thrumming base of the latest soft jazz song to come blaring out of the speakers. “Or watch the Disney movie. They gave him abs practically the size of a four by four—it’s hilarious.

“And if you ever want to get out of the tower, you can, you know? You don’t have to stay inside all the time if you don’t like it.”

“And have one of Stark’s goon squad tailing me and telling him everything I do? Yeah no thanks, man. Not interested.”

Castiel stared over in confusion (and if the dude wasn’t even gonna try not to sulk over Dean continuing to refuse Sam’s sorry excuse for an olive branch, then honestly Dean had no idea why he’d even come along to this whole shindig). “Mr. Stark has a ‘goon squad?’”

“Damn right he does. I don’t know about the rest of the guards, but all the ones we’ve had on our floor have been stuck-up sycophants with their heads so far up Stark’s ass I’m surprised they can even still see the light from their tasers.”

“I’ve found them perfectly amenable,” the angel stated, brow furrowed in that annoying way he had sometimes.

“Yeah. That’s ‘cos you’re still sucking up to their boss’ new best friend. You shoulda seen the stink-eye that one dude sent me last night”

“I’ll have a word with your guards about professionalism,” Steve frowned. “And I’ll talk to Tony about maybe getting rid of the guard system altogether. I think you’ve proved by now that none of you are here to spy on either the Avengers or Stark Industries. You’re supposed to be our guests—not our prisoners.” He smiled at Dean— the perfect image of a gracious host. “Falcon’s right
“though- maybe you should try to get out of the tower a bit. Maybe explore the city? From what I hear, it’s been doing your brother a lot of good.”

“Sam’s been leaving the tower?” This was the first he’d heard of it. (And, shooting a glance over at Cas, he was fairly certain this was news to the angel, too. Looked like Sam hadn’t been being as open as Cas had thought. What a shocker.)

“Every day.”

“What about the translation stuff?”

“That High Enochian stuff? I don’t know why Tony didn’t tell us originally that Sam can read it, but apparently he’s been translating some every day and then going out afterwards.”

And there was the leaden lump in his stomach again. “Wait. Sam didn’t tell any of you where he learnt it?”

Perhaps picking up on his sudden unease, Steve sat straighter in his seat. “No. Sam hasn’t spoken to any of us since last week, if you don’t count Tony and Bruce. And Clint, but only twice in the hallway.”

“How in the hell does he expect anyone to be able to tell if he’s getting bad again if none of you even know what to look for?!” A thought suddenly occurred to him. “Wait. If he’s been leaving the tower every day anyway, then what’s so special that he’s gonna leave for even longer?”

Natasha levelled a steady (but somehow, he sensed, vaguely calculating) gaze in his direction. “He’s going to Seoul.”

Okay.

He didn’t really know what he’d been expecting to hear but, whatever it was, it wasn’t that. “What? Why?”

“Tony and Bruce have made progress on a possible cure for his physical condition. They’re taking him to Seoul to see a specialist.”

“What cure? Cas?”

“Sam hasn’t mentioned anything to me about a cure.” The angel looked down, appearing slightly disappointed. “I can see why he’d want one, though, as I am incapable of healing him.”

“Yeah, but only in this universe. Once we get home, you can fix him up no problem. And they don’t even have Grace and stuff over here- if they go poking at him they could just make him worse.” Scrubbing his hands down his face, Dean deliberately held in his growl of frustration. “See, this is exactly what I was worried about!”

Thor was beginning to look as confused as Cas had the first time he’d watched porn. Or when Dean had taken him to that brothel (another time when Sam had been conspicuously absent, oddly enough). “You were worried that your brother would seek a cure for his ailment?”

“No- I was worried he’d start to lose focus, like he always does when Cage stuff comes up.”

Looking over at Steve, Dean pushed what remained of his beer away from himself. He needed to be taken seriously here. “You want to know why Sam knows High Enochian? Because he learnt it from Lucifer. In Hell.” Deciding to take the sudden widening of most of his companions’ eyes as a sign that they would actually take this as seriously as was necessary, Dean pushed on. “And the
last time he had Hell stuff in his head, he went completely off the rails. Couldn’t make a smart
decision to save his life. He was seeing shit all over the place. He couldn’t sleep. Man, he ended up
so crazy over the whole thing that he wandered right into traffic and got himself hit by a car. And
that was even after he almost shot himself in the head because of something a hallucination told
him. The only reason he’s even still alive is because Cas managed to take away the worst of it, and
because I was there to keep an eye on things.

“Why do you all think I wanted Sam on our floor so much? Hell, I know he’s pissed at me. I know
he could probably make my life a living hell if he wanted to. But I’m the only person who can
always see through it when Sam tries to pretend he’s fine when he ain’t. If he’s gonna be making
decisions over what kind of “cure” goes into his body, I am the only one who’s gonna be able to
tell whether he’s only doing it because some hallucination of Lucifer is telling him to. He’s too
good at hiding this stuff from other people.”

Dean heard rather than saw Cas’ frown this time. “Dean, there have been no indications in his texts
that he’s not behaving perfectly logically, or without the use of his full mental faculties.”

“Yeah, well no offense, Cas, but you didn’t even care enough not to bring his wall down the first
time we dealt with this stuff. You got no right to go pretending like things are really any different
now.”

There were several seconds of heavy silence as the two of them stared at each other, the tension
strong enough that it seemed not a single one of the Avengers dared to interfere. And yeah, Dean
hadn’t really meant for that to slip out. But that didn’t make it any less true. And he was sick and
tired of other people (aliens, gods and angels included) barging in and trying to tell him that he
didn’t know how to deal with his own brother’s issues.

After what felt like forever, Cas’ jaw clenched. “I deserved that—”

“Yeah. You did—”

“But I am not the same as I was in the past, Dean. And however long it may take me, I do plan on
making full amends to Sam, to you, to my brethren and to anyone else I hurt unjustly both during
and outside of my fight for Heaven.”

The sneer was on his lips, and the words out of his mouth, before Dean was even fully aware that
he was speaking. “Yeah, well good luck with that. I don’t easily forgive people who hurt my
brother.”

Eyes glinting with an anger and a surety Dean hadn’t seen from him in years, Cas stood,
straightening to his full height. “Then maybe you should reassess just how easily you appear to
have forgiven yourself.” Then, while Dean was still reeling from the ice-cold spike which had
apparently decided to force itself into his throat, the angel addressed the others sitting at their table.

“I apologise for ruining the mood. Perhaps it was a mistake for me to join you. I’ll return to the
tower now.”

“I shall accompany you.” Thor rose, patting Dean on the shoulder as he moved past. “Perhaps I
may join you in revelry some other time? For now, though, I shall uphold our current agreement
with the Man of Iron. When next we meet, I pray that your spirits have eased.” Then, with one last
sorrowful expression, he ‘bid farewell’ to his ‘comrades’ and guided Cas out of the building, not
even stopping to pay their share of the bill.

Dean closed his eyes, calming his breathing before turning to no doubt take the fallout.
“Look, I’m sorry. Sometimes I say things I don’t always mean when I’m angry and-”

Steve held up a hand. “You don’t have to explain yourself to us. The Lord only knows you’ve had a rough couple of weeks, and you’re obviously worried about your brother. Rightfully and understandably so, if what you’ve just told us is true. And I think we all know that worry doesn’t always come across the way we want it to in the moment.”

Natasha didn’t look convinced (he got the feeling that was just her permanent default around people, though), but Falcon nodded at him calmly.

“And look, man,” the other man offered in what sounded like his best ‘councillor’ voice, “if you ever wanna talk about it, my ears are always open. It’s what I’m here for.”

Dean forced himself to laugh. “Appreciate the offer, but Winchesters don’t really do the whole ‘therapy’ thing. I just need to let out a bit of stress is all.” He needed to blow past this whole mess is what he needed. Stick to his guns and wait until Sam came back before figuring out what to do next. He glanced back over at the bar. “And I know exactly how I wanna do it. Assuming I can bring people back to the tower, that is.”

Not even bothering to follow his gaze, Natasha rolled her eyes. “Knock yourself out, birthday boy. Don’t expect us not to tail you back, though.”

When Dean opened his mouth to object, Steve just smiled (if a little more awkwardly this time, like he was doing his best not to be judgemental over Dean wanting a casual hook-up or something). “Don’t worry. We’ll keep our distance, and we’ll be gone as soon as you’re through the door.”

Okay. So apparently the surprises came quick and varied with these three. “Alright, then.” He downed what remained of his beer and stood up.

The well-proportioned redhead smiled at him as he slid onto a stool next to her, only glancing subtly past him and over to his previous corner once. “Hi there.” She leaned forward (displaying just the right amount of cleavage) and smirked in interest. “So was it my imagination, or did I see you come in with the Avengers?”

Dean allowed a lazy smirk of his own to tug at his lips. “Darling, right now? I’m living with the Avengers.” He raised a deliberate eyebrow. “So how about it? You wanna see where Captain America works out?”

Less than half an hour later, as they left the bar together, his arm firmly around her waist, he felt that smirk turning a little more honest.

Maybe living in the creepy-ass tower had its benefits, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Phew. This was another of those chapters that didn't quite go as I had planned, but considering the reason for that was Castiel surprising me by behaving the way he did, I honestly think I kind of prefer this version anyway. Lol. And the other points I was going to make here can easily be shifted to a different chapter (which gives me ideas I hadn't even considered before), so... *shrugs* What the hey? This is why I like writing so much. Lol.
Anyway, thanks as always for your comments and kudos etc. after the last chapter, too- you guys keep me smiling through lesson planning and all sorts of other hectic school stuff! Hope you liked this chapter, too! ^_^
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Thor does not know what to think of Dean's revelations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thor found himself to be… unsettled as he and the Angel of the Unknown Lord made their journey back towards the tower. After Tony’s insistence that enquiring unnecessarily into the more sensitive aspects of their newest acquaintances’ pasts would only be detrimental, he had been making a concerted effort to follow the Man of Iron’s suggestion. But there was a sinking feeling in his stomach, and a thrum of electricity running through his bones, that made him think that that course of action had now been cut off to him on some levels and, while it may have been to do with his general ignorance when it came to Misgardian attitudes towards family, he was not sure he was entirely comfortable with how he had come across the information he had heard this night, nor with the potential ramifications of how this might impact the fragile sense of growing stability they had been gaining up to this point.

Indeed, it may have been Castiel walking by his side, but it was Dean’s words which rang through his mind, taunting him with knowledge he was not sure it was truly his right to hold. And, try as he might to deny himself curiosity over the matter in question, he could not rid his thoughts of the multitude of questions which now presented themselves to him.

And so, as they entered the tower and moved away from the curious eyes and ears of the passing public, Thor could not help but turn to his travelling companion, with hope that the angel may ease his mind in regards to one particular conundrum.

“Angel Castiel, if you find yourself both willing and able, I would that you would agree to answer me one thing.”

After a short moment of silent consideration, Castiel nodded his assent. “Go ahead.”

Fixing the angel dead in the eye, Thor made sure to keep his voice low and his ears open (and he suspected Castiel was doing the same). Regardless of how at ease Dean Winchester had been with sharing the information with them in the drinking establishment, he still somehow felt it would not do to allow the topic to become common knowledge throughout the tower should any other being stumble upon their conversation.

“I do not wish to pry into the affairs of others, so I hope that you can forgive me my intrusion, but I must admit myself confused by some aspects of the elder Winchester’s claims. During my time on Misgard, it has come to be my understanding that only the worst of humankind are believed by some to be sent to face the torment of ‘Hell’ after their deaths. Granted, I have known Sam Winchester only briefly, but in all honesty he does not strike me as a man deserving of such a title. Was I, perhaps, mistaken in that belief?” Although his own personal experiences served as proof of the fact that sentient beings were capable of change, the idea was nevertheless not a pleasant one.

Several seconds passed before the angel sighed. “No. You weren’t. And I suppose Dean has left
me with little choice but to explain this, even though Sam asked us not to.”

Thor remembered that second day, and the younger Winchester’s pained pleas for privacy regarding his role in the apocalypse. Though he was not sure he understood how that related to this claim of him dwelling for a time in the halls of Hell. “Perhaps you should not answer, if you feel he would be against it.”

A shake of the angel’s head mimicked the tone of his earlier sigh exactly. “No. The part he probably didn’t want you all knowing is the one part Dean has already told you. And this, at least, could help you not to draw the wrong conclusions about his time there, or the reasons behind it.” Shame clouded his features, and he looked away as one of the Stark Industries researchers made her way past them, only speaking again once the woman had passed out of earshot. “Sam was manipulated by many- myself included- into believing that a certain course of action would prevent the apocalypse from ever taking place. He did what we had told him was necessary, sacrificing much of himself along the way, and only afterwards discovered that he had been deceived. Instead of halting the beginning of the End Times, his actions allowed them to come to fruition instead.

“Believing himself wholly responsible for the disasters which followed- a belief which I, regretfully, encouraged in both Sam and Dean, too much of a coward to admit- even to myself- that I had, indeed, had a choice in my actions after discovering the true purpose of my orders at the time- Sam made it his mission to atone by doing everything in his power to fix things. He was even willing to erase his entire existence, if that was what it took.

“Eventually we found a way. And Sam did it, even though none of us truly believed him to be strong enough. And even though we had made no secret of that fact. He took Lucifer into his body, overpowered him, and threw himself into Lucifer’s Cage in Hell, dragging Michael with him.”

“So this second Grace within Sam Winchester’s body- it belonged to Lucifer?”

Castiel nodded, finally meeting his eyes once more. “I tried-” He cut himself off as a second employee passed by- this time a harried-looking elder man who muttered to himself as he walked, a Starkpad and a small stack of files clutched firmly in his grasp. “I tried to rescue him, but by the time we realised that I had only managed to retrieve his body, and not his soul, it was too late. Time in the Cage moves faster than even that in Hell itself. In the end, the damage done before he was recovered was so severe that not even Death himself could take it away.”

“And it is worry over this damage which governs Dean Winchester’s behaviour in matters concerning his brother?”

“I thought it was, but…” The angel trailed off, looking uncertain. Thor regarded him for a moment, waiting to see whether he would be able to bring himself to finish voicing his apparent newfound doubt, but it appeared no more would be forthcoming.

“I understand. And I offer you my thanks for entrusting me with this tale. Rest assured that I shall do my utmost not to abuse this knowledge.”

Still looking strangely introspective, Castiel offered his farewell and departed from Thor thereafter, citing (with no small weight behind his words) that he had many things to consider. Thor did not attempt to object- he himself, after all, had any number of thoughts upon which to muse after hearing the night’s revelations. Fortunately, he was well acquainted with an ideal location for his deliberations.

The air was cool and still as he emerged onto the roof of the tower, the stars clearer at this height than they had been from the streets below, and Thor seated himself without ceremony upon the
dusty concrete, staring up at the alien constellations above him (four years since his first foray onto
this planet, and yet they were still almost as unfamiliar to him now as they had been then). It was
from this very spot that Loki had launched the Chitauri’s attempted invasion, and it was just below
that Thor had felt the sting of his brother’s dagger in his side. Such bitter memories, and yet still
the site had lost little of the soothing calm which graced his soul whenever he felt compelled to
make the journey here. He had to wonder if, in a most unusual of ways, it was because being here
left him feeling more connected to his brother, somehow. He had been witness to a desperate
rawness in his sibling’s demeanour during that battle- a moment of unintentional honesty Loki
rarely- if ever- deigned to show. And such a moment was not easily forgotten, despite the chaos
happening around it at the time.

How strangely fitting, then, that tonight it should be another pair of once-close brothers who
consumed his mind’s focus in this very spot.

Exhaling through his nose, Thor leaned back slightly, using his hands to prop himself up. He had
seen (or perhaps convinced himself to see) certain aspects of himself in Dean Winchester- had
viewed him rather simply as another elder brother, trying his best to care for a wayward younger
brother who, by Dean’s own account, had proven himself on multiple occasions to be irresponsible,
unreliable and weak. While he had believed Dean to have been exaggerating, he had not seen fit to
doubt the opinions of one who claimed to know his brother so well. Especially not when the two
men had shared both a life and a profession for such a large portion of their short lives.

Perhaps he had been wrong.

But how was it possible for there to be such severe disparity between the Sam painted by Dean’s
words, and the Sam portrayed in Castiel’s tale? How was it possible for a man who had sacrificed
all to save the lives of the many, and who had forgiven a friend who admitted to purposefully
leading him down a path which led to only pain and guilt, to be viewed as emotionally malicious or
uncaring by his own kin? What else had happened in their lives that could possibly justify such
contradictory views of the same man from two of his closest companions?

And how, he wondered also, could a man as intelligent as Dean appeared to be still claim not to
understand his brother’s anger and frustration regarding Dean’s deception over this latest
possession, even after having lived through the effects Sam had suffered as a result of the first- and
that by one as mighty as Lucifer himself. Thor had dwelt on Misgard for long enough to have heard
tale of the Christian Devil. And he did not imagine that the Lucifer of their world could be
remarkably different from the devious creature he had heard tale of here. Sam’s stay in the halls of
Hell must have been anything but pleasant.

For a moment, he placed himself into the elder Winchester’s shoes. If it had been Loki who had
suffered so at the hands of one such beast, would Thor have given in to the same temptation Dean
had faced? If, even after many years had passed, the only way to wrest Loki back from the brink of
the abyss of death had been to force him to be visited by another such monster, would he have
done it? To keep his brother alive? To allow his sibling to see the light of another day?

In all honesty, he did not know. But, if there was one thing he was certain of, it was that- should he
have ever committed such an act against his brother, knowing of such a past- he would never, in
good conscience, be able to begrudge Loki the right to hate him for it.

And yet Sam did not hate Dean. If the Man of Iron was to be believed, Sam was merely seeking
time alone to recover his wits and to re-evaluate where he stood in life. Given his own personal
history- and how he had responded to the Frost Giants, in particular- Thor was not sure he himself
would have responded in such a favourable way. Which begged the question of why, precisely,
Dean had expressed such bitter emotions over this turn of events, even though hope shone in a potential future should he allow his brother this time without complaint.

Perhaps this was yet another consequence of the brevity of the lives Misgardians led.

Or perhaps Thor was misunderstanding things yet again. He did not know all that had happened in the Winchester brothers’ lives since that first fateful possession, but what Dean had earlier revealed of Sam’s behaviour in the aftermath did indeed sound most severe. Perhaps it truly was possible that Sam had been irrevocably altered by his time in Hell - transformed from a mighty Hero worthy of epic odes and great revelry in his name into a man whose actions needed always to be examined for signs of repeated insanity. The truth was, Thor had not been long enough in the younger Winchester's presence to be able to grasp to any real extent what manner of man he was now. A deliberate choice in light of the man's wishes for peace, but one he nevertheless found himself regretting to a point now.

Thor suspected there was only one way to be sure. One way for him to be truly comfortable with any conclusions he drew regarding this matter.

He would need to speak to Sam Winchester himself.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all! I really hope you liked this chapter- I really enjoyed writing it! Thor just sounds so old-fashioned compared to the others, and it was a lot of fun sinking into that for an entire chapter, especially as he hasn't had much to do so far in this story. There are still some things which haven't been mentioned about Thor's reaction to Dean's verbal diarrhea last time, but I'm hoping to go more into those in a later chapter. ^_^

Anyway, huge thanks to all those who left comments on the last chapter- you guys are awesome! And a special shoutout, too, to everyone who has left/is leaving kudos. A large part of my brain is still not sure exactly what I've done to deserve continuing to get them, but I am beyond grateful for every one. And it makes me smile every time I see a notification for one in my inbox, so huge thanks for that happiness!
“So, umm… What did you want to talk to me about?”

Thor startled from his thoughts, focussing on the slightly awkward set of the younger Winchester’s shoulders as he set a pair of beverages on the table and seated himself down. The uncomfortable air was understandable, at least, considering Thor’s previous lack of contact (and coupled with the fact that he had said nary a word since first accepting Sam’s offer for refreshments). And there was nothing in the young man’s demeanour which spoke yet of the paranoia or irrationality his brother had mentioned. Nothing which indicated that he truly did pose any real danger to himself. But then, it was not unheard of for insanity or deception to hide itself behind a mask of calm logic.

Loki was proof enough of that.

Thor coughed, feeling himself to be perhaps even more ill at ease than Sam appeared. This was not, after all, an easy topic to approach and, if he were to be entirely honest with himself, he could not say with absolute certainty that this was indeed the wisest course of action. It was entirely possible that Sam Winchester (together with Dean, if ever he heard tell of it) would view this visitation as an attempt on Thor’s part to invade his privacy and ignore the boundaries he had so painstakingly been constructing. The thought was enough to make him wish he had thought to seek out further council on the matter first.

Still, now that Thor had ventured down to attend this meeting, it would be naught but cowardice to withdraw now. Especially without offering sufficient explanation for his visit. And, whatever else he may be, the Price of Asgard was no coward.

After a moment more to consider how best to express his thoughts, Thor inclined his head briefly, making sure to keep his eyes fixed firmly on Sam’s all the while. If the younger Winchester truly was as adept at hiding his true condition from others as his brother claimed, the eyes and hands were the most likely to unintentionally project a glimpse of what he was concealing.

“I have this night been granted some form of insight into your past- unwittingly at first, it is true, but I cannot deny that it was by my own will that I sought out the second source. And I must admit my mind is… conflicted, by what I have been told. I came to you in hopes that, in conversing with you, I might ascertain the degree to which I should heed the opinions of those to whom I spoke.”

A pensive expression blossomed in the shadows behind Sam Winchester’s eyes- he was wary of what could have been revealed, then, even if he could not yet be certain as to what information was involved.

“Right. Umm, would you mind maybe being a little more specific? I’ve done a lot of things in my life.”
Thor smiled despite himself. “Of that I have no doubt.” Misgardians were capable of surprisingly much in surprisingly little time. The expression faded as swiftly as it had sprung into being, however- replaced once more with the sombre tone which currently inhabited his mind. “While celebrating the anniversary of your brother’s birth, it was revealed to him the purpose of your departure on the morrow, together with the fact that you had not revealed to any of the Avengers present the reason behind your ability to comprehend the language of your God.” As Sam’s lips parted marginally, he inclined his head once more in acknowledgement. “It is as you appear to have ascertained- in explaining his reasons for the concern he has professed in regards to your separation thus far, Dean revealed to those present where- and from whom- you gained your knowledge. Together, also, with the effect remembering your experiences had upon you.”

A far milder version of the sense of betrayal the Hunter had exhibited on the first of his nights in the tower tugged once more at the other man’s brow, and he blinked twice in quick succession, drawing in a carefully measured breath as he did so. He did not speak until several seconds after that first breath had been released once more.

“So he just… told you? All of you? Just like that?” He asked, voice dying out almost to the level of a whisper. The hurt in his tone was almost disbelieving, as if such a concept had not occurred to him, but the slight bitter tinge which bled into his final question suggested that perhaps he thought it should have.

“I do not believe he did so with malicious intent,” Thor felt compelled to clarify. Not consciously malicious, anyway- it had seemed more impulsive than anything else (a thought which, if proved to be part of a pattern instead of purely due of the stress the man had experienced of late, was horrifying in and of itself). Though he had to wonder whether the elder Winchester had truly never considered how revealing such intimately negative details of his brother’s life- with such bias and so little context, no less- could so easily tarnish the opinions new acquaintances may be building of him.

Sam took a few moments to process that, hands furling and unfurling against his knees, before nodding seemingly to himself, no longer meeting Thor’s eyes. “So everyone knows now?”

“Hawkeye, Doctor Banner and the Man of Iron were not present. But I cannot imagine it will be long before they have been informed, if they do not know already.”

“Tony knows. I don’t know if Bruce does.” An unsurprising declaration, considering the Man of Iron’s vehement declaration that they should not pry. “So your second ‘source-’ I’m guessing that was Cas?”

“It was, but it was at my own behest. Upon accompanying him back to the tower, I sought his opinion out of confusion over some elements of what your brother claimed. He explained to me the general circumstances which led to you… being where you were. But-” he hurried to add, in an effort to ease the further degree of pain which eked into Sam’s features- “rest assured he did so only out of fear that, if left alone, I may have come to some incorrect conclusions regarding the nature of your character. And that he explained as well his own role in your decision-making at the time. It was never his intent to go against your wishes for privacy, and I beg that you not hold this against him. The fault lies solely with me.”

Sam shook his head softly. “I won’t.” (And that Thor could most definitely believe- the Hunter had already, after all, forgiven the Angel for far worse crimes against him in the past.) Moments later, his demeanour shifted, morphing until only sad resignation could be seen. “So I guess Dean’s re-telling wasn’t all that flattering to me, huh? Well, that’s fine, I guess. To be expected, really. There may have been reasons, but it still wasn’t exactly a small screw-up, and he was dealing with a lot
of other crap at the same time.” He shrugged self-deprecatingly, glancing down. “And I already knew he hasn’t really forgiven me for all that stuff, anyway.”

“You insist that you should have forgiven him already for this latest incident? That does not seem fair.”

“It’s how we’ve done things for a long time- how the entire family did things, really. That’s not going to change overnight.” When Thor did not respond even after several seconds (for how, precisely, should one respond to such a declaration? He understood that some matters could be hard to truly forgive but, by all accounts, it sounded to him as though the younger Winchester had more than earned the right to have his slate in this matter wiped clean), Sam glanced over to him, a concerned frown tugging at his brow and blending oddly well with the self-conscious twist of his lips. “Are you alright? You’re looking at me kind of like you think I’m going to explode or something.”

Thor shook his head, attempting a smile. “Forgive me. It is merely that I have many things to dwell upon.” He cleared his throat, deciding that, if ever he planned upon resolving his main worry of the night, now was perhaps the best of times to do so. “The Angel Castiel did indeed provide me with a clearer picture of your character before the… event in question, but still I find myself troubled by how your brother described your reactions upon being confronted with your memories of that time. I know well how experiences can change a man, and I cannot help but to understand Dean’s concern should you unintentionally return to so dangerous a mindset.”

Sam blinked once more, something like indignant, defensive anger flickering for the first time into life in his eyes before the emotions were quashed- replaced once more with resignation. A hint of determination remained, however, and Thor felt it was probably this which drove the Hunter’s next words.

“Look, I get it. I know people have a right to be as worried as they want to be. And I’m not going to pretend like Dean was lying. I’m not going to tell you that he’s entirely wrong to doubt me. When I- When I came back, I wasn’t exactly in the best shape. Death put up this… this wall. In my head,” he explained carefully, bringing up a hand to rest briefly against his temple in demonstration. “It was supposed to protect me- keep me from remembering- but there was no way to tell how long it would last.” He paused, tongue flicking across his lips, and brushed a hand across his mouth. “When C- When it was broken, I didn’t exactly have time to process things properly- everything came rushing back all at once, and uh… well, let’s just say it’s true that I didn’t cope with it well, especially at first. I found ways to cope though. Enough to keep myself functional. But then Dean…

“There was this case, and Dean… he got taken. I needed to find him before he got killed and… and I got desperate enough that I cracked. Interacted with my hallucination instead of just ignoring it.” Drawing to a brief halt once more, Sam gazed down at his palms, ghosting a gentle thumb against one. “After that I couldn’t turn it off any more, and He- it wouldn’t leave me alone. Wouldn’t even let me sleep. At all. I still managed to work at first- drank about a million coffees to help myself stay anything close to sharp- but… well.”

“Your body required sleep.” Thor could not imagine the torment- physical exhaustion combined with constant mental attacks. The toll such an ordeal took on the younger Winchester must have been severe indeed. It went a great way towards explaining the behaviour his brother had spoken of.

“Right. So I can see why Dean- and you, I guess- are worried.”

“And yet you seem far less so.”
Sam did not smile, but a wry expression encompassed his face for the barest of moments. “I’ve got a better handle on things this time. I’ve got JARVIS to help me. I’m facing limited exposure. I’ve got people around me to talk to if things get rough, and I’m getting way more sleep than I was back then. Trust me- I am taking every single step possible to make sure that I’m doing these translations in as safe an environment as possible, and I’m doing just fine. So as much as I appreciate the fact that you guys apparently want me to be safe, this is my choice. And I know exactly what I’m doing.

“Besides,” he admitted with a bitter smile, “this needs to be done. And no-one else is around who can do it.”

As Sam straightened in his seat, face set and eyes clear, Thor was hit with the sudden sensation that he was being dismissed- or, at the very least, that the Hunter would accept no more argument on this matter. It was not a sensation he had experienced outside of talks with his father, but he felt no less cowed now than then. The slight bow of his head came almost instinctively.

“Very well. Then I shall trust your judgement in this matter, and shall lobby for your continued right to solitary living should any try to convince me otherwise.”

Another blink, and Sam’s eyebrows rose momentarily in a second of soft, pleased surprise.

“Thanks.”

Thor shook his head. “A warrior always knows best what is happening within the confines of his own mind. I should have remembered that earlier.” He was somewhat soothed when Sam accepted the sentiment with quiet grace, and the conversation drew to a short close as the Hunter, while pondering over what next to say perhaps, led him in drinking from the mugs he had earlier placed before them. He could never find another beverage which would compare to the simple rawness of Asgardian liquors, but his Lady Jane had long ago persuaded him that the ‘coffee’ so many Misgardians were so fond of was not a poor substitute, and Sam’s coffee was pleasurably flavoured indeed.

It was only after they both had set down their mugs once more that Sam moved to speak again (though not, Thor noted, without first tapping his fingers almost nervously against the warmth of the china on their journey back to his lap).

“Thank you. For going out with Dean tonight, I mean.” He rubbed a hand against his neck- a gesture he apparently shared, to a degree, with his brother. “I appreciate you guys, you know, being there for him. Letting him vent. He deserves that sometimes. Dean’s a good guy- he really is- but he tends to get a little… reckless, sometimes. When he’s trying to distract himself, you know?”

Thor nodded. “I understand. I can be much the same way myself- much to the frustration of my father.”

“Right. Well, I think it’ll be good for him, having more people around. He’s always been pretty comfortable with the whole friend-group thing.”

The unspoken ‘not like me’ hung heavy in the air.

“He has made an interesting companion this last week,” Thor acknowledged truthfully. This one night not counting, the brief times he had spent with the elder Winchester and with Castiel had been a welcome- and oftentimes amusing- distraction from the constant hunts for the sceptre. “Though both he and the Angel of the Unknown Lord have been sparing with their tales of past adventures before today. I am not certain they trust our intentions as of yet.”
“They’ll get there,” Sam told him. “And, in the meantime, I’m sure you’ve got plenty of adventures of your own to share, right? I bet Dean especially would love to hear them.”

Thor beamed back. “Then tell them I shall! And perhaps, after you have returned from your quest, I may be permitted to do the same with you? I find myself most intrigued by the idea of the creatures the team suggests you may have hunted!” He tried not to feel too dis-heartened by the uncertain air he felt between them as the younger man smiled at him once more and offered up an answer which could only be described as tentative.

“Send me a text or something if you still want to talk then. I’ll try to make some time.”

“I most assuredly shall!” He did not know what had caused the sudden shift in atmosphere, but perhaps that was a question best asked another time. He stood up, Sam mirroring the action almost immediately. “Very well- I am sure you still have arrangements to make for your departure. I shall take my leave here.”

Sam nodded yet again. “Thanks for coming. I’ll see you around, then, I guess.”

“Indeed. Again, my sincerest apologies for interrupting your evening with my inquiries. And many thanks for the beverage- it was most satisfying. I know many a fine warrior who would relish the opportunity to partake in so fine a draught.”

It was not until Thor had long since returned to the privacy of his own quarters- Mjolnir at his side and an image of the fine Lady Jane upon his bedside table- that it occurred to him precisely why his unease over the evening had not yet fully subsided.

When Sam had spoken of the team’s connection to Dean, all of his concern had seemed genuinely linked to his brother’s mental well-being.

When Dean had spoken of Sam, however, his main focus (at least to start) had appeared solely on the younger man’s effectiveness in research or as a companion.

It was an observation he sincerely hoped he was mistaken in making.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

The flight to Seoul has its ups and downs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Making his way out of the car and across the tarmac, there were any number of things Tony would have appreciated infinitely more than the cold bite of the late January wind which hit them head-on. Bracing himself internally against the phantom echoes of freezing metal burrowing into his chest, he quickened his pace just marginally, eager for the warm relief he knew awaited them inside the plane. Sam matched the change almost instantaneously, hands tucked firmly into the pockets of his tightly sealed jacket, but Bruce seemed largely unaffected. Not that Tony was honestly surprised by that- the control the other man had over his own body was probably on par with (or even greater than) even the most zen Buddhist monk the mortal world had to offer. No way he’d let something like a mere minute of icy wind mess with that.

Once they’d all made their way up the stairs, though (in fantastically hop-filled fashion in Tony’s case) the scientist was more than willing to let out a quiet groan as he sank down onto one of the seats.

“Thank god for temperature control.”

Now there was no way Tony could let that slip by unopposed. “Hey- God had nothing to do with it. You seriously think some out-of-touch deity could design a plane better than me?” He winked over at a grinning Sam as Bruce rolled his eyes.

“Depends on the deity.” The Hunter shrugged the duffel off of his shoulder and dumped it down on a spare seat, nodding at the flight crew as they brought in Tony and Bruce’s stuff (they’d offered to carry his, too, but apparently that would have ‘felt weird’). “I’d be interested to see you go up against someone like Athena or Hephaestus. And that’s just if you go with the core Greek Pantheon. I mean, granted, most of the mythology doesn’t really tie in fully to modern technology, but there are all sorts of gods around the world linked to knowledge and invention. Saraswati could probably give you a run for your money, too.”

“You meet a lot of gods on your travels do you, Mountain Man?”

Sam pondered his answer for a moment. “Some,” he acknowledged honestly. “Most of them have been trying to kill us, though. And almost all of them have just been low level Pagan gods trying to get back to the glory days of devoted followers and blood sacrifice. First one we ever came across just looked like a knock-off scarecrow from a horror set.”

“So better looking than Thor, then.” Slightly confused by the flicker of something which seemed suspiciously like sadness or self-doubt in Sam’s returning huff of a laugh (but hoping at the same time that he’d just imagined the whole thing), Tony shrugged over-exaggeratedly. “Well, I’d like to see this ‘Saraswati’- and what is that? Indian? It sounds Indian, or am I just being completely dense here?” He shook it off. “I’d like to see them try. Bit of friendly competition between species
would be good for us, I feel. Be a nice break from deranged megalomaniacs and neo-nazis, anyway."

"Anything is a welcome break from megalomaniacs and Nazis, Tony," Bruce pointed out. Tony just grinned.

"I dare you to say that after you’ve walked in on a group of twenty OAPs trying to recreate the swingers’ party of the century. ‘Cos let me tell you right now- that is not a pretty sight.”

A collective shudder ran through the group. “I don’t know,” Sam admitted disgustedly, “I still think I’d rather see that than to ever have to walk in on Dean with twins again. Nightmare-inducing, that was. I’m telling you- It should be genetically impossible to see a family member naked.”

“Unless you’re changing their diaper,” Bruce put in. “I can’t imagine parents need that task to be made any more difficult than it already is.”

“Well, regardless-” Tony smiled at one of the stewardesses as she placed his tech bag by his side, giving her a playfully flirty wink and a quick joke about how maybe someone as gorgeous as she was deserved a raise- “I think I have something here which could stave off that particular memory for now.” Reaching over, he pulled an ever-so-slightly dated device from the bag (a whole year and a half old. He really needed to speed up designs for a newer model- consumers of this particular device wouldn’t be content with just downloads for long). He held it out to Sam. “This is for you.”

Sam looked at the device somewhat dubiously, but took it regardless. “Should I be worried that talking about sex-based crimes against nature reminded you of this?”

“Fear not, mis amigo. There are no cougars waiting to facetime you. No this, my ridiculously tall friend, is the Hacker Initiate Trainer- HIT for short. I designed it to help white hat hackers who want to keep their skills sharp. It provides you with progressively more difficult simulation programmes, and then monitors how easily you get past them, notes points you had difficulty and provides feedback to help you improve. The standard copy given out to white hats employed by the government just has regular upgrades to the packages but, seeing as I like you and all, this one’s got a direct link to JARVIS, too, so he can give you hints if you ever get stuck.”

Sam, who had grown progressively more wide-eyed as he gave his explanation, stared in silence for a few seconds between him and the HIT before swallowing once. “Why would you give this to me?”

Tony bit down on the automatic fear of rejection, reminding himself who he was dealing with here. He shrugged nonchalantly. “You said you need to hack police reports and stuff to Hunt. Figured we might as well give you a chance to level up a bit while you’re here.” (And that was fast becoming an uncomfortable topic in his mind- the idea of sending Sam back to the Universe which had put him through all this crap in the first place was not exactly a pleasant one. In fact, he was fairly certain he was only still looking into it because stopping now would just be a complete and utter violation of Sam’s trust. Well, that and it would get rid of Dean. But hey, he’d never claimed to be anywhere close to pure-hearted.) “You don’t have to use it, but it’s there if you want it.”

“Are you kidding me?” Something which looked like excitement entered Sam’s eyes. “This is awesome. Thanks.” He smiled (a genuine one- not one of those ones he so often wore to pretend like he was okay when he definitely wasn’t). “I’m definitely adding this to the list of things to pay you back for, though.”
Tony just rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Dream on, Mountain Man. No one has ever bested me in a gift war.” (Not that most people ever actually tried.)

The next few hours were surprisingly fun for an international flight. They all had their own stuff to do- Bruce some biogenetic research and yet another planned update for Veronica (because he still insisted on having her as back-up, no matter how many times the Hulk had proven himself a friend), Tony prep work for his lecture and schematics for some SI projects, and Sam a new toy to explore- but both the atmosphere and the banter remained light throughout. Well, Sam was still slightly more subdued than the last time they’d spoken, but not by too much- Tony just figured if it was anything too serious the Hunter would either deal with it himself or else open up about it in his own time. By the time they finished eating their in-flight lunch (and maybe he should give the chef a raise, too, because it was delicious) he was pleasantly surprised to note- even if it was only to himself- that this was the most relaxed he’d been in weeks. Which, considering how rare an event it was that he could apply that emotional label to himself, was quite a feat indeed.

He should have known it couldn’t last.

The change came while Bruce was in the back of the plane, half-way through his extensive daily meditation routine. Sam had been asleep for just over an hour, having nodded off shortly after lunch, and everything seemed pretty calm.

“Sir,” JARVIS’ quiet voice came not from the plane’s speakers, as it usually did, but from Tony’s own phone. This was as quiet as he could be while still being heard. And he sounded worried. “I believe it would be prudent to wake Sam up.”

It had been a long time since he’d heard that level of deliberate restraint in the AI’s tone.

Moving without question, the mechanic shifted out of his chair, the answers to his thoughts revealed as soon as the Hunter came fully into view. Sam wasn’t making a sound, true, but the younger man’s expression was twisted in agony, and his hands were clenched so tightly that faint trickles of blood were visible, dripping steadily onto the arm of his seat. Perhaps the most unsettling point, though, was the unnatural stillness. Even his breathing was all but non-existent.

Tony reached out one hand to gently shake him awake…

…and the next thing he knew he was on his back on the floor, Sam’s arm jammed up against his throat and limbs pinned down with almost startling precision. Fuelled by adrenalin, the Hunter was pretty strong even in his condition.

Thinking fast, Tony deliberately slowed his breathing, fixing his eyes straight forward to meet the sheer blankness of Sam’s gaze dead-on. Calm. Non-threatening. If this was anything like his own experiences after the Chitauri, that was the best way to do this.

“Sam. Wake up.”

It took a few seconds. But eventually awareness blinked back into those hazel irises, and Sam straightened up at a speed which would have impressed even Natasha. Gulping down whatever had driven him into that level of fear, he held a hand out to help Tony up. Neither of them bothered to move from their spots on the floor.

“Sorry.” Sam’s eyes remained stubbornly fixated downwards.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“No, I-”
“Trust me. I woke up to enough panic attacks and flashbacks after the wormhole that this really doesn’t faze me.” Tony froze. He hadn’t actually intended to share that much information. It just… hadn’t seemed fair that Sam should be the only one being forced into that much vulnerability, and the words had just… slipped out. “You can’t tell the others. Not even Bruce. No-one but Pepper and Rhodey” (and that Harley kid) “know, and if people found out they might-”

“They might not cope well with the fact that you’re human.”

The sad understanding in Sam’s voice was enough to snap Tony out of his self-recrimination. He looked over at the younger man’s hunched posture. “Exactly.” A lot of the world just wasn’t ready to face the fact that Heroes’ minds weren’t unbreakable. That the people they trusted to save them could still be that afraid. And it wasn’t just Iron Man, either. Even with Pepper as the CEO, Tony was still seen as the face of Stark Industries. And if that face was outed as having mental struggles any deeper than those expected of a ‘playboy’ of his stature… well, there was more than one reason stock prices had dropped so much when he’d announced his plan to stop producing weapons.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.”

Tony couldn’t quite force himself to answer that verbally, but he had a feeling Sam was more than aware enough to sense the slow nod he offered instead. “Do you want to talk about it?” Not that Tony was the best choice of therapist here, but that was what friends did, right? They listened? Or, at least, they were supposed to try. And he knew painfully well how much it hurt when they didn’t.

Sam shook his head, though Tony suspected a large part of it was purely out of frustration with himself for getting someone else involved in what he probably saw as his weakness. “Sorry. It’s been a while since I’ve had one quite that bad. I usually have better control than this, I swear.” He sighed heavily, head thumping back to rest on the side of the seat. “I guess yesterday bothered me more than I thought.”

“Something happened yesterday? JARVIS didn’t-”

“It wasn’t a physical threat or anything. I just-” He cut himself off, searching the ceiling for answers it was highly doubtful he’d find so simply. Tony didn’t take his eyes away for a second. And when Sam finally brought himself to speak again, he pretended he didn’t hear the faint catch at the back of the younger man’s throat.

“Dean told them, you know.” His mouth twisted bitterly, a hollow huff of a laugh sharp on the heels of the half-whispered admission. “The other Avengers. All about the Cage, and what I was like after. Thor came to find out my side of things, but I still-”

“I’ve been trying so hard to make sure you guys knew how good he actually is- to make up for how I reacted that first day, and he just-”

Blinking furiously, Sam breathed out shakily. And yeah, maybe this level of raw emotion was uncomfortable to witness, but Tony couldn’t exactly back out now, could he? For a brief moment, he wondered whether this- this terrible sensation of utter uselessness- was what Pepper had felt all those times he’d woken up, disoriented and half convinced he was still lost forever in the all-consuming depths of space.

“I feel like I don’t even know him anymore,” Sam admitted, so quietly Tony probably wouldn’t have heard it if he hadn’t been sitting so absurdly close. “Or like everything I thought I knew was just my imagination. Even after everything with Gadreel, I thought there were at least some things
he knew belong to me. Some things I don’t want anyone else knowing unless it’s absolutely
necessary. And now I just…

“What on Earth am I supposed to do with this?”

And really? There was only one answer Tony could honestly give to that.

“I don’t know.” Maybe the Dean Sam had once known was still in there, or maybe he really was
just a giant bag of dicks disguised in human form, like Obie- *Stane*- had turned out to be, but there
was no way in Heaven or on Earth Tony was qualified to make that call.

Even if his desire to wreak havoc down upon the older Winchester’s head *had* increased about a
thousand-fold within the span of the past couple of minutes.

Sam finally looked at him- just a glance, really, out of the corner of his eye. “Guessing that’s not
something you admit to all that often.”

“True. I’m a scientist, though- if I really knew everything, my life would be *incredibly* dull.
Discovery is the only reason humankind bothers trying to move forward, after all.”

An attempt at a more joking smile, this time, though the spoken words betrayed Sam’s true
sentiment right now. “Kind of feels like that’s not the only thing it leads to.”

“Sometimes, yeah,” Tony acknowledged after a moment or two of what most people would
probably consider uncharacteristically sober thought for him. “Some discoveries suck. But there’s
no progress without setbacks, right? And sometimes the best progress comes out of the worst
situations.” Even Iron Man himself had bloomed from the ashes of a terrorist camp.

A non-committed hum- Sam’s current version of verbal agreement- was the immediate and only
reply. The meaning behind it was obvious enough, though, to someone like Tony who had been in
such a similar place so many times. Progress was all well and good. But sometimes you really did
have to question whether the setbacks in question were really worth it- especially when they came
as thick and fast as they currently were for Sam. It wasn’t exactly easy to see the light at the end of
the tunnel if said tunnel was piled high with rocks every few feet, with more being added at every
turn.

Neither of them spoke for the next few minutes, each choosing to spend the time instead lingering
in that strange place between solitude and companionship, and it was like this- silent and still
seated on the floor- that Bruce found them when he returned a short while later.

The doctor stared down at them for a good few seconds. “Do I dare ask?”

Tony and Sam stared straight back up at him. Then at each other. Back to Bruce. Back to each
other again…

And promptly burst out laughing.

“We really do look ridiculous, Mountain Man.”

“Oh, I’ve looked worse.”

“Is that even physically possible?”

They both climbed to their feet, Sam hissing automatically as one of his hands brushed against the
seat, leaving a faint smear of red behind.
“It’s nothing,” Sam told Bruce. “I just… had a few things on my mind. Tony was just listening to me moan about them.”

“Tony was—” Bruce just shook his head, tone disbelieving, and waved a vague hand around before going back to his research. “Okay.”

Which, frankly speaking, was just a little bit insulting. Tony was capable of dealing with emotions. Sometimes. Occasionally. Every now and then…

Okay. Maybe Bruce had a point. Tony Stark wasn’t exactly the first name to come to most peoples’ minds when it came to sympathy or emotional understanding.

Shaking away all thoughts on the matter, Tony gestured towards Sam’s hands. “You should probably clean those up. There should be first aid kits in the cupboards by the bathroom.” Then, as the younger man moved away and out of immediate earshot, he raised an eyebrow in Bruce’s direction.

“What do you think anyone would try to blame me if Dean were to find himself ‘accidentally’ locked in a room full of hungry mosquitoes for an hour or two?”

Chapter End Notes

Hey all! Apologies for the slightly later-than-usual upload this time- I spent last week getting everything ready for this week’s tests, and I forgot to give you a heads up. Unfortunately, this also means that there’s a possibility that the next chapter will be late, too, but I guess we’ll just have to wait and see how things go.

Anyway, huge thanks to everyone who responded to the last chapter. I really hope you liked this one, too. And, as always, feel free to let me know what you thought. ^_^

(Also, is it weird that I’m as nervous as I am about writing Helen Cho in the upcoming chapters? We’ve seen so little of her that I have no way of knowing whether what I put is out of character. Which most people would probably see as a good thing, but I actually find a little frustrating. Lol.)
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Sam, Bruce and Tony arrive at U-Gin. Helen is a trying-to-be-secret fangirl.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The U-Gin genetics research facility was not as... blocky as Sam would have imagined. In place of the solid square mass of concrete he’d been half expecting (a bit dumb, he knew, considering he’d spent the past week and a half in a research-filled tower with twice as many windows as there were people), they were met with four tiers of grand, sweeping glass curves. Which, he supposed, could mean one of three things. One: that the glass (or what was inside it, at least) was either specially reinforced or else protected from external attack by some sort of hidden defence system. Two: that the company’s proprietors didn’t believe people would be interested in coming after whatever was housed within. Or three: people just liked stylish buildings these days, regardless of their defensive properties, and he was seriously over-analysing this.

Stifling an impending yawn as they pulled into the semi-removed parking lot, Sam took a moment to blink up at the shining afternoon sun. Even with a second (thankfully uneventful, this time) nap before the plane had begun its descent, his body was still flagging slightly, the brightness of the sky not quite enough to convince it that it wasn’t actually night-time in this part of the world. The thought of his second sleep brought the aftermath of the first back to his mind, though, and he glanced over at Tony, focussing on that instead of on the dull drag of his weary limbs.

It had been such a long time since he’d last allowed himself to open up like that- to be that honest-with another human being. An eternity since he’d spoken so truthfully about his personal troubles with anyone other than Dean (and, to be honest, even those instances had been few and far between, and more often than not tinged with the desperation of imminent doom). Lifetimes since he’d last believed with any certainty that admitting to holding that kind of doubt in his brother could be anything other than betrayal- a sure sign of his own impurity. If this had been just two weeks earlier, he would have been feeling utterly disgusted with himself right now.

Instead, as had been happening surprisingly often since coming to this new universe, he just felt… freed. Like he’d been stuck under a rock for the past who-knew-how-many years, and now he’d finally thrown it off and was able to stretch out and reach... well, maybe not the stars, but at least the tips of some low-hanging branches. It was an entirely different sensation to the bubbling pit of anxiety he could usually feel inside him, just a stone’s throw away at any one moment.

Maybe, despite how overwhelmingly negative confessing had felt at the time, this was the first sign of the ‘progress’ Tony had mentioned.

This was all thanks to the mechanic, he knew. He wasn’t completely blind. He’d seen how easily Steve, in particular, had understood and agreed with whatever explanation Dean had come up with while Sam was having that first night’s breakdown. He knew- or at least heavily suspected- that most of the team would willingly fall in line with whatever decisions the Captain made, even if they didn’t necessarily agree with them. If Tony (and JARVIS, of course) hadn’t been there, playing the part of the belligerent billionaire while actually seeing everything with startling clarity
and understanding, Sam had little doubt that he would have been back living with Dean in just those first twenty-four hours. And he had no doubt that, if that were the case, he would have given up and allowed himself to be stuffed right back under that rock before even the first week was up-forcing himself to put everything that had happened aside for the purpose of working together to get home, and then becoming too afraid of being branded a selfish hypocrite to go back and give in to his anger once their task was complete. The Good Little Brother once again, schooling his every outlying emotion in an effort to make it so that Dean would never again have to feel like he’d failed in the mission their Dad had bestowed upon him.

The question now was: how long would this feeling last this time?

After passing the security checks, they were greeted in the lobby by a young, professional-looking woman named Eun-ji, who introduced herself as one of the junior researchers on Helen Cho’s project, and were guided through the building (Sam was grateful to see a number of vending machines with cans of hot coffee as one of the options) until they arrived at their target.

“Doctor Banner, Doctor Stark, it’s a pleasure to see you both again.” Another woman, taller than both of the men she’d just named (about 5’10 by Sam’s reckoning) straightened up from her inspection of a computer screen as they entered, hands automatically moving to smooth the material of her uniform. “And you must be Sam Winchester. Apologies for making you come out here at such short notice. I’m Helen Cho.”

Sam shook his head. “It’s fine. I’m just sorry you’re having to do all this extra work on a project which only helps one person.”

Helen smiled. “A majority of this data can only be applied to your case, it’s true, but if we succeed there are certain elements which could potentially expand the parameters of the Cradle’s future capability in any number of different directions.” Excitement at the possibilities had her eyes gleaming, and she shot a look in Tony’s direction. “I’m telling you, Stark- if my team and I succeed at even half of what we imagine coming from this, your little flying suits? Will be a thing of the past.”

“And I’m telling you, Helen, if you think you can do it, I dare you to try. I’ll be there waiting for you with parties and free wine for all.” Ignoring (or possibly relishing) Helen’s minutely put-out expression over his failure to rise to her bait, Tony wandered further into the room, fingers brushing across surfaces seemingly at random until he came to rest between something which looked remarkably like a giant metal coffin and a flat, gurney-esque contraption with a single, programmable arc reaching over it. “Now then, shall we get this show on the road?”

Looking like she didn’t quite know whether to be exasperated or amused, Helen made her own way over to the second machine, Sam and Bruce following suit after sharing a brief look of their own.

“This is the machine we’ll be using for the initial testing,” she explained to Sam once they were there, gesturing to the gurney. “It’s a portable version of the cradle, used for creating tissue to heal wounds in a specific area rather than over the body as a whole. Effective, but not as efficient as the Regeneration Cradle itself. What we’re hoping to do here is to replace the infusion of simulacrum with the modified version of Extremis and use that to enhance the effects of the Grace-“ she glanced over at Bruce, as though to confirm that that was the proper term- “already in your system. The problem we’ve found from working with the blood you sent us, however, is that the Grace only remains bound to your DNA for a brief period of time once it’s been separated from your body. As you can imagine, this has made the tests we’ve attempted to run so far rather more difficult than would be preferred. We’re hoping that these new tissue samples will retain the Grace for a longer period, acting similarly to an animal-testing phase but, failing that, we may need to
move directly to running the tests directly on your body. We won’t be moving on to using the Cradle itself until we can be as certain as possible that you won’t suffer any adverse effects.”

Sam nodded. “So what kind of tissue samples will you need? And how long before we know whether or not they’ll work?”

“We’d like to start relatively small. A fresh sample of blood might work, now that we don’t have to worry about the transit time, but we were hoping to also take samples of your nails, saliva and, if you’re willing, a small section of skin. We can keep you updated on their effectiveness each day. If none of those work, however, it may be possible that we’ll need to progress to bone marrow. That’s really more of a second-to-last resort, though. We’d like to avoid it if at all possible.”

“Right.”

It was ten minutes later, while Tony and Bruce were off to one side and Helen was preparing his skin for the biopsy, that Helen’s curiosity got the better of her. Sparing a sideways glance towards the two older men, she eyed Sam speculatively.

“So you’re one of the three men who got transported to right outside the Avengers Tower, right?”

“…I am.”

“Is that how you ended up in this condition? Some sort of side-effect? I’ve been in contact with Doctor Banner, of course, but he’s been refusing to share anything other than your name and the data from your scans.”

Sam couldn’t help it. He tensed. Memories of Gadreel sprang to his mind- all the times the angel had taken over to provide Dean with updates, Sam himself none the wiser- and, for the smallest of moments, it was like his body just shut right back down again. He shook it off almost immediately, but with Helen in such close proximity there was no way for the reaction to pass entirely unnoticed.

To her credit, though, she backed up as soon as she realised what had happened.

“Sorry.” She went back to work, her tone as pragmatic as it had been before. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to, or if it's classified. I was curious, yes. I still am. But it's not necessary for the procedure. I won’t pry again- and neither will any other member of my team.”

“Thanks. And sorry, too, I guess. It’s just… kind of a complicated story.” He watched as deft hands carved some shallow incisions into the anaesthetised section of his arm and lifted the skin into a waiting dish.

“It’s honestly no problem,” Helen smiled as she dripped a small amount of liquid onto his arm, then set about applying the dressing. “I do have one more question, though.”

Taking in the slight red tint of her cheeks, Sam nodded slightly apprehensively. “What is it?”

“If you’ve been living in the Avengers Tower…” She leaned in, lowering her voice almost conspiratorially. “Does that mean you’ve spent much time with Thor?”

It was only through sheer force of will that Sam didn’t let out a small, surprised laugh. He honestly wouldn’t have guessed. “You’re a fan?”

Helen fought quite admirably not to look too interested. “I… may have seen footage of a few of his battles…”
“I actually spoke to him yesterday.”

“Well, he supposed there was no harm in saying anything, as long as it wasn’t personal (not that he really knew anything personal about the Asgardian in the first place). Helen (thankfully) definitely didn’t seem like the type to go all Becky on someone. “He’s nice,” he admitted, keeping his voice as quiet as hers. “More thoughtful than you’d expect at first.”

A mildly vindicated smile spread across the doctor’s face. “I knew it. And the armour?”

“I’ve only actually seen him a couple of times but, outside of that first meeting, no, he hasn’t been in his armour. Just regular Earth clothes.”

“Casual?”

“V-necks. And jackets”

“Oh, I bet he looks amazing in a V-neck.”

“Well, he definitely doesn’t look bad in one,” Sam acknowledged, smiling at the sudden change in Helen’s formally very professional demeanour- especially when she let out a slightly wistful sigh.

“Jane Foster is a lucky woman. Still, no harm in the rest of us just looking, right?”

“What are you two laughing about over here?” Tony questioned, he and Bruce having apparently finished their own conversation. “Does it involve me? Am I naked? I’m warning you now, Cho-Sam is my future husband-bride-hybrid. And I will not let you steal him away from me!”

“Your husband-bride-hybrid is safe from my womanly wiles, Stark. You needn’t worry about that.” She and Sam shared a brief glance, before the Hunter turned as obviously put-on an innocent expression as he could muster in Tony’s direction.

“Don’t worry, Tony. We definitely weren’t plotting your ultimate demise.”

A mock-suspicious narrowing of the mechanic’s eyes was more than enough proof that he had easily picked up on the joke. “Oh really? What were you talking about, then?”

“…V-necks.”

Now that definitely wasn’t what Tony had been expecting (Sam had to wonder whether he’d ever figure out, at this point, that there was any truth to it). Still, the older man recovered pretty much instantaneously, ignoring the single blink which had been his initial reaction and choosing instead to fall into a flirty smirk. “There’s no need to beat around the bush people- if you’re curious, you need only ask. And there are plenty of people who can vouch for me” He winked at Sam, arms moving in an immodest shrug.

“I look absolutely stunning in a V-neck.”

Chapter End Notes

So here we are, guys. Really hope you liked it!
(For the semi-removed carpark (or parking lot, depending on where you're from), I looked at a bunch of google pics of the U-Gin facility, but I couldn't see one. It could be on the ground floor, of course, but I figured I'd just go down this route. Maybe it's possible that the employees get bussed in at regular points or something? I have no idea. It seems like a very strange design choice.)

And, as always, huge thanks to everyone who left a response last chapter, in any shape or form. You guys are awesome!
“Hey, Sam-I-am the Mountain Man, how’s life as a lab rat treating you?”

On the other end of the line, Sam let out a small huff of laughter. “Pretty good. Better than I imagined it, anyway. And Bruce is like a kid in a candy shop with all the genetics talk going on. How’s Australia?”

“Hot as a blacksmith’s forge. I’m actually beginning to wonder whether it would be worth it to invent some sort of portable personal cooling system. Fans just don’t cut it.”

“What, the great and mighty Iron Man can’t take the heat?”

“Hey, Iron Man loves the heat. Iron Man relishes the heat. Tony Stark, on the other hand, would much rather outside temperatures never went above nice and toasty. Which is precisely why the inside of Iron Man has such an excellent regulation system.”

“Well, I can’t say you don’t have a point.” There was a beat of silence. “How come you’re calling now, anyway? Isn’t your lecture due to start soon?”

“I’m on my way there now. Just thought I’d check in on my latest project while I had a few minutes to kill. So how’s it going- any progress?” It was a long shot, considering only a couple of days had passed since they first arrived in Seoul, but you never knew when a breakthrough might come- especially with people as smart as Bruce and Helen leading the charge. And Tony preferred to keep on top of such things, anyway. Being out of the loop sucked.

“…Kind of the opposite, actually,” Sam admitted after a moment of hesitation. “Unless the aim is for me to end up a pile of ash, that is.”

“What?”

“Mn. Turns out we were thinking so much about how the extremis could influence the Grace that we didn’t really think about the opposite. Helen’s team tried a dose on one of the larger samples earlier, and apparently it kick-started some of extremis’ former properties? That’s what they think happened, anyway.”

“Crap.”

“…Pretty much. The entire thing was incinerated in seconds.”

Massaging his brow with just a tad more force than was probably strictly necessary, Tony ran a quick mental review of extremis’ current make-up, considering which parts of the structure could have been re-altered to create such a violent reaction. Three points came to mind almost instantly,
but there was no way to know which one (or ones) was in play here—or how to prevent the change—without more information.

“Can you have the team send me the data from the test? They’re perfectly capable of figuring it out by themselves, of course, but I have to admit my curiosity has been piqued.” Not to mention the fact that having as many geniuses as possible working on not burning his new friend to a crisp was definitely the best option here.

“Sure thing. They’re all in some sort of debate right now, but I’ll ask about it when they pause for breath.”

“What about the retention time? Have you figured out the exact limit yet?”

“We think so. Going by the three control samples, it looks like the Grace disappears at around the forty hour mark. Which makes sense, I guess. In biblical terms, at least. I mean, forty is basically the biblical numerical version of completion—forty days in the wilderness, forty days on Mount Sinai, forty days and forty nights for the flood. It’s mentioned close to 150 times in total, I think. If God based that on how things work in Heaven, then it’s fair to assume that Grace works under similar parameters. I could always try checking with Castiel, of course, but at this point I’d say it’s a fairly safe bet that the same is going to be true for any future samples, too.”

Tony smiled despite himself. It was kind of a novel experience in his life—being around someone whose random stores of trivia didn’t relate to either science or weaponry. Pepper was another one, if you ever got her talking about art. As much as he absolutely loved the perks being a know-it-all could offer, having someone who could teach him something for a change was nice.

“You know, I’m fairly certain it’s not exactly normal to sound so excited about biblical numerology.”

He could practically hear the shrug and the slightly self-conscious smile over the line. “Well, people have always told me I’m kind of a freak.”

“Freaks and geeks and brimming with mystique. Best things to be in my opinion, regardless of which one someone is.” Glancing out the window as they stopped at a red light, Tony spent a moment studying the small crowd of business people who were obviously enjoying their early lunch, regardless of the freakishly stifling temperatures. He couldn’t imagine ever being that entirely certain in his own safety while out in public. But then, paranoia was kind of a given side-effect for a not-insignificant portion of those born into extreme wealth. Too many close calls (and beyond) for that not to be the case. “Alright. So only an average-sized window of opportunity for each sample, then. Hope you’ve got plenty of spit to share with the class.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage,” came the sarcastic reply.

“Wouldn’t count on it, Mountain Man. We scientists are a greedy lot. Drain you dry if you’re not careful.” The car moved on, inching closer to his destination, and Tony slid his sunglasses back on in one practised movement, guarding against the intermittent glare which shone through the gaps between some of the buildings. “Anything else interesting going on?”

“Not much. I’m not really much help with the cure stuff, so I’ve mostly just been entertaining myself. We have been going out in the evenings, though. Helen took us to this local restaurant yesterday, and Eun-ji says she’s going to give me her father’s bibimpap recipe. Apparently Americans have no idea how to make it properly.”

“I better get some of your first batch, Mountain Man.”
Another huff tickled at his ear. “If you’re willing to risk almost certain poisoning, you’re on. Don’t let the knife skills fool you- I’m not exactly a culinary master. Simple dishes only.”

“My last attempt at making anything outside of an omelette resulted in sausage meat exploding in Rhodey’s face. I am the last person to judge someone over terrible cuisine, my good man. Just ask Pepper. Ate every last bit that one time she decided to try making scrambled eggs.”

“Two minutes,” came a sudden voice from the front seat, and Tony looked up, hand fluttering in a mini wave of thanks to the driver as he met her eyes through the mirror.

“That’s my cue,” he informed Sam. “Got a few more things to do here after the lecture, but I should be back in Seoul in two or three days. Keep me updated.”

“I will. Have fun.”

Tony snorted in the inelegant way his mother had always scolded him for using in public. “It’s Science, Mountain Man. Almost impossible for it to be anything but.” The non-science stuff, however…

A little over two hours later, Tony stood in a now near-empty lecture hall at the Melbourne School of Engineering, ostentatiously supervising as a Stark Industries team packed up the equipment he’d had them drive over from the company’s nearest lab. He still had a few hours before he’d have to head back to the hotel to change before setting out again for the latest round of social pandering Pepper hadn’t been able to prevent the board signing him up for. Politicians and other potential investors this time, all of them eager for a few minutes with the world’s most renowned engineer before they decided just how much money they’d like to squander. The question was, how did he want to entertain himself during those hours?

It was as the final box got carted out that an ever-so-slightly timid voice sounded from the door.

“Mr. Stark?”

Dragging his gaze away from the rows of empty seats (and his mind from the memory of all the bright young faces which had filled them), Tony grinned over at the Student Representative who had been the one to guide him here.

“Ready for my close-up?”

Amina gave him a brave attempt at a confident smile- one belied only by the habitual tugging at the fringes of her hijab- and nodded once.

“I’m supposed to take you over to meet the Dean?”

“That’s the plan. Lead the way, my lady.”

They made it all of three minutes and nineteen seconds out of the door before the nervousness gave way to gushing enthusiasm.

“Mr Stark, I just… I wanted to thank you. I know the Dean’s probably going to say the same thing, but that lecture was just… amazing. I mean, this is an amazing university, and I absolutely love my course and all of the professors here, but none of them have ever made science sound so… easy, you know?”

Tony could only shrug. “That’s because it isn’t.” At Amina’s questioning gaze, he clarified. “Some concepts are easier to grasp than others, sure- more for me than there may be for a lot of others-
but if you ever approach something scientific thinking it’s going to be easy, you’re almost
guaranteed to hit a tonne of roadblocks. Even I struggle with projects sometimes. Some of them
might take me months to figure out.” Sam’s situation lurched to the forefront of his mind,
accompanied this time with memories of a desperate, scrambling race to find- and eventually
create- a cure for the poison which had been invading his own veins- “some might take years.”
God, he really hoped it wouldn’t end up taking that long to solve this extremis/Grace issue- “but, in
the end, it’s the ones which take the longest which end up feeling the best once they’re finished.”
He grinned over at the girl walking beside him. “If science were easy, it would be boring. Try to
remember that.”

A hint of bemusement crept into Amina’s expression, cutting away at the rapt attention she had
been paying him and turning it into something a lot more thoughtful (and somehow just a little
more awed).

“…You’re not as brash as you look on TV.”

Straightening up slightly, Tony allowed a bit of his signature smirk to creep across his features.
“Hey, don’t write me off that easily.”

“No, but all those things you say at conventions and stuff, it’s really not all show, is it? You really
do believe it all.”

Curiosity sufficiently met (and now with a private, knowing smile tugging minutely at her lips),
Amina trailed off, leaving Tony with people-watching (and the occasional acknowledgement of the
random students who noticed who he was as he passed them) as his only form of entertainment as
they continued on through the campus. He had to wonder, though- was Amina’s fast observation of
his slightly softer underbelly an indication of her own observation skills, or was he merely
becoming worse at hiding that side of himself in his everyday life?

And would it really be the end of the world if the latter were true? So many years after he’d moved
on from creating the weapons which had so divided the nation, did he really need to rely on that
shield of cockiness any more?

Or was this all just sentimental drivel from a man with old age looming not too far off in his future?
Was his ever-increasing support of the dreams of the young people he met (and his belief that they
were destined to re-shape the world into something better than his generation could even start to
imagine) simply a side-effect of his own mortality?

He supposed he’d just have to wait and see.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, mid-week release this time. Partly because I'm heading off to a three-day
English camp for another ALT's school (and will therefore be unlikely to post the next
chapter until *next* weekend instead of this one). Mostly because this chapter was
kind of a pain to write for some reason (dialogue tends not no be my strong point), and
it's taken me this long just to complete it (and to get it (especially the university
section) to a level I'm reasonably happy with). Hopefully you all liked it, anyway. Lol.

As always, huge thanks to everyone who responded to the last chapter. I still have no
idea where the continuing stream of kudos is coming from, but it makes me smile
regardless. ^_^ (And reviews, of course, are a writer's comfort-food)
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

The remaining Avengers, together with Dean and Castiel, head out for a bit of bonding.

Chapter Notes

Not sure if this needs warning for, but just to be safe: heads up for a line which compares an expression to suicidal ideation. Also, apologies for the Dean-isms.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Typically speaking, a pub quiz wasn’t exactly Dean’s scene of choice. Not only because the whole concept just seemed kind of pathetic to him, but also because the Hunter lifestyle didn’t exactly lend itself to the easy outlook or comfortable friendships generally considered necessary for such activities.

Still, the last couple of weeks- filled as they had been with precious little relief from the lonely desperation and confused anger which filled him in Sam’s absence from his side (and the bullshit reasons behind it)- had not been pleasant, and he was self-aware enough to know that he needed a distraction right now if he ever wanted to escape those emotions and prevent himself from blowing up at someone undeserving. And, with his usual outlets cut off from him (and with there being a limit to how much help ridiculously loud rock music was capable of providing), he kind of had to take what he could get when he could get it. So when Falcon, after having spotted a poster while out on his morning run, came to their floor to invite him and Cas to an impromptu evening out with the team members who were still in the country, Dean found himself agreeing (despite it being somewhat dubiously) to go along.

After, of course, providing full disclosure over precisely how non-useful Cas would almost certainly be on the trivia front.

As it turned out, though, the whole deal wasn’t anywhere near as trauma-inducing as he’d originally expected it might be. The lingering awkwardness and tense silences which had begun to permeate his interactions with Cas weren’t as noticeable with the others around to act as a buffer and, honestly speaking, the air of friendly competitiveness exuded by the other teams (which only seemed to multiply when they realised who most of the members of the last group were) was practically contagious.

He could do without the Hawk Princess’ continued dickishness, though. As much as he was starting to wonder whether being a Dick-with-a-capital-D was just Clint’s default setting (instead of a legitimate reaction to anything he perceived Dean to have done wrong), the whole self-righteous ranger act was getting old fast. The archer’s brooding was mostly subdued in comparison to the anger of those first few days, however, so it was far from being something Dean couldn’t put up with. He had grown up with Sam, after all, and had developed rather a thick skin where temper
tantrums and silent treatments were concerned because of it—no matter the age of the one throwing them.

And besides, in the brief times between when Clint’s snark and bad attitude surfaced too strongly and Steve’s disappointed glances set in, Dean could give as good as he got. And more.

“I’m telling you, she was 27.”

Falcon frowned slightly, still frustratingly uncertain despite Dean’s firm insistence. “Are you sure? That just sounds a bit too young to me.”

“This is about classic rock. I know rock, alright?”

“Just like you knew the first camera phone came out in 2000?” Clint pointed out snidely.

“That’s ‘cos it did in my universe,” Dean snapped back. “Just ‘cos you’ve got some freaky-ass techno whizz-kids over here putting things out years early doesn’t mean I was wrong.”

“And we’re supposed to just take your word for it that you’d’ve been right in your universe?”

“Well unless you think I’d ever forget those pictures Janet Marshall let me take of her after I switched phones in 2003, yeah. You can bet your ass I’d’ve been right. And unless you’ve got some other secret gizmo which stopped Janis Joplin from overdosing in 1970, yeah. I’m right here, too. She was 27.”

“The two leading groups are also answering 27,” Natasha informed them, in a tone which suggested she viewed the matter as settled.

“Natasha, I told you, you can’t just spy on the other teams!” Falcon, who had been attempting (unsuccessfully, obviously) to reign in the group’s behaviour all evening, whispered for what felt like the millionth time. “This is supposed to be about our own knowledge and skills—not espionage!”

The former spy just shrugged calmly, completely unrepentant. “I’m using my skills and knowledge of lip-reading. As long as I don’t try to listen to the other teams or read what’s on their papers, it’s not technically against the rules.”

After a somewhat star-struck blink, the woman nodded. “Go ahead. I’m afraid I’ll have to ban you from participating in the remainder of this round, though,” she finished regretfully.
“Of course.” With one more smile, Steve ducked out of the room, leaving the rest of their group hovering in a state somewhere on the edge of preparing to leave while also listening to the second attempt at asking the question.

“Finish the following lyrics from Taylor Swift’s Bad Blood- ‘Band Aids don’t fix…”’

And that was Dean out, then. As if he was gonna know any lyrics by some teeny-bop pop star. And, in a reveal which was probably bad in light of their current setting, but which boosted his opinion of all those present to a slightly more respectable level, it didn’t look like anyone else on the team had any clue either. Thor least of all.

“Who is this swift person?” The alien wondered out loud, voice (as it often was) pitched just a little too loudly to be considered normal for regular conversation. “And why is their blood tainted? Should not the effort be being made to cleanse them of their disease rather than forming entertainment around their circumstances?”

Falcon smiled, and the people at the next table looked like they were trying very hard not to laugh (as they had every right to- the Asgardian sounded even more retarded than Cas did sometimes when he asked stuff like that). “It’s more like bad blood between enemies. And Taylor Swift is a singer- Bad Blood is the title of one of her songs.”

“Ah, I see. And what is this band aid of which she sings? The two words seem an odd combination to my ears.”

“A band aid is the American term for a small adhesive strip of bandage many humans apply when wounded.” Castiel looked as privately proud as he ever did when he got an opportunity to teach someone something he’d learnt about human culture. A few years ago Dean might have found it amusing. Now, after repeated exposure (and especially in light of Cas taking Sam’s side in Sam’s latest tantrum) it was honestly just kind of annoying.

Luckily, he had plenty of practice in letting Cas’ particular brand of oddness just wash right over him.

Steve came back three questions later, hovering by the bar to collect more drinks until the adjudicator announced the end of the round and made her way around the room to collect the answer sheets from each of the teams.

“Ten minutes until the next round starts,” lil’ miss frumpy announced.

“Nothing important,” Steve informed them as he sat back down, leaning backwards to make enough space for everyone to grab fresh glasses from the tray he had brought over. “Tony, Bruce and Sam will be back in two days.”

“Finally.” They’d already been gone for two weeks. That meant Sam had literally been off cavorting in Seoul for longer than he’d been in the damn tower in the first place- it was long past time he came back and stopped acting like a damn coward.

Much to Dean’s annoyance, Clint rolled his eyes. “What did you expect? An easy fix? You saw the damage to Sam’s DNA- there’s no way that’s gonna be solved this quickly.”

And yes. He had seen it. He doubted he’d ever be able to forget seeing it- his little brother’s DNA so altered it was barely even recognisable as human any more. Solid visual proof of Dean’s repeated failure to keep Sam from flinging himself down paths which were doomed from the start to give him nothing but pain. It was an image which would likely haunt him for years if he let it-
not least because of the evidence that Gadreel had not been entirely unfaithful. That he had actually healed Sam enough to prove that, if only Dean had put his faith in an angel who wasn’t a lying, manipulative, two-faced dick with wings, then maybe Sam would have been that much closer to being 100% fixed by now.

Gla-ring at Clint, however, he didn’t say any of that. “I’m not stupid.” Ignoring the archer’s rolling eyes and muttered ‘could’ve fooled me,’ he looked instead at Steve. “Anything on getting us home?”

Steve shook his head. “He didn’t say anything.”

“That will probably take weeks at least.” After taking another sip of her cocktail, Natasha set her glass down, moving on to pick up a couple of the peanuts sitting in the centre of their table. “From what I gather, they can’t progress too far without getting more of the translated code. Although,” she added, arching a delicate eyebrow and offering them all a teasing smirk, “I doubt that’s the only reason it’s not getting done yet.”

As some of the others joined in with a small, private laugh, Steve took pity on Dean and Cas’ confusion after just a few seconds. “Tony’s not exactly the most responsible person around,” he explained with a joking smile. “If he isn’t around someone who can get him to focus, he tends to get a bit… distracted.”

“Pepper Potts was famous for it,” Falcon put in, similarly amused. “Magazines used to call her the Stark-wrangler.”

Well, that was just great, wasn’t it? Not only was there no way on this Earth or any other that Sam was focussing properly on the translations with a whole other country’s worth of distractions to explore (which, considering what the High Enochian might be bringing up, Dean might have been happy about were it not for the fact that A) they needed those translations to get home and B) Sam had been the one to stubbornly insist on doing them in the first case, regardless of Dean’s opinion on the matter), but now he had apparently managed to latch on to the one person in the Avengers who apparently had even less a sense of duty than Sam himself did.

He was beginning to get more than a little pissed off with his brother’s unerring ability to put his trust in the worst possible person (or monster) available.

On the upside, though, at least Sam probably wouldn’t end up screwing this one.

Chapter End Notes

Hey all! Huge thanks to everyone who responded to the last chapter. And a welcome, too, to the new reader(s) this fic apparently now has. Hope you’re all enjoying the story! This chapter was originally going to continue for a little longer (just having them go back to the quiz- nothing important), but I dunno. After I wrote that last line it just felt like putting anything more would have detracted from it. I think I prefer it this way.

Also, to clarify: I personally feel like Sam is Demisexual Panromantic (Biromantic at the very least). But I have very little doubt that, if asked, Dean would 100% think Sam is straight. Hence his reasoning behind Sam being unlikely to "screw" Tony. (Which he won't. But not because of gender. I just prefer those two as friends. That, and I think
canon Tony is probably straight (which I admit is up for debate, as I don't believe he's ever actually stated that). Plus Tony is already in a relationship.)
Tony really loved driving. Always had. It wasn’t really something he got many chances to do anymore (not in comparison to just a few short years earlier, at least), and he found he missed it. Despite how much he liked all of his drivers, there was just something about feeling the thrum of the engine vibrating through his fingers and the rush of the wind through his hair which awakened some primal sense of joy and exhilaration within him. Not on the level he experienced while in the Iron Man armour, of course, but there was a unique comfort to it which he could never help but revel in whenever he got the opportunity.

Which was precisely why, after helping Helen settle in at the New York U-Gin facility, he booted Carla into the passenger seat and took over the wheel on the way back home. City traffic was a far cry from the thrills of a race track, of course, but that didn’t stop him grinning from ear to ear by the time they arrived at their destination.

Of course, a good portion of that smile could also have been attributed to the two men in the back seat. The slow pace and the steady hum of city noise had worked its magic on the pair of them, lulling them in their exhaustion into the welcome embrace of sleep and leaving them propped up against each other, Bruce’s head on Sam’s shoulder providing the taller man with a pillow at just the right height. Holding a finger to his lips after they were safely parked, Tony winked conspiratorially at Carla, then twisted in his seat to get the perfect angle as he snapped a few shots with his phone.

“And that,” he informed her before thanking her for driving them the first leg of their journey from the airport, “is what is commonly known as The Money Shot.”

Thoroughly accustomed by now to Tony’s particular eccentricities and brand of humour, Carla went along with the whole deal somewhat indulgently. Although he could have sworn he saw an amused smile on her face as she left the area to go back to her other duties. He counted that as a win.

“Welcome back, Sir.” JARVIS’ dulcet tones greeted him once she had left.

Tony shut the driver’s side door, not bothering to lock it behind himself. “Glad to be back, J. We miss anything?”

“Nothing of import, Sir. Although Captain Rogers and Miss Hill have both requested to speak with you upon your return.”

“Together?” Boy, he hoped not. If that were the case, if could only spell trouble. Which would be odd, considering neither of them had attempted to reach him by phone.
“Separately, Sir. It seems you are a popular man today.”

“It seems so. Although I’m not too sure you needed to use such a sarcastic tone there, buddy.”

“I beg to differ, sir.”

Tony paused where he stood, eying the nearest of JARVIS’ cameras. “I’m beginning to think I’m a bad influence on you.” He grinned. “I think I like it. What about this weekend?”

“Barring unforeseen circumstances, Sir, everything should go ahead as planned.”

“Great. Okay, tell Rogers I’ll meet him first. Just gotta get the kids up before I go.”

Leaving JARVIS to his business, Tony made his way round to Bruce’s door, leaning in to shake the doctor awake. A finger to his lips ensured that the older man woke- and then climbed out- near silently (if a little confused), leaving Tony free to wander round to the other side without fuss. As far as he knew, Sam hadn’t had any more potentially violent awakenings since that one on the plane, but even if it didn’t look like he was having a nightmare that still didn’t mean it would necessarily be wise to risk it happening again with other people within arm’s reach and in an enclosed space. Especially when the other person within said space housed the Hulk.

“Sam? Hey, Mountain Man.”

Luckily, Sam jerked awake with nothing more than slightly wide eyes and a startled gasp of “Kevin!” A gasp which, considering the crestfallen expression which flitted momentarily through the younger man’s eyes upon realising what he had said, Tony chose to ignore for now. No use prodding at that particular wound uninvited. Instead, he quirked a sneaky eyebrow.

“Rise and shine sleepyhead number two.”

Biting back a groan, Sam pulled himself out of the car, grabbing his bag from the pile Carla had thoughtfully unloaded from the trunk before she left. “What time is it?”

“Eight thirty.” Hoisting his own bag (and all the tech-based goodies which dwelt within) over his shoulder, Tony beamed at his bleary-eyed companions. “Well, I’d say you two fine specimens are more than capable of sorting yourselves out from here on. I’ll leave you to it.”

Fifteen minutes later, after depositing his stuff in his lab and fiddling with his hair and clothes just enough that he looked slightly less travel-weary, Tony wandered into the common floor briefing room to find Steve already in there waiting for him. He had to hold back a groan of his own upon seeing the stubborn set to the blond’s jaw. What the hell was he supposed to have done this time?

Stomping down on his (probably completely misplaced) apprehension, he strode across the room, half throwing himself into his usual chair. “Cap. Thanks for keeping everything in one piece while I was away. What’s up?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Castiel and the Winchesters.”

Great. Because *that* was a topic they had a history of agreeing on. Still, *something* big must have gone down to put that serious an expression on Steve’s face. “Shoot.”

Steve crossed his arms, leaning one shoulder against the nearest wall. He paused for a second before voicing his request (although, to be honest, it came out sounding more like a reprimand). “I think you should lift the security detail and restrictions.”
The laugh which burst out was 100% unintentional. Well, maybe 87%. “Wait, that’s what this is about? Here I am thinking you look like Dean finally snapped and tried to strangle the angel or something, and all you want to talk about is stopping the guards?”

The disapproving scowl he got in return told him he probably could have handled that a whole lot better, but come on. Who on Earth looked that serious over something as simple as a security procedure?! Let alone one that wasn’t hurting anyone.

“Tony, come on—”

“Let me- let me stop you right there, Cap. I can’t cancel the security yet.”

“Tony, you’re just being stubborn about this.” Steve straightened up, putting on his ‘reasonable negotiator’ voice. “You know they’re not a threat. I’m not going to stand by and let you continue treating them like prisoners just because you’ve got a petty grudge against Dean.”

Okay, maybe he was just over-reacting, but quite honestly Tony was feeling increasingly insulted. Was that really what Steve thought of him? Or was the super-soldier just exaggerating for impact? Tamping down on his irritation, he leaned forward to explain. “No, I literally cannot cancel the security yet. Not without Pepper.”

Steve shot him a confused blink. “What?”

“First things first- if you think this is how prisoners are treated, you really need to try taking a tour of an actual jail sometime. Secondly, this tower may be used by the Avengers, but it’s still a Stark Industries property with Stark Industries projects being developed in it. People start living here in circumstances which look as potentially suspicious as Sam, Castiel and Dean’s and security protocol kicks in automatically. It can’t be lifted unless both me and Pepper sign off on it- or someone authorised to act on our behalves if we’re unable to. I know as well as you do that those three aren’t exactly here to commit some crazy espionage attempt, but Pepper won’t be in New York to check them out for herself until this weekend.” Standing up, he allowed a small portion of his indignation to come out in the form of a bite right at the edge of his tone. “So next time you want to go throwing those types of accusations around, Cap, try actually asking if I’ve got reason for what I do first. Now, if we’re done here, I’ve got some other stuff to do.”

Before he could actually make it through the door, though, Steve grabbed hold of his arm, stopping him in place. He let go as soon as Tony drew to a solid halt, though, practically exuding an aura of earnest contrition. “Tony, wait.”

Tony didn’t even bother to reply. Just raised an eyebrow and waited to see where Steve was going with this.

“Look, I’m sorry,” the blond began. “I shouldn’t have just assumed something like that about you.” He sighed, offering up an apologetic smile. “It’s just… you haven’t exactly rolled out the welcome mat to anyone other than Sam, you know. And Dean’s been having kind of a rough time because of it. And everyone knows the stories about the way you used to act whenever Justin Hammer was around. I guess I just… didn’t want to see you giving in to the temptation to revert to that sort of petty behaviour again.”

As far as apologies went, it was far from perfect. But he supposed the base sentiment was there, at least. And it was pretty common knowledge that Tony Stark didn’t always react the most rationally where people he didn’t like were involved. Hell, there was video footage of him challenging a damned terrorist to a revenge match. Even with Happy as injured as he had been at the time, that had been a ridiculously stupid move. So when you considered stuff like that? Yeah,
inconveniencing some douchebag hillbilly definitely seemed like something right up his alley.

He nodded once, the small smile Steve gave him in return a clear sign that the acceptance of the Captain’s words had been acknowledged, and made his way out of the door unhindered this time.

“Just to be clear,” he called back over his shoulder, “Hammer deserved every single thing I said about him and more.”

Grinning to himself over the sound of the small half-snort Steve had no doubt tried to hide, Tony sauntered away, following JARVIS’ instructions until he reached the gym used by the ex-SHIELD members who worked in the building. There weren’t many people in there- a lot of them tended to prefer working out earlier in the day- but it still took a couple of seconds for him to spot Hill, hidden as she was over in the farthest corner. She didn’t notice him at first, concentration almost solely focussed on the steady rhythm of her fists against the heavy duty punching bags, but she looked up as he drew nearer, wrapping her arms solidly around the bag to stop its movement.

“Stark. About time you got back.” The glint in her eye made it obvious enough that she was joking. On some level, at least.

“Well, I guess I just couldn’t bear to be away from you even a moment longer, Hill.” He tilted his head to one side, tone turning serious. “Heard you wanted to talk to me. What’s wrong?”

Maria huffed out a breath, grabbing a towel from the nearest bench to wipe across her face. “You couldn’t have picked a better place to have this conversation, boss?”

“No your boss.” He brushed past the eye-roll his statement caused. “We can go somewhere else if you want, though. Is this confidential or something?”

“Nothing that serious.” Swiping a couple of loose hairs off her face, she jerked a thumb in the direction of the gym’s second door, waiting until they had moved into the equipment room to continue the conversation. “We finished looking through the information from the Serbia base.” She explained with a shake of her head. “Some of the files suggest that Hydra moved some of the Chitauri weaponry to a base in Tajikistan. It’s possible that Loki’s sceptre was among them.”

“And I’m guessing the bad news comes next?” With how long they’d been waiting for this exact news, only a particularly troublesome setback could put that level of frustration on the ex-agent’s face.

“I’ve been trying to talk with the Tajik Prime Minister- or at least someone in his government- to get permission for the Avengers to enter the country and run a search of the base. It’s been almost a week now, and none of them will even give me the time of day. Apparently they’re still bitter because of some of what they read in the Info Dump.”

“Crap.” Tony took a few seconds to study Hill’s face, trying to work out just how bad this could potentially be. They’d had issues because of the Dump before, but this was the first time they’d provided a big enough obstacle that Hill had needed to come to him directly. “What exactly,” he sighed, “did SHIELD get up to in Tajikistan?”

To her credit, Hill didn’t shy away from the scrutiny. “Nothing good. And some of the more high-profile missions there were performed by the Black Widow. Even if we do manage to get someone to talk to us, I doubt they’d look kindly on a request to bring Natasha into the country. If you weren’t so against it I’d say we should just sneak in and risk it but-”

“No. I told you- if the Avengers want to survive, we have to be legit.” And not only because of
how much it could influence SI if Tony was caught that blatantly going against a sovereign
nation’s wishes regarding their borders. People needed to trust the Avengers if they wanted even a
chance of beating whatever space launched at them next, and that would never happen if the
various countries out there had legitimate reasons to run smear campaigns against them. And that
wasn’t even taking into consideration the influence negative actions taken by a group as prominent
as the Avengers could have on everyday Enhanced.

Closing his eyes for a minute, Tony ran through a number of possible plans of attack. Every
government- every person- could be moved if you found the right buttons to push. And he had
little doubt that the Prime Minister wouldn’t object too strongly to an Avengers mission crossing
his borders if it meant stamping out a terrorist cell before said cell began to cause problems for his
people. Distrust of Americans- and of SHIELD in particular- was one thing, but wilfully ignoring
the presence of Hydra operatives was a political minefield Tony simply had to trust the PM
wouldn’t be stubborn enough to dive into.

“Alright,” he breathed out. “I’ll talk to the Prime Minister. If I manage to get the green light,
though, you’re going to have to be the one to come up with a reason the team will accept for
Natasha not being cleared to go on the mission.”

Hill smiled, nodding like she honestly believed Tony had the political skills to pull this off. It was
actually kind of flattering, in a way. They’d definitely come a long way from ‘when did you
become an expert in thermonuclear astrophysics?’ that was for sure.

“You’ve got it, boss.”

Chapter End Notes

Whee! The dream team is back inside the country, and confrontations are (hopefully)
right around the corner (depends entirely on how much I ramble)! As for this chapter?
Well, it kind of came out of nowhere. I was actually part-way through writing the
arrival from Sam's POV when Steve and Maria informed me that they had some
things to go through, and I had to switch to Tony to make it fit (luckily not at all a
hardship). Hope you guys liked it!

And many thanks once again for peoples' continued responses to and support of this
story. You have no idea how much encouragement I draw from all of you- especially
as a new set of exams (and therefore grading) is only a week away. Seriously- thank
you all so much! ^_^
Home. It wasn’t something Sam had ever really thought he’d experience again- not after Stanford, and definitely not after Amelia. But as he set his bag down next to his desk and stood for a second, taking in the room by the light filtering in through the open curtains, he couldn’t deny that Home was where it felt like he finally was. He had loved Seoul and all its eccentricities, but the hotel-despite easily being the best he’d ever stayed in- had still held the ‘temporary’ air which had encompassed so much of his life. The tower was different. More settled, regardless of the fact that some of the brightest minds on this earth were working on getting them to leave it. And, despite the relatively short time he’d spent here so far (and the number of bad memories and revelations he had experienced within its walls), it still felt strangely familiar- like he Fit here, in a way he rarely had before. Even an entire year in the Bunker hadn’t had this same effect on him.

Perhaps that was why it took him such a short amount of time, after settling into his bed, to sink into the depths of sweet oblivion.

…Or maybe he was just plain exhausted.

Either way, going by past precedent, he certainly hadn’t expected this particular rest to remain unhampered by the dreams which had haunted him every other night. Or to wake well into the mid-morning the next day- the first time his eyes had opened since first laying his head on his pillow. And he certainly hadn’t expected the phone call which came barely half an hour later, or for Thor’s name to be the one flashing across the screen.

Laying his book down on the coffee table, Sam swiped his thumb across the screen, palms
beginning to itch in nervous anticipation as he lifted the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Sam, my friend, I have been informed of your return!”

Sam winced automatically, pulling the phone a couple of inches away from his ear. If Thor was trying to add an impersonation of an OAP who didn’t know that using a phone wasn’t the same as yelling through several layers of walls to his usual booming voice, he was doing an extremely good job of it. Which was kind of odd, considering he assumed the Asgardian must use some kind of com system on Avengers missions. Unless Thor thought phones were less sensitive or something? Or maybe he yelled this loudly during missions, too. Sam wouldn’t be surprised.

“Mm, we got back last night,” Sam concurred. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

The idea seemed to amuse Thor greatly, if his burst of surprised laughter was anything to go by, and he quickly refuted the idea, insisting instead that his only aim in calling was to ‘further extend the hand of friendship’ by inviting Sam to a ‘lunchtime of revelry and the sharing of tales.’

Which was how Sam found himself stepping, somewhat nervously, onto the Avengers’ common floor at 12:37, still trying to convince himself that Thor genuinely wanted him to be there. He hadn’t expected this. Most people they met ended up liking Dean more in the end, especially given any form of lengthy exposure. Trusting him more, too. It wasn’t something Sam had ever been particularly bitter about (not since that Hunt with the four year old ghost back when he was sixteen, when he’d finally woken up to the fact that there was quite literally nothing he could ever do to convince their dad they’d ever even come close to measuring up to his brother). It was just a fact of life- diamonds were expensive, water was wet, and 95% of people would always choose Dean over him. And, despite Thor’s insistence before Seoul that he wanted to talk to Sam about Hunting after he got back, Sam was just now beginning to realise how strongly he’d kind of just assumed that the Asgardian would follow the normal pattern, regardless of the circumstances behind his and Dean’s latest split. He wasn’t really sure he knew how to deal with that not being the case, and it had him feeling strangely off-balance.

Then again, if the over-enthusiastic greeting he was met with was anything to go by, Thor was pretty much destined to keep him almost eternally off-balance.

The ‘lunchtime of revelry’ ended up being at least one of what looked like every single food item available from a nearby pizzeria, complete with about fifty packets of various brands of instant coffee. Thor seemed especially pleased with the latter, and listed all of the different flavours he had found with such child-like abandon Sam couldn’t help but smile- he had little doubt that, if he himself ever visited another planet, he would be similarly enthralled by the different foods and beverages available there. But even with that in mind, the sheer amount of food did seem just a little bit excessive.

…Until, that is, mid-way through Thor’s retelling of the first time he had ever hunted a Bilgesnipe alone (“No mean feat as the mighty beast’s first charge had succeeded in relinquishing me of my weapons” the Asgardian declared with a proud nod) and Natasha walked into the room, spotted the pizza, and promptly grabbed a slice and joined them, settling comfortably at the far end of the next couch. Over the next fifteen minutes one Avenger after the other trickled in on their ways back from whatever they had been doing, every single one of them apparently initially unaware that the pizza would be there, but all too keen to dig in once they’d spotted the spread (Steve in particular, it turned out, ate enough for at least two or three regular men- a side effect of the serum which had given him his strength, he assured Sam with a vaguely abashed expression as he first sat down, three entire boxes in front of him). It was a little jarring originally, Sam had to admit, considering
this was the first time he’d spent any real time with the group without having Tony or Bruce there as a buffer (Bruce, he knew, had been planning on meeting Helen at the lab, and Tony had mentioned something a few days ago about wanting to finish a project when they got back, which meant he was most likely still in his workshop, lost in his machinery), but the general atmosphere was friendly enough (even if he was fairly certain that about half of them were assessing his every move) that it didn’t take a particularly long amount of time for Sam to adjust.

When the attention turned more fully on to him, though, with Thor asking him to ‘regale’ them with a story of one of his ‘triumphs,’ he very nearly couldn’t think of anything. He needed to tell them about at least one Hunt, there was no doubt about that, but the problem was trying to think of which Hunt- especially if he wanted to avoid (as best he could, anyway) bias and to choose one where he and Dean had worked together. On an equal level.

But then, he thought as his gaze landed on Thor’s eager expression, maybe a case where they had simply been equally stupid would work just as well.

“How would you like to hear about when we met our universe’s version of Loki?”

And it worked. While he definitely wasn’t the master of storytelling Thor had turned out to be (which made sense, considering the culture the other man was from), everyone present at least seemed engaged by the mystery of the “trickster’s” actions (and, as long as he didn’t allow himself to think about his next meeting with the Archangel, even Sam himself could appreciate the less sordid aspects). After he was done, though, Thor was so eager for more that he somehow ended up also telling them about a couple of the other Pagan entities he and Dean had come across- without revealing any of the truly personal details behind them, that is.

He had just begun describing the awkwardness of when they’d had to try and trick the Not-Really-The-Anti-Claus with Christmas Carols neither of them even knew when he felt his phone buzzing insistently in his pocket- a steady stream of long and short bursts replacing its normal single vibration. Startling when he realised that it was actually Morse Code- a message simply telling him to ‘read me,’ Sam quickly moved to see whatever had been sent to him, raising his other hand in apology at the same time.

“Sorry. I- I think this might be urgent.”

A lump stuck in his throat as he took in the contents of the message.

‘Your brother appears to be moving towards the common floor. Do you require me to re-direct him? – JARVIS’

“You okay, Sam?”

Pulling his eyes away from the screen, Sam turned his gaze left and took in the alert worry in the set of Falcon’s shoulders. “It’s nothing. I’m fine.” He glanced momentarily towards the ceiling, trying to keep the small shake of his head as natural as possible while still making sure JARVIS would know what he meant. “It’s fine.” Taking a steadying breath, and trying to ignore both the sudden pressure tightening around his heart and the quick glances Natasha and Steve shot each other over Clint’s knees (the archer having perched himself on the back of his and Steve’s couch during his own retelling of how he had first been scouted by SHIELD), Sam continued with his story as best he could. It wasn’t quite the same, though- gone was the (relative) ease of before, to be replaced with an electric hypersensitivity which left him only all too aware when the soft thud of familiar footsteps sounded from around the corner which led to the door to the stairs.

He pretty much just gave up on even trying to continue talking at that point.
Time seemed to grind to a juddering halt at the same time as the footsteps did, and Sam forced himself to draw on a courage he never should have needed just to face his brother, turning nearly robotically in his seat until Dean came fully into view.

Seeing him again was like a solid kick in the gut, robbing Sam of his breath even as that part of his brain which never stopped worrying about his brother filled with relief upon seeing that he looked, if not happy, at least healthy and uninjured. Something similar seemed to cross Dean’s expression, too, before he shook it off, a hard blankness Sam knew all too well overcoming his features.

“What’s going on here?”

Heart beating a rapid, off-beat staccato rhythm in his chest, Sam rose slowly to his feet. “Dean-”

There was a moment—just a moment—where he honestly thought Dean was going to turn and walk straight back out again. But then his jaw clenched in that way it did when he was really, really pissed off, and he strode into the room, throwing himself almost belligerently down onto the single spare couch and leaving Sam the only one standing, ever the odd-one-out. Slowly, carefully, Sam lowered himself back down, palms drawing together almost magnetically in his lap (a motion Dean’s eyes tracked automatically), even as a still, angry corner of his brain told him that he was not going to let himself be forced out of this gathering. That he hadn’t even done anything to deserve this anger.

“Guess you really weren’t that keen to talk to me, then,” Dean pointed out bitingly, a twitch in his forehead the only sign that he’d noticed Clint’s not-at-all-subtle eyeroll (or his harsh mutter of ‘great’).

Sam didn’t even need to question what he meant. “Dean, I’ve been back for less than a day. I was just settling in first.” Making certain this time that he thought he was ready to approach his brother again.

Dean just fixed him with a steady stare, his head tilting to one side. “Always with the excuses, Sammy.” He looked around the room, taking in the mounds of pizza boxes. “Why are you even down here, anyway? I thought you’d turned all hermit when you weren’t wandering off with your new boyfriend.”

“Ah, the fault in this would be mine,” Thor explained only slightly awkwardly. He shot Sam an apologetic look. “Though I would not have made the request had I known you wished to pursue a hermit lifestyle. Was I perhaps wrong to extend the hand of companionship?”

“No. No, it’s fine, Thor. It’s just a figure of speech. I appreciated it. Really.”

Dean’s jaw twitched again, and he let out a bitter laugh. “It’s the damn dog thing all over again, isn’t it, Sammy? Anyone’s fine but family.”

And that was just… After that crap with the fake SOS? No. If he gave into this stuff now, no matter how tempting it was to just take the easy path and let it go, all it would do was make it that much harder to stand up against it next time.

“Dean, I think maybe we should go and talk in another room.”

“And why would we need to do that? Weren’t you the one who said you didn’t care anymore if other people were listening?”

Now that he’d had so much time to think about and recognise the pattern their relationship had fallen into, it would’ve been hard not to see it taking shape here. “I’m not letting you turn this
around on me this time, Dean. If you want to talk, we can go next door and talk. If you don’t, either stay and eat some pizza or don’t. It’s your choice.”

For several moments, the two of them just stared at each other, neither of them willing to move an inch. Then Natasha leaned forward, unfolding her legs in the same smooth motion.

“You two obviously have a lot to talk about. Maybe we should be the ones to leave and let you get on with it.”

“You’re right,” Steve agreed, looking between the two of them. “We should go.”

Perhaps it was the way he said it. Or perhaps it was that Dean had just come to like the Captain or something. Whatever the reason, something in Dean’s demeanour shifted at Steve’s words, and he shook his head somewhat magnanimously. “No, you’re good, man. We’ll go.”

It only took a few moments after the door of the next room closed for Dean to go right back to staring at him, arms crossed and feet shoulder-width apart, his stance not dissimilar to how their dad used to stand when he was about to call Sam out on what he called his ‘bullshit ideas and bull-headed teenage attitude.’

“I’m gonna take a wild stab in the dark and say you still haven’t bothered to take your head out of your ass.”

Breathing heavily through his nose, Sam told himself once again to stay calm and steady—both physically and verbally. He took another deep breath in through his mouth before starting, choosing every word as carefully as he could manage. All he wanted here was for Dean to see.

Why was that such a bad thing?

“When you agreed that I should get out of the game after Ruby, I did. When you said I should pick a hemisphere, I stayed away. So why is it that when it’s me asking for space, it suddenly becomes this huge betrayal?”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Oh come on, you know that’s completely different.”

“How?”

“Because, unlike you, I actually had a right to be pissed. You had just started the God-damn apocalypse!”

“No.” Something stuck in his throat, and he had to force back a sudden, almost instinctive jolt of anxiety over the denial. “I had just tried to stop the apocalypse.” Years of injustice welled up within him, and he straightened to his full height, willing himself not to tear his eyes away from Dean’s. “64 seals. That’s how many were broken by angels and demons. One seal. Just one. That’s how many I got tricked—by heaven, hell, and everyone in between—into breaking, and even then it was because I thought I was stopping it. Not to mention everything I had to go through to fix it all again. So why do you still bring it up whenever you need ammunition? Why am I the only one you ever seem to hold responsible?”

“Because you never should have been trying to kill Lilith in the first place. And you wouldn’t have been if you’d’ve just listened to me. Which, by the way, I thought you’d accepted years ago.” He continued on before Sam could even open his mouth to protest. “And while we’re on the topic of things you do that don’t make sense for shit, tell me this again: why is it okay when you run off to another country and don’t tell me about a possible cure, but it’s not okay when I don’t tell you about one I find one which is guaranteed to work?”
Sam clenched his fist against his jeans. He was very, very close to losing it again.

“This is my body, Dean. My life. I get to choose what I do with it. Not you. And definitely not some douchebag angel. And if you haven’t figured out yet how me just looking for a cure for myself- with scientific research, all the information and as many safety precautions as possible- is different from you shoving an angel you’ve never even met before inside me and letting it wipe my memory- letting it control me- whenever it wanted are nowhere near the same thing, then I can’t help you.”

“Hey, I don’t need you ‘helping’ me, alright?! I did what I had to to save your life! I don’t get why you’re being such an angry bitch about this. But then, you always did get kinda pissy when people didn’t get what you were whining about.”

And that was it. Sam was done playing nice about this. He was done with waiting around, hoping that Dean would ever be the one to apologise by himself.

“I’m not angry because you don’t get it, Dean,” he bit out, tone as sharp as his gaze. “I’m angry because you’re not even trying to get it.”
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Dean gets subjected to a few home truths which have been all too long in the coming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Because, seriously, what the hell was that supposed to mean?! All he’d wanted was to see if anyone wanted to get rid of some stress by pounding the crap out of each other, only to have been confronted by the sight of Sam apparently deciding that moseying in on Dean’s (budding) friend group was, once again, apparently preferable to him to putting aside his selfish pride and just admitting- for once in his life- that he’d screwed up. And now he was spouting this rubbish?!

Sam didn’t move though. Just continued to look at him, that strange, alien expression still in his eyes.

No. Not alien. Just never directed at him before they’d been sent to this god-damned universe. And it went on, too- an entire lifetime of defiant anger packed inside the single second before Sam finally replied.

“It means exactly what it sounds like it means.”

And that was just… Throwing his arms up at the sheer ridiculousness Sam was choosing to shoot at him with this, Dean allowed a healthy dose of his incredulity to bleed into his voice. “Come on, man, don’t forget I’m practically the one who raised you.” He didn’t need to try to understand his brother, thank you very much. There was no-one on this earth or any other who understood Sam even half as well as he did. “Hell, I’m pretty sure I probably understand you even better than you do.”

A sharp, bitter, shuddering inhale twisted at the previously icy set of Sam’s expression. “Really, Dean? Really?” He paused a moment, eyes roving over Dean’s face. “What’s my favourite kind of music, Dean?”

Dean blinked, confusion jamming up the angry rebuttal he had been about to let loose. “What’s that got to-”

“Just answer the question, Dean.”

“What? No.”

“Why not?”

“Why n- because it’s god-damn stupid, that’s why!”

“You wanna prove you know me so well? Then answer the question.”

“Look, I don’t have to prove anything, alright?”
“Fine. Then I guess we’re done here.” Pausing for barely a beat before he turned, Sam took a solid step closer to the door, hand already raised and reaching for the handle.

“Fine,” Dean spat out, bringing his brother up short. Fine, he would go along with this stupid façade. If that was what was needed for them to get past this— for Sam to wake up and face reality—then he could answer a few dumb questions. “Classic Rock.” Best type of music there was. Sam had been pretty resistant to it when they were younger, but had warmed up quite a bit over the past few years. He smirked. “Just like dad raised us.”

“Wrong.” Sam turned back, arms coming up to fold almost deliberately contemplatively across his chest, a stark contrast to the still frozen set of his features. “Which book do I like to read after we finish up any Hunts in California?”

“What? How the hell should I know?”

“Because I’ve read it in front of you at least eight times, Dean. What’s my favourite salad dressing?”

“What kind of a stupid-ass question is that?”

Sam just raised an eyebrow. “A simple one if you know me as well as you seem to think you do.”

God, this was even more ridiculous than he’d thought. “I don’t know, alright. Ceasar?”

“Wrong.”

Okay, he’d had enough of this. And honestly, at this point, how did he know that Sam wouldn’t start denying that the damn sky was blue if Dean was the one to say it was? “Look, what does it even matter whether I know what kind of rabbit food you like?” He demanded heatedly. “It’s rabbit food. It’s all crap anyway. So what’s your damn point?”

“My point, Dean,” Sam bit out, ice turning to a cold, palpable, practically burning fury as he took a step forward, hands swinging down to clench at his sides, “is that I am not you. And I am not your property. And you do not get to dictate what I do with my body and my life, and you do not get to just shove some angel inside of me and act like you’re entitled to my immediate forgiveness for it just because I didn’t die even when I probably should have!”

It was like someone had just punched him in the gut. Dean couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe. All he could do was stare as Sam panted out harsh, silent breaths, eyes blinking rapidly like even he couldn’t fully believe what he’d just said. There was no sign of a lie. No sign of any attempt at manipulation of any kind. No sign that even a single word of that had been any more than just a visceral, unplanned decision. Which meant… God, was this— was this really what Sam thought of him now? Was this what Stark and his psycho computer had been feeding him for the past month?

“I don’t—” Anger completely forgotten for now, Dean couldn’t even bring himself to care about the raw, pleading tone he could hear in his voice, or the single, staggering half-step he made as he reached forward, halting only when Sam actually, physically flinched away from him. “Sam, that’s not— How could you think— I’m not trying to control you, Sammy. It’s just… I couldn’t let you die, man. You’re my brother.”

“No.” There was a literal sheen in Sam’s eyes now, the light reflecting off it only serving to highlight the sheer amount of pain which had apparently been festering within him, and his voice rasped harshly, tearing out of him in waves Dean doubted he could have contained even if he tried. “No, I’m not falling for that. Not again. This isn’t what brothers do, Dean. And, I mean, I’ve put up
with it for *years* now. I- I’ve let you decide practically everything we do. I’ve let you hit me. I’ve let you yell at me. I’ve let you take out every ounce of anger you ever had on me and I- I told myself I *deserved* it. I told myself it didn’t matter. That any kind of pattern there was just my imagination. That the good times made it all worth it. But now I-

“So you know how many times I’ve been able to sleep through the night since I got here?” Sam drew back another step, all but pressing himself against the door as he pulled up from where he’d begun to hunch in on himself. “How many nights I *haven’t* had to stop myself from screaming in the middle of the night?” He gnawed at his lip- a sign of fear and forced bravery Dean hadn’t seen from him since that Witch Hunt in Iowa back when Sam was fourteen. The action was far too fluid for it not to have happened at all in those years in between. “Once,” he confessed, the word sharper than any of the blades Dean had spent his time in the Bunker so lovingly cleaning. “Last night. That’s it.

“And that? That’s because of you. Not just Gadreel or some other random monster. *You*. I see… I see my hands killing Kevin. Only it’s not just Gadreel in my head this time, Dean. It’s you. I see myself slicing Steve Wandell’s throat, and it’s not Meg who’s got me locked away inside myself anymore, Dean. It’s you. I see myself slaughtering a room full of my possessed teachers and friends, or splitting Castiel down to individual atoms, or snapping Bobby’s neck with a single gesture, only it’s not *Lucifer* inside me anymore, Dean. *It’s you*. My dreams can’t even tell the difference any more, and it is *killing* me because I can’t even convince myself anymore that you would never do that to me because you *did*. You knew all of that- you *knew* I would rather have died than have to go through that again. I know you did-” he insisted harshly, cutting off Dean’s instinctive objection- “because you *told* Gadreel *I* would. You knew it, and then you *did* it anyway. I built my entire reality around you when my wall broke, and now I know that you’re perfectly okay with taking it all away again as long as you get something you want badly enough out of it and you’re not… You’re not even sorry you did it. You’re not even trying to *pretend* you’re sorry you did it.” His voice cracked on the final word- the broken crescendo a perfect mirror to what Dean was feeling happening inside his chest- and he shook his head, thumb pressing almost fiercely against his palm, only stopping to pull the hand in question back almost lightning fast when Dean reached out to try to stop him.

“Sam, I-”

“You go on and on about how we’re *brothers*, Dean. And I forgive you every time because of it. But all that means is that you never *stop*, and I can’t take it anymore. I won’t.” He shook his head, and it felt like a rejection worse than any other. “I mean seriously- family aside. Duty aside. Forget about whether or not you *respect* me, because I’d say at this point it’s blindingly obvious that you don’t. Do you even *like* me?”

There was a beat of heavy silence as the words wrapped around them, tying themselves firmly around the older Hunter’s neck. And then, before Dean could force himself do more than gape, Sam was gone. With a single, shuddering gasp of self-directed horror, he practically tore his way out of the door. Dean could still hear him, though. Hear the weight of his body as it thumped back against the wall outside, sliding down to a crumpled heap on the hallway floor. He could picture it in his mind’s eye- Sam’s current size superimposed over any number of moments from their childhood- but, unlike back then, he was powerless to help. No matter how much he tried to force his stupid, unresponsive body forward, he couldn’t even lift a finger.

He had done this. *He had done this.* Every fibre of his being rebelled against the idea, telling him that that couldn’t be possible. That all he had ever wanted was to protect his brother. That all of this was some giant trick put together just to break him down by hitting him in every weak spot he had (and if Sam *had* been trying to hurt him, he could barely have chosen any better words for the job).
But this? He’d seen the truth in those eyes. He’d heard it in those words. This wasn’t Sam lashing out or throwing one of his bitch fits, like Dean had been telling himself ever since they arrived. This wasn’t Sam trying to hurt him or get him to start dancing to his brother’s tune. This was Sam hurt and broken in a way he had only ever been a handful of times before, only Dean couldn’t help him this time because Sam was right. Sam was right, and he hadn’t seen it. Hadn’t wanted to see it. His own brother could barely even distinguish him from the Devil himself, and right here? In this moment?

He couldn’t honestly make himself believe that he didn’t deserve it.

The horrifying implications of that thought hung heavy in the air, forming a thick, stifling fog around him. Binding him in place and choking him until he felt like he could barely even breathe against the pressure of it.

No.

Shaking his head, he forced himself to re-focus. Stared around the room, eying the multitudes of video games and consoles which he’d barely even realised lined the walls in a desperate effort to find even some strange, tangential link to the possibility that there was something he was missing here.

Because there had to be something.

It wasn’t a lie. He couldn’t deny that. But an exaggeration, maybe? Or a misunderstanding? It could be that this was just Sam getting confused again, right? He’d been pressing at his palm—maybe the translations really had re-booted his hallucinations, and he had spent all this time with visions of Lucifer once more whispering in his ear, unchecked and unnoticed by anyone else as his faith in his Big Brother was slowly, gradually whittled away by them? Because this? Sam having a reason based in anything even close to fact to react this way? It couldn’t actually be the truth, could it? Dean was a Hunter. A Brother. A Hero. A man who had fought tooth and nail against becoming everything Hell had tried to twist him into. As his faith in his Big Brother was slowly, gradually whittled away by them? Because this? Sam having a reason based in anything even close to fact to react this way? It couldn’t actually be the truth, could it? Dean was a Hunter. A Brother. A Hero. A man who had fought tooth and nail against becoming everything Hell had tried to twist him into. Because this? Sam having a reason based in anything even close to fact to react this way? It couldn’t actually be the truth, could it? Dean was a Hunter. A Brother. A Hero. A man who had fought tooth and nail against becoming everything Hell had tried to twist him into. Could it?

…Could it?

…Because, try as he might, he couldn’t rid himself of the overwhelming sensation that he was just trying to convince himself of something which would never be true. No matter how much he wanted it to be.

When he finally shook himself (at least mostly) out of his fugue, Sam was gone from the hallway. Dean wasn’t lucky enough to avoid seeing him again, though, as just a few steps down the corridor and a turn around the hall revealed him to have re-joined (if that was the right word for someone who looked like he wanted nothing more than to disappear into the couch cushions he was all but hovering above) the Avengers. He wasn’t sure whether he should be pleased or just plain relieved when none of the group seemed at all hostile toward him (or, at least, any more hostile than before in Clint’s case). The only thing with any measure of importance was the way Sam refused to even look up at him. Let alone meet his eye.

With a painful swallow and a single, subdued nod towards the confused-looking Captain and his crew, Dean merely continued on his way past them, this time taking the elevator instead of the stairs. Even if he’d had the focus to spar right now, with all of this going on in his mind, the will to do so had been swept away in a tornado of revelations, leaving him raw. Lost.
God, he really needed a drink.

Chapter End Notes

AND THE ROCKS CRY OUT!!!!!

...Okay seriously, though. I know this is only really the first major step towards any sort of conflict resolution between Sam and Dean, but I really hope it was at least somewhat satisfactory to all of you who have been waiting for this moment. I can't promise it'll be smooth sailing from here on out ('cos, let's face it, that would be completely unbelievable considering who's involved), but at least the first hurdle has been officially reached! (And, more importantly, actually *acknowledged*)

With that said, HUGE thanks to everyone still reading- especially those still leaving kudos/comments. I'm still in the middle of grading, so I can't guarantee that the next chapter won't be a little late, but the energy I get from your responses is one of the main reasons I'm still as enthusiastic about this story as I still am, and I am, as ever, incredibly grateful for that. I can only hope I continue to please from here on out. ^_^
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Clint just wants some family time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the end, it was almost four by the time Sam announced he would be bowing out of their impromptu get-together, citing a need to rest as his reason. And Clint had to give it to the man-after seeing the shell-shocked expression on Sam’s face when he’d first returned from whatever had gone down with his brother, he had half expected the Hunter to just give in and scarper right away. Instead, he’d somehow managed to make himself look completely composed in just a matter of minutes. It was a level of skilful deception Clint had rarely seen in a civilian (outside of when Tony had still been one, anyway). The mask was miles better than his own could be sometimes, that was for sure. But then, if what he had heard about the profession so far was true (and he had no reason to doubt that it was), he supposed that shouldn’t really be a surprise. After all, both the Winchesters and Castiel seemed to have gone through at least as much crap as any of the agents he’d been paired up with in the past.

“I’ll go with you.” Pushing himself backwards and off of his perch as Sam stood up, Clint merely shrugged nonchalantly at Steve’s questioning glance. “Be back soon. Got a couple of calls to make.”

“Those girls again?” Steve smiled, exasperatedly indulgent, and Clint answered with a wide grin of his own.

“What do you think?” And sure, he didn’t need the slight twitch of Nat’s eyebrow to tell him he was laying it on just a smidge too thick on the whole ‘fake playboy’ front, but considering everyone not in the know would just (rightly) assume that he was covering the desire to speak to Sam one-on-one quickly, it wasn’t like any of them would try to poke at the story. Especially with Sam standing right there (and 100% aware of what was going on, if the slight, self-conscious hunch to his shoulders was anything to go by).

It took less than a minute after the elevator doors closed for Sam to level a quiet, resigned gaze in Clint’s direction.

“You don’t exactly strike me as the playboy type.”

Clint blinked, making a conscious effort not to show any surprise over the lack of doubt in the observation. “Really? ‘Cos I know plenty of people who would disagree.” Hell, he’d been working for years on making absolutely certain plenty of people had that image of him- his own team included. And, assuming Sam wasn’t just bluffing to get out of the question he had to know was coming, he wasn’t all that comfortable with the idea that he might have somehow underestimated how capable the newcomers might be of seeing past that.

Sam looked away, seeming to realise that he’d hit a nerve. “Sorry. None of my business, I know.”
And then, somehow, Clint was left feeling like just so much crap, a stab of guilt twisting in his stomach even though Sam hadn’t given any real indication that he was upset by Clint’s deception. It was just that the guy had had so much hidden from him already - and with such disastrous results - that it felt wrong, in a dumbest of ways, to hide something from him now - even something he wasn’t even involved in.

…And if that wasn’t the most ridiculous crap Clint’s gut had ever tried feeding him, then the pope was a fire-breathing lizard man from outer space, and Thor shat rainbows on rainy days.

Glancing back up again, Sam must have caught sight of something in the archer’s expression, because a small, reassuring smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “It’s fine. Really. You’re entitled to whatever image of yourself you want to create.”

Smirking right back in an attempt to repress his still-present unease, Clint shrugged, feeling the old, familiar tug of fading scar tissue on his left thigh (damn Hydra goons) as the doors re-opened and they stepped onto Sam’s floor, both of them stopping to half-face the other as soon as they were out. “Hey, it’s none of my business what you wanna believe.” Then, letting the humour fade from his expression, he fixed the taller man with a steady gaze. “Seriously, though. You sure you’re okay? That talk with your brother didn’t seem like it was all that fun.”

Sam breathed out heavily, a conflicted expression twisting its way across his face. “I’m okay. Mostly, anyway. Just… wasn’t really expecting to react the way I did, you know?”

His eyes narrowed almost automatically, a burst of curiosity mixing with something strangely like pride (sue him - even if this guy was in his thirties, didn’t mean Clint’s protective instincts weren’t allowed to kick in. Especially after everything he’d learnt as far as Sam was concerned. For a seasoned agent, he could be a sucker for the right kind of sob story - Natasha still being alive was proof of that). “What? You hit him or something?”

“What? No. No, I… I just… said a few things.” Sam sighed, one hand coming up to brush through the hair at the nape of his neck. “Not really sure either of us were ready for it.”

“Huh. Shame. Woulda paid good money to see you whack him good and hard. You know… assuming I actually had any spare money to pay.” Letting the hint of laughter fade from his voice, Clint instead raised one serious eyebrow. “You regret it?”

Sam seemed to think about it for several moments, a picture of sombre rumination even Rodin’s ‘Thinker’ would have trouble against if they ever had to compete, before finally shaking his head. “No. But it’s not something I’ve really done before. Not with Dean, at least.

“No, But it’s not something I’ve really done before. Not with Dean, at least.

“Not sure it’s anything we can ever go back from.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“…I don’t think so… But I’m not entirely certain it’s a good thing, either.”

"Hmm... well, guess you'll just have to wait and see, then."

Sam huffed a nervous laugh. "I guess so."

It didn’t seem like he was ready to expand much more on the idea, so Clint reasoned it was probably best to just leave him to his thoughts. If his own past disagreements with Laura were anything to go by, having to entertain some random semi-stranger was probably the last thing Sam needed right now. Hell, he still had no real idea how it’d taken the man even this long to seek out some time alone.
"Well, I better go make those calls. Don't be a stranger, yeah? You still haven't really told us how this whole 'cure' shebang is coming along."

Sam nodded. "I won't."

Without further ado, Clint stepped back into the elevator, typing in a few sentences into his phone as soon as the doors shut. He couldn't actually make any calls, per se- not with JARVIS listening in (he trusted the AI almost implicitly at this point, but that didn't mean he was willing to have verbal confirmation of his family on file, available should any really phenomenal hackers pop up in the future)- but he hadn’t really been lying about having people to contact, either. It had been a few days since he'd last spoken to his kids, and a few weeks since their last video chat. And seeing how miscommunication and deception had caused such a breach in one family, it just left him that much more eager to make sure nothing of the sort happened to his own.

'Planning on taking an evening walk later on,' his fingers informed the screen, even as he made sure to keep the soft smile he knew would otherwise be tugging at his face entirely internal. 'Somewhere between seven and nine. You free to meet up? I'm in the mood for a three course meal.'

The smile almost broke out anyway when the reply came through just a few seconds later. 'You're on.'

The messages could easily pass scrutiny, of course, appearing to be nothing more than one of his supposedly frequent hook-ups. They kept it that way deliberately (just in case his phone fell into the wrong hands), with Laura alternating between different burners at random intervals, and their codes changing at the same pace. Still, it didn't matter how bland (or, occasionally, kinda raunchy) the words seemed, as long as the two of them understood the meaning behind them.

He was just glad that she'd agreed to let the kids talk even though it was a school night.

"-until Saturday," Steve was saying as the doors opened back onto the common floor.

"Well it makes sense," Natasha responded, looking up at the sound of his entrance and shooting him a smile before turning back to finish answering the captain. "Pepper's a busy woman. I am surprised you didn't know about the security protocol, though."

"We never had guards when we moved in," Steve shrugged. "Looking back, I'm guessing that's because Pepper was already here, but I suppose I never really thought about it being an issue before now. Knowing how paranoid he gets about his property, I just kind of assumed it was something Tony controls alone.” He shook his head, a gentle self-chastisement. “I think Tony was a bit offended. Not that I blame him- with the way I said it, it did kind of come across like I was just assuming the worst of him. I apologised but…”

Right. It could be hard to know whether or not Tony had honestly forgiven you sometimes. For someone with a face that expressive, he could be a surprisingly tough read. For someone like Cap, who valued honesty in such situations, it could get a little frustrating every now and then.

Natasha leaned forward when Steve didn’t finish, reaching across to offer him a friendly pat on the knee (the only part of his body easily within her reach). “Tony’s a big boy. And he’s been through misunderstandings a hell of a lot worse than this one. He’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Shaking the gloom away, Steve glanced up instead, pinning the archer with an open, curious look. “So?”
“So what?” Clint questioned deliberately facetiously, half throwing himself down onto the seat Sam had vacated. “Hey, pass me my drink, would you?”

The glass was in his hand almost before the question was even asked, he and Nat as perfectly in sync as they always were, and he quickly downed the remnants of the cola within. Still cold, thank god. And a way better match with pizza than the mound of instant coffee Sam and Thor had been picking away at over the past few hours. When both Falcon and Steve arched their eyebrows, though, their expressions almost eerily similar, he relented, setting his glass back down on the table in front of him.

“Alright, alright. I know.” He sighed, almost regretful considering he knew what Steve, at least, was probably hoping to hear (reconciliation was kind of the last thing he himself wanted for the brothers but, as strong as his opinions were, he could reluctantly admit that it wasn’t his place to try and force anything). “To be honest, I think it’s kind of a see-saw situation. From what I gather, I think Sam let Dean hear a few ugly truths. How he reacts to them will probably be the clincher for this whole thing.”

“Do you think I should talk to him?”

“No.” Natasha leaned forward, eyes passing around the group before settling on Steve. “At this stage, I think it’s best if we stay out of this altogether.”

“I concur,” Thor put in, his frown almost uncharacteristically solemn for a conversation where Loki hadn’t been mentioned once. “I fear this is a trial the brothers must face alone. It is not for us to interfere.”

“Not to mention that if either of them see us as picking sides at this point, the other could see it as a form of betrayal,” Falcon agreed. “And they might not even realise it’s gotten to them. Either way, if we want them both to trust us, we still can’t afford to get more involved than we already are-especially knowing that they probably won’t be around forever. No, I think we just have to wait and see where the chips fall on this one.”

Steve nodded, not looking entirely happy with the situation, causing Clint, Nat and Falcon to share a look. The brief silent conversation ended with Falcon getting the short end of the stick (of course), and he leaned forward, shoulders set in his standard ‘mild, unassuming councillor’ persona.

“Something still bothering you, man?”

It took almost half a minute for Steve to react past just the light, pensive biting of the inside of his cheek. Finally, though, he shook himself into gear, keeping all of them in his line of vision as he gave his reply.

“I’m still not sure I understand why this is being treated the way it is,” he admitted in the end. “Especially with how Tony’s been acting whenever Dean comes up in a conversation.

"I'm not saying I don't get why Sam is mad," the blond clarified hastily (probably at least partly in response to the looming thundercloud Clint was pretty sure the statement would have had erupting into being over his head if emotions were ever to become that easily displayed). "What he’s been through… it’s obviously terrible. Possession? Mind control? After everything with Bucky and Loki, I'm probably one of the last people who need to be told just how much damage they can cause to someone. But it seems to me like some people are deliberately forgetting that Dean didn't do what he did to hurt Sam. HYDRA wiped Bucky's mind just to get him to kill for them. Loki was more of the same. But Dean's different. He did what he did because he wanted to save Sam, and
then it all just spiralled out of his control when external factors came into play. He was desperate enough to make a choice he knew his brother might end up hating him for, and that alone says a hell of a lot about just how bad things must have been." Steve sighed heavily, shaking his head. "Call me crazy, but I can sympathise with that. We've all made plenty of mistakes in the past, and honestly? I just think there are better paths for us to take than to let someone keep being punished for doing the only thing they could to save the life of someone they love."

And that, Clint supposed, was why Steve was the team leader and he remained the ever-present lackey with a bow. The fact was, Clint was well aware of how much of a stubborn ass he could be at times. He’d seen far too much bad in the world to ever think that any adult actually existed who had purely innocent, selfless reasons for doing anything. And he was also well aware of the fact that Steve was- when it came to individuals at least- pretty much the polar opposite. A hopeless optimist who preferred to see the potential for good even in the shittiest of people. Clint could respect that- a good leader needed to be able to make use of all the resources available to him, after all, and negative biases (no matter how well deserved) could prevent someone from doing that all too easily.

Clint had never been so glad that he wasn’t the leader.

It wasn’t that he thought Steve was wrong. Not necessarily. And he wasn’t going to go against any decisions the super soldier made- if Cap was implicitly saying that he wanted him to stop being so antagonistic towards Dean, then that’s what he’d do. It was just that he couldn’t make himself see things the same way. Dean had been moaning ever since he’d arrived about how Sam should have just ‘gotten over’ what he’d done by now- even in the immediate aftermath. As far as Clint was concerned, that didn’t line up with Steve’s suggestion that the older Hunter must have originally braced himself for Sam potentially turning on him when everything was revealed. And even if that had been the case, it obviously wasn’t a resolution he’d decided to follow through on. Call it an ex-assassin’s stubbornness kicking in, but that kind of behaviour sure as hell meant that Clint wasn’t gonna be giving Dean the benefit of the doubt any time soon. So yeah. Clint would be civil if that was what was expected of him. But if Dean wanted Clint’s actual respect? Well, he was just gonna have to earn it.

“Agreed.” Falcon straightened up, pulling Clint out of his own thoughts at the same time. “Considering the circumstances, we can’t judge him too harshly on this- especially when their universe obviously follows such different rules to ours. We have no way of knowing how the whole human/angel relationship thing usually works over there.

"...But that still doesn’t mean we should get involved.”

Steve didn’t answer (probably because he knew none of them actually needed a verbal confirmation that he’d listened to their opinions. They all knew perfectly well how much the captain valued their input at times like this). Instead, after a few moments to let the decision sit, he just stretched out, nose wrinkling in distaste. “Right. I think I need a shower.”

“Well, I didn’t want to say anything.” Dodging the cushion Steve launched in his direction, Clint jumped to his feet. “I’m taking that to mean I’m dismissed. About time, too- I smell like I’ve spent the last week wallowing in a demonic mud pit.” Three hours working out and enough pizza to feed a whole herd of horses could do that to a guy. “I guess I’ll see you losers around. I’ve got a meeting with a very attractive girl or two later, and I have a feeling it’s gonna take more work than usual for me to appear even slightly human before then. No trying to follow me so you can join in, now. Except you, Nat. You get special permission.” Then, after jumping (mostly successfully- Natasha had killer aim) out of the way of the next round of cushions, he turned and made his way out of the room once more.
Only about three hours to shower and find a rooftop secluded enough so that he could talk openly.

He could manage that. Just about.

Chapter End Notes

HUGE apologies for this chapter taking two weeks instead of the usual one! There were certain sections where I just hit a giant block- especially when it came to the part with Sam and with how to end it. Apparently, Clint's inner voice is not an easy one for me to write.

Anyway, I just wanted to say an ENORMOUS thank you to everyone who commented last chapter. I know you'd been waiting a *long* time for that confrontation, and your response really blew me away. And thank you as well to the twenty-four(!) people who have left kudos since I last posted. I don't know where you're all coming from, but I appreciate every single one of you.

And now, a couple of questions for those willing to answer them:
1) How old do you think the Maximoffs are in AoU? Going by their appearances, I'm leaning towards mid twenties? Maybe somewhere between 24 and 26? But I'd be interested to know what you think.
2) How much weight do you put on the MCU TV shows? I've only seen Jessica Jones and the first season of Daredevil myself, but I know that in Agents of Shield there are supposedly 'inhumans,' and I'm not really sure that would work in the image of the world the movies have put in my head. Even though I mentioned the X-men really early on (because the school is talked about in Deadpool), I kind of had this image that anyone with abilities has been 'enhanced' through technology, medicine or accidents (and therefore my version of the X-men is kind of a new thing, because I don't think that the mutant history is really something which fits in the MCU canon). I guess what I'm really asking is, what would your opinion be if, in the end, I chose to make it so that the mutant/inhuman stuff doesn't happen in the universe of this story? That, at this point in the world's timeline, all enhancements come from outside sources?

Anyway, I hope you liked this glimpse into where the Avengers' (minus Tony's and Bruce's) heads are on the whole Winchester front. Thank you so much to everyone still reading this fic! ^_^
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Sam can't sleep. And I finally get to bring Rena back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sam couldn’t sleep.

It wasn’t that he wasn’t tired (because he was. Of course he was. When wasn’t he these days?). It was just that his damn brain wouldn’t shut up for long enough to pay any merit to the dull, roaring ache which had been gradually increasing in his muscles under the weight of his annoyed tossing and turning. Or, at least, what would have been tossing and turning, had he had enough energy for it.

It was almost like being back in that mental hospital all over again.

Reaching out one hand, he fumbled blindly for his phone, squinting uselessly against the relative brightness which made a valiant effort to torture his retinas when he held the device up closer to his face.

3:37 a.m. One hour and twenty-nine minutes since the last time he’d looked, and not a lick of sleep in between. Ugh.

Groaning in frustration, Sam half-rolled himself off the bed and, leaving the phone laying discarded on the mattress, padded his way out of the room and down the hall. The lights were already on out here- subdued in the hallway, but shining at full strength in the lounge area- and he blinked owlishly up at them as he walked, feeling irrationally angry at their existence even though they played no role whatsoever in him still being up.

It was probably a testament to his exhausted state that he didn’t even notice his guard was one he hadn’t met before until he was half-glowering at the inside at the fridge and the one small part of his brain not currently taken up by either over-analysing what had happened with Dean for the thousandth time or else his yearning for rest suddenly clicked to the fact that neither Devon nor Kendrick looked even remotely like an Asian woman.

Meeting her eyes, he spent several moments staring in her direction, trying to get himself into gear enough to process how he should be responding to this unknown’s presence.

“Hi.”

The woman stared right back at him, an amused quirk tugging at her eyebrows (so different from Dean’s anguished shock- his fault his fault his fault). “Hi.”

He blinked somewhat stupidly. “You’re new.”

“I am. To this floor, anyway. The rotation shifted.”
“I’m Sam.”

“Rena.” She cocked her head to one side. “Were you actually planning on getting anything out of
that fridge? Or is this some weird kind of hypnosis-by-food thing?”

Looking down at where he was still holding the door open, Sam quickly shook his head, hoping to
stave off the fog of idiocy which had apparently descended upon his brain. “Oh. No, I was just
getting a drink. Did you want anything?”

“I’m good.” Rena held up a flask she’d had hooked to her belt, then promptly re-attached it. “No
offense. I just never accept drinks from other people while I’m on duty.”

"Is that SI protocol or something?" He remembered wondering as much upon first meeting Devon,
but later interactions with Kendrick had put the idea out of his mind.

"No." Rena shrugged, somehow managing to continue pulling off a 100% professional vibe even as
she did so. "Just less risks this way. I’d rather be careful than dead."

Or worse.

Nodding in restrained understanding, Sam turned back to the still-open fridge door and grabbed
hold of the first carton of drink to catch his eye. Mixed vegetable juice, as it turned out. Not that he
particularly cared either way- he just figured that standing round staring into space for much longer
would probably be grounds enough to convince Rena that he was completely crazy. Which wasn’t
exactly the first impression he wanted to give people. Not unintentionally, anyway.

Drink in hand, he grabbed a glass from the cabinet and began to make his way over to his usual
couch. Maybe it would be better to head back to his room and continue trying to get some sleep
but, given what his night had been like so far, he highly doubted that would do him any good.

Unfortunately, his body wasn't as certain as his mind as far as that particular assessment went. And
it had absolutely zero compunctions about reminding him of that. One moment he was walking.
The next a sharp spasm ran up one leg and he dropped like a stone, juice spilling out and inching
its way towards (but thankfully not quite reaching) the huge rug which stretched across the entire
breadth of the seating area.

"Ow." Christ. That was… unexpected. And far from welcome.

Rena was at his side in moments, one hand grasping his shoulder (he tried not to react to the
unexpected touch) as she crouched down beside him, worry clouding her gaze. "Hey, you okay
there?"

"I'm fine." Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Sam pulled himself to his feet, not resisting as Rena
guided him over to the couch. "I'm fine."

"Really? Because you don't look fine. You look like Death warmed over."

Sam huffed out an attempt at what he hoped would come across as a reassuring laugh. "Doubtful.
I've met Death- he looks nothing like me. Plus I could never eat that many onion rings."

"...Huh?"

"Nothing. Just… a joke."

"Look, are you sure you didn't jolt your head or something back there? You're not making much
sense here. Should I get someone?"

"No. Really, I'm fine. Just... really tired is all. And I'm not exactly at my usual levels of strength right now.” He couldn’t help the bitter tint to his tone, nor the pathetic nature of his glare as he eyed the leg which had caused all this. “Apparently not the best combination.”

Rena nodded, looking less than satisfied with the fact that she evidently couldn't think of a good enough rebuttal to argue otherwise. "I'd better clean up that mess." Sam tried to say that he should be the one to do that, being the one who put it there, but was cut off by a sharp look and a single raised finger. "You stay there. Don't move. I'm assuming there are towels in the kitchen?"

Giving up, he allowed himself to half-collapse back into the couch’s soft, embracing warmth, staring hopelessly up at the ceiling like the feeble invalid that he pretty much was right now. "In the drawer to the right of the sink. Second down. Thanks."

He hated this. Hated it. Years spent trying to convince people that he was capable enough not to need to be babied all the time, and now he couldn’t even have a single sleepless night without practically slamming face-first into the ground. And he couldn’t even go for a run any more to relieve himself of some of the frustration the entire situation was causing him. He could try consoling himself with the fact that his body wasn’t getting any worse, at least, but that just made him remember that it wasn’t getting any better either. It never would unless Helen and co. pulled a miracle out of the abyss and manage to conjure up that cure. And accepting that this was his new norm wasn’t getting any easier, no matter how much he tried to convince himself it was. Sometimes he could live with that. But other times...

And now, to top it all off, he could feel the beginnings of what was probably going to be a decent bruise on his knee.

“So I’m guessing the fact you’re out here now even though you’re this exhausted means that you can’t sleep?” Rena came back over, looking calmly up at him as she bent down to wipe up the juice. “I know it might be weird considering we only just met, but do you want to tell me what’s up? I'm pretty terrible at the actual comfort side of things, but I’m an okay listener.” She shrugged again. “It might help.”

“I… don’t really think that’s even possible.” Even if he had known Rena enough to actually open up about this, he still wasn’t sure it would have been possible. How was he ever supposed to explain what he was thinking right now? To ever find words to justify the true extent of the battle being fought between his heart and his mind? The unfading sensation that he was teetering on the edge of a cliff, waiting to see whether his brother thought it would be worth the effort any more to pull him back and work with him on building a safety rail, or whether he would just give up and let Sam fall into whatever unknown awaited him otherwise. There was no way he could predict what was going to happen here. He hoped, at least, that his unintentional word vomit had at least opened the door to Dean acknowledging that there was a whole lot more to fix about their relationship than "just" this whole clusterfuck with Gadreel. But, at the same time, he knew that it was just as likely that what he had said could have driven Dean even further away. That Sam could, in his moment of anger, have destroyed the last hope they ever had of reconciliation.

In laying into Dean the way he had, he'd done precisely what he'd spent the last month telling himself was a bad idea.

Not that he'd meant for it to turn out like this. He had wanted a calm conversation. Just to get it into Dean’s head that he'd been hurt enough this time that he wasn't going to be the one to back down again. But then everything had just bubbled to the surface- all of his conversations with JARVIS as he tried to make sense of everything filling his mind- and he had just...
God. He didn't want this. He didn't know what he'd do if Dean actually chose to walk away from this. He didn't know if he could actually deal with something like that happening again. He didn't know if he was even strong enough to keep going on alone any more, or if he'd give in and go back out of sheer desperation for the approval he'd been chasing after his entire life.

What was he supposed to do here???

"Okay. It's no skin off my back." Rena stood up, floor now dry, and tossed the damp towel onto the glass top of the coffee table closest to her. "Let me know if you change your mind." Then, without further ado, she made her way back over to her former post, choosing to lean against the wall instead of sitting in the fold-away chair she'd set up over in the regular guard spot.

"I doubt it. I do appreciate the offer, though." He didn’t think he’d come across as rude in his refusal, but it was better safe than sorry, right? Especially as he was already feeling a slight twist of guilt over turning her down.

…but then, that was part of the problem, wasn’t it? Him always feeling guilty, even for things JARVIS assured him he didn’t need to dwell on? Hell- wasn’t part of the reason he couldn’t sleep now based not just on uncertainty of the future, but also on his near-overwhelming guilt over his behaviour earlier? Because Dean had been hurt- had probably felt like his own fears of abandonment were coming true- and it was all his fault. Even though, objectively speaking, nothing he had said had been untrue, he still hated seeing that kind of expression on his brother’s face. And knowing that he was the one to cause it (and that he couldn’t back down or take it back this time)? Well, that was just the icing on the whole rotten cake, wasn’t it?

...Aaaaand his thoughts were looping back round again. Fantastic. He needed a distraction. Ordinarily he probably would have just picked up a book or a tablet and immersed himself in either research or fiction but, considering there was nothing like that in the area (and with his knee still feeling too pathetically shaky to attempt the journey back to his room) that wasn’t really a viable option.

Instead, he looked over at Rena. Even if he couldn’t explain what was really going on in his brain right now, that didn’t mean they couldn’t talk about other things, right?

“You fight, right? Beyond the basic stuff most security staff learn, I mean.” She certainly walked like she did. And her stance suggested a fairly decent level of competence.

“Yeah, I do MMA on weekends.” She grinned proudly, her eyes shining with the passion of a true enthusiast. “Best in my gym. Amateur stuff only, of course, but I won the last two tournaments I participated in.” Curiosity sparking in her gaze, she tilted her head to one side. “You’ve been around enough fighters to tell, then?”

“You… could say that. Not usually the types you’d find in a gym, though.”

“Huh. So if you’re able to tell so easily, why couldn’t your brother?”

“You’ve met Dean?”

“I’ve been stationed on his floor ‘til now.”

Sam shook his head. “There’s no way he wouldn’t have been able to tell. Castiel, too.”

Rena paused for a moment, re-evaluating, before her eyes narrowed marginally. “Okay then. Not so much stubborn single-mindedness as stubborn arrogance, then. I’ll keep that in mind.”
“What did he-” Why did her tone suggest that Dean had got into a fight with her at some point? What possible reason could he have had for something like that? “Wait. Do I really want to know?”

Rena just shrugged. “Nothing big. We got it sorted in a couple of minutes. I don’t think he likes me or Anna very much anymore, though. If he ever did.” An amused smirk stretched its way across her face. “Still- at least it means he won’t try to hit on me again. I get enough of that crap from those ‘yellow fever’ types.”

Sam sighed. “Sorry.” Because of course Dean had hit on her. “It’s not that you’re Asian, though.” (At least he hoped not- he tended not to delve too far into why Dean had chosen Busty Asian Beauties as his skin mag of choice) “Dean tends to flirt with pretty much every pretty girl he meets. It’s kind of an instinctive reaction at this point.”

A few seconds passed as Rena stared at him- blankly at first, but then a vaguely exasperated frown began to form, followed quickly by an eye-roll and a muttered “And people wonder why I don’t get the whole ‘attraction’ thing.”

…Which, if he were truthful, Sam could kind of relate to. Not that he’d never felt attraction- just that he’d never really felt that kind of physical pull to a person without reaching some kind of understanding or connection with them first.

Maybe a change of topic was in order- he’d rather not have to spend any more time on a subject where Dean came so easily to mind. Twisting slightly in his seat so that he was more comfortable, he smiled. “So what was the most ridiculous thing to ever happen at your gym?” He assumed there’d be a few choice stories- that was generally the case where things like MMA were involved.

He wasn’t wrong. Apparently, Rena had plenty of stories about her gym-based adventures. And she didn’t seem to feel the need to ask why he wanted to know, either, which was a blessing in and of itself.

The ruse worked, too. Perhaps hand-in-hand with the mental distraction, Sam slowly felt his eyes grow more and more heavy as the minutes ticked steadily away, until they blended into something resembling the pull of a mythical siren’s call. It was half way through a recounting of a fight with a particularly misogynistic twenty-six year old that he finally gave into it.

…Not that he noticed until he woke up in the late morning to an empty room and a soft blanket draped haphazardly over his shoulders.

Chapter End Notes

Hey all! Huge thanks for all your help with my questions last chapter- I've got a much clearer image of what I want the universe to be like regarding enhanced people, and that's all down to you lovely folks! (Especially for pointing out that Deadpool isn't actually MCU- huge weight off my shoulders, that one!)

And now for another heads up: I'm about (as in, I'm ten minutes away from heading over to check in) to set off for a visit back home to England (my first one in over four years!), so I can't guarantee a regular update schedule for the next month. I'll still be writing, but I probably won't have anywhere near as much time. We'll see how it goes, though.
Hope you liked this chapter, and that you're all having a fantastic Summer! ^_^
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Tony has cause for even *more* planning. As if he didn't have enough of that going on already.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Relocation of stored products. Purchasing building materials. Demolition and reconstruction of areas of the warehouse which were obsolete in terms of his vision of the compound for the future. Ensuring there would be plenty of space for general staff, ex-SHIELD agents and current members of (along with possible future additions to) the Avengers. And those were just the mere basics of what would need to be done. Necessary, though- no one had mentioned anything to him, but Tony knew the Avengers wouldn’t be able to stay at the tower forever. Not if they ever wanted the initiative to be able to grow into what it could be. What it would need to be for them to have even a hope in hell of combatting what was coming. Besides which, having them all in the middle of the city presented too big a target- and, therefore, far too high a potential for civilian collateral if any of their enemies proved themselves smart (or lucky) enough to launch a successful attack on their home.

All in all, though, the relocation process was a bit of a daunting task.

But Tony was a Futurist, and an engineer at that. Not to mention that he was far from unfamiliar with facing down jobs of this magnitude. And, however much of a headache he was sure this was going to prove itself to be, he knew full well that it was far better to get this done now, rather than getting blindsided when it was too late for them to prevent a disaster.

(Which was, now that the thought had come back into his mind, also why he needed to set aside some time so that he could work to find a way for his and Bruce’s plans for the Ultron Project to ultimately become a reality.)

“Sir, I believe Doctor Banner has sent you an email you will find most heartening.”

Well that was kind of ironic timing. Pulling his focus away from the estimates from his contractor, Tony diverted his attention to the text JARVIS had brought up on the nearest display screen, scanning through the diagrams and conclusions of the latest tests with an ease born from a lifetime of practice.

The same ease could not be applied to the ungainly way he practically leapt across the table to grab at his phone.

Outside of his original tests when designing the Mark 2 suit, he had never been so glad that only JARVIS and the Bots were present in his workshop.

(The pain blossoming where he’d somehow managed to slam his elbow against the corner of the table did, however, serve him well in cancelling out some of his raw excitement as he brought the phone up to his ear.)
“Please tell me this isn’t you pulling my leg, Brucie Bear. Because if it is, I swear to God I’ll call Veronica on you right now- Hulk or no Hulk.”

The other scientist wasn’t nearly as effective in hiding his glee. “No joke, Tony. The results are as I sent you.”

“So you really think-”

“I think we may have done it.” There was a whir of doors in the background, followed by a slight increase in background noise. Bruce must have answered the call while he was just outside the lab, then. “I mean, you saw the results- it still disappeared, yes, but it was stable, Tony. Actually stable.”

“Have you verified the results yet?”

“Not yet. It’s why I’m telling you first instead of going straight to Sam- he’s got enough going on that I don’t want to get his hopes up if this is just a one-off. We want to run the same process on the samples I took this morning, and maybe tomorrow’s ones too, before we bring him in.” A brief pause echoed down the line before he admitted, the excitement in his voice barely restrained, “Honestly, though? I’m pretty certain we’ve solved it.”

“Solved the impossible in just a few short weeks.” Grin spreading shamelessly across his face, Tony spun in place so that he could lean back against the worktop. “Jelly Bean, I could honestly kiss you. Helen, too. In fact, I’ve half a mind to fly over there right now and French kiss you both into a blissful oblivion.”

“Don’t you bring those filthy lips of yours anywhere near me, Stark!” Helen’s muffled voice shouted from the background. (And when exactly had Bruce put him on speaker? Maybe he should invent some sort of app which told you when you were talking to more than one person? It would certainly be useful for people in abusive environments. Although he’d have to make sure police wiretaps remained undetected, lest criminals take advantage. An idea for a new day, perhaps? For now, though, it wasn’t like he minded- not when he was comfortable with everyone present.)

“Aww, Helen, you know you love me.”

“You’re fine. That doesn’t mean the same goes for your germs, though.”

“I’ll have you know I’m perfectly hygienic.” Using his spare hand to flick another hologram open above his head, he continued scrolling through the file on the Avengers compound, checking through the numbers in the spare corner of his mind. “I get the point, though, despite the fatal wound you’ve dealt my soul. No kisses.”

“Damn right no kisses.” The smile in Helen’s voice grew more pronounced as she drew closer, and there was a vague clang of metal on metal. “We’ll send you progress reports a bit more frequently over the next couple of days. If we’re all happy with it, you should bring Sam by on Tuesday to see about starting treatment.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

After going through a few more of the numbers with them, Tony said his goodbyes as calmly and maturely as he could, signing off on his contractor’s estimates at the same time. After waiting for the small click which indicated JARVIS had disconnected the call, however, even a sledgehammer to the face would have been entirely incapable of wiping off the wide, stretching, anticipatory smile which overtook his features. Neither would a sword to the chest have succeeded in erasing
the quiet thrill pulsing through it. *They had done it.*

Tony had always been terrible at giving people things they actually *needed.* Or even just appreciated. He tended to go too big. Too extravagant. It scared most people—made them think he was trying to buy their loyalty. Made them leave. And the bigger the gift, the faster they tended to leave (well, either that or they stuck around in transparent attempts to milk him dry… until they got fed up with him, anyway). Hell, he had more fingers than he had exceptions to that rule.

And yet, somehow, even though this cure had the potential to change Sam’s entire life, he felt *absolutely certain* that the same thing wasn’t going to happen here.

Imagine that.

Maybe it was because he wasn’t the only one involved in the creation of this particular gift?

Well, whatever the reason, there was no way he was going to waste this newfound euphoria, even if he *couldn’t* share it with the person who (assuming Sam was, as Tony more than suspected, capable of working through the mental preparation it would take to willingly bind his tormentors’ Grace to his DNA) would be most affected for another three days. Which meant there was even more planning to do. Grinning over at JARVIS’ nearest camera, he offered up an exuberant wink.

“What’dya think, J?”

“I believe celebration is in order, Sir.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” Straightening up, he leapt to his feet, practically vibrating with the need to move- to *build something*—as he cast an eager eye around his various projects. “Keeping it positive. Set up a reservation for Tuesday evening, then- somewhere you think everyone would like.”

“Should that reservation include Miss Potts, Sir?”

“Hmm… put her in for now. We can always change the reservation later if it turns out she needs to fly out again.”

“I shall make the necessary arrangements immediately, Sir.”

“Brilliant.” Fingers drumming impatiently against the worktable, Tony considered his schedule for the rest of the day, estimating precisely how much time he had before he would need to start his own preparations. “Is everything ready for this evening?”

“The final touches are being put in place as we speak, Sir. And Miss Potts will be arriving in approximately four hours.”

“Alright, then.” Still grinning from ear to ear, Tony strode over to his fourth worktable— the one he generally used for Avengers gear— and hoisted several components he had been preparing for his next Iron Man suit out from the concealed container in which they were stored. “Let’s see if we can’t put this newfound energy to good use.”

The next few hours were spent elbow-deep in the inner mechanisms of the suit, the steady thrum of machinery and rock music in the background blending with the feel of the shifting cogs and wires beneath his fingers and eventually morphing his enthusiasm into the sort of blissful calm he could almost only ever achieve through this perfect balance of physical and mental work.

Which was probably a good thing—bouncing, over-enthusiastic puppy wasn’t exactly the tone he was aiming for this evening.
By the time JARVIS informed him that he only had about forty minutes left to pack up, wash up, change and get into position, a delicious strain had built up in his muscles— a side effect of so long spent lifting and rearranging some of the heavier parts of the armour without the mechanical aid he would have once it was up and running. Years of practice doing just that, though (not even taking into account the equipment he’d been lugging around for years before Iron Man was even a twinkle in his mind), meant that he was more than accustomed to such labour (and the physical side-effects which came from it). And it also meant that he had the relief of such aches down to a fine art.

A fact proven when he walked sure-footedly out of his shower, feeling like at least five million dollars.

God, he was a genius. (And a good thing, too- in his various lines of work, he needed to be as careful with his body as possible. Especially if he planned on being around long enough to make sure the world was as prepared as it needed to be.)

“All right, J, what’ve you got for me?”

A shirt-and-pants combo extended from the wardrobe, and he may not have tried all that hard to conceal the grimace which erupted into being at the sight. “Ugh. No. Far too backstreet boys.” That shirt had to have been a joke gift from Happy or something. “Got anything a little more… Charles Aboah meets Hu Bing?”

“I’m sure we can rustle something up, Sir.”

If sarcasm could take physical form, Tony was fairly certain JARVIS’ would have covered the entire surface of the Earth by now. At the very least. Still, it was worth it- not just for the added element of fun it gave their conversations, but also because the AI had an absolutely killer sense of style when he wanted to. Which meant that the next outfit offered forth was absolutely perfect for what Tony had in mind for an evening of gentle wooing. Hell- it even had the added benefit of including his one-of-a-kind, self-designed War Machine cufflinks (hey- if he wanted to fanboy his best friend and (probably) make his girlfriend roll her eyes in one fell swoop, he damn well would, okay?!) Just for good luck.

“I should remind you, Sir,” JARVIS added while he was still in the process of attaching said cufflinks, “that Captain Rogers also asked to be informed of Miss Potts’ arrival.”

Tony didn’t falter even the slightest in his actions, “Inform away, J. Just tell him that, unless it’s urgent, I don’t want him- or anyone else- butting in on us until tomorrow morning.” He paused briefly. “You can word it however you want. ETA?”

“Thirteen minutes, Sir. Also, you have an incoming text from Sam.”

“Bring it up.” He’d asked JARVIS to add Sam to the (very short) list of people whose messages got announced immediately, assuming he wasn’t in the middle of something important. Sitting down to slip on his shoes, he glanced up at the text in question.

‘Good luck for tonight.’

Tony scoffed deliberately. “Tell him no luck needed. And ask him what he’s doing up past his bedtime.” It may only be late afternoon, but that didn’t exactly matter when it came to a guy who needed to nap as often as the Mountain Man did.

A few moments passed before JARVIS replied again, during which time Tony finished fiddling
with his shoes and made his way over to the full-length mirror in the corner of the bedroom to check on his final appearance for the night. “He seems most offended, Sir, that you would ever suggest he retire without the company of his beloved future wife, and bids you godspeed in your dalliances so that the two of you might someday be reunited.”

“Record and send this for me will you, J?” Certain now that his hair was just the right amount of tousled, he blew an over-exaggerated kiss directly into the AI’s nearest camera. “Til next we meet, my love.” Then, finishing with a similarly embellished wink, he strode out of the room and took the private elevator down to Pepper’s preferred entrance.

Eight minutes later, he sank into his own signature gentleman-meets-playboy bow, reaching out to plant a single, soft kiss onto the proffered hand as he did so.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Miss Potts.”

Pepper smiled as he straightened up- a smile soft and gorgeous and with barely a hint of nerves over the kinds of over-the-top celebratory gifts she no doubt thought he once again had planned. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Mr. Stark.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey all! I'm back!!! And wow- it really did turn out to be precisely a month. I did get half of this written while in England, but the lovely weather (cool breezes and light, refreshing rain to save me from the scorching heat and suffocating humidity of Japanese summers) and various meetings and board game tournaments with family and friends kind of distracted me a bit. Lol. (Apparently, my mother is one of those people who believes that, if you're on holiday, you should get out and about Every. Single. Day. My poor hermit heart was not quite prepared.)

Anyway, I really hope you liked this chapter- or that it was at least worth the wait. I've been back in Japan for pretty much a week now, and have properly recovered from my jetlag, so I figured it was about time I got my butt in gear and gave you something. ^_^ (Ps. If any one of you ever decides to fly through China, make sure you check whether or not your airline's flight path includes any secret third planes. Also, make sure airline staff are aware that said secret third plane exists. That way you may just about avoid nearly getting stuck forever in a foreign country where you only know two words of the language. Word to the wise: that is *not* a fun experience.)

Some explanations:
- In my mind, there is absolutely *no* way Tony wasn't already planning/in the process of building the new Avengers Compound before AoU started. Something like that doesn't exactly happen quickly. Hence the references to it here.
- Disclaimer: I know nothing about fashion. Nada. Zip. Ziplich. I also know precious little celebrities compared to most people, it seems. As such, the names Tony uses while JARVIS chooses his clothes are just ones I picked from the 2017 GQ list of the 50 best dressed men in the world. Charles Aboah and Hu Bing both seemed to have a good sense of style, so I went with those. Just figured Tony is well travelled enough, and goes to enough celebrity events, that he is probably at least aware of such people. (I'm assuming that they were both still around back in 2015)
- I wrote in the War Machine cufflinks on a whim. And because Tony loves his
Rhodey. I ended up looking it up afterwards, though, and it turns out War Machine cufflinks actually do exist. I imagine Tony's are even better than any of the ones I saw, though. And probably have at least one hidden feature.

Finally, *HUGE* thanks for all the kudos and comments while I was away. You guys absolutely blew my socks off, and I am so incredibly grateful. THANK YOU!!! ^_^
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Pepper and Tony try to catch a break. They start out being successful.

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Just wanted to say sorry for another long break between chapters. It’s a mix of settling back in at work, binge re-watching Buffy (now finished), and a whole lot of writer's block where this chapter was concerned (three different versions and two different povs I tried to work through before finally settling on this one). Still, I hope you weren’t too bothered by the wait, and that this chapter at least somewhat satisfies. ^_^

If Pepper ever claimed, at any point, that she wasn’t nervous as Tony led her, eyes shielded, into their penthouse, she would most certainly have been lying. It was a comfortably familiar kind of nervous, though- anticipation rather than dread as she wondered whether Tony’s remembrance of Valentine’s Day had led yet again to one of his over-the-top attempts at a humorous declaration of affection, or whether this would (as his choice of wardrobe suggested) by some miracle be one of the rare occasions where he allowed his more thoughtful, sensitive side to shine through.

Once he uncovered her eyes, though, there was no question as to which one was true.

He had led her to a small, intimately sized table, where they stood surrounded by a wide ring of gorgeously intricate thin wooden screens, illuminated by the light of what must have been hundreds of carefully arranged candles- some mounted on the screens, others in holders of various heights, and still others dangling from some sort of string or wire from the ceiling. These last ones were the smallest, and were it not for their stillness she could almost have mistaken their light for that of a multitude of dancing fireflies, each one called forth to bless them for a short time with a private world of their own, safe and secluded from all of the outside interference which usually dogged their relationship.

The effect was… almost ethereal.

Heart swelling, Pepper turned in place, words dying on her lips as she took in the slight anxious set to Tony’s posture- the one it had taken her a good year and a half when they first met to learn to fully discern from the arrogance she’d originally thought it was.

“Too much?” He asked, trying for a flippant tone. “Rhodey had the nerve to talk me down from one for every day since the expo to one per week, but it’s no skin off my brow- I know you’re not always keen on the whole big gesture thing. I can still have it taken away if it is too much, though- the whole crew’s on standby anyway. Doubt they’d complain all that much over not having to wait around for hours before-“
The verbal outpouring cut off as Pepper placed a single finger upon his lips.

“Tony. It’s perfect.” Her own lips followed the finger’s path for the briefest of touches, and she looked around again, trying all the while to contain the blossom of gratefulness threatening to burst from her ribcage. “Looks like you can teach an old dog new tricks, after all.”

“Hey!”

Ignoring the mock objection, Pepper continued her admiration of the set-up. This- this was them. This was their history, shining bright before and around her with an undeniable strength and beauty.

A strength she hadn’t felt for some time now.

She had been struggling lately, and trying to hide it- trying to deal not only with the usual pressures which came from her job as CEO or from the renewed stress and fear of knowing that Tony’s choice to continue as Iron Man yet again meant there was the potential for it to tear him from her at any moment, but also, thanks to Killian, with a whole slew of new issues of her own. Dreams that she was still burning- a red hot fire boiling her from the inside out, reforming her until she endangered everything and everyone nearby. Others where she fell, over and over, slipping through Tony’s fingers, only this time there was no searing poison in her veins to help her survive. Bursts of worry that maybe they hadn’t managed to neutralise Extremis entirely, and that it would one day re-emerge and she would awake to find everyone she loved blackened and smouldering. And, with it all, the looming knowledge that there would always be more villains out there. More deluded psychopaths who may or may not choose to try to use her to get to Tony. To get to Iron Man.

And she wasn’t strong enough to stop them.

She had lost Tony before. For months in Afghanistan. Once to a gaping portal. And again to the raging terror of an explosion. She didn’t think even want to consider how hard it might be to do it again. To see him disappear into the cold abyss of death, and to not have him return this time. But she also didn’t want him to have to lose her to death, either. To have him go through that same fear and despair and aching emptiness she had. So she had been pulling away- shielding herself from the inevitable heartbreak which she couldn’t help but see haunting their future together. Hoping she wasn’t hurting him too much in the process.

But now? Right here, separate from the world and surrounded by the symbols of all they had been through together- of all the times they had survived, and of all the support Tony was trying, in his own way, to show that he was offering, she could almost let herself believe that none of her fears mattered. That it would all be okay.

Evidently she hadn’t been quite as subtle about hiding those issues as she’d thought.

The next time Pepper turned around, Tony was already moving, settling himself unceremoniously down at the other side of the table and gesturing at the single vacant chair.

“You planning on staying there all day?” He grinned widely, nerves no longer visible now that her initial reaction was out the way. “Not that I’m complaining about the view.”

She had to smile at the familiar dichotomous nature of it all- the sheer bluntness of Tony’s words and actions a direct contrast to the romantic atmosphere provided by their surroundings. And, right at that moment, she wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Sitting down, she sent a teasing approximation of a disapproving look his way. “You should know
better than to rush me, Mr. Stark.”

“Oh really?” Leaning forward, he shot her a cocky smirk in return. “And what are you planning to do about it?”

“That is for me to know, and for you to find out.” She had to cut off the rest of her reply, though, trying to ignore the way his tongue flickered out for a single instant to lick (probably unintentionally) across his lips, as the vague sound of footsteps reached her ears. Seconds later, two young men appeared from behind her, the insignia on their shirt pockets revealing their status as employees of Windhurst Catering, a company she and Tony had made use of many times in the past (though never, it must be said, when there were so few people to be served). The two men smiled politely and, without saying a word, decorated the table with glasses of white wine and bowls of what, if she wasn’t mistaken, appeared to be the chicken and wild rice soup she had so enjoyed from them in the past. Then, bowing slightly, they were gone, and she and Tony were alone once more.

And so it continued, light conversation and playful jokes filling their evening, interspersed with the odd bout of vague (and not so vague) flirtations, and all accompanied by a selection of both of their favourite dishes. And for a short, sweet eternity, Pepper could feel all of her worries washing away, leaving her more relaxed than she had been in months. It was almost as if they were separated from reality, somehow. A tiny universe where their usual troubles could never reach them. Untouchable.

And then it all came crashing down.

“I am most sorry to intrude, Sir. Miss Potts-” JARVIS interrupted just as they were starting on dessert (roasted pears with mascarpone cream- a firm favourite of hers for several years now). And he really did sound sorry, his voice soft and tone remorseful. Not that it helped, in the slightest, with the sudden, jarring sensation of being jerked back down to reality. “-but Captain Rogers is insisting that he needs to speak with you both.”

Tony frowned, fork stilling briefly in its path towards his mouth. The chunk of pear on it wobbled slightly, a single drop of cream falling down and landing- just- on the edge of Tony’s plate. “I thought you asked him to wait ‘til tomorrow.”

“I did. But he is proving rather insistent.”

Something tightened in Tony’s face, and Pepper frowned, not wanting their evening marred by anger or frustration. (Any more than it already was being, anyway.) “Let him up, JARVIS.”

“Pep, we don’t have to. He’s probably just antsy about-”

Pepper joined him in laying down their forks. “It’s fine, Tony.” It wasn’t. “We can always finish this later.”

Her words and tone were light, but her heart was anything but. They both knew that that wouldn’t happen. This was just how their lives worked. And, for as long as they both continued down their chosen paths, this was how they always would work.

No matter how much they tried to pretend otherwise.

It didn’t take long for Steve to arrive, his eyes widening as he stepped into their little circle and took in the scene before him. (Pepper tried to ignore how much it felt like an intrusion.)

“What-?”
“Valentine’s Day, Capsicle.” Tony’s voice was brash—probably the only reason he’d chosen to use that particular nickname— but anyone who knew him would be able to tell just how much he was restraining himself. “What? People didn’t have time for romance in the good old days?”

To his credit, Steve made the (admittedly wise) decision not to comment, instead accepting the insult with some measure of silent grace. Coughing awkwardly, he straightened in place, standing almost to attention as he turned to offer her his explanation. “Apologies for interrupting your evening, ma’am,” he told her, sincere regret shining from his every pore, “but Tony did say you would resolve the security detail issue today.”

By the looks of it, Tony was barely managing to restrain himself from throwing out whatever snide remark was resting on the tip of his tongue. He settled for being merely contrary instead.

“Actually, Cap, I believe—” he held up a finger, wagging it once in the supersoldier’s direction, “-I told you I couldn’t do it until at least this weekend- which, yes, could potentially mean today. However, if you would care to mentally review our conversation, I never technically agreed to any particular date.”

The slight answering twitch in Steve’s jaw was barely noticeable, but it was enough to have Tony smirking triumphantly.

“No, but you did fairly heavily imply-”

“What? Do they not let you hang onto your common sense in the army or something?”

Pepper laid a hand on the tablecloth, attracting Tony’s attention. Best to step in now, before someone said something they’d regret. That was so often the case with these two— both too stubborn for their own good. “What security detail?”

Tony let out a frustrated huff. “Sam, Castiel and Dean— those inter-dimensional guests I told you about. They’re still under the automatic security protocol. Low level.”

“Night-time guards?”

“Mm.”

Okay, she was beginning to see why Tony was so ticked off. This was why Steve had decided to so blatantly interrupt their evening? She almost wanted to tell him to go away and come back tomorrow. Try to recapture the night’s disappeared atmosphere.

Really, though, she knew it wouldn’t be coming back. Real life had reared its ugly head, and if they didn’t respond to it now, it would only bother her for the rest of the evening. An unfortunate side effect of being in her line of work. Never put off ‘til tomorrow, as they say.

Drawing on all her experience as both secretary and CEO to make sure not an ounce of her dawning annoyance showed on her features, Pepper rose to her feet. “Alright, then. Let’s go and meet these men.”

Tony was far less restrained as he, too, stood, making no effort to hide his displeasure from Steve. Eyes rolling, he made his way out of the circle (but not without snagging another bite of his pear first. Pepper suspected the action was largely just done to spite the captain), not pausing to check whether or not they were following. “Fine. JARVIS, tell Castiel or Dean we’re heading down. Might as well get the unpleasant one out of the way first.”

Steve didn’t look surprised by the comment— only disapproving, if the small furrow to his brow
was anything to go by. “Tony,” he admonished.

“Steve,” was the glib, sarcastically cheerful reply.

It wasn’t until they were already in the elevator, watching the doors close, that Tony’s instructions to JARVIS really registered in Pepper’s brain.

“Only Castiel and Dean? What about the third one?”

A dark shadow fell across Tony’s eyes at the question, something cold and tight and angry which she’d really hoped never to have to see him be forced to experience again. In an instant, she was practically on full alert, watching with narrowed eyes as he all but glared at the shifting numbers above the entrance. His voice was harsh as he answered, wrath twisting its way into each and every word he bit out.

“Had to put Sam on another floor, on account of his brother being a huge-”

“Tony!” Steve cut in angrily, and Pepper got the sudden sense that it was more than just frustration over the interruption which had fuelled Tony’s ire since his arrival. The captain calmed down almost instantaneously, though, and instead switched to that purposefully calm, reasonable tone Pepper had seen him use so often where his disagreements with Tony were concerned. “Don’t you think you should let Ms. Potts make up her own mind about this, instead of influencing her with your own biases?” As if Tony’s biases had ever been known to impact her own. Turning to her now, he explained softly that “Dean and Sam are brothers. They had a falling out just before they got sent here, so they’re staying on different floors until they can work it out.”

Tony snorted furiously. “Way to over-simplify things there, Cap.” He didn’t get a chance to say more, though, as it was just then that the doors slid open again, revealing one of the tower’s guest floors. Straightening up to his full height, he stepped out, not sparing Steve another glance, just in time for them to see a tall, dark-haired man in a trenchcoat exit the hallway where the bedrooms were housed, looking vaguely confused. “Come on, then. Let’s get this over with.” Pepper didn’t waste even a single moment before following, moving straight to his side to give his hand a single, momentary squeeze.

Call it woman’s intuition, or just plain clear-as-crystal common sense, but something told her Steve had left out some very pertinent information in his explanation. And she intended to find out what.

Some part of her couldn't help but resent him a little for that.

Welcome back, real life.

Chapter End Notes

Seriously, guys, writing romance is *hard.* Especially when I know that, in canon, Tony and Pepper's relationship had to be going through a rough patch by this point. It's just like... how do romantic feelings even work?!? I don't understand them!!!

Hopefully my poor little aromantic self has picked up enough from reading that this came across as at least *somewhat* believable, though!

Okay, random question time, 'cos I've been wondering about this for a while. You
don't have to answer unless you feel like it, though- I'm just curious: in regards to my replies to reviews, which would people prefer; me replying earlier (thus leaving time for possible conversation if you want it), or me replying a few hours before the next chapter comes out (so you know it's on its way). I'm fine with either, but I was kinda wondering what you guys thought.

Finally, as always, mega thanks to everyone still leaving comments/kudos. You seriously have no idea how much they help me when I'm struggling with a chapter, and I am seriously *so* grateful to you all. Thank you so much! ^_^
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Dean is drunk. And angsty.

Chapter Notes

No excuses for this chapter being a week late, this time. My fault entirely. I just... honestly didn't realise that two weeks had passed instead of one. Lol. Oops. That said, I really hope you guys like this chapter! Some parts changed a little (got longer, too-by about a thousand words) from how I'd originally imagined them, but I honestly think I like them better like this. Hopefully you guys feel the same! ^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything hurt. His neck hurt. His back hurt. The knuckles of his left hand still hurt from where he’d rammed them, in a moment of rage within a hundred moments of only slightly less overwhelming anger and frustration, into the side of his bedside table earlier in the... morning? Day? Evening? Who even cared anymore?

None of that compared to the throbbing ache which roared behind his eyes, though, swamping through his temples in what he swore must have been a dance designed by the devil himself.

The devil.

Ha.

He took another swig from the bottle still clutched tightly in his right hand.

Oh, look at that. Empty now.

Barely even pausing to mourn that fact, he dropped his arm down to the side, watching as the bottle rolled pathetically away. Kind of fitting, really. The clinking as it hit the loose pile of similarly empty bottles which were peeking out from under the bed, sending them bouncing erratically around, seemed to go on forever, each chime like a million claxons to his ears. A sign that he should stop, perhaps? Or at least relocate to somewhere less likely to cause permanent damage to his spine?

‘It’s not Lucifer inside me anymore, Dean. It’s you.’

Growling in frustration, he fumbled all but blindly for the next six-pack in line.

Not enough. When was it going to be enough? How much would he need to drink before those damned, guilt-inducing words could finally stop swirling around his head?

How much before he could forget the look on Sam’s face when he’d said them?
Was there even enough drink stored within this entire universe to accomplish something like that? Although, he supposed, he could always hop on over to another universe if there wasn’t. Start again there. He’d already hopped between universes and dimensions and times this many times—how hard could one more jump possibly be?

Still, there was still quite a while to go before it came down to that. And in the meantime?

Well…

Beer good.

And at least the pain and haziness could offer the odd, blessed moment of relief from the memories.

A slow bottle and a half later, though, and he found himself faced with a whole new distraction—this one a lot less welcome.

“Loathe as I am you interrupt your… wallowing, Mr. Winchester, I must inform you that Sir, Miss Potts, and Captain Rogers are requesting access to your floor.”

Dean kind of tuned out all of the names following ‘Sir.’ He was so not in the mood to be dealing with the Tin Prick right now. Wasn’t really in the mood to be dealing with disdainful, disembodied voices from above, either. “Tell ‘em they can go screw themselves. I’m busy.” Hoping that would be that, he took another swig from this latest bottle and shifted in place, sinking even further into the gap he’d created between his bed and the (still slightly blood-flecked) table beside it.

Things never did fall in line for a Winchester, though, did they? Least of all for him.

“Apologies,” JARVIS intoned seconds later, sounding about as far from sorry as it was possible for a robot voice to sound, “but Castiel was asked at the same time, and has given his permission.”

“Well hooray for him.” Dean paused for a moment, glaring fuzzily up at the ceiling in the opposite corner of the room. God, this new position really wasn’t helping with the neck pain. Couldn’t really be bothered to move again so soon, though. “Why even bother asking me in the first place, then, if they’re not gonna do what I want them to?”

There was a beat of what felt uncomfortably like tense, disapproving silence. Then, for a single fraction of a second, he could almost swear that the temperature of the room dropped. Ever so slightly.

That could have just been the beer playing tricks, though. It did that sometimes. Right?

JARVIS was the perfect picture of professional politeness when he replied, so maybe he really had just imagined it. Unless the politeness was just a way to cover up the AI’s temper. God, his head hurt too much to even try and work out which one it was. “It was entirely unintentional, I assure you. Although perhaps I should still apologise. I do not imagine it is pleasant to have your will overridden in such a way.”

Dean just snorted, hoping he was still capable of sounding sarcastic. “Right.” Nope, he’d made up his mind. Stupid robot was definitely up to something with that tone. He knew it. He just didn’t want to waste the brainpower figuring out what, exactly.

‘You knew it, and then you did it anyway.’

His hand slammed into the table once more.
“Ah! Son of a-!”

Clenching the offending limb in front of his face, he squinted in the dim light he’d been favouring for the past… however long… and took in the fresh blood peeking out from where the results of his last outburst had only just begun to scab over, imagining just how much more satisfying the injury would be if it was there because he’d punched some random monster in the face.

At least back home he’d have had the option of at least pretending that was what happened.

Hell, back home that might actually have been what happened.

The door swung open just as he was wondering whether it would be worth it to waste any of his alcohol on his hand instead of down his throat, and he looked up to see a familiar near-silhouette framed in the light now streaming in from the doorway, its head the only thing moving as it took in his (probably more than a little, at this point) dishevelled appearance.

“Dean…”

God, what was it with the people in his life and their uncanny ability to fill his name with so much disappointment and exasperation? Was it really any wonder that he ended up snapping at them so often?

“What?” Stupid, judgemental angels.

“We’re supposed to be meeting Miss Potts. Are you coming?”

“No.”

There was a beat of silence. Cas’ fingers twitched in that way they did when he got all nervous about human interaction (and seriously, the guy had been alive for millennia- you’d think he’d be able to meet new people without acting like a complete spaz. Loads of the other angels managed it just fine). He turned to leave, then paused, glancing back over his shoulder.

“You should be careful how much alcohol you consume while we’re here, Dean. I can’t heal you if you do any permanent damage to yourself.”

“Well if I screw myself over, I guess I’ll just have to wait to go home before you mojo it all away then, won’t I,” Dean sniped back, part of him hating how bitter he sounded, the other twisting uncomfortably at the hint of worry bleeding out of the other man’s tone. He blinked twice, opting to ignore it. One drinking binge never did any real harm, right?

…I suppose you will.” And, with those surprisingly anti-climactic words (not that he should really have ever expected anything different- Castiel’s voice rarely strayed out of the ‘anti-climactic’ zone, after all, even if it was strangely subdued this time), Castiel was gone.

“You should join him, Mister Winchester,” JARVIS said a few seconds later, just as Dean was just done deciding that, yes, another swig of beer was necessary right now. “Unless Miss Potts meets the both of you, she is unlikely to-”

“They want me that badly,” Dean cut in, “they can come and drag me out of here themselves. I. Am. Busy.” He downed the rest of the bottle in one, just to prove how busy.

Of course, he should have known better than to offer up a challenge like that. Barely a minute later, the door swung open again.
“JARVIS, lights.”

The lights switched jarringly up to their full brightness, all semblance of their usual gentle fade forgotten, and Dean (after blinking a few times to at least somewhat adjust) glared up at the man responsible, wondering whether or not it would be worth it to give the smug-looking son of a bitch the satisfaction he’d no doubt get out of having a few choice words fired off in his direction.

Stark- asshole that he was- just smirked down at him.

“Rise and shine, Gollum. If I have to have my evening interrupted for this, there’s no way you’re getting out of it.” When Dean made no move to reply, though, outside of merely adding intensity to his glare, the billionaire simply raised an eyebrow at him and shrugged carelessly. “Either you come out or we all come in. Your choice. Bear in mind, though,” he added, casting an eye around the general state of disarray which currently coated the room, “Pepper is not gonna be happy if she sees what you’ve done with the place.”

“Like it’s any of her business.”

Another shrug. “True. But unless you want to be shadowed by security 24/7 from here on, I’d recommend staying on Pepper’s good side.” That said, Tony stepped back out into the hall. “You have two minutes.”

When he was gone, Dean continued to stare obstinately at the now empty doorway. Screw that dick and his weak-ass threats. Dean was going to stay exactly where he was.

He was.

...A little under two minutes later, he found himself walking (with no real idea as to why he was doing it) out into the main living area (and hey, the alcohol was barely affecting his posture or his gait in the slightest. A lifetime of building up a tolerance was finally paying off, it seemed). The latest pair of guards were there (which narrowed it down to either evening or early morning, at least), sequestered over on the other side of the room, but he figured he could just stick to his usual form and try to ignore them. Cas was out here, too, sitting with his back to Dean at one end of the nearest couch, his back almost ramrod straight and his hands in his lap. Deciding that was as good a place to start as any, Dean walked over and settled himself stiffly down at the other end, taking the time as he did so to crick his neck and to take stock (as much as he was currently capable of, anyway) of the three people sitting opposite the both of them. Steve, on the right, looked much the same as ever. The same (barring the strangely fancy clothes) could pretty much be said for Stark. The woman between them, however, was the one who really caught his eye. Talk about the beautiful elite.

“Dean Winchester.” She smiled professionally at him, not even blinking an eye at his still probably currently less-than-stellar appearance. Considering the fact the green dress she was wearing looked every bit as fancy (and therefore, probably, expensive) as what Stark had on, Dean counted it a good thing he rarely got self-conscious about stuff like that. “As I was telling Castiel, my name is Virginia Potts. Called Pepper by most. CEO of Stark Industries, and Mr. Stark’s partner. I have come to ascertain whether your presence in this tower warrants a continued security detail, or whether you can be trusted not to pose a threat to either the persons or the information you may come across while living here.”

Dean eyed her up and down. Nice. The slow grin which spread across his face was just instinct, really. (Hey, he was drunk, not dead.) “’Partner’ meaning…?”

“Romantic partner, Mister Winchester.” Her jaw tightened slightly- the only physical sign that
she’d recognised his flirting for what it was- and Dean raised his hands in apology. Well, at least he knew now that Stark’s ‘threat’ was probably a truthful one- this chick obviously had some sort of screw loose if she was dating that asshole. And besides, he wasn’t really one for (knowingly) going after another guy’s girl, even as a means to put off having to face everything which was going on in his mind of late.

“And we’re doing this now because…?”

Pepper paused momentarily, almost dangerously still. “Captain Rogers was under the impression that you wished to be free of your guards at the earliest possible opportunity, Mister Winchester,” she told him, not reacting at all when Steve shuffled slightly in place, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “As I only arrived back at the tower a few hours ago, that earliest possible opportunity just happens to be now.” A few more seconds passed as she studied them both, then, with that out of the way, she shifted her focus to Cas.

“Castiel. Is there a last name I can address you by, or will your first do?”

Cas tilted his head. “I do not have a surname of my own, Miss Potts. But the documentation given to us calls me Castiel Angell.”

A beat of silence fell over the room as Pepper (and her raised eyebrow) turned, along with Steve and Dean himself, to face Stark, who just shrugged childishly back at his girlfriend. “What? It was right there. Did you really expect any different?” When Pepper didn’t relent, though, he grinned. “Sorry.”

‘You’re not even sorry you did it. You’re not even trying to pretend you’re sorry you did it.’

Pepper smiled right back, rolling her eyes in the process, before turning back to Cas, professional mask back in place pretty much instantaneously. “So, Castiel, before Tony and I make our decision, perhaps you wouldn’t mind telling me a little about how you came here, and what you intend to do during your stay?”

Dean kind of tuned out after that, listening with barely half an ear as Cas fumbled stiltedly through an explanation of their suspicions regarding their means of travel. The urge to stand up and go fetch himself another beer was nearly overwhelming, the mentions of Sam’s theory that God was involved somehow doing little more than to remind him of exactly how upset his Little Brother had been when they’d first arrived. Of how upset he’d still been just a few days previously.

God, how had Dean so easily managed to convince himself that everything Sam had said that first night was just melodramatics? That all of this would just blow over straight away because arriving here had given them a common goal?

And where the hell was alcohol when you needed it?!

“-ester?”

Someone shook his shoulder. “Dean.”

Glancing over at Cas, then towards the others in the room, Dean shook his head. Alcohol would come soon. He just had to get through this first, right?

“What was that?”

“I asked, Mister Winchester,” Pepper repeated herself, not letting on if she was fazed or not, “whether you have anything to add. You’ve already been in one altercation with our guards. If we
were to take them away, could I trust that you would continue to follow the rules which have been set out for you?"

For some reason, Dean found himself laughing at that- a dark, bitter laughter which came twisting up from the pit in his gut, ripping out of him in harsh barks and thudding through his head as he stared, wide-eyed and half hysterical, at the people staring straight back at him.

“Trust me?! Why the hell would anyone trust me?!” He rose to his feet, arms flaring out from his sides and voice low in its twisted mockery of joviality. “Haven’t you heard by now? I’m trash, sweetheart. Lowest of the low, right here! Hell, apparently you could replace me with the damn Devil himself and people wouldn’t even be able to tell there was a difference! And you know what else? Even if I wasn’t, I don’t think there’s a damn thing I could say which would change your mind one way or the other, so you just do whatever the hell you were planning to do in the first place. I’m going back to my room for a drink.”

Not pausing to hear any of their reactions, Dean turned on the spot and strode off down the hall. Once in his room, though, he didn’t settle back into his nook as he’d originally intended, choosing instead to hunch down on the edge of his bed, an open bottle dangling lifelessly from between his fingers and eyes staring sightlessly into the unknown.

He didn’t know what to do.

Pretty much all his life he’d looked after Sam. Raised him. Tried to keep him on the right track. It was all he was good for. He’d thought nothing could break that bond between them. Yeah, Sam had gotten mad over stuff he’d done in the past. Been mad enough to run off and do some incredibly stupid things. But he had always come back before. There had never been a time before where Dean hadn’t been able to make himself believe, one hundred percent, that somehow he would be able to get Sam to come back when he needed him. Not one single monster had ever been able to split them up for good. Hell, not even death had managed it.

Who’d have ever thought that the thing to break them wouldn’t have been a thing at all? After everything they’d been through, who’d have thought that the one who would tear it all down… would be him?

A knock at the door sounded. Dean didn’t bother to look up.

“What?”

The door swung open as soundlessly as ever, sending a single, solid shadow stretching across the room to tickle at the toes of his boots.

“Are you alright?”

Well, wasn’t that just the question of the century? “I’m fine, Cap.” He took his first swig from the ‘til then untouched bottle, still focussing on Steve’s shadow instead of the other man himself.

“Shouldn’t you be going off with Stark and whatshename?”

The soft shuffle of feet reached his ears. The captain’s shadow shifted briefly from side to side.

“I don’t like standing by while a friend is in pain,” Steve said after a while, his voice soft but filled with a steely determination. “And I think I’ve let the others keep me from stepping in for long enough.” The shadow moved as Steve came over to stand in front of him, and Dean finally forced himself to look up at the blond’s face.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”
Steve hesitated for a moment, before crossing his arms, faith in his own decisions apparently reaffirmed. Good to know one of them had some sort of a plan. “All that stuff you said in there… That conversation you had with Sam the other day- is that what he said to you?”

Dean bit back his usual instinctive response that what went on between Winchesters was none of an outsider’s business. After all, if things continued like this, there wouldn’t be anything going on between Winchesters any more, would there? Not ever again.

“Not exactly. Some stuff with a similar theme, though.”

To his surprise, Steve frowned. “Well, then, I have to say I disagree. I don’t know everything that went on in your past. But I do know that you did what you did because you love your brother. That has to count for something, and I don’t think it’s fair of him to throw that back in your face the way he did.”

Just a few days ago, that would have been all Dean wanted to hear. He probably would have embraced the comment in its entirety. Used it in his so-called “conversation” with Sam as proof that he wasn’t the only one who thought Sam was being unreasonable. Told his brother that, if even the leader of a parallel universe’s team of goddamn superheroes thought he was blowing things out of proportion, then he definitely needed to wake the fuck up and get his head out of his goddamned ass.

Just a few days ago, that little speech would probably have been enough to make sure he wouldn’t have even let Sam have his say.

This wasn’t a few days ago, though.

And Sam had had his say.

And as much as it pained Dean to admit it…

“You’re wrong.”

Steve blinked. “What?”

“Not that I don’t appreciate the pep talk, man. But… you’re wrong.” And how messed up was it that he needed to hear someone else say what he himself had honestly believed not that long ago before he could actually admit it out loud? “There wasn’t a single damn thing Sam said that I didn’t deserve to hear. Nothing that was wrong, either.” Taking one last swig out of habit, Dean reached across and set his bottle on the still-displaced bedside table. “I didn’t save Sam because I thought he deserved more than to go out like that. I did it because I couldn’t deal with the thought of him not being there anymore. I put my brother through the one thing I knew he never wanted to go through again… because I was too goddamned selfish to deal with the idea of carrying on alone. It wasn’t about him at all. Not really. And now he's the one who has to suffer for it.”

“Dean…” Steve seemed uncomfortable now, his shoulders dropping from their usual military-esque squareness until he just looked… like a regular guy. “There’s nothing wrong with not wanting to be alone. If anyone could understand that, it’s me.”

Dean just shook his head. “That still doesn’t mean I get the right to-” Cutting himself off, he drew in a deep, steadying breath, trying to ignore the twinge the motion sent through his still sore neck. “Look, I know you’re just trying to help, man, but… I gotta think this through myself. If I’m gonna have a hope in hell of fixing this… I have to sort things out myself.”

And why the hell had it taken him actually saying the words aloud for him to realise they were
true?

‘All that means is that you never stop, and I can’t take it anymore. I won’t.’

Sam had never said that things were unfixable. He’d only pointed out what so desperately needed fixing. And as Dean thanked Steve again for his support and sent the super-soldier on his way, he knew for sure that he would do whatever it took - whatever it took - to fix this.

He was a Winchester, after all. And Winchesters saved lives.

Maybe it was about time they tried to save their own.

First, though, he really needed to take a whiz. And sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, first things first: thanks so much to all of the continued support for this story! And special thanks to those who answered my question last chapter! For now, I think I’m going to continue (barring special circumstances or an overwhelming urge to respond immediately) to reply to comments within the twelve hours or so before the next upload. If anyone wants an earlier response, let me know and I’d be happy to make an exception. ^_^

Okay, now that that’s out of the way, here we go:
YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAYYYYYYYYY!!!!! Character growth for Dean!!! Taking steps forward!!! Ack! Sorry for my excitement- I’ve just been waiting to get to this point for a *long* time! (Even though I feel sorry for Pepper- she totally just arrived back with incredibly bad timing with Dean, and Castiel kinda just got dragged along for the ride. Hopefully her meeting with Sam goes a bit more smoothly, though. ;) Hehe) Anyway, I really, *really* hope you guys liked this chapter! Feel free to let me know your thoughts. ^_^ (Also: being drunk? Also something I’ve never experienced. And never will. Lol. Hopefully I did it justice.)
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Sam gets a visit of his own. As with all things in Sam's life right now, it has its good points and its bad ones.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sam paused before twisting open the bottle of iced tea, glancing over at the three people waiting for him on the nearest couch. Something was wrong. He’d known it ever since JARVIS first told him that they were requesting access. The tense, antagonistic set to Tony’s shoulders and the determined set to Steve’s jaw as he and the mechanic leaned around Pepper to continue whatever heatedly whispered debate they had cut off when the elevator doors opened only confirmed it. Worry stirring in his gut at the thought, he turned his gaze over to Rena as he poured the tea into the glass he’d set on the counter, knowing from the barely-there shrug she sent in reply that she felt just as confused as he did.

They both knew how much planning Tony had put into tonight, after all. No-one would have disturbed that were it not an absolute emergency.

Shoulders tense, he re-capped the bottle and placed it back in the fridge, before setting the glass alongside the other drinks on the small tray he’d found in one of the cupboards. No sense in putting things off. Carrying it over, he handed the drinks over one by one. The usual coffee for Tony. Water for Steve. Iced tea for Pepper. Was it just his imagination, or was there a hint of disapproval in Steve’s eyes as the supersoldier watched him sit down opposite them, his own coffee firmly in hand? Had Sam done something wrong, then? Was that why they were here? He was fairly certain that hadn’t been how the captain had looked at him during that lunch on Wednesday...

Pepper’s glass meeting its coaster drew his attention, and he took a quick sip of coffee before setting his own drink down, too. Whatever was going on here, it wouldn’t do to give it less than his full consideration. And besides, going purely on what he’d seen and heard of the woman so far, he liked Pepper. She didn’t seem like the type to beat around the bush. An observation only proven when she gave him the same polite yet professional smile she’d offered during their introductions. The least he could do was offer her the same courtesy.

“Mister Winchester. Am I right in assuming you don’t know why we’re here?”

He bit back the ‘yes’ before it even came out this time, not wanting to draw attention to his issues with the word. “That’s right. Sorry.”

Pepper’s smile softened slightly. “That’s not really something you need to apologise for.” Straightening even further, she gestured towards Tony, the movement sending a small flash of light reflecting off of the ring on her right hand. “As Mr. Stark informs me you are aware, Mr. Winchester, as the respective owner and CEO of Stark Industries, there are certain matters of security which fall on the both of us to settle. One such matter regards relative unknown- and, therefore, potentially dangerous- inhabitants of the tower, such as yourself, your brother, and Castiel. Captain Rogers has requested that we make a decision regarding whether or not your floors
should continue to remain guarded at night. Obviously, I am not as familiar with your circumstances as the others are. Therefore, we are here so that I can get the information necessary for me to help make that decision.”

Well that explained his brain’s lingering question as to why Steve was a member of the visiting trio (although not why the issue was apparently deemed important enough a disaster to discuss tonight). This was the first time he’d seen Tony with the captain- seen Tony with any of the other Avengers, come to think of it, bar Bruce- since before they’d left on that mission. The sight of them together again now probably shouldn’t have surprised him, but for some reason he found that his subconscious, despite the fact that they were on the same superhero team, had, somewhere along the line, stopped pairing them together. There was Tony and Bruce. And then there were the other Avengers. It just felt like there was a divide there, somehow. Which was completely ridiculous, and he really needed to stop his brain from leaping to conclusions about a group of people he’d known for only a month. Especially when half of that time had been spent with two of said group out of the country.

He nodded once, sparing only a moment to glance over at Tony, trying to gauge the older man’s mood now that he knew why he and Pepper were here instead of eating stuffed bell peppers (or whatever other course they would otherwise have been on by now). “What do you need to know?”

“Perhaps we could start with the circumstances behind your arrival? Along with what you intend to do during your stay?”

“Oh. Well, I’m not really sure how much I can tell you about our arrival, to be honest. I mean, the theory is that our universe’s God- the Abrahamic God, that is- sent us through,” (he saw Rena shift as he spoke, her attention and curiosity peaked as she finally heard some of what the tower’s security hadn’t actually been told about their new charges’ origins), “but I don’t really know how he did it. We were just-” the words stuck in his throat as he remembered what they had ‘just,’ and he hastily tried to cover it up with a cough. Not, going by the subtle (and not so subtle, in Tony’s case) changes in their expressions, that it prevented any of those present from noticing his distress. “We were just on this bridge in Somerset, and then there was this sort of golden light and this voice, and then we were here.” He shrugged. “That’s about it, really.”

Pepper paused for a moment, studying him as though he were a piece of a puzzle she was in the midst of solving. “I see. And what are your plans while you’re here? Tony tells me you are proving essential in his deciphering of the… means of transportation which sent you here, but he hasn’t said why.”

It was Sam’s turn to shift somewhat uncomfortably this time, and he brought a hand up to scratch at the back of his neck, hoping the sudden heat in his cheeks wasn’t too noticeable. It was… rare, to say the least, to find someone who would ever claim him as being ‘essential’ in anything other than bringing about some new form of Hell on Earth. “I- I wouldn’t say essential. Maybe just useful. I mean, all I’ve been doing is helping with the translations—”

“Doing the translations would, I feel, perhaps be a more pertinent phrasing,” JARVIS put in, surprising more than just Sam if the confusing blend of thoughts and emotions which momentarily featured on Pepper’s face were anything to go by. Sam was strongly reminded of the insistent tone the AI had used when they talked through his culpability (or relative lack thereof) in the events leading to Lucifer’s original release from the Cage. Something warm blossomed in his chest.

“Doing the translations, then, for the High Enochian used in the transference. I have a… umm… unique set of experiences which led to me being the only one here who can read it.” He glanced briefly away, drawing a steadying breath, before continuing, deciding it would be
infinitely better to try to focus on the more positive aspects of his time here.

“Other than that, research mostly. I mean, the big differences between our worlds are obviously interesting, but the really fascinating stuff is all the smaller changes. Like, I was reading about the history of entomology earlier today, and I came across this article which showed pictures of some of the various species of dragonfly, and when I was looking at the picture of this blue-eyed darner I noticed that the shape of the thorax was…”

He trailed off as the looks on everyone’s faces finally registered. Tony’s amused smirk. Rena’s ‘what the hell were you researching that for?’ expression. Pepper’s steady blinks and quirked eyebrow. And, finally, the vague furrow which was beginning to worm its way into Steve’s forehead.

“…And that wasn’t really what you were asking about, was it? Sorry.”

The silence which followed was soon broken by a loud, wholly undignified snort.

“Did I ever tell you that your polymath side comes out in the most bizarre ways imaginable? I mean, first it was that thing with the scent of verbena, and now-?” A wide grin suddenly spread across Tony’s face, and he leaned back, one leg crossing casually across the other. “You know what? My evening has just become just a little bit better. Don’t you ever change, Mountain Man.”

Sam felt an answering grin tug its way across his own face in return. He still wasn’t quite used to people not either scoffing or else shutting him down entirely when he went off on one of his strange tangents, but he’d found he really liked the sense of comfort which enveloped him whenever he remembered that he had friends now who not only were perfectly happy to indulge him, but who also treated him to just as many fact-filled ramblings in return. It reminded him of Stanford, in a way. Of evenings spent with Jess and Luis, with Rebecca and Zack and Rowan and more, just sitting around laughing at each others’ idiosyncrasies. Of quieter moments spent with just Jess, as she talked him through her portfolio, or as they discussed their (completely misguided, he now knew) plans to try to help Brady get himself back on track. And yet, in some ways, it was even better than Stanford. Because his friends here knew him. They knew what he did. What he had done. What he had to him. They knew the parts of him he’d always tried to hide and run away from in his youth.

And they accepted him. All of him.

Pepper, who had been watching their exchange with a contemplative air, suddenly seemed to relax, her fond smile turning to a friendly, half-joking one as she turned her gaze from Tony and onto him.

“It seems you and Tony have been getting on far better than he and your brother have.”

The mention of Dean froze Sam in place more effectively than any rope ever had, sending waves of anxious, uncomfortable guilt rolling through his stomach. “You’ve already spoken to Dean and Cas, then?” He’d lost track of the number of times he’d had to stifle the urge to go down there himself over the past few days. To tell Dean that he would take the whole thing back. Everything he’d said. Anything he’d ever said if it just meant that they could-

He cut the thought off with the almost calm determination he’d developed over a lifetime of practice, instead concentrating on trying not to appear too affected as he waited for Pepper’s reply. Maybe it was his reaction, or maybe it was the hand Tony had moved off of the couch and onto her shoulder, but the redhead seemed to realise she had inadvertently stepped into a metaphorical minefield. She paused, taking in the tension which had settled around the group with the calm yet
careful air of one well used to being around such a rapidly changing atmosphere.

“…We have.”

“Is-” Try as he might, he couldn’t quite prevent the words from getting stuck on the rock-solid lump in his throat. “Is Dean alright?”

“No.” The surprisingly hard voice came from Steve, who sat rigidly on Pepper’s left, looking like he’d been waiting for this particular topic to surface ever since they’d arrived. “He’s not alright. Did you really think he would be?”

“Steve-”

Steve didn’t react well to the warning. “No, Tony. I told you, I’m not going to be bullied into letting this go. And I’m not going to stand by and watch someone else get bullied, either. You saw Dean.” The blond somehow managed to straighten even further, levelling the full force of his steady, disappointed gaze right at Sam. “Your brother did the only thing he could to save your life. How long are you going to keep punishing him for that?”

Sam drew back as if struck, flashes of Kevin and Abner and Thaddeus and Dean- so many of Dean-crowding at the edges of his vision. His chest felt tight, the air in them weighing him down and making him feel small. So, so small. “I’m not-”

“Really? Because from what I could make out, it sounds a whole lot like you told him he was on par with Satan. I’ve stayed quiet this long because the others thought maybe we should let things play out, but don’t you think you’ve gone a step too far this time? And now you’re just sitting up here researching bugs while he-”

“Steve, stop.” Tony was glaring now, cold eyes staring daggers at the supersoldier, the hand not on Pepper’s shoulder flexing against the material of his trouser leg. It wasn’t enough, though- not to keep the icy flame of Lucifer’s finger from swiping languidly down Sam’s back, dipping lower and lower.

“I didn’t-”

Did he?

“Sam.” JARVIS’ soft, familiar tone broke through. “Do you require me to adjust the temperature?”

Gratitude flooded through his system, erasing all traces of the phantom touch. “I’m okay, JARVIS. Thank you.” Focussing on all the strength he could draw from the multiple conversations he and the AI had had over the past weeks, and from the easy, unspoken support Tony, Bruce, Rhodey, Helen, Rena and others had offered him alongside that, Sam drew himself back up, setting his jaw and meeting the captain’s gaze head-on.

“First, thank you. For having Dean’s back.” Steve blinked at his words, mouth opening just a few millimetres, but Sam didn’t stop. “He needs that. We went too long with just the two of us, and obviously it wasn’t good for him. Or me. But-” He straightened even further, thankful for once for the extra height it gave him over Steve, even though they were both sitting a good few feet apart- “I think maybe you should have listened to the others. What’s going on here is between us, and only we can figure out whether it’s possible to fix it.

“Also,” he added, cutting off any coming arguments when he saw Steve’s mouth open further, because this needed saying, and he needed to be the one to say it, “I don’t know what made you think that anything I’ve done has been to punish Dean, because it hasn’t. It’s been for me. Because,
for once in my life, I’ve been given the chance to take time for myself and to sort through my 
frankly kind of appallingly awful excuse of a life without the threat of monsters and demons 
hanging over my head, so forgive me for actually taking the opportunity to do just that.” Pausing, 
he ran his mind over precisely what Steve had said. “And please don’t think I wanted Dean to go 
away from that conversation thinking I was telling him he was just like Lucifer. I was angry, and 
desperate, and I told Dean what I thought he needed to hear because we’re never going to solve 
anything unless he understands exactly what it is he put me through. Or what I’m still going 
through because of it. That’s all. And I’m not going to apologise for that. Not to you.” 

The words, once out, could not be taken back even if he had wanted to. Instead they hung in the 
air, sending pulses of vibrant electricity pulsing through his spine to keep him upright as he waited 
for the guilt to kick in over speaking so far out of turn. 

Much to his surprise, when it came, it was little more than a vague, uncomfortable tingling in the 
farthest reaches of his gut. 

Also surprising was the fact that no-one- not even Tony, who usually hated the quiet with every 
fibre of his being- seemed to be willing to be the one to break the silence which followed his 
declaration. Which was, perhaps, why the biggest shock was the next to come. 

“Forgive me, Captain Rogers, but I think it would be best if you left.” 

The words weren’t spoken in anything even remotely close to a rude tone, but nevertheless they 
were enough to have the heads of every single person present swinging up to face random spots on 
the ceiling (except Tony, who was obviously looking at where he knew one of the many cameras 
which lined each room to be hidden. Sam subtly shifted his gaze to focus on approximately the 
same spot along the ceiling’s border). 

“What?” Steve managed to force out, his voice just on the cusp of becoming a stammer. 

"I may not be a trained expert, but I do what I can to protect the mental health of those I care about, 
Captain Rogers. Since your accusations have the potential to negatively impact the progress Sam 
has made on this front since his arrival, and as I am not prone to asking one of my charges to leave 
their own living quarters, I feel the most beneficial situation for all involved would be for you to 
volunteer to remove yourself from this environment.” 

Sam turned back to the room at large, taking in the near-gaping set of Steve’s mouth. The captain 
continued to blink disbelievingly up at the ceiling. “I- I didn’t- I mean, you can’t-” 

“Maybe JARVIS is right.” Pepper laid a hand on Steve’s arm, drawing his incredulous expression 
er her way. “I’m not saying you were wrong to feel that you needed to defend Dean, considering the 
state he was in, but this is not the time nor the place. Especially as I don’t think any of us know the 
full circumstances of whatever went on. We came here tonight to solve a security issue, Steve. Not 
to bring up personal matters or to accuse people of unsubstantiated wrongdoings in their own 
homes. Leave. Think on it. And if you still feel like there’s something which needs addressing, it 
can be done another day, in a more neutral environment.” 

Steve somehow managed to pull himself together while also continuing to look like a horse had 
just kicked him with some force in his head. “But what about-?” 

“So far I’ve seen no evidence that removing the guards should prove an issue in the long term,” 
Pepper reassured him firmly. “If Tony agrees, their schedules will be re-arranged tomorrow.” Her 
calm, solid voice brooked no arguments.
Looking mostly calm now, minus the hints of betrayal and stubbornness battling in the depths of his eyes, Steve rose somewhat awkwardly to his feet. “In that case, of course I’ll go. I didn’t mean to hinder anyone’s evening.” Then he walked stiffly away, past Rena (who seemed to be finding her shoes to suddenly be the most interesting items in the room) and into the elevator.

He turned just before the doors began to close behind him, and sent Sam a single parting nod. “I’m sorry if you feel like I’ve over-stepped my boundaries. It won’t happen again.”

Tony stared at Pepper for several moments after he’d gone. “You are an absolute Goddess, woman.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I watched Lost and Found (13.01) for the first time literally right before posting this, and I just... Ack. Like I told a friend on tumblr, I hate hugs. Seriously hate them. But I would hug Sam and Jack at the drop of a hat right now. Can I just steal them away and keep them safe forever? Is that something I can do? Ugh. I am drowning in so many feelings for the both of them.

...Alright, now that you are privy to just a small portion of what is going through my head right now, on to the stuff which is actually relevant here:
First, huge thanks again to everyone who commented/left kudos last chapter. I know I say this all the time, but it really does mean so much to me. Thank you! ^_^ Second, apologies for there once more being a two week gap instead of one week. I forgot to warn you last chapter that tests are next week, so I've been spending my time making sure I marked everything the students needed returning to them before that, as well as actually putting together my parts of the tests themselves. Unfortunately, this does mean that the once-a-fortnight pattern we've been in lately may have to continue a little longer, as I'll be spending the next week or two drowning in papers. Sigh. Thanks for being so patient with me. ^_^ Finally, I really hope you liked this chapter! It took me a while to admit I needed to switch from Tony's POV (my original two drafts) to Sam's, but I got there in the end! Yay! I had to leave out some of the stuff I wanted to include, but I think I may be able to just move them to the next chapter instead, so no harm there. Once again, huge thanks to everyone who continues to stick with this story, and I look forward to hearing from those of you who choose to comment. ^_^
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Sam’s not the only one who leads conversations down random tangents.

Chapter Notes

I just... I don't even know, to be honest. This chapter *still* doesn't include what I meant for it to, and I blame Tony entirely. He got distracted. (Although it *does* mean that I get to play around with these guys' first meetings for one more chapter, I guess, so I can't really claim to be all that mad.)

For anyone who might potentially get confused, "Cohenisms" is a reference to Max Cohen, the number theorist protagonist of a 1998 film called Pi. I haven't actually seen it, but the summary seemed suited to my purposes (more closely than other potential films I looked at, anyway). Also, sorry in advance, but I know *nothing* about numerology. All mentions of it here are thanks to internet searches over the past week. You can blame Tony for that, too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Now that was just... golden. That was ‘JARVIS-I’m-really-tempted-to-ask-you-to-keep-that-on-file-so-I-can-watch-it-next-time-Rogers-really-pisses-me-off’ level golden. Not that he thought the footage would ever actually see the light of day (that wasn’t really how he liked to cheer himself up, after all), but he was feeling almost vindictive enough over Steve’s bull-headed self-righteousness act this evening that the idea was tempting regardless. Just as a point of pride.

Pushing aside the urge to make the petty request (because he just knew Pepper would give him that Look if he actually made it), Tony instead took a few moments to admire the incredible woman sitting by his side. A woman who had just, by some miracle of magic, managed to defuse a patented Determined Captain America Morals Bomb—a feat heretofore practically unheard of by man or beast.

When she quirked a questioning eyebrow at him, he grinned unashamedly in reply.

“You are an absolute Goddess, woman.”

An expectant silence followed the declaration (and God only knew how JARVIS managed to make silence sound expectant. Tony suspected waves at a frequency below the absolute threshold of hearing were involved somehow. Which would mean it wasn’t exactly silent, per se, but the point still stood as far as he was concerned), and Tony turned the full force of his grin on the nearest of JARVIS’ cameras. “And you, J, are one snarky little powerhouse, aren’t you? Good on ya, buddy.”

The silent thrum in the air turned into pleased self-satisfaction, which somewhat belied the overtly innocent tone of the AI’s reply. “I couldn’t claim to know what you are referring to, Sir.”
“Right,” Tony intoned. “Of course not.” Shaking his head, he switched his attention to Sam, smile fading as he took in the other man’s demeanour. Gone was the straight-backed guy who had been refusing to be cowed in his own home, and in his place sat a considerably smaller-looking man with hunched shoulders and shadows of worry and guilt bleeding out of his eyes, encompassing his entire face. “You doing okay there, Mountain Man? Sorry about Steve. Usually he’s fine, but sometimes he gets an idea in his head and it’s like all logical thought and common sense flies straight out the window and gets replaced by Captain Oblivious Douchebag. Call it a kick-back to more repressed times.”

Sam offered up a smile over the attempt at levity (though even ‘half-hearted’ would have been an over-exaggeration as to the strength of it), before quickly letting it drop into something more sombre. “That’s not it,” he explained. “I meant what I said- I’m glad Dean has someone who’s willing to support him like that.” After several seconds, he continued, hands clenching together in his lap. “I just… Is Dean really doing that badly?”

Looking into those wide, pleading eyes, Tony would have been hard pressed to lie even if he had wanted to. Weapons of mass destruction those things were- and he should know. “No,” he sighed, watching as Sam’s eyes closed briefly in relief upon not seeing any signs of falsehood. “He looks like he’s spent the last few days living in a bottle, but other than that he’s not all that different from his usual less-than-pleasant self.”

“But what about-?”

“The Satan crap? Just him dealing with the fact that maybe he’s not the be-all-and-end-all pinnacle of tragic heroism he seemed to think he was.” When Sam’s face inevitably twisted in self-recrimination, Tony sighed again, this one much heavier than the last. “Look, I don’t know exactly what you said to him, Mountain Man, but whatever it was finally has him re-evaluating things. You start feeling guilty about that and I’ll sic DUM-E on you with a fire extinguisher.”

Sam huffed out one of his ‘laughs.’ “God forbid.” Then, after a few more moments, “Don’t worry. I’m not gonna go and take it back. I meant everything I said. It’s just…” He gnawed at his bottom lip. “No matter what he’s done, he’s still my brother, you know? Just like I’m still his, despite how many times I’ve screwed up, too. It’s not easy. Knowing that I’m the reason he’s going through all this.”

Choosing to ignore the return of the ‘I’m a screw-up, too’ theme (because he knew from personal experience how hard that particular train of thought was to shake), Tony jabbed a finger in Sam’s direction. “He’s going through this because of himself, Mountain Man. Don’t go fooling yourself into thinking otherwise. This is his fault. It’s about time he learned to live with some of the consequences.”

“…Are you trying to argue emotions away with logic again?”

Tony returned the question with an over-exaggeratedly careless shrug. “Consider it a talent of mine. What? Do you have a better method?”

Sam huffed out another laugh, coupling it this time with a single, ironic shake of his head. “Still working on that one. I’ll have to get back to you.”

“Don’t you dare. How am I supposed to get away with half the crap I pull if I don’t have the excuse of ridiculously unhealthy coping methods anymore?”

A soft, good-natured snort sounded at his side. “Good to know where your priorities lie on that front.” Pepper smiled at Sam, honesty (and just a little confusion) creeping in to mingle with the
politeness. “I have to admit, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone bring out Tony’s intuitive side this early in a friendship. I’m impressed.”

“You take that back,” Tony pouted. “The nerve of you, I swear. Claiming I have anything even close to an intuitive side. You let Natasha hear that, and she’ll snort so hard it’ll send you into next century.”

She probably would as well. Hell, even Bruce might manage sometime around the ten year mark with a snort of his own.

“Well it’s a good thing she’s not here, then, isn’t it?” Pepper said matter-of-factly. “It saves us all from a rather daunting time jump.” Fixating once again on Sam, she dipped her head for a moment. “I should apologise, too. I didn’t mean for anything I said to stir up any unpleasantness.”

Aaaaand there were the earnest puppy-dog eyes again. “No, no. I’m just sorry to have gotten you involved in any of it, Miss Potts.” The Hunter’s mouth twisted in wry acknowledgement. “And, to be fair, I’m pretty certain it would have been brought up at some point, anyway. Steve seemed pretty determined to talk to me about it.”

Damn right it would have. As hard as Tony had argued against it on the way up, he’d known without a shadow of a doubt that the whole thing was going to blow up at some point. Rogers’ stubborn jaw had been enough to tell him that. The only real question had been when it would happen.

He supposed maybe they should be grateful that the blond’s typical impulsive lack of patience had kicked in- it meant that they’d got all the messy stuff out of the way quickly and could now move on with the evening, instead of spending an age sitting there, all but drowning in tension.

And speaking of moving on…

“So are we done with the whole interview thing? Because I was getting seriously bored of rehashing things I already know.”

Pepper rolled her eyes, the corners of her lips pulling up in a familiar sign of long-suffering affection. “You heard what I told Steve. Don’t pretend you didn’t.”

“I’m not pretending anything! Just acknowledging the fact that there was about a twelve percent chance that you were just saying what he wanted to hear to get rid of him.”

The smile transformed into a gentle, teasing smirk. “There’s that twelve percent again.”

“It does seem to pop up quite a bit around you, doesn’t it? Maybe there’s some sort of illuminati conspiracy behind it. Four triangles and all. Or is there some other significance?”

“Other than you just being wholly unoriginal with your number choices, you mean?”

“Hey, you’re the one who keeps doing things in twelves! How does that make me the unoriginal one?! Mountain Man, back me up here.”

Sam half-startled in place, looking like a deer caught in some headlights. “Huh?”

“Need your Cohenisms for a minute, buddy. Number twelve- important or not?”

“Oh! Oh, right. Umm… Do you want biblical or non-biblical theories?”
Tony cracked a questioning eyebrow at Pepper, who just laughed indulgently in return, reaching out to pick up her tea at the same time. “I’m pretty sure I only have twelve percent of an idea of what you’re even talking about anymore.” When Tony didn’t relent, though, she shook her head. “Alright. Non.”

Sam still had the same bemused expression when Tony turned an expectant look back his way.

“Well?” Tony prompted, amused despite himself (and kind of wondering just how many times Sam had pulled a similar expression in his life for his forehead to fold up quite so splendidly).

“…Right.” Sam shook his head, thinking for a moment before he sank forward, elbows dropping to rest on his knees even as his hands gestured easily, accentuating everything he said. “So get this- in numerology, everybody is believed to have a number which most strongly links to their destiny. Number twelve people are said to be great at managing other people, which makes them pretty good at managing things on both a personal and a professional level, especially considering how versatile they are. Now if I’m remembering properly, they’re smart, and usually have a lot of different interests, but they don’t really like being told what to do.” Eyes glinting, he flicked a teasing smirk in Tony’s direction. “Now if we went just by that, I’d say you were quite a good fit for a twelve, Miss Potts.”

Pepper raised a single eyebrow. “But…”

“But,” Sam grinned, “twelves are also typically attracted to bright, honest, independent and funny people, so considering who you’re with, I don’t really know that twelve’s theology can really be applied here.”

Pepper let out one of her rare, delighted giggles. “Well, I can hardly argue with that.” Pausing to take another sip, she leaned back, creating maximum impact as she glanced side-long towards Tony with a falsely sympathetic shrug. “Looks like the universe isn’t pranking us after all, Tony. Any other theories?”

Not to be outdone, Tony paused only long enough to shoot a betrayed glare at a smug-looking Sam before letting a flirtatious grin take over his face. “Less a theory, more a proven hypothesis.”

“And that would be…?”

“It all just boils down to how attractive I find you. On a scale of one to ten, of course.”

A rather indelicate snort was Pepper’s prompt reply. “Oh, very smooth.”

“Eh. I try.” After shooting a semi-triumphant smirk towards Sam, Tony cocked a curious eyebrow in the other man’s direction. “Go on, then- what case did you have to study numerology for?”

“None, actually.”

“Seriously?” He’d known Sam was interested in a lot of random things, but he hadn’t honestly expected those interests to stretch quite this far. He’d made the original Cohenism crack mostly just as a joke.

He probably should have known better.

Sam shrugged in response. “I had a friend in college who was into that sort of thing- you know, numerology, crystal healing and so on. I uh… I guess I was the only one who didn’t tune him out after five minutes whenever he tried to explain any of it? Picked up a few things, I guess.” A strange, unreadable expression flickered across his face. “I think I’d forgotten all about it before
the Trials. Forgot a lot of things from before…” Before Tony could do much more than wonder about either that expression or the dark, haunted, lonely one which followed it, however, they were both gone, swallowed down with a harsh gulp and a quick thumb to the palm. “Can I confirm a couple of things?”

Inwardly reeling over the sudden realisation that Sam must have been… where he was… for a lot longer than he had previously estimated (had to have been, for a mind like his to have lost memories from before he had gone there), Tony more than willingly let Pepper take point on this one. (Although as it looked like Sam had been directing his question towards her in the first place, he probably would have done that anyway.)

Pepper, being Pepper, didn’t miss a step. “Of course.”

“You said the guards won’t be on our floors anymore, but what about when we go out?”

“Oh, don’t worry, external supervision will stop at the same time. You’ll all be free to come and go as you please.”

“…Right.”

Was it Tony’s imagination, or did Sam look… sad over Pepper’s words? Forcing back the vague sense of horrified nausea he was still feeling over his revelation, the engineer studied the younger man’s features, the shadows in them making so much more sense now, watching as his gaze darted briefly towards a spot somewhere behind Tony and Pepper (to Rena, assuming the guard hadn’t changed position since he last looked), and trying to work out what in Pepper’s words had caused Mountain Man’s distress.

As it turned out, though, Sam’s next words pretty much answered the question for him.

“What about on their down time? When they’re off duty or on a break? Can I still talk to them then?”

Tony was quite proud of the fact that he managed to hold back his snort of amusement. Or, at least, he would have been proud, had it actually been true. He was probably lucky that Sam knew him well enough by this point not to be offended by such mannerisms.

He was even luckier that Pepper actually cared about using tact.

“We don’t make a habit of telling our employees what they can and can’t do in their own time, Mister Winchester. As long as they don’t disclose any information about Stark Industries, that is.” Her smile faded slightly, a hint of almost motherly concern creasing her brow. “This isn’t compulsory, Sam. If you would rather things continued as they currently are, that can easily be arranged.”

For a moment, it really looked like Sam would agree, a kind of yearning lingering in his eyes that Tony had been familiar with ever since his first week at elementary school, when he’d first realised that there wasn’t a single student in his class who hadn’t thought he was some kind of too-fast-thinking freak of nature. But then the younger man shook his head, practically rolling his eyes at himself. “No. No, it’s fine. I’m not here to force more work on people. Thanks for the offer, though.”

Pepper didn’t look entirely convinced, however, and the two continued to debate back and forth for a few minutes on the logistics and necessity (or lack thereof) of keeping the guards around—until Sam was stronger, maybe. Mountain Man was adamant, though, an innate dislike of causing people
inconvenience feeding his arguments and overshadowing his obvious desire for friendly company until, in the end, Pepper relented with a joking sigh.

“No wonder Tony likes you- you’re every bit as stubborn as he is.” When Sam just smiled in response, she inclined her head. “You said there were a couple of things? What else did you want to confirm?”

Sam stared for a moment, then blinked in understanding. “Oh, nothing major, I just-” He cut himself off, glancing between the two of them with a curious air. “Are you sure you want to be here? I mean, weren’t you supposed to be-?”

“Oh, that.” Tony sat up a bit straighter, stretching out at the same time. “We were. Apparently, Steve didn’t get the ‘do not disturb actually means do not disturb’ memo. Don’t worry, though,” he tacked on with a wolfish grin, “I plan to enact full vengeance in due time.”

“Oh. Well, are you sure you still want to be here, then? Shouldn’t you be getting back to… I dunno, whatever course you were on?”

Tony shot a look over at Pepper to gauge how she felt about the whole thing before replying, a careless shrug accompanying his words. “Meh, we were up to the desert anyway. No point going back to half a cold, soggy pear- it’d probably be like sucking down congealed tofu. And besides,” he added with an award-winning grin, “I was planning to introduce you two tomorrow anyway. What’s one night’s difference make between potential friends? I think you’ve already proven you’re up to Pepper’s own sarcasm-driven brand of girl talk and Tony Teasing, Mountain Man. So what say you? Up for an hour or two of impromptu entertainment?”

The concerned crinkle on Sam’s brow disappeared after a few moments spent studying Tony’s face with a sharp, probing gaze, and he smiled welcomingly. “If you’re sure then I suppose I could put up with you for a bit, Tin Can. And you, Miss Potts-”

“Please- Pepper.”

“Pepper.” Sam nodded. “You’re welcome anytime. Tony Teasing or no.” Then, a few seconds later, he sent Tony a pretty award-worthy grin of his own. Dimples and all. “Of course I couldn’t recommend it but, if you two really had your heart set on that desert, we can always brave an attempt to recreate the magic here. I refuse to be held responsible if any one of us blows anything up in the process, but I’ve got pears, and I’m sure JARVIS would be more than happy to look up a few recipes for us. Right, JARVIS?”

“It would be my pleasure, Sam. As will be the contacting of the fire brigade should anything go too far wrong.”

Tony shared a Look with Pepper, and he just knew both of them were remembering the results of the last time he’d ‘cooked.’ Not that she was much better, really.

“Let’s have at it, then.” Jumping to his feet (the others rising in relatively more dignified manners), he glanced over his shoulder. “You too, Rena. We’re venturing into a warzone here. No man left behind.” Rena’s stuttering objections over her own cooking prowess only served to confirm what Tony already knew.

This? This was going to be fun.

Chapter End Notes
Hope you enjoyed it! And thanks once again to all you lovely people who have been leaving kudos and comments- you guys truly are amazing. ^_^

I will try to get the next chapter written within a week, but I'm afraid I once again can't make any promises. It's Halloween time, and that requires me to plan (and take charge of) parties for four different sets of students over the course of this week. (Which also means I need to hurry up and finish making my costume- the disney version of the Mad Hatter, to tie in with the teachers who will be Alice, the March Hare and the Dormouse- asap)

In the meantime, if anyone's interested, my obsession with Sam and Jack resulted in me writing a couple of things for tumblr, which I cross-posted here last night. If that sounds like your kind of thing, feel free to check them out. If not, no worries, and see you next time! ^_^
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

The cookery session turns out about as well as could be expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sam poked a dubious finger at the near radioactive blue colouring of the pear slices which were set before him, before glancing up once more at the layer of sugar which coated Tony’s AC/DC T-shirt and oil-stained jeans (Pepper had insisted that formal-wear was not for cooking in, and had therefore half-dragged him off to get changed before they proceeded any farther than the planning stages).

“Are you sure this is actually edible?”

Butterfingers, who had been invited to the event along with her siblings, (and whose over-enthusiasm was also the thing responsible for said sugar coating) let out an insulted beep, before jabbing her claw at the label on the bottle of blue food colouring she had (somehow) found and drenched his pear in, sending it clattering sideways. Sam supposed he should just be glad he’d capped it so firmly.

“Technically yes?” Tony answered, his own expression hovering somewhere between morbid curiosity and fear for Sam’s very life. “Like Butterfingers says, the food colouring is intended for human consumption. Just… probably not in quite such a concentrated dose.”

“And what about mine?” Rena questioned, her eyes still not leaving the concoction on her own plate. “You can’t seriously be expecting me to eat that?” Reaching out with a fork to prod at the pile of blue cheese, strawberry jam and (thankfully cooked) sausage meat Dum-E had decided would make a perfect garnish for her otherwise surprisingly successful looking attempt, she glanced somewhat awkwardly over at the robot who was still hovering by her side. “Umm… No offense? It’s just… these… aren’t exactly ingredients I would usually put… together…”

She trailed off, her nose scrunching as her gaze was inexorably drawn back to… it, and Sam felt a wave of sympathy rush through him.

Although he couldn’t help also feeling rather glad that his own robot helper had at least only decided to change his own food’s aesthetics. And he didn’t even want to know where Dum-E had got the sausage meat from, because he sure as hell knew it wasn’t from his fridge.

Pepper gestured towards her own plate with an air of distinct satisfaction. “Well I think I did quite well.”

It was true. Her chunks of pear were blatantly misshapen, but everything else looked almost annoying perfect, especially next to the wild, blackened mess which Tony had only just managed to scrape off of the oven tray. (He had rushed through the process fast enough to start cooking, without their knowledge, earlier than everyone else, switched the heat up, then promptly forgotten about it when he decided on a whim that he should go and collect the bots. Apparently, JARVIS
had been too amused to notify any of them unless they were in any actual danger from it.)

After a quick glare at Pepper’s plate, Tony shrugged and picked up his fork, shooting them all a conspiratorial grin. “Are you ready for this?”

“What? No!” Rena jerked back, staring at him in horror. “Have you seen what’s on my plate?!”

“I thought guards were supposed to be brave,” Tony needled. “Are you telling me you’re chickening out now?”

“I’m telling you I’m seriously thinking of declaring myself vegetarian right here and now if it means I get out of eating this. And you don’t even know how much I love a good steak.”

“Oh, give it here, you coward. I’ve had more than enough Bot-made smoothies that my taste buds are capable of handling pretty much anything by this point.” Not pausing for confirmation, Tony tugged Rena’s plate towards himself, switching it out for his own scorched… creation, then eyeing it like a doomed man would eye the Grim Reaper itself. “Alright, everyone. You in?”

“Happily,” Pepper smirked.

Rena looked at least slightly less unhappy over this new twist of fate. “I guess so…”

“See you all on the other side,” Sam put in, and, with one final shared look of fortitude, they all dove in.

...Surprisingly enough, it was Pepper who cracked first. With a heaving mutter of ‘oh God,’ she flung a hand to her mouth, only just making it to the sink in time to spit the offending mouthful into the garbage disposal before the coughing started and she had to reach for one of the waiting glasses of water (courtesy of U). “Salt,” she explained with a grimace when she noticed everyone’s eyes on her (Rena squinting through what was undoubtedly the taste of almost pure charcoal). “I put in salt instead of sugar. Oh, god, that is absolutely vile. Remind me never to do that again.”

“How on Earth did you get them mixed up?! We were using brown sugar!” Tony exclaimed, before swallowing his half-chewed mouthful and shooting Dum-E a bitter (but still somehow fond) glare. “And you! Are you trying to get me to ship you off to be a university lab rat? Or do you honestly think poison is the way to a human’s heart?”

Three expectant faces (together with three equally anticipatory camera lenses) turned on Sam, who was trying not to appear more than mildly smug as he swallowed his own bite and reached calmly for another.

“Mine’s actually not that bad.” He patted Butterfingers on the robot’s arm, smiling at the self-satisfied beep which followed. “Kind of… ridiculously sweet, thanks to my partner here, but definitely this side of the border as far as acceptable cuisine goes.”

“What? Give me that.” Reaching over the counter, Tony snagged a forkful for himself, his eyes widening in surprise as he chewed.

“He’s telling the truth,” he admitted moments later, the hand in front of his mouth the only thing stopping them from catching an eyeful of the blue horrors within. “It’s actually not bad. It’s not good, but it’s not completely awful either.” He stared at Sam. “How the hell did you manage that one, Mountain Man?”

Sam shrugged, watching in amusement as Rena and Pepper both dove in to test for themselves. “I just followed the instructions. Guess it wasn’t as tough a recipe as I thought it could’ve been.”
Maybe he would actually be up to attempting that bibimbap one day...

“If you’re trying to insult our cooking skills,” Rena pointed her fork at him, her words only slightly muffled by the pear, “I’ve got to say you’ve only got about half a leg to stand on there. It’s edible. It’s not a masterpiece.”

Raising an eyebrow, Sam leaned forward himself, scraping off some of Dum-E’s ‘garnish’ to get a taste of what Rena’s dish could have been like without the tampering. Mouth twisting downward, he let out a startled cough of his own. “Whoa. How much lemon juice did you add to this?!”

“Wait, the lemon was your fault?!” Tony jabbed his own fork towards Rena, his glare as obvious as it was fake. “And here I was giving Dum-E a hundred percent of the blame, when he only deserves around seventy! What are you, immune to citrus or something?”

Rena tried (and failed) to look innocent. “… I like lemon?”

“Nobody likes lemon that much, you psychopath.”

“Says the guy who served cinders in the place of actual food.”

“Hey, just because it’s a little bit burnt doesn’t mean it’s not food anymore.”

“Dream on, Iron Man.”

“Yeah, Tin Can,” Sam joked, “I think you may be overreaching a little with that one.”

“He tends to do that a lot,” Pepper agreed knowingly. “You should’ve seen how he acted the first time I saw him in an Iron Man suit. What was it again, Tony? ‘This is not the worst thing you’ve caught me doing?’”

“It wasn’t the worst thing-”

“You were covered in bullet holes!”

“Hey, okay, that’s fair, but-” Tony cut himself off, frowning absently down at the plates. “Do you think we need to put these in a hazardous waste bag?”

“As tempted as I am to say yes,” Sam explained, “-and as curious as I am about that whole ‘bullet hole’ situation, by the way- I don’t think we need to go quite that far.” Glancing back down at the plates again, he raised his eyebrows. “Despite appearances.”

With unspoken agreement, the four of them moved as one, Sam swiping up the last of his pear as the others all scraped what remained on their respective plates into the garbage disposal, Tony clapping his hands together once everything was safely in the sink.

“So… considering I already sent Chef Martinez and his crew home… order in desert, maybe?”

“Not,” Pepper told him, tapping lightly on the tip on his nose, “until all of this is cleaned up. And as you’re the one who made the most mess, I volunteer you for washing up duty.”

“Seconded.” Rena gestured back towards her usual spot with an innocence so false even an infant would have been able to see through it. “I would volunteer to do it myself- I really would- but I think I’ve been away from my post for far too long as it is. Wouldn’t you agree? Sir?”

Taking pity on the older man, Sam patted Tony on the shoulder, not even bothering to hide the wide, comfortable smile he could feel stretching across his face. “I’ll help. You wash, I’ll dry-
“Well, I hear that is how these things usually work,” Tony agreed, before turning to Pepper. “If that’s acceptable to my boss, that is.”

Pepper pretended to consider it for a moment, her lips only twiching up when she finally deigned to reply. “I think I can let it pass. This time.”

That said, Pepper walked away, Rena following barely a second later, and Sam and Tony were left alone at the sink.

“Alright then, Mountain Man, let’s get this over with.” With a semi-disgusted look on his face, Tony picked up the oven tray he’d cooked his pear on, eyeing the encrusted remnants. “Okay… how hard do you think I’ll have to scrub to get this off?”

With a laugh, they turned together, falling into an easy rhythm as they worked, the steady stream of water the only sound beyond the late night talk show Pepper was watching in the background. Gradually, though, Sam began to realise that Tony kept sending him quick, side-long glances. They were infrequent, so he almost thought he’d imagined them at first, but there was no denying the familiar tingling at the base of his neck which almost invariably came when he was being watched.

After the twentieth time it happened, he decided it was probably okay for him to question precisely why.

“Something on my face?”

The only sign that Tony had even heard him at first was the barely-noticeable momentary stilling of the mechanic’s hands. Sam waited, watching as Tony fixated on the flow of the water over his hands, and on the slow rotation of the sponge beneath his fingers. One calloused finger tapped a slow beat against the side of the plate- one which sounded remarkably like a staccato version of Black Sabbath’s ‘Laguna Sunrise.’

A little while later, as he passed the plate over to be dried, Tony’s considering gaze finally met his eyes.

“You look better. Still far from good, mind you,” Tony tacked on, his focus already flicking back to what was in the sink, “but… better.”

“You sound like you’re talking about my pear again,” Sam joked, pausing to consider how he should proceed before offering a slightly strained smile. “I guess routine and sleep work wonders. Even for someone in as bad a condition as I am.”

Something tightened in Tony’s jaw at that, sending alarms blaring in Sam’s mind, but still he forced himself to wait. Whatever was going on in the older man’s head, he could wait for it.

Tony had done the same for him on multiple occasions, after all.

It wasn’t long before his patience paid off.

“I got a call from Bruce earlier today.”

“…Yeah?”

“He wasn’t sure we should tell you until we’d confirmed it.”

Something heavy coiled in Sam’s gut, pulsing streaks of nervous electricity up his back and
jamming in his throat. This couldn’t be what it sounded like. Not so soon. It couldn’t-

“Mhm.”

Tony rinsed off another plate, still looking distinctly uncomfortable. “I thought maybe he was right, but… you just… with everything you’ve had done to you lately… All of the secrets…”

Nodding to himself, Tony glanced over yet again, his eyes firm. Decided. “It’s going to be a few more days before they can finish running enough tests to be sure, but Bruce thinks they might have managed to perfect the cure.”

The whole world shut down.

“…Oh.”

Chapter End Notes

So we finally reached (albeit from a different POV) the ending I was expecting, like, two whole chapters ago! Hopefully you all enjoyed this random little foray into fluffiness the characters insisted on! (Seriously- I had pretty much zero control over this whole cooking scenario. Everything you see here came directly from them.)

And yay! Sam now knows how the cure is progressing! Hopefully we’ll be seeing a bit of his current mindset regarding that in the next chapter, but until then huge thanks to everyone who is still reading this fic- especially those leaving comments and kudos.

You guys are what keep my enthusiasm for this whole fic up, and I really appreciate every single one of you. ^_^

(Random bonus note: This chapter brings the word count up to over 100,000. I literally have no idea how I am supposed to feel about that- especially considering how much is still yet to come. Lol.)

(Bonus note number two: Hope you all had a nice Halloween. Or just a nice time in general, if any of you don’t celebrate Halloween.)
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Melding your DNA with your tormentors' is not exactly the easiest of things to come to terms with.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains some descriptions of torture and vague references to what could quite easily be inferred to be rape. If you don't want to read that, I suggest you skip the paragraph which comes after "yet another possession," and possibly (if you're really sensitive to that sort of thing) the paragraph which starts "Six years ago". That being said, I hope you enjoy this chapter, despite the level of (well deserved and highly appropriate) angst contained within!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sam? You okay?”

Sam blinked once. Twice. A third time. All the while waiting for Tony’s words to penetrate the fuzzy haze which had descended upon his mind. He could feel the mechanic’s gaze on him- a single tether pulling him away from the sharp contrast of blue cloth against china which had otherwise become the entire span of his reality- and it wasn’t until following the tug of it against his consciousness led him to finally meet the full force of worry in the older man’s chocolate eyes that the question finally registered in his brain.

Blinking again, he felt a single dry swallow pulse down his throat.

“I… I think I need a minute.”

Looking down again, he placed his plate on top of the small stack on the countertop then, after setting the towel alongside them, he turned and walked rigidly away, trying not to notice the eyes tracking his every step. The hallway, as he walked it, had never seemed longer, every flicker of shadow a gaping chasm he forged through in seconds which dragged past like centuries until he reached his room and felt the gentle give of the bed beneath him.

And then he was sitting, the sheets soft against his palms, empty air buzzing in his ears, and all he could think was that the translations were taunting him from their spot in his desk- endless pounding symphonies which, were they sentient, would at this very moment be sending out tendrils of blazing light and burning ice to entwine in zigzag patterns along his skin, marking him both inside and out as the tainted creature he had been trying to pretend he wasn’t anymore. Re-formed and re-created in the bowels of Hell.

Forever Lucifer’s.

From thousands of years before he was even born, to thousands of years after he had died.
Millions, even. Stretching out from the beginning and to the end of time itself. ‘You can take a thing which could have destroyed you and you can use it to make yourself stronger.’ That was what Tony had said, the day this cure had first been discussed. Take that curse, twist it around, spit it in their faces and use it to remake himself into someone stronger than any of those who had wished to use him- who had plotted to use him since millennia before there had even been a him to use- had ever dreamed possible. Take what their mechanisations had infected him with and use them this time.

That was the plan.

So why did it feel so much like he was giving in?

Why did it feel like he was just preparing his body for yet another possession?

Why did it feel like those times in the Cage where, after decades of darkness and silence and utter nothingness when Lucifer wanted him compliant but had decided he wasn’t “vocally appreciative” enough of the “loving” attention bestowed upon him, he had finally been permitted sight and touch and sound and taste and he had begged and pleaded for more of that most excruciatingly exquisite pain even as he screamed and his skin bubbled and his organs liquified and his own nails grew life and began to devour his very flesh just so that he wouldn’t have to go back to that? Because even Michael’s anger and Lucifer’s fury-fuelled caresses were better right then than absolutely nothing at all?

Why did it feel like he was accepting- no, asking for- Lucifer’s help?

Why did if feel like he was behaving grateful for the “gift” Gadreel had unwittingly left behind?

Just… Why?

Resting his head in his hands, Sam leaned forward until he was hunched almost double, concentrating on the steady in. out. in. out of his breathing, counting each stream of air as it flowed through his lips in an attempt to block out the waves of thoughts which were suddenly streaming through his head. Gone was the vagueness of before, replaced with startling abruptness by a thousand different memories and thoughts and imaginings- a picture of his life as it was and as it could be and everything in between. If he did this, he would be healthy again. He would be able to run and fight and shoot. He would be able to walk up a single flight of stairs without feeling like his legs were going to collapse underneath him. He would be able, while they were still here anyway, to go out with his friends and not have to cut all of their fun short because his pathetic excuse for a body couldn’t take the strain.

But all that time, he would know just what it was- just who it was- that lay in and under his skin, laughing at him for being so dependent on what he had tried so hard to distance himself from. He’d thought having demon blood had been bad enough.

This was so much worse.

Forever Lucifer’s. Forever Gadreel’s. Forever carrying them with him everywhere he went, relying on their strength- their Grace- just so that he could live his life the way he wanted to.

At least if he didn’t accept the cure, and they somehow managed to get back home, he could (if his friend was willing) ask Castiel to help him find a way to rid them from his body forever. Castiel had been thinking a lot about possession and autonomy lately. He would understand.

But then, what if they never made it home? Would he really be any happier continuing with his
body as it was now, still knowing that they were in him but deprived of such a huge part of his life? Exercise had been one of his only ways to express his control over his body. Could he truly live the rest of his life knowing that, when his thoughts got really bad, he would never again be able to run until they finally settled down? And what about the people around him? Could he really force them to feel obligated to bow to his limitations, just because he was too selfish to accept the alternative? Helen had flown half way across the world to help him. Tony and Bruce had gone with him to Seoul and back. A whole team had been working for weeks just for him. Could he really reject all of that work just because he was too... squeamish... to put up with the results?

God, Dean had been right all along. He really was a dick.

Raising his head slightly, he glanced through the curtain of his hair, staring over at the unlit candles still sitting on his desk. He had been selfish with Kevin, too- first abandoning him when he’d thought Dean was dead, then later not doing as much as he probably should have to help the kid feel welcomed and comfortable during his time at the bunker. Too guilty over his failure to try and insert himself into the prophet’s life. If Kevin were here now, how would he feel about how much Sam was see-sawing over his decision? Would he compare it to his time with Crowley and think that it was okay for Sam to react as he was? Or would he remember the reason he’d had to spend so long with Crowley in the first place and end up thinking that maybe even being tied to Lucifer like this was too good for a piece of shit deserter like him? That he should just suck it up the way Kevin had had to and spend less time angsting over the hand life had dealt him and more time on the mission itself?

A short, tuneful series of knocks sounded from the doorway.

“You alright there, Mountain Man?”

Running a hand down his face, Sam sat back up, plastering on a weak smile at the same time. “I’m fine.”

Tony raised a sceptical eyebrow, but didn’t say anything to rebuff the statement. Instead, after a silent question to check Sam was okay with it, he walked further into the room, spun the desk chair round, and sat down so that they were both more or less at eye level. “Let me guess- you weren’t really expecting this to be ready so soon?”

A similarly weak laugh followed the smile. “Pretty much.” Looking back down at his hands, Sam pictured the strands of light which were already inside him, once more imagining them multiplying, spreading out and tying tighter until he was more Grace than human. “I don’t know what to do here, Tony,” he admitted painfully.

Tony was silent for nearly a full minute, only moving occasionally to tap his fingers against his half-folded arms, before finally letting out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry- maybe I shouldn’t have told you. You may have noticed it, but I kinda have terrible timing and impulse control.” When Sam looked up at him, he grinned widely, a hint of self-deprecation hidden in the corners and in the creases around his eyes. “One of my many charms most people could do without.”

“No.” Sam shook his head, only feeling like even more of a dick now that he realised just how ungrateful his suddenly walking away must have appeared. “No, I’m glad you told me. Better now, when I have time to digest, than when everyone’s in the lab all prepped and ready to go, right?”

Tony eyed him for a few moments longer, lines of uncertainty burrowing into his brow until he came to a decision and squared his shoulders instead. “…Can I show you something?”
“Umm… go ahead?”

With only a twitch of his fingers to show just how uncomfortable he was with the action, Tony pulled at the hem of his T-shirt, tugging it up to reveal a thick spider-web of ugly scars spreading out from the centre of his chest, leaving just enough time to make sure Sam had taken the sight in before covering them up again.

“Six years ago, when I was in Afghanistan,” he explained, voice slightly thicker than usual, his eyes fixed on something Sam couldn’t even see, “my… foster father, of a sort, hired a group of terrorists to kill me.” *Wait, what?* Tony bit out a bitter laugh. “Using my own weapons, of all things. When they realised who I was, though, they decided I could be more useful to them alive. I had shrapnel in my chest though, worming its way towards my heart, so before that they shoved an electromagnet into my chest and hooked me up to a car battery. It stayed in there until me and Yinsen-” Tony’s jaw clenched, and somehow Sam just knew that he was one of the first to hear that name pass the older man’s lips, “-Yinsen was the doctor they kidnapped to try and keep me alive. Anyway, it stayed in there until we designed a portable version of my dad’s arc reactor to replace it. That arc reactor? That was the reason I was able to escape. That was the reason I was able to become Iron Man. It’s gone now, but-” he rubbed a self-conscious hand over his chest “-sometimes I still feel like it’s in me.”

Looking back at him, Tony let his gaze meet Sam’s- just for a moment, before it shot back to the distant past. “Afghanistan was forever ago, but I still remember it every time I work on my armour. Every time I see my chest in a mirror. I remember what they did, and what I went through, and what happened to Yinsen, and every single way that I’ve changed because of it. I took that experience, and I became better. I became Iron Man.

“That was my decision.” Eyes deep and sorrowful, Tony met Sam’s gaze straight on this time, no longer drifting away even for a moment. “I chose to keep the arc reactor. I chose what I did with it. And I was the one who decided to have it removed when the technology and the medicine became available.

“You don’t have to make the same decision, Sam.” Tony gestured towards him, then back at his own chest. “This cure, it’s not the same as what was done to me. It isn’t some piece of tech you can just remove a few years down the line. This is your DNA, and it’s forever. Call me crazy, but I think it’s kind of understandable if you’re a bit freaked out by that.”

Freaked out. Understatement of the year right there. He was down-right terrified. Still, though, Sam didn’t say a word (wasn’t really sure he was currently even capable of it, if he were to be completely honest with himself). Something told him Tony wasn’t done making his point.

A few seconds later, that suspicion was proven correct.

“You don’t have to do this, Sam. And if you’re telling yourself that we’ll think you’re ungrateful or something if you don’t, then stop. No-one said this was going to be easy, and no-one is going to force this on you if you decide you don’t want it. If you want to wait until you’re sure you’re ready, that’s fine. We’ve got the data now- we can wait ‘til the end of time if that’s what you want. And if you decide you don’t want them in you- if you want to find a way to get them out and fine a whole new method instead?” Brown eyes burned with dark determination. “Then I promise you, we will do whatever it takes to make that happen. Even if I have to work on it ‘til the day I die, Mountain Man. Even if I have to send the data through to another dimension for it to reach you. If you want them out of you, then I will get them out.”

And, somehow, Sam believed him. And maybe it should have been daunting- the idea that, with one single request, he could push Tony to exert that amount of effort- but, for some reason, it
wasn’t. That was just… who Tony was. If he decided something needed doing, he did it.

Never let it be said that Winchester stubbornness could be that easily subdued, though. Even if it would ease their suffering. He still couldn’t help but picture the crestfallen (but trying to hide it) expressions Helen, Bruce and co. would possibly have if, after they presented the results of all their hard work, he turned them down flat.

“But-”

“No butts, Mountain Man. This isn’t a porno.” Smirking in retaliation to Sam’s own confused blinks (because talk about out-of-left-field there, Tony), Tony leant forward just the tiniest fraction of an inch. “I’m serious here, Sam. No-one’s going to judge you, or feel like you’ve wasted their time. Like Helen said, this research can be taken in oodles of different directions. Just by letting them run the tests they’ve done so far, you’ve probably helped her research advance by a couple of years, at least. And if anyone knows about the mental dilemma which comes from altering your own DNA, it’s Bruce.” Straightening back up again, Tony sniffed in what was blatantly mock offense. “Honestly, I’m kind of hurt that you think our opinions of you could be changed that easily.”

“What?” Sam all but sputtered. “I didn’t- I don’t-”

“I know.” With a wide, teasing grin to (through some magical ability) match perfectly the calm, understanding tone of his voice, Tony drummed the flats of his hands against his knees, then rose to his feet and cocked his head towards the door. “You coming? Or do you need a few more minutes?”

Sam didn’t answer straight away. Instead, he took a few moments to run a quick review of his current mental and emotional state. On the one hand, he still hadn’t found his answer. Still didn’t know whether he would ever be prepared to truly face the full consequences this cure entailed. On the other, though, like Tony had said, maybe he didn’t need to come up with that answer right away. Or even by Tuesday. No one was going to pressure him on this.

He had all the time in the world.

Glancing back over at the candles, he smiled. Even Kevin had allowed himself some time off every now and then.

“I’ll come with.” Still smiling internally, he raised an eyebrow in Tony’s direction, keeping his expression deliberately stern. “I have one condition, though.”

“Oh, really? And what would that be?”

“No more mentions of pornos, alright? That’s really not an image I need of you.”

Tony just barked out a laugh in response. “Oh, you really haven’t pried far into the leaked videos of me pre-Iron Man, have you? You are one very unlucky man to have never been blessed with that particular sight.”

 “…You have a very strange view on what exactly constitutes a blessing…”

“Yeah, well, after the fifth video or so gets out there, you learn pretty quickly to change the way you view this kind of thing. It was either accept my position as a certified Sex God or else start up a cave-dwelling hermit lifestyle.” Winking back at him, Tony started out the door. “Sex God came with better perks.”
The words caught at Sam’s ankles, freezing him mid-step for just a fraction of a second. That fraction was more than enough time, though, for something which felt strangely like pride to well up in his chest. It took a strong person, he decided, trailing Tony back down the hallway, to take that kind of betrayal and to refuse to be cowed by it. To, instead, choose to focus on the positives and turn it into a point of pride.

As it turned out, the impression he’d had after watching Tony’s press conference, the day after they’d arrived in this strange and welcoming new world, had been one hundred percent correct. He really could learn a lot from this man.

And he was looking forward to every single second of it.

Chapter End Notes

Hello to readers old and new! Many thanks to every single one of you, and especially to you lovely folks still leaving kudos and comments (and, because I'm not sure if I've actually mentioned you yet, all of you who have subscribed and/or bookmarked this work). You're probably getting sick of me saying this by now, lol, but your continued support really does help soooo much in keeping up the enthusiasm I have for this fic, and I appreciate every single one of you. ^_^
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Real change doesn't happen all at once. Especially when a person doesn't realise how much they actually need to change.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was Tuesday by the time Dean finally felt like he was ready.

Sunday was taken over by him almost drowning in all the greasy goodness he could stuff down his throat, trying to rid himself of the mother of all hangovers he had inflicted on himself over the past few days. And, of course, avoiding the way Cas’ pensive eyes tracked his movements whenever the two crossed paths.

Monday was spent in the cold world of sobriety, trying not to sink into the familiar temptation of rightness and certainty he so strongly wished he could embrace once more. Trying not to listen to the dark, stubborn voice in his head which whispered guilt-soothing promises that Sam really had just been lying or confused or trying to manipulate him (just like he remembered happening so often in the past), and which told him that it was only the alcohol which had made him believe otherwise.

Monday night was a restless pit of despair, filled with images of abandonment and solitude, all of it brought about by his own hand, all of it taunting him with the myriad of ways his plans could fail (again) and fall and break and end with him alone and unforgiven and cast aside.

Tuesday, though. By Tuesday he knew he needed to just get this whole thing over with. Knew that if he wanted his brother back- if he wanted things the way they once had been (the way they should be)- then he had to man up and say what needed to be said. Whatever crap had gone down between them, he and Sam were still brothers, after all. And, to a Winchester, that meant a lot.

So yeah.

He could do this.

He was ready.

He was.

… Or, at least, as ready as he ever would be.

“JARVIS?”

As usual, there was a hint of steel in the AI’s ever-polite voice when he replied- one which didn’t seem to exist with anyone else. “Yes, Mister Winchester?”

“Tell Sam I want to-” No. That wasn’t the right way to do things this time. Ugh- this censorship was once of the many reasons he had always hated giving apologies. Always having to watch your
words was so frustrating. “Can you ask Sam if he’d be okay with me coming to talk to him? Please.” He tagged the final word on a moment later, taking extra care not to make it sound too forced. He couldn’t afford to piss JARVIS off right now. Not again. There was too much on the line here.

A beat of tense silence reverberated around the room, bouncing off of walls, pillows and sheets alike until it felt like the sheer emptiness of it was pressing in on him from all sides, holding him firmly in place as he awaited the AI’s judgement.

Finally, though: “I will pass on your message. Please wait for a reply.”

And thank whatever god they had (or didn’t have) over here, because it was like a weight had been lifted. Fresh air rushed through his lungs, his shoulders dropped down and out of their rigid angles, and nervous anticipation tingled almost pleasantly in his fingertips. For a short time, he was filled with an absolute certainty that this would work.

…Ten minutes later, however, he was decidedly less than certain that the AI had even been true to his word. In fact, he was beginning to feel like he was mere seconds away from demanding a reply right then and there. Clenching his teeth tightly together, though, he forced himself to hold it in, even as one booted foot beat out a relentless rhythm against the floor. For all he knew, this was some sort of messed up test JARVIS had devised just to wind him up, and there was no way he was going to give the damn son of a bitch the satisfaction of cracking him this soon.

And, luckily for his bedside table’s potential lifespan, he didn’t have to wait much longer.

“Sam has reached his decision.”

“…And?”

“He has agreed to meet you, on the condition that it be on neutral ground.”

“Right, yeah,” Dean rushed to reply, “that’s fine. Tell him that’s fine.” Not ideal, but he could work with it.

“I feel I should also inform you, however, that his decision goes against my advice to him—” (Which kind of pissed him off, but was also technically fine. For now, Dean already knew JARVIS didn’t like him. And, to be frank, the opinion of some psychotic robot wasn’t exactly at the top of his list of priorities. As long as messages got passed along and fresh food found its way to the fridge, all was good, right?) “—and, as such, I should therefore warn you that, should anything you say prove detrimental to the progress he has made, you will find me far less lenient in regards to any future communication you may wish to have with your brother.”

Well shit. “You can’t do that.”

“I think you will find I am authorised to take whatever steps I deem necessary to protect Sir and Sir’s friends, Mister Winchester, short of causing harm. I would advise you not to test how far I am capable of pushing the limits of my programming in this respect.” After taking a moment to allow that to sink in, JARVIS spoke again, his overly polite tone almost chilling in comparison to the cold threats of just seconds before. “Now, if you would kindly proceed to the conference room in which you first encountered Falcon, Sam will meet you there shortly.”

Okay. Not what he’d wanted. But he could run with that. Biting down on his tongue to prevent himself from getting into an argument, Dean stood without a word and made a beeline straight for the room in question.
Where he waited.

Again.

Damnit if this was all just some sick joke the damn AI was playing with his prick of an inventor, Dean was so not above taking advantage of the new lack of bodyguard stalkers to get some revenge for it. See if Stark still acted so tough when he didn’t have his suit or his psycho robot to back him up.

…He was saved from having to plot out exactly how he would get said revenge when the door swung open and Sam stepped hesitantly into the room. Dean ran an automatic eye over his brother’s posture, years of habit having him going through his mental checklist to check for possible injuries before even a single conscious thought made its way into his mind. When the conscious thought did kick in, however, it was quickly followed by a sharp burst of pain in his chest.

How had the little boy who had practically worshiped the ground he walked on ended up being, as an adult, so obviously distrustful of him?

“I can’t stay for long,” Sam said stiffly, still not stepping any further into the room. “I’m supposed to be meeting Tony in half an hour so we can go… out.”

The instinct to demand to know where they were going- or why it was more important than him- than them- was practically overwhelming, but, with no small amount of effort, Dean forced it back, nodding instead towards the chair opposite him.

“You wanna sit down?”

For several long seconds, Sam didn’t move, only his eyes flitting uncertainly between Dean and the chair in question. Eventually, though, he did finally take a seat…

…As far from Dean as possible.

Again, Dean had to remind himself that this wasn’t just theatrics. He had earned a bit of cold shoulder treatment, however much it hurt, and he had to try to be happy that his brother had even agreed to this meeting. It wasn’t easy, though. Despite the distance, Sam still looked wary- chair far enough out and close enough to the door that he’d be able to make an escape at a moment’s notice. Back straight and shoulders tense. One hand wrapped loosely around the opposite elbow. Defensive. Like he was protecting himself. From Dean. And, for the first time, Dean realised just how many times he had seen (and dismissed) this shielded aura throughout the years. He’d always shrugged it off as melodramatic crap before, rolled his eyes over the idiocy of choosing to look that weak just to earn a bit of a sympathy vote, but now…

That couldn’t all have been because of him. Could it?

No. Definitely not. He was just over-compensating. Re-writing history because he knew now just how much he’d screwed up with the whole Gadreel situation. He wasn’t responsible for any of the crap Azazel and Ruby and Lucifer (and so, so many others) had unloaded into Sam’s life. Or for the crap Sam had brought upon himself.

“Dean?”

Dean shook himself aware, realising that he had been staring. “Oh, um…” Allowing his face to drop into something he hoped didn’t come across as too confrontational, he attempted a smile. “So, uh… How ya been, Sammy?”
Sam didn’t respond at first, his narrowed eyes dancing somewhere between hope and outright suspicion. “I’ve been good enough,” he eventually admitted, though, voice slow and tone careful before adding- probably deliberately bluntly- “What did you want, Dean?”

The business-like edge to the question stung. Like they weren’t even brothers even more. Like they were strangers, only worse. JARVIS’ warning still ringing in his mind, though, he very purposefully didn’t snipe back. Instead, he shifted awkwardly in his seat, one hand coming up to rub against the back of his neck.

“Look, man,” he started a few seconds later, his gaze dropping down and just off to Sam’s left. “You know I’m… not exactly the best at this… this whole apology thing. But, for what it’s worth, I know I screwed up. What I did… I can’t say I’m sorry for asking Gadreel for help, but- but I shouldn’ta kept it from you. I just didn’t-” Huffing out a frustrated breath, he finally let his hand fall again, and brought his eyes back up to meet the solid (but still guarded) shock blinking back at him head on. “I screwed up, Sam. And…” Deep breath. “And I’m sorry.”

The words, as they did every time he had to stoop to uttering them honestly, felt harsh and alien against his lips but, for once, he didn’t let that push him into one of his ‘no chick flick moments’ deflections. For the first time in years, he was the one in the wrong here. Well and truly. He couldn’t let himself balls this up.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated again, willing- begging- Sam to understand the sincerity behind the words.

And then, gaze falling down to a less guilt-inducing spot once more, he awaited Sam’s imminent acceptance.

It took longer than he’d thought it would. Even a full thirty seconds of patient contrition later, silence still rang heavy through the room, suffocating him once more, and Dean, after deciding that risking it was unlikely to have any negative effect, chanced an anticipative glance up to gauge the situation.

Hope. That was what he saw- battling its way through Sam’s attempts at suppression, it flooded out, bleeding into the grateful sheen in his brothers eyes and into the hunch of his shoulders. Into the barely-there flexing of his fingers and the near magnetic way Sam’s body seemed to lean almost imperceptibly towards him. Sam wanted this to work- that much was blindingly obvious- but still, for some reason, something seemed to be holding him back. Or rather, he was holding himself back.

The hope was a signal, though, that Dean was on the right track here. That he had made the right decision in coming to apologise. That this could be fixed after all. Offering a similarly hopeful smile back, filled with promises and reminders of how good things could be when they didn’t have this gaping chasm between them, he didn’t even try to stop it when his hand landed open on the table, letting both his body and his words speak to how much they obviously both wanted this. To how futile it was- how ridiculous, really- to fight against such hope when the alternative was a brotherhood strong enough to take down the Devil himself.

The apology had been made. The breach had been crossed. And things could only go up from here.

“So we’re good now, right?” He prodded, not even caring that a vaguely pleading edge had crept into his voice. “You can come and stay with Cas and me until we get home. And then we can get back to normal, yeah? You- we- can forget this whole thing ever happened. Move on. It can be you and me against the world again, man. Isn’t that what you want?”
He didn’t know what triggered it. Didn’t know why. He only knew that Sam’s jaw tightened, all that hope merging practically instantaneously with the anger which flashed like cannon fire across his features, leaving nothing but mournful disappointment in its wake.

“No, Dean,” Sam admitted quietly. “It’s not.”

Dean drew back defensively. “What?”

In that moment, he didn’t care that it came out more forcefully than he’d intended. Couldn’t help, either, the small rush of vindictive satisfaction which flickered briefly in his chest when Sam flinched, even as he knew it was a bad sign. Because all of the fears he had spent all night suppressing were coming true before his very eyes, and it damn well hurt.

The potential for rejection. Reason number two for why he’d always hated apologising.

Recovering quickly, Sam took a calming breath and shook his head. “It’s not just Gadreel, Dean,” he explained, each word a needle stealing air from his brother’s lungs. “Things have been broken here for a long time now, and the whole ‘you and me against the world’ thing isn’t helping. Isolating ourselves- not having other people around who know what’s going on and who can call us out when things are looking bad- it’s not good for us.

“An apology is great, Dean- and I’m thankful for it, I really am- but it’s not enough to fix all the crap which led to Gadreel. That stuff’s gonna take time. And work. And until we’ve made some progress with that, I can’t just come back and pretend everything is just… magically alright again. I can’t.”

Dean couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Even with the over-earnest puppy dog eyes of doom. It was like… he heard the words. They made sense. They just didn’t make sense for them. Sam not capitulating even after just the slightest signs of remorse- let alone the baring-my-soul-here apology Dean had just given- was unheard of. Hell, even in their teens, it had only ever been Dad who took the real brunt of Sam’s ‘moralistic’ streak- Dean had got off pretty much scot free in comparison to those bitch fits. And even then Sam had still (up until Stanford, anyway) always given in in the end.

And Sam had grown past that whole Stanford attitude years ago.

Hadin’t he?

Swallowing down the painful lump in his throat, Dean spread his hands helplessly to the sides. “What do you even want from me here, then, man?” Because, right now, it was like the entire world had turned itself on its head, and Dean had absolutely no idea how to proceed anymore.

After a moments hesitation, Sam nodded to himself, swallowing determinedly as he pulled his chair closer to the table and rested his forearms against the hard surface. Wide, empathetic eyes latched onto Dean with razor-sharp focus, pinning him in place with more efficiency than any pair of shackles ever invented.

“I want more time, Dean. I need more time. But if you’re really serious about wanting to work past this- if you’re willing to work with me on building something healthier between us, then I’m willing to give this another shot.”

“How?”

“…We meet up. Every two or three days. We talk. We listen to each other. We try to figure out and confront why things went wrong, and we work on fixing those things.”
“And if I don’t agree with what you say at these ‘meetings’ of yours?” Because no matter how much Dean wanted his brother back, that didn’t mean he couldn’t be just a little bit suspicious here, or that he had to be willing to just bend over and take everything Sam shoved at him. He had his limits, and turning into someone’s whipping boy over just one mistake was definitely one of them.

“Then we talk about why and we adjust.” Sam offered him a pathetic, wounded excuse for a smile. “I want things to get better between us, Dean. I do. I want my brother back. But I can’t go back to living a life where you don’t trust me, or where I have to walk around on eggshells censoring myself any time I disagree with you because I’m just… so scared of disappointing you again. So if you want to work together again, it needs to be as real partners. And… and I think this is the only way that’s gonna happen. But if that sounds like too much for you-” Long fingers curled into shaky fists against the table top- “then tell me now, Dean. Please.”

And in that moment, faced with the tears threatening to spill from his baby brother’s eyes at any moment, Dean knew there was only one answer he could give.

“Then let’s do it.”

A shuddering breath burst from Sam’s lips, at least half of the tension Dean had been trying to pretend wasn’t even there draining away in an instant. Eyes closing, Sam took a few seconds to pull himself together again before nodding one final time.

“I’ll let JARVIS know when I’m free. You do the same, and we can take things from there.”

Then, without another word, Sam pulled himself away from the table and left.

Dean tried not to fixate on the slight, gasping exhale which he heard slip out just before the door closed shut between them. Instead he waited once more, giving Sam time to make his full escape before making his own way back to his floor, and to Cas’ curious gaze.

Finally.

Finally, it felt like he could see the light at the end of the tunnel. It wouldn’t take more than a couple of these ‘meetings’ to sort things out, after all, and after that?

After that?

He’d have his brother back. Once and for all.

Chapter End Notes

It's finally done!!! Lol. Sorry- I just had a LOT of issues while writing this chapter. Dean was just being sooo stubbornly *difficult* about the whole thing, and finding some sort of balance as far as how much he's progressed/how much he's stayed the same and how much that might influence his interactions with Sam turned out to be way tougher than I was initially anticipating. Still, I really hope you think it turned out relatively okay in the end (or at least that it isn't completely terrible), because honestly I've re-read/re-written most of it so many times now that I'm not sure I can even tell anymore. And thank you so much to those of you who left kudos/comments last chapter- you really did give me the inspiration I needed to keep going despite Dean's
Deanisms, and I can't even *begin* to express how grateful I am for that. Thank you soooooooooo much!

Also: this is your standard test week heads-up. As ever, it is possible that marking will interfere with my writing time, and if so there may end up being another two week break before the next chapter gets posted. At times like this, I really wish I had Bernard's Watch. Having the ability to freeze time would make things much easier sometimes. (Plus you could freak people out by making it look like you never slept, and how fun would that be?)
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Sam kind of oscillates between thinking forward and thinking back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In a sure sign that this visit was being treated with more weight than those that had come before it, Helen met Sam and Tony at the door herself this time, leading them through to the lab in person instead of sending out one of the three assistants who had been flown over from Seoul. There was still another half hour before they’d be able to verify the results of the last tests, she explained as they walked, but there was something which needed to be decided upon in the meantime.

Where to administer the first dose.

“We’ve narrowed down some options for you to choose from,” she told Sam, leading him over to a desk in the lab with various pieces of paper scattered across it and indicating that he should take a seat. “Each of them come with their own unique drawbacks, however, should something go wrong, so I’d advise you to think carefully about how a worst case scenario could affect your life from here on.”

Wrong. Right. That was putting it mildly. They’d talked about this before, during one of his routine visits- if the cure reacted differently when used on his actual body instead of on the tissue samples, there was a slim chance that it could mutate and spread. Which, considering the... rather volatile reaction seen in those initial tests back in Seoul, was something everyone involved was eager to avoid.

“The information is all here,” Helen continued, still with heavy hints of the professional tone she always tended towards when talking about the more serious aspects of her work. “You can take as much time as you need to go through it all, of course, and to weigh all the pros and cons of each one.”

“Thanks.”

Left to his own devices (Tony having decided to join the others in going over the final preparation for the Test), Sam dove right in, reasoning that at least research should help him get his mind back on track and back off his brother.

Option one: breast tissue. He ruled that one out straight away. While it was true that the male nipple was among the most useless parts of the body, he agreed with the conclusions Bruce and Helen had written down- it was just too close to the heart (and other internal organs). Sam didn’t care much about dying when his time came but, for the most part, he didn’t think he counted as suicidal, and ending up as a pile of ash in the middle of a lab really wasn’t something he planned to put on his to-do list. However much faith he had in the team’s work, that was just too high a risk this early on.

Option two: an extremity. The ‘outermost toe,’ as Helen’s notes put it, would probably be his first
choice there. He relied on his hands too much while Hunting- whether it be for shooting, stabbing or spell-work- and adjusting to make up for a lost hand would take time they often didn’t have, should they eventually have to return to their own universe. The loss of a pinkie toe, however, was typically relatively easy for most people to compensate for and, if push came to shove, he figured he could work around a prosthetic foot far more easily than he could a hand- especially if it was one of the no-doubt more advanced prosthetics from this world. (The real difficulty there, of course, would lie in finding a way to convince Tony he didn’t have to fund (or build) the thing.)

Option three: the tangential approach. Helen could direct the Cradle to deliver the dose at an angle, so that it skimmed over the surface of one of his forearms or calves. Theoretically the reduced area of impact and easy access would give them the best chance at reacting quickly if something were to go wrong. On the other hand, however, a mutation in one of those areas could potentially lead to any degree of tissue damage to his muscles, and he was fairly certain that would influence his life even more than having a prosthetic would. He didn’t particularly fancy the idea of ending up like Dr. House, after all…

…Which meant he’d decided on the toe, he supposed.

Right?

He could deal with losing a toe.

Or a foot…

…Or a leg…

Sighing heavily enough that he needed to act quickly to stop the top sheets of paper from rippling away, Sam started reading again from the beginning, double and triple checking all of the facts and statistics laid out before him. After all, there was no harm in being careful here.

Quite the opposite, in fact. He could only imagine Dean and Castiel’s expressions if, the next time he saw them, he turned up with the modern-day equivalent of a wooden stump.

…He had made the right decision in not telling Dean where Tony was taking him, right?

…God, why had things become so twisted? Before, it wouldn’t even have been a question. Dean deserved to know that his brother (and Castiel his friend, though Cas already knew the basics of what was going on, even if he wasn’t aware of the actual specifics) was going through with a highly experimental medical procedure. He deserved to be given time to prepare for the possible ramifications of the whole thing. Sam would have told him, and he would have trusted that Dean would have his back and be there should anything go wrong.

Now, though…

Now he couldn’t even stomach the idea of Dean being even remotely involved. He knew it was illogical- knew there weren’t any Angels (with access to their powers anyway) here for Dean to call upon. Knew that Crowley and all his manipulative, scheming little minions (and adversaries) were a whole world away. But still-

-Still-

What if Dean found a way to interfere? To fix the tests to his own design?

He just couldn’t do it.
Hell, even just thinking about doing it had his heart thudding painfully in his chest, his palms itching like they couldn’t decide whether the situation called for sweat or not, his shoulders-

“-am? Are you alright?”

Jerking back, Sam only just managed to catch himself from sending every single piece of paper cascading to the floor. Fumbling to get them back into some kind of order, he glanced up for a second, taking in the furrowed brow and dark, concerned eyes hidden behind a rimless pair of glasses.

“What?”

Bruce somehow managed to frown even more. “I said are you alright? You seem a bit… vague. Tony did tell you you don’t have to do this, right?”

Sam just shook his head, not sure whether he could really explain the confusing blend of relief and fearful anxiety swirling through his mind right now, thoughts from earlier rushing back like just thinking of Dean being around had re-opened the floodgates on everything he had been trying to repress ever since he’d left Dean (too soon. Was it too soon? What if Dean tried to push? Was he strong enough to properly set up boundaries, or would he cave the same way he always did? Would he end up telling Dean about the Cure anyway? Would Dean try to get involved even if Sam told him he wasn’t ready for that? Was it fair to Dean if he acted like he still fully believed they could fix this, even while his brother continued to feature so strongly in his nightmares? What if he never felt truly safe around his brother again?). Not sure, either, that this would be the right time or place even if he could put a voice to his thoughts.

“I’m fine.” Drawing himself together, Sam offered Bruce what he hoped could pass for a reassuring smile. “This isn’t anything to do with that. I just… I saw Dean earlier is all, and I guess I just… got kind of thrown off by how well it went.” That was essentially the truth. Right?

The surprise was enough for Bruce’s brow to unfurl almost entirely. “It went well,” he repeated half disbelievingly. “With Dean.”

And for a split second, despite his still-looming reservations- despite everything- Sam felt a proud, joyful grin split (albeit shyly) across his features. “He apologised.”

“He apo- really? What did you say?”

Drawing in, then releasing, a steady breath through his nose, Sam re-directed his gaze across the room, where Sun-Hi and Tae were (while Helen and Eun-Ji were busy with the attached screen) inserting a vial of liquid into a compartment on the side of the Portable Cradle. “I told him… we can see how it goes.”

He was answered, for several long seconds, by nothing but the faint buzz of the surrounding machinery. Then: “Good for you.” And a few seconds after that: “I’m guessing Tony already knows?”

Sam moved his gaze over to the man in question. He still looked ever so slightly (to the eyes of someone who knew enough of his tells, anyway) more reticent than usual, even as he swept deliberate lines across the screen of his Starkpad. “Mm. I think he’s… kind of worried about it.”

Which was an understatement and a half, really. Sam had told the older man about it in the car on the way over, and (while Tony had been careful not to actually say anything against any one person in particular) he had been left with the distinct impression Tony wouldn’t believe Dean to be serious about the whole thing until Dean had written a two-hundred-page dissertation detailing all
the ways he vowed to change and shouted it off of every rooftop in New York.

In fact, he was fairly certain Tony would still be sceptical even then.

Bruce just tapped twice against the pen he had sticking out of the breast pocket of his lab coat, humming gently in understanding. “It doesn’t surprise me.” Then, after reaching up to poke his glasses slightly further up his nose, he nodded towards the Portable Cradle. “Are you ready for this?”

Was he?

“I guess there’s only one way to find out.”

After a considering pause Bruce nodded again. “Have you chosen?”

“The toe. Definitely the toe.”

Bruce nodded understandingly. “We thought that’s what you’d go with. In fact, I’m fairly certain Tony’s already coming up with ideas for a bionic leg.”

That… would definitely line up with the general shapes the mechanic seemed to be tracing. Sighing resignedly (but secretly kind of happy for the distraction from other, darker thoughts), Sam followed Bruce back across the lab. “Tony, I don’t need a special custom leg.”

Tony barely even looked up. His careless shrug and teasing smirk, however, spoke volumes. “You’re going with the toe thing, right? I’m a futurist, Mountain Man- doesn’t hurt to be prepared. Now I’m imagining something in plaid- would red and gold work on you, do you think? Be kind of cool to have a whole ‘team spirit’ vibe going on. We could even add in a touch of green,” he added as an afterthought, tilting his head towards Bruce. “For the Big Guy.”

“I really don’t think the Other Guy cares all that much about team colours,” Bruce pointed out dryly, before switching his attention to Helen. “He did choose the toe, though. Is everything ready?”

Helen pressed a few more buttons on the screen, before pausing to run a careful eye over all the data displayed there, comparing it to the clipboard she had rested on the desk next to the machine. “It is now,” she finally announced (prompting Tony to put his Starkpad away), then smiled encouragingly at Sam. “Are you ready?”

Sam eyed the metal gurney for a moment, trying not to give in to the sudden comparison his mind made to the cross-shaped slab he had hallucinated himself being on during his first detox, so many thousands of years ago now (or to the similar ones Lucifer had sometimes used when he decided to play ‘dissection’ in the Cage). “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

…On the upside, at least he sounded slightly more confident than he felt.

A few seconds later, a sharp clap broke into the sudden, tense silence.

“Well then,” Tony declared, shooting them all a devil-may-care grin (and man did Sam hate that phrase now) and rubbing his hands together like the Mad Scientist he was, “let’s get this show on the road!”
Confession: I thought I was close to finishing this chapter, and then I just got that dissatisfied sensation where it just doesn't feel *quite* right, so I ended up re-ordering and re-writing the whole thing in the span of about three hours last night. Lol. Still, I'm much happier with this chapter as it is, so I think it was worth it. I really hope you guys liked it, too!!

Also: SOOOOOOOO many thanks to commenters for last chapter- both old and new. I think I've literally lost count of just how many times I read all of your reviews, but they really did cheer me up so much over the past couple of weeks. You all deserve some kind of really amazing award. (Unfortunately it's approaching both my birthday (15th, people! I finally get to move past the horribleness of the number 26) and Christmas, so I don't have any spare money to blow on you all. And no way to get it to you even if I did. Therefore, I hope this chapter will suffice.)
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

The cure begins. With... mixed results.

Chapter Notes

For those curious: the Latin used in this chapter is the Lord’s Prayer. It felt like the most appropriate choice.

WARNING: This chapter contains a lot of Cage-related non-consensual sexual language/contact. This is probably the most blatant this story will be with this (and hopefully it doesn’t stray into what could be termed ‘graphic’ territory) but, if you don’t want to read that, I advise you to skip past the section which is mostly in italics.

With everything Sam had been through in his life (and deaths), a single medical procedure wasn’t that big a deal. At least, that was what Sam tried to tell himself as Tae secured his disinfected left foot loosely in place with a cold metal clamp-like contraption, and as Eun-Ji carefully directed the arm of the Portable Cradle to aim at the flesh directly below his cuticle.

Not that it helped against the swirling anxiety beating against the walls of his stomach even in the slightest.

“Try to relax,” Helen told him with a calm, reassuring doctor’s smile. “The chance of failure here is extremely slim. In fact, I’d estimate a ninety-two percent chance that there will be no negative side effects.

“And even if there are side effects,” she continued, “I assure you we have done everything we can to be prepared for them.”

But that was the problem, though, wasn’t it? Right now, Sam honestly couldn’t have said whether he was more concerned about whether the test would fail… or whether it would succeed.

Potentially losing a foot was bad. But the alternative…

The alternative…

He didn’t need to worry the others with that, though.

Drawing on every ounce of ‘fine’ practice he had ever had, Sam shot Helen a grateful smile before she turned her attention back to the screen, relaxing his shoulders and loosening his features just enough that she would believe her words to have truly helped, but keeping just enough tension that
Tony and Bruce would still be able to see a portion of his apprehension—this was about balance after all and, given what they knew, appearing completely calm would only set their alarm bells ringing.

Tony (probably because of his own experience with masks) didn’t seem completely convinced, but that was fine. Kind of. He could trust Tony. Tony wouldn’t interfere without Sam’s say-so.

But then he’d thought he could trust De-

No. He could trust Tony. That was that.

“All right, Sam. We’re ready.”

Sam didn’t dare to respond out loud to Helen’s declaration. A verbal answer right now could shatter the whole illusion. One nod was fine.

_Breathe in through the nose. Out through the mouth. Don’t think too much about what was going to happen. Pater noster qui es in coelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum._

The machine didn’t even have the decency to whir to life. One moment there was nothing, the next a single, thin, reddish-gold beam cut through the air and burrowed into his toe.

_Breathe in through the nose. Out through the mouth. He could do this. Adveniat regum tuum, fiat voluntas tua, sicut in coelo et in terra._

There was no pain. Not even the slightest of tinges against his skin to distract him.

_Breathe in through the nose. Out through the mouth. He was fine. He was fine. Panem nostrum quotidiamum da nobis hodie, et dimitte nobis debita nostra._

His flesh didn’t even so much as glow, let alone explode or dissolve into dusty cinders. Two puzzle pieces slotting seamlessly into place. It should have seemed anti-climactic. Hell, maybe it was to some of the others in the room.

_Breathe in through the nose. Out through the mouth. There was no need for him to panic. Sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris._

But a pretty front didn’t change the reality of what was happening here. Didn’t change what was being done. Didn’t change the fact that his cells were fusing with-

_Breathe in through the nose. Out through the mouth. Slowly. Slowly. He could handle this. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem sed libera nos a malo._

And then it was over— the beam gone, the machine still. Bruce was smiling. Helen was smiling. Eun-Ji and Tae and Sun-Hi were all congratulating each other, and Sam-

-Sam felt like he was going to be sick. His heart was a jackhammer in his chest, his breath torn between coming out too fast and not coming out at all. His skin (_or was it the room?_) felt colder than ice, and he couldn’t-

He couldn’t-

Tony, expression grim and understanding, stepped forward to deftly loosen the clamp and jerked his head towards the nearest doorway.

And without even pausing to tug on as much as a sock, Sam was off the gurney and through the
door almost before Tony even *started* telling the others to just let him go.

*In through the nose. Out through the mouth.*

The first door he came to was a small storage room for cleaning supplies. It would do.

*In through the nose. Out through the mouth.*

Maybe his knees hurt when they slammed into the floor. Maybe they didn’t. Logic told him they probably *should*, but if they *did* his brain was *far* too busy right now to register any of it. He could feel his breaths coming faster and faster. Dimly registered the slow swing of the door closing behind him.

*Pater noster qui es-*

Sam.

No. *In coelis sanctificetur-*

Sam.

*Please no. Nomen tuum-*

*There’s no use turning to dear old Pastor Jim’s prayers now, Sam. Dad didn’t help you before-he’s not gonna help you this time.*

*In through the nose. Out through the mouth. He needed to get this under control. Find something to focus on.*

The solid ground. The clinical smell. The shadows cast by the light shining in through the single, frosted glass window in the door. None of it was enough to fully erase the taunting laughter in his ears. The colder-than-ice touch which wrapped its way around his foot, sending freezing tendrils up his leg to caress his-

Nose. Mouth. *Adveniat regnum tuum, fiat voluntas tua-*

*Whose will are you talking about there, my precious little Sam?*

*Please, God. Sicut in coelo in terra-*

*We both know dear old Dad doesn’t care about Earth or Heaven now, don’t we? What makes you think he’d care about you?*

*Please no. Nose. Mouth.*

*You know what this means, don’t you Sam?*

Cold. So cold. He couldn’t breathe. *Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie-*

*You know why it didn’t hurt.*

*He couldn’t think about that. It didn’t mean anything. It didn’t mean anything. -Et dimitte nobis debita nostrae-*

*I’m deeper inside you now than in any of our fun little bedtime games, Sam. I fit inside you. You*
were made for me, Sam. That’s why it didn’t hurt.

Bile rose in his throat. He forced it down. Reached out one hand to steady himself against the nearest wall.

Lucifer wasn’t here. It wasn’t really Him. Sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris-

Think of it, Sam. Remember how good I could make it feel? All that burning, freezing, vengeful, tender pain burrowing deeper and deeper inside you?

His hands clenched, the shaking visible even through the haze of water coating his vision.

No. Please no. Not again. He couldn’t do this again. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem-

And now you’re joined to me, Sam. Forever. Even if you stop now, that’s never gonna change, bunk buddy.

-Sed libera nos a malo. Amen.

...Lucifer’s.

Mine.

Lucifer’s.

Eternally.

The walls were fading. Mops and buckets changing and turning, transforming until he knelt once more in the iridescent mass of colour and confusion and painpainpain which was the Cage’s natural state. Shelves morphing until they were reaching towards him- serrated nails and familiar teeth yearning to feast on each and every drop of his lifeblood until he was nothing more than an empty husk for Lucifer to do with as he would.

He shook his head, trying to clear it.

No. No, none of this was real. Lucifer was gone.

I’ll never be gone now, Sam. You’ve made sure of that. I’ll be deep, deep inside you. For the rest of time itself.

This wasn’t happening. None of this was happening. He was just over-reacting after the first test, that was all. He just needed to focus. Stone number one. Stone number one. Stone number-

Stone number one crumbled, my pretty little pudding. Or did you miss the memo?

No matter how hard he dug his thumb in, it didn’t fade. None of it faded.

He wasn’t there. He was in U-Gin New York. He was in another Universe. He didn’t need Dean as stone number one this time. He had more to live for now. It wasn’t just a promise of a repaired brotherhood anymore. He had friends. Goals. A home. Hobbies and dreams and so many things he still wanted to do. He was not going to let Lucifer beat him again.

Nails and teeth turned to needles- living needles which twisted into his veins, inching closer and closer to his heart. The icy touch traced under and around, slipping slowly between his legs, circling closer and closer to its goal, and he wasn’t fast enough to bite back the terrified whimper
which tore out of his lips. Couldn’t keep the warm droplets from falling onto his hand from eyes closed instinctively- *ineffectively*—against the leering face he knew would appear, looming over his shoulder, to rub tenderly against his cheek any second now.

*I’m inside you anyway, Sam. Why don’t we have a little fun with it while we’re here? Start the rest of eternity with a nice big Bang, as it were?*

*Nonononononono* he couldn’t do this again. *He was free. He was free.*

*Maybe you were once. But when push came to shove, Sam, you came back. You chose me. You will always choose me.*

*He didn’t. He didn’t. How could he have chosen to come back to—*

“JARVIS.” Pulling his hand away from the wall, he fumbled blindly in his pocket for his phone, hoping beyond all hope that the AI would hear him even though he wasn’t in the tower. “Get Tony.”

The room was cold. Too cold. Eyes still closed, he concentrated on trying to block out the insidious voice in his ear. On trying to ignore the freezing finger which was teasing *oh so close now please help. He’d chosen this for a reason. He knew that. He just couldn’t remember what it was right now- not when he knew so well exactly what was coming next.*

*Please God just—*

**Sam.**

The tendril brushed against its mark.

*Nonononononononononononononononononononononononononono—*

A hand landed on his shoulder and he jerked back, head connecting solidly with something as he twisted automatically, back instinctively seeking out the relative protection of the closest wall. (*Because he wasn’t in the Cage- he wasn’t- and the walls couldn’t hurt him here. Could they?*)

“Ah, *shit*, that hurts! Christ, Mountain Man, how hard is your head?!?”

*That voice didn’t belong in the Cage.*

Despite every instinct screaming for him not to do it (*nothing was worth the agony of seeing Their True Forms- he must be crazy if he was risking it even when his eyelids hadn’t been torn away ready for the unveiling*), Sam forced himself to open his eyes…

The walls were still that same unfathomable *everything*. The teeth and needles still tore into his flesh. The cold was still pressing on him, teetering just on the edge of entrance. But the *Tony* in the middle of it all, his worried eyes brought to tears as he clutched at his nose, mouth open and face scrunched in pain- *Tony* didn’t belong in the Cage.

Lucifer didn’t know *Tony*.

The disconnect was just enough.

“*Tony?*”

And with just that single question, *warmth* breathed back into the room. The colours started to
fade, merging into the beige walls of the storage room until he was floating in a strange, mirage-like space half-way between his two realities. And somehow, for some reason, in that moment, he just needed to make certain. Needed someone- anyone- to just believe him.

“I didn’t do this because I wanted to choose Lucifer. I didn’t,” he heard himself gibber, a desperate plea for understanding- for confirmation. Anything to force that icy tendril away.

Tony just looked at him in surprise, still rubbing vaguely at his nose. “I know,” he stated, like it was the most obvious piece of information in the world.

The tendril withdrew- just slightly, but slightly was more than Sam had ever been able to achieve before. He breathed in. Out. In. Out. “I did this because I wanted to choose myself,” he clarified, pleading, and was almost ridiculously proud of even just the tiny sliver of determination which had filtered into his voice. The Cage faded just a little bit more.

Finally letting his hand drop (although maybe it was too soon, considering the continuing rapidity of his blinks), Tony sank to the floor with an understanding, sombre sigh, waiting until they were more or less level with each other before once more saying simply, “I know.”

“I Hate Him.” He did. He loved Him too, of course- a twisted, ugly, wretched love forged by necessity in the depths of pain and suffering and sweet, searing wrath. But even counting that, Sam hated Him more. Almost as much as he feared Him.

“I know.”

Several seconds passed, the only sound between them the still rasping sound of Sam’s slowly steadying breaths, before Tony reached up once again to poke gingerly at his nose.

“You really do have a hard head, you know. If this Hunting thing doesn’t work out for you, you’d have a pretty decent shot at being one of those stunt guys who get thrown through windows.”

And maybe it was the guilt over hurting a friend, or maybe it was the sense of shocked gratefulness Tony’s easy acceptance and lack of judgement always brought out in him but, just like that, the Cage faded entirely. Even the tendril finally warmed to something greater than sub-zero.

Not feeling quite up to smiling yet, Sam offered Tony an apologetic look instead. “Sorry about your nose.”

“Meh. As long as I don’t come out of this looking like Owen Wilson, you’re forgiven, Mountain Man.” A wry grin and a small, vaguely self-deprecating shrug followed soon after. “Besides, the first time I had a panic attack it was because a nosy kid asked me a question. Under the circumstances, I think most people would forgive you a bit of a freak out.”

Speaking of… “How much did- I mean… the others…?”

“They’re confused,” Tony admitted after a few seconds. “Feeling a little guilty, I think. I had to tell them the Grace came from a bad incident in your past. They didn’t pry after that.” He paused for a moment, eyeing Sam with a careful blend of appraisal and sorrowful empathy. “Bruce is wondering whether we should delay the other doses for a while. Or whether we shouldn’t have even done this one yet, actually.”

Pressing down on the automatic sense of indignation (he already knew Bruce didn’t see him as weak, damn it, that wasn’t what this was), Sam just shook his head. “It wouldn’t have mattered.” He could admit that, however pathetic it made him feel. Whether they had done the first dose a week from now, a year, or even an entire lifetime, he doubted his reaction would have been all that
different. No matter how much longer he lived, after all, it would always pale in comparison to Then. The Cage would always be too close. Lucifer would always be too close. That was just how these things worked.

Accepting that- *dealing* with that- was the only way to move forward.

Without even thinking about it, Sam already knew his answer. “I don’t want to delay the other treatments. It’ll get easier. Or I’ll get better at dealing with it. One of those things. Putting it off is only gonna make it harder in the long run. I can deal with this. I promise.”

Tony just nodded, not even a glimmer of doubt in his eyes. “I know.”

They sat there for a while, the silence not quite comfortable (but not quite tense either, somehow), as Sam’s breathing slowly evened out, the clammy sensation along his brow fading along with the tingle, and the needles shrinking back down into plain, innocuous shelves. It was… nice. Sort of. Not the images themselves, of course, but just the idea that he could actually take this time to let it all fade naturally, instead of the pressure he’d always felt to appear *immediately* okay whenever he’d hallucinated around Dean. He wondered what Tony was thinking about- whether the mechanic was also remembering the *other* times he had helped Sam just… by being *there*, really. So many times for such a short acquaintance.

He hoped Tony would never go through anything where he would need *Sam* to provide that same, accepting presence for *him*.

…A strange, pensive feeling itched at the back of his mind at the thought, replacing the cold from before with something far less tangible. And, not for the first time, Sam also wondered precisely why it was that God had chosen *this* Universe to send them to. Whether it really had been just to give *them* peace.

Stamping it down, he smiled nervously at Tony.

“I think I’m ready to go back.”

Chapter End Notes

Did you really think I would erase Sam’s leg? Come on- I am *far* more cruel than that, people!

So I know today breaks my normal pattern for when to post but, as it’s the anniversary for the first chapter, I have to admit I couldn’t quite resist the lure.

Anyway, I really hope you enjoyed (even though that seems a terrible word choice considering the contents) this chapter. And huge, *huge* thanks to everyone still reading this- especially you wonderful people who commented on the last chapter! (Also: we have officially hit 100 bookmarks!!! How?!??! How are you guys so incredibly awesome?!?!)?

I doubt I’ll get another chapter ready before Christmas, so I’ll say this now: MERRY CHRISTMAS!!! And HAPPY HOLIDAYS!!! to anyone who doesn’t celebrate Christmas. I hope you’re all having an absolutely *fantastic* December, because you all absolutely, one hundred percent deserve it!
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Various people need a little time to adjust. Sam shows signs that he's beginning to re-learn the meaning of 'self-care.'

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Hope you all had (or are still having) fantastic holidays!!! I had an absolutely great time! (Ended up getting addicted to Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency. If you haven't seen it yet, go to Netflix (or BBC America/Amazon, I believe, if you're in the US) and watch it, like, right now. The second season has just been uploaded, and It. Is. Insane. In the best of ways. So yeah. Watch it.) I was actually planning on getting this chapter posted for New Years, but... well. Turns out the characters didn't want to be quite so obedient. Kinda... hard to settle things after what happened last chapter. Nevertheless, I hope you enjoy how this one turned out!

In hindsight, maybe pre-emptively asking JARVIS to book a celebratory meal hadn’t been the best idea Tony had ever had. The problem now being, he mused as they both rose to their feet, Sam’s masks already beginning to slot back into place, that he’d kind of backed them all into a corner with the whole thing. He couldn’t exactly cancel the evening now.

…Well, he could, but all that would result in would be Sam feeling like a failure and most likely blaming himself for ‘ruining’ everyone else’s evening. And that was kind of the complete opposite of what Tony had been aiming for with this whole shindig.

No. Cancellation wasn’t an option.

Repressing the urge to sigh (because this was definitely not a time that would go over as intended), Tony watched as Sam straightened up, the tremor in the taller man’s fingers barely even noticeable anymore as he tugged at the hem of his shirt, smoothing out the rumples in the process.

Re-branding. That could work, right? Keep the meal, change the purpose? He’d never actually officially announced the whole thing as being a celebration to anyone other than JARVIS and Pepper in the first place, so it wasn’t like people were going to be turning up with bouquets and congratulations cards after all. Especially not at a reasonably high-class Chinese restaurant (not really the atmosphere for it). Re-branding worked for products, companies, and even people all the time- no reason the same technique couldn’t be put to use here.

Yeah. He could make it work.

Mind made up, Tony rolled his shoulders, gesturing towards the door once he was done. “You want a coffee before we go back, Mountain Man? ’Cos DUM-E knocked over most of my last cup, and I swear I can already feel my braincells beginning to die off from a lack of caffeine.”
Sam spent a few seconds eying him slightly warily in response (no doubt checking for signs that the acceptable levels of caring Tony had been showing weren’t straying into the dreaded ‘babying’ territory) before relenting with a nod and a grateful half-smile. “I could go for a cup.”

Decision made, they ducked out of the closet without another word (and Tony could well imagine the field day the media would have with *that* image were a lucky paparazzo around), turning left instead of right and making their way around the corner to the small staff kitchen. Sam immediately got to work, handling the eccentricities of the coffee machine with the well-oiled motions of a seasoned pro (which he kind of was by this point), while Tony took a seat at the plastic table and sent off a few messages to JARVIS (to be passed on to Pepper, of course) about the change in theme for the evening.

Oddly enough (or not), once that was done, he found his mind turning back to the rough sketches now sitting on his StarkPad, back in the lab. He’d mostly just made them as a joke to be honest, confident enough in the team’s research to know there was only a one percent chance (maybe not even that) the leg would *actually* be needed even if the test *did* go wrong, and because he’d been hoping to ease Sam’s tension a bit (and he’d done a *fantastic* job there, hadn’t he?). But now… now the idea was in his head. There was *potential* there, he knew it. And he was kind of tempted to see how far he (and, in turn, SI) would be able to run with it.

…With the Board’s go-ahead, of course. (And maybe just a little bit without it.)

He looked up at the soft ‘thunk’ of a cup being set in front of him, smiling in thanks as Sam settled into the seat opposite, his own drink gripped firmly now between both hands. For a moment Tony considered starting a conversation, but quickly shrugged the idea off. He may have always preferred action (be it working, talking, or anything in between) as a distraction after his own attacks- a way to fuel his fear over what he was sure would eventually come into something more productive- but he was quickly learning that the same didn’t apply to Sam. In contrast, the younger man seemed to prefer a more introspective route, drawing in near silence on the data collected from what had happened and working out how to apply it to his life from here on, only speaking when he’d reached some kind of conclusion or resolve. He didn’t know how much of that was just Sam’s natural self-reliance and how much was a product of his relationship with his brother, but as long as the technique worked he wasn’t about to go throwing around alternative options.

Instead, he took a slow swallow of his own coffee (sweetened to his exact preference, he was pleased to note) before digging into his inner jacket pocket for the plastic packet contained within. He downed a couple of the delicious little balls of goodness himself first (of course), before holding it out as offering.

“Blueberry?”

Sam looked up briefly, tearing his eyes away from whatever answers were calling to him from within the swirling brown ambrosia housed within his grip, and reached out to take a couple of berries, the soft half-smile he shot Tony’s way a clear ‘message received.’

“Thanks.”

They sat in silence from then, the only sounds the occasional rustle of plastic and the faint, appreciative sighs the coffee gods required as offering, neither truly heeding the low ticking of the clock mounted on the wall (Tony did shoot a quick text Bruce’s way, though, just so the team wouldn’t get too worried over how long they were taking). Contrary to how things were with most people, Tony didn’t mind the quiet when it came to Sam (one of his few exceptions to the rule), and instead of babbling along (as he tended to do quite often, he knew) he ended up simply mentally running through ideas as to how SI could approach a prosthetics line as he waited for the
younger man to make his next move.

When the conclusion came, just a couple of minutes later, it wasn’t one he’d been expecting. (If, indeed, he had been expecting anything in particular.)

“I- I don’t think I should do any more translating for now,” Sam confessed out of the blue, keeping his eyes fixed determinedly on the contents of his cup as Tony re-focused on the conversation. “Until the Cure’s done, I mean. Or until I get better at dealing with it. I know it’s probably selfish, but I… I don’t think my head’s in the right place.” A faint blush tinted his cheeks at the admission, hints of shame just visible in the set of his mouth, in the tension of his shoulders, and in the way his fingers twitched just a little bit tighter around his cup, as though he was bracing himself for admonition.

And Tony… didn’t know how to react. He was pretty sure ‘staring in shocked bewilderment’ wasn’t the best option, but for some godforsaken reason he- a man known far and wide for how masterfully he wielded his words- couldn’t come up with anything else to mark this (he was pretty sure) momentous occasion other than yet another simple, “Okay.”

If Sam’s hands continued to tighten much more, he was going to end up cracking that cup. “Are you sure?” A tilt of the younger man's head had his hair unfurling from where it had been tucked behind his ears, falling forward slightly to create the beginnings of a curtain which partially shielded his features from view.

Tony swallowed another blueberry. “Better you take a break now and get your head on straight than go barging in when you know you’re not ready and burn yourself out, right? At least, I’m pretty sure that’s the kind of thing JARVIS would spout right now.”

Sam huffed out a strangely strangled-sounding laugh. “Probably.” Then, casting that knowing expression of his Tony’s way, he let his gaze soften slightly. “Guess now we know where he gets it from,” he teased.

Downing the rest of his coffee in what was probably a completely transparent attempt to cover for the embarrassingly pleased sensation swelling behind his ribcage, Tony pushed himself out of his chair, then gestured briskly for Sam’s cup. “We should head back, or we won’t have time to finish your first check-up before we leave.”

Features dropping slightly at the reminder (and Tony tried not to feel too bad over that, considering he wasn’t actually lying about the time issue- Helen and her team were moving to the tower so they could monitor Sam’s progress, and they needed time to get all of their stuff moved in before the evening’s outing), Sam finished his own drink at a similar speed. Then, after Tony had finished washing the cups, they set back out into the hall, the tension in Sam’s posture once more increasing with every step.

Rightly so, as it turned out.

From the moment they stepped through the door, returning to the lab was like an exercise in awkwardness, with everyone trying so desperately to pretend everything was normal that it just made the fact that they were dancing around the topic about fifty times more obvious. Tae and Sun-Hi were stiffer than Tony had ever seen them, their rigid postures devolving into rapid, whispered conversations in Korean and worried glances whenever Sam’s back was turned. Eun-Ji was behaving almost annoyingly perkily, the overly friendly and polite smile she had plastered across her face betrayed instantly by the careful movements she reverted to whenever she entered too far into Sam’s immediate vicinity, like he was some sort of skittish horse she was afraid would get spooked by any sudden movements. Even Bruce, who had already been aware of at least the
basics of Sam’s situation, was behaving vaguely more timidly than usual, guilt twitching its way across his brow every time both Sam and the Portable Cradle were within his line of sight. Which kind of suggested to Tony that this particular development was less to do with Sam’s reaction to the test, and more to do with Bruce’s own involvement in it.

Still not helpful, though.

The one behaving least like there was a metaphorical elephant in the room was Helen. She seemed to have recovered almost entirely from (or else was extremely good at covering up) the shock she had demonstrated following Sam’s initial departure, and launched almost immediately into guiding Sam into a suitable position so she could scan his foot (and the fact that Tony was only noticing now that Sam was still half shoeless was appalling, and Tony really ought to be ashamed of himself and his powers of observation), talking him through the process with the same calm tone she always used.

“So far everything looks stable.” Smiling reassuringly at Sam, she gestured for Eun-Ji to bring over the discarded footwear and remove the scanner, setting the screen with the readings down on the table they had seated themselves next to and swatting away Tony’s proffered blueberries all in one smooth motion. “No food in the lab, Stark.” She looked to Sam again. “The data falls in line with the successful tests we ran on the removed tissue so, barring unforeseen circumstances, I think things should progress smoothly from here. We’ll let you know straight away if that changes.”

Tony took over her seat as soon as she walked away (her staff following her lead and packing up the equipment they’d need over the course of the next few days), twitching the hand he rested on the table in the general direction of the others. “You’re handling this pretty well.”

“I don’t blame them for being put out. And besides,” Sam huffed out a self-derisive laugh, “I’m pretty used to being the Freak in the room. At least this time I can be pretty sure it’s just a short term thing.” In contrast to the light-hearted tone of his words, though, Sam continued (if Tony looked closely) to give off a barely-detectable aura of being somewhere between off-balance and uneasy, keeping his movements and expressions marginally more gentle and unassuming than was normal (even for him), his eyes still holding a hint of shame and sadness which definitely hadn’t been there earlier in the day.

For a moment, Tony wasn’t sure whether he should be jealous or grateful for the fact that most of the people he’d told about his own fears or attacks largely just seemed to think he was over-reacting. On the one hand, the fact that no-one else seemed willing to take the alien threat seriously was an endless source of frustration in his attempted preparations. On the other, at least he never needed to put up with this grating ‘walking on eggshells’ rigmarole. Eyerolls and dismissals he could deal with. He'd had his entire childhood to grow used to them. This was just uncomfortable for everyone involved.

Hopefully, he reasoned as Helen gave the signal that they were all packed, marking the start of the move down to the parking lot, the evening’s meal would sort that out, though, because otherwise the next few days would not be fun for any of the data-collecting crew.

Chapter End Notes

Still not 100% sure about how this chapter ends, tbh, but my brain is rebelling against the idea of any more fiddling, so I shall leave it as is for now. Now, before I go, huge
thanks again to everyone still responding to this fic- especially the comment-leavers. You guys really are the absolute BEST. I wish you all the joy of a thousand unicorns in this new year!!!

(Now what are you waiting for? Go and watch Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency!)
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Forrest Gump and Dumbo have more in common than you'd think.

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Sorry for the delay- meant to get this up last week, but work preparations got in the way, I'm afraid. And then I had another of my POV dilemmas (I considered Tony, Bruce, Pepper, Sam and even Helen for this one, but in the end Tony (who was my initial choice anyway) came out the victor, purely because my brain decided that playing a game of 'name two movies which are similar' sounded like something Tony would excel in.

Speaking of said game:
- The foreign-sounding films at the beginning of this chapter are all Korean. I haven't seen any of them, but I tried to research ones which had similar plots/themes. All of them have really good reviews, if you want to check any of them out for yourself.
- The Forrest Gump/Dumbo pairing came from my mother (who was very confused by my request of "two films which aren't at all similar but have bizarre connections... like, imagine if 'Pride and Prejudice' could be legitimately compared to 'Tremors,' or if 'The Blob' took place in the same universe as 'Downton Abbey.'"). The reasons for the pairing come from our ensuing conversation.

Also, Tae says 'Molla' later in the chapter. As far as I can tell, this is like a really informal way of saying 'I don't know' in Korean (kind of like 'no clue' in English). If anyone knows any better, please feel free to correct me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ajeossi and Taken.”

“Eeh... Im-geum-nim-eui sa-geon-soo-cheob and Joseon Myungtamjung : Gakshituku Ggotui Biil?!”

“Armageddon and Deep Impact?”

“Forrest Gump and Dumbo.”

“Friends with- wait, what?” Pepper paused, gazing quizzically at Tony, who simply smirked and leant forward to spin the Lazy Susan so that the Xiaolongbao was within snagging distance.

“Isn’t-” Sun-Hi blinked over at him, the prawn she had been in the process of picking up laying forgotten on her plate. “Isn’t Forrest Gump the movie with the running man who gave chocolate to people he didn’t know?”
“And whitewashed half of American history in the process? Yup.”

“And Dumbo is-”

“The Disney movie about a flying Elephant, yes.” Grinning over her bemused expression, Tony set a couple of the Xiaolonbao down in his vinegar to soak for a moment, deftly settling a few pieces of shredded ginger atop each one.

Bruce stared at him from Pepper’s other side, hand withdrawing from its previous quest to reach his water. “You do realise those two movies are nothing alike, right?”

“Well if they weren’t alike, there wouldn’t be any point in me pairing them up for this game now, would there, Brucie Bear?”

“You can’t be-”

“Serious? Oh, but indeed I am, my squishy little chickadee. And, to be quite honest, I am, frankly speaking, appalled and insulted that you would imply otherwise.” Lowering the affronted hand he had slung across his chest, Tony shifted one of his Xiaolongbao into his spoon, piercing the side and popping it into his mouth, then promptly repeated the process with the second, savouring the sweet slide of the soup down his throat.

Bruce levelled what was probably meant to be an unimpressed gaze his way, but the effect was somewhat ruined by the amused glimmer in his eyes and the smile fighting to break free at the corners of his mouth. “I think we’re all going to need you to explain this one, Tony.”

“Now that’s hardly fair- you didn’t contest any of these guys’ choices!” He gestured widely towards the Koreans at the table (excluding Tae, who had proven himself quite the American Movie buff, and hadn’t offered up a single foreign option in the entirety of the last three rounds), and let a healthy dose of blatantly fake indignation bleed into his voice. “They could be comparing Sharknado to Romeo and Juliet, for all you know, and you’re gonna single me out?!”

Bruce merely shrugged in response. “They have integrity.”

“As do I, you traitor.”

“Go on, then. Prove it.”

“Oh, you’re on, Lucie-Brucie.”

Pepper quirked an eyebrow across the table at Helen. “Oh, this should be good.”

“First, of course,” Tony- never one to shirk from a worthy challenge- began, one finger jabbing upwards to highlight his words, “there’s the all too obvious parallel between Forrest and Dumbo. Both teased and ridiculed as children because of their disabilities. Both thrust into the spotlight, using those same disabilities to turn things around and twist those traumatic childhoods into epic journeys of self-growth and enormous sporting success-”

“Pretty sure thousands of movies include stories about abused kids, Tony.”

“Now I’m going to have to ask that you don’t interrupt me after every point, Bruce. Do that and you’ll lose the full effect of my genius reasoning skills.” Waiting regally while Bruce zipped up his mouth, Tony only broke character when he accidentally caught Sam’s eye, shooting the other man a cheerful wink before continuing. “Then there are the other people- or animals- in their lives, starting with the mothers. Both of whom are so protective of their sons that they end up taking
extreme measures and suffering horribly as a result. I mean, prostitution, animal abuse and jail
time? Not exactly what you’d think of as one hundred percent wholesome family entertainment,
am I right?

"And then there’s the people who arguably have the most impact on either character- and I’m
speaking of Jenny and the illustrious Timothy Q. Mouse here, of course- who both end up, albeit
with the best of intentions, falling temporarily into the world of drugs. And that’s not even
mentioning the happy-go-lucky token Black Friend stereotypes in both movies, whose only real
purpose in the script is to provide the ‘Hero’ character with the key to their success. It all adds up,
Brucie, if you just have the mental fortitude to look beyond the differences in directorial style.

“Plus,” he added, almost as an afterthought, when Pepper laughed, “there’s the fact that both
characters end up reuniting with the person they love most towards the end of the movie. A reward
for all their hard work.” Grinning at Bruce, he took a small bow in his seat. “That enough for you,
oh ye of little faith?”

“You forgot the feather.”

Everyone glanced over at Sam in surprise, Tony beaming as he took in the smile (the first fully
genuine one of the evening!) tugging hesitantly across the other man’s features. He’d been keeping
a subtle eye on the younger man throughout the night, drawing attention away when Sam looked
like he was beginning to get overwhelmed, or so that no-one else would see the slight stiffening of
Sam’s spine whenever anyone walked too close behind him, and this was easily the most natural
the Hunter had looked throughout the entire meal (there’d been a bit of an iffy moment when Tony
had thought Bruce had noticed when an accidental brush of the doctor’s fingers- still cold from
where they’d been gripped around his ice water- had frozen Sam solid for a good three and a half
seconds, but a quick round of ‘who wants to order more food?’- coupled with Sam’s penchant for
covering up such slips- smoothed that right out). “A tag team moment. I like it. Go ahead and wow
us with your powers of observation, partner.”

“Well there are feathers used as symbolism in both movies, right? The black one in Dumbo, and
the white one in Forrest Gump? They have different colours, but they both essentially symbolise
the same things.”

"...Freedom and new beginnings for our intrepid heroes! See, Mountain Man, I knew there was a
reason I wanted you on my team!”

“We weren’t on teams until just now, Stark,” Helen pointed out dryly.

“Ah, maybe not officially, but in our heart of hearts, Sam and I have always been connected. With
Pepper as our radiant Goddess, of course,” he acknowledged, raising a glass towards the woman in
question.

“Actually,” Pepper denied, pushing it back down to the table again with a teasing smirk, “if we’re
going with teams, I think I’d much rather be paired up with Eun-Ji. She’s easily the most put-
together of the lot of you.”

“Abandoned by my own gleaming red goddess! Never before and never again has treachery been
such a bitter pill to swallow.” Mock-glaring over at where Eun-Ji sat ensconced between Helen and
Sun-Hi, a faint blush staining her cheeks (and, if Tony was reading that particular blush right, the
surface-level crush he was fairly certain Eun-Ji had on Sam had blinded him to the entirety of the
situation there), Tony jabbed his chopsticks in the younger woman’s direction. “What do you have
to say for yourself, Siren?”
The blush faded as quickly as it had blossomed, replaced by a confused blink. “Siren?”

Before Tony could explain, however, a loud beeping echoed across the table from the bag tucked between Helen and Sam’s feet, drawing everyone’s attention and prompting Helen to lean down and reset the timer within. “Hour’s up,” the doctor announced smartly, removing the scanner and setting it on the table, Eun-Ji scrambling to make sure no plates got knocked off in the process. “Sock off, Sam.”

Sam, who had already started to do just that, gazed around at the flummoxed expressions the people at the next table over (along with a couple of the waitstaff) were sending his way for the second time since they’d arrived, before covering up his embarrassment with a small smile towards Eun-Ji. “I don’t know what Sirens are called in Korean,” he admitted, laying his sock across his knee while Helen once more attached the scanner’s Electrodes to his foot, “but they’re mythical creatures, usually pictured as being similar to mermaids. Legends say their songs can enchant people into doing whatever they want, so there are loads of stories of them causing sailors to crash or to jump overboard. They’re actually closer to a mix between shapeshifters and wraiths, though, in that they can change their appearance, but their true form can still be seen in mirrors. Oh, and real Sirens do their enchanting by tricking their targets into somehow ingesting their saliva instead of singing, usually either by kissing or by slipping some into a drink. It’s… actually kind of disgusting. There’s this nozzle thing in the backs of their mouths,” he explained, tapping a finger against the base of his jaw, “and they excrete the saliva from there, kind of like a spray bottle or a really tiny hose.”

This time it was Tony’s turn to be shocked near motionless. Or maybe he was just plain grossed out. “Are you saying some Siren tricked you into drinking its spit?”

“Oh… not exactly. It tricked Dean. I got the more… direct version.”

Wait, that was- “It kissed you?” Seriously- it was beginning to feel like every single time Tony learnt about one of Sam’s Hunts it involved some kind of violation. The thought of sending him back to it all was becoming less appealing by the day.

And, to be honest, it hadn’t been even remotely appealing in the first place.

“No. He’d already enchanted Dean by that point, so there was no need. Just got Dean to keep me still while he held my mouth open and just squirted it right in.” Disgust tugged at the corners of Sam’s mouth. “Faster acting that way.”

All kinds of disturbing that way, too. Ugh.

As Tony imagined was often the case with anyone who happened to be around when Sam brought up such stories from his past, the table fell silent for a few seconds (though not with the same type of awkwardness which had taken so long to disperse earlier on, thank god)- those in the know processing yet another casually-stated horrifying insight, those not in the know trying to work out whether Sam was joking, serious and/or just a little bit crazy. Or maybe a mixture. Pepper took the opportunity to tap on Tony’s arm, drawing his attention to her long enough for him to take in the disapproval, worry, and a silent question dancing in her eyes. He shook his head in response, reaching down to squeeze her hand, thankful when she accepted his answer and looked away again without a fuss. They could talk about this later if necessary. He had far too many thoughts on the subject for them to go into in any real detail in public, and he needed time to work out which of them Sam would probably be okay with him sharing anyway.

“I… don’t understand anything you’re talking about,” Sun-Hi put in a moment later, hand raised to shoulder-height in a strangely adorable motion.
“That’s… probably for the best, to be honest,” Sam told her, looking down to watch as Helen worked her magic with the scanner. “Just be glad you don’t seem to have them over here.”

Sun-Hi nodded slowly in reply, before sharing a confused glance with Tae, who simply gave her a shrug and a muttered “Molla” of his own in turn, prompting a quiet chuckle from Helen as she removed the electrodes, straightening in her seat as she re-packed the equipment.

“I think it’s probably Avengers-related,” she told her team (a misunderstanding no-one in the know seemed to see any real inclination in correcting just now) before gesturing for Sam to cover his foot back up. “Still stable.”

The relief was almost palpable, an almost synchronised exhale running around the table. Three scans safely done and dusted. Thirty-eight more to go.

Tony really didn’t envy how little sleep Sam and the Korea Crew were likely to get over the next couple of days.

“So…” Tapping a finger against the table-top, he glanced around the group. “Does this mean my team won?”

(Needless to say, the matching eye-rolls Pepper and Helen gave in response did absolutely nothing to dissuade him from getting permission from the staff to snag one of the decorative feathers from the display stand by the door when they eventually left and presenting it to Sam with a dramatic flourish. Spoils go to the victors and all that.)

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: my characters have a tendency to spring information about themselves on me when I least expect it. For those wondering: yes. Eun-Ji is Bi. Something I had absolutely zero knowledge of until Pepper made her blush like that. Gotta love writing, folks.

(Also, if you have never tried Xiaolongbao, you are Missing Out. A friend of mine took me to a restaurant in Nagoya over the holidays, and it is Just. So. Good. I *had* to include it after that.)

Anyway, hope you liked this chapter! If the next one's not up next weekend, it's because I've got a lot of marking to do this week. Fingers crossed I somehow develop some kick-butt time-management skills, but if not chapter fifty-two will be up in a fortnight.

Huuuuuuge thanks to everyone still reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. You guys truly are utterly amazing! ^_^
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Natasha offers some "sage" advice.
...Nobody's perfect.

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Apologies for the longer than usual wait- real life issues (work, writer's block and one day of illness) kind of got in the way. Luckily, this week I finally gave into the little voice which had been telling me what I'd written so far as a start to the chapter wasn't working properly, and this is the result of that. I really hope you like it!

It was a little past ten when Natasha, fresh from meeting with Hill, made her way up the tower’s numerous steps and back to the Avengers’ main floor, intent on going over all of the details of her newly-received mission statement before the night was through. Truth be told, her assignment couldn’t have come at a better time. With an entire month having passed now since their last Hydra raid, she (and many of the others) had found herself going increasingly stir crazy- spending so long in the same place like this set her on edge, and even her own self-appointed goal of finding out as much as she possibly could about Castiel, Sam and Dean had lost most of its initial allure somewhere down the line, removing most of the distractions she had been giving herself in the process.

While knowledge was always good, spying just wasn’t quite as satisfying when you knew there was no takedown at the end of it all.

Adjusting her grip on the folder she was holding, the redhead paused for a moment by the door, listening out for any of the tell-tale sounds which would inform her someone was either following her or was on the other side- an old habit she saw no logical reason in trying to break. It wasn’t until she was satisfied that she allowed herself to step through, resting the door’s gentle weight against her shoulder as she guided it silently closed.

All plans for a prompt start on her pre-op work went directly out the window, however, when she caught sight of Bruce.

The scientist was sitting in his usual spot in the centre of the nearest couch (being the only one of them who had absolutely no qualms with having his back exposed to both of the entrances), his head angled just enough that she knew his gaze was probably focused not on whatever the set of his shoulders told her he had gripped between his hands, but instead on the faint glare of city lights on the window. The TV was off, the room deadly silent as she leaned against the doorway, eyes fixed firmly on his curls, debating whether it would be better to pass by and leave him to his ruminations, or whether his being out here was an indication he would prefer for some company and an unjudgmental ear.
A moment of tension in his shoulders and a five degree alteration to the angle of the scientist’s head, though, made most of the decision for her in the end, her mind made up before he’d even finished twisting in his seat—just enough for his profile to come into her line of sight.

“You waiting for an invitation? Or just enjoying the view?”

Cocking an eyebrow, Natasha sent Bruce a teasing smile as she moved smoothly forward. “Can’t a girl do both?” Bypassing his couch in favour of the next one along, she took a seat of her own, placing the folder beside her and crossing her legs in her usual carefully careless fashion. “Odd time for you to be here.”

Bruce hummed as he took a sip of his tea, sending a glance towards the clock when he was done. “Didn’t feel like going back to the lab.”

“Something happen at the restaurant?”

“How did you-?”

Please. “You’re wearing your third favourite casual shirt, and you smell like sesame oil, ginger and garlic. It really wasn’t hard.”

Bruce shot her that odd little smile he got sometimes— the one she’d first seen hints of way back in a ramshackle hut in the slums of Kolkata. Like there was something about her that amused him in some way. “You know all of our favourite clothes, do you?”

“I wouldn’t be much of a spy if I didn’t.” Smirking shamelessly, Natasha quickly decided that ignoring the deflection was the best way to go here. “So you gonna answer the question, or should I just go ahead and leave you here to stew alone?”

A huff of subdued laughter from his nose was the instant reply, and Bruce turned his gaze back to whatever vision he’d been imagining in the darkness beyond the windows. “No, nothing happened at the restaurant. The restaurant was good.”

Natasha watched as the smile faded away, a vague hint of a watered-down version of the guilt and self-recrimination the doctor still donned post-Hulk (until he was fully reassured that no accidents or fatal maulings had occurred, anyway) taking its place. “After the restaurant, then?”

“…Before, actually.”

“And you’re only just getting to the moping now? Thought you brainy types liked to move a bit faster than that.”

Bruce didn’t look at her, but a tiny flicker of that amusement filtered back into his expression. “Only for the boring, easy stuff,” he acknowledged, his tone deadpan. “The really good stuff’s worth taking your time over.”

Then that expression was back again, and Natasha… really wasn’t good at this stuff. Not in real life, at least. Emotions were messy, complicated things, and while she was an expert at manipulating them to get her Marks to do what she wanted, she had been making a concerted effort of late to avoid such techniques (unless necessary, of course) with people she had somehow come to genuinely care about on a more personal level. Namely, the Barton family and the Avengers.

A Black Widow with more than one friend. A Black Widow not only developing principles, but also feeling actual worry over a teammate’s wellbeing. A Black Widow who was actually learning what it was like to feel like a real person, instead of just a tool.
If her old instructors could see her now.

They’d probably see her as one of their greatest failures.

A sensation which felt remarkably similar to the vicious pride she often felt when a genuinely challenging fight ended with her victorious thrummed through her briefly at the thought, and Natasha, too, shifted in her seat, focusing her attention on Bruce’s reflection instead of on the man himself. It was harder to read the nuances of his expressions this way (at this distance from the window, anyway), but it did offer him a small illusion of privacy and solidarity- and, hopefully, through that, comfort.

She met his reflection’s eyes. “You wanna tell me about it?”

Several long seconds passed in silence- the type of silence which made most regular people uncomfortable in its obviousness- before Bruce finally sighed. “Have you ever met someone,” he asked the window, “who just… makes you re-evaluate all these things you thought you knew about yourself? Without even meaning to?”

Natasha stared momentarily at the him in the window, the surprised raising of her eyebrows actually one hundred percent unintentional for once. She quickly caught herself, though, allowing an amused smirk to stretch across her features instead. “You could say that.” As one of the resident former assassins on a team which included Captain America, it would’ve been hard for things to be any different (although, in all honesty, and despite the comparative lack of time spent in each other’s presence, she wasn’t certain it wasn’t Bruce himself who hadn’t had the most influence on that front- not that she planned on sharing that little titbit with anyone anytime soon. Or ever.)

Sometimes she wondered whether that specific phenomenon hadn’t been one of the deciding reasons for Fury to add her to the team’s roster (outside of just needing someone to keep Stark in check until the dynamics settled, that is) in the first place.

Self-reflection and all that jazz.

It didn’t take a genius to work out who Bruce was referring to, and she let out an understanding hum. “Something happened with Sam, then?”

A self-reproachful twist of the lips was the scientist’s only reply at first, and he took another sip of tea before granting her any more to work with. “We figured out his Cure.”

Not new information. “I heard.”

“…We started his treatment today.”

Newer information. “And then?” It definitely hadn’t gone horrendously wrong- there was no way she wouldn’t have known about it already if that were the case.

And it was already bad enough that she hadn’t known even this much.

Again, Bruce didn’t answer right away, taking yet another sip of tea as he thought, before finally answering with a question of his own. “How much do you know? About what- About Sam’s past?”

Natasha took a moment of her own at that, eying Bruce’s reflection carefully as she considered how much she should reveal she knew (or, rather frustratingly, didn’t know, even after all this time). Considering the fact that Bruce quite possibly knew more than she did, however, she reasoned that perhaps a certain level of transparency was the best route to take here.
Leaning back ever so slightly, she allowed herself to relax a little. “I know where he learnt to understand High Enochian,” she stated matter-of-factly (though the full details of how exactly that situation had come about were still a mystery to her, even as she also suspected the same couldn’t be said of Thor). “I know some of how that affected him when he came back. I know-” (or, at least, she had made an educated guess) “-why that experience meant that Dean’s role in his recent possession impacted him as much as it did. I know he’s highly educated-” (because otherwise the hours he’d spent practically drooling over old books- in various languages- in a library on one of the days she’d decided to tail him was a ridiculously well-acted farce). “And I know that Thor seems to believe that he’s far more capable and put-together than Dean seems willing to acknowledge. I know-”

“I get the picture.”

Natasha simply quirked an eyebrow. “And the point of this little sharing session was-?”

Sighing as he aborted what would have been yet another sip, Bruce placed his cup down on the table, his hands coming back to wring together.

“See, I knew all that. And I knew how he reacted when we first told him how the Cure would work. And I just-”

Ah. “Forgot?”

“Yes. No. I-” Bruce’s hands clenched infinitesimally. “I just ignored it. I got so caught up in the science of it all that I didn’t even-”

Cutting himself off with a clench of his jaw, Bruce fell silent again, leaving Natasha to fill in the gaps for herself. She allowed the silence, one corner of her brain running through a mental list of which weapons would likely be the best for her to pack, until a defeated sigh told her that Bruce was ready to talk again.

“The thing is,” the scientist admitted, “Tony’s been so great with helping Sam through it all-”

“He has?” Well that was… surprising. Natasha had known that Tony had latched onto Sam, of course, but she’d figured it was more of a short-term thing- one that would blow over once the part of the billionaire which so enjoyed flitting between different people who would pander to his ego (a role which used to be fulfilled by his numerous sexual partners, and which only really shifted after he and Potts became an official couple) was satisfied. Tony actually offering up emotional support for this long a continued time period fell outside of the realms of what she had seen from him before.

Apparently she had underestimated just how much of his own overblown ‘trauma’ Tony would project onto this latest eventual victim of his narcissistic side.

Sloppy work, Natasha.

“Yeah,” Bruce continued, oblivious to the self-reproach he had set loose in his companion. “And the thing is… it’s kind of making me wonder whether I haven’t been doing the same thing to Tony. I mean-” he glanced over at her, the guilt in his eyes warring with an obvious hope for reassurance that he was wrong- “what if he’s going through something similar, and I’ve just been too focused on my own projects to care enough to see it?”

“He isn’t.” Was Natasha’s firm response.

“But the Worm-”
“The Wormhole is irrelevant.” Unsurprised by Bruce’s sudden blink at the declaration, Natasha leaned forward slightly, drawing on that blend of blunt and soothing she had mastered so many years ago. “Look, I’ve been studying men like Tony my entire life. My training depended on me being able to read them with practically a single glance. It’s not pretty,” she acknowledged in answer to the Look Bruce sent her, “but it’s true. And I am damn good at what I do. I’ve had to be. And all of the time I’ve spent around Tony in the interim has only served to prove the conclusions I reached about him the very first time we met.

“Tony’s strong,” she explained at Bruce’s quizzical expression. “He spent three months in Afghanistan, and he came out of it Iron Man. Someone like that needs a lot longer than just a minute or two in a Wormhole to break him. Compare that to what Sam’s been through and you’ve got no contest.”

“No, of course they’re not on the same level, but why would he bring up the Wormhole so often if it wasn’t important?”

“He likes the attention,” Natasha explained simply, only to uncross her legs and lean forwards a little when Bruce still looked unsure over that. “Look, next time he brings up the Wormhole, just listen to him. Ignore the words and listen. It’s not that he’s scared by whatever he says he saw in it, even if that is what he tells himself. His tone is all off,” she shrugged. “He’s fascinated by it. It’s a challenge to him, just like Sam’s Cure was to you. That’s all. Tony’s entire career- his entire life has been about conquering challenges, and about showing off as he does it, and this is no different.”

Leaning back again, Natasha shot Bruce a confident, reassuring smile. “If I thought there was anything to be concerned about- if Rhodes thought there was anything to be concerned about- I promise you one of us would have brought it up. Trust me, there’s nothing there you need to worry yourself about. It’s just Tony being Tony.”

And besides all that, if Tony legitimately thought the world was in imminent danger, then she liked to think he’d be able to put aside his need to be the one in the spotlight for long enough to do more than just ramble at the Avengers occasionally about theoreticals. His decision to stop aside, there was no way a life-long weapons manufacturer didn’t revert back to making weapons if the threat was that severe.

Silence fell again, and Natasha made sure to keep a calm gaze fixed on Bruce’s as the scientist digested what she had said, turning it around and analysing it in that big brain of his to see whether or not it measured up to the (admittedly greater) length of time he himself had spent in Tony’s presence.

Eventually, though (as expected), he gave her a slow nod in return, a little of that lightness he’d gradually been letting the team see returning to his features. A small hum of pleasure ran through her at the sight.

Further proof that she was capable of helping people- and with more than just her fists.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” Feeling strangely lighter somehow, Natasha rose to her feet and picked up her folder all in one smooth motion, tucking it into the crook of her arm. The movement caught Bruce’s eye, and he nodded, confused, towards it.

“Anything important?”
“Solo mission from Hill. I’ll be out of town for a week or two starting tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Bruce didn’t seem to know how to react to that. He never did when she or Clint got a mission of their own. “Well, good luck, I suppose. Be careful.”

Despite herself, Natasha found herself smiling slightly at the sincere concern she could hear in his voice. “I always am. You boys try not to kill each other while I’m away, now.”

“No promises.”

“There never are.”

Back in her room, Natasha spread the contents of the folder across the top of her bed, making sure every page was visible before taking a single step back.

Shashamane, huh? It had been a while since she’d last been in Ethiopia.

This could be interesting.

Chapter End Notes

I don't have any real plans to go into details on what Natasha does during her mission, so sorry to anyone hoping for that. If something pops up, it pops up, but yeah. It's doubtful.

As always, Mega, Mega thanks to everyone responding to this story- if my calculations are correct you've literally granted me an extra 20 kudos since I posted the last chapter, and there's no way of possibly measuring the joy which comes whenever I read your comments. You guys are the absolute best. Thank you so much for all of your support! ^_^
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Tony’s not particularly fond of early mornings. That doesn’t mean he’s not capable of working through them.

Chapter Notes

Did you know that, in 2016, Tajikistan banned giving babies Russian-style names? It’s not relevant to this chapter- I just thought it was interesting. They also have both a President *and* a Prime Minister. Also, they are ten hours ahead of New York- hence the time in this chapter. This is the first time I’ve written a politician. Hopefully I’ve done it at least relatively believably, but if I’ve made some sort of major snafu please feel free to let me know, and I shall tweak it if necessary. ^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the dipping mattress and the shifting covers which woke Tony up on Thursday, rather than the starting notes of classical music filtering through the air (or the dulcet tones of JARVIS’ greeting, which sounded out mere seconds later). Groaning out his displeasure at this unwelcome turn of events, Tony flung out one sleepy arm, attempting (wholly ineffectually) to loop it firmly enough around Pepper’s waist so that he’d be able to pull her back down and into a more appropriately comfortable position for the hour.

He was rewarded for his efforts by a soft hand swatting lightly at the arm in question.

“Tony, I’ve got a lot of work to get done today.”

Tony cracked one eye open. “…Has anyone ever told you you are inhumanly good at waking up at, frankly speaking, obscenely early hours of the morning?”

“You. Repeatedly. Every time I have to do it, in fact.” Twisting in place, Pepper gifted him with a gentle poke to his upper arm before abandoning him in favour of the standing world. “And I’m not the only one who’s supposed to be getting up. Didn’t you say you had an important call at six?”

“Ugh. Don’t remind me. That’s not your job anymore.”

“No,” JARVIS put in as Pepper walked away and started scanning everything in her closet. “But it is mine. You have fifty-seven minutes to complete your preparations, Sir.”

“Oh, fine. Have it your way, you vile dictator.”

“You flatter me, Sir. I would have termed myself a benevolent dictator at the very best.”

Pulling a face at the nearest camera, Tony pushed himself out of the bed and made a beeline
straight for the bathroom, pausing only once he’d reached the door to shoot a glance in Pepper’s
direction. “Do you need-”

“No, you go ahead.”

A quick shower (and an even quicker breakfast) later had Tony feeling much closer to human, and
he paused behind the couch on his way out, waiting until Pepper tilted her head back so he could
press his forehead briefly to hers and inhale the subtle scent of lilac and lavender from her still
damp hair.

“What dinner tonight?”

Pepper closed her eyes, one hand leaving the reports she had in her lap to reach up and stroke
momentarily down his cheek. “Not sure. It depends on how far into overtime my conference call
goes, and how much paperwork I need to get through afterwards. I’ll let you know, but it’s
probably best if you just order without me.”

“You got it.” Straightening up, Tony met Pepper’s eyes as she opened them again, grinning widely
as he backed up towards the elevator. “Tell Happy I hope he likes his presents.” Then, deciding he
could get away with pretending he couldn’t see the suspicious narrowing of Pepper’s eyes, he let
the doors close between them.

Better than have to explain precisely why he’d arranged to have fifty-seven zoo animal
figurines dressed up in boxing gloves and specially-tailored gothic-themed versions of Downton
Abbey costumes and delivered directly to Happy at random points throughout the day.

A few minutes later, he walked onto the eighteenth floor, where most of the former SHIELD
agents worked their magic, and headed (after a quick detour to the break room) for the second
conference room. Hill was already inside, arms folded, propped back against the far side of a table
littered with various folders and documents. She glanced over her shoulder when he came in,
though, throwing a nod and a firm “Boss” his way before turning her attention back to the
blueprints shining on one of the screens on the opposite wall.

“No your boss,” came the automatic response, and Tony ignored the slightly smug quirk to Hill’s
lips as he, too, focused his attention on the screen. “JARVIS, expand and show the surrounding
area.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The images shifted fluidly, blueprints over-laying satellite images of the two small towns closest to
the HYDRA base in Tajikistan. “Pretty ballsy of them to set up shop so close to a highway, don’t
you think?”

Hill just shrugged. “HYDRA’s a pretty ballsy organisation. Smart, though. The highway gives
them easy access and a means of escape should they need it. The towns mean they don’t have to go
too far for supplies. And the base and uniforms were all designed to make it look like a small
governmental research facility. Nothing there to stand out to the locals as anything suspicious.”

Tony knew all of this, of course, and he knew that Hill knew he knew it, too. But he’d learnt soon
after hiring her that the former agent liked to run through the facts out loud before the important
stages of each mission (a side-effect of having to corral technicians who did things like play Galaga
in the middle of a genuine alien invasion, he suspected), so he was far too used to the procedure by
now to even bother to point that fact out.
Instead, he merely narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re another one who’s far too awake for this time of day. Stop it. It’s unnatural.” Then, after she had accepted the proffered cup of break-room coffee, he took a seat at the table, setting his own cup down next to the closest folder. “How long before the call, J?”

“Twenty-four minutes, Sir.”

“Perfect. Alright then, my fellow maestros, let’s make extra double certain we’ve got all our pretty little ducks in a row, then, shall we?”

The next twenty-four minutes were spent with the three of them carefully checking through every single aspect of the information- Maria by going through the physical files and carefully sorting them into separate piles (ready to be copied and distributed to all relevant parties once the plans received Tajikistan’s approval), and Tony (with JARVIS’ input) speed-reading all of the digital copies of said files, checking for even the smallest deviation from the plans (and back-up plans) he and Maria had been perfecting via email ever since JARVIS had first contacted the Prime Minister’s office about setting up this call five days ago. Fortunately, however, no such deviations were found, and as Tony moved around the table to settle into the seat at the head, Maria choosing a position standing just behind him and to his right (Tony couldn’t help but wonder absently whether that was the shoulder typically used for angels or for devils- though to be honest Hill could probably fit either role without too much trouble if she put her mind to it), both of them were about as satisfied as they could be that they had covered all possible bases.

At a gesture from Tony, the right-hand screen flicked on, the SI logo replaced a few seconds later by a well decorated office, where a slightly rotund older man was seated at an ornate wooden desk. A reedy-looking younger man Tony recognised from various clips he’d watched over the past few days stood by his side- Akbarov, the PM’s primary translator for the past five years. “Prime Minister Isoev,” Tony greeted smoothly, “thank you for agreeing to speak with us. This is Maria Hill, the Avengers’ usual point of contact with foreign governments.” Hill nodded once in greeting, then went back to almost blending into the background, letting Tony take the reins.

After a couple of seconds for Akbarov to do his work, Isoev inclined his head. “You offered some compelling evidence as to HYDRA’s involvement here, Mr. Stark,” the words flitting across the bottom of the screen read as he spoke. “The President and I felt it would have been remiss of us to ignore it.”

Tony raised a hand as Akbarov began to tell them the same thing. “You don’t need to worry- I’ve got my AI running an automatic translation on our end.” Tajiki, unfortunately, was not a language either he or Maria spoke. Luckily, JARVIS was smarter than the two of them combined a thousand times over- a fact Tony was endlessly grateful for.

Isoev, upon hearing the translation, simply nodded in that painstakingly diplomatic way employed by politicians the world over. “Then this conversation should go much more smoothly. Now let us dispense with the pleasantries, Mr. Stark- explain to me why it is so necessary for your group of ex-SHIELD lackeys to be the ones to deal with this threat, instead of our own security forces.”

Tony shook his head. “You misunderstand, Prime Minister. The Avengers aren’t here to override your authority- we know your people are capable. What we’re suggesting is simply that we approach this with a group effort, to minimise the risks involved. HYDRA has been making use of an increasing number of well-hidden military-grade defences since their forced separation from SHIELD, and we’re beginning to see enhanced recruits at some of their bases, too.” All the more reason to make sure they got that sceptre off-world as soon as humanly possible- there weren’t
signs of its influence in any of the (thankfully low-level) enhanced they’d taken down so far, but if HYDRA ever managed to tap into that kind of power…

“Our team,” he continued, with not even a pause to show the damage calculations he was running mentally, “is well equipped to handle any unpleasant surprises which will likely be present. Let us go in first- we can clear the main defences, take out any major or unexpected threats, and then your own people can come in in a second wave and with much less potential danger to evade. Every action we take while there will, I assure you, follow all protocol for international cooperation down to the letter.”

Isoev merely gave a non-committal hum. “And what of the two neighbouring towns? I have seen the impact members of your ‘well-equipped team’ have had on civilian areas even within America itself, Mr. Stark, and no-one in our government is willing to simply roll over and let our people become just another statistic for those members- no matter how ‘well-qualified’ or ‘necessary’ they claim to be.”

“I understand completely your unwillingness to Have Natasha Romanov on Tajikistan soil, Prime Minister,” Tony acknowledged, making a careful mental note of how both Isoev’s and Akbarov’s lips curled slightly at the mention of Natasha’s name. “And, after taking your country’s viewpoint into consideration, we have ensured that the Black Widow will not be involved in this particular mission. In fact, she left America yesterday to follow up on some unrelated matters. We have proof of her departure,” he explained, raising his voice just marginally when it looked like Isoev was going to interrupt the translation, “which we can send to you if you or anyone else in your government don’t want to just take my word for it.”

“That… would be acceptable,” Isoev allowed after a few moments of deliberation.

“Thank you. The email should arrive within the first five minutes after we end this call.”

“And your other precautions?”

Setting his StarkPad on top of the table in front of him, Tony swiped a finger across its screen and waited as JARVIS brought up a hologram of the area surrounding the base. “I’m planning, with your permission, to bring fifteen of the Iron Legion. They would remain within our transportation here, of course,” he explained, pointing to a now lit up area approximately a mile and a half from the base itself. “Then, should something go wrong, they will be able to reach either town within a minute at most and protect the civilians there.”

“And if this ‘Iron Legion’ of yours fails?”

“If the Iron Legion fails,” Tony acknowledged, the weight of the notion settling firmly on his shoulders (and, from the slight shift in the corner of his eye, also on Hill’s), “then I will personally accept full responsibility, and will do everything in my power to ensure the victims of that failure- or their families, if it comes to that- are fully compensated, their homes rebuilt or relocated, any injuries seen to and any permanent effects funded for the rest of their lives.”

Akbarov’s barely-there double blink- and, moments later, the minuscule raising of one of Isoev’s eyebrows- were the only indications either man gave that they were at all surprised by the offer, and Tony would almost have suspected that they had predicted it were it not for the way the Prime Minister settled slightly further back into his chair, studying him through the screen.

“That is a bold offer to make, Mr. Stark.”

“I’ve seen the destruction which can occur when I’m careless, Prime Minister,” Tony explained
simply. “And I’ve been reminded of it multiple times.” (Happy, lying pale and damaged in a hospital bed. DUM-E entrenched deep in the seabed. Pepper plummeting, her fingers barely a centimetre from his and yet so many miles apart. Civilians screaming in terror, crushed beneath debris from falling helicarriers because, especially after Killian, he hadn’t proven himself trustworthy enough to be depended upon in a crisis. Never again. Not if he could help it.) “I do not take the loss of innocent lives lightly, Prime Minister. The Avengers do not take loss of innocent lives lightly.”

A few more seconds passed in near total silence as Isoev studied both he and Hill once more. Finally, though, he gestured for them to continue.

“In that case, Mr. Stark, Miss Hill, I will hear your proposal.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey all! Huuuuuge thanks once again to everyone still responding to this story! You guys are absolutely AWESOME. ^_^

(This chapter was originally going to end a little later, but it would have felt too weird shifting into a lighter tone again. Then again, this chapter was also originally going to be a Sam POV (with different circumstances, of course), so I guess I'm just utterly terrible at getting my way here. Lol.)
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Tony has a lot going on in that head of his. And out of it.

Chapter Notes

Howdy! And apologies for the mega long wait!
A couple of things I discovered while writing this chapter:
1) I picked Tajikistan mostly at random, but while writing this (which takes place on the 19th of February, 2015), I actually found out that Tajikistan *actually* had a parliamentary election on the 1st of March that year. So yeah, that was purely coincidence, but I ended up including a line about it anyway.
2) According to the MCU wiki, Pepper's birthday is actually on the 12th of February. I'm not gonna go back and change anything around that, but I think we can safely assume (especially considering Pepper was so far away on that day) that her celebrations were just combined with the Valentines ones here.
3) Not a discovery, but being allergic to Christmas trees *is* actually a thing (in fact, one of my many sisters has that allergy). It just always made me laugh. *shrugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Isoev, as it turned out, was far easier to work with than any of them had predicted. He was stern, yes, and the sharp edge to the way he presented himself throughout their talk made it plain to see he was on the lookout for any signs of bullshit or built-in excuses, but there was a certain level of blunt pragmatism to his diplomacy (though whether it was a natural trait or a side effect of governing in a country still technically recovering from civil war was hard to tell) that Tony truly appreciated.

A result of this pragmatism was that the call ended up lasting just a little over an hour, instead of the several hours of heated to-and-fro Tony had experienced in similar(ish) situations in his past with SI. They began by going over all of the important information Maria’s team had uncovered about the HYDRA base (including, but not limited to, what kinds of research were probably being conducted there and the known- or otherwise likely- defence systems which would be in place), then segued into a more detailed description of the Avengers’ plan of attack and the roles which would be played by the unenhanced crew from both sides of their alliance, and finally moved onto the plans for the resolution and potential clean-up after all was said and done- all of which were accepted and approved of largely without contest, and with Maria marking down any alterations in the relevant files. By the end of it, only minimal changes had really needed to be made, and most of those were merely to give the Tajik forces a larger role in the operation (and, conversely, the ex-SHIELD agents a smaller one), which Tony could easily understand the reasoning behind. After all, even if you discounted the general attitudes of distrust Tajikistan’s government had towards SHIELD itself (and certain former agents in particular), there was no denying that being shown to have their own forces participate so heavily in striking back against such a well-known terrorist organisation would do a hell of a lot to aid the government’s public approval ratings, especially so
close to the parliamentary elections.

So yes, all in all a surprisingly pleasant conversation considering the circumstances.

With a final promise to have all the relevant minutes sent through at the same time as the proof of Natasha’s departure (so that Isoev could go over everything again with the Tajik tactical teams’ leaders), Tony waited patiently through the obligatory goodbyes and for Isoev to disconnect the call from his side before finally collapsing back with an exaggerated exhale, rolling his head to release some of the seriousness from his shoulders at the same time.

“Well, that went a lot better than it could have.”

Hill, who had already started on double checking her notes, paused in the process of shifting one of the files back to its previous pile to send one of her standard inscrutable expressions his way (Tony was half convinced, by this point, that that very expression had been half of SHIELD’s hiring criteria when signing on new recruits, what with the number of ex-agents he’d seen donning the exact same look).

“Did you really expect otherwise?”

“There was a not-insignificant chance that the entire thing would blow up in our faces, yes. Seventy-two percent that it would go worse than it did. Thirty-one that they’d refuse any ex-SHIELD personnel altogether. Seventeen that they’d choose to reject even the slightest bit of help from us. Call me crazy but, as a scientist, it’s my professional opinion that those weren’t exactly the best odds.”

Hill let out a light snort as she moved to continue with her work. “Please,” she said, flipping open another folder and jotting some more notes in a couple of the margins as she spoke. “I’ve seen you work. You love ridiculous odds like those.”

“For fun, yes.” (What? She had a point- you didn’t make ground-breaking inventions come to life by being scared of a few numbers. Even if he did always do as much as he could (despite what some people might think) to lessen such risks). “This is business. And business Tony likes his odds a little more firmly in his favour.” Tapping his fingers against the Starkpad which was still resting in front of him to prove his point, Tony watched as a flicker of amusement tugged minutely at one corner of the former agent’s mouth. Only to receive a deadpan stare when she caught him looking.

“Either you’re fishing for compliments or else you’re deliberately underestimating Iron Man’s political weight in these situations,” Hill joked (or, at least, he thought she was joking. It could be kind of hard to tell with her sometimes- too much time on her part around her good ol’ pirate leader). “If it’s the former, then dream on, flyboy. If it’s the latter, then perhaps I need to start looking into finding myself a more self-aware boss.”

“Oh, come on,” Tony needled, breaking out his signature rakish grin, “don’t I deserve a compliment here and there? I woke up at five for this, you know!”

“Sorry, boss,” Hill straightened up, a small stack of folders tucked into the crook of one elbow. “I’m afraid I don’t have any ‘congratulations on being a big boy’ stickers on me today. Maybe next time.” The tiny hint of gratitude in her tone belied her words, though, as did the small smile she sent his way a few seconds later. “You’re surprisingly good at this, you know? This side of things.”

The ‘I wouldn’t have guessed it when we first met’ went as unsaid as ever, and Tony (surprised as he was by the sudden about turn) was left with the unsettling sensation that this conversation had suddenly taken a far more serious, honest tone than he’d been aiming for. He resisted the urge to
shift slightly in his seat at the unexpected praise, though, instead cocking an unimpressed eyebrow.

“So not so much with the fighting side, then? Good to know. Maybe I should reign in how much time I spend watching everyone else’s asses on the battlefield.

“…Or, on second thought, maybe I need to up the amount of time I spend watching their asses. There are some very fine asses on this team.” (There were whole fan-sites dedicated to that entire topic, in fact. Something he’d discovered when the founder of one of said sites asked them all to sign a picture of said asses (all fully-clothed, thankfully- even Tony’s) at a fan meet-and-greet event.)

Hill merely rolled her eyes, not having any of it, and waited until she was half-way out the door to respond, tossing the reply over her shoulder. “You know what I mean.”

He did. But that didn’t mean he agreed even in the slightest. And he wasn’t exactly short on reasons for that either- the first, of course, being that he didn’t want a larger role in the running of the Avengers (and most definitely not a leading one). Not only was ‘leader’ a role he wasn’t particularly worthy of, considering his track record, but to be honest he already had more than enough on his plate when his work for SI and such was taken into consideration alongside everything he already did for the Avengers behind the scenes. Second, naturally, came the matter of public opinion. The decades-long propaganda around Captain America’s clean-cut image may not hold much weight with a lot of the governments outside the US, but it did help with the public in many countries. And that image did wonders to balance out the vehemently negative emotions Tony knew the citizens of some nations held against him- some due to lasting fury over the use of Stark weapons in the areas pre-Iron Man, and some because of anger that he’d taken those weapons away when the alternatives their governments received from other US contractors were often deemed sub-par protection in comparison (the general populace, after all, weren’t exactly first in line for the improved body armour and such SI now made in place of said weapons). All of which was further fuelled, in a way, by him being the natural choice to be the main media face for the Avengers, especially if ever things went wrong during a mission.

…Which led quite nicely to his third tip-of-the-iceberg reason, really- things going wrong. He knew from experience that he didn’t tend to have the most… rational of reactions when people got hurt because of something he had done (or failed to do, as the case may be). And while he hoped his experience with Killian and AIM had helped him to grow past that a little, that kind of temperament wasn’t the sort of thing which was ideal for the leader of a group who so constantly found themselves in high-risk situations. Especially with so many military and agent types around who had undoubtedly been better trained to deal with and compartmentalise the guilt he himself was always nearly overwhelmed by whenever things went bad.

So no. Despite Hill’s out-of-the-blue hints lately of some strange sense of belief in his abilities, like her earlier comment about his ‘political weight,’ Tony believed whole-heartedly that it was far better that Iron Man remained primarily as back-up, funding and technical support. In the face of what was undoubtedly coming, there was no other option, really.

All of that was a bit more sombre than he really liked being this early in the morning, however, so instead of allowing his thoughts to turn yet again to the inevitable invasion of the future, he instead forced his mind back to a more pressing (for now) theory. Slipping a comm unit out of his pocket and into his ear, he sat for a moment, thinking over the past few months.

“J? What’s the schedule like for the rest of this morning?”

“Miss Dardana-” (one of his several personal trainers, Luljeta Dardana was highly trained in various forms of martial arts, including Muay Thai and Sambo) “-will be arriving for your session
at eight a.m., Sir,” JARVIS told him through the comm- the norm for them on a non-private floor when it came to such topics. “Then there is a brief free period in case you wish to be present for Sam’s final scan at 9:17, before Miss Denton and Misters Flannery and Lee arrive for the consultation session at 9:50. Your selected members of the R&D team, however, will gather in the conference room ten minutes beforehand, so I strongly advise you to meet them there at approximately the same time.”

“Noted and… I’ll consider it. Hey, J?” Tony shifted forward again in his chair (the slight spin the motion caused cutting the doorway from the corner of his vision) and leant his elbows against the table, gesturing towards his Starkpad. "Email those files, then bring up a map of all the HYDRA raids we’ve been on since the Fall, would you? There’s something I want to check. With dates.”

When the hologram sprung up a second later, Tony wasted no time in flicking at one corner, rotating the whole thing in a steady circle as the niggling suspicion he’d been harbouring formed into a solid pit of certainty in his stomach. And, with that, annoyance wasn’t far behind.

“Damn it.”

He hated being played with.

“Damn what?” Came Hill’s voice from the doorway, followed almost instantly by the (now empty-handed) woman herself striding into his line of sight. Casting a quizzical look his way, she came to a halt alongside the table, crossing her arms as she, too, studied the map. “What’s this?”

“Distractions, that’s what.” And, considering who they were dealing with, he was an idiot not to have seen it earlier. “We’re gonna have to change tactics slightly. Keep things running mostly as usual, but I want you to tag a couple of your best to work on the down-low on different methods of locating bases in Europe- especially the Eastern countries. Russia not included.”

Eyes narrowing slightly, Hill widened her stance, concentrating even harder on the map. “What am I missing here?”

“The dates,” Tony explained, indicating each base in order of ‘visitation.’ “The team’s been tracking down each base by using the information stored in the ones before that, but look at the pattern- most continents we’ve hit a couple of bases in similar regions. Every time we go to Europe, though? Only one hit, before we get bounced off to some other part of the globe. My bet is that’s where they’re keeping the golden goose.”

It was a clever system, he had to give HYDRA that. They controlled what was stored at each base, after all, and they really had used that to their full advantage. Keeping the Avengers from going to Europe at all would have been instantly suspicious, but letting them discover the odd base there meant the whole thing seemed far more coincidental and, therefore, harder to unmask. It didn’t mean he wasn’t kicking himself for not seeing it before this (especially considering HYDRA’s history in that part of the world), but at least it explained why no-one else had spotted the deception, either.

Thankfully, Hill had been working with him for long enough now that she seemed willing to trust his judgement here (and she was also smart enough to see that he’d pinpointed Eastern Europe in particular because only two of the eight European raids had been conducted in that area, and even those were just on bases containing low-level agents). Nodding firmly in acquiescence, she immediately settled back into gathering up another pile of folders. “I’ll get on that as soon as this afternoon’s mission briefing is o-”

A jaunty, synthpop rhythm suddenly cut through the air, bringing the remainder of Hill’s words to
an abrupt halt, before being joined by a (vaguely defensive-sounding, in his opinion) male voice exclaiming ‘She blinded me with science!’ Clamping down on any outward signs of the laughter Tony could feel bubbling in his chest, he slid his phone halfway out of his pocket and glanced down at the screen just long enough to read the message displayed there (‘Scan 39 complete. No change.’), before pushing it back in and staring flatly at Hill’s matching deadpan expression for a good few seconds.

“Everything okay there, bumblebee?”

“You just…” Breathing out a huff of laughter, Hill raised her one free hand in surrender. “You know what? I’m not saying anything.”

“What? You’ve got a better choice of message tone for a biologist of the Mighty Helen Cho’s calibre?”

“Like I said, not saying a word.”

“Spoilsport.” Rising fluidly to his feet (but not without offering up a petulant pout in the process), Tony slid the last two sets of folders into his own grip, grabbing his Starkpad with the other hand once they were secure (he had a little time before he needed to head down to his training room and change- might as well take the opportunity to snag another cup of coffee while he was here, and the desks of the team members who would be doing the last of the sorting were on the way).

“Like I was saying,” Hill responded (almost) blandly as they made their way out of the room, JARVIS turning off the lights behind them, “I’ll get a few people together after the mission briefing this afternoon. Which, by the way,” she tacked on in a slightly more joking tone, “I really hope you’ll actually be on time for.”

“The briefing begins at four thirty pm, Sir,” JARVIS told him through the earpiece. “After your visits to the Queens R&D department and to the future Compound site.”

Tony shot Hill a wolfish grin, barely even pausing as, at a gesture from her, he handed over the top three of his folders to the guy sitting at the second desk they passed (Jaylen, he was pretty sure his name was- the guy with the Christmas tree allergy). “Wouldn’t miss it for the w- wait, no. That’s a lie. I would definitely miss it for the world. In fact, I’d probably miss it for a cup of coffee and a cinnamon bun if someone offered me one good enough.”

At the semi-amused look Hill sent him in reply, though, Tony toned down the glibness just a smidge. “We’ll see how it goes,” he promised with a shrug. Pretty much all he could do, really- in all probability, it would end up coming down to the state of the traffic on his way back. Though if the worst came to worst, he supposed he could always just dump the car at the Compound site for a couple of hours and fly the suit back- go back to collect the car later on. Honestly, though, he wasn’t sure how he’d ended up with this reputation for constantly being late for briefings- it had only happened a handful of times, really, and every single one of those (bar that one time he’d got carried away with Rhodey’s family the week after Thanksgiving) had been because of something or other to do with either SI or one of his charities. In his opinion, the others had a bit of an advantage over him time-wise on that particular front. The perks of (sort of) unemployment and all that.

Meh. Hill was probably only bringing it up this time because of the added political elements to this particular mission- she never usually made a fuss about his occasional penchant for tardiness.

“I’ll hold you to that,” was Hill’s teasing(esque) reply.

The eye-roll he received in return was legendary.

Chapter End Notes

Hey again! Just wanted to apologise again for there being such a long wait for this chapter. I'm still loving writing this story, but I was having some trouble with this chapter, and I ended up getting kind of overwhelmed by *just* how much is still to come, and *just* how fiddly this particular stage of the story is, and it all resulted in this huge writer's block (as it is, I'm still not 100% certain about how this turned out, but I don't think poking at it is really helping any more). Fingers crossed the block has passed now, though!

And, of course, *huge* thanks to everyone who took the time to leave either kudos or a comment- you guys are the absolute best!!! ^_^

(Oh, and the ringtone, which I discovered by searching for science-themed ringtones, is a section of 'She blinded me with science' by Thomas Dolby. You can find it on youtube if you're curious. ^_^)

Also, random question you don't have to answer if you don't want to: this won't factor into the story in any major way (and, in fact, won't even *apply* for *ages* yet), but would anyone mind if I shifted the death of Howard and Maria Stark to a couple of years earlier? maybe '88 or '89? I just don't understand why the Marvel folks would have chosen '91 (at which point Tony was 21) while also saying that Stane ran the company until Tony came of age.
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

*Nooooooobody saaaaid it was eeeeeeasyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!*  
(aka: We go back a little in time to see what the night/morning is like on Sam's end.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sam woke with a muffled gasp, eyes flitting erratically (he had control of his eyes back, at least) around the near-complete darkness which engulfed him- every sense at his disposal searching for even the slightest hint of the vast, crimson-stained battleground (slaughterground, more like) he had been in moments before.

No bodies. No ash. No blood. No screams (outside of the ones he could still hear echoing around the confines of his mind, anyway). No gargled, watery gasps. No sound at all beyond the pounding beat of his heart or his shallow, carefully measured breaths.

He was still in his room in the tower.

He was safe. (Everyone else was safe.)

Was he alone, though?

Swallowing down the solid lump of nervous anticipation in his throat, Sam concentrated on the feel of his hands where they lay under his pillow (and not, in fact, buried elbow-deep in anyone’s chest), using the shift of material against his skin as proof that the ‘twitch’ command he sent to his right thumb had been both heard and obeyed. The entire arm followed after, slowly withdrawing from its containment and reaching over to feel around for the phone he knew he had left on his bedside table.

That beat in his ears nearly stuttered to a complete stop when, for a brief second, his fingers couldn’t find their goal.

An inch to the left, however, soothed his breaths back into being, and it was with a silent prayer of relief that he tugged the phone down level to where he lay, blinking blearily until, with a gentle press of his thumb, the ‘02:04’ on the screen came clearly into focus.

Only six minutes until JARVIS would need to wake him up, anyway. No point in trying to get back to sleep now.

Letting out an exhausted exhale, Sam put the phone back, unfurled his other arm, and slowly shifted into a sitting position, swinging his legs off the side of the bed.

“How long this time?” (God, was it his imagination or did his voice sound abnormally hoarse? He couldn’t have been screaming, right?- JARVIS would have woken him up sooner if he had. Or maybe one of the others would have come running in. Unless he really had gone somewh-No. JARVIS would have said something by now if his body had been gone. Unless JARVIS had said something- was saying something, and there was some other being still in his body keeping him... etc.)

*The next hour was a blur of trying to get back to sleep, failing miserably, and repeating the process.*

The rest of the chapter continues in the same manner, with Sam struggling to find solace in the aftermath of what has just occurred, his mind reeling from the recent events.

**Note:** The text contains examples of the Gamergate meme format, used to exaggerate the difficulty and intensity of the situation. This is a stylistic choice to emphasize the gravity of the situation for the character.
“Twenty-one minutes,” came the vaguely regretful reply (and the small portion of Sam’s brain which was still capable of concentrating on more than just the internal knew that that meant that he’d fallen asleep about two minutes faster this time than last, at least. Not that he expected the same to occur next time he tried to drop off. Not after that). The lights began to rise slowly at the same time, and Sam made himself shoot a corner of the ceiling a grateful smile (an unnecessary habit, he knew, having witnessed Tony’s own interactions with the AI, but that was beside the point) and pushed down the rising sense of panic within him just long enough to complete the process of gingerly testing out the current strength of his legs. It wasn’t until he was satisfied that they’d be able to take his weight without too much strain that he finally pushed himself to his feet, making a hasty beeline for the bathroom.

Once there he didn’t waste any time. His top was off before he’d even made it halfway across the tiled floor, the cool air on his sweat-coated back (while likely refreshing to most people) sending prickle up and down his skin. His heartbeat spiked slightly at the thought, building on the hasty rhythm already present, and he forced himself to block it out as he stared into the mirror, zeroing in on the reflection’s eyes with laser-like focus.

It was ridiculous, he knew, to revert to signs of mostly visual proof when he got like this, considering just how easy it would be for a possessing force to simply alter his perception. But considering the angel blades and various treated herbs and spices he would usually use were either back in the Bunker or else locked up tight in the trunk of the impala (the keys to which were still in Dean’s possession), visual proof was pretty much all he had right now. Unless he wanted to slice himself open and use the blood to make some banishing spells-

No. He wasn’t even sure yet that the witchcraft from their world would work here. No point potentially causing the others to worry if he couldn’t even be certain the results would provide solid proof. He needed to run some experiments before that route became viable.

Visual “proof” it was.

Keeping an eagle-eyed watch for any signs of colour shifts—be they blue, black, yellow, or anything in between—Sam began his tests. Left index finger. Right thumb. Right ring finger, together with the left knee. Neck. Right knee. Right shoulder. Left middle and pinky fingers. Right toes. The list went on—cycling through various movements for each and every body part (all of them at least twice) in random orders until he managed to (mostly) convince his body that he was the one in control. His heartbeat slowed, the chill in his bones warmed, and the screams… well, they fell silent at least.

He wasn’t stupid enough to think they wouldn’t resurface next time he tried to fall asleep, though.

Finally turning away from the haunted eyes staring back at him from the mirror, Sam let his gaze drop, glancing down instead at where his hands were now propped against the hard marble counter in which the sink rested. With his bare arms coming into view, though, he couldn’t help the automatic comparison to the bloody, ash-coated limbs which had taken their place in his dream—the Grace in them so strong it had radiated a haze of blue-white light along the surface of his skin, the only break in the pattern coming from the solid, sulphuric black of long-since poisoned veins. His fingers twitched once more, and he had to close his eyes tight against the sudden barrage of images of the destruction his (Lucifer’s? Gadreel’s? Meg’s? Dean’s? They’d all shifted through him so often this time that it was hard to know exactly who had been inside him at each specific moment in time) hands had brought raining down on any and all who could ever seek to keep them apart.
It wasn’t the worst nightmare he’d had since they’d come here (no, that particular honour- as it always had and likely always would- belonged to the Cage). Nor was it the hardest to disassociate from (that prize belonged to the ones where he was locked away in a corner of his brain, screaming for someone- anyone- to hear him, only for no-one to even realise he had been taken over (or worse- they knew and they actually preferred it that way), and it was all he could do when he woke to convince even half of his mind that this entire world and every single friendly voice or smile in it wasn’t just some extravagant fabrication cooked up by this latest invader to convince him he was safe from it all). It was, however, most definitely the most violent (in terms of his own body’s actions, at least). By far. And that was saying a lot considering what had been tearing through his mind during those early days.

Not for the first time, Sam found himself grateful he had had the foresight to decline Helen’s offer of setting him up a place to sleep in the main room, so that he wouldn’t need to wake up every hour for the scans. God only knew how much he didn’t need to add another freak-out in front of the team to the list of his problems right now (even if he had been getting better at controlling the ferocity of his reactions).

And he wasn’t exactly keen on them knowing just how often he was plagued by these dreams, either.

Or, indeed, on them (or anyone, really) having that much access- however innocent, and however much he liked them- to his unconscious body.

One more glance at the mirror (eyes still hazel), and Sam began the shift back into a more normal morning routine. He’d woken up early, after all, and despite the reasons behind that it would be stupid of him not to put this extra time to use in some way. The toilet came first, followed of course by the washing of his hands. Another couple of eye checks (because, try as he might, that lingering sensation of ‘what if?’ just would not let go) as he moved on to rinsing all traces of sweat from his face and neck, and then again while a quick swig-swallow-and-spit maneuver cleared out the faint fuzzy sensation beginning to develop in his mouth. Then it was back into the bedroom to (briefly) reassure JARVIS that he was okay and to tug on a fresh (if identical) top.

The timing of it all, to his pleasant surprise, actually turned out pretty well for once, as it was just as Sam decided that he was probably about as presentable as it was possible for him to be right now that JARVIS informed him that it was now 2:13 and, as such, he only had four minutes before his next scan was scheduled to begin.

The hallway was quiet- soothingly so, really- as he entered it- the distant hum of the communal TV barely even audible as he made his way silently past the two rooms opposite where he knew Eun-Ji and Sun-Hi were sleeping off their last shift. It was also a couple of degrees cooler than JARVIS kept it for him when he was alone- a concession made so the team wouldn’t feel uncomfortably hot- but thankfully the lack of exposure to the High Enochian over the past couple of days was working wonders when it came to his ability to handle that particular side of things. As it stood, the slight (comparative) chill did little more than to send prickles of goosebumps up and down his arms and legs, and that was easy enough to disregard (or to cover up with long sleeves and an extra layer during the day).

The faint echo of Lucifer’s presence which accompanied said goosebumps was a little harder to ignore, but then again it couldn’t be said he didn’t have plenty of practice.

Stepping out into the common area, Sam took a habitual moment to take stock of where its current inhabitants were (Tae on one end of the central couch, Helen the other) before heading over to join them.
“Hey.”

Tae merely threw up a distracted hand in greeting, his attention seemingly torn between the equipment (now housed in a semi-permanent spot under the coffee table) he was powering up and the Korean variety show game playing out across the TV screen (the shorter man had made no secret of the fact early on that he planned to split his TV time evenly between those and various Hollywood blockbusters, and he seemed determined to stick to that). Helen was a little more interactive, sending him a welcoming smile (definitely real, right?) over her shoulder and tucking her legs slightly closer to the couch to give him more room to slip past her and sit between the two of them, but it wasn’t long before she, too, needed to get straight back to the information (Sam Winchester / Left Outermost Toe / Scan 31 / 2015.02.19 2:17) she was half-way through entering into the tablet she was holding. Sam didn’t mind the silence, though—unlike the daylight hours, there was never much conversation (with either pair of scientists) during these briefer excursions of his during the night. Instead, he simply sat patiently—first as they finished setting up, then as Tae re-connected the scanner to his foot, and finally as the scan itself ran. The TV was a welcome enough distraction through it all (some Asian game shows were actually kind of fun, he’d discovered, when you weren’t being forced into being an unwitting participant in a violently twisted version of one), and it was easy enough to occupy himself with wondering what the purpose of the giant, blocky arch thing with the six cushions underneath it was while he waited.

“Okay.” Helen drew his attention back with a swift word (she wasn’t much of one for casual touches, thank God), turning the tablet so that he could easily see the series of complex graphs and data readings now displayed upon it. “Go.”

Sam focused on it in an instant, scanning through the information as fast as he could. He had (rather unsurprisingly) found the data difficult to read at first—basic familiarity with various types of medical charts (a side effect of Winchester-style Hunting and a youth spent trying to live up to Dean’s and their Dad’s physical prowess) was practically child’s play compared to the math these guys had had to use in devising this whole system, after all—but after Eun-Ji helped guide him through it all during the earlier sessions the previous night, he could now identify and evaluate the key data points almost as easily as he could when scanning through a police report. The team had encouraged what they viewed as simple interest, eager to impart their know-how onto willing ears (he didn’t quite have the heart to tell them that, as fascinating as he did actually find the math and science behind it all, the main reason he’d started asking questions in the first place was just so he could distract himself from the more… metaphysical aspects of the experiment), and somewhere down the line it had somehow devolved into a timed challenge of sorts.

A few seconds later, he smiled. “Stable.”

“Thirteen point seven two seconds,” JARVIS declared, and Tae sucked an exaggerated breath in through his teeth as he leant down to un-attach the electrodes.

“So slow, Sam!”

Sam chuckled in response. “Can I play the exhaustion card yet?”

“Not for another three hours,” Helen informed him, the corners of her lips quirking upwards just slightly. “You’re going to have to work harder if you want to beat your record.”

“I’ll keep that in mind next time.”

And so it continued throughout the rest of the night— a simple cycle of ‘wake up – scan – sleep’ repeating itself in an hourly loop, with the only real change being the precise number of minutes that final step took. He did have three more nightmares (only one of which managed to wake him
up), but as none of them came even close to being as bad as that he counted it an overall win.

It was around the 4:17 scan that his exhaustion peaked, leaving him shaky and weak, and he found yet another thing to be grateful to the team for when neither Helen nor Tae made even the slightest of deals out of it when Sam managed to swallow his pride and accept Tae’s offer to walk him to and from his room from then on (just in case)- a pattern mirrored by Eun-Ji and Sun-Hi when he came out for scan 39 just before 7:17 to find that the two of them were already up and cooking a full Korean-style breakfast (some of which, they promised unprompted, they would hold back for him to eat whenever).

Then, in what felt simultaneously like an eternity and yet like no time at all, it was 9:12, and Sam was prepping to go out for the final scan of this first round. It was an odd feeling- relief and anticipation and anxiety and that same stifled glimmer of looming depression which hit whenever he allowed his thoughts to stray into pondering what this whole process meant for his already fragile humanity, all mixing together until he felt… almost numb- and as he sat on the edge of his bed, heart thudding steadily in his chest while he waited for Tae’s final knock, he caught himself staring almost contemplatively down at the damned toe this whole thing was about. If this final scan revealed the levels to still be stable (and there was little to no doubt in his mind that it would), then it was official. That toe would now house a tiny sliver of Gadreel and Lucifer until the day he died. And likely even beyond. No going back. A little slice of both Heaven and Hell, all irreversibly wrapped up in one neat little package.

What would their Dad have thought of that?

What would Dean think of that?

Regardless of the can of worms that train of thought led to, though (however inevitable he knew the reveal would eventually prove itself), there was one more Dean-related issue which was a bit more urgent. A promise he’d made that he knew would be unfair of him to break.

“Hey JARVIS?”

“Yes, Sam?”

“Is Dean awake yet?” (It was doubtful, but there was no harm in checking nonetheless.)

“No yet.”

“When he wakes up, could you give it an hour or so and then tell him… tell him tomorrow. Tomorrow, twelve fifteen, in the cafeteria. If, you know… if he’s still up for it. I can talk then.”

“…Of course.”

The knock on the door came thirty-eight seconds later, and Sam took a deep breath before calling out that he was “coming!”

Ready or not, he supposed this was it.
Tony's stuff first... Only for it to go right *back* to kicking my butt afterwards anyway. (Seriously- this chapter was like my Moby Dick or something- I literally have a record *ten* different versions (at varying levels of completion) sitting on my computer, because I just could *not* get it sounding right. Most bizarre for a Sam chapter.) But anyway, I wash my hands of it now, and I hope you guys found it to be a suitable offering (especially after such a slow update).

MEEEEEEEEEGGA thanks again to all the (many!) people who left kudos/comments over the past few weeks (including some new folks who left comments on earlier chapters). Every single one of you guys is utterly incredible, and I only wish I could send all of you on a (no deaths, injuries or otherwise unwanted bodily alterations guaranteed) tour of Willy Wonka's factory or something to show my gratitude. ^_^

(Now, I'm off to watch 13.20 and 13.21, because this fic isn't the only thing I've fallen behind on...)
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

The bots do as they please, and no author may stand in their way (although why one would ever try is a complete mystery to me).

Chapter Notes

*pokes head out from behind rock*

Hi all! *Very* long time no see! Huge apologies for that- I'd like to blame it on the tests which took place the week after I last posted, or on the three-day English camp I took part in, but honestly I think it’s just that I’m finding it really hard to adjust my writing to my teaching schedule this year. I'm trying to work on that, though, so hopefully I'll manage to get my act together a bit before *too* much time passes, because if I keep going at this pace I won't finish this fic until well into my forties. Lol.

Well, with that being said, I hope this chapter goes some small way towards making up for the *huge* delay. Many thanks, as always, to my lovely review/kudos-leavers (because I *seriously* needed that boost in getting this chapter done), and feel free to let me know what you think of this one, too! ^_^

“U, I swear on the Mark VII, if you’re not out that door in the next thirty seconds, you’re gonna spend the rest of your life flipping burgers at the greasiest, sleaziest burger joint in the whole northern hemisphere. No, don’t give me that look- I already *told* you we don’t have any more blankets down here, you demonic little over-inflated arcade machine.”

Hearing a faint twitter of amusement from behind him, Tony spun in place, the finger which had been tapping impatiently against his upper arm darting out to jab threateningly in Dum-E’s direction. “And don’t go thinking you’re off the hook, either, mister- it’s pretty obvious who the bad influence responsible for this sudden stubborn streak is.”

Dum-E whined indignantly, though a quick warning look meant that whine quickly shifted into abrupt silence and an (obviously fake- honestly, who did the idiotic little drama-queen think he was fooling with that over-dramatic posturing?) excessively repentant pose. Which may even have had the *tiniest* bit of an impact… were it not for the fact that, in the process, he somehow managed to get the old, slightly grease-stained blanket he was carrying entangled around his left front wheel.

Heaving a put-upon sigh, Tony ignored the twinge of his still-sore muscles in favour of crouching down to help his most rambunctious creation escape from this latest in a *looooong* line of plights (throwing in a bonus “dimwit,” just for good measure, as he did so). Barely had he even begun, however, before a very distinctively suspicious sound caught his ear and, with a not insignificant level of trepidation building in his gut, he turned his head just far enough to be able to see if what he *imagined* was happening actually was.

He was *not* disappointed.
“U, what are you- no, the couch cover is not a blanket, and I am not going to remove it. Look, we know Sam’s already got blankets up there anyway- can’t you just take something else?”

U whined mournfully in reply, and Tony paused just long enough from re-arranging Dum-E’s blanket (and Butterfingers’ too, just to be on the safe side) to wave a distracted hand around the miscellaneous oddities spread across the Workshop’s various surfaces. “Well I don’t know- you lot are the ones who randomly decided gifts were suddenly necessary. Look around. Go wild. Mountain Man’s not exactly picky- I’m sure you’ll find something he’d like. Just… make it snappy already. The scan starts in ten minutes, and if I had to rush through my post work-out shower, I’m sure you can manage this one little thing. So come on- move it or lose it, buddy."

Four minutes later, faced with five almost identically bemused expressions, Tony reached the firm conclusion that ‘go wild’ wasn’t exactly the best instruction he had ever settled upon. Lacking the time- or the fortitude- to go into detail on U’s particular brand of… eccentricities, however, he merely offered up a shrug and a pointed “Don’t Ask” before striding over and flopping onto the nearest couch.

Bruce just managed to scooch over in time to avoid being landed on. Shame.

“So,” Tony began, fending off the retaliatory bat to his arm. “When’s our resident BFG due to emerge for the Big Finale, then? And why aren’t I seeing any popcorn? Don’t you people have any sense of theatricality?”

As could only be expected, Helen was, of course, the first of the newbies to tear her eyes away from the spectacle that was the bots vying for prime position. Shooting him a look which very clearly read ‘I’m definitely going to need this one explained to me later,’ she promptly got back to work, fiddling around with the tablet his entrance had caused her to abandon to her lap. “I think you provide more than enough theatricality for all of us, Stark. And Tae was just on his way to collect him, actually, before you and your… whatever-they-are interrupted.”

“Aah!” Snapping himself out of the trance which had frozen him in place just behind the centre couch, Tae jerked back into motion, sending one last curious look over his shoulder at the bots as he disappeared into the residential hallway, every inch the lost little gosling scrambling to follow its mother’s fading trail. Tony watched him go with no small measure of amusement, waiting until he had vanished entirely from sight before tuning back in to where Bruce had just wrapped up a quick explanation of who the bots were, and was now inviting Helen to come and provide an outsider’s perspective on his latest project should she be so inclined. While everyone was distracted by the project outline, Tony took the opportunity to sneak in a quick stretch, swiftly containing a wince when he accidentally knocked his calf against the nearest table leg (he was pretty certain he was developing a bruise there after his sparring session with Luljeta), before settling himself in properly with a comfort-inducing butt shuffle.

…Which, in typical fashion, was of course the moment when, over on the final couch, Eun-Ji and Sun-Hi’s near identical shifts in expression just had to go and catch his eye. Sudden blinks, a drawing back of the heads and fiddly little eyebrow acrobatics could only mean one thing- He was twisting out of his recently-achieved peak comfort zone before Eun-Ji even got her question (“What… what are they doing?”) out, a mournful curse over the loss already sent silently into the uncaring universe, one steadying arm thrown haphazardly over the back of the couch, and one eyebrow arched to maximum I-am-not-impressed-itude.

“Have you lot not settled down yet? ‘Cos I told you you had to be on your best behaviour if you wanted to come, and don't go thinking I’m above sending you straight back down to the workshop if you can’t hold up your end of the bargain, ’cos I am not.”
Butterfingers and Dum-E quit their circling in an instant (the former’s guilty shuffling every bit as true to form as the latter’s chagrined whine), and Tony realised, in a burst of fond exasperation, that what had caught the two scientists’ eyes was merely a continuation of the lightly jealous bickering which had overtaken the entire journey up here. Shooting the two trouble-making robots an attempt at a stern frown (the impact of which was promptly ruined by the hints of a smile he could feel poking their way through when U tried to mimic him with one prong of her claw), the mechanic held back just long enough to ensure their full attention was on him (and that the likelihood that they would slip back into their usual antics as soon as he turned away was at less than thirty percent) before continuing with a satisfied nod.

“Alright, now can you at least try to pretend you know how to be patient? And buck up a bit, yeah? U chose her gift, you two chose yours- you need to quit second guessing yourselves and stand by your decision. Be more confident and all that jazz. Got it?”

After waiting a beat for the three determined beeps he received in reply, Tony shot all three a grin before turning back around, ready to settle back in…

…Only to freeze when he found every single Korean present (and even, to a surprising extent, Bruce) staring at him like they’d never seen him before. Over in the hallway entrance, one hand propped against the wall, Sam was the only one who looked completely unfazed.

Tony looked at each of the others in turn, nonplussed.

“What?”

At least a couple of seconds passed before, just as Sam and Tae began to work their way slowly across the room (Tae’s careful hovering making him look for all the world like the nation’s most anxious, over-protective boyfriend), Bruce gave a bemused shake of the head and turned away, half muttering under his breath.

“Never gonna get used to it.”

Huh? What on Earth was there to get used to? Had he missed something? “Well that’s a bit rude, isn’t it, Brucie Bear? You’ve met the bots before.” Three times, in fact.

“It’s not the bots he needs to get used to, Stark,” Helen stated distractedly, nodding a greeting to Sam as he and Tae drew level with her, before going straight back to the tablet. “Mechanics are part of the parcel with you- although I have to admit I wasn’t expecting the sentient angle here. It’s you- and whatever suburban mother apparently snuck in and overwrote your usual snark code- who’s the oddity here.”

Tony hit her with a full-force perplexed pout (completely unsuccessfully, going by the saccharine smile and crinkled eyes he received briefly in return). “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If you don’t know, I’m not going to be the one to tell you. Tae, electrodes.”


“Sorry, Tin Can.” Sam took his seat, making sure to leave Tae easy access to his foot. “It’s kind of fun watching you flounder a bit. Hey, Bruce. Hey, you three.” The bots tweeted in greeting (U coming dangerously close to dropping her gift in her attempt to wave as much as much as the others were), and Sam smiled softly at them before turning back to Tony, his brows scrunching up just the tiniest bit. “You look a bit off. Did something happen?”

“Says the guy who could literally go undercover in a panda exhibit.” (Because seriously- those
were some epic shadows going on there.) Huffing out a snort when the vague hints of concern in
the younger man’s gaze didn’t let up, Tony gave up and waved a dismissive hand at him. “Early
morning, tough workout and some unexpected work issues. Nothing out of the norm, so you can
quit your mother-henning already.” Sobering a little, he quirked a single eyebrow in Sam’s
direction- a silent inquiry as to his own condition- and received a tiny hint of a grimace and a quick
nod in return.

Which, to be honest, was about what he’d expected.

Redirecting his thoughts (as best he could, anyway) from the guilty churning in his gut (should he
have kept searching for another cure after all? One which wouldn’t have meant Sam needed to go
through any of this? One which removed the Grace entirely instead of sealing it in for good?),(Tony spent the rest of the time it took for Tae and Helen to finish setting up doing what he was best
at: keeping up a string of meaningless chatter. He didn’t let up, either, as the scan ran its course,
directing the others’ attention towards answering him, and away from focusing too strongly on the
tense line of Sam’s jaw or the tight, painful-looking grip of the hunter’s long, slender fingers
against his knees.

“Done.”

Helen’s voice cut through a ramble about… chicken wings? (How had he moved from that Zombie
Mortician show which was coming up to chicken wings? Damn, maybe he should have eaten a
bigger breakfast…), cutting the entire conversation off with all the skill of a veteran kindergarten
teacher and ensuring near total silence (the bots’ tense shuffling the only exception) for the final
announcement.

“Stable.”

The impact of the news on the other scientists was immediately visible- the proud, satisfied
glimmer of a job well done and a breakthrough successfully realised shining in all of their eyes-
but, in strong contrast to just two days ago, none of them said a word. Instead, they watched with
baited breath as Sam digested the information, his unblinking gaze fixed on the results sprawled
across Helen’s screen as she handed it to him. Tony tried to track the vast multitude of emotions
which passed at lightning speed across that too-old stare- the vague relief in the momentarily
widened eyes, the bitter pain and rage in the tightening jaw, the grief lining a brow already too
heavily burdened- but found, in the end, that it was impossible. There was just too much there, and
shifting so fast- a swirling maelstrom of ancient struggles and injustices he couldn’t have put a
name to even if he was given a hundred years to try.

Far from a hundred years, however, it was closer to just thirty seconds later that Sam closed his
eyes against it all and, with a single calming breath, set the tablet down on the table in front of him.
When he opened them again, it was, yet again, as though a protective shutter had slammed down
behind them, leaving nothing left visible in his gaze but mournful acceptance and a soft, fond
gratitude.

“So what happens next?”

“Well fir-”

Three equally demanding whines cut off Helen’s reply, coupled with an attention-drawing clash of
metal, and the focus of the entire room twisted to where the bots (apparently having decided that
they had been more than patient enough) were now wheeling excitedly back and forth.

“Well,” Helen deadpanned, “it looks like the decision’s been taken out of my hands.”
With the room’s agreement, Tae moved out of the way to clear a path, he and Helen re-locating their equipment to a safer spot. At the same time, Eun-Ji and Sun-Hi worked in tandem to balance the more delicate items which had been perched on the coffee table in their arms, meaning Tony and Bruce were then free to shift it further away from the couch without fear of breaking anything, leaving plenty of space for the bots to access their goal. Sam, at the insistence of everyone involved, sat pretty throughout the entire thing, only scooching closer to the edge of his seat when the procession began.

Dum-E wanted to be first, of course, but (in a move which secretly had Tony filling with pride for the youngest of his three creations) was beaten to the punch by Butterfingers, who draped his blanket across Sam’s knees with only a carefully-contained fraction of his usual clumsiness, and who cooed delightedly when Sam stroked a hand across the metal of his arm.

Not to be outdone, however, Dum-E was close on Butterfingers’ heel, barely even waiting for the younger bot to move aside before zooming into the vacated position and proudly displaying his own offering- which Sam accepted, this time, with an amused smile, leaning forward without prompting so that Dum-E (as he so obviously wanted to) could wrap it around his shoulders.

Then, last but not least, came U, who trilled with obvious joy when Sam (even while most others in the room still seemed almost comically baffled) accepted her gift without batting an eye, making sure all the while to appear properly impressed by the thoughtfulness of her gesture. In fact, it wasn’t until, after Bruce suggested that they put the present into action and Sun-Hi and Tae had led the three bots into the kitchen (the bots eager to start in on whipping up the first batch of drinks, and the scientists eager to spend some time communicating with the bots) that Sam quirked an eyebrow in Tony’s direction, mouthing silently.

‘A smoothie maker?’

Tony just shot him a smug-looking shrug in return, pairing it up with a perfect smirk and a low-pitched answer. “Rhodey did tell you she likes to make smoothies. What else would you expect when I gave her free reign over what to bring?”

Eun-Ji stared at him for several long seconds, even after Sam, Bruce and Helen appeared to have accepted his explanation (Helen looking, honestly speaking, like she would rather just be in bed). “You make strange robots.”

And, really, what else could Tony do but laugh?

“I guess I do, Blossom.” (Ah, the Powerpuff girls. JARVIS never had had much luck in choosing shows which would drive Tony out of the lab during a work binge. Kind of made you wonder whether or not he had actually been trying.) “I guess I do.”

The smoothies, thankfully, turned out to be pretty darn good- a side effect of, for once, being around a group of people who loved fruit (almost) as much as he did, no doubt- and they sat around drinking them (much to the delight of U, who, along with Butterfingers and Dum-E, would dart back to the smoothie maker almost as soon as someone’s glass reached the half-empty mark) as they discussed the next stage of the Cure.

Helen’s team was largely going to stick to their current rotation schedule. Tomorrow, as Helen and Sam had already pre-arranged, would be- outside of a couple of extra scans, just to be certain- left free for recuperation (although a certain shadow in Sam’s eye had Tony thinking that maybe Sam wouldn’t be focussing solely on doing just that). Then, the following morning, they would begin the second dose- most likely on the entirety of Sam’s foot, with scans being cut down to once every two hours. And after that, assuming everything was still going smoothly, they would begin
to branch out into other limbs (with, hopefully, even fewer scans), leaving vital organs for last. If all went well, the entire process should be completed within about a month.

All in all, it was a fairly decent distraction from the more… unpleasant revelations of the morning.

Tony couldn’t stay for long, though, so at nine thirty, with JARVIS’ firm reminder of the time, he and the bots said their goodbyes and made to depart.

Before they could, though, Sam joined them, patting the bots farewell as they rolled dejectedly back into the elevator and fixing Tony with that ‘you can tell me anything’ look of his and a low, vaguely concerned tone, quiet enough that none of the others would be able to hear.

“Are you sure nothing’s bothering you? I mean, you don’t have to tell me anything, of course, but you seemed kind of… troubled. Is there anything I can help with?”

Tony almost wanted to laugh. Instead, though, he simply shook his head, feeling some small portion of the pressure lifting from his chest. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“…Never mind.” He stepped into the elevator, pretty certain ‘how do you manage to offer to help me without sounding condescending or like it’s a burden or obligation of some sort’ wasn’t quite the right wording for what was going on here, and shot Sam a wide, completely natural grin. “I’ll be fine, Mountain Man. Now you make sure to rest your dainty little head, okay? And, whatever it is you’re planning on doing tomorrow, try not to push yourself, yeah? I do not want to find out how Helen would react if you started back-tracking.” (Or JARVIS, for that matter.)

“I promise, Tin Can.”

The last thing Tony saw as the elevator doors closed was the sure-minded glint in Sam’s eyes.

...And, just visible over Sam’s shoulder, Bruce’s inscrutable expression and analytical gaze, tracking his every move in a way Tony hadn’t seen from him since the very beginning.

…Weird.
The rain was just starting to fall as Steve pulled up outside the Westfield retirement home in Washington, DC. Eyes fixed on the innocuous-looking brick building which was just visible beyond the fence and thick foliage which surrounded the property, the super-soldier turned off the engine of his Harley-Davidson, dismounting and removing his key in one smooth movement before finally flicking the stand into place. Then, a well-worn weight slipping back into its place in his chest, he made his way inside and through the numerous security features, letting his feet carry him along behind one of the security guards and past the wings and doors which housed the other high-priority retirees who secretly dwelt in the building, before finally ending up outside a familiar off-white door.

“You have thirty minutes,” the guard informed him, and Steve nodded, careful to maintain an air of calm yet grateful self-assuredness until, after stepping into the room and closing the door behind him, he was able to let the façade drop away, replacing it in an instant with all the open vulnerability he could never truly give into anywhere else.

“Hey, Peggy.”

Hazy brown eyes shifted his way, and the rock in his chest doubled in size, resignation deflating him faster than any battle would as he once more took in the lack of recognition in what should
have been those razor-sharp depths he first fell in love with. Offering up a deliberately soft smile, he moved forward a single step, the oft-spoken words dripping like silken poison from his lips.

“My name is Steve, Peggy. I’m a friend of the family.”

Peggy watched him for only a moment more, not a single shift in expression to reveal whether or not she had processed his words, before turning her gaze back to the ceiling- the softly playing classical music which filtered through the room creating, he hoped, some beautiful images and memories for her to track across its speckled surface. Moving closer, he circled around to the other side of the bed and shifted a chair into his usual spot- chosen because some part of him (despite all the precautions he knew this facility took) couldn’t stand the idea of leaving Peggy in direct line of sight of any potential ill-wishers who might take aim at her through the window. Especially during times like these, when she was least able to defend herself. It was stupid, he knew, but still. Until he found Bucky again, Peggy was quite literally all he had left of his past life, and he wasn’t ready to lose her. So better safe than sorry, right?

Settling in, he began talking. Nothing specific to their own history, though- not when he knew how unpredictable Peggy’s mood could be when she was like this. He didn’t want her to become agitated or violent (or, worse, to break down into tears again, when she used to be so strong). Just simple stuff, like the latest landscape he was working on, and the multitude of strange fruits he’d seen on display in a Ugandan market (while following what had appeared at the time to be a promising lead in the search for Bucky, though he didn’t include that particular detail). Stupid little things to try to make her smile and to provide a blanket of background noise while he waited to see whether or not Peggy’s true self would be able to slide its way out from behind the blank slate her illness was currently drowning her under.

About ten minutes later, he almost thought it had worked, his words stuttering to an achingly hopeful pause when Peggy shifted slightly, her mouth beginning to twitch open. Instead of that cutting insight and wit he so longed for, however, the only sound forthcoming was the starting tones of a softly hummed lullaby- one he remembered his own mother singing to him on occasion. Sinking back again in his seat, he took a moment to collect himself before continuing in much the same vein as before, though this time adding in little references to other tunes he remembered from the past (tunes which, truth be told, he had hoped to dance with her to one day).

Still there was no change, though. Not until, when the door opened and he finally stood to leave, a withered old hand came up to grasp with all its meager strength at the fabric of his sleeve.

“They watch me here, you know,” Peggy hissed in an unintentionally carrying whisper, once more quashing his sudden burst of hope with her narrowed eyes and twisted, alien expression. “They stand and watch and trap me here. They want to steal my secrets.”

“No, Peggy,” Steve reassured her, not for the first time, while blades tore into whatever lay within his chest. “They’re here to protect you, that’s all.”

Peggy tossed his arm away with a disgusted huff and wide, betrayed eyes. “One of them, then,” she muttered under her breath, gaze turning back to track once more those visions which lay above her bed, and Steve leaned forward, forcing himself not to falter in his projected cheer when she flinched angrily away from the gentle hand he used to brush away a few strands of errant hair which had fallen onto her forehead.

“You’re safe here, Peggy. I promise. I’ll be back soon enough, okay?”

It was just as he was stepping through the still-open door and nodding to the blank-faced guard that Peggy’s mutterings quietened down, replaced with that same gentle, lilting melody from before,
and Steve let the notes sink their way into mind, haunting his thoughts and footsteps alike as he made his way back through all the necessary checkpoints and ventured out of the building once more.

The rain was heavier how, spilling across his skin and dampening his hair in a matter of seconds— the perfect mirror, in a way, to the hollow, helpless sensation which filled his stomach and drowned his heart. He turned his face upwards as he left the property, letting the soft weight of the water and all it stood for engulf him completely and wondering, not for the first time, what he would be when what little remained of the Peggy he knew eventually faded away completely—lost either to her illness or else to the cold embrace of death, and he was left behind. Without her. Was he indeed doomed, as it often felt, to soldier on alone, the last relic of a time half-forgotten to the world? Or would he finally succeed in tracking down the one man who could shoulder that burden by his side? Two puzzle pieces reunited at last, working in tandem to tackle whatever new losses the world thrust their way?

He knew which option he preferred.

Reaching into his pocket, Steve slipped out his phone, a few taps all that was needed before he lifted the piece of technology to his ear and waited for the now fairly familiar ringing to cut off.

“Steve?” Falcon’s softly curious voice sounded over the line, as clear and crisp as though they were standing side by side. “What’s up, man?”

“Sam. You happened to dig up any more leads, by any chance?”

“As a matter of fact—” A few seconds passed before Steve just about caught the faint clack of computer keys. “—I think I may have a couple of places lined up worth a bit of investigation. You want me to—?”

Steve nodded, though he knew Falcon couldn’t see him, and switched the phone into his other hand as he neared his bike, plucking the key out of his pocket once he’d done so. “Yes. Get everything ready. God-willing, you’ll be able to leave at first light.”

“You got it, Cap. Anything else?”

“That’s all for now. Thanks, Sam.”

“No problem, man. I’ll catch you later, then.”

“See you later.”

Mission assigned, Steve cut the call, then quickly slid the phone back into his pocket, brushing most of the water which had welled on his seat away before swinging a leg over the bike’s waiting mass. Such a short phone call, but he couldn’t deny that his mood felt infinitesimally better with the knowledge that he was actively doing something to prevent the bleaker of his two primary future paths, even if how much he himself could do was limited by his need to be prepared for more official Avengers business.

...And speaking of Avengers business...

Setting off, he made a quick U-turn, setting his sights back towards where he’d left the Quinjet. The flight back took a little less than an hour, Steve mostly just letting JARVIS do the actual flying while he simply sat in the pilot’s seat, sorting through his jumbled mess of thoughts and trying not to let it affect him as the need to move and to find some sort of outlet for his frustration itched beneath his skin. He made sure to thank JARVIS politely when they touched down, too, still
slightly wary of how the AI had acted towards him the other day (because, although he still wasn’t quite certain what it was about Sam which had set off such strange behaviour in both Tony and JARVIS, he liked to think he knew better- especially after Clint had convinced him to watch the Terminator movies- than to deliberately anger the disembodied consciousness which controlled his living environment). And, finally, after taking the larger, Avengers-only elevator down so that he could park his bike back in their private garage, he made his way to where he really wanted to go.

The gym.

There was something about the single-minded focus used in training which had always calmed Steve down. Even before the serum he’d tried to keep his body as fit and healthy as his frail form and weak constitution had allowed. After it, though, was where he’d really come into his own on that front. The steady pounding of specially-reinforced material beneath his fists. The shifting rhythm he could manipulate at will to suit the gradual changes in his mood. The slow-building ache in his muscles which mostly only occurred in situations where he was really allowed to just let go (rather than the constant restraint he had to force upon himself in fights with most baseline humans). All of it was like music to his mind and a balm to his soul and, by the time he received JARVIS’ one-hour warning for the start of the meeting, Peggy (and all of the accompanying baggage which cropped up most strongly after one of his visits) had been safely secured in the (not so) little corner of his brain in which he liked to keep her while he was otherwise occupied, and he felt ready and raring to tackle whatever mission Hill had (finally) managed to locate for them to tackle next.

A trip back to the Avengers’ living floor came first, however, and (after a quick jog up the stairs and an exchange of greetings with Clint and Thor where they sat together, hunched over a chess board) he plucked a couple of large-sized pizzas out of the freezer and popped them in to cook while he went back to his room for a rinse-down and a change of clothes.

“But I still do not understand why the queen would abide by such a weak and cowardly king,” Thor was saying as he came back. “Nor any of their subjects, if I speak true.”

“It’s just the way the game goes, man,” Clint replied, though the amusement in his voice was both unmissable and undeniable. “You need something to aim for, and that gets a lot harder if the king’s off whizzing around the board.”

“Precisely my point. He provides no personal challenge, and surrenders as soon as he is surrounded. Asgard would never stand for so weak and cowardly a ruler.”

“Well I don’t know, maybe… maybe he’s been cursed or something. Or maybe he’s not really surrendering. Maybe he’s just being smart and waiting for the perfect chance to counter-attack. Right, Cap?”

Looking over from where he was just finishing up tugging the pizzas out of the oven and onto a pair of waiting plates, Steve allowed a smile to slip onto his face as he took in the beseeching expression Clint was sending his way. “I have no idea why you’d think I’d know. And besides-” he slipped a couple of pizza-cutters out of a drawer before making his way over, plates and cutters in hand- “I think I’d rather just eat pizza right now.”

“I’ll second that.” Attention successfully diverted, the archer pushed aside the half-finished game, and gleefully set the offered second plate in its place. He cut into the pizza with gusto, quickly slicing off a third for himself and leaving the rest for Thor as Steve settled onto a second couch and tucked into his own prize. (Meat Lover’s. For the protein.)

Pizza can only distract a determined alien prince for so long, however, and by the time they set out
for the meeting, Thor was back at it again. Despite Clint’s mounting bewilderment, though (or maybe even because of it), Steve found himself grateful for the mindless entertainment listening to such inanities provided. And, to be honest, while he was more than eager to get out there and start the next mission, it was nice to see his teammates so relaxed. They deserved it. Especially with all the extra drama certain other inhabitants of the tower had been fuelling for the past month.

“Banner!” Clint suddenly called, catching sight of the scientist just as he was about to enter their destination. “Hey, you’re a smart guy- take over and explain chess to our resident thunderhead, would you?”

Bruce paused where he stood, blinking at them. “…What?”

“Thor.” Clint explained, drawing level and sending a vague scowl back at the man in question. “I’m trying to teach him how to play chess, and he keeps… being all… you know… Thor about it,” he finished with a feeble shrug. Bruce shot Thor another confused look.

“Wait, I thought you already knew how to play chess? I mean, I’ve heard you talk about pawns before, so I just kind of assumed some Asgardians picked it up when you first visited Europe.”

Steve brushed off the faint tinge of disappointment he felt in his teammate’s culture whenever he was reminded of how they had come and tricked all those poor people into believing them gods, and instead turned (together with Clint) to watch in surprise as Thor’s innocently earnest expression suddenly dropped away, replaced by mirthful eyes and a disarmingly mischievous grin.

“Well,” Thor conceded with a slight shrug, “I know when I am caught. But ‘twas an enjoyable ruse while it lasted.” And, with that said, he strolled past them and into the room, giving Clint a firm pat on the shoulder and an “I thank you for your earnest and most thought-provoking reasonings” as he passed.

Clint gaped after him. “…Did… did he just-?”

“I think you just got played by the God of Thunder,” Bruce agreed. Then, with an amused twinkle in his eye, he, too, headed inside, leaving Steve and Clint alone.

“That devious son of a-” the archer spluttered, before his eyes narrowed in what was quite likely only half-joking suspicion. “Oh, that’s it. I’m never trusting that puppy-dog act of his ever again.” Then, barely allowing Steve even a moment in which to respond, he waltzed on into the room, face set in a wry smirk which Steve just knew meant payback somewhere down the line.

The next thing he heard, as he stepped forward to follow the archer through the doors, was Thor telling Bruce “you know, Banner, I shall have to introduce to you all the games of Tafl should the chance arise. I believe you would enjoy them greatly.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks a million for reading! (And for being so patient in waiting for this chapter! And for continuing to leave kudos in the meantime!) I really hope you liked it, and feel free to leave a review!
A couple of notes:
- I don't have much experience with alzheimers (outside of a few visits to my nan when I was still fairly young), so I really hope I didn't stray too far outside of how patients with it can occasionally behave. If you saw anything you think is painfully medically inaccurate, please feel free to let me know, and I may come back and alter things at a later date.
- After some long-term dithering, I've decided to remove some of the character tags on this fic, so that only the 'main' characters, as it were, are tagged (so that people searching for fics about Natasha, for instance, don't end up having this crop up, when she's in it so (comparatively) rarely). Just in case you were wondering.

Also, a couple of Fun Facts:
Fun Fact Number One: There are mixed accounts of where Peggy's retirement home actually is. Some say London, others say Washington DC. I went with DC for convenience's sake, but may have her family move her at some point further down the road, because I believe her funeral was shown to be in London?
Fun Fact Number Two: I originally had some issues trying to make Steve's handling of his motorbike helmet flow naturally in the text. When I tried looking up pictures to help me with that, however, I was surprised to see that he doesn't wear one when in civilian gear! Which... is actually illegal (at least in DC and New York). I know civilians weren't required to wear them until after he'd gone into the ice, but still. Illegal. And now I keep imagining him being pulled over then let off by a star-struck police officer. Or video footage going viral and some parents being outraged because he's supposed to be a good role model. So there we are, kids: don't be like Captain America.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

Maria Hill is Beyond Done(TM).
(But then, if we're being honest, when is she *not?* Lol.)

Chapter Notes

*peeks out from behind a rock* Hi all! So a couple of super lovely reviews I received lately (in particular, one last chapter and one on chapter 30) really inspired me to finally finish writing this chapter! Yay! It's not the meeting I originally thought it was going to be (as I realised that the themes I was intending to cover there would fit better it left to settle for a bit and thus emerge later in the story), but I really hope you enjoy this little side-step into Maria's life. I rather enjoyed writing her. (And her guest.) Even if it *did* take me several false starts to get into the swing of things. Lol.

(Also: I *think* the items mentioned in this chapter are ones you can get in an American 7/11. I did try to check online, as the only 7/11s I've ever been in are here in Japan, but if I'm mistaken please feel free to let me know and I'll change them to something else.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Being a fairly high-ranking member of a super-secret government organisation (especially at such a young age) had always held certain… perks, in Maria Hill’s experience. The removal of one’s fingerprints from any standard database? A definite perk. Access to some of the most high-tech equipment known to the developed world? Most distinctly perk-like. Automatic compliance from law enforcement agencies when you ordered them to turn over what could otherwise be deemed incriminatory evidence towards oneself and/or one’s subordinates? Or the ability to bypass pretty much all forms of red tape in the interest of quick response times so you could do what needed to be done to keep the nation safe? Also perks (although, in hindsight, perhaps not 100% the best of ones considering how such a practice had ended up being taken advantage of).

The fall of SHIELD as it had been, while necessary (though perhaps not… ideally managed, to say the very least), had removed many such perks from her arsenal. Mostly because of Stark’s (well-reasoned, to be fair, given the circumstances) insistence upon openness and accountability. Something the Fall hadn’t removed, however, was all of the (not-inconsiderable) skills she had gained- and honed- while under SHIELD’s employ, in everything from political maneuvering to hand-to-hand combat against multiple armed opponents.

That being said, there was one skill in particular she had found significantly more use for than any other in her arsenal: the ‘do you really want to start shit with me right now?’ stare. In the past it had proven useful in any number of high-pressure situations. Right now, however?

...Well, right now it was granting her easy access to the last BLT on the shelf at 7/11.
Walking away from her slightly shell-shocked victim (it was fine- he was already switching over to an egg salad), Maria moved over to the short queue, snagging a fruit yogurt on her way and balancing both items atop the microwaveable burrito she was already carrying. Which, okay, perhaps didn’t make for the most glamorous of feasts all-in-all. But, as her plans for the evening pretty much consisted of curling up on the couch in her pyjamas and winding down with a glass of wine and some well-earned reading, being ‘glamorous’ wasn’t exactly at the top of her list of priorities.

It didn’t take too long to arrive home after that. A brief hop on the subway and a couple of semi-busy streets later and she found herself at her door, the key turning without a hitch to welcome her inside.

Once she had entered, however, and was already in the process of sliding her heels into their proper slot on the waiting shelf, that was when the unmistakable sensation of ‘Wrong’ hit. It came in a familiar wave, creeping up her arms and across the back of her neck and flooding a much-appreciated pulse of adrenaline through her system. Careful eyes scanned the short hallway behind her via its reflection in the deliberately positioned mirror, even as her fingers danced their well-worn path across the alarm system’s keypad. Nothing out of place. No hint of even a slightly suspect shadow. No trace of powder or any other substance on any of the keys’ surfaces. If someone was here, it was someone who knew what they were doing. And, considering she was still most assuredly alive and unharmed, most likely someone who didn’t wish her any immediate ill will.

Which definitely narrowed down the list of suspects considerably.

Still, better to be safe than sorry. Adjusting her grip on both purse and plastic bag alike (so that she’d be ready to either drop, throw or swing them at a moment’s notice), Maria let her other hand drift seemingly casually down, granting her easy access should she need to pull out her gun. Then, widening her senses but still making sure to appear calm and unaffected, she began her short journey down the hall, keeping just marginally closer to the wall than she usually did.

That extra couple of inches to the left granted her a perfect view of the full-length mirror she kept at just the right angle slightly inside the entrance the the living room, and she relaxed as her target came into view, rolling her eyes and flicking on the light before moving over to place her bags down on the humble wooden coffee table.

“I’d ask if you were really planning on just sitting there in the dark for however many hours it took for me to get home, but I think we both know the answer there.”

Nick (because of course it was Nick, and of course he’d chosen to ensconce himself on the old wooden stool over in the corner instead of on the considerably more comfortable couch. The man always had loved a bit of theatrics), implacable as ever, barely even blinked at the harsh shift in lighting (and he was lucky she’d got back at a fairly decent time today- it wasn’t altogether unusual for her to arrive home an hour or three later than this when they were so close to a mission). He did, however, hold up what she recognised as her copy of Pride and Prejudice- the one she’d left out in hopes that she’d be able to finish it tonight.

“’I didn’t realise you were still quite so into the Victorian romance scene.’”

“I don’t believe that for a second.” It wasn’t exactly something she cared about people knowing, after all. And Nick wasn’t exactly known for his lack of observational skills. “And, besides, I actually think it might be Georgian.” Crossing the distance between them, Maria held out her hand for the book, then promptly checked the bookmark was still in its proper place and walked it back over to its place besides her earlier haul, before finally fixing her steadfast intruder with the
considering look he was no doubt waiting for.

Well. At least he didn’t appear to have been shot this time.

She didn’t bother to hold in the smile for long. “It’s good to see you, Nick. You look well.”

“What can I say?” Nick rose to his feet at last, somehow managing to cut every bit as imposing a figure as he always had- even with a combination of a casual henley, quilted jacket and knitted cap replacing the billowing black leather she had grown so accustomed to over the years. “I guess retirement agrees with me.”

“Retirement,” Maria repeated blandly. “Right.” In all honesty, she wasn’t entirely sure Nick even knew the meaning of the word. A sentiment he clearly agreed with, if the wry expression currently on his face was any indication.

“Well. Being dead has its ups and downs, I suppose. But I find ways to keep myself busy.”

“Such as?”

In typical fashion, Nick turned away instead of answering, and paced leisurely over to the small bookshelf which rested on the cabinet behind his former perch. She wasn’t fool enough to believe that he was actually perusing the contents, however, despite how the action would appear to a casual observer.

“How are things with the Avengers?”

“Smooth enough.” If you discounted the standard tensions which were all but inevitable in a team containing such a mish-mash of personalities and egos, at least. “We’re preparing for a mission in Tajikistan.”

Nick glanced at her over his shoulder, eye flicking across the slight hints of pointed disapproval she knew he could undoubtedly read in her expression. It was only for a moment, though, and then he went straight back to his former position.

“Tajikistan, huh. That must have been an interesting one to arrange.”

“Stark helped with the negotiations.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Perhaps Maria was just imaging the slightly softer-than-average tone there, mixed in amongst the vague hints of almost smug satisfaction. She didn’t think so, though- Nick had always struck her as strangely fond of Tony. Not enough that anyone who hadn’t spent as much time around him as she had would notice, of course, but there weren’t many people the man was quite so lenient with. Or would have put quite so much effort into getting on-side. She had to admit, though- while it had been next to impossible for her to fathom at first, considering all that she had heard of Tony back then, she was far more understanding now of how-or, rather, why - that soft spot might have come about. Despite how easy it was to miss underneath all those layers of glibness and snark, Tony truly did care. And she was honestly a little ashamed of just how long it had taken her to realise it. It seemed she still had some way to go in that department.

None of that was really relevant as to why Nick was currently in her apartment, however. Throwing caution to the wind, Maria jutted her chin forward, allowing just a sliver of the frustration she’d felt over the past few days to bubble to the surface.
“It would have been nice if he hadn’t needed to help.”

Several long seconds crept by, weighed down with heavy silence. Maria kept her eyes on Nick’s form the whole time, watching the minute shifts in his posture for any hint as to how he would respond. Eventually, though, he let out a soft sigh.

“Let’s stop beating around the bush, Hill. You want to know why I let the Info Dump happen. Or, more specifically—” He turned at last, crossing his arms behind his back and fixing her with a nigh inscrutable gaze. “—you want to know why I didn’t tell you what was going to happen.”

There was no point in denying it. Not with the number of good agents (and innocents) who had died in the aftermath. And not with how well she knew he could read her. “I do.”

“A dead man doesn’t get a say in the actions of the living, Hill.”

“Perhaps not. But there’s more to it than that.” If Nick had truly believed that the Dump was a mistake, there was no way he would have let it happen. So called ‘death’ be damned. Not when so many lives were on the line.

Several long moments passed as Nick scrutinised her, and it was only through sheer length of exposure that Maria didn’t end up shifting uncomfortably beneath that eagle-eyed gaze. Eventually, however, Nick seemed to deflate, just an infinitesimal amount.

“Stark’s beginning to rub off on you,” he sighed. “You never used to ask this many questions.”

“A lack of questions is how I ended up working alongside HYDRA. I can’t say I feel all that bad about the change.”

For just a moment, a faint hint of pride seemed at tug at the corners of Nick’s lips and eyes alike. It was gone in an instant, though, and he gave her a firm nod instead.

“You’re learning. Good.”

Maria allowed her eyes to narrow slightly, widening her stance and further straightening her spine at the same time. Enough beating around the bush. “So?”

Another sigh, and a regret she knew very few people on Earth would ever be privy to clouded Nick’s features (though it quickly gave way to firm and deliberate self-assuredness). “SHIELD was past the point of no return,” he said at last, indicating with a jerk of his head that she should follow as he went and took a seat on the couch. Maria did so without complaint, claiming the spot at the other end and watching for any indication that she was being lied to—either outright or by omission. “It was too late to clean house. HYDRA’s philosophies and SHIELD’s were too closely linked by that point. Too deeply ingrained in too many agents’ psyches. If we’d gone any other route, it would have been too easy for those problems to fester. I don’t know how long it would have taken, but eventually that infection would have reared its ugly head once more, and the fallout…”

He let the implication sit heavy in the air. It wasn’t necessary to do more. They’d both been there, after all—they’d both seen just how close HYDRA had been to success.

And they both knew, too, just how much blame would have fallen upon SHIELD’s shoulders had things gone just infinitesimally differently.

“That’s why,” Nick continued, unwavering as always in his resolve. “If we wanted to prevent even more deaths in the long run, this was the only way. Sacrifice what we had and start again. Build
from the bottom up.”

“But revealing everything.”

Nick cut her off without compunction. “You know better than most that the world isn’t just black and white, Hill. Sometimes victory comes at a price. Sometimes a big one. It’s not a pretty truth, but it’s a truth nonetheless. It’s about time you snapped out of Stark’s idealistic little fantasy world and remembered that.”

It was a dismissal- as clear a one as she had heard in all the time since she had seen Nick last- since long before then, even. It didn’t matter that she still had lingering suspicions that there was more to the decision than she had been told. She could question as much as she wanted- rant and rave until she was blue in the face- but she would get no further explanation or information on this matter. Not directly. Nick had made his case, and he now expected her to come to her own conclusions on what to do and how to react to what she had been told here today. It was a sign of his belief in her abilities of discernment and proper judgement- despite how much it may appear, on the surface, to the contrary.

And it was also, to a degree, a test of her faith in him.

There was no other option for now, however much she might dislike it: drawing on years of experience with the sort of snap prioritisation which was necessary in jobs like theirs, Maria set her jaw, forced down all of her still-lingering misgivings, and tipped her head briefly in acquiescence (temporary as it may turn out to be).

“Understood, Sir.”

“Good. Now-” Nick reached into an inner pocket of his jacket, deft fingers tugging out a small selection of what looked to be photographs- “on to our main business.” He tossed the pictures down on the table, decades of practice ensuring that they landed both face-up and spread out just enough that their subjects were all reasonable levels of visible. “What do you know?”

Wondering a little at the undisguisedly pissed-off glint in Nick’s visible eye, and at the sudden tightness to his jaw, Maria leant forward and cast a curious eye over the table.

Understanding dawned in an instant.

There were twelve photographs in total. Four for each man. All simple surveillance shots, though the younger Winchester’s locations were more varied than those of his companions. In amongst the photos, three copies of drivers licenses stood out in stark relief- each, she already knew, one hundred percent legal. Albeit obtained using Tony’s somewhat unorthodox methods.

Glancing up at Nick, she allowed a dry smile to twist at her lips. “I imagine I know just about as much as you do.”

“If this is some NDA shit-”

“It’s not.” Looking away from that dangerously narrowed eye, Maria let her gaze fall back to the photographs. “From what little I’ve heard, the only people who know for sure where they came from are the Avengers themselves. Stark, Banner, and some of the SI security staff seem to be particularly fond of this one-” She tapped on Sam’s license. “-and word is that Rogers and Stark have had a few disagreements about this one-” A tap on Dean’s this time. “-but that’s about as much as I can say that you probably don’t already know.”

She didn’t have to look to know that Nick was scowling.
“You mean to tell me,” he ground out after a painfully heavy silence, “that three men who couldn’t be found on any known database until Stark stuck his fingers in the pot literally appeared out of nowhere and started living with a team I put together- inside a building where you work- and you haven’t managed to find out a single worthwhile thing about them?!”

Fighting against the automatic yet conflicting urges to either apologise or else snark straight back, Maria straightened in her seat, deliberately meeting her old boss’ eye and speaking in a calm, measured tone. “My team might be working in the same tower as some of SI, but Stark made it very clear when we started there that we’re entirely separate entities. He may trust me and mine, to an extent, but that doesn’t mean that any of the SI workers do. I start stepping outside of my jurisdiction and properly investigating any of these guys and you can bet your ass that, if someone on the SI staff catches wind of it, we’ll be either replaced or relocated faster than you can say ‘it’s fun to punch a nazi.’

“You may not like the way Stark does things,” she reminded him, “but, as long as it’s his money and influence keeping my team off the streets, I don’t plan on testing the limits of his generosity unless I’m certain it’s absolutely necessary.”

“These men could pose a significant risk-”

“They’ve been around for over a month and none of the Avengers have given me any indication that any of those three have any bad intentions towards them. Or even that they would pose a significant risk if they did have any. Even Romanov seems fine with them. That changes and so will I but, until then, my hands are tied.”

Another scowl. “I don’t enjoy blind spots, Hill.”

“Neither do I. But pushing to fill in this one could prove more trouble than it’s worth.”

Nick seemed to consider her words for a few seconds, before easing to his feet, Maria following a moment later. “Fine. Not happy about it, ‘cos this is some next-level ghost shit these guys have got going on, but fine. They turn out to be up to anything, though, and it’s your ass on the line here, agent.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

Nick merely huffed in response, before pulling a burner phone from another pocket and handing it over to her. “Hang onto that. I have no doubt I’ll be contacting you again soon.” Then he turned on his heel, and was halfway out the room before Maria had had time to do more than open her mouth to reply.

In the end, though, she supposed there wasn’t really anything else which needed saying. Not right now anyway. Letting out a sigh as she heard the back door click closed, she glanced down at the ungainly lump of a phone.

Typical.

Sitting back down, she tossed the damn thing onto the table, and promptly busied herself with gathering up the photos Nick had left behind, all the while wondering what on Earth Nick (and whoever else he had undoubtedly roped in) was getting up to behind the scenes.

Well. It didn’t look like she’d have to wait too long to find out.

She wouldn’t be all that shocked if it turned out to have something to do with that ‘from the bottom up’ line, either.
Again: *Typical*.

Passing a detached sort of glance over the bag containing her food for the evening, Maria stood and made a beeline towards the bathroom, only pausing to toss the pile of photos into the smaller of her two shredders. Relaxing with a book could come later. For now, though, she needed to unwind a bit first.

God (or whoever, really) bless whoever invented warm showers.

...And curse anyone else who dared try to interfere with the rest of her day.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked the chapter! And, as always, HUGE thanks to everyone still leaving kudos and comments etc. This fic truly would never have come this far without you, and I am *beyond* grateful for all of your support. Thank you so much! ^_^

(And happy Easter to all who celebrate it! Or for any holidays I don't know about which happen to fall around this time!)

(Oh, just in case: please keep comments on this chapter spoiler-free for now. I've kind of fallen a few episodes behind with SPN. Lol. Oops. I hear some of them are pretty good, though, so hopefully I'll get around to rectifying that soon-ish...)

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